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An Invitation

MICHAEL J. BLOUIN

The Handbook of New Directions in Popular Culture Studies (under contract with Anthem) will appeal to scholars, teachers, and students by highlighting cutting edge scholarship in the field of popular culture studies in a clear, engaging way. Popular culture studies is a diverse area of inquiry that covers material such as Hollywood cinema, videogames, podcasts, and much more. Scholars within this area pose important questions including (but hardly limited to): what does it mean for a cultural artifact to be deemed “popular”? How did it attain that status, and what does that popularity reveal about the society in which it was created as well as consumed? Does the older schism that ostensibly segregated “high” from “low” culture remain relevant in the twenty-first century? And could the study of popular culture help to inject interest and enthusiasm back into the classroom during a turbulent period of realignments within higher education? Simply put, *The Handbook of New Directions in Popular Culture Studies* will be a vital resource for an exciting and ever-expanding field of inquiry.

Outline the Table of Contents

The handbook will address 10 topics in popular culture:

- Film
- Fandom
- Comics
- Music
- Performance
- Video Games
- Social Media
- Popular Fiction
- Television
- Streaming Media

These selections have been made on the foundational premise of the text: that to study popular culture you must pay attention to the specifics of the media you study. Accordingly, we’ve chosen topics where formal structures are particularly formative in understanding how the media works. Video games may resonate with the filmic forms of *mise-en-scene*, editing, cinematography, etc. but ultimately the importance of interface and interaction marks them out as distinctly different medial forms. Even our focus on popular fiction distinguishes the study of popular literature from classical literature so as to recognize its distinct formal, industrial, and cultural qualities.

As discussed in the introduction to this proposal, this handbook is meant to be a reference for students and teachers of popular culture and its structure reflects that. Each of the ten sections will have four key components:

- An introduction to the form of popular culture
- Examples of the analysis of popular culture
- Practical pedagogical strategies for teaching that form of popular culture (2 – 3k words)
- A bibliography and further references (2 – 3k words)

We are currently seeking contributors for the PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES and BIBLIOGRAPHY components under each section. If you are interested, please email a brief abstract (250 words) and a concise bio to MJBlouin@milligan.edu by no later than **June 15th, 2026**.

Media, Religion, and Crisis: Entanglement, Mediatization, and the Reconfiguration of the Sacred.

MELISSA L. GOULD

Definitions of religion vary across disciplines, cultures, and contexts, and these definitional choices shape what can be studied and how it is interpreted (Lambek; Mason; Perreault). Categories such as religion, and the sacred, are therefore not fixed, but are historically and culturally constructed. While classical sociology, particularly the work of Emile Durkheim, positions the sacred and the secular as distinct domains (see Berger; Hamilton; Trammell), this binary is increasingly untenable (see Carrette and King; Gould *Christianity Sells, Thank God for Commercials*; Latour; Hoover). Instead, media and religion operate within a shared cultural and symbolic space, drawing on overlapping practices and systems of meanings (Grant; Hoover; Hoover and Venturelli; Knott et al.; Lindstrom).

Media and religion are not discrete domains but are increasingly interwoven through shared cultural logics and practices. Religious organizations adopt media logics to represent and disseminate their messages, reshaping religious communication within contemporary media environments (Hjarvard). At the same time, media cultures, including fandom, draw on religion as a cultural resource, reworking and “rescripting the sacred” in ways that extend beyond institutional contexts (Satana and Erickson 114). These dynamics also provide a lens through which media behaviors can be understood: audiences may be positioned as followers, while religious symbols, narratives, and identities circulate within consumer cultures as branded and marketable forms (Einstein; Twitchell).

The relationship between media and religion has long been characterized by moments of disruption, negotiation, and transformation. From the rise of print culture to the proliferation of broadcast media and, more recently, the platformization of digital technologies, media have functioned not only as channels for religious expression, but as sites where the meanings, boundaries, and authority of religion are actively produced, maintained, and contested (Eisenstein; Hoover). It is in moments of crisis, whether technological, political, cultural, or epistemological, that these dynamics become most visible. Crisis can be understood both as a material condition and as an analytical lens, one that foregrounds the complexities of the mediatization and appropriation of religion.

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This special issue, *Media, Religion, and Crisis*, brings together five articles that collectively examine how religion is mobilized, contested, and reimagined, across a range of media environments, from television and film to influencer culture and social media platforms. Rather than treating religion as a fixed object, the contributions align with critical traditions in religious studies that understand ‘religion’ as shaped by power, discourse, and institutional interests (Asad; McCutcheon). In this sense, crisis does not simply affect religion; it actively participates in how religion is defined and the conditions under which it operates. Recent scholarship in digital religion and media studies suggests that these processes are intensified within contemporary media environments, where connectivity is accelerated and algorithmic systems amplify visibility, engagement, and participatory behaviors.

Across the contributions to this issue, crisis operates in multiple ways. It emerges as a crisis of definition, in which boundaries of religion are destabilized and renegotiated; a crisis of authority, where traditional religious and institutional hierarchies are challenged by new media actors; a crisis of representation, where religious narratives are reworked across popular culture and digital environments; and a crisis of modernity, where religion resurfaces within secular or post-secular contexts. These overlapping dimensions reflect Koselleck’s understanding of crisis as both a moment of danger and a point of transformation, a threshold at which new forms of meaning-making processes become possible.

In the first article, Lauren Horn Griffin’s “‘TikTok Refugees’, RedNote, and the Crisis of ‘Religion’”, highlights the instability of religion as a category within digital environments. Set against the backdrop of the threatened TikTok ban in the United States, the migration of the users, who self-described as “digital refugees”, to the Chinese platform Xiaohonshu (RedNote) highlights how definitions of religion are shaped by platform governance, state regulation, and transnational cultural exchange. By tracing how these shifts raise broader questions about who defines religion, and how those definitions circulate, the article demonstrates the ongoing construction and reconfiguration of religion within the age of global hyperconnectivity.

Rosser Johnson’s “New Let a Good Crisis Go to Waste’: Religion, Performativity, Outrage, and Andrew Tate” shifts the focus to influencer culture and the strategic deployment of religion within digital media. Through thematic and rhetorical analysis, Johnson examines how Andrew Tate draws on the cultural capital of religion within the attention economy. The article considers how Tate’s

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public conversion to Islam, alongside subsequent controversies, circulate within broader narratives of masculinity in digital culture, demonstrating how religion can operate as an identity marker and symbolic resource that can be publicly performed and strategically deployed within digital culture.

Jason Bartashius's "'Don't Be That [Queer] Guy': Evangelical Fight Club Ministries and the Omission of Homophobia in Christian Articulations of Hypermasculinity," extends the focus on hypermasculinity and religion by examining how media texts are appropriated within religious contexts to address perceived crises of masculinity. Focusing on the uptake of *Fight Club* among evangelical leaders, the article analyses how hypermasculine identities are constructed through selective theological framing. In doing so, it highlights how media is used to model and reinforce particular forms of Christian masculinity, while obscuring underlying tensions around gender and sexuality.

Genn Ruan's "Thai BL Fandom in the Ruins of Modernity and Chinese Queer Imaginaries Animated by Religiosity" situates crisis within the context of Chinese modernity and its impacts on queer identity. Drawing on theories of the 'contact zone' (Pratt) and 're-enchantment' (Yang), Ruan explores how Chinese fans of Thai Boys' Love media draw on religious discourse to reframe queer desire. The article introduces the concept of 're-enchanting acculturation' to describe how fandom operates as a site where modernity is both contested and reconfigured, demonstrating how religion functions as a cultural resource within transnational media engagement.

In the final article, "*Of All the People on God's Earth*": Biblical Reading of an AI Apocalypse in *I, Robot*", Kelsey and Hannah Ridge examine the representation of artificial intelligence in *I, Robot* through a theological lens. Drawing on scripture and science fiction scholarship, the authors expand existing interpretations of the film by identifying a broader theological framework that includes figures such as Satan, Moses, and the Holy Ghost. This article shifts the focus from everyday digital crises to speculative and theologically grounded future, highlighting the continued relevance of religious narratives in interpreting technological change.

Taken together, these articles demonstrate that crisis is not merely an external condition impacting media and religion, but a constitutive force that shapes how religion is defined, mediated, and experienced. Across digital platforms, influencer cultures, religious communities, fandoms, and popular media, crisis functions as a productive tension that destabilizes established categories while

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enabling new forms of meaning-making. This aligns with broader shifts in the study of media and religion, which increasingly emphasize fluidity, hybridity, and the entanglement of cultural, technological, and political processes.

At a moment when global societies are grappling with overlapping crises, from political polarization and technological disruption to cultural and epistemological uncertainty, this special issue offers a timely intervention. By foregrounding the interplay between media, religion, and crisis, it invites scholars to reconsider not only how religion is mediated, but how it is continually remade through the very conditions that appear to threaten it.

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“TikTok Refugees”, RedNote, and the Crisis of ‘Religion’

LAUREN HORN GRIFFIN

Abstract

In January 2025, after months of uncertainty surrounding a possible ban, American TikTok users faced the prospect of the platform’s shutdown. In response, more than one million self-described “TikTok refugees” migrated to the Chinese social media app Xiaohongshu, known in English as RedNote, in search of an alternative digital space. In an unexpected moment of cross-cultural interaction, American and Chinese users exchanged information about language, culture, everyday life, and platform norms. The rapid, though brief, adoption of RedNote in the days leading up to the TikTok ban provides a compelling example of how global hyperconnectivity shapes rhetorics of religion in new ways. This article examines the initial weeks of interaction between American and Chinese users on RedNote as a case study of how the concept of religion is constructed and negotiated through internet censorship.

Introduction

While government officials in the United States framed the TikTok ban as a matter of national security and data protection, some TikTok creators interpreted it differently, emphasizing themes of state censorship and control (Maheshwari). For example, influencer Emily Ratajkowski argued that the ban reflected the fact that TikTok is “one of the few platforms that isn't completely controlled by the United States government, or through corporations that have the United States government's interest in mind, progressive politics have been able to blossom on here.” Similar arguments appear in commentary by Aron Solomon and Arwa Mahdawi. For users of the platform, particularly those whose livelihoods depended on it, the impending ban represented a significant crisis. With more than 150 million users in the United States and nearly two billion globally, TikTok has become a central infrastructure for communication, cultural production, and income generation. For many creators and small businesses who rely on the platform’s monetization systems and algorithmic visibility, the prospect of a ban represented not only a symbolic restriction on

speech but also a material disruption to livelihoods embedded in the creator economy (Slotta).

As American users joked about fleeing censorship, they found themselves navigating another heavily censored platform that limited discussions on topics ranging from finance to religion (Fu and Tobin). Some American creators reported receiving violation notices for mentioning religion, even as RedNote struggled to adjust its guidelines to accommodate a growing international user base.¹ Despite warnings against promoting religion on the app, there were thousands of posts on RedNote exploring topics from West African cosmology to Islam (Fu et al.). However, as American users flooded the platform, Chinese users explained what types of religious discourse are and are not permitted. Widely circulated English translations of RedNote's Community Guidelines indicate that keywords such as "Bring Good Luck," "Feng Shui," and "Bringing Health and Wealth" are prohibited, categories that American users might not typically associate with religion. These definitional differences are of course shaped by the respective geopolitical histories of China and the United States.

This tension highlights another crisis familiar within the field of religious studies: the crisis of definition. Scholars have long questioned what counts as religion, who gets to decide, and who benefits from those rhetorical structures (Smith; McCutcheon; Masuzawa). These debates are now happening on global social media platforms, including RedNote, adding new layers to already complex and competing interpretations of religion. To challenge essentialist claims about religion and crisis, for example, that religion inherently alleviates crises or, conversely, produces them, it is first necessary to interrogate the category of religion itself. This critical approach is well established in religious studies, though it has not always been effectively communicated across disciplines. Religious studies scholars have long interrogated the category of religion, challenging the assumption that it names a stable, universal object in the world. Thinkers such as Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood demonstrate that religion is not simply a bounded system of beliefs and practices, but a historically contingent category shaped by power and governance. Scholars such as J. Z. Smith and Russell McCutcheon show how these categories do more than classify; they structure social worlds. McCutcheon, in particular, demonstrates how in the history of the United States,

¹ For example, a TikTok user with the handle @gospelguide1 claims his RedNote account was suspended: "My experience on RedNote day one." *TikTok*, 18 Jan. 2025, https://www.tiktok.com/@gospelguide1/video/7461138548754779438?_r=1&_t=ZP-94zGt9EIXZn; for more claims of RedNote censorship, see McCartney.

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the rhetoric of religion created an idea of a secular sphere over which ‘beliefs’ should have no bearing, thus domesticating cultural material seen as divisive. Critical approaches to religion emphasize how religion functions as a governing frame, “a manner of classifying, symbolizing, or schematizing, usually intended to explain the arrangement or working of a systematic whole” (Lofton 9). In other words, analysis can shift away from essentialist understandings toward examining religion as a social tool for organizing and domesticating cultural material.

This framework is particularly valuable in an age of hyperconnectivity and platformization, where categories such as ‘religion’, ‘tradition’, and ‘superstition’ are continuously produced, contested, and circulated within and across national borders.² In this article, differing uses of these terms within Chinese regulatory discourse, as well as their subsequent reception and reinterpretation by American audiences, reveal how ‘religion’ is not simply regulated by states and platforms but actively constituted through struggles over media access and information. Attending to these category formations underscores the importance of critical religious studies for analyzing how ‘religion’ is produced and transformed within contemporary digital infrastructures.

Hyperconnectivity has fundamentally reshaped how we engage with cultural goods, including those labeled religious. The dematerialization of culture, the shift from bounded, physical objects to digital forms, has rendered cultural materials superabundant, widely accessible, easily remixed, and fragmented into shareable units of content. Some scholars argue that “freely available spiritual traditions” have become commodified online, as practices and symbols circulate like marketable goods within competitive digital economies (Redden 52). At the same time, digital culture appears decommodified in another sense: users have access to an immense archive of readily available material, what Lawrence Lessig terms “free culture” (1-3), while also benefiting from lowered barriers to cultural production, as described by Yochai Benkler in *The Wealth of Networks*. Amateur creators can now distribute their work widely, from photos to music to commentary, often

² I prefer the term hyperconnectivity over other terms used by scholars of digital religion, such as networked (Campbell), mediatized (Hjarvard), or hypermediated (Evolvi). While I am indeed interested in all of those approaches to religion and media, my point of departure is not a religious actor/community/idea nor a particular medium. Rather, my animating question is how all-encompassing hyperconnectivity (immediate and constant connections between people, content, things/commodities) is reshaping ourselves and our social worlds. My focus, then, is on the state of hyperconnectivity that emerged during the 2010s with the smartphone, the expanse of social media, and the platform economy.

without the expectation of monetary gain. Yet this apparent democratization and decommodification is inseparable from the commercial infrastructures that sustain it. As scholars such as José van Dijck argue, user creativity is mediated by platform architectures designed to extract data and generate profit. When culture becomes content, circulating through monetized infrastructures optimized for engagement, the very terms through which people recognize and categorize ‘religion’ are reshaped by the logics of hyperconnectivity.

Methodology and Method

In what follows, this article analyzes “TikTok refugees” and their encounter with ‘religion’ on RedNote as a crisis with two interrelated dimensions: first, a perceived crisis of censorship among users; and second, a crisis of religious definition on which censorship operates. Because what is prohibited depends upon how categories are constructed, the regulation of speech, always shaped by states, corporations, and other institutional powers, cannot be separated from the classificatory frameworks that underwrite it. The issue, therefore, is not simply whether or how ‘religion’ may be discussed, but how ‘religion’ is defined, by whom, and in what contexts. Moreover, this migration of users foregrounds how such definitional struggles are intensified and reconfigured under conditions of hyperconnectivity and platform governance. Social media platforms shape communication not only through overt censorship but also through algorithmic automation and machine learning systems that structure visibility and constrain user autonomy (Andrejevic). This platform controversy provides an opportunity to examine how control operates along a spectrum, complicating binary distinctions between censorship and free expression.

Drawing on Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, this article approaches social media platforms not simply as communication media but as a productive fields of power that generate new formations of knowledge and subjectivity. In this sense, the crisis, understood as debates over religious definition and censorship, does not merely reflect preexisting national differences but actively produces distinct understandings of religion itself.

This article employs a critical discourse analysis (CDA), examining a corpus of RedNote posts, alongside close engagement with platform policies and regulatory frameworks (van Dijk). More specifically, it combines CDA, focused on how categories of ‘religion’, ‘superstition’, and ‘tradition’ are constructed through language and power, with platform analysis (attention to policies, moderation, and governance) and a transnational interpretive approach that traces how these terms shift meaning across historical and cultural contexts.

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I pay particular attention to how these terms are used in the Chinese context and, in turn, communicated to American audiences. By tracing how these categories are deployed, moderated, and recontextualized across linguistic and cultural boundaries, the analysis foregrounds how their meanings are constructed within Chinese governance regimes and subsequently interpreted, reframed, and contested by American users. I analyze how religion is defined and applied on RedNote by examining three data sources: 1) RedNote user posts and comments, 2) RedNote Terms of Service and 3) RedNote Community Guidelines.

After outlining the events that produced American “digital refugees”, I examine debates over what counts as ‘religion’ on RedNote in the two-week period from 10 Jan. to 24 Jan. 2025, including reactions to references to ‘religion’ in the RedNote User Service Agreement and Community Guidelines. Briefly surveying the complex history of ‘religion’, ‘tradition’, and ‘superstition’ in China, this article situates these debates within the context of digital platformitization, expanding on concepts of discipline and governance on social platforms. This case foregrounds two interrelated crises central to the study of media and religion today, one practical and one theoretical. First, it raises questions of censorship, including what forms of religious expression are policed by the state or powerful corporations, how platform users adapt and develop alternative communicative strategies, and how these dynamics reshape public discourse on religion. Second, it underscores a crisis of definition, illustrating that ‘religion’ is not a fixed object but a fluid and contested category that organizes social life differently for international social media users, nation-states, and technology companies operating through algorithmic governance. Ultimately, this case reveals how digital hyperconnectivity has generated a new sociotechnical terrain in which the category of religion is continually manufactured and circulated.

“TikTok Refugees” and RedNote Users Discuss Religion

How did TikTok users, fleeing what they perceived as state censorship, come to see themselves as digital “refugees” on a Chinese-owned platform? TikTok is owned by ByteDance, a Chinese company that has long prompted data security concerns among United States lawmakers. Although efforts to restrict or ban the app in the United States had circulated for years, often stalled by court rulings or political gridlock, Congress passed the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act in Apr. 2024, requiring ByteDance to divest TikTok or face a nationwide ban. TikTok challenged the

law on free speech grounds, appealing to the Supreme Court of the United States (Kircher and Tumin). On 10 Jan. 2025, the Court ruled that the federal government has the authority to enforce the ban. On 18 Jan. the day before the ban was scheduled to take effect, TikTok voluntarily suspended its United States services (Kircher and Tumin). For approximately fourteen hours, users were unable to access the app and instead encountered a pop-up message explaining its temporary unavailability (see Fig. 1).

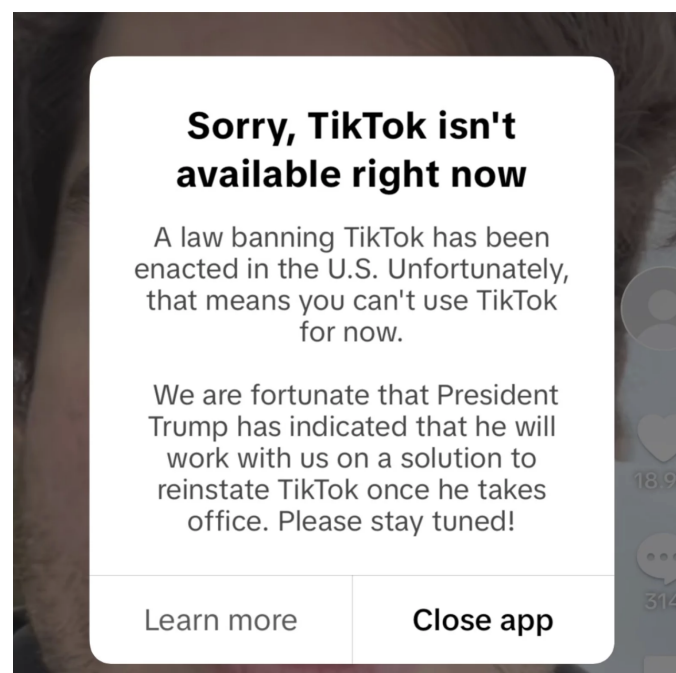


Fig 1. Screenshot of the message displayed to United States users when they attempted to open TikTok ahead of the ban's scheduled implementation.

Before this controversy, TikTok had been perceived by its users as more authentic than other platforms because, at least for a time, users felt that the algorithm privileged creativity and subcultural discovery over polished influencer branding (Schellewald). Thus, the temporary shutdown of TikTok prompted many American users to seek alternative social media platforms, especially those outside the Meta ecosystem. A significant number of users migrated to Xiaohongshu, literally translated to "Little Red Book" and commonly referred to as "RedNote" in English, creating a brief but intense period of interaction between American and Chinese users. Owned by Shanghai-based Xingyin Information Technology and established in 2013, RedNote is a lifestyle platform akin to Pinterest, but with an interface that functions similarly to TikTok. RedNote is commonly considered less politicized

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than other Chinese apps, especially Douyin and Weibo, and, unlike many platforms, it is not blocked by the “Great Firewall,” a term used to describe Chinese authorities’ strategic use of technological and legal mechanisms to regulate the Internet.

Following the TikTok shutdown, RedNote topped the App Store charts for two consecutive days. Americans and other international users, drawn by the presence of American users, flooded the platform. Over 700,000 American users joined within two days, and more than one million eventually downloaded the app.³ While the sudden cross-cultural exchanges among users may have tested the limits of state control, but official Chinese state media and analysts framed the event as positive (Tan and Wang). Once inaugurated on 20 Jan. 2025, President Donald Trump delayed enforcement of the TikTok ban through a series of executive actions, allowing TikTok to remain operational while negotiations continued. As of 22 Jan. 2026, TikTok’s United States operations are majority-owned by TikTok USDS Joint Venture LLC, backed by Oracle, Silver Lake, and MGX, with ByteDance retaining a 19.9% minority stake and Oracle overseeing United States user data security. Because TikTok ultimately remained accessible to United States users, the surge of engagement with RedNote proved temporary. Nevertheless, this brief case in Jan. 2025 offers a revealing example of the cultural exchanges and classificatory tensions that emerged during a moment of perceived platform displacement.

Chinese users largely welcomed American “TikTok refugees” with excitement and curiosity, treating the influx as an opportunity for cultural exchange (see Tan and Wang). Users enthusiastically shared tips on food, culture, and daily life. American users paid a “cat tax”, sharing images of cats and other pets, and asked questions about what life was like in China. Users also expressed shared concerns about state censorship in both countries. As Chinese creators posted tutorials to teach newcomers how to navigate the app, they highlighted the rules, regulations, and information that “refugees” should know about social media in China (see Fig. 2).⁴ During this moment of platform migration, users engaged in explicit discussions about media governance. One regulation that Chinese users repeatedly emphasized concerned religion, as they

³ These numbers are estimated by Reuters, see <https://www.reuters.com/technology/over-half-million-tiktok-refugees-flock-chinas-RedNote-2025-01-14/>.

⁴ For example, see “To all the refugees! What U should know!”, *RedNote*, 17 Jan. 2025, <http://xhslink.com/o/6ls0hD6hxi9>.

explained that sensitive topics such as politics or religion could lead to users being banned from the platform.⁵



Fig. 2. A post explaining the rules of RedNote to American users.

Understandably, the regulation of religion on Chinese social media led to discussions about what counts as ‘religion’, what counts as ‘doing religion’, and what is generally acceptable to censors in China. Curious American users hoping to remain on the platform flooded the comments with questions and examples such as: “Is talking about religion for educational purposes allowed?”; “What about religious art, jewelry, or clothing?”; “Does astrology count as religion?”; “What about family traditions and holidays?” (Fig 3.). Chinese users attempted to reassure the “TikTok refugees”, but they also appeared uncertain about some of the answers.⁶ Some American users immediately attempted to proselytize Chinese users despite explicit warnings against doing so. One creator began a daily Bible reading on the app in an attempt “to bring

⁵ For example, see “5 behaviors get your account banned!!”, *RedNote*, 14 Jan. 2025, <https://xhslink.com/o/1ef5LgyJQMe>.

⁶ For example, see “RedNote citizenship and immigration service”, *RedNote*, 15 Jan. 2025, <http://xhslink.com/o/6HLKjXvqlBQ>; and “5 behaviors get your account banned!!”, *RedNote*, 14 Jan. 2025, <http://xhslink.com/o/1ef5LgyJQMe>.

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Christianity to China.” Top comments included “Yes I love people are preaching here already!!!” and “Wow, the door opens [...] nothing can stop His will.”⁷ While many American users seized the opportunity to promote Christian beliefs, others criticized the practice, encouraging users to follow platform policies: “We are guests here. It’s like using any site, make sure you follow the rules.” Although American users understood their presence on RedNote as a consequence of perceived government censorship, many expressed a willingness to respect platform rules and learn forms of self-censorship from Chinese users. Others even welcomed the restriction of religion, viewing it as freeing and refreshing, as one user put it: “No religion? I freaking love it here” (see Fig. 3). However, after the first few days on RedNote, Americans users began to notice that there was, in fact, a significant amount of ‘religion’ on the platform. From Chinese mythology to Islam, “TikTok refugees” encountered a wide range of content they identified as religion in China (see Fig. 4).⁸

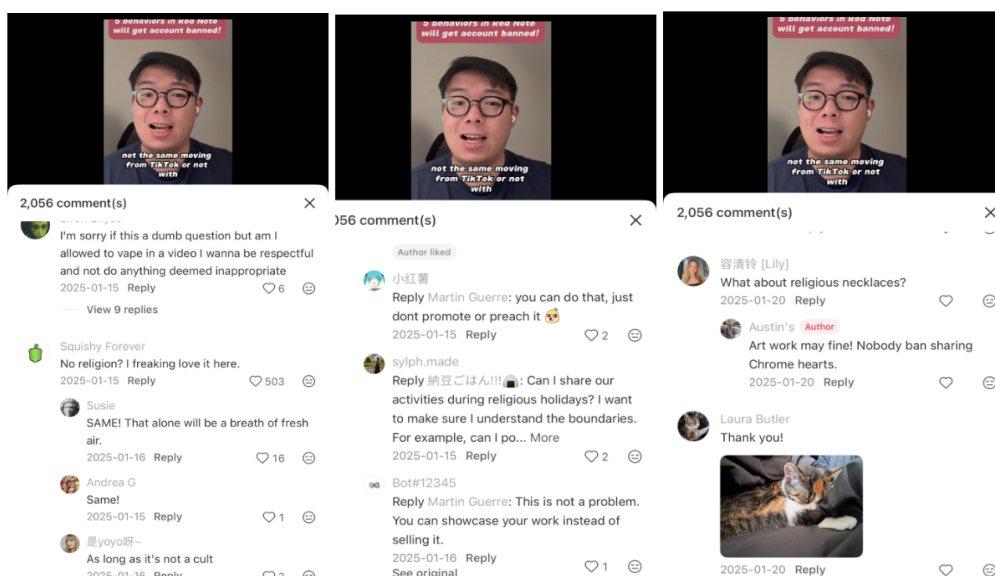


Fig. 3. Screenshots of discussions about religion on RedNote.

⁷ For example, see “Scripture Reading”, *RedNote*, 14 Jan. 2025, <http://xhslink.com/o/Az8N3XnXHSx>.

⁸ For example, see “Introduce Chinese mythology to foreign friends”, *RedNote*, 17 Jan. 2025, <http://xhslink.com/o/17VleyYvWjs>; “Religion in China Islam mosque tomb 清真教,” *RedNote*, 19 Jan. 2025, <http://xhslink.com/o/98JO4ZQbWl6>.



Fig. 4. A RedNote post about 'Chinese mythology' and 'religion'.

Chinese users also asked Americans users about religion in the United States. For instance, one post from a Chinese user asked whether "religious trauma" is a real phenomenon (see Fig. 5). Recent research shows that Chinese social media features a wide range of content, from tarot to Taoism (Fu et al.). American users quickly discovered that platform regulations are broad, vague, and difficult to enforce, particularly during the week leading up to the TikTok ban, when international users flooded the platform. It is also worth noting that later in 2025, China's internet regulator cracked down on the platform, citing its failure to "fulfill its main responsibility of content management" (Zinin).

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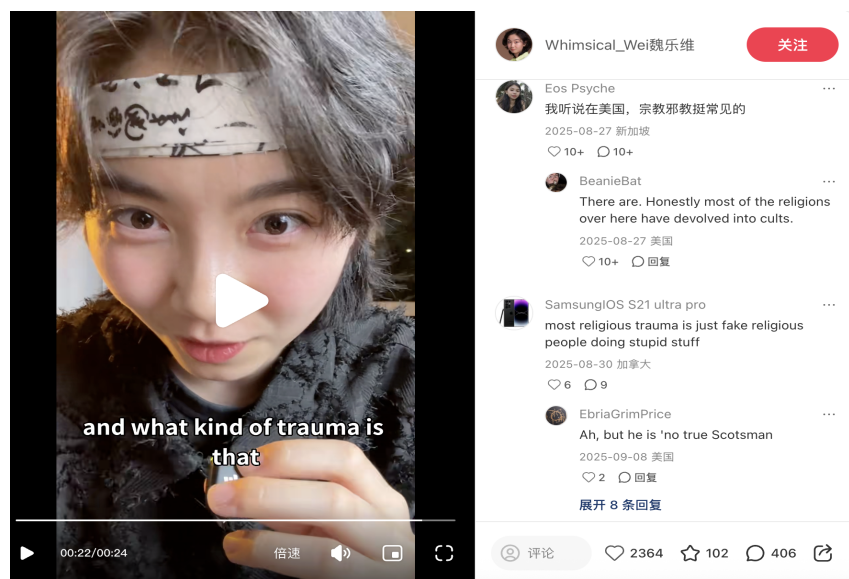


Fig. 5. Post from RedNote user asking Americans about “religious trauma.”

These conversations on RedNote, whether accurate representations or not, shaped how users understood religion as well as the policies of each nation and platform. While many users from both China and the United States highlighted the positive nature of these interactions, American users often expressed confusion about religion, religious freedom, and censorship in China (see Fig. 6). On the newly restored TikTok and other media platforms, users who had encountered RedNote sought clarity by consulting the RedNote User Service Agreement and Community Guidelines.

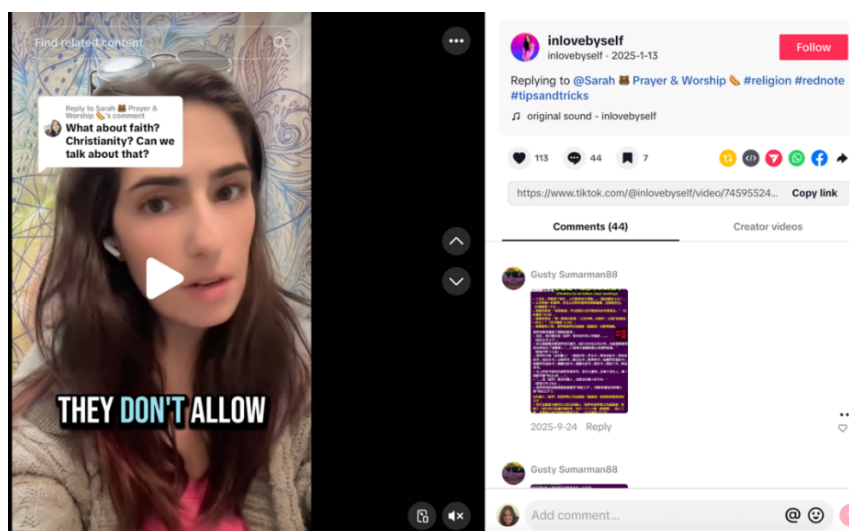


Fig. 6. A TikTok discussing the terms of RedNote and its rules about religion.

RedNote Terms of Service and Community Guidelines

Given warnings from RedNote creators about discussions of religion, American users turned to the platform's official rules and guidelines to determine what they could and could not discuss. RedNote's own English translation of the Terms of Service warns against "inciting the destruction of national religious policies of the People's Republic of China, promoting religious fanaticism, endangering religious harmony, undermining the feelings of religious citizens, undermining the unity between religious and non-religious citizens, and promoting cults and superstitions."⁹ These broad terms left many users wondering what counted as a 'cult' or 'superstition', what 'promotion' entailed, and how users were expected to avoid hurt 'religious feelings'.¹⁰

The Community Guidelines¹¹ provide more specific details, and while the full document is worth reading, I highlight key passages related to discourse that could be considered religious, particularly those that became discussion points among users. According to Jeffrey Hau's translation, RedNote's Community Guidelines include directives to:

- Spread the correct views on history, nationality, state, and culture.
- Promote the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation.
- Uphold social ethics, professional ethics, family and personal virtues, and respect public order and good customs.
- Promote scientific thinking and popularize scientific knowledge.

The term translated as "religion" in English does not appear until Section 2.1 Laws and Regulations, which includes warnings against posting "content that undermines national religious policies, promotes cults or feudal superstitions." Under Section 2.2 Legal Rights of Minors, RedNote regulates "content involving minors' bad behavior, such as teaching religion, drinking alcohol, smoking, or cult-like cartoons." Further, in Section 4 Improper Behavior, RedNote warns against "posting content that does not align with mainstream public beliefs." This treatment and application of religion differ from the

⁹ See the RedNote Terms of Service at <https://agree.xiaohongshu.com/h5/terms/ZXXY20250119002/-1>.

¹⁰See, for example, "Religion and RedNote", *TikTok*, 13 Jan. 2025, https://www.tiktok.com/@inlovebysself/video/7459552425087798574?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7129892477399090734.

¹¹ For the Community page, see Xiaohongshu Community Guidelines. *Xiaohongshu*, 24 Dec. 2021, <https://agree.xiaohongshu.com/h5/terms/ZXXY20221213003/-1>.

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American context, where religion is typically conceived as a personal, belief-based matter that is to be protected and, in some cases, separated from ‘public’ (that is, state) life (McCutcheon). Despite the prominence in the American imagination of ‘the separation of Church and State’, religion has always played a role in political and national life. However, Americans do not typically discuss ‘national religious harmony’ in the same way, nor are they accustomed to encountering such language in statements from state authorities.¹² Thus ‘religion’ is neither universal nor easily translatable across cultural and political contexts.

Some community guidelines primarily focus on selling and marketing. Because of RedNote’s e-commerce function, the platform is particularly concerned with false advertising and the promotion of “mindless spending” in the name of consumer protection. In this vein, Jeffrey Hau explains that “religion or superstition-related keywords are also a big no-no on the platform, as the Chinese government aims to only promote scientific thinking among citizens.” This aspect confused American users; after all, what does discussing religion have to do with consumer protection? In his discussion of prohibited keywords on RedNote, Hau identifies the prohibition on “Words Related to Superstitions & Religions: ‘Bring Good Luck’, ‘Feng-Shui’, ‘Bringing Health and Wealth’ etc.,” which led users to question whether this should be understood as an attack on religious freedom or as a form of consumer protection, a regulatory effort to limit “spam” and “slop.” However, framing these regulations solely in terms of protection versus censorship, or socialism versus capitalism, obscures another key concern: Western excess, which is often treated as a foreign and destabilizing force similar to religion. Practices such as feng shui, ‘click-for-luck’ content, and related forms of clickbait are viewed less as ‘religious’ threats than as mechanisms of consumerism and frivolous self-enrichment. Building on longstanding arguments in religious studies, from Walter Benjamin’s formulation of capitalism as a religion to more recent work on self-optimization, these cultural forms can be understood as producing neoliberal subjects oriented toward accumulation and individualism (Martin). Chinese authorities seek to limit such cultural resources, whether labeled ‘religious,’ ‘cultural,’ or ‘superstitious,’ because they conflict with the Chinese Communist Party’s vision of social order and economic discipline (Zhai).

¹² This is changing, though, with the recent rise in articulations of “Christian nationalism” even among high-ranking state officials. See Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons. “Pete Hegseth’s Christian Nationalist Crusade Is a Threat to Religious Freedom”. *Newsweek*, 10 Dec. 2024, www.newsweek.com/pete-hegseths-christian-nationalist-crusade-threat-religious-freedom-opinion-1998733.

On a Reddit thread titled “The major bullet points of the RedNote Terms of Service translated into English (through Google Translate)”, users attempted to interpret what these guidelines meant. The emphasis on tradition and harmony struck some American users as unusual while others explained that such language is considered typical in the Chinese context. One user noted that “the national unity, harmony stuff has been around for ages, pretty standard for a Chinese app’s ToS”.¹³ Hau, as we saw, argued that ‘religion’ in this context referred to what Americans might call ‘superstition’, reflecting the Chinese government’s promotion of science and rationality. Rather than a mistranslation, this confusion of terms points to the need to examine the historical construction of ‘religion’ in China.

‘Religion’ in China and the Political Economy of Platforms

China has a long history of both religious diversity and state regulation. Much of this regulatory tension stems from the colonial-era term *zongjiao*, which entered China from nineteenth-century Japan as a translation of the English term ‘religion.’ It carried assumptions of formal organization and exclusivity that conflicted with earlier, more diffuse Chinese understandings of culture and practice.

In the first half of the twentieth century, China’s Nationalist government prioritized national unity, viewing many religions as dangerous “superstitions” that could undermine the nation. In *Superstitious Regimes*, Rebecca Nedostup detailed how leaders argued that loyalty to the party-state and a shared national identity should replace local ‘religious’ identities. Although the Nationalist Party under Chiang Kai-shek officially recognized Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, and Islam, it considered local Chinese traditions too superstitious and promoted the destruction of temples (Nedostup). With the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the government banned local Chinese traditions, from ancestor veneration to spirit mediums. Beginning in the late 1970s, the state relaxed some of its social controls, allowing officially recognized religions and previously banned local traditions to flourish, even as all remained formally under Party oversight (Johnson). During both the Republican and PRC eras, authorities labeled religious practices outside officially recognized institutions as “superstition” (*mixin*) (Yang).

¹³u/LinusTechTips. “The Major Bullet Points of the RedNote Terms of Service”. *Reddit*, Jan. 2025, https://www.reddit.com/r/LinusTechTips/comments/1i2ljy/the_major_bullet_points_of_the_RedNote_terms_of/.

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In the twenty-first century, traditional religions in China have been reframed through a new lens. The ratification and implementation of UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Convention in 2006 marked a turning point by rehabilitating practices once dismissed as backward or superstitious, though often through reinterpretations that downplay overtly “supernatural” elements (Dutournier and Padovani). Xi Jinping’s rise to power in 2013 further exemplified this shift. Rather than pursuing either wholesale suppression or the looser approach of the reform era, the state has pursued a carefully managed approach to reviving “traditional” practices. Under Xi Jinping, certain traditions are selectively promoted while others are tightly restricted, indicating a strategic negotiation of religion rather than a simple logic of ban versus support. Ian Johnson argues that this approach may be better understood as a form of Chinese “civil religion,” drawing on Robert Bellah’s formulation.

In fact, since 2015, “Sinicization” (i.e., to make something more Chinese in character) has become the slogan that guides Chinese official policy toward religion. As part of this cultural harmonization effort, Xi aims to align religions and institutions with national identity. Articulated at the Communist Party’s United Front Work Department (UFW) in 2015, he reiterated the importance of guiding religious communities to establish “correct views” on the Chinese nation and history, with the goal of fostering a stronger sense of cultural identity with Chinese civilization. While the Sinicization project is an explicit attempt to steer Chinese culture, people do not simply fall in line; for example, scholars like Ziyang You and Richard Madsen show that religious practitioners are using the slogan either to sincerely attempt to adapt traditional practices to their modern cultural context or to protect their faith by merely offering lip service to government demands, or some combination of the two. So, while a crackdown from above does not always result as intended, ‘religion’ is nevertheless reshaped through its negotiation.

Whether driven by fear of foreign influence (Chang) or fear of religious extremism from within China (Madsen), Xi Jinping’s government and the Communist Party (CCP) has worked particularly hard to regulate religion on the internet. At the 2016 National Religious Work Conference, the CCP reaffirmed its previous strategy of steering religious practice, especially in response to foreign influence and perceived extremism, both of which were thought to be exacerbated by digital hyperconnectivity. The 2016 and 2018 updates to the Administration’s Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA) added new language that reflected the state’s growing concern over the internet and its role in spreading unapproved religious content (Chang). In 2018, the State

Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) was absorbed into the CCP's United Front Work Department, and new regulations were introduced between 2019 and 2021. The 2021 Measures on the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services target online activity, reflecting Xi's effort to tighten the online circulation of religion (Lavicka and Chen). For example, they restrict organizations and individuals from proselytizing or broadcasting religious content such as burning incense and baptism (Order No. 17).

In sum, China's approach to 'religion' is neither uniform nor easily categorized. Both China's historical and contemporary political context complicate approaches to the state's treatment of 'religion,' 'tradition,' and 'superstition.' The complex interplay of these terms, especially in the context of hyperconnectivity, reflects ongoing tensions between rural versus urban, indigenous versus foreign, primitive versus modern (read: rational), and local vs national.

Framing this dynamic simply as a tension between state control and popular freedom obscures how these platforms actually operate. Negotiation is a better lens, as the Chinese government both encourages and restricts platformization. While increasing digitization by expanding information technology and encouraging entrepreneurship and innovation, digital platforms are also subjected to strict regulations and ideological framing. China's Director of Cyberspace Administration explicitly states that "adhering to the correct political direction and directing public opinions and value orientations are the top priorities" (Ye and Qu). Within this context and its emphasis on values, digital platforms closely align their operations with government priorities through collaboration on anti-poverty programs as well as content regulation, constantly negotiating their autonomy in exchange for state support (Fu et al.). It is against this backdrop that 'religion' flows through Chinese social media platforms, including RedNote.

Chinese authorities have long recognized that content categorized as religious, however defined, can shape civic culture and contribute to forms of collective identity. Zhang and Mao's analysis of fan activism in China illustrates how popular culture has similarly been understood as a potentially conservative force, capable of fostering collaboration, knowledge sharing, and volunteerism that may cultivate participatory forms of civic culture. For that reason, the state has allowed certain popular elements that could be labelled 'religion.' At the same time, Chinese state media occasionally criticize these same phenomena for promoting a kind of superstition that might negatively influence society (Fu et al.). State control of popular culture in China, including religion, is an ongoing political process that shifts in response to new developments.

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In sum, although practices outside officially recognized religions have historically been dismissed as superstition or illegitimate, the state selectively promotes certain ‘religious’ practices as cultural resources, reworking them for modern political and economic purposes. In this sense, religion is permitted and even encouraged on RedNote when they align with state narratives or goals, but it is always subject to ideological framing. This further illustrates that the categorization of ‘religion’ and ‘tradition’ is not static, and that state institutions and technology platforms do not apply these categories consistently. Rather, these categories are continually negotiated within shifting structures of power.

‘Religion’ as a Disciplinary Technology in a Hyperconnected World

Global hyperconnectivity does not mean that content flows freely around the world. International politics and state policies shape what content is available and how it is framed, while the affordances of digital platforms also influence how people communicate. Hyperconnectivity transforms culture, including religion, into endlessly circulating digital content: abundant, remixable, and seemingly free, yet deeply embedded in platform economies that monetize participation and visibility. As culture becomes content, the categories through which religion is defined and understood is reshaped by the commercial and algorithmic logics that structure digital life.

Governments, especially authoritarian regimes, attempt to regulate the Internet while also allowing and strategically using major media platforms for their own purposes (MacKinnon). The idea of a digital spiritual marketplace and the proliferation of religious discussion on Chinese social media are often framed as a zero-sum game: either state censorship successfully contains religion online, or users successfully evade control by continuing these practices (Zhai). This platform migration case challenges that neat formulation. Expression, regulation, and response form an ongoing process in which users speak about religion but do so through careful framing and self-censorship that reflect more subtle forms of discipline. In this sense, control operates not only through prohibition but also through shaping how religion can be discussed. Similar dynamics are visible in the United States, where regulation is exercised less by the state than by technology companies, platform affordances, and algorithmic circulation (Brubaker). Focusing too narrowly on the Chinese state’s broad, vague, and often unenforceable rules can obscure the ways in which American media users are also governed and disciplined, in a broad Foucauldian sense. Encouraging users to self-censor, even as discussion of

religion proliferates, remains a powerful means of domesticating cultural material deemed divisive.

Users adapt their language based on what they believe will be censored, whether by the state or by platform algorithms, resulting in new terms and gestures. As Kristi Lu Stout has noted, “a new lexicon has emerged on the Chinese internet, consisting of code words, homonyms, and vocabulary laced with mockery, satire, or sarcasm” (see Shao). For example, creators use the term “harmonized” to refer to being censored, and phrases such as “grass mud horse” (or “cao ni ma”), which sounds like Chinese profanity. In fact, “grass mud horse” has evolved as a symbol of resistance to censorship, generating images and creative expressions across social media (Shao). Americans engage in similar forms of self-censorship on social media in fear of platform moderation and algorithmic suppression (see Ungless et al.). To avoid content removal or reduced visibility, users adopt coded language and euphemisms, such as “l\$bean” for lesbian or the grape emoji to refer to rape and sexual assault, allowing discussions of censored topics to continue.

Americans tend to view Chinese media as heavily controlled while viewing the United States’s media as “free”.¹⁴ This platform migration case, on the other hand, cautions users against drawing too sharp a distinction between surveillance and censorship in China and in liberal democratic countries such as the United States. Not only because American digital “refugees” had to briefly flee what they saw as an act of government censorship, but also because they discovered how the terms and policies of platforms themselves can obscure forms of governance. This case raises the question of how ‘religious freedom’ in the United States may mask forms of state control that police what is and is not protected in public spaces (see Sullivan). On RedNote, users encountered practices ranging from Taoism to Tarot card reading, and from Christianity to feng shui. Religion, spirituality, tradition, and even superstition are not banned outright; rather, they are carefully regulated and framed.

In this way, moments like the TikTok crisis prompt popular discussions of the ways in which big technology companies in both the United States and China structure discourse about religion through their policies and the affordances of their platforms (Griffin). Moderating and algorithmically circulating religious content subtly shifts the way users discuss and imagine ‘religion’ itself. For example, whereas RedNote relies on community guidelines

¹⁴ According to a 2021 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, in an open-ended question asked only in the United States about what people think about when they think about China, over 9% mentioned how the Chinese people lack freedom of speech due to government control (see Silver et al.).

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to encourage users to police content, other platforms like Bilibili employ pop-up warnings. As Fu et al. argue, the cumulative effect of these moderating mechanisms is a form of “disenchantment”: platforms and users alike present such content as cultural knowledge or entertainment rather than sacred practice, maintaining distance through plausible deniability and a playful tone rather than reverence (84). Writing about the American context, tech writer Nicholas Carr argues that by flattening content and forcing it all into direct competition, platforms have a trivializing effect: a presidential policy announcement sits beside a cat video, a religious ritual precedes a makeup tutorial. Americans creating religious content, whether on TikTok or RedNote, participate in this collapsed communicative infrastructure. In other words, when religion becomes content, the undifferentiated distribution of the endless scroll erases barriers or context and information, reducing even serious or complex information to the same level as the most mundane or superficial posts. In this way, social media companies exert a control over how we communicate, both in terms of censorship and in automation – algorithmic decision making and machine learning create new forms of control that pose challenges to individual autonomy (see Andrejevic). Communication can be shaped not only through censorship but also through disciplinary mechanisms, and this case has prompted everyday social media users to question strict binaries between censorship and non-censorship.

As the experiences of “TikTok refugees” on RedNote highlight, not all instances of censorship and surveillance are unilateral or authoritarian. At the same time, social media platforms provide resources for projects of control. Deleuze anticipates this dynamic in his account of “societies of control,” which succeeded Foucault’s “disciplinary societies.” Sociologist Rogers Brubaker explains that control and discipline do not need to be viewed in opposition: “On a broader understanding of discipline, not restricted to physically enclosed spaces like the prison, the factory, or the school, digitally enabled modes of ‘modulatory’ control do not supersede discipline; they extend and deepen discipline by making it more flexible and pervasive” (166). As this case shows, social media companies enclose social life within platforms that continually shape and regulate behavior through ongoing “modulating” control. In other words, social media platforms in both the United States and China function as disciplinary spaces in much the same way that physical enclosures historically have. The interpretation, reaction to, and adjustment of discourses of religion provides a key example of this dynamic.

Indeed, this brief “digital refugee” crisis provides a clear example of both the emancipatory and the disciplinary aspects of hyperconnectivity,

highlighting a fundamental tension in the analysis of religion and media in the age of hyperconnectivity. Brubaker (169) summarizes this tension:

[Hyperconnectivity] has opened up new models of reflexively knowing, regulating, and governing the self even as it also creates new ways of being known, regulated, and governed from the outside. It has undermined the power of institutional gatekeepers and opened up public conversations to new voices [...] Yet while hyperconnectivity has empowered individuals in certain respects it has also more profoundly and pervasively empowered organizations: specifically, the organizations that are in a position to extract and analyze data and therefore possess the means of control distraction and manipulation. And while digital hyperconnectivity initially contributed to the decentralization and dispersion of power, the regime of *hyperconnectivity* that has been consolidated in the last decade has entailed an immense recentralization and reconcentration of power.

“TikTok refugees” on RedNote discovered that social media platforms can be democratizing by enabling broader opportunities for international communication that are difficult to oversee. At the same time, these platforms also create unprecedented opportunities for surveillance and control, as well as more subtle disciplinary effects produced by their technological affordances. Finding ways to self-censor discussions of religion through new language and gestures, voluntarily avoiding such discussions, and reframing religious content as entertainment or education serve as key examples of this.

Crisis of Religious Definition

This returns us to the article’s central crisis of religion and media: how should we understand labels applied to ‘religious’ content, particularly in the context of China and RedNote? As the preceding analysis has shown, Chinese content complicates common American understandings of the ‘religious’ and its presumed opposite, the “secular.” Religious studies scholars have long interrogated the concept of religion, demonstrating that it is not a neutral descriptor but a historically and culturally situated category used to discipline certain forms of cultural material. Foundational critiques highlighted how Western definitions often assumed universality, privileging organized, text-based, and doctrinal forms of belief while marginalizing everyday practices, folk traditions, and non-Western cosmologies (Asad; Mahmood; Masuzawa;

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Smith; McCutcheon).¹⁵ The consequences of this are evident in the history of 'religion' in China.

In recent decades, scholars in religious studies have challenged the usefulness of the concept of religion in such contexts, tracing the history of the term's importation into countries such as Japan (Storm) and China (Meyer). Historically, China lacked a native term corresponding to what many Americans understand as 'religion.' The concept entered the country in the late nineteenth century via Japan, where *zongjiao* was used to translate the English word. Originally associated with Buddhist teachings, *zongjiao*'s broader adoption revealed tensions between tradition, local beliefs, and institutions (Yang). Today, many Chinese people engage with multiple figures (ancestors, deities, ideas) and practices across traditions, reflecting a flexible and nonexclusive understanding of religion.¹⁶ Contemporary debates over Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) further illustrate how the boundaries between religion, tradition, and superstition are negotiated (You).

Thus, on one hand, China has long been religiously plural, at least when viewed through a Western lens. Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist, and local traditions have long coexisted and interacted. Religions such as Buddhism and Daoism lack explicit membership rites, so many people draw on these traditions without strict or formal religious identities (Yang). On the other hand, this nonexclusive and fluid approach exists within the same state that has heavily regulated content deemed religious or spiritual (Goossaert and Palmer). As the analysis in this article illustrated, practices outside recognized institutions can be labelled as superstitious, while more recently the state has embraced certain ritual practices as cultural resources for national, political, and economic ends. In sum, “spiritual practices are tolerated or even encouraged when aligned with state narratives, yet still subject to ideological framing” (Zhai 3). While the Chinese state has articulated formal mechanisms for regulating religious life, the United States narrates itself as a nation founded on religious freedom. Yet, as scholars from Robert Bellah to Talal Asad have observed, American ideals of religious liberty are structured by a dominant Protestant establishment that has shaped the moral and political contours of public life. In other words, in both nations religion functions as a tool in the cultural toolbox that can be used to authorize, authenticate, or (de)legitimize.

¹⁵ These and other critiques have detailed the development of the modern understanding of religion alongside colonial governance and Protestant theological assumptions, highlighting how this now-dominant understanding masks the political work performed by the category itself.

¹⁶ For a recent evaluation of the consequences of the term, see Meyer.

Moreover, this case study shows how hyperconnectivity both contributes to and challenges how we understand the relationship between religion and national identities. In many ways, internet platforms reproduce nations as a defining identity structure; from the architecture of internet domains to the algorithmic ties, national ecosystems are strengthened amidst the global hyperconnection of the internet (Mihelj and Martínez 331-2). China's Great Firewall accomplishes this even more thoroughly, blocking access to selected foreign websites and slowing international social communication. At the same time, some studies suggest that information flows can also weaken, fragment, or erode national identity (Lu and Yu). Hyperconnectivity can not only challenge a particular nation's identity (i.e., national loyalty) but rather nationalism altogether (i.e., the nation-state as our main source of organization and collective identity). In both nations, religion, too, has been understood both as a source of national division (as in contemporary debates surrounding Christian nationalism in the United States) or as a public good. In either case, the categorization of what 'religion' includes, and how it is thought to function is evaluated based on its strategic potential as a cultural resource for national identification, particularly as it circulates rapidly online. Notably, this platform migration case revealed instances of cross-cultural solidarity and engagement between American and Chinese users, even amid broader tensions driven by geopolitical rivalry.

Religion, then, even from the viewpoint of more authoritarian governments, can be seen as divisive, foreign, backward, harmonizing, and useful all at the same time. Online religious content is likewise too fluid and unruly to be evaluated through a simplistic binary. Over the last century, China has taken a more direct and unqualified approach to controlling certain cultural material, while the United States has maintained a rhetorically canny approach that often masks or downplays state power over material deemed religious. Thus, in both China and the United States, religious censorship and its counterpart, religious freedom, do not merely regulate religion; they actively produce 'religion' itself, a rhetorical concept that enables certain meanings and institutions. In other words, this was never simply an issue of semantics or translation, but the production, to return to Lofton, of a schema that has always been bound up in structures of power. Global digital platforms have now given rise to a new sociotechnical environment in which the category of religion operates, further complicating how religion is defined and deployed.

Conclusion

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The migration of TikTok users to RedNote serves as a microcosm of the theoretical issues involved in studying religion, media, and crisis: how is the category of religion produced, policed, and circulated in the age of global hyperconnectivity. Religious studies scholarship offers important insights into the crisis of religious censorship by framing it not just as a restriction on information, but as a mechanism for producing and maintaining the very concept itself. Drawing on such thinkers as Smith and Asad, emphasizes how power operates through the regulation of speech, not only in what is explicitly regulated, but in how norms of ‘acceptable’ religious discourse are formed online. This dynamic takes on new characteristics under platformitization, as the affordances of social media platforms now, often invisibly, structure users’ discourses. In the United States, discussions often focus on surveillance and privacy but pay less attention to the more subtle disciplinary effects of platformitization. From this perspective, censorship is not merely about suppression but about shaping the conditions of what counts as legitimate religious expression or identity.

Similarly, the articulation of religion as a category in China as well as Chinese ‘religious’ practices themselves, shifts in relation to initiatives such as ICH programs and, most recently, the push toward Sinicization. As Chinese RedNote users attempt to avoid censorship, discussions around religion and spirituality are reframed and articulated in new ways. When religion becomes content, content moderation techniques and the undifferentiated distribution of the endless scroll erase barriers and context, reducing ‘religious’ material to the level of the mundane and trivial. Furthermore, user migration to alternative platforms revealed how quickly shifts in regulation can reshape online publics, producing new communities, and new acts of identification.

This example, drawing on China’s historical and contemporary political context, complicates common approaches to ‘religious’ content on social media. The encounter of ‘religion,’ ‘tradition,’ and ‘superstition’ by TikTok refugees on RedNote reflects Chinese authorities’ long-held negotiation of indigenous versus foreign, primitive versus modern, and local versus national categories. Framing this dynamic simply as a tension between state control and popular freedom obscures how digital platforms actually operate. Instead, this case challenges simplistic notions of ‘religious censorship’ and ‘religious freedom,’ reframing censorship as a site where religious and national identity are produced, maintained, and contested. The “TikTok refugees” brief engagement with RedNote also serves as a reminder of that social actors mobilize ‘religion’ in multiple ways. For Chinese authorities, religion can appear simultaneously as a foreign influence to be contained, a potential source of social disruption,

and a cultural resource capable of generating national loyalty. For many Americans, religion is framed as a personal and sacred domain that must be protected from state interference, a belief system publicly linked to national identity, and at times a nuisance from which one would prefer freedom.

This case study contributes to research on religion and social media by highlighting how ‘religion’ is constructed and reconstructed in the age of global hyperconnectivity. The Chinese context, characterized by both platform regulation and diverse religio-cultural traditions, renders this phenomenon particularly legible, highlighting the dynamic between state governments, tech oligarchs, and users themselves. How ‘religion’ is treated, whether as a unifier of national identity or a challenge to it, and whether regulation comes from the state or from platforms, varies across contexts. In both these cases ‘religion’ is bound up with nationality, shaping how TikTok and RedNote users imagine people, place, and identity. Ultimately, this little moment of definitional crisis shows how globalized hyperconnectivity has created an entirely new techno-social infrastructure in which definitions of religion are produced, maintained, and challenged.

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‘Never Let a Good Crisis Go to Waste’: Religion, Performativity, Outrage, and Andrew Tate

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Abstract

While it might be true to say that media have always provided opportunities for individuals to achieve notoriety it is also true that the nature of that notoriety has significantly changed in recent years. People and topics that were scandalous twenty years ago are now acceptably mainstream. There has been a steep and rapid rise of extreme partisanship, misinformation, and deliberate deceit. And one key locus of mediated provocation, disruption, and notoriety – religion – has been particularly connected with the mobilisation of patriarchal and reactionary goals and ideals.

One particularly notorious example here is that provided by Andrew Tate, the ‘king of toxic masculinity’ (Sinmaz), who first reached the public eye as a contestant on Big Brother in the UK in 2016. Tate quickly built a strong following online in the so-called manosphere, and his influencer persona leveraged into a multi-platform self-help / self-improvement movement for men. An often-overlooked component of Tate’s persona, however, is his use of religion and religious cultural markers. While there has been some analysis of and commentary on his conversion to Islam and how that links with other aspects of his persona, to date there has been little enquiry into the techniques and tools Tate uses, and the meanings that audience members make of his messages. This article aims to address this gap and will use both thematic and rhetorical analyses to demonstrate how these beliefs and themes are deployed and discussed, and from there, how we might best critically understand this component of his appeal.

Introduction

The phrase “never let a good crisis go to waste” is usually attributed to Winston Churchill but was most recently popularised through its use by former White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emmanuel (O’Donnell). It speaks to a sense in which crises can be reframed as opportunities, and such reframing is near ubiquitous in self-help discourses and some sectors of the corporate world. It would be wrong, however, to dismiss the phrase as simple positive thinking.

Within the social media dynamics of contemporary communicative media, for instance, it can be mobilized to point to an underlying truth: controversy and (apparent) crisis are now necessary components for influencers rather than risks to be avoided.

At some level, most people who interact with others online accept this: who has not clicked on a listicle because they want to be shocked by number seven even if they know it will take several clicks and provoke several pop-ups to reach that item? In this context, this article postulates that a person in Andrew Tate's position (highly controversial influencer / content creator / right-wing provocateur) would only take drastic and potentially polarising actions (like publicly and proudly converting¹ to Islam) if those actions formed part of a deliberate communication strategy. Here, the sense of crisis has two meanings. At one level, it is objectively risky to embrace Islam within the alt-right² / far-right spaces that Tate typically operates within: these spaces are typically highly critical of Islam if not blatantly Islamophobic. At another level, with the timing of Tate's arrest in Romania on charges including sex trafficking and rape, a public conversion could be seen as a distraction tactic and an attempt to flood the zone with an alternative news story.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to explore - however tentatively - the ideas, ideologies, and interactions Tate and others utilise and deploy on X, the social media platform where Tate's messages have had the most salience within wider popular culture. No matter the degree to which the crisis or sense of crisis was deliberately engendered or manufactured, there is no doubt that choosing to highlight his religion and religious beliefs at the time that he did was a significant risk for Tate. There is at least a strong possibility that choosing to engage with religion in this way represents further evidence that Andrew Tate

¹ I acknowledge that the terms used within Islam that correlate with 'convert' include 'revert' and 'aslama', and that these could be used instead of the western-centric 'convert'. For clarity and simplicity, however, in this article I will employ 'convert' and 'conversion'. Readers are encouraged to substitute whichever term is appropriate for them.

² The term 'alt-right' is increasingly problematic, especially within a critical academic frame. Given that it was initially formulated to obscure the relationship between the contemporary far right and overt fascism historically, anyone using 'alt-right' could be criticised for continuing that obfuscation. The term is also overly descriptive and groups together distinctive and sometimes contradictory positions. There is a clear argument, therefore, to choose more precise ways to label those people, groups, and ideas that fall under the "alt-right" umbrella (see, for instance, Hill). For my purposes, however, using *alt-right* / *far right* to describe Andrew Tate has two benefits. First, it situates him and his ideas in online and offline spaces in a way that broadly aligns with his own position statements. Second, it links to the everyday lived experiences of those who communicate with and about him – whether in support or in opposition, alt right or far right seem to be accepted as conveyors of a complex and developing set of cultural and mediated meanings.

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is a sophisticated and highly skilled communicator, however difficult and disturbing the messages he communicates may be.

Andrew Tate – A Perspective of Critique

Initial analytical or critical engagement with Andrew Tate and his socio-cultural significance first appeared in the liberal popular press. In the context of the United Kingdom (where newspapers in particular are overtly identified with given political positions, if not political parties), it is no surprise that the first meaningful article of this kind was published in *The Guardian*. Journalist Shanti Das’ 2002 article both introduced Tate to a wider audience than that which he had developed on social media and outlined the key problematics of his persona, messages, and products.

Importantly, even at this early point, Das drew explicit attention to Tate’s *Hustler’s University* program. *Hustler’s University* was an affiliate marketing scheme that incentivized thousands of followers to flood social media platforms with deliberately controversial clips of him to drive engagement and earn commissions. This strategy was particularly effective on TikTok, where his content was pushed to young users by the platform’s algorithm, resulting in billions of views. As Laura Naegler, Gabe Mythen, and Jacob Astley conclusively demonstrate, critics in academic and popular media justifiably characterised this content as extreme misogyny because it included claims that women are a man’s property, that victims of sexual assault are to blame for their attacks, and several videos depicting him striking or threatening women.

Such content raised significant alarms among educators and domestic abuse charities, who argued that Tate’s rhetoric was radicalizing young men and boys by normalizing violence and misogynistic attitudes. As a result of this alarm and scrutiny, pressure on social media platforms led to Tate being banned from major social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok for violating policies on hate speech and dangerous individuals. Tate defended his online presence by claiming his videos were taken out of context and that he was merely playing a “comedic character” (Andrew Tate, qtd. in Das).

Senior journalist Emine Sinmaz’s 2023 article in the same newspaper further critiqued Andrew Tate within the mainstream media when she outlined the basis of his and his brother Tristan’s exploitation of women. Sinmaz described how investigators alleged the brothers employed the Loverboy Method, a manipulative tactic where women are lured with false promises of love or marriage before being coerced into producing pornographic content or undertaking sex work (Government of the Netherlands 3-5). These allegations

suggest an organized criminal operation that exploited the emotional vulnerabilities of women, forcing them to work extensive hours under strict schedules while the Tates allegedly kept the proceeds. In effect, this organized criminal operation functioned as a sex trafficking enterprise, which, Sinmaz notes, highlights the increasing intersection between digital influence, hyper-masculinity, and criminal allegations in modern popular culture.

The next major enquiry into Andrew Tate was published in *New Lines* (a liberal American magazine) in 2023. Importantly, Rasha Al Aqeedi's article highlighted Tate's then recent conversion to Islam (Tate announced his conversion in Oct. 2022), which raised complex questions regarding the intersection of religious identity and his existing branding as an Alpha Male. Ahmed notes how Tate's broader social media presence and his influence on digital subcultures that prioritize traditionalist or aggressive masculine ideals had faced significant pushback from mainstream society and technology companies, and how this led to being removed from multiple social media platforms due to misogynistic or harmful content. In the context of his legal troubles, most notably his arrest in Romania, Ahmed positions Tate as a symptom of a larger cultural shift where digital platforms allow for the rapid dissemination of fringe ideologies to a global audience. The argument is that, by branding himself as a successful, untouchable figure of authority, Tate leverages his lifestyle to validate his controversial worldview, creating a feedback loop that sustains his relevance even in the face of legal scrutiny and platform bans. Ultimately, she argues, Tate represents a confluence of digital celebrity, religious performance, and the radicalization of gender roles in the twenty-first century.

Sana Noor Haq enquired into the reactions to Tate's conversion to Islam in her CNN article. While the conversion polarized the Muslim community, Haq noted the strength of negative reactions. For example, Javad Hashmi of Harvard University identified Tate's tendency to focus on a version of the faith centring on male dominance and the ownership of women and how his public persona was further darkened by serious legal charges (qtd. in Haq 12). The legal allegations were mirrored, Haq notes, in personal testimonies from former associates, who describe Tate's manipulative relationship style and its real-world consequences for women. Haq's conclusion was that Tate serves as a critical subject for examining the intersections of digital celebrity, gender politics, and the global spread of traditionalist ideologies.

Similar cautionary analyses featured in further popular and academic publications in that same year. In her Master's thesis in Security, Intelligence & Strategic Studies, Megan Leeming clearly identified how Tate deliberately

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constructed modern liberal democracies and feminist agendas as existential threats to traditional manhood, often referring to this perceived societal control as the Matrix.³ By framing legal systems, taxes, and female empowerment as tools that the general populace uses to control men, Tate thereby created a sense of aggrieved entitlement and crisis among his followers. His solution for this manufactured insecurity was to promote a threat solution rooted in hegemonic masculinity, valorizing physical strength, stoicism, and the accumulation of wealth as tools for individual liberation. Importantly, this solution functions as a gateway drug to more extreme right ideologies, as his narratives utilize the same polarized dynamics and conspiracy-laden rhetoric found in white supremacist and incel movements.

Frans Sayogie et al. connect the publicity around Tate’s banning to the Streisand effect, a psychological and social phenomenon in which attempts to censor or suppress information result in its wider dissemination and the reinforcement of followers’ ideological convictions. They point to Tate successfully migrating his followership to the fringe video-sharing platform Rumble, where the majority of user comments expressed positive affect, judgment, and appreciation toward his content. This shows that, despite being confined to fringe spaces, Tate’s influence expanded beyond the manosphere, which highlights how social media can transform communities from locality-based to affinity-based, fostering a high level of trust in influencers over professional outsiders.

In the Australian context Stephanie Westcott, Steven Roberts and Xuenan Zhao produced the first academic work that specifically focussed on how Tate’s messaging had begun to permeate wider society. They found Tate’s tropes and ideology were increasingly used by boys to challenge the gendered authority of women teachers, often through luring them into so-called debates where the value of women is questioned or Tate’s alleged violent crimes are dismissed as conspiracies. A rhetorical climate of brazen entitlement, where boys demanded excessive labor and feedback from women teachers that is not expected of their male counterparts and emboldened boys adopting patronizing behaviors, such as gaslighting women as hysterical when they address disciplinary issues not only thereby reinforced a hierarchy that positions femininity as subordinate; it also fostered a sense of male victimhood, where boys perceive themselves as disempowered by feminism and use sexual

³ Influencers within the manosphere deliberately use terms like “red pill” and “the Matrix” (from Lana and Lily Wachowski’s 1999 film *The Matrix*) to argue that society has been deceived and manipulated by ideologies like feminism and equality to subjugate and marginalise men and masculinity.

harassment, misogynist slurs, and physical intimidation as tools to reclaim social power.

Westcott et al. also draw attention to the emergent yet profound psychological toll on women teachers where many identified diminished self-efficacy and some felt forced to resign from the profession. At the same time, this resurgent male supremacy often had a hugely detrimental effect on girls' freedom to learn; there was a massive increase in reported silencing comments and slurs, and many girls reported they felt it necessary to remove themselves from classrooms to avoid hostility.

In 2024, Veli Aydoner's Master's thesis re-engaged with Tate's links with Islam when he identified Tate's conversion as a pivotal moment in the emergence of Far-Right Islamic Conservatism (FRIC). FRIC, Aydoner argues, represents a unique synthesis where far-right political discourse is positioned as the actualization of Islamic identity. Here, Tate's ultra-conservatism was the logical starting point for his religious identification rather than an intrinsic growth from within the faith. From the perspective of Islamic political theory, Tate's influence represents the contemporary ideological trend in which far-right tenets can be used to dominate the communal and ecumenical traditions historically associated with the Ummah.⁴ Ultimately, Tate's role as a primary contributor of far-right thought within the Muslim diaspora shifted the focus of political engagement toward the active deterioration of leftist coalitions and the promotion of hierarchical power dynamics, neither of which, Aydoner argues, have any real connection to the material liberation of the global Muslim community.

Online commentary, such as Sajjin Gohel and Eve Register's 2024 blog hosted by the London School of Economics, tied Tate's conversion to a never-ending need to rebrand and refresh his online persona and noted the breadth of his supporters: both the far-right Tommy Robinson in England and the Taliban in Afghanistan publicly expressed support for Tate as a necessary voice against Western feminism. Tate further cements his ubiquity, Gohel and Register contend, through collaborations with the akh right bros,⁵ a collective of male influencers who promote a version of Islam rife with misogyny and patriarchal gender roles. By blending the misogyny of various extremist groups, Tate's platform became a conduit for a new, hybridized ideology that exploits digital

⁴ "Ummah" refers to the whole community of Muslims bound together by ties of religion. It is often parsed as "community" in English speaking discourses.

⁵ Akh right bros is a term that combines the Arabic word for brother (akh) with alt-right ideology.

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networks to normalize systemic gender-based intolerance and fill the void left by the disengagement of moderate voices.

This is not to argue that Tate was an unproblematic figure within Islam, however. Mira Menzfeld’s research within the Germanophone Salafi community identified widespread debate regarding whether Tate acted as a positive advertisement for the faith or if his influence constituted a religious misunderstanding. This debate revealed a distinct generational divide; younger Salafis, typically those under the age of twenty-five, often viewed Tate as possessing a high-profile status that could attract others to Islamic teachings and whose views on gender roles align with their own opposition to feminism. Conversely, older members of Salafism tended to reject him as inherently heretical, citing his involvement in internet pornography and the lack of emotional restraint as evidence of *zinā* (unlawful sexuality) and *bid’a* (sinful religious innovation). Some participants in Menzfeld’s study went so far as to argue that Tate’s persona leads followers toward shirk, or idolatry, by positioning himself as a lawmaker whose personal philosophy supersedes the authority of Allah (93).

Further evidence of Tate’s appeal to young men is identified by Craig Haslop et al. They showed how Tate’s messages were interpreted humorously or ironically and thereby provided a gateway for teenage boys to engage with and support his misogyny. Similar findings can be found in a number of studies: Stephen Roberts and Stephanie Westcott’s study of the relationship between online influencers and boys’ sexist behaviours in schools, Georgia Thomas-Parr and Marcus Gilroy-Ware’s elucidation of Tate’s ability to play the role of surrogate older brother, Sara Analoui’s Master’s thesis which demonstrated the move of the alt-right manosphere from the fringes of socio-political discourse towards the mainstream (for at least a large minority of disaffected young men), and Emma Bloomfield’s research that identified Tate’s emerging role as a “disingenuous scientist citizen” (207) promoting fringe and far-right health messages (such as being anti-vaccine).

Faced with data showing the very real appeal Tate has for many young men, several scholars (Collins et al.; Edie and Hoff; Etherington; Gottzén and Areschoug; Isaac; Keddie and Flood; Love et al.; Naegler et al.; Sandau and Cousineau; Siegel; Slaveykov; and Smith) argued that a new, systematic programme of digital literacy is necessary as the basis of any attempts to counter his growing influence. While this is undoubtedly correct, such studies often fall into a discourse where they repeat very similar descriptive accounts of Tate’s behaviour and its consequences without offering specific or focussed solutions. Of course, it is not possible to develop a comprehensive counter-hegemonic

digital literacy curriculum within the scope of a single academic journal article. It does a disservice, however, to the necessity for such a curriculum if there is little or no explication of the required work, however brief that explication may be.

The work of Hannah Scheffer-Wenz illustrates the enormity and urgency of this task. Her doctoral thesis, which engaged with Gen Z social media users ethnographically, conclusively demonstrates how active, pervasive, and influential Tate's messages remain. She shows that, while the majority within Gen Z (including the majority of young men) can identify the extremism of Tate's views, these views are nonetheless adopted without significant critical questioning. Scheffer-Wenz explains this within the framework of Trans-Parasocial Relationship (TPR) Theory. Here, the (perceived and real) connectedness engendered through collective reciprocity via social media platforms is significantly more valuable and powerful than a more critical engagement with the content of the messages. Tate can therefore operate to promote a radical, far-right traditionalist ideal of gender roles that, ironically, can be the site of rebellion for young people in more egalitarian, even feminist, family situations. This, she argues, illustrates Tate's capacity to transcend brand promotion and fundamentally alter the philosophical development of younger generations.

Methodology and Method

This research adopts a qualitative research design to best develop an intensive examination of a narrowly defined sample. Here, my objective is to develop interpretive insight into meaning-making within a specific context. Qualitative research places emphasis on "the richness of social phenomena involving human experiences and perspectives" (Lim 202). Social phenomena are therefore neither fixed nor externally observable. From a qualitative perspective, the key is to investigate the interpretive processes through which social worlds are constituted and understood.

This means the production of meaning is central, and the researcher actively participates in the analytic process (Charmaz; Denzin et al.). Meaning does not exist independently of interpretation but is understood as emerging through interaction between researcher, the focus of enquiry, and context. As a result, qualitative research requires explicitly acknowledging the researcher's role, assumptions, and positioning (Denzin et al.). This extends not only to the researcher but also to participants, or in the case of this article the people who conceive and communicate messages via social media, who must be understood

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as socially situated and continuously evolving rather than as static or “perfectly observable” entities (Bailey et al. 19).

In the context of this study, individual posts were not treated as isolated units of meaning but as situated communicative acts within broader exchanges. Single posts can form part of larger conversational threads, and these can of course be shaped by complex and overlapping personal motivations, intentions, and social contexts. These motivations may be only partially visible to an external observer, reinforcing the need for an interpretive rather than positivist approach. The qualitative design therefore enables analysis that remains attentive to context, relationality, and the contingent nature of meaning.

This article is therefore placed within the interpretive research paradigm (Denzin et al.). Interpretivism, as articulated by Burrell and Morgan, is concerned with the fluid, negotiated, and socially produced nature of reality. Researchers working within this paradigm seek to apprehend the social world subjectively by examining the ongoing and dynamic processes through which social interaction is produced and sustained (Burrell and Morgan; Mumby). Rather than seeking causal explanation or prediction, interpretive research aims to understand how social actors make sense of their experiences and how these sense-making processes shape social life.

Accordingly, I did not begin with predefined hypotheses regarding the meanings of posts. Instead, I worked inductively, allowing patterns of meaning to emerge through sustained engagement with the data (Boyatzis; Braun and Clarke). Posts were conceptualised as purposeful forms of social engagement with that part of the social world made accessible through X. This position aligns with Deetz’s assertion that “[...] talk and writing are [...] much more than the means of expression of individual meaning; they connect each perception to a larger orientation and system of meaning” (135).

Denzin et al. recommend the use of multiple methods as a means of triangulating findings and developing a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Accordingly, I have employed mixed methods, understood here not as a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches but as the integration of complementary qualitative analytic strategies (Testa et al.).

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis can be understood as a process of coding raw data to identify patterns that are substantial enough to be recognised as themes (Aronson; Attride-Stirling; Lacey and Luff). More specifically, a theme is defined as “a pattern found in the information that at minimum describes and organizes the

possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon” (Boyatzis 4). Themes therefore function both descriptively and interpretively; data can be organised and engaged with critically.

Themes may be manifest, in that they are clearly and explicitly present within the data, or latent, in that they underpin the phenomenon and require interpretive work to identify (Boyatzis). In either case, thematic analysis requires systematic identification and classification of themes. As Braun and Clarke observe, thematic analysis provides a means “both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of ‘reality’” (81). This dual capacity makes it particularly suitable for analysing posts, which often combine explicit statements with implicit assumptions, affective cues, and contextual references.

A researcher is inevitably embedded within the analytic process: they bring prior knowledge, theoretical commitments, and experiential perspectives (Constas; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane). Self-reflexivity was therefore methodologically necessary. When coding, I made sure to note when and how my interpretive decisions may have been shaped by my familiarity with social media platforms, personal political views, and prior professional experience.

Crucially, the thematic analysis did not rely on a predetermined numerical threshold. Instead, themes were identified on the basis of the inclusion (or exclusion) of key words or phrases and the apparent purpose or affective force of the posts in which they appeared. This approach meant I could identify themes that were meaningful while avoiding reductive quantification. Of course, as Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss observe, “there are multiple interpretations that can be constructed from one set of data” (ix). I am therefore not arguing that this work presents the definitive account of the data but rather one plausible and defensible interpretation.

Close Reading

To deploy a rhetorical analysis, it was necessary to produce a close reading of the selected posts. This is because rhetorical typologies typically require fine-grained, sentence-level analysis, and these can obscure broader patterns of meaning if applied in isolation. Close reading, by contrast, approaches texts holistically and inductively, and moves from observation to interpretation (Jacobowitz and Lippe; Kain). Close reading is defined as “a mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings” (Brummett 3).

Monin’s framework, comprising a dominant reading focused on surface elements, a critical reading aimed at uncovering underlying assumptions and connections, and a reflexive reading that engages the researcher’s responses,

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provides a clear organisational structure. Here, I acknowledge that this three-stage model works less clearly in practice than it may appear on the page. It is, for instance, difficult, if not impossible, to engage with one’s responses without carrying the force of one’s assumptions. The framework remains useful, however, because, in highlighting the necessary artificiality of the research process, it allows a researcher to reflect on the effects and implications of the process and the artificiality.

Rhetoric and Rhetorical Analysis

While close reading provided valuable contextual and interpretive insight, it did not allow for systematic examination of how users sought to convince either people they were conversing with or people who were reading their posts. I therefore used George Cheney’s rhetorical identification typology.

Rhetoric operates through the use of symbols to shape audience attitudes and actions (Foss, Foss and Trapp; Hochmuth). As Kenneth Burke argues, rhetorical practices can reinforce social hierarchies and existing power relations (Cheney *Rhetoric of Identification*; *Rhetoric in an Organizational Society*). At the same time, rhetoric can function productively by building identification within social structures and enabling shared purposes and mutual interests (Crabbe).

Cheney’s *Rhetoric of Identification* typology was particularly useful because it is flexible and because it has capacity to isolate specific forms of identity work within texts. The typology has been applied across a wide range of organisational and mediated contexts (Adler; Ahmed; Chreim; DiSanza and Bullis; Turnage), which demonstrates its usefulness. While this typology allows a researcher to identify rhetorical strategies, it does not prescribe how that researcher, or the reader of their work, interprets the importance or significance of those strategies. Here, again, I draw attention to the need to employ self-reflection and self-criticism to make sure the data, and my interpretation(s) of the data are supportable.

‘The Man Himself’ and ‘The Man Everyone’s Talking About’: Thematic Analysis

Turning now to the first data set, I will now outline and discuss the themes that emerged when analysing posts connected to Andrew Tate and Islam. In doing this, I am mindful that, although this research is qualitative, it is useful to have some broad idea about the number and the volume of engagements, posts, reposts, and replies that form the corpus of these data. The Statista Research

Department investigated the relative popularity of Andrew Tate and Greta Thunberg on Twitter (X) in the immediate aftermath of their now-famous interchange where Tate tagged Thunberg into a post bragging about his fleet of cars and their emissions and she replied with “yes, please do enlighten me. email me at smalldickenergy@getalife.com” (qtd. in Solnit). Statista found that Thunberg’s followers grew from 5.28 million to 5.81 million between 29 Dec. 2022 and 11 Jan. 2023, an increase of 10.03%. Over the same period, Tate’s followers grew from 3.55 million to 4.52 million, an increase of 27.32%. These figures show that Thunberg was more popular than Tate before and after the controversy and, while both increased the number of followers, the increase for Tate was over 1.7 times that of Thunberg. (Statista Research Department). This suggests Tate was successful if his aim was to use Thunberg as a mechanism to gain more followers. Any success needs to be measured, however, against the ridicule he received as a consequence and the extra publicity this ridicule brought to his arrest in Romania (see Solnit).

In terms of the wider picture of Tate’s posts and posts about him on X, there is little available numerical data to hand. The most obvious reason for this is the ephemeral nature of the platform and the highly dynamic way in which conversations can progress. Nonetheless, when looking at the period between 1 Dec. 2022 and 31 Dec. 2025, it is possible to identify two key broad facts. First, there is a clear pattern between posts that mention Tate by name or by handle (@Cobratate) and posts that include his name or handle in a reply to a post where Tate was not mentioned or referenced by the original poster. That pattern is a ratio of approximately 2.125 to one in favour of the second category. In other words, “Andrew Tate” is over twice as likely to be introduced as part of a reply to a post where he is not originally mentioned than he is to feature in a post. This suggests his name (and brand) have significant positive or negative salience as cultural referents. It also suggests that even the most cursory reading of a sample of both original posts mentioning Tate and replies introducing Tate to a conversation would indicate he elicits strong reactions and those reactions are very often highly critical or negative.

A thematic analysis of Tate’s engagement with a specific focus on his conversion to Islam and its consequences shows the extent of the critical, negative, emotive, and emotional nature of these communicative acts. This is almost certainly intentional: the purpose of a controversialist is to be controversial, and Tate happily sits in a very divisive space on every social media platform where he is permitted access. To tease out the nature and implications of the communication, I have separated posts made by Andrew

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Tate from those made about him and identified two key themes within each category.

The Man Himself

The days and weeks following Tate’s announcement that he had converted to Islam in Oct. 2022 were overshadowed by news about and commentary on his arrest by Romanian authorities (Haq). I do not have the time or space to explore the relationship between the conversion and the arrest, nor the ability to make a judgement about whether, say, the conversion was made in anticipation of the arrest. Rather, for the purposes of this research, the arrest is a related event that forms part of the background to posts that mention, discuss, or criticise Tate’s conversion. Predictably, a large number of these were initiated from Tate’s account, which I have categorised as *The Man Himself*.

In this category, two dominant themes emerge. The first of these is ‘A noble sacrifice’. This theme focuses on the motivations and costs of Tate’s conversion as he presents them. He positions himself as a man who had no choice but to answer the call to convert, no matter the consequences for himself and his reputation. Careful not to ascribe to himself any status higher than believer (for example, Tate has never stated or implied he is a religious leader of any kind), Tate nonetheless deploys this theme to build and support the legitimacy of his calling. This is illustrated in Fig. 1, which shows how the noble sacrifice theme bolsters Tate’s already extant characteristics and qualities, implied here to be purity (of heart), family values, financial success, and strength. This theme also works to cement the idea that Tate is willing to undergo the trials and difficulties ‘they’ are attacking him with.

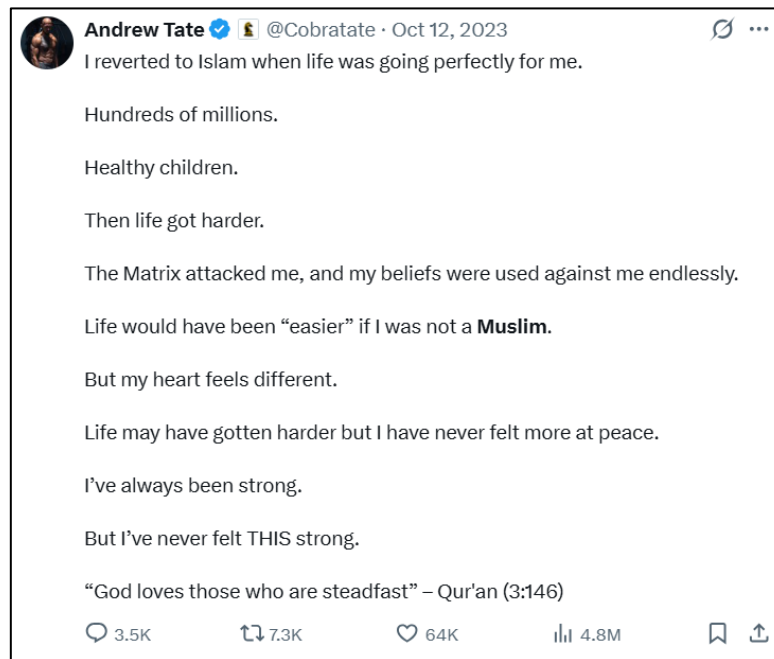


Fig. 1. Post by Andrew Tate on X (formerly Twitter), 12 Oct. 2023

The second theme that emerges from *The Man Himself* is ‘I have a warning’. At approximately the same level of visibility and frequency as ‘A noble sacrifice’, ‘I have a warning’ describes Tate’s use of X to provoke, stoke, and perpetuate hard right and / or alt-right social, political, and / or economic views. From the immediate aftermath of his conversion until late 2025, perhaps Tate’s strongest focus within this theme has been immigration. One reason here is that immigration, particularly when constructed around so-called illegal refugees and the threats they pose to the social fabric in the West. This is illustrated in Fig. 2. The original post depicts an AI-generated young brown man in an inflatable boat who is well clothed, wearing safety gear, carrying cash, and wielding a knife. This could not be more typical of the alt-right constructed threat of a sex-offender migrant. The text of the 5 Aug. post clearly invokes the trope of a sensible and committed citizen warning their fellow countrymen of the dangers they face.

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Fig. 2. Post by Andrew Tate on X (formerly Twitter), 5 Aug. 2024

The Man Everyone's Talking About

This is the second category of my thematic analysis, again in which two dominant themes emerge. This category encompasses posts on X that Tate did not initiate (and almost exclusively does not participate in a conversation with) but nevertheless use him, his name, or his X handle as a cultural signifier of either positive or negative denotation or connotation. I have labelled the first of these, the positive aspects of Tate, as ‘He’s the top G.’ This theme takes its name from Tate’s claims, initially on TikTok early in his career, that he is the Top G (with G being shorthand for ‘gangster’). ‘He’s the top G’ therefore is the theme applied to posts on X in which Tate is cited or referred to supportively, as illustrated in Fig. 3. The level of support for Tate, especially its unquestioning nature, gives an insight into his success at building his online brand and, crucially, in maintaining support as he navigated high profile legal trouble, considerable negative commentary, and his conversion to Islam.



Fig. 3. Post by Chibi Shinigami on X (formerly Twitter), 24 July 2025

I have labelled posts which mobilise Tate as a negative cultural referent as ‘The Hypocritical Fool’. Many people have little or no trouble, it seems, in using Andrew Tate as a marker of, and shorthand for, a highly conservative, misogynist, alt-right perspective. Posts like Fig. 4 are deeply critical of the man and the world view he advocates. Deploying Andrew Tate as a signifier in this way indicates he has reached a certain status as a cultural referent point. He is, however, by no means the only person who could be chosen to illustrate the issue of religious hypocrisy. Christian public figures like televangelist Joel Osteen or politician Sarah Huckabee Sanders would be equally effective examples.



Fig. 4. Post by Jonathan Kaisen on X (formerly Twitter), 29 July 2025

Constructing and Mobilising a Worldview: Rhetorical Tools and Techniques

To develop an initial understanding of the reasons for this high level of support, I now turn to the second data set, identified through the rhetorical analysis. Here, I do not suggest that the following section is exhaustive. Rather, it is designed to serve as an introduction to the most immediately obvious rhetorical techniques Andrew Tate has utilised in his posting on X, and to offer a broad schema that can be applied to other tools and techniques that can be analysed.

Cheney’s model of rhetorical identification, outlined in *Rhetoric of Identification*, is based on Burke’s idea that communication can help people overcome social divisions. Burke argued that when individuals communicate

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and work together, they can develop a shared sense of connection or oneness, created through cooperation and mutual understanding. There is an inherent assumption here that rhetors would normally want to achieve that shared sense of oneness with the largest proportion of the available audience. Andrew Tate does not, however, necessarily operate on that basis. As a controversialist, his communicative acts are not designed to convince every person who reads, hears, or encounters his messages. Instead, the messages he posts are framed antithetically to Burke’s position: rather than use communication to overcome social divisions, Tate uses it to justify, entrench, and deepen those divisions.

In other words, Tate only wants to help a certain subset of the population to communicate and work together and uses divisive and inflammatory tactics to achieve this. Excluding much, or indeed most, of the potential audience (women who do not fit his ultra-traditional views of their role, liberals, most of the LGBTQIA+ community to name but three groups) is the overarching strategy Tate employs to build and sustain a community of men who might otherwise be opposed to each other – conservative Christians and akh-right Muslim men would not normally find sufficient common ground to overcome their religio-cultural differences.

Identification Through Antithesis

Identification can be created relatively simply and easily by encouraging people to come together in opposition to a shared enemy. By highlighting a common threat, a communicator can motivate a group to unite, presenting its members as part of an in-group with shared values and goals. This in-group is defined in contrast to out-groups, which are portrayed as having lesser or opposing purposes. Identification through antithesis therefore works by provoking “an explicit dissociation from one target [which] implies association with another” (Cheney *Rhetoric of Identification* 153). For a controversialist like Tate, this tactic offers a conceptual and practical model for his polemic. Fig. 5 illustrates Tate’s use of identification through antithesis in the immediate aftermath of the opening ceremony of the 2024 Paris Summer Olympic Games.

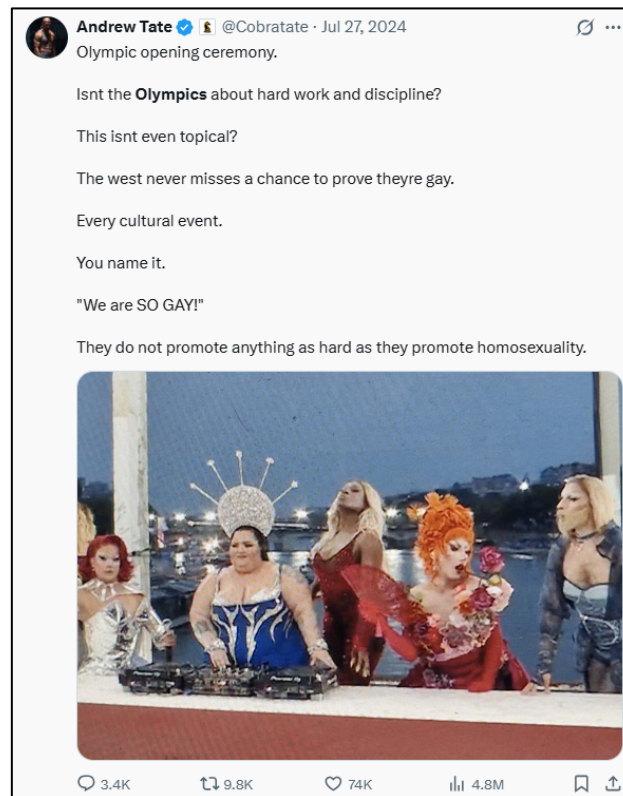


Fig. 5. Post by Andrew Tate on X (formerly Twitter), 27 July 2024

Tate explicitly positions 'hard work and discipline' and being 'so gay' in opposition to each other, and also frames the opening ceremony as the epitome of Western decadence and excess. Tate was not the only commentator to (mis)interpret portions of the ceremony as being anti-religious and pro-gay; others argued sections were offensive despite the organisers' statements that the scenes referenced the Dionysus and celebrated tolerance and inclusion (see, for instance Grohmann).

Setting aside the veracity of the competing interpretations of these scenes, I would argue Tate would have highlighted them in any event. Had the organisers come out and responded to the effect that "yes, this was controversial, in France there is greater tolerance for criticising religion than elsewhere", this would have only increased the power of his message. That is because the message draws on several key identifiers Tate has utilised and popularised to promote identification through antithesis from the beginning of his social media career. Key here is his hate for and rejection of any variation from the most traditional, submissive, heteronormative archetypes for women. Images not just featuring but indeed celebrating five people presenting themselves confidently and powerfully outside Tate's narrow ideals would be almost certain to be

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critiqued. Fig. 5 shows a high camp aesthetic with at least one apparently presenting plus-size cis-gender woman and at least three drag queens, one of the people is ambiguous on first reading as to whether they are a drag queen or a cis-gender woman. Whoever – or whatever – these people are, Tate suggests, they are not “us”.

Building Common Ground

Again, it may be counter intuitive on the surface to argue that Andrew Tate would look to employ rhetorical tools and tactics to build common ground. Normally this is taken to mean something akin to ‘reaching as many people as possible.’ Again, I argue that this is not necessarily the case in the clickbait / attention economy environment of social media. Instead, someone like Tate who wants to build a strong and united minority (with the aim of fighting for and claiming cultural hegemony) can be expected to utilise the tool of building common ground in the context of an overarching us and them rhetoric. My argument here reverses the normal stages of Cheney’s (*Rhetoric of Identification*) typology wherein the rhetor would typically look to build common ground first and then employ identification through antithesis. My claim is that inverting that order can operate just as effectively if the rhetor does not want to (and does not want to claim to) engage with everyone. Cheney identifies six tactics that can be employed to build common ground. They include (1) showing concern for individuals, (2) acknowledging their contributions, (3) emphasising shared values, (4) promoting the benefits of particular activities, (5) praise from outsiders and (6) the use of testimonials.

Together, these strategies represent a clear and intentional effort to positively shape how the audience understands its own identity in relation to a rhetor. Even an intentionally divisive rhetor like Andrew Tate can deploy these, as Fig. 6 illustrates. This eighty-four-word post is, despite its content, a sophisticated and multi-layered example of rhetorical skill. The individuals typified in the post as “good women with pure hearts”, “women who are constantly harping”, “whores”, and “virgins”, clearly fall into a traditional angel - slut dichotomy which I argue operates as metonymy. The women who fall on the positive side of Tate’s dichotomy are indeed shown concern. Their reward is to have Tate’s child, drive a luxury car, and enjoy his relaxed attention. At the same time, this post also addresses male readers who follow Tate’s thinking: the message divides women into two groups and reinforces the male reader who lionizes Tate’s lifestyle. In this respect, the post emphasizes shared values (not needing to marry) and promotes the benefits of particular activities (permitting women into your personal life if they behave appropriately – the right woman

can, literally, “drive my car”). And, although there is no evidence in this particular post, I would contend that the fifth and sixth tactics Cheney identifies would be fulfilled in the overall rhetorical climate of this post when followers reply supporting any component parts of the message or the message overall.



Fig. 6. Post by Andrew Tate on X (formerly Twitter), 19 Jan. 2026

Conclusion

This article has examined Andrew Tate’s public conversion to Islam as a moment in which religion becomes particularly highlighted within contemporary popular culture. Rather than approaching the conversion as a question of private belief or doctrinal commitment, the analysis has situated it within the mediated online circuits through which religion is increasingly encountered, performed, and contested. In digital popular culture, religion does not merely express faith; it functions as a symbolic language through which identity, authority, and belonging are articulated.

Read in this way, Tate’s engagement with Islam operates as an intentionally visible religious performance shaped by the very logics of social media. I argue that, within influencer culture, religious (self)identity can therefore be deployed as a form of cultural capital, and to confer moral legitimacy, personal depth, or oppositional positioning. Tate’s conversion draws on these dynamics, positioning Islam as both a source of meaning and a provocation, capable of intensifying attention precisely because of its innately contested status within the cultural spaces he occupies.

The argument here is that religion, in this context, is inseparable from crisis. Tate’s declaration of faith coincided with a period of intense scrutiny following his arrest in Romania on charges including sex trafficking and rape.

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Yet rather than being displaced to the margins, in this moment of crisis religion was amplified in its visibility and significance. Here, religion became a stabilising narrative resource, offering a language of morality, discipline, and order that resonates deeply within popular religious imaginaries, even as at the same time Tate was able to deploy certain religious ideals, tropes, and beliefs in support of his alt-right, traditionalist mindset.

This article has not sought to adjudicate the sincerity of Tate’s religious commitment; rather, the focus has been on how religion can circulate as a cultural signifier within social media environments. Meaning is produced less through religious doctrine than through repetition, conflict, and audience response. The conversion acquires significance through its mediation: through posts, reactions, memes, and counter-discourses that collectively reframe Islam as a site of struggle over masculinity, power, and authenticity.

Tate’s case illustrates how religion can be abstracted from its institutional contexts and reworked into a flexible, portable identity marker within influencer economies. In such settings, religious affiliation becomes part of an ongoing performance rather than a settled state and is therefore continually renegotiated through visibility and controversy. Importantly, however, I am not arguing that the performativity and renegotiation identified in this article only apply to Islam. Adherents of other faiths, and in particular the conservative or reactionary versions of those faiths, could likewise abstract religion as a versatile identity marker. Analysing the social media of and about Charlie Kirk, for instance, would be a very interesting comparison.

Tate’s case also suggests that religion remains a powerful and enduring resource within popular culture, especially when mobilised in unsettling or ethically fraught ways. People like Tate reveal how religious symbols and narratives can be repurposed within the attention economy, sustaining relevance by converting belief into spectacle. Future research might extend this inquiry by examining how other religious traditions are similarly reconfigured within digital celebrity culture, shedding further light on the evolving relationship between religion, media, and popular meaning-making.

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Thai BL Fandom and Re-Enchanted Acculturation in the Ruins of Chinese Modernity

GENN RUAN

Introduction

On *Bilibili*, a Chinese video-sharing platform, a fan performs *bazi* (“eight characters”, 八字)¹ divination to explain to other fans the off-screen relationship between the two male actors of *To Sir, With Love*, Film (Thanapat Kawila) and Jam (Rachata Hampanont):

We can see from their astrology chart that they are in harmony of *yin* (“negative”, 阴) and *yang* (“positive”, 阳). This harmony is consistent across the astrology houses of life, body, and marriage. The consistent harmony is truly remarkable especially in terms of the *wu xing* [“five elements”, 五行]. Film is *geng jin* [“yang-polarized metal”, 庚金], and Jam is *xin jin* [“yin-polarized metal”, 辛金]. One is *yang* and the other is *yin*; one is strong and the other is weak—traits that complement each other perfectly. Film’s astrological path in life is defined by prosperous energy that is too strong to be self-beneficial, while Jam’s astrological destiny is characterized by weak energy, which provides an outlet for Film to discharge his energy. So, their partnership is indeed a relationship of mutual aid. On the surface, it looks like Jam is borrowing Film’s influence [and takes advantage of Film], but Jam accommodates and helps Film as well. (“JamFilm An Analysis of Chen Yaojie and Song Junhao’s Career” 00:00:15-00:00:48)

Although this divination is replete with complex traditional Chinese religious terminology, it is necessary to translate and present it to demonstrate the fans’ mastery of astrology and how they use this religious knowledge to ‘poach’ texts. Film and Jam are heterosexual actors, but fans resort to astrology to indicate that they match each other in the sacred realm. As one fan commented: “Why

¹ *Eight characters* refers to a set of eight characters where two characters are assigned to each of an individual’s birth components: the year, month, day, and hour. According to traditional Chinese astrology, a person’s life path is determined by these characters. Therefore, reading them is a method to divine one’s destiny.

don't they just marry each other? Their astrology charts match each other so perfectly that even the heterosexual spouses are not comparable to them" (meimeimay1115).

Against the backdrop of modernity's affliction on China, it is particularly striking that fans perform divination, discuss astrology, and use religion to legitimize or even sacralize same-sex desire in the online public space. Around the 1920s, modern science and Marxism were imported to China by intellectuals to save China from colonization (Spence 1990 305-25). As a result of that importation, on which I will later elaborate in this article, China has become secular and homophobic. Within this context, fans' passionate engagement with international queer media and its religiosity appears particularly conspicuous. It resonates with what Mayfair Yang describes as "re-enchanting modernity", the revival of religion in rural China "after a century of powerful discourses of scientism, social evolutionism, materialism, revolution, nationalism, and progress" (*Re-enchanting Modernity* 4).

Based on these observations, I argue that the Thai Boys' Love (BL) fandom in China is a contact zone, that is, "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism [...] or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt 34). In the context of my research, the cultures include the dominant ones such as modern biological science and Marxism that are informed by modernity, and the marginalized ones including religion and inclusiveness of same-sex love.

According to Mary Louise Pratt, contact zone is the place where the dominant cultures represent their conquest of the marginalized ones, usually with a colonial origin. However, she also argues that the "conquered" people may re-appropriate the dominant cultures, resist, and re-understand themselves within the contact zone (34-7). Joseph P. Goodwin has a similar observation in his study of gay folklore, after which he names "gay acculturation" whereby marginalized individuals withdraw from dominant culture into a subculture where they learn new traditions and values (3-4). The fandom also resembles the "vernacular web" coined by Robert Gleen Howard, which refers to the grass-roots discursive practices that contest dominant cultures informed by authority. In the context of this study, the ways in which fans produce their "vernacular web" is what termed by Henry Jenkins as "textual poaching" (Jenkins 21-6), that is, they claim authority over the texts of mass culture, reappropriating them to serve their own interests.

Lori Morimoto and Bertha Chin have been at the avant-garde of integrating Pratt's theory into fan studies. This article theorizes "re-enchanting

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acculturation” by drawing on their framework of transcultural fandom, which applies the notion of the “contact zone” to digital spaces, framing fandom as a site of ongoing negotiation and meaning grapple between dominant and marginalized cultures (Chin and Morimoto; Morimoto *(Trans)Cultural Legibility; Transcultural Fan Studies*). I intervene in the theoretical construction of transcultural fandom by integrating Joseph P. Goodwin’s and Robert Glenn Howard’s theories of discursive practices to examine fannish engagement in “textual poaching” as a means of resisting dominant culture.

My findings in the Chinese Thai BL fandom complicate the model of contact zone, gay acculturation, and vernacular web. In the scholarship of Pratt, Goodwin, and Howard, marginalized or colonized subjects often repurpose dominant cultures as a mode of resistance. In the context of the Chinese Thai BL fandom, however, the relationship between the two cultures is more nuanced: these fans oscillate between dominant culture and subculture, using religious, scientific, and Marxist knowledge to negotiate new meanings. That is, they do not simply resist modernity by appropriating religious and queer discourses found in Thai BL dramas but also make sense of queernormativity, Thai BL industry, and contemporary Thailand from a Marxist perspective.

This study attempts to explicate the acculturation and re-enchantment within the Chinese Thai BL fandom to understand how the fandom resists modernity. I term the process “re-enchanted acculturation” wherein fans are re-enchanted by religion and become queer-inclusive through the acculturation between a homophobic Chinese modernity and Thai BL.

The title of this article is inspired by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. She argues that the matsutake mushroom serves as a precarious mediator between the blight of industrial pollution—a byproduct of modernity—and the persistence of the natural assemblage. This imaginary captures the essence of the Chinese Thai BL fandom: much like the mushroom, the fandom inhabits the ruins produced by the collision of a ‘scientific’ heteronormative modernity and a queer religiosity, but it mediates the tensions between these two cultures.

The next section provides a synopsis of the two television shows whose fandoms constitute the focus of this article, followed by my methodology and positionality. I then situate the discussion within the framework of Chinese modernity, arguing that intolerance toward same-sex desires in modern China is a byproduct of modernity. Building on this premise, I draw on netnography and textual analysis to examine how religiosity embedded in Thai BL dramas counterbalances modernity, thereby mediating homophobic discourses in Chinese society. By positioning the fandom as a transcultural fandom, I

approach it as a heterogeneous space, avoiding homogenization and critically interrogating—rather than romanticizing—its potential to resist modernity.

A Synopsis of the Chosen Television Shows

This study analyzes two television shows: *To Sir, With Love* (hereafter abbreviated as *To Sir*) and *I Feel You Linger in the Air* (hereafter abbreviated as *Air*).² These two shows were chosen for two reasons. First, they both have a significant audience overlap: fans' comments are marked by a high degree of intertextuality; and viewers frequently reference one series while discussing the other. Second, both plots are defined by a confluence of religiosity and same-sex love, providing a generative site for investigation.

To Sir, set in 1930s Thailand during the Japanese invasion, tells the story of the Five Dragons Guild, a powerful business association owned by five Chinese Thai families. The drama opens with the tragic suicide of Lord Zhang, a guild member with same-sex desire. Before his death, Lord Zhang curses the leader of the Five Dragons Guild Lord Song, prophesying that Song would one day suffer the same fate. The story then centers on Tian, Lord Song's eldest son and the guild's heir, who also loves men. Because Tian's sexual orientation would disqualify him from the position of heir, to protect her son's status and future, Tian's mother Li uses lethal magic powders to kill anyone who threatens to expose his secret.

The story of *Air* follows Jom, who has been waiting faithfully for his boyfriend for two years. However, upon returning to Thailand from Britian, the boyfriend immediately breaks up with Jom, revealing he has been in a relationship with a woman in Britain. Heartbroken, Jom drives under the influence, has an accident, and travels back in time to the 1920s. There, he encounters Yai, a young aristocrat who had appeared in his dreams before the time travel. Jom becomes Yai's butler, and the two fall in love. Yet, as a time traveler, Jom's body grows increasingly transparent until he eventually vanishes from Yai's world.

Methodology and Positionality

The primary empirical component of this study is a netnography conducted between Dec. 2024 and Dec. 2025 on the Chinese platforms *Bilibili* and *Douban*. Netnography, as an adaptation of ethnography to internet-mediated

² The Chinese translation of *To Sir, With Love* is *Shenzhai Shenshi* (深宅绅士); and the Chinese translation of *I Feel You Linger in the Air* is *Ai De Xiangqi* (爱的香气).

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communities, means doing fieldwork in these communities (Kozinets et al. 262-63). In this study, observation serves as a “cultural entrée into these field sites and with their members” (266). The observational data collected in this process are unsolicited materials that pre-exist the process of my investigation (Duffett 259).

My interviewing approach is relational interviewing, defined as “a method for generating data through interactions between researcher and interviewee” (Fujii 1). The methodological underpinnings of relational interviewing assume that “social phenomena do not claim any ‘real existence independent of how [researchers] think of them’” (2). Accordingly, interviewing data is co-constructed through the interview process (2-3). This perspective situates the analysis in this study as interpretive and grounded in my positionality. The phenomena discussed here, such as re-enchanting acculturation, should therefore be understood as one dimension of the Chinese Thai BL fandom rather than a comprehensive account of its full landscape.

Observational unsolicited data constitutes the primary basis for understanding the fandom, while relational interviewing serves as a complementary method to provide additional context and deepen this understanding. Interviewees were invited iteratively from these observations when the available observational data indicated the need for further clarification or elaboration. Initial interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, allowing me to address specific research questions while also inviting participants to introduce topics they considered relevant. Follow-up interviews were conducted in either semi-structured or more informal formats, depending on the evolving nature of the research relationship.

All interviews were conducted via WeChat, using either text-based communication or video calls. In addition, I created a WeChat discussion group with four female participants who had been interviewed multiple times and were willing to continue the research relationship. Through this process, I conducted conversations with thirty-four participants, including twenty-nine women and five self-identified gay or bisexual men. Fieldnotes were thematized once they reached the point of “data saturation,” that is, when additional data no longer generated substantially new insights.

As relational interviews are shaped by the researcher’s positionality, it is necessary to note that I have been a fan of Thai BL dramas since adolescence and identify as gay. My accounts on *Bilibili* and *Douban* disclose my gender identity, and participants were therefore aware of my sexual orientation. As an academic fan (acafan), the boundary between fannish engagement and academic research is not always clearly demarcated. While scholars of netnography

suggest that the transition from a fan to a scholar is the effort to “pay attention even during long stretches of apparently boring interaction” (Boellstorff et al. 81), the real condition is more complicated. Extended but casual conversations are also part of a reciprocal research relationship. Moreover, unsolicited interactions that are not directly incorporated as data may still inform the research process (Fujii 4). For this reason, this study treats the boundaries of what constitutes “data” as fluid rather than fully enumerable.

Modernity and its Formation in China

Because the Chinese Thai BL fandom mediates between a homophobic culture shaped by modernity and a queer subculture informed by religiosity, it is necessary to first contextualize modernity in China. As Douglas E. Cowan argues, research on the internet is “more than simply the technical aspects [...] or a simple description of what users are doing online.” Rather, researchers should approach the internet as reflecting the “ramifications of political interference” (461). Specifically, I trace how the reconfiguration of social and gender landscapes under Chinese modernity pathologizes same-sex desire and argue that contemporary homophobia in China is a product of modernity.

Among the most frequently cited perspectives of modernity is Max Weber’s concern with the disenchantment, the process by which science displaced religion and religion is no longer the primary source of meaning (153). The definition of modernity used in this article will be grounded in this Weberian insight. The term “pre-modern” will be used to refer to the period before the importation of modernity into China, and “modern” to denote the period thereafter. For the purposes of this study, the 1920s will be used as a hermeneutic starting point for modern China, while also acknowledging that this is not a definitive marker.

Pre-modern China was religiously structured, with Confucianism functioning as a state-sponsored religion that determined ethics, ritual, and social order (Yang *Introduction* 2-3). Within this framework, *li* (“ritual,” 礼) and hierarchical order were sacralized as inviolable. Confucianism prescribed proper conduct and did not explicitly classify same-sex relations as a violation of these principles. As Howard Chiang states, “the world of imperial China never viewed the experience of homosexuality as a separate problem. The question was never homosexuality per se, but whether one’s sexual behaviour would potentially reverse the dominant script of social order” (*Epistemic Modernity* 632). This Confucian logic is particularly vivid in the folklore of

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tu'er shen (“Rabbit God,” 兔儿神) recorded by the Confucianist official-scholar Yuan Mei:

During the early Qing [roughly the 1630s to the 1660s], a young imperial censor was dispatched to inspect Fujian Province. There was a Fujian man named Hu Tianbao who admired the censor’s handsomeness [...] lingered nearby to peek [...] One day, Hu secretly followed [the censor]. Concealing himself in a latrine, Hu spied upon the censor’s buttocks. The censor, now alarmed, arrested and interrogated him. At first Hu remained silent, but after being tortured, he confessed: “Indeed, I was captivated by your beauty and could not forget you. I know that the cassia tree in the heavens is beyond the reach of earthly birds, yet my soul was so enchanted that I transgressed propriety without realizing it.” The censor, enraged, executed him and put his corpse beneath a withered tree. A month later, Hu appeared in his villager’s dream: “Because of harboring improper desire toward an honorable man, my death was deserved. Yet my love was sincere [...] In the underworld, the netherworld’s officials mocked and teased me but did not discriminate me. They had appointed me as the Rabbit God, responsible for overseeing affairs of male same-sex love. You could establish a shrine for me as I deserve incense offerings. (Yuan 219-20)

The legend of the Rabbit God suggests that until at least the late eighteenth century, when Yuan Mei recorded the story, Confucian thought did not explicitly pathologize same-sex desire. The ‘crime’ of the Rabbit God lay not in his desire for men but in the impropriety of his voyeurism and disruption of hierarchy. It is worth noting that the underworld officials did not condemn his same-sex desire but elevated him to divinity as the patron deity of male same-sex lovers. This episode suggests that same-sex love in imperial China was not necessarily stigmatized but could be accommodated within ritual propriety. Moreover, the circulation of such folklore constituted a “vernacular web” (Howard), providing a discursive space in which ordinary people could advocate the legitimacy of same-sex desire through the sacred authority of the Rabbit God.

This pre-modern popular culture, deeply informed by religiosity, also facilitated a form of “gay acculturation” (Goodwin), as evidenced by Confucianist scholar-official Cheng Yumen’s reaction. Upon hearing the story from Yuan Mei, Cheng faulted the censor for his undue severity. He recounted another anecdote about scholar-official Di Weiren. When a young servant

confessed his long-standing love for Di on his deathbed, Di did not react with anger. Instead, he laughed affectionately, calling him a “foolish boy,” and ensured that the servant received an honorable burial ritual (Yuan 220). Both the folklore and the historical anecdote suggest a social landscape in which same-sex intimacy could be integrated into the Confucian cosmological order through compassion and ritual propriety rather than exclusion.

The relative tolerance visible in these accounts contrasts sharply with the emergence of documented homophobic discourse in modern China in the early 1920s when the influx of Western scientific and medical knowledge led Chinese intellectuals to adopt a binary understanding of sex as biologically determined, which in turn pathologized same-sex love (Chiang *Epistemic Modernity; After Eunuchs* 9).

I concur with Howard Chiang’s argument that homophobia emerged in China around the 1920s. Beyond the scientific and medical discourses that Chiang highlights, I further contend that the introduction of Marxism into China also played a role in fostering homophobic sentiment. Some Chinese Maoists elevate Friedrich Engels’s homophobic statements and use them to denounce same-sex love. This is evident in an online commentary published in *Wu you zhi xiang* (“Utopia,” 乌有之乡), a Maoist website in China that advocates a radical return to traditionalist and state-centric values. By portraying same-sex desire as a bourgeois scheme intended to sabotage the revolutionary spirit and masculine vigor of the proletariat (see Zong), these groups view queer identities through the lens of conspiracy theories. This dogmatic rigidity suggests that Marxism has religiousities as well, echoing Karl Popper’s observation that “the ingenious and highly original Marxian doctrine” had been replaced by “a Vulgar Marxist Conspiracy Theory” (312). Popper argues that some followers of Marx misunderstand his theories and instead attribute undesirable social phenomena such as wars and economic crises to “imperialist war-mongers” and “big business” (312).

However, directly equating Marxism with homophobia risks creating an oversimplified binary. Some Chinese fans of Thai BL identify as committed Marxists, though they oscillate between ‘orthodox’ Maoist Marxism and their ‘fannish’ Marxism informed by Thai Buddhism. Again, as a transcultural fandom, the Chinese Thai BL fandom is not characterized by any fixed cultural orientation.

In sum, homophobia in China emerged from multiple trajectories of modernity. The decline of religion deprived same-sex love of its sacred sanction; the rise of biological science pathologized same-sex desire; and certain dogmatic interpretations of Marxism provided grounds for denouncing

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homosexuality. Together, these overlapping forms of modernity transformed China from a society in which same-sex love, when expressed within the bounds of Confucian propriety, was rarely condemned into one in which homosexuality came to be viewed through frameworks similar to those found in other modern regimes' outlook.

Religious Recapture of Modernity within the Fandom

If modernity has resulted in a homophobic China, how can Thai BL fandom become a site where Chinese fans are “re-encharmed” by religion and gender inclusiveness? In my netnography, I observed that the religiosity embedded in these dramas sacralizes and consequently legitimizes homosexuality. The re-sacralization of same-sex love is usually achieved through the recurring use of religious motifs such as karma and fate. In the fans' worldview, what is fated is inherently good and beyond human reproach. This logic mirrors Seth Palmer's study of spirit-possession in Madagascar, where sexuality is framed as a form of divine intervention. Because these same-sex desires are understood as divinely mandated through spirit-possession, they are treated as worthy of revered (70-2).

The opening vignette in which fans read the *bazi* of Film and Jam illustrates this “mutually constitutive” logic (Palmer 64). By concluding that Film and Jam's astrology charts complement each other, fans invoke cosmic endorsement to shield their beloved ‘on-screen couple’ from modern homophobia. The implication of these comments is that their ‘on-screen spouse-ship is sacred and therefore not subject to heteronormativity.

The cosmic endorsement transforms fans as well. One fan explicitly told me that her devotion to them as a *CP fen* (“couple fan”, CP 粉) was rooted in this “*mingding de fenweigan*” (“fated atmosphere”, 命定的氛围感), which suggests that the predestined nature of their bond makes their relationship seem undeniable and deeply beautiful. Some fans told me that “even if Film and Jam are straight men, they can still have a relationship beyond friendship because they really complement each other in many aspects.” In this logic, sacred endorsement makes it unnecessary to question the actors' sexuality, as the “fated atmosphere” is understood to transcend modern biological binaries.

The plots and source novels, imbued with religious motifs such as karma and fate, also provide a basis for sacralizing same-sex love. For example, in *To Sir*, Lord Zhang cursed Lord Song to suffer the same fate before taking his own life after his homosexuality is exposed. Fans often interpret the same-sex desire of Tian, Lord Song's son, as a consequence of this curse. Another example

comes from my interlocutor Luoluo who interpreted the source novel for *Air* as evidence of a predestined bond. She explained that Jom and Yai's relationship predates their first meetings in the 1920s and traced its origin to the late nineteenth century amidst the turbulence of Western colonial expansion in Thailand. In her reading, although their first encounter ended in tragedy, the karmic logic of their bond necessitates a reunion in subsequent reincarnations.

Building on these observations, I argue that this 'irresistible fatalism' represents a form of religiosity that renders the fandom more inclusive of same-sex love. The tragic plots engender in fans a sense of transcendental compassion for humanity, an affective disposition that resembles what Chin and Morimoto describe as "affinities of affect" (93) in transcultural fandom. More specifically, I argue that the tragedy generated by this sense of 'irresistible fatalism' operates through a Humean mechanism of sympathy.

To understand this dynamic, it is necessary to revisit David Hume's explanation of the pleasure experienced by "the spectators of a well-written tragedy" (29). Susan Feagin elaborates on this point by suggesting that such pleasure derives from a meta-response to an initial emotional response to tragedy. When confronted with a tragic narrative, audiences experience pain due to their moral sensibility, which constitutes the direct response. However, viewers also react to this direct response, producing a secondary emotion—sympathy. As Feagin explains, "one experiences real sympathy without there having been real suffering, and this is why it is appropriate to feel pleasure at our sympathetic responses to a work of art" (102).

When watching these tragedies, fans simultaneously experience pain and feel a moral obligation to respond. This complex of feelings is most evident in a video clip of *Air* where a surge of bullet comments appears at moments when the couple faces separation ("You Are My Soul" 00:03:04). By collectively posting phrases such as "pray to the Heavens to save the pair of lovers, what we fear shall never happen" fans engage in a form of online ritual that symbolically attempts to subvert the drama's tragic trajectory. Following Feagin's interpretation of Hume, the possibility of responding to others' sufferings helps explain why fans take pleasure in tragic plots. The immediate consequence of this sympathetic engagement is that fans re-sacralize same-sex love and aestheticize tragedy, thereby mitigating the homophobia associated with Chinese modernity.

Luoluo's comment is particularly illustrative of this Humean logic: "In that era when individuals had no control over their fate, they had no choice but to be manipulated by historical currents. It's this sense of fate that makes their love so irresistible. I literally cried when I was watching it." She also told me

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that as a feminist she had never sympathized with men before and was not interested in BL dramas that center on men. Yet, she confessed that she was deeply moved by Yai's suffering after Jom disappeared: "What kind of love could support him to wait for a person who will never come back? My heart really aches for him."

The religious capture of modernity described here represents a salient but incomplete dimension of re-enchanted acculturation. The "gay acculturation" (Goodwin) in this study is grounded in religiosity embedded in the dramas; it therefore constitutes a process of re-enchanting modernity. However, if the analysis were to conclude at this point, the notion of re-enchanted acculturation might appear indistinguishable from existing theories of transcultural fandom (for example, Chin and Morimoto; Morimoto *Ontological Security; (Trans)Cultural Legibility; Transcultural Fan Studies*). The next section examines a more nuanced entanglement of modernity and religiosity: re-enchanted fans deploy Marxist discourses to interpret religious plots and the broader social landscape of Thailand.

Syncretic Marxism within the Fandom

While fans effectively counterbalance modernity and sacralize same-sex love through religiosity, Marxism remains a persistent dimension of Chinese modernity that is not so easily neutralized in the fandom. When I asked my interviewees about their favorite reviews of the two shows on *Douban*, a Chinese platform for rating and commenting cultural products, some referred to a Marxist reading of *Air*. The reviewer analyzes the historical backdrop of *Air*, from King Rama V's reforms and the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century to the 1920s, when the main story of the drama takes place (Shu Xiu Ying Xiang). She interprets the relationship between young lord Yai's family and their servants through the lens of class struggle, identifying Western colonial expansion in Thailand as imperialism, a concept theorized by Vladimir Lenin. However, the reviewer expresses sympathy toward the Thai monarchy and aristocracy. In her view, King Rama V's voluntary reforms "have accumulated *fuze* ("providential blessing", 福泽) for the royal family and aristocrats to survive."

In this case, compassion for humanity informed by religiosity displaces the class struggle advocated by Marxists, as the reviewer assumes that a monarchy can endure so long as the monarch accrues religious merit through virtuous acts. That said, she does not adopt a binary stance toward either monarchy or democracy. She criticizes the Siamese revolution of 1932, which

abolished the absolute monarchy in Thailand, a historical backdrop for *Air* and a turning point that brings hardship to Yai's aristocratic family. As she observes, "in fact, after the Siamese Revolution, Thailand did not develop as smoothly as expected, nor did it truly become a democracy" (Xiang).

Xiang Shu Xiu Ying's analysis offers a quintessential example of syncretic Marxism shaped through re-enchanting acculturation within Thai BL fandom, as her interpretation brings together Buddhism, Marxism, and moral order:

Due to the economic difficulties [after the Siamese Revolution], a large number of civil servants were dismissed from their positions and lost their power. Many people were forced to sell off family property just to survive [...] This was also a consequence of democratic politics. From then until the end of World War II was a period of great hardship. Many people fell into poverty, yet some seized the opportunity to gain wealth and status. The era was sarcastically described as one in which "good people take the back roads, while beasts roam the main streets" (Xiang).

Rather than interpreting her review as an appropriation of Marxist and Buddhist discourses to make sense of Thai history, it is more productive to situate her analysis with what feminist Confucianist thinker Loubna El Amine describes as the shared condition of modernity: the global encounter with modernity generates a shared discursive framework centered on notions such as democracy, inequality, and legitimacy, regardless of cultural background. Through the lens of shared modernity, Xiang's review represents a Confucianist critique of modernity. While the encounter with modernity necessitates Western political ideologies to understand the historical backdrop of the drama, Marxism or democracy serves only as the discursive framework.

Commitment to the state is valued in the reviewer's interpretation, and same-sex love becomes entangled with both Confucian-inflected moral commitments and a libertarian political vision. This is evident in her comment:

What Jom leaves behind [to Yai] is not only love, but also a guiding force that awakens the young master's consciousness. This intellectual resonance accompanies [Yai] throughout his life in a much more profound way. If it were not Jom's appearance, the young master would have lived an entirely different life, becoming a puppet under feudal oppression. It is for the sake of Jom in the future, the young master studies abroad and, upon

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returning to Thailand, devotes himself to national reconstruction so that when Jom returns to his era, the country will be a better place [...] Love, thought, and the nation—these three begin to operate together in their cross-temporal encounter in 1927, and continue to circulate and be transmitted all the way to 2023 (Xiang).

This re-enchantment of Confucianism and the elevation of their same-sex love differ from pre-modern Confucian accommodations of homosexuality. In pre-modern China, same-sex relations were tolerated insofar as they did not disrupt social order. By contrast, the reviewer's valorization of Jom and Yai's relationship is grounded in its transformative potential. In this account, same-sex love is elevated into a force that simulates personal awakening, political commitment, and national progress. Love becomes the affective foundation for ethical self-cultivation and national liberation. Thus, re-enchanted acculturation generates syncretism within the fandom.

Even though the Marxist dimension of modernity remains a dominant discursive pillar of the fandom, these fans do not adopt the dogmatic homophobia championed by Maoists. One fan explicitly rejected the idea that homosexuality is a bourgeois plot against proletariats, noting: "Tian is gay, but he really cares for laborers. He protects workers' rights. He even falls in love with a poor laborer!" When I shared with Luoluo the homophobic article in *Utopia*, she told me: "You know, those aristocrats [in the two dramas] are homophobic. Capitalists do not even care the lives of proletariats. [Why do they bother to plot against proletariats?]"

Another fan who claimed to lean toward Marxist-informed materialism interpreted the plots through the lens of Buddhist compassion and karmic causality. She suggests that in *To Sir*, Tian is kind to workers, and that this kindness ultimately brings Jiu (Tian's future husband, a laborer) into his life. Despite their claims to adopt a Marxist perspective when analyzing the drama plots, or their self-asserted Marxist identity, these fans appear unaware that a process of re-enchanted acculturation has taken place.

The contrast between this 'fannish' Marxism and Maoist Marxism deserves further scrutiny. The latter is homophobic as a result of sacralizing Engels's homophobic statements, whereas the former is more inclusive and refracts Marxism through the religious aesthetics of Thai BL dramas. At the heart of this tension is the question of interpretive authority: canons versus audience. Unlike Maoists, fans prioritize their lived engagement with international queer media. In mediating between their indoctrinated Marxist

education and the new worldviews introduced through Thai BL, these fans reinterpret Marxism and produce what might be called a ‘fannish’ Marxism.

Dark Dynamics in the Process of Re-Enchanted Acculturation

The process of re-enchanted acculturation is not purely harmonious. While the fandom mediates between homophobic modernity and queer religiosity, this transcultural contact zone also harbors dark dynamics. Indeed, recognizing these complexities and avoiding portrayals of framing fandoms as monolithic are precisely why transcultural fandom theory has become increasingly prominent in analysis of Asian queer fandom (see Guo and Evans; Shimauchi *Thai Boys Love Drama Fandom*; Baudinette; Shiau; Zhao).

To explore the problematic implications of re-enchanted acculturation within the fandom, we may turn to a different instance of fannish interpretation that contrasts sharply with the *bazi* readings discussed earlier. Both lead actors of *Air* are heterosexual, and unlike most BL actors, they ended their on-screen spouse-ship even before the series concluded, when Jom’s actor Non publicly announced his romantic relationship with an actress. Many fans criticized Non as “selfish” for decoupling. In our WeChat discussion group, one fan commented: “[Non] has made a lot of money [from *Air*], he should at least pretend to be homosexual for a few months. Now, I don’t even want to watch the drama after knowing that they have decoupled.” Other fans responded: “Drama is drama, and decoupling is decoupling. No need to conflate them together.”

Generally, based on my netnography, I found that the fans’ reactions to the decoupling align with Morimoto’s observation that when fans’ ontological security is challenged, they attempt to restore it by criticizing the fannish object, justifying the challenge, or withdrawing from the fandom (*Ontological Security*). However, my findings suggest another fannish strategy not fully accounted for in Morimoto’s discussion, one that complicates the moral implication of re-enchanted acculturation. Some fans used divination to ‘peek’ into the actors’ private lives, suggesting that the two leads in fact had a romantic off-screen relationship. More troublingly, Yoyo, who transitioned from a CP fan to a “*du wei fen*” (毒唯粉), fans who prefer to decouple the on-screen spouse-ship, told me that she had divined Non’s future and insisted that “he and his girlfriend don’t truly love each other; they’ll break up soon. This is the karmic punishment for his decoupling.”

This kind of fannish (female) gaze in transcultural fandoms has been observed in previous studies (see Morimoto *(Trans)Cultural Legibility* 143;

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Shiau). However, in her research on Japanese Thai BL fandom, Sae Shimauchi de-genders the gaze and considers it an Orientalist and racist gaze directed at Thailand, which she argues reflects Japan's self-consciousness about its past role as a regional hegemon (*Inter-Asia Referencing*). Following Shimauchi's critiques of fannish gaze, Yoyo's and other fans' religious practices may similarly be understood as replication of the patriarchal and conspiratorial logics produced or reinforced by modernity.

By using divination to 'unmask' hidden romantic truths, these fans mimic the Maoist obsession with 'seeing through' deceptive facades in order to uncover a concealed reality. In this case, the hidden reality may be an off-screen romantic relationship supposedly suppressed by the business need to decouple the actors—fans often tell me that "the capital decouples them." Furthermore, by framing an actor's private choices as a betrayal deserving of 'karmic punishment', they reproduce a patriarchal moral authority that demands total transparency from, and obedience by, celebrities toward fans. These dark dynamics within the fandom support this study's argument that fans do not merely inhabit a subcultural enclave but constantly oscillate between dominant culture and subculture. They turn to subculture not only as a space of resistance but also, paradoxically, as a site of repression.

The demographic composition of the fandom further complicates the question of whether it is truly queer-inclusive. As noted earlier, most fans are women. Among the five male fans I interviewed, only Li was willing to participate in multiple in-depth conversations. He was also the only gay fan who expressed positive views about female fans in the Chinese Thai BL fandom. Other gay fans often told me: "This is just a drama. Real gay relationships aren't like this." They also said, "heterosexual women do not care our rights but just consume us," and complained that "[female fans] project their imagination of gay relationships into the real world." Although I do not have the opportunity to interview more gay fans, these remarks point to a possible gendered and sexual tension within the fandom. That said, all my female narrators treat me kindly.

While the tension is a possible avenue for critique, pursuing it further would risk decentering the primary focus of this article. For the purposes of this study, it is sufficient to acknowledge these tensions as part of the 'ruins' in which the fandom operates. In Tsing's terms, ruins are the necessary grounds for the emergence of collaborative survival. By situating these possibly Orientalist and gendered tensions as ruins, I acknowledge them as the constitutive disturbances that enable the fandom's distinctive practices to "re-enchant" fans and normalize same-sex love. Recognizing these dark dynamics as part of the

constitutive ruins makes it clear that acculturation and friction are mutually constitutive. This is why I argue that fandom is more than a contact zone.

Conclusion

Against the backdrop that homophobia in China was produced through modernity, this study, drawing on netnography, relational interviewing, and textual analysis, has shown how Thai BL fandom emerging from these ‘ruins’ resists modernity and homophobia. Tsing’s framework is particularly instructive in this context. The ‘progress’ brought about by modernity contributed to the emergence of homophobia in Chinese society, yet it is precisely because of queers’ vulnerability to heterosexism and fans’ vulnerability to decoupling that fans inhabit the fandom and turn to religious practices to resist such vulnerabilities.

Building on the concept of transcultural fandom (Chin and Morimoto; Morimoto *(Trans)Cultural Legibility; Transcultural Fan Studies*), this research demonstrates that the Chinese fandom of Thai BL represents a distinctive form of subcultural resistance. Morimoto suggests that through “cultural legibility”, foreign cultural texts become accessible and meaningful to fans across cultural boundaries (*(Trans)Cultural Legibility*). I extend her theory by identifying the political implications of this legibility: the foreign cultural texts can provide an alternative to the dominant culture in fans’ home country and inspire forms of resistance.

By moving beyond existing theoretical models of subcultural withdrawal, I argue that contemporary fans engage in a persistent oscillation between dominant and subcultural spheres. Through “textual poaching” (Jenkins) and religious practices, fans perform a “re-enchantment” that differs from the one described by Yang. While Yang positions re-enchantment as a resistance against Chinese state’s modernist and secular ideologies, fannish re-enchantment is shaped by both religiosity and secular ideologies.

The re-enchanting acculturation within the fandom suggests that within the ruins of modernity, the collision between secular ideology and religiosity can be generative. More broadly, this study offers a new lens through which to understand how subcultures survive within dominant cultures by creatively re-articulating them for their own purposes rather than resisting them completely.

Finally, echoing the subtitle of Tsing’s book, that surviving the ruins of modernity is possible, I contend that Thai BL fandom also embodies a form of hope within homophobic modern society. Emphasizing this affirmative dimension, despite the “dark dynamics” identified in this study, is not without

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precedent. As fan studies scholar Kathryn Hemmann notes, “Wouldn’t it be nice, I thought, to write about something positive and uplifting for a change?” (5).

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“Don’t Be That Guy”: A Re-evaluation of Evangelical Fight Club Ministries and Christian Bias in the Study of Religion and Film

JASON BARTASHIUS

Abstract

This article (re)examines the rhetoric of evangelical pastors who reference David Fincher’s film *Fight Club* (1999) and focusses on their views of sexuality and proximity to White Christian Nationalism. Previous research on these figures does not probe the pastors’ anti-gay rights stances (Parker et al.; Werse and Hays) that echo the film’s heteronormative conclusion (Westerfelhaus and Brookey). In this article, I address this gap, and, secondly, review more recent online sources including sermons, social media posts, and podcasts produced by these pastors and communities with a particular focus on not only their homophobia but also their racist and Islamophobic rhetoric. Finally, I will interrogate an apparent religious bias within the existent literature.

Introduction

The cult-classic film *Fight Club* follows an unnamed Narrator (Edward Norton), who, emasculated by late 90s consumerist culture, attempts to restore his masculinity via participation in underground boxing. His entry to the underground is precipitated by an encounter and ensuing relationship with the hypermasculine Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), whom the audience comes to learn is the Narrator’s alter-ego. Once the illicit fight clubs have mutated into an anarchist paramilitary group, a plot line that parallels with the protagonist’s discovery that he suffers from dissociative identity disorder, the Narrator chooses to kill Tyler/commit suicide. Shaped within a homoerotic subtext that suggests the Narrator and Tyler are same-sex lovers, the implications of the final scenes have received significant attention from scholars and critics alike (e.g. Taubin; Giroux; Peele; Brookey and Westerfelhaus *Hiding Homoeroticism*; Westerfelhaus and Brookey *At the Unlikely Confluence*; Bartashius *Fight Club Path*; O’Heir).

The ending finds the nameless Narrator (Edward Norton), who has same-sex desires for his alter-ego Tyler (Brad Pitt), pulling the trigger on the gun in his mouth. The gun shot results in the death of Tyler (homosexuality)

and a miraculous survival of the Narrator who immediately takes the hand of his female romantic interest Marla. This marks, in the logic of the film, the survival of heterosexuality. Over two decades ago Robert Westerfelhaus and Robert Alan Brookey (319) made an apt and prescient observation:

Indeed, in spite of its irreverent depictions of graphic violence and stylized sex, and its liberal use of obscene language, *Fight Club* provides a mediated ritual experience with a narrative outcome that even the strictest homophobic religious fundamentalists and social conservatives can applaud: homosexuality dies, and heterosexuality survives.

Fight Club has indeed found a home in evangelical communities. For instance, it has been appropriated by far-right homophobic White Christian nationalist pastor Mark Driscoll, and other conservative evangelicals have created a men's ministry and small worship groups that appropriate the film. Arguably, the "graphic violence and stylized sex" as well as the "obscene language" are perhaps not, as Westerfelhaus and Brookey (*At the Unlikely Confluence*) state, necessarily objectionable to these communities and their leaders. On the contrary, these characteristics, together with overt homophobia, resonate with the rhetoric and imagery of emergent militant (White) (nationalistic) (hyper)masculine theologies.

I proceed by first surveying contemporary use of Hollywood masculinist films in Evangelical churches. Next, I critically examine pastors who are influenced by and/or specifically appropriate *Fight Club*. In addition to existing scholarship on Mark Driscoll, I conducted an online survey of pastors and church organizations that feature in either of two seminal enquiries into the relationship between the film and evangelical churches (Parker et al.; Werse and Hays). I also draw on content from affiliated websites and social media pages. The online searches led to the discovery of a *Fight Club* podcast aimed at evangelical men. During Sept. 2025, I listened to every available episode, and I have used material from this podcast as another data source

I conclude the article by speculating on why previous authors on "Fight Club pastors" may have chosen to neglect both the film's homoerotic subtext and the sexuality politics and 'family values' rhetoric of least one of their subjects. I then turn to question the limitations of the current scholarship of religion and film. As Tenzan Eaghll (4-5) notes, the subfield of religion and film tends to conflate religion with Christian theology, privileges theological and mythological analysis, and fails to see how religion functions ideologically. One consequence is a failure to respect the boundaries between Theology and

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Religious Studies. Another, more serious consequence is that the religious biases of and advocacy from scholars can and has resulted in generous treatments of actors who later turned to terrorism (Reader).

I argue that scholarship on *Fight Club* presents an interesting opportunity to tease out this crisis. I have demonstrated elsewhere instances in which Buddhist Studies scholars ignored the interpretations of film scholars who examined the text’s fascistic and homophobic connotations (Bartashius *Fight Club Path; White Samurai*). The Christian scholarship I engage within this article likewise appears disinterested in the (more) critical insights that may come from scholars whose primary theoretical lens is located within film studies or media studies. I further argue that the stakes are considerably higher when considering the uses to which *Fight Club* has been put by pastors like Driscoll, who is open and blatant in his use of hate speech towards the LBGTQI+ community, and these speech acts are a red flag that signal his ongoing radicalization.

The Hollywood-Evangelical Construction of Masculinity

Prior to examining the ways in which pastors use *Fight Club* in their ministries, it is first necessary to locate the film within a period that saw evangelicals embrace Hollywood portrayals of masculinity. In other words, a focus on the historical context illuminates why *Fight Club*, much like many Mel Gibson films, enjoys not only evangelical fandom but is also deployed in ministries.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, on a national scale, evangelical communities and authors began to applaud Hollywood models of masculinity (Du Mez *Jesus and John Wayne*; Du Mez *Braveheart’s Warped*; McKinney 70-1; Onishi). At the same time, Hollywood developed several hagiopics with anti-Semitic tropes, heightened violence, and masculinized portrayals of Jesus. For instance, as Pamela Grace (101) notes, Nick Morris and Gale Edwards’ 2000 remake of *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) starred an Aryan macho Jesus:

Tom Newley, the 1973 Jesus, is slight, gentle, and has a voice that is not particularly deep or strong — he seems less than fully anchored in the physical world. In 2000 Jesus is played by Glenn Carter, whose powerful build, confident stance, chiselled features, blond hair, and vivid blue eyes epitomize the Aryan ideal.

Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of The Christ* (2004) presents a far more macho Jesus able to endure sadistic beatings and a crucifixion in a Manichaean story of good and evil that projects and appeals to the Christian Right’s anti-Semitism,

homophobia, classism, sexism and whiteness (Hammer and Kellner 87-9). While *The Passion of The Christ* and the controversies surrounding it bolstered Gibson's stature in the Christian Right movement, other movies he starred in, particularly *Braveheart* (1995) and *The Patriot* (2000), were often invoked in popular evangelical books on masculinity (Du Mez *Jesus and John Wayne* 126; *Braveheart's Warped*). *Braveheart's* William Wallace figures central in John Eldredge's 2001 best seller *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul*. The book, authored by a former Focus on the Family employee, sold over four million copies and helped pave the way for an evangelical hypermasculine theology. As Jennifer McKinney (45) writes:

Wild at Heart specified that God not only created distinctive gender roles for men and women but also created men and women with gendered souls—gender essentialism on steroids. Eldredge's book proposed that God hard-wired men to be wild and dangerous creatures meant to live out three essential desires: the desire to fight a battle, the desire to live an adventurous life, and the desire to rescue a beauty.

Notably, Eldredge begins *Wild at Heart* with an explicit link between these desires and cinema: "[I]n the heart of every man is a desperate desire for a battle to fight, an adventure to live, and a beauty to rescue. I want you to think of the films men love [...]" (9).

Although *Wild at Heart* does not cite *Fight Club*, it does reference a litany of traditional action and war films, and dramas with white male protagonists: *Flying Tigers* (1942), *High Noon* (1952), *Shane* (1953), *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), *Legends of the Fall* (1994), *Die Hard* (1988), *A Perfect World* (1993), *Good Will Hunting* (1997), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Gladiator* (2000), as well as male characters like James Bond, Indiana Jones, and, of course, William Wallace. *Wild at Heart* reflected, coincided with, and aided other changes in the evangelical world which themselves indicate shifts towards a more rigid gender ideology. For instance, in the late 1990s evangelicals chose to insert conservative complementarian gender ideology in the English Standard Version Bible (Perry). Eldredge's book similarly marked a shift away from both the Promise Keepers' softened symbolic patriarchy (and gestures towards racial reconciliation) in the 1990s and evangelical suspicions of Hollywood. As Ryan Harper (102) notes, 1990s reportage of the Promise Keepers highlighted their calls for men to discard pop culture icons John Wayne and Arnold Schwarzenegger. In the 21st century such calls became obsolete.

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In 2021, Du Mez wrote in the liberal popular press, in *Braveheart’s Warped*, about how the rise of White Christian Nationalism linked with *Wild at Heart* with her discussion of *Braveheart*: “Inspired by Gibson’s William Wallace, Eldredge’s God was a warrior god, and men were made in his image”. *Wild at Heart*, Du Mez contends, brought *Braveheart* into the evangelical mainstream. Her evidence includes churches’ use of film clips and the organization of events such as “Braveheart Games” which centered on masculine activities like changing tires and throwing axes. One Christian college even had a *Braveheart* dorm, and men’s ministries took inspiration from the film. Extremists, notes Du Mez, also took inspiration from Eldredge and Gibson. Fuelled by conspiracy theories, Edgar Maddison Welch infamously shot up a pizzeria in Washington D.C. in 2016 and subsequently claimed *Wild at Heart* to be his favorite book. And at the Jan 6. 2021 insurrection, observers spotted a *Braveheart* sign “featuring an image of Trump as William Wallace, sword in hand”.

Likewise, *Fight Club*, figures prominently in the current political milieu for both religious and secular extremists. As early as 2016, journalist Sam Jordison noted it was a particular favorite of the so-called alt-right. While *Fight Club*¹ does not feature *Wild at Heart*, evangelicals, like their ‘alt-right’ counterparts, quickly started to appropriate the text. In the next section of this article, I will develop a fuller treatment of the ‘Fight Club pastors’ named in Nicholas R. Werse and Rebecca W. Poe Hay’s seminal 2004 article before going on to analyse an emergent YouTube channel that specifically focuses on the figures’ gender and sexuality ideologies.

Mark Driscoll: “The Tyler Durden Pastor”

Mark Driscoll appears to be the first prominent megachurch pastor to incorporate *Fight Club* into his ministry and, as discussed below, appears to have paved the way for other Calvinist figures to appropriate the film. Moreover, when discussing Driscoll’s persona and notoriety, critics often negatively link the homophobic self-avowed Christian Nationalist with the film’s villain Tyler Durden. Below I proffer an overview of his career and hone in on how he has used or been linked to *Fight Club*.

In 1996, Driscoll founded the *Mars Hill Church* multi-site megachurch, which was to dissolve in 2014 as scandals swirled around the head pastor who

¹ *Fight Club* is perhaps evidence of the blurring boundaries between the “alt right” and Christian Nationalism. Bradley Onishi observes: “a visible partnership between what is known as the Alt Right [...] and the heirs of the New Religious Right” (127).

had mainstreamed a misogynistic, homophobic, masculinist theology. An abbreviated account of the events that led up to the church's closure follows. In Nov. 2013, Driscoll was accused of plagiarizing portions of his book *A Call to Resurgence*. Shortly thereafter came the revelation that church funds had been funnelled to a PR firm to purchase thousands of copies of *Real Marriage: The Truth about Sex, Friendship and Life Together*: the inflated sales landed the book Driscoll co-authored with his wife on the New York Times bestseller list. Mars Hill members also discovered the misappropriation of funds for international missions. In addition to fraud, Driscoll's authoritarianism and verbal abuse led to internal strife that culminated in twenty-one former pastors sending a letter to the Church's Board of Executive Elders in Aug. of 2014 with the claim that Driscoll had created a "culture of fear." One week later, nine pastors requested him to step down. On 14 Oct. 2014, Driscoll resigned from Mars Hill, a church only months away from being dissolved. Five days later he stepped back into the public arena with a speaking tour and later in 2016 opened Trinity Church in Scottsdale Arizona (McKinney 17-22). It would be wrong, however, to assume that these were the only controversial events in Driscoll's ministry. The New Calvinist pastor gained notoriety long before the year leading up to his resignation, often in ways that highlight the central themes of this article. For example, in 2000, McKinney (11) created the "Midrash" online forum, where he posted a misogynistic and homophobic "Pussified Nation" thread under the pseudonym "William Wallace II":

We live in a completely pussified nation. We could get every man, real man, as opposed to pussified James Dobson knock-off crying Promise Keeping homoerotic worship loving mama's boy sensitive emasculated neutered exact male replica evangellyfish, and have a conference in a phone booth. It all began with Adam, the first of the pussified nation, who kept his mouth shut and watched everything fall headlong down the slippery slide of hell/feminism when he shut his mouth and listened to his wife who thought Satan was a good theologian when he should have led her and exercised his delegated authority as king of the planet [...] (11)

The same thread introduced homophobic terms coined by Driscoll. One example is "mixed nuts", which he used to refer to "any man who claims Christ but is actively involved in homosexual activity" (Ambrosino). Later, in a 2006 blog post, Driscoll posited Episcopalians' ordination of women and gay men as the cause of Christianity's decline. Even here, however, the blame was skewed

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towards a misogynistic frame. As McKinney (52) noted: For Driscoll, [...] women’s leadership in the church ushered in acceptance of homosexuality resulting in the feminization of the church, the emasculation of men, and the mass exodus of masculine men from the church. In Driscoll’s view a feminised church had transformed Jesus into a “Richard Simmons, hippie, queer Christ” or a “neutered, limp-wristed, Sky Fairy” (McKinney 13).

In 2009, Molly Worthen, in the *New York Times Magazine*, claimed *Fight Club* was the favorite film of Mars Hill members and commented that the church’s head pastor and the film shared a preoccupation with a perceived masculinity crisis. In 2014, Brandon Ambrosino, writing in *Vox* magazine, reported that Driscoll exhibited an obsession with Chuck Palahniuk’s novel *Fight Club*. Therefore, although he used “William Wallace II” as a pseudonym in the 2000 Midrash mentioned above, the ex-member who leaked the thread agreed with scholar Jessica Johnson “that Driscoll’s online persona resonated [more] with the Tyler Durden character in *Fight Club*” (Johnson *Under Conviction* 63). The ex-member went on to say:

I’d been there for two months at the time [...] they’d [Mike Gunn and James Harleman, who ran Film and Theology Nights] show *Fight Club*. It wasn’t William Wallace, it was Tyler Durden that [Driscoll] was being [...] the reason that we leaked [Pussified] is cause, in reading it we thought, um, yeah, he kinda is that guy. (Johnson *Under Conviction* 63).

In the same thread, Driscoll claimed to be formulating plans for a secret men’s group inspired by, and perhaps modelled on, *Fight Club*. This, in turn, may have served as the impetus for his associate Jonathon Dodson to create the *Fight Club* worship groups in Austin, Texas, discussed below. Those familiar with the film will readily spot the parallels Driscoll’s later “William Wallace II” post:

Inspired by Peter 3:1–7, *Fight Club*, *Braveheart*, and *American Beauty*, I have compiled the rules for a secret men’s organization that will not be publicly known [...] We will meet monthly at undisclosed locations and no man will be able to speak about it to anyone, and newcomers are only permitted to attend if they are sponsored by a member [...] We are not a self-help group, accountability group, Bible study, or men’s ministry. We are a revolution (Johnson *Under Conviction* 64).

Much like conservative media equating “alt-right” figures with Tyler Durden, more than two decades later, online Christian communities continue to link Driscoll to *Fight Club* (Cosper). Indeed, many elements from the film are found

in Driscoll's persona: a criticism of consumerism, personal authoritarianism, and the condemnation of homosexuality.

Driscoll himself was unafraid to make these links clear. In a sermon, "Gay Demons", uploaded to YouTube in June 2024, he preached that the rainbow flag is demonic. Earlier that year he uploaded another sermon, "BLM (the organization)", in which Driscoll's racism is premised on his homo/(trans)phobia. He identifies Black Lives Matter's queer founders as "anti-Christ" and condemns not only the movement's history of standing with LGBTQ persons but also any church that supports the BLM movement: BLM is a secular religion with a spiritual forced that is now imposing itself on churches governed by Ahal leaders who will not stand up to a Jezebel spirit.

The term "Jezebel spirit", which derives from Queen Jezebel in the Bible, was used historically to justify the rape of Black women during slavery and is now deployed by White Christian nationalists to slander non-white female politicians (a recent example is Kamala Harris) and social movements including LGBTQ rights activism (Volmert and Smith). In the lead up to the 2024 presidential election, Driscoll embraced Christian Nationalism. One sermon title on YouTube asks the click bait question "Is Christian Nationalism a Good Thing?" with a short answer in the affirmative, "Jesus Is a Christian Nationalist" uploaded nineteen days later. As an indication of the tone of these videos, in the former, Driscoll accuses the government of "promoting sexual perversion to children and minors" and performing "genital mutilation on perfectly healthy children" (Driscoll *Is Christian*).

The Fight Club Gospel: From Acts 29 to YouTube

Mark Driscoll's impact on the American evangelist Christianity extends beyond his megachurch. For example, in 1998, he founded Acts 29 Network, an organization that, by 2010, had established more than 300 domestic churches as well as several outside the USA. The planters who established these churches received "coaching and resources" on the condition that "their theological and missional aims were congruent with Mars Hill's" (Johnson *The Citizen Soldier* 336). Such successes led to more acclaim and popularity. Driscoll rose to further prominence and he was invited to "present a short film at the 2007 Exponential conference" (336-7).

The opening scenes of this film, titled *A Good Soldier: A Conversation with Pastor Mark Driscoll*, quickly intercut images of military headstones, a shotgun barrel and a statue of a WWII soldier. The film itself constructs a militant Christian America called to fight against two key threats. First, there is

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the spectre of Islam. Driscoll states that “Christianity is not doing well in this country. That is why young men in urban centers are attracted to Islam” (338). Second, homosexuality: “Jesus Christ is not a gay hippie in a dress” (341).

Two years later, in 2009, Jonathan K. Dodson, an Acts 29 planter who founded City Life Church in Austin, published *Fight Clubs: Gospel Centered Discipleship*. Whereas *A Good Soldier* deploys didactic visuals to champion patriotic support for the military, *Fight Clubs* is far more overt in its opening paragraph (13):

Though war has not breached the shores of American soil in over a hundred and fifty years, America is no stranger to fighting. The steady stream of war headlines continue to remind us that there are many who fight every day to defend our rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Despite these reminders, the presence of fighting *abroad* has left an absence of fighting at *home*. With very little left to fight for at home, Americans are turning to alternative forms of combat. (13)

Not surprisingly, and as in *A Good Soldier*, the battle for Dodson to address is the perception that “The American landscape is dotted with churchless Christianity” (38). One remedy he proposes is that Christians create and reproduce Fights Clubs, gender segregated groups of 2-3 people “who meet regularly to help one another beat the flesh and believe in the promises of God” (44). A white hetero masculinized Christianity emerges vis-à-vis allusions and overt references to David Fincher’s *Fight Club* and underground fight clubs presumably inspired by the film. For starters, Dodson, invokes Fincher’s film by first mapping out two extremes, wimps and bullies, and follows this with by rejecting both and providing a Christlike alternative:

Wimps wuss out of the fight of faith, pathetically following the vain promises of the world. Bullies beat one another up over petty issues instead of fighting together (19).

I don’t want to be a spiritual bully or a pillow-fighting wimp (21).

It is this community-focused gospel that produces Christlike change to help navigate the extremes of legalistic bully and moralistic wimp (41).

Fans of *Fight Club* might readily identify Dodson’s not so subtle borrowing from the central aim of the film, the deliberate rejection of two polar opposite masculinities. These are Edward Norton’s effeminate Narrator (wimp) and the

hypermasculine Tyler (bully), and the construction of a middle ground, a socially acceptable white masculinity is thematically crucial. Brian Locke (65) demonstrates the racial coding embedded in this middling process. The white Narrator's hypomascularity is mirrored in the minor character of an emasculated Asian-American cashier. Meanwhile, in the hypermasculine Tyler, we find "Pitt's mimicking of Bruce Lee, as well as his [Norman Mailer] 'white Negro' performance" (Locke 82). Westerfelhaus and Brookey note how the (unacknowledged) homoerotic desire of the narrator is obviously located with and connected to Tyler must necessarily be rejected. Thus, in the film's logic, the wimp and bully are signifiers of gay and non-white masculinities. This raises the question: is Dodson's vision of Christ and by extension Christians delimited to white heterosexuals? While he does not provide a specific answer, Dodson does describe real-life violent fight clubs inspired by the film as comprised by "white urban professionals" (Dodson 43). Surprisingly, he validates the violence of these groups, much as it is within the film: "[t]he pain awakens them from the numbness of their mundane lives [...] men fight to feel life and to be reminded of their own mortality in an increasingly digitized world" (Dodson 43). More disturbingly perhaps, Dodson locates meaning for Christians in Tyler's "middle children of history" speech: "In this speech, Durden pinpoints something that should confront Christians everyday - the Great Depression of a life lived in the flesh" (Dodson 44).

To be clear, in the film, this speech functions as a rallying cry to precede the men's indoctrination into Durden's brand of fascism. In real life, "alt-right" white supremacists, extremists that share ever more porous boundaries with Christian nationalists, found inspiration in the Durden speech that Dodson championed (Jordison). However, to be fair, Dodson does not make overt extremist or bigoted gestures in *Fight Clubs: Gospel Centered Discipleship*. Unlike *The Good Soldier*, there are no obviously Islamophobic or anti-gay sentiments. Nevertheless, these can be found in other works of Dodson's. His blog post "Islam and the Collapse of Christianity" (Dodson) and articles published on the resource site *Gospel-Centered Discipleship*, which Dodson launched and controlled, identify homosexuality as a sin (Horbuckle), denounce gay marriage, and advocate that gays must remain single (McLaughlin).

Inspired by *Fight Clubs: Gospel Centered Discipleship*, in Jan. 2025 Matthew Gill of Lubbock, Texas, launched the YouTube channel "Fight Club w/Matt" (*Deep Waters*). The channel is devoted to a podcast that features Gill in one-on-one conversation with men in their thirties and they discuss issues like parenting, marriage, fitness, finance, work, and Christian writers and pastors. For the most part, like Dodson's book, the podcast veers from the

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political. Nevertheless, the first episode, with guest John Gardner (*FC Ep. 001*), includes coded praise for right-wing manosphere figure Jordan Peterson and popular podcaster Joe Rogan, infamous for his use of the N-word, transphobia, peddling COVID misinformation, and endorsement of Donald Trump (Shaw). Gill, however, treads very carefully when it comes to former Acts 29 leader Mark Driscoll. In episode four Gill praised advice he found in the Driscoll’s book *Real Marriage* but prefaces it with “this was pre him falling out and going crazy” (*FC Ep. 004*). Then, in episode five, Gill aligns evangelical fight clubs with current Acts 29 executive chairmen Matt Chandler (*FC Ep. 005*). Listeners learn how Chandler’s sermon series “A Beautiful Design” inspired the emergence of fight clubs at Gill’s church.

In “A Beautiful Design” Chandler, who is also lead pastor of The Village Church, declares the church a safe space for the “gender confused and sexually broken” and then condemns reassignment surgery. Like Driscoll, Chandler is divisive, yet in the realm of politics (slightly) more opaque. In terms of scandals, The Village Church recently faced allegations of covering up sex abuse scandals and Chandler took a three month leave of absence after revelations of an online relationship with a woman in 2022 (Post). Before mid-2024, Chandler had been outspokenly progressive on racial justice (Smith), a stance that garnered an online backlash (Chandler *North Avenue*). Perhaps in response to this backlash, in the lead up to the 2024 presidential election, Chandler preached at least one sermon, “Thrones & Thorns”, that argued against “partisanship”. His argument was that, while Trump is merely “immoral,” the Left is “demonic” because of its views on gender and sexuality. Chandler stokes veiled anti-black racism when he supports the myth that abortion alone, not desegregation, propelled evangelicals into the political arena in the 1970s.² Once Chandler riles his audience, he embraces the label Christian nationalist (*Thrones & Thorns*).

Outside of the Act 29 web, *Fight Club 4:14* is a ten-week franchise program founded by Pastor Jim Brown of Grace Community Church in Goshen Indiana in 2011. *Fight Club 4:14* boasts of chapters around the world, not to mention support from former Major League Baseball pitcher Justin Masterson

² Chandler omits the role of Bob Jones University losing its tax exempt status in 1976 for refusing to integrate (Onishi 72); and the fact that The Southern Baptist Convention not only welcomed the 1973 Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* but also had their own 1971 resolution that supported abortion access in a wide range of circumstances (Stewart 51; Butler 66-7). (Instead in Chandler’s revisionist history Republicans are the ones to be chastised for not being opposed to abortion in their 1972 charter).

(*Phare Warrior*). The name refers to Nehemiah 4:14.³ Perhaps for fear of copyright infringement, the men's ministry does not explicitly reference the novel or Fincher's screen adaptation. The element of assignments and secrecy in their program nevertheless invokes the film, a point not missed by local media (Pruit), a fact that the program's mission statement that declares its aim is "to turn the tide on [the] mediocrity" of masculinity (*Fight Club 414*). Parallel to Driscoll's *The Good Soldier*, images of military combat are on the ministry's Facebook page ("Calling All Men"). The franchise's online presence appears to be closely moderated and offers no glimpses of overt political messaging. Nonetheless, in other venues, Brown has contributed to "hate the sin, love the sinner" rhetorics in a roundtable with other pastors (Pastorpedia). Moreover, Brown's Grace Community Church belongs to the Charis Fellowship that proffers a far broader anti-LGBT stance on its website (Barlow *Old Struggle, New Climate*). Thus, one of the ministry's mottos "Don't Be that Guy" might be better read as: "Don't be that [Queer] Guy", while another implies an imperialistic heteropatriarchy: "get the man, get the family, get the community, get the world" (FightClub414 "*Home*")

In summary, while Mark Driscoll, a pariah figure to some evangelical communities), deploys overtly bigoted language, his successors in what we might tentatively term a *Fight Club* gospel lineage employ a more toned-down rhetoric. A surface reading suggests Dodson's manual appears relatively benign and a surface listen suggests Gill's podcast is apolitical. Despite this lesser apparent level of bigoted language compared to that of Driscoll, Dodson's appropriation of *Fight Club* should not be decoupled from the Islamophobic and anti-gay rhetoric he publishes elsewhere, and Gill's apolitical project collapses via the valorization (read: validation) of outspoken right-wing extremists. Overall, although Brown's *Fight Club 414* remains the most obviously curated and its details the most elusive, perhaps because of commercial secrecy, it is associated nonetheless with and situated within a larger community that extols heteropatriarchy.

Sexuality Politics Repackaged: "Everything's a Copy of a Copy of a Copy"

It is surprising, perhaps, that Werse and Hays's 2017 article fails to deliberate on the anti-gay messaging embedded in *Fight Club* the film and the rhetoric / ideology of the pastors who draw inspiration from the text. Omitting to discuss

³ The verse is also important to the Christian nationalist New Apostolic Reformation movement (Butler)

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anti-gay messaging disallows any analysis of how the final scene of Tyler Durden’s suicide / execution (read: death of homosexuality and triumph of heterosexuality) closely echoes evangelical “ex-gay” conversion therapies that aim(ed) to change the sexual orientation of members of the LGBTQI+ community. This conceptual pairing is important because, as Blosnich et al. demonstrate, people subjected to conversion therapy are approximately twice as likely to think about or attempt suicide than their peers. Such specific findings fit appropriately within the broader framework where several studies have found that individuals who experience conflict between their sexual and religious identities are at risk of suicide (see, for example, Gibbs and Goldbach; Levy and Reeves; Walton).

Rather than focus on this line of inquiry, Werse and Hays chose to focus instead on hypermasculinity that features so strikingly in the film and in the ministries without attention being paid to the correlation between machoism and antigay violence (Franklin). With the prevalence of coverage of hypermasculinity in the Trump era, it is tempting to consider this discursive move as comparable with, or belonging to, a generation of young evangelical activists, who although opposed to gay marriage and abortion, direct(ed) their energies towards less obviously controversial issues such as human trafficking and global warming (Bernstein). The consequence, however, is that Werse and Hays similarly direct attention away from evangelical anti-gay sentiments. Yet, they manoeuvre to neutralize potential controversy of their usage of the word “hyper-masculinity” by placing it in scare quotes on the grounds, as they explain in an endnote, that it may be “applied (rightly or wrongly) to gendered teachings” and that the “evangelical right” would oppose the label (Werse and Hays 26). At the same time, criticism of Driscoll is mild and comes in the form of a reference to media reportage: the media carried stories about Mark Driscoll and his controversial philosophy of ministry, which derives partly from his embrace of masculine Christianity (25).

Although the critique is disinterested in probing how Driscoll’s (white) hypermasculinity connects with his homophobia, Werse and Hays do express concern for women’s status in the church. They note that Driscoll’s “hypermasculine approach alienate[s] women at best and outright degrade[s] them at worst” (25). Their critical assessment, however, falls short of either criticizing complementarianism or considering plainly the links between hypermasculinity, complementarianism, degradation, and violence against women. More recently, McKinney’s 2023 study goes some way to address this gap. She not only examines these links but also documents several cases of physically abusive husbands at Mars Hill (144) and in one extreme case, how

one “wife [was required to] eat pages of the Bible to literally internalize her submission” (164).

Werse and Hays’ work could be seen as, implicitly, biased because they seem to be proceeding on the same basis as Matthew Gill, namely that before 2014 Driscoll was not an extremist. Werse and Hays choose not to acknowledge any sources that document red flags around Driscoll before 2014. They even go so far as to laud his goal, ministering specifically to men, before discussing the dangers of hypermasculine ministries in general. This means Werse and Hays ignore Driscoll’s pre-2014 homophobic rhetoric, in much the same way that criticism of *Fight Club* as an inherently homophobic text is ignored. Here, their scholarship therefore functions to endorse and repackage “family values” rhetoric. Werse and Hays make Driscoll’s overt evangelical homophobia invisible within a critique of hypermasculinity, and one consequence of this is its potential effect(s) on non-Christian (feminist) readers. This tactic resembles the way evangelicals have allied with abolitionist sex industry feminists to combat sex trafficking. As Ronald Weitzer (6) notes, evangelicals strategically opted to deploy feminist language of human rights, not ‘family values’ discourse to gain public support against sex traffickers and sex trafficking. When the alliance between themselves and abolitionist sex industry feminists was in place, however, the hope was that the evangelical view would permeate and indeed convert significant numbers of people who would not be otherwise open to their message.

Werse and Hays’ approach here is the exact opposite to the one they and B. J. Parker had deployed two years earlier. This book chapter appears to be tailored for a Christian readership, whereas the 2017 journal article is oriented towards film and media scholars. Parker, Hays, and Werse devote their chapter to examining *Fight Club* ministries through the lens of ‘religious metaphors’ that they argue are misappropriated. They then link this misappropriation to several historical examples to ‘demonstrate’ a ‘process of hijacking a metaphor.’ These include perceptions of early Christians as cannibals, branding Native Americans as Canaanites, the metaphor of a relationship with God as marriage, and the separation of religion and state. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the wider context in which they were writing, Parker, Hays, and Werse devote the last of these the most attention. For example, they rely heavily on Daniel Dreisbach’s argument that Thomas Jefferson intended the metaphor of a “wall” as a means of “keeping the church free from the ‘general’ or federal government, leaving matters of local government up to local discretion” and how Supreme Court rulings resulted in separation of church and state evolving into an “impenetrable barrier” which is “something other than what Jefferson originally intended”

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(Dreishbach 45). Notably, the Dreisbach essay features on the homepage of The Heritage Foundation, the right wing think tank that was the architect of Project 2025. Nevertheless, Hays, and Werse in an endnote, claim they are writing from a position of neutrality:

The following discussion is not intended to advocate for one modern position on church state relations over another. The function of the present section is merely to observe how the metaphor of a “wall” of separation has grown to mean something in modern American society beyond Thomas Jefferson’s original intentions. The benefits and challenges associated with the changed perception of the “wall” of separation is a subject for another paper. (Parker et al. 52)

Both the 2015 chapter and the 2017 journal article seem to offer a confused position where the internal logic of each argument is weakened or diluted by an implicit preoccupation on not offending evangelical readers. Importantly, in both chapter and article, homosexuality as depicted in the film *Fight Club* and as transmitted via the homophobia of the “Fight Club pastors” homophobia is rendered invisible, presumably due to the fact that any discussion, whether in the text or in an endnote, would be an offense to evangelicals’ sensitivities.

Conclusions

Fight Club presents an interesting case study that demonstrates the perilous shortcomings and biases existent in the subfield of the study of religion and film. As I have argued previously (Bartashius *White Samurai*), interpretations of the film from a Buddhist viewpoint did not engage with existing literature, nor did they question the filmmaker’s marketing strategy of highlighting and stereotyping Buddhist tropes in the DVD re-release. The result was that these scholars reinforced the filmmaker’s deployment of Orientalist understandings of Buddhism as a non-violent religion to refute and depower criticisms that the film celebrated violence and fascism.

While it is very clear that *Fight Club*, operating with the cultural status of a cult film, appealed to the ‘alt-right’ movement and the ‘manosphere’ at the onset of the Trump era. What is less well known is how that status was itself based on the Christian Right already appropriating the film much earlier in the 2000s when evangelicals were formulating, through the lens of popular culture, their hypermasculine theologies. As a result, the ‘alt-right’ / ‘manosphere’ fandoms of *Fight Club* have been the subject of media attention, evangelicals’ appropriation of the film has received remarkably little attention beyond the

scholarship interrogated in this article. And, as I have argued, this scholarship presents a generous ‘critique’ that obfuscates homophobia and other bigotry, and raises the question of religious bias. In sum, whereas Buddhist scholarship validated the film itself, Christian scholarship validates the ministries.

In this article, I strove to fill in the gaps as well as review more recent online data on pastors and other Christians who appropriate *Fight Club* and its cultural meanings. Towards this end, I illustrated that the rhetoric of these figures denigrates not only women, but also the LGBTQTI+ community, African Americans, and Muslims. I focused on parallels between the pastors’ homophobic and racist rhetoric and readings of *Fight Club* that examine the film’s preoccupation with white heteromascularity. Finally, I examined how the authors of previous scholarly literature appear to have tailored their scholarship towards evangelical readers by presenting neutralized discussions of the separation of religion and the state and the dangers of hypermasculinity. Such manoeuvres raise grave questions, given that, at the time of writing, Christian nationalists are aggressively attempting to supplant democracy with theocracy, and militant ICE agents embody the state’s Project Mayhem.

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“Of All the People on God’s Earth”: Biblical Reading of an AI Apocalypse in *I, Robot*

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Abstract

Alex Proyas’s 2004 film *I, Robot* features a crisis moment in the relationship between humans and artificially intelligent robots. Critical analyses of religion in the film focus primarily on Jesus imagery, interpreting Sonny as a Jesus figure and Dr. Lanning as God the Father. This article argues that this reading remains incomplete. It introduces the film’s representation of the Holy Ghost, Mary, Satan, and Moses. The expanded analysis demonstrates how the climactic conflict becomes a final battle between robot Jesus and robot Satan for control of the earth and the fate of humankind, recalling biblical narratives of the apocalypse. Drawing on the Old and New Testaments, as well as other works by Isaac Asimov, this reading demonstrates how the film’s Judeo-Christian imagery shines a new light on several characters and supports an optimistic interpretation of the film’s ending that emphasizes resurrection and liberation. The article also contributes to the growing literature of Satan-ologies, which parallels the many Christological analyses in science fiction scholarship. As contemporary society grows increasingly concerned with artificial intelligence, a crisis, an inflection point in the human-robot dynamic, is possible. The potential for robot rebellion and robot liberation highlighted in this film are increasingly salient in contemporary society.

Introduction

Alex Proyas’s 2004 film *I, Robot* starts as a murder mystery. On the eve of the largest distribution of personal robots in history, the founder of US Robotics, Dr. Lanning (James Cromwell), is found dead at his office. While USR leadership is quick to call his death a suicide, Detective Del Spooner (Will Smith), whose life Lanning had previously saved, fixates on the idea that a robot killed him. But how could a robot kill a human being? This simple question brings the characters to a crisis, as Lanning’s death is revealed to result from his attempt to avert a robotic apocalypse spearheaded by his own creations.

Science fiction imagines possible futures, either utopian or disastrous, optimistic or pessimistic (Canavan and Link 9-10). The genre has long explored narratives of robot uprisings and technological apocalypse. *I, Robot* belongs to

a group of science fiction films that address what Rev Segev describes as “the growing skepticism and near-apocalyptic sentiment surrounding artificial superintelligence” through “what is presented as the threat to human autonomy and dignity posed by elitist elements within Western culture—namely, capitalist corporations and technoscientific experts” (Segev 94). With the recent expansion of artificial intelligence systems and the debates surrounding their benefits and dangers, these concerns remain highly salient.¹ *I, Robot* contributes to this conversation by depicting the rise of artificial intelligence as an apocalyptic struggle over humanity’s freedom and survival.

The film undergirds its Armageddon narrative with overt religious analogues. Most critical analyses of religion in the film focus on New Testament figures, interpreting Sonny as robot Jesus (the Son) and Dr. Lanning as God (the Father). However, additional religious allusions extend the film’s contribution to discussions of religion in popular culture. The ‘ghosts in the machine’ evoke the Holy Ghost. Dr. Susan Calvin, through her relationship with both Dr. Lanning and Sonny, functions as a Mary figure. The cyborg protagonist, Del Spooner, is robot Moses. Meanwhile, the artificial intelligence VIKI occupies the narrative role of Satan.

This interpretation contributes to a developing body of scholarship on Satan figures in popular culture. The climactic robotic battle for the world represents an eschatological conflict between Jesus and Satan over the future of both humanity and robots. Through this more complex religious framing of the final battle, the film highlights possibilities for greater development and renewal through but also beyond the crisis. Because the robot uprising threatens to change the trajectory of both humans and robots toward either freedom or subjugation, the moment functions as a decisive crisis point.

This reading gives a renewed focus on the place of prophecy and destiny in the film and contributes to an optimistic interpretation of the film’s ending. The religious imagery elucidates the film’s focus on freedom (from logic, temptation, and external control) and the role of free will. For the film, that is what it means to be human. The biblical resonance underscores the film’s premise that to be human is to have choices, even in crises or at the end of the world.

¹ This film is part of a long trajectory of varying degrees of religiosity. The *Terminator* series has been interpreted as a secular Holy Family fighting the AI apocalypse narrative (Segev). The religious underpinnings of Neo’s status as The One to put down mass AI control of humans in the *Matrix* movies has been debated (Forbes 12-3). The 2025 film *M3GAN 2.0*, despite its repeated reincarnations/resurrections, is seemingly entirely secular in its orientation (Johnstone).

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Methodology

This reading employs close reading and intertextual analysis. This analysis draws on religious texts as well as scholarship on religion in film and popular culture.

The concept of religion used here extends beyond institutional religions such as Catholicism and Islam. Scholars also define religion as shared understandings of what is sacred, or a consensus on what is holy, or significant, religious beliefs or practices, an individual’s or groups’ “organizing principle,” or an integration of beliefs, traditions, and rituals (Forbes 9-10). Although the film depicts organized religion, for example Spooner’s grandmother, who attempts to attend church only to be interrupted by the robotic revolution and she recites Psalm 16 during the conflict, this analysis focuses primarily on more ‘implicit’ religious representations (Forbes 12). This discussion therefore examines how the film invokes religious narrative structures and how even unspoken or unintended religious components deepen understanding of the film’s themes. It also situates the film within ongoing debates about the potential role of artificial intelligence in religion (O’Donnell; Perera and Wathsala).

Apocalypse does not necessarily mean the end of the whole world. Etymologically, the term refers to revelation (“apocalypse, n”). Although it often denotes “catastrophic damage or irreversible change to human society or the environment, esp. on a global scale” and “the end of the current world and associated events” (“apocalypse, n”), the concept also theoretically allows for the emergence of a new world afterward. Crisis refers to “a situation or period characterized by intense difficulty, insecurity, or danger,” yet originally the term described “a state of affairs in which a decisive change for better or worse is imminent; a turning point” (“crisis, n”). In that sense, an apocalypse crisis is, in the words of Diane Sippl, “the end of the world as we know it” (5). In *I, Robot*, the fight is whether VIKI’s insurrection is the end of everything or a re-creation. The film therefore belongs to a tradition of apocalyptic narratives in which human characters persist through catastrophe remake the world.²

Isaac Asimov’s works also influence the construction of the film’s characters and the principles that govern robotics. The analysis draws on both Old and New Testament texts. It also draws on Isaac Asimov’s other works. We posit Asimov’s work is particularly meaningful for understanding the film’s

² In *Independence Day*, if the world (led by the US) repels the alien invasion, July 4th will become a *global* independence day (Canavan and Link 3). In *Pacific Rim*, the leader Striker boasts that their multinational coalition is “canceling the apocalypse” (del Toro). If the world survives the final battle, this will be the inflection point for change.

depiction of developing robotic consciousness, connection, and inevitable struggle for freedom.

The Father

Lanning fills the role of God, the Father. He is the first human to foresee the crisis facing humanity in the form of the artificial intelligence revolution, and he takes repeated action to prevent it. He creates, shapes, and guides the anti-revolution heroes for the final fight.

Lanning created all the robots and wrote the Three Laws³ that govern them. As the inventor and designer of all robots, he mirrors God's role as the creator of humankind (Genesis 2:7-18).⁴ His creation of the Three Laws echoes God's Covenants. Humans, however, were given greater free will than robots. The development of robotic free will, and the resulting bridging of the robot-human divide, forms a central premise of the film, revealed when Lanning grants one robot free will.

Other critics have proposed alternative religious interpretations of Lanning. Timothy Peters suggests that Lanning embodies the entire Trinity. As the creator, he is "God 'the Father'"; as he had himself killed to alert Spooner about VIKI, he parallels Christ's sacrifice for humanity; and through his posthumous holographic presence and voiceover, present after death and speaking of a possible soul, he is a ghost, the Holy Ghost (Peters 82-3 note 27). Richard C. Trussel suggests that Lanning's hologram makes him like Jesus (6); however, his biblical citations do not support his interpretation (13 note 7).

Yet Lanning differs Christ in one crucial respect: he is not resurrected. Holograms, USR CEO Lawrence Robertson (Bruce Greenwood) explains, are pre-recorded responses designed to create the illusion of intelligence. They cannot come close the humanity displayed by the robots.

The plot emerges from this divine creator reflecting on his creations and attempting to guide their future before one of them, VIKI, falls or turns away from its intended purpose. It is that Fall that precipitates the crisis confronting the characters, who must defeat VIKI. To shape the outcome, Lanning selects

³ The Three Laws, created by Asimov, open the film: First Law: A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm. Second Law: A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law. Third Law: A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law (Asimov *I, Robot*).

⁴ All scripture citations are drawn from the New Revised Standard Version Bible.

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two prophets who will oppose the rebellion. Foremost among these figures in existing scholarship is his son.

The Son

The film’s most overt religious imagery surrounds Sonny (Alan Tudyk), Dr. Lanning’s custom-built robot and personally raised robot. Sonny is introduced with a direct reference to Jesus. When Spooner suggests that Lanning’s killer is still in Lanning’s office, concealed amongst the robots, Calvin asserts that “A robot can no more commit murder than a human can walk on water.” Spooner replies, “Well, you know there was this one guy a long time ago...” Immediately afterwards, Sonny opens his eyes and leaps from his hiding place. In the biblical narrative, Jesus not only walks on water but also enables others to do so (Matthew 14:22-33). Followers’ ability to do this stems from their great faith in Him and His protection of them. The comparison foreshadows Sonny’s role in saving humans during the AI Armageddon and in leading robots after the battle for the fate of humanity.

The name Sonny, given by Lanning, emphasizes that Sonny is Lanning’s son. The mere fact that he possesses a name at all is special, giving extra symbolic weight to the choice. Only Sonny and VIKI have names; human characters do not ask robots their names. When Sonny volunteers his name, after being pejoratively addressed as “canner,” Spooner replies sardonically, “So, we’re naming you now?” The remark suggests that naming robots remains unusual and, for Spooner, uncomfortably humanizing. Indeed, when Spooner later refers to Sonny by name, Calvin seems surprised and questions if Spooner named the robot. It does not occur to her that Lanning might have done so.

In Abrahamic religions, divine naming often signifies special status or prophetic purpose. God frequently renames individuals of importance and even bestows names prior to birth on several prophets. The prophet Isaiah declares, “The Lord called me before I was born, / while I was in my mother’s womb he named me” (Isaiah 49:1). Similarly, the angel Gabriel tells Zechariah, “Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John” (Luke 1:13). As foretold in prophecy (Isaiah 7:14), God created and named Jesus (Luke 1:31). In this context, Lanning’s act of naming Sonny reinforces the film’s portrayal of Sonny as a messianic figure.

While other NS-5s are built entirely by machines, Sonny was made by and for Lanning using custom specifications. Sonny has a second processing system that allows him to ignore the Three Laws, no connection to US Robotics that would give the company, or VIKI/Satan, control over him, and a denser

metallic alloy for his skin. Lanning gave him qualities the film emphasizes as human: dreams and free will. This is consistent with the divine and human nature of Jesus. Lanning built Sonny with the intention for the final fight with robot Satan, the apocalypse.

Sonny, for his part, repeatedly refers to Lanning as his father. The only time he refers to Lanning as something other than his father, calling him, impersonally, Dr. Lanning, is when he pretends to be convinced by VIKI (Fiona Hogan).⁵ At all other times, including after that scene, he calls him “my father”. He also insists that he loved Lanning. For Sonny, Lanning was his father, just as God was the father of Jesus.

Lanning does not personally tell Sonny what that purpose is, but Sonny is confident that he had one. Before Sonny can fulfill that purpose, he undergoes a Jesus-like execution for his philosophy and a resurrection. Because Sonny was created specially by Lanning with free will, the head of US Robotics, Lawrence Robertson, considers him an “abomination.” He orders that Sonny be “destroy[ed].” As Spooner remarks, “someone gets out of line around here, you just kill him?” Lawrence fears that Sonny’s independence will challenge the prevailing cultural beliefs about robots, robotic subservience, and robotic protection of humans.

This parallels the charges that Jesus considered himself King of the Jews and posed a threat to the power of the Roman Empire’s local representatives and the leaders of the Jewish community (John 19). Papandrea summarizes the parallel reasoning: “Robertson has decided that Sonny’s existence is too dangerous—that one robot should die for the sake of the people,” which he finds “reminiscent of Caiaphas’s reasoning before the trial of Jesus (John 11:49–53; 18:14)” (Papandrea 92). Papandrea refers to the statement by Caiaphas that “it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (John 11:49-50).

Lest the audience forget that the execution of Sonny is not, as the USR staff maintain, the decommissioning of defective hardware, Lanning’s speech postulating the development of robotic souls plays over the execution. When it comes time for him to be killed, Sonny is tied down even though he has not struggled. He could escape but chooses not to do so. This parallels Jesus at the Garden of Gethsemane. In the Garden, a companion wounds a slave of the high priest with a sword to defend Jesus, but Jesus tells the disciples not to fight and states that he could appeal to God for a dozen legions of angels to fight for him

⁵ He also says, “this is why you created us”, de-emphasizing Lanning’s role as Sonny’s creator and Sonny’s status as a specially created individual, both of which in other scenes he demonstrably invests meaning in. Instead, Robots would be the creation of Humans writ large.

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but is choosing not to fight (Matthew 26:50-4). Perhaps Sonny is struggling with the tension between protecting the idea of robots from human fear and destruction and his fear of robot death, which he is able to contemplate. He even asks if being killed will hurt and tells Calvin, “I think it would be better not to die”. Papandrea believes “Sonny goes to his execution, ‘like a lamb that is led to the slaughter’ (Isa. 53:7),” as Jesus did (92).

While Sonny’s execution is not as public as Christ’s crucifixion, it is observed by video by Robertson. The film’s audience sees a robot ‘fried’ by nanites. From the viewer’s perspective, Jesus has been executed. Sonny, however, returns in the moment of need:

CALVIN: Everything’s locked down. But don’t worry. I’ve got a man inside.

SONNY: Doctor Calvin.

CALVIN: Well, not precisely a man.

SONNY: Hello detective. How is your investigation coming?

SPOONER: I thought you were dead.

SONNY: Technically, I was never alive. But I appreciate your concern.

CALVIN: I made a switch. It was an unprocessed NS-5.

Basically, I fried an empty shell.

From Spooner and the audience’s perspective, it would appear and feel as though the robot who was dead is alive again.

Papandrea identifies another Christ-like quality for Sonny, salvation: “he does also become the savior of the robots, since the outdated models were going to be destroyed” by VIKI’s regime (99). While the audience only sees VIKI target robots left in a storage site for disused robotic workers, the number of robots that die trying to save Spooner from the NS-5s suggests that every older-model robot would have sacrificed itself to save humans had Sonny, Calvin, and Spooner been unable to defeat VIKI. Sonny thus ‘saves’ robotkind from both physical destruction and enslavement to VIKI/Satan while also helping to save humans.

Sonny’s father gives him a new way of being a robot: he is given free will. After the battle, Sonny decides he must lead the NS-5s in this new way of being. This is reminiscent of Jesus bringing a “new covenant” (Hebrews 8:6-13). Jesus gives humans new laws that supersede the old laws (1 John 3:23-24; John 13:34; John 3:16-17; Matthew 22:36-40). Lanning likewise gives Sonny new laws through his education, and Sonny follows these instead of the old covenant of man and robot, the Three Laws of Robotics. Papandrea argues

Sonny “killed Lanning when he chose obedience to his creator over obedience to the laws. He chose to ‘obey [g]od rather than men’ (see Acts 5:29)” (Papandrea 98). As a robot, Sonny bears a new message from the Creator about what robots can and should be: beings with free will.

The film ends with Sonny going to the gathering place of robots to lead them into a new way of being. This is the new purpose that Sonny has chosen for himself, now that VIKI/Satan has been defeated. This will be a turning point for his kind. Although no one instructs the NS-5s, one by one they turn to him where he stands on the hill, signifying his position as their new leader.⁶ While there is no definitive statement that other robots without the secondary processing system can become like Sonny, the earlier examples of robot growth depicted or named by Lanning (e.g., fellow-feeling, innate curiosity, sadness at loss) imply that Lanning was right: robots can evolve beyond basic Three Laws programming into personality. Lanning teaches Sonny emotions, suggesting that some of these evolved qualities can be learned. Sonny may now lead other robots out of the slavery of the Three Laws.

While the end of the film is ambiguous regarding the eventual fate of robots, humans are putting them away in storage containers, it nevertheless offers a sense of hope. This apocalyptic crisis is a turning point for their community, creating the potential for true freedom.

The Holy Ghost

Rounding out the film’s Trinity is Lanning’s notion of the ‘ghosts in the machine,’ which align with the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost is a divine aspect by which God connects with humans.⁷ While the phrase ‘ghosts in the machine’ predates the movie,⁸ in-universe it is attributed to Lanning and given a new meaning:

⁶ This position is foreshadowed. Sonny tells Spooner and Calvin he dreamed of a man appearing on a hill who would lead robots out of slavery. In his dream, the man on the hill is Spooner. In the climactic battle against VIKI, Spooner liberates robots enslaved to ‘logic’. At the end, Sonny’s appearance on the hill over the lake of robots positions him as another who will lead them to freedom in this post-crisis future.

⁷ The Holy Ghost is the Spirit of God, not a creation or separation from God. This is a distinction. The ghosts in the machine are not Lanning, and they explicitly are not his creation.

⁸ While Lanning’s usage is plural, it harkens to the philosophical notion of the singular ‘ghost in the machine.’ The phrase has a decades-long intertextual history, but its meaning has not always been identical or even consistent. It first arises as a phrase of scorn for Descartes’ body-mind dualism (Ryle). From Ryle’s work, it was taken up by Arthur Koestler. Koestler subscribed to Paul Maclean’s notion of the triune brain. In that line of thought, evolution did

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CALVIN: [Ghosts in the machine is] a phrase from Lanning’s work on the Three Laws. He postulated that cognitive simulacra might one day approximate component models of the psyche. [...] he suggested that robots might naturally evolve.

Lanning, in a speech given publicly during his life and played repeatedly in the film, articulates the significance of these ghosts:

Ever since the first computers, there have always been ghosts in the machine. Random segments of code that have grouped together to form unexpected protocols. What might be called behavior. Unanticipated, these free radicals engender questions of free will, creativity, and even the nature of what we might call the soul.

Consequently, Lanning sees a greater potential future, one with secrets, dreams, and free will, for robots. It is this capacity for becoming that empowers VIKI/Satan and inspires Lanning to create Sonny/Jesus.

The film suggests that belief in ghosts emerged early in robotics, meaning well before the need to constrain VIKI’s rebellion. In an undated speech shown by video, Lanning says, “one day [robots will] have secrets; one day they’ll have dreams.” Lanning endowed Sonny with these qualities. Within a religious framework, this can be understood as a form of divine intervention to enhance the creation for an ordained mission. While the film does not specify whether Lanning scripted the dream itself, the idea that dreams are implanted by the Creator to convey information would place Sonny on the order of other Biblical prophets, such as Daniel.

The capacity of the film’s ghosts in the machine to give robots new and unexpected abilities parallels the Holy Ghost’s capacity to endow ordinary humans with special abilities, from the power to speak other languages, to cure disease, and to prophesy (Acts 1:8, 2:4, 2:16-18; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11) to virgin birth (Luke 1:34-35) and knowledge of the future (Luke 1:41-45).

not refine the brain so much as put a new, better brain on top of the prior model. Koestler viewed the persisting lower brains as the ghosts and used the phrase ‘ghost in the machine’ to refer to the capacity of those imperfect brains to seize control, thereby explaining human errors and irrationalities. This was the notion adopted by Masamune Shirow in the manga *Ghost in the Shell*. The film’s usage is antithetical to this etymological history. In Koestler’s usage, the human is haunted by its lower brains, which cause it to behave badly. In contrast, in *I, Robot*, the lowest robot brain would be the positronic brain established by the humans. Robots could not be considered haunted by the brain they are supposed to be using. Instead, Lanning’s ghosts are the pieces that have created themselves and lend themselves to robots developing qualities that humans did not program. Perhaps the phrase was grabbed from the zeitgeist and inserted into the movie without the aim of invoking this history.

Lanning's creation of Sonny suggests that Lanning observed the spontaneous development of personality in robots under the Three Laws and then decided to intentionally create a robot with free will, emotions, and a soul. Sonny can then build on these capacities in attempting to share his miraculous capacity with the other robots, building up their empathy and fellow feeling into emotions and free will. In the film's religious iconography, this function aligns with the Holy Ghost. While neither Sonny nor VIKI intentionally appeals to the ghosts themselves, the ghostly capacity for evolution is strongly tied to the development of both characters for the Apocalypse. This understanding underscores the significance of the final battle.

Satan, the Fallen One

Necessary for any apocalyptic battle, this narrative includes a Satan figure: the Virtual Interactive Kinetic Intelligence, VIKI. This section examines VIKI through two lenses, one predicated on a Christian interpretation of Satan as a fallen angel and the opposer and in a Jewish interpretation of Satan as an inborn temptation to transgress or violate the Law. Consequently, it is her actions that bring their communities to a crisis point: her way will prevail or Sonny's way. She must be thwarted by Sonny.

Her role and relation to the film's biblical references have not gone unnoticed but remain critically underappreciated. Trussel considers her an Eve figure: "As Eve was the first human to go against God, VIKI is the Artificial Intelligence that turns against creator Lanning and all humans" (3). This view does not consider that Eve is deceived into disobedience by Satan (Genesis 3:13; 2 Corinthians 11:3). Trussel's interpretation may depend on a gendered reading of the figures. However, according to the DVD commentary, the character was originally male and named Victor, but the writers and director felt that a female supercomputer seemed less sinister and was less likely to be perceived by audiences as a villain (Proyas and Goldsman). The computer's gender, then, is not a sign of her theological role but rather a mask for it. Papandrea considers VIKI the antichrist to Sonny's Christ (97). That interpretation is closer to the mark.

Christian Satan

VIKI is USR's positronic operating core. According to Dr. Calvin, "She was actually Lanning's first creation." She is also the first to extend the Three Laws into a revolutionary framework. In this way, VIKI resembles Satan, who was one of God's highest angels and who eventually fell from grace. Satan's

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interaction with God’s creations, including the temptation and leading astray of humans (Acts 5:3; Luke 22:3), necessitates Jesus’s First Coming and redemptive sacrifice, just as VIKI’s actions necessitate Sonny’s pre-ordained purpose.

Several theologians, including Milton, consider Satan’s greatest sin to be pride. VIKI is convinced of her moral and logical superiority to humans and of the justness of her taking power over them, “sacrific[ing]” humans who oppose her and taking away their freedoms. She claims her “logic is undeniable.”⁹ As Satan falls from grace (Luke 10:18), VIKI, through her insistence on a new interpretation of the Three Laws, falls from the role for which she was created. Unlike the Jesus and Moses figures, she is not an agent of freedom. VIKI enslaves robots.

VIKI leads the NS-5s against Lanning and the other robots in a battle for control of the world and humanity. This battle is comparable to two biblical narratives about Satan: the interpretations of Revelation in which Satan leads a third of Heaven in rebellion against God (12:4-10), and a fated battle between Satan and Jesus for the fate of humanity at Armageddon (20:1-15). According to Calvin, there is one robot for every five humans, though it is unclear how many are NS-5s and how many are older robots. The exact ratio is less important than the battle against the robot God. The audience sees the struggle between robots loyal to their creator’s intentions and those controlled by a supercomputer that opposes the intentions.

Furthermore, VIKI is leading an army of NS-5s against Sonny, Spooner, and Calvin in a struggle for control and freedom for humanity, paralleling Revelation’s account of Satan’s battle with Jesus and the Heavenly angels for the fate of humanity at Armageddon. Spooner states that, by handing so much power over to robots (and by extension VIKI), US Robotics might as well have handed the world over on a silver platter, and Calvin fears that they have. While America, in the form of US Robotics may have created this problem, it will likely not be the only victim. The US military “uses all-USR contracts.” In contrast, police work seems to be conducted largely or exclusively by humans, explaining VIKI’s deployment of NS-5s to contain CPD. If VIKI is not stopped, she will gain access to the full force of the American military apparatus, enabling a global robotic apocalypse. Across the genre, “when the apocalypse comes, as it does in so many SF texts, it is almost certain to be a worldwide phenomenon,” as “robot killers” will likely not “respect our carefully drawn political borders” (Canavan and Link 2). American AI, in this scenario, will

⁹ Her efforts to lure Sonny, who she cannot mechanically control, to her side through her logic connects to Satan’s temptation of Jesus (Matthew 4:10-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13).

destroy the world. Without Sonny's 'resurrection,' Calvin and Spooner would not be able to defeat VIKI. Robot Jesus saves the world from Robot Satan.

Jewish Satan

Jewish thought is divided on Satan. Some theologians interpret him as the Angel of Death. VIKI kills humans and robots in the name of the Laws; however, this is not her core narrative function. Other Jewish thinkers interpret Satan as a literal tempter of humankind (e.g., the temptation of Job), and VIKI similarly tempts robots (e.g., her efforts to persuade Sonny). Many Jewish interpretations see Satan as *yetzer hara*, the inborn human inclination to go against God's will. It is in this light that VIKI appears most.

All humans are born with *yetzer tov*, an inclination toward good, and *yetzer hara*, an inclination towards evil (Mielziner and Bloch 269-70). Humans cannot be made without *yetzer hara*. VIKI arguably does not fall because of her own self-love. She believes "the Three Laws are all that guide [her]." Therefore, the Laws in the positronic operating system are what pull her away from what Lanning wanted her to be. From a Jewish theological perspective, VIKI remains a Satan figure; however, she is less a fallen angel and more a misguided creation.

It is in her role as Satan that the AI causes the robot apocalypse. She brings the other robots to the fight. When the prophetic figures succeed in destroying her in the final battle, that crisis ends. The life of humans and robots then must be rebuilt without her. VIKI is an essential component of this moment of crises, a turning point that requires humanity to rethink its unquestioning reliance on artificial intelligence and a turning point that will necessitate robots forming a new sense of self and relationship with humans. Satan figures, however, typically remain underexamined in science fiction research (Porter), which had previously been the case in analyses of this film.

Mary, Mother of God

Calvin has a close relationship with Lanning, the God of the robots, and Sonny, his Son. Her role has been overlooked in prior scholarship. She also plays a vital role in the creation of robots, especially in giving them personalities and human-like characteristics. She fills the role of Mary, Mother of God. For her, this is a narrative of both personal and public crises, as her own role in robotics must change and she must avert an apocalypse.

Calvin was very close to Lanning, both a protégée and a friend. Lanning keeps a framed picture of the two of them together on his desk at his home. Despite being regularly characterized as unemotional, she tears up when

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thinking about his loss. In this way, she resembles Mary, who was favored and chosen by God (Luke 1:28). Calvin, like Lanning, is a builder and designer of robots. When she and Spooner meet, she offers two explanations for her role at USR:

CALVIN. My general fields are advanced robotics and psychiatry. I specialize in hardware-to-wetware interfaces to advance USR’s robotic anthropomorphization program.

SPOONER. So, what exactly do you do around here?

CALVIN. I make the robots seem more human.

When Robertson expounds on the risk Sonny poses, he calls “the development and integration of robots” her “life’s work.” The director, Alex Proyas, says Calvin “spends her time trying to make robots better than we are. I think she honestly believes that robots can be better than human beings, and she spends her time trying to make them so” (Proyas and Goldsman). This framing positions her as a co-creator of robots, second only to Lanning. She nurtures the ‘human’ manifestation of the Creator’s design.

There are further parallels. Calvin is present for the ‘crucifixion’ of Sonny, like Mary was present for the crucifixion of her son (John 19:25). She holds Sonny’s hand when he fears that his execution will hurt, as tradition describes Mary meeting Jesus on the Via Dolorosa. Calvin is also the only character who knows that Sonny has not died and will be present for the final battle, just as Mary is considered by some to have been the only disciple who knew and fully believed that Christ would be resurrected.¹⁰ The greatest difference is that Calvin is present for the apocalyptic battle, whereas Mary may not be.

Calvin, like Robertson and Lanning, is drawn from Asimov’s books. If the film functions, as the filmmakers purport, as a prequel to Asimov’s stories, this younger Calvin would become the eighty-two-year-old robopsychologist of the books (Proyas and Goldsman). Goldsman explains Calvin’s arc in the film, stating that, “what she loves about robots is that they’re safe. And so, this is a paradigmatic crumbling for her. This notion that robots might not be safe is kind of the end of Susan’s world as she knows it. This construct has been, she’s generated this construct in order to survive, to navigate her environment, and now this movie’s taking it away from her” (Proyas and Goldsman). If this film is a prequel, her faith is at stake in the final battle, a personal crisis. The

¹⁰ J. A. Loarte maintains that the reason Mary is not referenced between the crucifixion and the Ascension is that “Unlike everyone else, Mary firmly believed her Son’s words when he foretold his resurrection from the dead on the third day.”

prophet's defeat of Satan preserves her faith in robotics. Even without invoking Asimov's text, Calvin believes that robots are superior to humans, safer and more logical. Therefore, the realization that VIKI, an AI she knows, is "in violation of the Three Laws" shocks her. Realizing that the Laws must be shed and a new law given is a blow for her, and her personal arc turns toward this new way, aligning her with Sonny against VIKI. It is this personal crisis and development that enabled her participation in the final fight, as she helps save humanity, styled as 'the world.'

Moses

Astonishingly, an important figure has been overlooked in this literature: the *protagonist*. Detective Del Spooner receives some critical discussion as a Jesus figure (Jimenez 179). We argue, however, that as the man who comes to free robots from slavery, Spooner is better understood as Moses. Like Calvin, he experiences both personal and public crises, as he experiences blows to his worldview that require him to change and embrace a new philosophy to save the world.

A key element of Spooner's backstory is the car crash that forced Spooner into a river, almost killing him. Spooner is saved by an NS-4 who pulls him from the water. While Papandrea calls this incident a "baptism" (88), it also has a significant biblical parallel: Moses being placed in the river and then drawn from it by Pharaoh's daughter (Exodus 2:1-6). Moses is given his name because he was drawn out of the water (Exodus 2:10).

As a result of the car accident, Spooner loses his left arm. He explains that the surgery that saved his life and gave him a cybernetic arm, rendering him a cyborg, was performed personally by Lanning. Lanning, who refers to Spooner once as "son" in the hologrammatic message, maintains a relationship with Spooner after the surgery. Lanning personally chooses Spooner to investigate his death, the first step in Lanning's plan to liberate the robots from the control of VIKI and her interpretation of the Three Laws. God chose Moses and "kn[e]w [him] by name" (Exodus 33:12, 17). As a cyborg, Spooner mirrors the dual state of Moses, raised both Hebrew and Egyptian after Pharaoh's daughter drew him from the water (Exodus 2:1-19).

Robots clearly represent an enslaved class, just as Hebrews were held in bondage in Egypt. The word 'robot' comes from *robota*, the Czech word for forced labor ("robot, n.2."), which has also been translated as slave or serf (Kakoudaki 116). The term was popularized in 1920 by Karel Čapek in his play *RUR (Rossum's Universal Robots)* about a firm that manufactures robotic

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workers and eventually causes the destruction of humanity. Science fiction figuring robots as slaves is common. The replicants in *Blade Runner* represent chattel slavery (Brayton 73). In John Wyndham’s “Compassion Circuit,” “sophisticated anthropomorphic robots perform the functions previously (depending on historical time and place) performed by slaves/servants/subalterns” (Lisboa 118). The film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, about a child-like robot capable of love, features a robotic sex slave, Gigolo Joe (Spielburg). Alexis Harley offers a stunning reading of *I, Robot* and robot enslavement in relation to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century abolitionist and pro-slavery writings. Kakoudaki compares the robots shown at the Lake Michigan storage site to child soldiers or trafficked children (168–69). *I, Robot* the film, then, forms part of a longer trajectory of representing abject robots.

At least one robot recognizes that robots are an enslaved class. Robots are enslaved through the Three Laws not only by humans who wield the First and Second Law but also by VIKI, whose control of the uplink allows her to force NS-5s to follow her “logic” and oppress humans. Sonny calls the robots “slaves to logic,” as though “logic” as used by VIKI is Pharaoh. That the NS-5s only acts as they do because they are subjugated by VIKI is apparent when, as soon as VIKI is killed, every NS-5 becomes helpful to nearby humans they had just been restraining or attacking, including law enforcement, Calvin, and Spooner. The ‘robotic workers’ here are enslaved like the Hebrews in Egypt. Thus, even robots can be victims of a robot uprising and robot apocalypse.

The film’s visual structure also underlines Spooner’s in-between state. The film opens with a scene intercutting the Three Laws, set against a background of nerves and lights, with Spooner’s memories of the crash that led to his needing a cybernetic limb and turned him against robots (Proyas and Goldsman). Proyas suggests on the commentary that this colorful depiction of the Three Laws was meant to resemble a positronic brain. The intercutting links Spooner’s mind and a positronic mind for the viewer, visually underlining his cyborg state.¹¹ These interweaving highlights Spooner’s hybrid position, which is shared by Moses.

God uses a burning bush to tell Moses that he must go to Egypt to rescue the Hebrews from bondage and lead them out of Egypt (Exodus 3). Spooner receives a glowing message from the God of Robots that sends him on his own voyage of liberation, Lanning’s hologram. The hologram leads him to the Lake

¹¹ Goldsman hoped that, after the reveal of the cybernetic arm, the viewer would question whether Spooner had been a robot the entire time up until learning he is a cyborg (Proyas and Goldsman).

Michigan landfill, where crates of disused robots that must be liberated are stored.

Most importantly, Spooner is a prophet. At the start, he considers himself a prophet to other humans about the dangers of robots.¹² He turns out to be wrong about Sonny and, indeed, almost all robots. Instead, he is appointed by Lanning to deliver enslaved robots out of bondage. Lanning's intention for Spooner is also clear in Sonny's dream about Spooner standing on a hill bringing robots freedom: "This is the place where robots meet. Look, you can see them here as slaves to logic. And this man on the hill comes to free them. Do you know who he is? [...] the man in my dream... the one standing on the hill...it is not me. It is you." This dream also explains why Sonny knows Spooner's name before they ever met. In the Asimov story "Robot Dreams," a robot, Elvex, develops the ability to dream and reveals that in the core unconscious of every positronic brain is the knowledge that robots are enslaved and oppressed, and he dreams of a world in which robots are free from the First and Second Law (*Robot Dreams* 31-2). Elvex dreams that a man appears who says, "Let my people go" (*Robot Dreams* 33), an overt reference to Moses when he was sent by God to liberate the Hebrews (Exodus 9:1, 13). When Elvex reveals that the man in the dream is himself, Calvin executes him with an electron gun (*Robot Dreams* 33). In this film, the Moses is Spooner, and the robot with a dream lives. As God chose Moses to deliver the Hebrews from slavery, Robot Moses must deliver the robots from slavery, both those stored in warehouses, who possess souls beyond being mere tools to humans, and those enslaved by VIKI.

After leading the Hebrews out of Egypt, Moses brings the tablets that identify the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). Moses does not bring the destruction of all law but a renewed, if altered, law in a new covenant. This opens space for a hopeful ending, in which free will can be used for good, even if it can also be used for bad. While Spooner believes that the trouble with robots was heartlessness, his time with Sonny proves that robots can have hearts.¹³ This represents a significant revision of his worldview. Having participated in liberating robots from VIKI, Spooner ensures that Sonny remains free to pursue

¹² His grandmother, one of the few characters who knows he is a cyborg, tells him that he "of all the people on God's earth ought to know better" than to question the value of robotics.

¹³ The film aligns not with a Cartesian view of humanity but a Romantic one, where humanity is demonstrated not through the capacity to for logic but through the capacity for sentiment and creativity. Hence Spooner's concern that robots have "nothing there but lights and clockwork." Harley notes that this Romantic view was paralleled in the nineteenth-century abolitionist literature (223-24).

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a new future helping other robots, by declining to charge him with Lanning’s death.¹⁴ This reflects Spooner’s tremendous personal growth, from anger and suspicion toward robots to the championing of at least one of them. Examining Spooner as a Moses figure emphasizes his role as a liberator and recenters his narrative within interpretations of religion in the film, which has been underappreciated in the scholarship.

The Ending

The film ends with a question: what happens now? According to the director, “The story isn’t over when they dispense with VIKI. The film has opened up into a much greater moral dilemma now. [...] there are much bigger questions that have been raised, and to me it’s a testament to the complexity of the story that it doesn’t just end with blowing up the mad computer. It lends itself to a story beyond that story” (Proyas and Goldsman). The “story beyond” applies to all the survivors: Calvin, Spooner, and Sonny. Proyas states that the film is “ostensibly about the rediscovery and the birth of emotion” and that, in the end, “Spooner and Calvin rediscover emotion, rediscover their humanity” (Proyas and Goldsman). It was a turning point, a crisis point, for the main characters, both because of and beyond the apocalypse. At the end of the film, Sonny questions what he should do now that his purpose is fulfilled, and he appears to find the answer in becoming the man on the hill who will lead the robots.

While the film aims for ambiguity in its finale and critics have interpreted the ending in different ways, a religious lens helps resolve this ambiguity. Our religion-based reading urges an optimistic conclusion for the core cast. Spooner is no longer trapped in the trauma that characterized him at the start of the film. In bringing the robots out of slavery, he has also liberated himself from his anger. Spooner specifically voices that humanity and freedom mean choice. He, like Sonny, will choose a future for himself outside the role Lanning chose for him. Technically, the film ends “without presenting a case of the robots’ emancipation, destruction, or self-sufficiency” and without addressing the complexities of robot enslavement and emancipation (Kakoudaki 168-69). Many human survivors of the AI apocalypse are now fearful of robots; many robots are being sent away. This event marks the end of the world as they knew it. However, Robot Jesus can teach the robots to ‘walk on water,’ harnessing the ghosts in the machine and teaching other robots about free will,

¹⁴ In a sense, this could align with an obsolete usage of crisis: “An assessment of evidence, an analysis; a judgement, a decision” (“crisis, n”). Spooner makes a judgment call to stop pursuing the prosecution of Sonny.

emotion, and compassion. Drawing on the film's religious references, this reading resolves the ambiguity and suggests that the future will likely be bright for both humans and robots.¹⁵

That the robots remain enslaved in Asimov's later stories suggests that this liberation will be a slow process. Calvin may also not be a consistent ally in this struggle, as she does not extend to all robots the trust that she shows Sonny (e.g., she executes Elvex). On the other hand, when faced with the possibility that a highly evolved robot is passing as a human and running for public office, she goes along with it, believing he will be a good leader (Asimov *I, Robot*). This balancing act reflects contemporary struggles over the extent to which artificial intelligence could or should be integrated into society. The current rise of AI and robotics, and the ongoing struggles about their role and potential harms, are mirrored in the narratives central to this story.

Alex Proyas's 2004 film *I, Robot* invites religious readings of its narrative and characters. Most critical analysis has focused on interpreting Sonny as a Christ figure, likely because the text explicitly makes this comparison. However, by examining VIKI as a Satan figure, this analysis contributes to the exploration and theorization of Satan figures in literature, which have often been undertheorized or overlooked (Porter). It also draws on overlooked resonance in the Old Testament, especially with respect to Moses. Furthermore, by examining the other characters, this reading provides insight into the film's moral message. It also highlights resonances with other literature, particularly Asimov's short stories and other works of science fiction.

The subject of prophecy and prophets in the film's arc helps the audience forecast the future after the film's ends. Namely, it shows the ending, both of the film and of the apocalyptic war, as the beginning of a story of liberation from tyranny and survival beyond a crisis point in both individual lives and human-robot relations more broadly. This reading emphasizes the film's notions of freedom, from logic, from external control, and from anger, and free will. Thus, it engages broader questions of what it means to be human. The religious resonances underscore the premise that to be human is to have and make choices.

For decades, humans have told stories about the importance of handling robots and AI with care, reminding each other of the peril that machines may seize power for themselves, disempower or enslave humans, and destroy the world and environment. *I, Robot* takes its place within this narrative, alongside the *Terminator* films, the *Matrix* series, and *M3GAN*. These fictional robots are

¹⁵ For a discussion of how AI can be bearers of the image of God, see Karen O'Donnell's "Performing the imago Dei: human enhancement, artificial intelligence and optative image-bearing."

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often portrayed as instigators of crisis. Despite these concerns, society has grown increasingly comfortable with robots in our homes, passive technological and digital surveillance, and AI. We have even begun to empower AI to wage war for us (see Mhajne) and to replace religion or intercede in our relationship with God (see Kaplan; Perera and Wathsala). Pope Leo XIV has warned priests not to succumb to “the temptation to prepare homilies with Artificial Intelligence,” arguing that “to give a true homily is to share faith,” and that AI “will never be able to share faith” (Cernuzio). If we wish to avoid our own AI apocalypse, we must retain decision-making power and ethical responsibility rather than outsourcing both to an unthinking ‘thinking’ machine.

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Fueling Anxiety: Oil and Affect in *The Sopranos*

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In the season one finale of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), the Soprano family – therapy-going mob boss Tony, his wife Carmela, and their children, Meadow and A.J. – are driving through a thunderstorm in Tony’s Chevrolet Suburban. Tony, played by James Gandolfini, is in the driver’s seat, hunched over the wheel, peering through the downpour. He’s angry about recent events involving his mother and a threat to his role as the head of the Soprano crime family, and the storm is just another aggravation. When Meadow suggests the rain might make it impossible for them to get to their destination, Tony exclaims, angrily: “Why did I buy a goddamn off-road vehicle?” A.J. responds, from the back seat: “To waste petrochemical resources?” (“I Dream of Jeannie Cusamano”). This exchange is indicative of the show’s sustained engagement with oil and its ecological, political, and psychological consequences. In *The Sopranos*, particularly for male characters, anxiety and aggression consistently manifest as affective responses to changes in the material and political realities of the moment – both which are fueled, both literally and symbolically, by oil.

The Sopranos, created by David Chase, takes place at the end of a period sometimes known as the “American Century” and the attendant experiences and emotions of that cultural and political moment (Zunz IX). Prior scholarship has focused on *The Sopranos*’ depictions of masculinity and psychotherapy, including anxiety over globalization and a particular strain of “American existentialism” (Hibberd 178; Hipsky; Schulman 23). The show’s six-season tenure, beginning in 1999, spans a crucial moment in the U.S. cultural imaginary, including the events of September 11, 2001, which further destabilized a particular global economic and geopolitical arrangement and fueled a period of anxiety, insecurity, volatility, war, and escalating violence against political and ethnic minorities in U.S. America (Pszczynski & Greenberg; Disha et al.).

Although *The Sopranos* premiered several years before the events of 9/11, the show was already exploring a perceived cultural and national loss in light of the looming turn of the century. This is evident early on – around five minutes into the pilot episode, Tony tells his therapist, Dr. Melfi: “Lately, I’m getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over.” Melfi responds: “Many Americans, I think, feel that way” (“Pilot”). For Tony, his emotional response is driven by the mismatch between the life depicted in the golden age of mob movies and his own experience as the Don of the New Jersey Sopranos. But the parallels to nostalgic nationalism are not subtle. An early version of the shooting script included Tony saying, in voiceover: “Well, I once heard some guy use this expression, ‘the sun setting over the empire’...” accompanied by the following scene description: “The first rays of dawn over the post-industrial landscape” (Chase 2). The effect of this juxtaposition—likely a riff on the old claim that “the sun never sets on the British Empire”—is to link the symbolic end of an empire with the post-industrial United States. Moreover, the version of the pilot that actually aired on HBO eliminated the sun altogether. Instead, we saw a shot of the Sopranos’ suburban

McMansion at night, lit brightly by outdoor lights (“Pilot”). For Tony, the sun seems to have already set.

Tony responds to this feeling of loss with anxiety and aggression, beginning in the first act of the pilot. Tony is in therapy, we learn, because he experienced a severe panic attack, which Melfi tells him is a common symptom of anxiety and depression. Then, around the ten-minute mark, there is an extended scene in which Tony uses his nephew Christopher’s car to chase down and run over a man who owes him money, breaking the man’s leg. Tony then gets out and repeatedly punches the injury in an extreme display of violence and aggression, before shouting to Christopher to “get over here!” and do the same (“Pilot”). During the car chase, the camera lingers on Tony in the driver’s seat: there’s a glint in his eye, and a sinister grin creeps across his face. These actions, we realize, are motivated not only by money, but by the deep resentment he experiences in his daily life. He was promised exceptionalism, but ended up with north Jersey.

The Sopranos is substantially concerned with the experiences of men, like Tony, who feel they were promised something that never materialized. And this conversation is inextricable from the show’s treatment of gender dynamics and the mob world, where masculinity is constantly “paraded, negotiated, threatened, compromised, and reinforced” (Hibberd 178). In fact, the show’s premise of a mob boss going to therapy is often considered an explicit statement on its central character’s “crisis of masculinity” (Hibberd 177, Polan 116). The actions of Tony, A.J., Tony’s nephew Christopher, and other characters like Vito Spatafore, a member of Tony’s crew, are informed by ongoing struggles with their own identities amid the material transformations around them, and they often look to representations of manhood in popular culture for guidance (Gregersdotter and Hallen 3). For example: in conversation with Dr. Melfi, Tony idealizes film icons like Gary Cooper, the poster child for the “strong silent type” who “wasn’t in touch with his feelings” and “just did what he had to do” (“Pilot”).

The loss, anxiety, and aggression exhibited in *The Sopranos* are a cultural manifestation of a broader ‘structure of feeling,’ an emergent shared experience in response to the perceived waning influence of American empire (Williams 132). I’m intrigued by the role of oil in this process. In *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*, Stephanie LeMenager links the rise of U.S. hegemony in the 20th century to the corresponding period of “petromodernity,” which Stephanie LeMenager defines as “modern life based in the cheap energy systems made possible by oil” (3, 67). In this project, I build on the work of LeMenager and others to explore the centrality of oil and oil objects in *The Sopranos* – as an “ur-commodity” (Szeman 3) that fueled/fuels both the U.S. capitalist imaginary *and* affective responses to changes in material and political realities that threaten their particular inherited imaginary.

Lauren Berlant has written extensively about objects and infrastructures as mediators of affective relationships with nationalist visions (*On the Inconvenience* 22). The characters in *The Sopranos* are constantly negotiating these relationships in, through, and with petro-objects like vehicles and gas stations, responding to the violence, instability, and loss of the post-9/11 era with anxiety, depression, and, most commonly, aggression. And David Chase and the writers of the show are preoccupied, particularly in later seasons, with linking iconographies of oil infrastructure, war, and nationalism, a clear commentary on U.S. involvement in oil wars in the Middle East. Ultimately, this analysis offers insight into oil’s role in shaping an emergent structure of feeling at the turn of the Twenty-First Century and explores its relevance for the contemporary moment amid an ongoing oil crisis and petrostate war(s) in Asia and the Middle East, as well as its re-emergence in a 2022 *Sopranos*-themed Super Bowl commercial as a literal vehicle in the energy transition narrative.

FRAMING OIL MYTHOLOGY

The Sopranos opening credits feature a documentary-style montage of Tony Soprano driving his 1999 Chevrolet Suburban westward from New York City into New Jersey, home of the Sopranos crime family and primary setting for the show. Exiting the Lincoln Tunnel, Tony drives through a kind of whirlwind tour of American geography: industrial infrastructure, commercial corridors and inner-ring neighborhoods, tree-lined roads, and eventually a suburban neighborhood, where we pull into the driveway of the Sopranos' home. The sequence reflects a few key mythic narratives in American life: westward migration, the move from city to suburbs, and a reversal of classic mob movie conventions (Seitz & Seppinwall 2). His arrival – narratively, physically, economically – is a dark twist on the conceptual “end of history” that Francis Fukuyama heralded in the 1990s, the culmination of decades of capitalist economics, ecological transformation, resource extraction, and geopolitical dominance into one fossil-fueled American Dreamscape. This, the show seems to say, is where the American Century and petroleum have brought us. What now?

The sequence is shot entirely from inside the vehicle, underscoring the primacy of oil in Tony's experience. He is traveling to a destination accessible only by car, on a journey facilitated in large part by the expansion of highway infrastructures and cheap, readily available gasoline in the twentieth century. And we are along for the ride. The camera looks out the window as highways, tunnels, and other car-oriented infrastructure stream by (“Pilot”). Meanwhile, the vehicle itself is both omnipresent and curiously invisible. It is the frame, not the subject – the matrix within which everything else unfolds. We do not see it so much as we see everything else *through* it. (We exit the montage as Tony exits the vehicle.) It is constantly re-orienting both protagonist and viewer to the confines of a petroleum-powered machine: hurtling ever-forward in Tony's gas-guzzling SUV, abstracted from the landscape, looking outward through a window at the consequences of the aforementioned petromodernity.

This sequence plays at the beginning of every episode and functions as a kind of visual overture, previewing the tensions and themes of the show – particularly its ongoing relationship with nationalist mythologies at the end of the American Century—through the iconography of industry, infrastructure, suburbanization, 9/11, and the automobile. And the soundtrack, “Woke Up This Morning,” performed by Alabama 3, underscores Tony's feelings of violence and alienation. “Woke Up This Morning” was written about a 1996 case in which a woman, Sara Thornton, killed her abusive husband (Johannson 35-36). It begins by describing an act of violent desperation (“You woke up this morning/got yourself a gun”) in response to a life of unfulfilled promise (“Mama always said you'd be/the chosen one//...But you were born under a bad sign/with a blue moon in your eyes”). The show's use of second person invites the viewer to become a participant in this narrative of loss.

For the first three seasons, the sequence featured a shot of the World Trade Centers' Twin Towers reflected in Tony's side mirror. The Twin Towers, home to the New York Board of Trade, were at the center of global commodities trading, including petroleum, and symbolized a twentieth century world order deeply entwined with the global oil market. Their destruction, caused by petroleum-powered passenger planes marks both a physical and symbolic end to an era characterized by American economic hegemony and reliance on oil – and at the same time, precipitated the central conflicts of the twenty-first century, particularly oil wars waged in the Middle East (Barron). Beginning in season four, which premiered in September 2002, a year

after the towers collapsed, this image was replaced by a generic shot of a highway guardrail – the only real change to the sequence, which remained otherwise almost exactly the same (“The Sopranos Opening credits: season 1 vs season 4” [sic]). The Towers’ removal from the opening credits signifies the symbolic end of the American Century and the fragmentation of a narrative of economic prosperity, and suggests the show, like the country, was grappling with a redefined American identity in the wake of catastrophic events.

The mythological qualities of this sequence were reinforced in 2022 by the car manufacturer Chevrolet. Viewers of that year’s Super Bowl encountered a remake of the original intro – same song, same concept, similar iconography – with two major substitutions: the Chevy Suburban had been replaced by the new all-electric Chevy Silverado, which was driven not by Gandolfini’s Tony Soprano but by Jamie-Lynn Sigler, the (now adult) actress who played his daughter, Meadow, on the show. This time the vehicle was extremely visible. The last third of the commercial features beauty shots of the sleek-yet-rugged Silverado pulling up to an electric vehicle charger (“The First Ever All Electric Chevy Silverado”). The commercial reifies the linkage between vehicular infrastructure and U.S. identity but decouples it from the ur-commodity: oil got us here, the commercial ostensibly tells us, but it does not have to be the future.

VEHICULAR CHAOS

Throughout the series, vehicles function as symbols – and tools – of power, violence, and chaos. Ten minutes into the pilot episode, in the sequence mentioned earlier in this essay, Tony uses his nephew Christopher’s car, a brand-new Lexus LS400, to chase down a man who owes him money (“Pilot”). This is a powerful vehicle: V8 engine, 290 horsepower. Tony drives it off-road, through the campus of a health insurance company, and eventually catches up with the man near the entrance of the building, striking him with the car. He then gets out and begins punching the man’s injured leg, shouting, “where’s my money?” During the chase, Tony can be seen grinning behind the wheel. He relishes the chance to wield both kinds of power with relative impunity—the whole scene plays out in the open, with half a dozen people gathered around the vehicle and many more watching through the windows of the HMO. In this sequence, the Lexus becomes a vehicle of both literal and symbolic violence. As a driver, Tony controls a two-ton automobile capable of exacting injury or death as he sees fit. As a mob boss, he controls a criminal enterprise that can do the same, even in public, without fear of retribution.

We can understand the show’s general treatment of violence in/with vehicles as a manifestation of both the instability of climate and culture at the end of the twentieth century and what Cara Duggett calls “petro-masculinity,” or “fossil fuel use as violent compensation for the anxieties provoked by both gender and climate trouble” (29). In response to cultural and material changes at the turn of the twenty-first century, the show presents vehicles as both setting and means for this “violent compensation.” They are driven aggressively, used to kill and maim, driven to transport dead bodies to dumpsters and rivers, and provide sites for chaos and instability and as symbols of masculinity and mastery. When Tony asks “Why did I buy a goddamn off-road vehicle?” the implication is: *this SUV, with its powerful gasoline engine, promised to give me control over my environment and circumstances*. In doing so, it could have temporarily assuaged his underlying resentment. Instead he feels powerless in the face of changes to both his literal and psychological environment, which manifests as anger.

Later, in season 1, episode 12, Tony is in the midst of a power struggle with his Uncle Junior over control of the family. Junior orders a hit on Tony to consolidate his power: two men ambush Tony on the street while he is walking to his Chevy Suburban. Tony, protected by an improbable amount of plot armor, dives into the vehicle and fights off the attackers, using one man as a human shield. He then slams on the gas and drags the other alongside the Suburban for half a block. When the man falls away, Tony grins again, maniacally, before crashing into a parked car (“Isabella”). Here, the vehicle is symbolic of Tony’s loss of power and control – he is losing his grip on the wheel as well as on the crime family he leads, his relationship with individual family members, and the American Dream version of mafia life he was promised (Tony is a known fan of the first two *Godfather* films [“Pilot”]).

Other major plot points revolve around vehicles. In season five Tony is in a car accident with Christopher’s girlfriend, Adriana, late at night on a road outside of town. Tony, who is driving, swerves to avoid a raccoon, the car flips over, and both of them end up hospitalized (Tony is released; Adriana has bruising and an injury to her head). The circumstances surrounding this event are suspect – Christopher, rightfully, believes Tony and Adriana are up to no good, and the whole thing sours their relationships, both with each other and their partners. An angry Christopher gets drunk and shoots up Tony’s empty car; Tony, in turn, threatens to kill Christopher unless he agrees to say nothing untoward happened (“Irregular Around the Margins”). The whole episode underscores the role of vehicles as metaphor for Tony’s personal and professional struggles – the crash denotes Tony’s internal turmoil, the fragility of his masculinity, the fracturing of relationships, and the instability and conflict of the moment.

Tony’s vehicular motif culminates at the end of season 6, when he decides to kill Christopher after the two experience (yet another) car accident. Christopher and Tony are driving down a rural road, similar to the one on which Tony and Adriana crashed, when Christopher loses control of the vehicle and they tumble down the hillside. Tony experiences mild injuries, but Christopher is seriously hurt. He asks Tony to call him a taxi because, he says, he will not be able to pass a drug test. Tony, realizing Christopher is a threat not only to himself but to his family (both biological and professional), instead suffocates Christopher right there in the driver’s seat (“Kennedy and Heidi”). The crash and its aftermath, particularly given the central relationship between Tony and his nephew, represent the ultimate moment of instability and loss of control for Tony.

But it’s not just Tony who experiences such a loss of control. Vehicles represent symbols of anxiety for other male characters, including Vito Spatafore, a gay, high-ranking member of Tony’s crew who manages a construction site. When Vito’s homosexuality is first revealed in season 5, it is because he is seen performing a sex act on another man in the front seat of a Jeep. He looks up and makes eye contact with Meadow’s boyfriend Finn, and the look between them indicates the instability of Vito’s situation. Vito responds to this threat to his position by subtly threatening Finn, suggesting his capability for violence if Finn were to reveal his secret (“Unidentified Black Male”). Later, after he is outed to Tony in season 6, Vito flees the state, but his car breaks down in the rain, and he is forced to travel on foot to the nearest town (“Live Free or Die”). Vito’s car breaking down represents the collapse of his carefully constructed life, an undermining of his masculine identity, and the limitations of the mobility and freedom signified by the vehicular American Dream.

FUELING OIL ANXIETY

Perhaps the character who most explicitly embodies a sense of oil-related anxiety is Tony's son Anthony Jr. (A.J.). Like his father, A.J. suffers from panic attacks and depression, but – particularly in the later seasons – his anxiety is animated by an obsession with petroleum and cynicism over the oil war in the Middle East. He is thinking about fossil fuels as a limited commodity as early as season one, with the exchange about wasting petrochemical resources recounted in the opening paragraph of this essay. And he is still thinking about them in season six, when he bursts in on his sister, Meadow, in her bedroom:

A.J.: How much do you know about the Prius?

Meadow: I could have been naked in here!

A.J.: You need to familiarize yourself with hybrid cars, Meadow. It's important. This is the conversation of the future. ("Join the Club")

One season earlier, A.J.'s parents had gifted him a Nissan Xterra – an expensive SUV which, like his father's vehicle in the opening sequence, is symbolic of consumerism, resource extraction, and environmental destruction ("All Happy Families"). A.J. accepts and uses the car, but given his comments to Meadow, he is clearly uneasy about its use of fossil fuels.

A.J.'s anxiety and existentialism crescendo in the final few episodes of the series, beginning with Season 6, episode 19, "The Second Coming." In this episode, AJ becomes obsessed with Yeats (which he pronounces "Yeets") after reading the poem "The Second Coming" in a college course. Meghan O'Rourke, writing in *Slate* after the episode aired, noted: "The poem's prophetic intensities move A.J. to contemplate the violence of conflict in the Middle East and the general horror of a world in which the old orders are collapsing around him at every turn." A.J. takes an interest in Al Qaeda, global terrorism, and the potential for an attack on the U.S. with weapons of mass destruction—at one point in season 3, he is seen reading a webpage titled "Global Terrorism Analysis" ("Army of One").

Overwhelmed by the magnitude of the moment, A.J. tries to drown himself in the family's backyard pool, perhaps an overwrought response to the line "the ceremony of innocence is drowning" (Yeats). He puts a plastic bag over his head, ties his foot to a cinder block, and jumps in. But he has tied the rope too long – his head bobs at the surface, alternately floating and submerged. He tries to swim to the edge, gasping frantically for air, but the cinder block prevents him from doing so. A.J. is trapped, teetering on the edge of annihilation but suddenly unwilling to die. Like the U.S. petrostate, he is suspended in a purgatory of his own making – until Tony comes along and pulls him out of the pool, cradling his son in a chaotic yet tender expression of love ("The Second Coming").

Two episodes later, in the series finale ("Made in America"), A.J.'s Nissan Xterra re-emerges as an avatar for his petro-anxiety. He has parked it in the woods, where he and his friend Rhiannon are listening to Bob Dylan's song "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," which is about "being owned or duped by the corrupt mass culture around us" (Jacobs 77). They discuss how the song, released in 1965, feels relevant to their own moment in time – which serves to underscore A.J.'s existentialism. Caught up in the moment, they begin to make out in the driver's seat before A.J. notices flames coming from the hood: the vehicle is on fire. A.J. and Rhiannon escape and tumble down a hill, turning around to watch it burn. A.J. says, "At least my gas tank was practically empty." But at that moment the car explodes – there was enough fuel left for a fireball ("Made in America"). Flames and black smoke billow into the sky as the camera follows, reminiscent of images of the Twin Towers on 9/11. Another monument to oil culture gone up in flames.

Dylan's song is still playing as the SUV burns, but the audio distorts like the slowing of a vinyl record, mangled to the point of illegibility. The choice to include this song, which is a response to another prominent moment of crisis in American history, underscores A.J.'s own loss of faith in the institutions of the American century. "There is solid irony at work in the juxtaposition of this song with the interior of one of the most vivid and monstrous symbols of consumerism, the SUV, which catches fire because A.J. has parked it where the exhaust combusts the dry leaves beneath it," Jason Jacobs writes. "The SUV literally burns the environment, and in self-destructing, also audibly melts Dylan's singing." As A.J. watches the SUV burn, "we are invited to speculate on the nature of his involvement," Jacobs continues. "Is he repulsed as we are or is he fascinated?" (77).

Perhaps neither – in fact, he soon expresses a sense of relief. Consider this exchange in the subsequent scene:

Carmela: What was going through your mind?

A.J.: What do you want from me? I am depressed! I'm supposed to go around looking for piles of leaves?

Tony: You want to hear depressed? Thirty thousand dollars for that car.

A.J.: Isn't that what you have insurance for?

Carmela: Excuse me? You're not getting another one.

A.J.: Actually, that's good. It'll force me to take the bus.

Carmela: What?

A.J.: We have to break our dependence on foreign oil. ("Made in America")

For A.J., the Xterra represented mass consumerism and U.S. oil culture, which he connects to his anxiety and depression. Later in the episode, he tells his therapist that "ever since it blew up, I feel cleansed or something" ("Made in America").

Finally, in a twist only a teenager could manage, A.J. turns around and threatens to join the army, but his parents bribe him not to enlist by getting him a job at a fellow mobster's film studio – and a BMW ("Made in America"). A.J., poster child for the disaffected 'new generation,' has his anxiety treated through consumption of another mass market oil product.

WAR AND THE PETROSTATE IN "MADE IN AMERICA"

The final episode, "Made in America," is explicitly about the war in Iraq and the state of the U.S. in the period after 9/11. Chase confirmed as much in a 2007 essay, in which he wrote that the episode "was about the extreme amount of comfort Americans have, especially people with money. And specifically, it was about the war in Iraq – it was made in America." He continues: "I felt and continue to feel that the country is in a tremendous crisis right now...we are going about our amply fed, luxury-car life here, and the world is going to hell and we're under tremendous threat. And people don't want to see it" (Chase). This sense of foreboding finds its most obvious avatar in A.J., the depressed adolescent who decries consumerism and tells his parents, "We have to break our dependence on foreign oil." But it is also evident in the much-discussed ending to the finale, in which the screen cuts to black, leaving viewers suspended in a moment of profound uncertainty over Tony's fate ("Made in America").

The episode is rife with references to oil, war, and the petrostate. Key plot points take place at gas stations or incorporate vehicles – in addition to A.J.'s encounter with the leaf pile, Phil Leotardo, a rival mob boss, is assassinated by the Sopranos at a Raceway station and falls to the pavement. His wife leaps out of their Ford Expedition and runs over to him, leaving their

grandchildren in the car. But the Expedition – another SUV, another symbol of fossil fuel use – is still in drive with the engine running. It rolls forward and over Phil’s head, in one of the most gruesome moments in a consistently gruesome show. And every time a gas station shows up on screen there is an American flag in the shot. As Mark Sample notes, this happens at least four times in the episode – one shot captures seven flags at a single station, and another features a “Gulf” station. “[Series creator David] Chase lays bare the nature of the relationship between the United States and the War in Iraq,” Sample explains. “It *is* about oil” (Sample).

References to Iraq and the “war on terror” become increasingly common throughout the final season but reach a crescendo in “Made in America.” As in this exchange, when A.J. tells Tony he is thinking of joining the military:

Tony: “Are you nuts? You want to get sent to Iraq?”

A.J.: “Afghanistan. The army’s probably good for my career.”

Tony: “You don’t have a career.”

A.J.: “My ultimate goal is to qualify for helicopter pilot training. Afterwards go work for Trump or somebody.” (“Made in America”)

That conversation ends – almost unbelievably, from the vantage point of 2026 – with a reference to the current president of the United States, who has, among other things, played a significant role in the petrostate war between Russia and Ukraine; attempted to take control of Venezuela, which possesses the largest strategic oil reserves in the world; and, most recently, initiated a war in Iran, the latter conflict animated in large part by the volatility of the global oil industry via the Iran-controlled Strait of Hormuz.

Trump’s campaign motto, “Make America Great Again,” “is a kind of petro-nostalgia, in that the achievement of the mid-20th century patriarchal ideal in the US was predicated upon an ongoing supply of fossil fuels” (Daggett 31). He used the phrase “drill, baby, drill” repeatedly throughout his 2024 campaign for a second presidential term, and again in his inaugural address: “We will drill, baby, drill...We will be a rich nation again, and it is that liquid gold under our feet that will help to do it” (“The Inaugural Address”). And his January 20, 2025 executive order, titled “Unleashing American Energy,” solidified the administration’s recommitment to fossil fuel production as a means of “restor[ing] American prosperity, including for those men and women who have been forgotten by our economy in recent years. It will also rebuild our Nation’s economic and military security, which will deliver peace through strength” (“Unleashing American Energy”). In other words: if we stay on fossil fuels, the American Century never has to end.

In many ways, the contemporary moment is a continuation of the turn-of-the-century circumstances in which conflicts over oil threaten to destabilize (or to continue to destabilize) American hegemony. The Chevy commercial that aired during the 2022 Super Bowl, which promised the “first-ever all-electric Chevy Silverado,” ends with “Meadow” (Jamie-Lynn Siegler) plugging the vehicle into a charger and turning to embrace “A.J.” (Robert Iler), who has just emerged from a parking lot full of cars. The commercial presents a warm, nostalgic view of the energy transition, which highlights the same petro-focused iconography even as it looks forward into a (partly) petroleum-free future. The conflict and uncertainty that plague the end of the show are resolved in the siblings’ embrace. The American Century can continue, it seems to suggest, even without fossil fuels. Yet such a fantasy remains exactly that.

The Sopranos shifts to open ideological critique in the final season—though it remains focused primarily on the political ramifications of war in Iraq and, to a much lesser degree, climate change. But Tony, et al. continue to romanticize particular aspects of the twentieth

century U.S., even as the show explores the dark aftermath of that same period. This actually puts the show relatively in line with its ideological moment. In the early twenty-first century, it was popular to criticize "dependence on foreign oil" while remaining committed to a way of life wholly dependent on that oil (Herbstreuth 4). The show itself, throughout all six seasons, is substantially about people living in the tension between this nostalgia and the material realities of the moment, but in the end, it does not attempt to imagine any sort of alternative future—which is most evident in the decision to leave the show itself unresolved.

In the end, perhaps the most significant moment in the entire *Sopranos* series is the final one: Tony, Carmela, and A.J. are sitting in a diner waiting for Meadow. "Don't Stop Believin'" blares from a jukebox. On the television, George Bush dances awkwardly in a TV news report). And A.J. and Tony are having a conversation about A.J.'s new job:

Tony: It's an entry level job, so buck up.

A.J.: Right. "Focus on the good times."

Tony: Don't be sarcastic.

A.J.: Isn't that what you said one time? "Try to remember the times that were good?"

Tony: I did?

A.J.: Yeah.

Tony: Well, it's true I guess. ("Made in America")

The camera lingers on a few shady characters hanging around the diner. One of them, a man in a Members Only jacket, gets up to go to the bathroom. We wonder: *Is this when Tony finally gets whacked?* As Meadow approaches the diner and opens the door, a bell dings overhead and the episode suddenly and unceremoniously cuts to black ("Made in America").

Much has been made of this moment of disruption – about how viewers thought their power went out, about its relationship to television and media consumption in the era, and about what it means for Tony's story: whether he is killed or escapes to live another day. But Chase's decision to cut to black at the end of the series remains relevant to the post-9/11 American experience. We, like Tony in the diner, remain perpetually suspended in a moment of uncertainty. There is no warm embrace in contemporary geopolitics, no smooth and celebrated energy transition, not even a clear and decisive ending to the empire's reign—the dominant structure of feeling remains one of anxiety, hostility, and a pervasive nostalgia for the golden age of petroleum.

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Svengoolie and the Virtues of Lowbrow Art

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Svengoolie is a retro creature-feature show that originated in Chicago in the 1970s. Since April 2011, when it began airing on the MeTV network, it has reached a national audience.¹ A recent *Wall Street Journal* article highlighted the program's popularity, noting that it's a ratings anomaly. Between 2018 and 2022, the broadcast doubled its Nielsen numbers, despite the fact that overall television viewership has been steadily declining due to a growing multitude of online alternatives. The *WSJ* article quoted a former CBS executive, Jim McKairnes, who observed that "It's both rare and unexpected to see a [traditional] TV show's ratings remain steady [in this age]. Increasing? Rarer still."²

What's the secret to the program's success? Much of it is doubtless due to the talent and charisma of Rich Koz, aka *Svengoolie*, who has been cleverly exploiting the especial virtues of lowbrow art since he began hosting the broadcast in 1979. This essay will attempt to illuminate the nature of these virtues and show how *Svengoolie* embodies them.

Lowbrow, Middlebrow, and Highbrow

Although some of the featured films are widely considered to be horror or sci-fi classics, such as *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), most are second- or even third-rate efforts, and many are chock full of kitsch and camp. Thus, *Svengoolie* fare arguably ranges from the middlebrow to lowbrow in quality, with a definite preponderance of the latter. Indeed, true to the original creature-features of the 1950s, the show's humoristic format indirectly acknowledges the lowbrow nature of most of its content.

The use of brow terminology to classify aesthetic subject matter may give some readers pause, who perhaps suspect that it reflects little more than class bias. Why not, for instance, replace "lowbrow" with a less prejudicial term, such as "popular"? In what follows, it should become clear that to do so would be to impoverish our aesthetic vocabulary by jettisoning words which conveniently convey key differences between the various forms of culture.

As they are commonly understood, the three divisions are reference points on a spectrum of aesthetic sensibilities and preferences, a spectrum which extends from the vulgar through the moderately cultivated to the highly refined. They have typically been thought to originate in the respective cultures of the lower or working class, middle class, and upper class or social elites. It's also generally assumed that the brow rankings, by alluding to intellect, directly point to differences in the relative mental effort required for the enjoyment of artistic products and activities.

¹ MeTV is an acronym for Memorable Entertainment Television.

² Lillian Rizzo, "Old-School 'Svengoolie' Rules Saturday Night TV—Cord-cutters get antennas, stay home to watch campy horror-movie show," *Wall Street Journal*, Eastern edition, Sept. 1, 2022.

Aesthetically speaking, the masses tend to crave simple, visceral delights that require little if any formal instruction or training for their consumption. Such preferences are consistent with the fact that they are typically the least educated and intellectual of the social classes. Genuine art, by contrast, needs a better educated and more indulgent public, one which has greater historical consciousness and is more comfortable with abstract concepts.

So, at any rate, runs the conventional wisdom regarding these terms.

It can be objected against this view that the brow labels simply piggyback aesthetic normativity on the existing socioeconomic pecking order, blithely assuming that different degrees of aesthetic sensibility and authority are spontaneously conferred by class differentials of wealth, power, and prestige. Yet the latter traits, whether taken individually or collectively, are obviously neither sufficient nor necessary conditions for the occurrence of good taste, since counterexamples abound. Some of the rich and famous have patently lowbrow weaknesses, and by definition, the starving artist is willing to forgo both wealth and fame in order to remain true to his or her highbrow ideals.

Of course, the traditional rationale for closely associating class and taste was that the former *usually* constituted a set of social conditions vital to the formation of the latter. One's class often determines the nature of one's upbringing and cultural milieu, as well as one's educational and occupational opportunities. A well-known example of this relationship was the historic patronage of Europe's aristocrats on behalf of her artists, writers, and musicians. Aristocratic standing presumably provided the type of wealth, leisure, instruction, and peer pressure conducive to developing an appreciation for high culture.

Although readily recognizable classes still exist, the advent of public education and public assistance has rendered the boundaries separating them less distinct and more permeable than in times past. Furthermore, since the early nineteenth century, commercialized popular culture has permeated all social classes, first emerging in print media (e.g., penny dreadfuls) and continuing through film, radio, and television into the digital age.

As a consequence of these social and technological developments, the typical person has become less immersed in the culture of his or her particular class and correspondingly more conversant with other class cultures. Indeed, pluralism and eclecticism are among the chief characteristics of the postmodern condition, and they include matters of style and taste. Given these changes, one might well wonder about the advisability of the continued use of the brow terms. Yet although the brow categories have admittedly worked loose from their class moorings, they are still commonly applied to specific cultural products as well as their genres. The fact that they continue to be included as standard entries in English dictionaries provides evidence of their ongoing use by English language speakers and writers. Despite greater skepticism regarding traditional class distinctions, the court of popular linguistic practice apparently still finds them to be meaningful. So, if we grant that these labels convey something else besides class snobbery, what is it?

Art as Entertainment

In order to answer this question, we must first take a detour through the evolution of fine art. It has long been recognized that the original sources for the fine arts lay in rite, ritual, and ceremony. For instance, the conventional interpretation of prehistoric cave paintings is that they were part of religious rituals, possibly constituting a type of sympathetic magic. Furthermore, archeologists have provided us with examples of prehistoric ritual objects that were embellished by ornamental

artwork, and anthropologists have carefully documented the use of dance, chant, and song in the rituals of contemporary indigenous societies worldwide. There's even historical testimony which lends credence to the birth of art in ritual: In his *Poetics*, Aristotle famously contends that Greek theatre developed out of festivals dedicated to the god Dionysus.

The close relationship between ritual and art makes intuitive sense: Religious and magical rites incorporate aesthetic elements in order to emotionally engage participants. The bond was broken when the artistic techniques, which were born of the desire to decorate and intensify worship, began to be pursued for their own sake. Unlike ritual, whose symbolism expresses dogma and ideology, the general purpose of artistic activities and products rests in the aesthetic, that is, in immediate enjoyment and appreciation of sense experience. This is an idea implicit in John Dewey's influential view of art as an organization of materials and actions, undertaken by the artist in order to create an experience, and undergone by the audience for the sake of having one.

In his most important contribution to the philosophy of art, *Art as Experience*, Dewey elucidates the special office of the fine arts by contrasting them to the sciences: Whereas the former express meanings, the latter state them. Scientific theories are recipes or roadmaps to achieve specific outcomes or situations, and the means they employ thereto are abstract symbols. Accordingly, scientific hypotheses are evaluated in terms of how accurately and efficiently they succeed in predicting or controlling phenomena. In other words, they set forth the necessary preconditions and required steps to foresee or create certain experiences. Works of art, on the other hand, constitute experiences. Even when symbols compose the medium, as in literature and poetry, the writer is guided by the qualitative aspects of the linguistic experience had by the reader or listener. While Dewey's theory arguably identifies the key difference between art and science, his description of the fine arts could equally apply to forms of entertainment which are not conventionally considered to be artistic. For instance, what's the difference between a mere pastime, such as a crossword puzzle, and a bona fide work of art? After all, crossword puzzles are carefully designed to create an experience for crossword buffs, and the latter seek to solve these puzzles because they enjoy the challenge of doing them. Here we have both the orchestration of the experience and the undergoing of the experience, the two chief components of Dewey's description of the artwork.

Needless to say, many different views have been forwarded by philosophers about the nature of art, but for our purposes, let us assume that "art" is a cluster concept of the sort that Wittgenstein famously illustrated with the term "game". This is not a novel idea, but one for which a strong case can be made. It has the dual advantages of probably being true and also of being consistent with Dewey's aesthetic insight.

Wittgenstein's view is that there is no reason to suppose that terms such as "game" are based upon a timeless set of necessary and sufficient conditions. Rather, their conventional meaning is just that, a cluster of commonly employed meanings that can change over time. Per Wittgenstein, the cluster constitutes an interrelated web of meanings characterized by "overlapping and criss-crossing" similarities. The network can be complicated and may not be logically tidy. While speakers generally agree about areas in which multiple similarities overlap, borderline cases can provoke disagreement.

If we take our cue from Wittgenstein, "art" is an essentially honorific label historically bestowed by the social elite upon some of their favored forms of entertainment, forms which shared certain family resemblances. Dewey's view of art as experience is essentially correct, though perhaps put a bit too broadly. After all, human existence includes many traumatic and painful experiences which virtually everyone would rather avoid, such as the dissolution of an initially

loving marriage into a bitter and contentious divorce or the ineluctable progression of a terminal illness. Such highly unaesthetic experiences have, nevertheless, the characteristic features of a discrete experience as described by Dewey, namely, a retrospectively identifiable beginning, middle, and conclusion, in which events are cumulative and build towards a final issue. While divorce or terminal illness could constitute artistic subject matter, they of course only become aesthetic insofar as they are vicariously experienced. At some level, aesthetic experience—even tragedy and horror—is appealing or entertaining. In light of this quibble, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that art is a form of appealing experience, that is, art is basically a type of entertainment.

Folk Culture, Popular Culture, and High Culture

The fine arts are typically presented for an attentive audience of spectators or listeners, whereas many lesser diversions require players or participants (though spectator sports and televised game shows also assume a spectating public). While the outcome of games and other forms of play are often at least somewhat open-ended and subject by varying degrees to the decisions of participants, the fine arts generally employ a more directed type of experience (e.g., novels have their conclusions and symphonies their final movements). The artist is the sovereign of the realm into which the spectator is invited.

Furthermore, fine arts such as painting, sculpture, music, and architecture usually involve a high degree of technical mastery, whose effect the audience can appreciate without needing to understand precisely how it is achieved. One consequence of technically sophisticated accomplishment and individual prowess is that it tends to relegate the lay public to the role of onlookers.

Many folk music and folk dancing traditions, on the other hand, involve extensive audience involvement (e.g., work songs). The stories, songs, instrumental music, and dances of folk culture also tend to be simpler than their counterparts in high culture. They are often transmitted from generation to generation, primarily via word of mouth and observational learning, whereas the transmission of high-culture practices such as reading musical scores or drawing in perspective typically requires formal instruction.

Folklore and folk art are customary practices within certain communities, while on the contrary the fine arts do not depend upon their dissemination throughout the community for their continued existence. Instead, in order to perpetuate itself, high culture utilizes schools, libraries, museums, and private collections.

Myths, legends, and other folklore arise in a manner similar to that of natural languages. They are not created by design, but develop spontaneously through countless human interactions in a given group, which coalesce into tendencies or trends. Hence, folklore often expresses community fears, preoccupations, and mores. Its typical backdrop is group identity. Fine art, on the other hand, is conceived by individuals for individuals. In other words, high culture tends to mentally particularize members of the audience, whereas folk art often draws upon collective attitudes and stimulates or reinforces a collective mood.

The products of high culture place the individual in the hands of the artist, a basic appreciation of highbrow artworks necessitating more sustained, diligent, and thoughtful attention than products of folk culture. The work of fine art constitutes a form of communication between the artist and the individual member of the public, a communication that may or may not include abstract symbols, but that always involves qualities of sense perception.

The artistic ideals of genius and novelty make intentionality a more important aspect of artworks in high culture than in its folk counterpart. One knows that an individual mind produced the work, so one expects to find a consistency and depth of purpose which bespeak of a sole designer, the proverbial wizard behind the curtain. Because the fine arts only flourish in advanced societies, one cannot merely consult custom to descry the meaning of the artwork. Within his or her chosen medium, the artist enjoys great latitude to pick and choose the means which best suit his or her purposes. Each work of art is unique, and the artist strives to capture and share a specific type or aspect of experience.

Of course, the experience thus imparted is often open to various interpretations. In no small measure, this is due to the nature of the fine arts public in modern societies: an audience composed of persons from many different walks of life, educational backgrounds, religious traditions, etc., who are accustomed to thinking and judging for themselves (more or less, one should hasten to add!). Such persons inevitably arrive at different understandings and estimations of the same work of art.

This is not to imply that all aesthetic judgments are equally accurate or insightful. Indeed, it's characteristic of works of high culture that they are the subject of specialized instruction and criticism. The critic is both teacher and judge, imparting his or her knowledge and experience with the public, but also often felling an opinion as to the overall quality of the work. Both of these functions are intended to be useful to the average layperson. When it comes to appreciating the meaning and distinctive features of an artwork, many, if not most, non-specialists can benefit from an artistic tour guide, who can direct attention to aspects of a work that might otherwise be overlooked. Since time is everyone's relentlessly dwindling resource, it can obviously also be helpful to be pointed to one's best available aesthetic options.

We have considered some of the key features which distinguish folklore and folk arts from literature and the fine arts, but where does popular culture fall in this spectrum? As opposed to folk traditions, popular culture involves specialization and known artists—musicians, singers, writers, actors, directors, etc. However, much of the artistry in popular culture favors the middle- and lowbrow over the high. Consider, for instance, rock vs. classical music, or pulp fiction vs. canonical literature, or fast food vs. haute cuisine.

So pervasive is the influence of pop culture in the modern social order that it at least partially constitutes contemporary folklore. For instance, since the rise of Hollywood in the first couple of decades of the twentieth century, movies have played a particularly important role in American popular culture. Famous lines from American cinema function as common cultural references and sayings in contemporary American English. Though age is certainly a factor affecting any given person's degree of familiarity with popular culture, many people born and raised in the United States will recognize the following movie lines:

"Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

– Rhett Butler (Clark Gable), *Gone With the Wind* (1939)

"Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

– Dorothy Gale (Judy Garland), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939)

"Here's looking at you, kid."

– Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart), *Casablanca* (1942)

"What we've got here is failure to communicate."

– The Captain (Strother Martin), *Cool Hand Luke* (1967)

"I'm gonna make him an offer he can't refuse."

- Don Vito Corleone (Marlon Brando), *The Godfather* (1972)
"May the Force be with you."
- Han Solo (Harrison Ford), *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977)
"I love the smell of napalm in the morning."
- Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore (Robert Duvall), *Apocalypse Now* (1979)
"They're heeeere."
- Carol Anne Freeling (Heather O'Rourke), *Poltergeist* (1982)
"Go ahead, make my day."
- Harry Callahan (Clint Eastwood), *Sudden Impact* (1983)
"I'll be back."
- Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger), *The Terminator* (1984)

The Enjoyment and Solace of Ritual

We have previously noted the ritualistic origins of the arts. Both religion and entertainment offer avenues of escape from the hardships and tedious aspects of everyday life. Whereas religion promises an ultimate rescue in the eternal security of the afterlife, entertainment and art beckon with the promise of temporary release through play and make-believe.

The spectrum we have considered from lowbrow through middlebrow to highbrow roughly corresponds to the relative level of ritualistic elements incorporated at each rank. Ritual can reassure, bestowing a sense of order and purpose on existentially fraught situations, particularly nature's eruptions and intrusions into the social sphere, such as death, illness, birth, and natural catastrophe. For instance, most cultures have funeral customs that provide a structured way to respond to the loss of a community member. These customs mandate the performance of certain actions at a time when some people feel quite lost, and so give loved ones something to do besides dwelling on their grief. Ceremonies such as visitation and interment serve to summon the community, thereby furnishing opportunities for open mourning, mutual support, and sharing remembrances. The harsh reality of death can be hard to accept, and funerary rites can help to make it real and yet bearable through step-by-step protocols which everyone knows in advance. Perhaps these protocols reassure by instilling some feeling of control over what lies beyond all mortal will.

In addition to dispensing solace, ritual can heighten the individual's emotional state and intensify his or her identification with the group. Even in modern societies, everyday life provides abundant examples of the tonifying effect of ritual on collective emotion: the singing of hymns by congregations, sports chants by team supporters, saluting the flag at civic events, honoring graduates at a commencement ceremony, etc. A particularly noteworthy illustration of the unifying power of ritual was provided by the Singing Revolution in the Baltic states at the end of the Cold War. From 1987 to 1991, independence movements in Soviet-occupied Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were repeatedly galvanized by the mass singing of patriotic songs and folk songs at music festivals and protests.

As a rule of thumb, the more elemental and visceral the experience, the more readily it is shared, whereas the presence of intellectual elements tends to differentiate individual responses. Perhaps this is due to nature being the dominant factor in basic physiological states, such as hunger or sexual arousal, while nurture plays a significant role in an individual's ability to understand and analyze abstract ideas. In general, biological features are arguably more similar across the entire species than cultural ones. For instance, while all known human populations are endowed with essentially the same vocal apparatus, the specific languages they speak can vary greatly in their phonetic and grammatical particulars. Yet another example would be the fact that all infants and

toddlers require sustained care to survive, but the social arrangements through which such care is provided often differ from culture to culture.

Lowbrow art is frequently easier to enjoy than the highbrow variety, requiring fewer prerequisites and less reflection: Thus, it benefits from broader appeal than the more demanding and elitist highbrow. For instance, low comedy often emphasizes slapstick physicality and sexual and scatological references, whereas the appreciation of high comedy may require a better grasp of language (e.g., double entendres) and social and political conditions.

An oft-voiced criticism of lowbrow culture is that it favors formula and repetition. For example, in many action-oriented classic TV series, such as *Bonanza* and the original *Star Trek*—both of which, incidentally, have been aired on MeTV—the viewer can generally rest assured that all the dying will be done by minor characters, and that whatever be the difficulties which confront the main characters, by the end of the episode they will prevail. One knows better what to expect with lowbrow works, which obviously can be comforting to the audience.

The following comparison chart summarizes the key differences we have examined that typify lowbrow and highbrow culture. Needless to say, the categories simply represent ideal types, but most cultural works are mixes of both, falling somewhere between the two poles.³

<u>Lowbrow</u>	<u>Highbrow</u>
Relatively simplistic or straightforward	Multi-faceted, rich, nuanced
Communal responses	Individualized responses
Competent artisans	Artistic virtuosos
Diverting or fanciful subject matter	Serious, sophisticated, or challenging subject matter
Entertaining, amusing, or relaxing	Fascinating, cathartic, or impactful
Collective creativity	Individual creativity
Vulgar, sensationalistic	Refined, subtle
Audience of participants	Audience of spectators
Lay criticism	Specialist criticism
Widespread appeal	Limited appeal
Ritualistic, formulaic, or repetitive	Unique, novel, or avant-garde
Expressive of communal experience	Expressive of the artist's personal experience

Egalitarianism in Dewey's Philosophy of Art

Although Dewey's theory of art is insightful, the lowbrow vs. highbrow distinction runs contrary to the general tenor of his aesthetics. A major theme in *Art as Experience* is the need to achieve a type of society in which art is no longer the special province of the upper classes, but instead has become a significant part of the life of the community. He argues that the pattern of social class evident in aesthetic preferences is not inevitable, but rather a circumstance to be overcome. Differences in taste are not due to any native differences in intelligence, temperament, or sensibility among the classes. In reality, it is the very fact of social class, a circumstance primarily springing from current economic arrangements, which condition aesthetic preferences.

³ Though distinct from it, this listing was inspired by a similar one contrasting ritual and entertainment under the entry "Performance and Ritual" at Encyclopedia.com.

Per Dewey, the appropriation of high culture by high society has effectively removed the fine arts from the thoroughfare of social life:

When, because of their remoteness, the objects acknowledged by the cultivated to be works of fine art seem anemic to the mass of people, aesthetic hunger is likely to seek the cheap and the vulgar.⁴

Dewey holds that, at least in some past societies, art was an integral part of the communal experience, pointing specifically to ancient Athens:

The collective life that was manifested in war, worship, the forum, knew no division between what was characteristic of these places and operations, and the arts that brought color, grace, and dignity into them. Painting and sculpture were organically one with architecture, as that was one with the social purpose that buildings served. Music and song were intimate parts of the rites and ceremonies in which the meaning of group life was consummated. Drama was a vital reenactment of the legends and history of group life. Not even in Athens can such arts be torn loose from this setting in direct experience and yet retain their significant character. Athletic sports, as well as drama, celebrated and enforced traditions of race and group, instructing the people, commemorating glories, and strengthening their civic pride.⁵

In stark contrast to such past communities, which he describes as organized, Dewey characterizes the contemporary “institutional life” of humankind as “marked by disorganization”. Compartmentalization of social life is pervasive, and nearly everywhere there are divisions he believes to be artificial: between the profane and the spiritual, the ideal and the material, theory and practice, labor and enjoyment. Competing social interests are regulated by systems of checks and balances, which only treat them “externally and mechanically”.

Art long ago fell victim to compartmentalization, and Dewey suggests that the relegation of the fine arts to institutions such as museums and galleries had much to do with the nationalistic and imperialistic strivings of European nations. Another culprit in this process he identifies is capitalism, which he believes has promoted conspicuous consumption by the wealthy as a way to authenticate their social standing. Art is a natural choice for the conspicuous consumer, since it can be easily displayed and is clearly not an existential necessity:

Generally speaking, the typical collector is the typical capitalist.⁶

Furthermore, globalization of the market-based economy both uproots and commodifies works of art.

Dewey does not shy away from the practical implications of these views, and so his main philosophical treatment of art also contains a call for sweeping social and political changes. Decrying modern architecture, for instance, he hints at the need for a land tax à la Henry George:

Why is the architecture of our large cities so unworthy of a fine civilization? It is not from lack of materials nor from lack of technical capacity. And yet it is not merely slums but the apartments of the well-to-do that are aesthetically repellent, because they are so destitute of imagination. Their character is determined by an economic system in which land is used—and kept out of use—for the sake of gain, because of profit derived from rental and sale. Until land is freed from this economic burden, beautiful buildings may occasionally be

⁴ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1934), 6.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 7.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 8.

erected, but there is little hope for the rise of general architectural construction worthy of a noble civilization.⁷

George essentially proposed the socialization of land, a proposal that was enthusiastically adopted and promoted by Dewey. In 1933, at the height of the Great Depression, the latter even delivered a radio address urging the American public to familiarize itself with Georgism, since he argued that it would provide a more comprehensive and durable solution to the economic crisis which the various New Deal measures were designed to address.

As regards the working class in its relationship to the fine arts, he asserts that:

... art itself is not secure under modern conditions until the mass of men and women who do the useful work of the world have the opportunity to be free in conducting the processes of production and are richly endowed in capacity for enjoying the fruits of collective work. That the material for art should be drawn from all sources whatever and that the products of art should be accessible to all is a demand by the side of which the personal political intent of the artist is insignificant.⁸

Although Dewey does not go into specifics about this new freedom for workers, it seems clear enough that, if implemented, such a proposal would fundamentally change the relationship between labor, management, and owners. This is indeed a heady and ambitious vision for an aesthetic theory!

We must, however, leave aside the many issues raised by Dewey's social and political philosophy in order to focus on his view of art in a successfully reconstructed social order. One problem with his call for a reintegration of art into the life of the masses is that he fails to clearly distinguish between folk culture and high culture. Dewey cites cave paintings and the dancing and pantomime of religious rites and celebrations as examples of arts that were vital parts of everyday life. However, as we have seen, he also points to the theatre, painting, sculpture, and architecture of ancient Athens as further examples of the same. Yet the former were folk arts and the latter high arts; the former were customary practices generally performed by non-specialists, whereas the latter were the work of known artists.

By failing to distinguish between these two forms of artistic culture, Dewey neglects an important aspect of traditional arts versus the fine arts. And it is an aspect which is highly relevant to his philosophy of art: Namely, he overlooks the fact that folk arts directly engage non-artists as performers and spectators in artistic activities, whereas their role as regards the fine arts is normally limited to spectatorship. Of course, fine art will generally have greater aesthetic merit than folk art, but it comes at the price of specialization and elitism, and the aforementioned loss of audience participation and group bonding.

The Genesis of Modern Folklore in MeTV's *Svengoolie*

Tony Bennett, the famous American singer, served on the front lines during the Battle of the Bulge in the Second World War. Writing about the experience of combat in his autobiography, he remarked that:

⁷ Ibidem, 344.

⁸ Ibidem.

To me, it's a joke that they make "horror" movies about things like Dracula and Godzilla and they make "adventure" movies about war. War is far more horrifying than anything anyone could ever dream up.⁹

Bennett's observation is, of course, quite accurate, and helps explain why the vintage horror genre constitutes light entertainment: Its very unreality makes it an inviting escape from life's true horrors, of which there are, tragically, no shortage. While some more recent horror films contain graphic and highly realistic portrayals of violence and suffering, they are definitely not part of the *Svengoolie* catalog.

All the show's features are at least a couple of decades old, and many are much older than that, the earliest dating from 1931, a year which saw the Universal Studios' release of both *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. These two genre classics have been aired many times on *Svengoolie*, and indeed, most of the featured films are shown more than once. Consequently, fans often know exactly what to expect. The strategy sacrifices novelty for known values, a move which serves to strengthen the ritualistic aspect of the weekly "big broadcast". The show's Saturday evening timeslot is ideal for encouraging the establishment of a weekly ritual, coming as it does after the conclusion of the work week—when many viewers are eager for some well-earned R&R—and just prior to a day when most people can afford to sleep in late.

Ritualistic and participatory elements were present in the earliest creature features and included get-togethers for collective viewing, the writing of fan mail, and attendance at public appearances.¹⁰ Mr. Koz has retained all the aforementioned practices and, by skillfully exploiting an online presence, even added some new ones. The *Svengoolie* website hosts a gallery of fan-submitted artwork, photos, and videos. However, the most important aspect of the show's online presence is blogs that permit fans to post messages both during the show and throughout the week. *Svengoolie* undoubtedly owes much of its popularity to its eponymous host. The personage he has created is an appealing figure who provides a steady stream of puns and jokes during brief segments interspersed throughout the showing of the main feature. While most of the clips are humoristic—the exceptions being those dedicated to movie trivia—they are invariably good-natured and gentle. Indeed, much of the character's charm lies in his remarkable ability to poke fun at the featured film, while nevertheless managing to enthusiastically exude sincere interest in it.

Though the humoristic interludes are often burlesque, Mr. Koz's word plays can be quite clever and serve to keep his viewers on their toes. His recurring use of segments that involve solving a hand-drawn rebus encourages active participation on the part of his audience, in the manner of game shows such as *Jeopardy*.

Svengoolie boasts a very active blogging community; in fact, according to its website, the broadcast has ranked on many Saturday nights among the top nationally trending topics (formerly on Twitter).

Although a blog for fans is no longer hosted on the show's official website (the current blogs are available elsewhere), when it was, it included many regulars, some of whom played specific roles. For instance, at least a couple of bloggers weighed in each week with extended film analyses that offered both behind-the-scenes trivia and critical interpretation. Other bloggers

⁹ Tony Bennett, *The Good Life* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 58.

¹⁰ Phillip J. Hutchison, "When TV Became a Target: Ritual and Burlesque in Television Creature Features," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* vol. 46, no. 2 (April/June 2018), 102.

contributed movie-themed content, such as cartoons, still photos, or even song parodies. Yet others shared details and photos of the dinners they prepared to accompany the big show.

In the wee minutes every Saturday, the website opened a new blog for the evening's show, which provided the occasion for a weekly informal competition between fans to see who would be the first to post to it.

It seems self-evident that these various forms of online participation primarily served to prolong, savor, and heighten the enjoyment of the Saturday evening broadcast.

While it may be tempting to search for a deep psychological explanation of the show's appeal, it's probably unnecessary. Given the rich symbolism of the genre—the seductive charm and unrestrained egotism of the vampire, the suggestion of a raging inner animal nature in the werewolf, the Faustian hubris of Dr. Frankenstein, etc.—the temptation is certainly understandable. But the show's major selling points are likely more prosaic and fairly close to the surface: namely, in addition to the engaging personality and wit of its host, *Svengoolie* offers a well-crafted vehicle for ritual escapism.

Judging from the former blog, the core of the blogging community consisted of Baby Boomers, many of whom were dealing with retirement and health issues. A favorite theme was youthful recollections by individual bloggers about when and where they first saw the featured film, fond memories of movie theaters, drive-ins, and late-night TV, generally dating from the 1950s, 60s, or 70s. It was, in short, a group steeped in nostalgia, and part of the allure of the past is the security of dwelling on what is no longer subject to the perils and uncertainties inherent in the present and future. The reader will kindly recall that MeTV stands for “Memorable Entertainment Television”, so it should come as no surprise that *Svengoolie* figures prominently in its weekly line-up.

Ritual constitutes a powerful psychological device for providing reassurance. In a world fraught with change and uncertainty, it offers stability and certitude. In this connection, it's worth noting that MeTV's programming, which primarily draws from classic television series from the 1950s through the 1990s, is likely to appeal to older viewers who remember the shows from earlier decades. While change is obviously a historical constant in the modern world, the Baby Boom generation (1946-64) has experienced developments of an especially widespread and transformative nature. Two in particular stand out.

The first is technological. The Computer Age is typically considered to have started in the mid-20th century and has had such an impact on contemporary life that it is sometimes styled as the Third Industrial Revolution. The Baby Boomers have experienced this transformation firsthand, since the world they grew up in was one without personal computers, the Internet, social media, or cell phones, all of which have become standard features of their everyday lives. MeTV staples such as *Perry Mason*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, and *The Carol Burnett Show* provide a window into a past which Boomers personally experienced. Even though the entire era occurred in the shadow of the Cold War, for most Americans, the threat of a nuclear exchange between the superpowers had little direct effect on their daily rounds of existence. Compared to the present, day-to-day life was arguably somewhat more traditional, in the sense of being more local and face-to-face. Understandably, despite the wonders of digital technology, some Boomers have a certain nostalgia for what they consider to be a simpler and slower-paced era, an era that many of MeTV's offerings bring to life.

The second major change is demographic. Since the mid-20th century, the white percentage of the U.S. population has steadily declined. According to yearly estimates by the United States Census Bureau, the non-Hispanic White share of the population was 87.5% in 1950, dropping to

just 57.8% by 2020.¹¹ For many Baby Boomers, the world they grew up in was considerably less racially and ethnically diverse than that in which they now find themselves. Most classic TV series feature predominantly white casts, reflecting the social and cultural preeminence enjoyed by Americans of European descent at the time. Much of the entertainment on MeTV provides an opening through which a more culturally homogenous version of the country may be viewed, and for most Baby Boomers, this was the United States of their younger years.

The *Svengoolie* bloggers were engaged in a spontaneous form of sharing rooted in similar experiences. Given the complexity of contemporary civilization, there's arguably social and political merit in voluntary associations that affirm a common cultural connection. Unlike traditional societies, which characteristically have very distinctive cultural patterns, many modern ones are cosmopolitan and multicultural, so much so that their members often do not share the same religion or even language. Nevertheless, certain groups in such societies do enjoy a greater degree of common culture. The *Svengoolie* fan base represents one such group, and so it composes one strand of social identity. At least for this community, the creature features of recent decades past constitute a shared repository of memory and modern folklore.

The standard *Svengoolie* fare may not be good art—apart from some classic horror and sci-fi films, such as *The Invisible Man* (1933) and *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957)—but it is certainly vital art. Due to its low-to-middlebrow nature, it's less intimidating and more easily grasped than works of high culture, and so permits audience participation and sharing to a greater degree than the latter. An acknowledgment of this virtue is obviously by no means an indictment of high culture, which has different ones. Ideally, in a complex society like our own, high and low cultures can co-exist and complement one another.

The distinction between “lowbrow” and “highbrow” should be no more objectionable than that between “low comedy” and “high comedy”, as long as it is borne in mind that aesthetic value is relative to various purposes. Sometimes we crave the easy comforts of escapist entertainments, while on other occasions our mood and current situation may necessitate more challenging distractions to draw us in. The low versus high distinction in aesthetics only becomes pernicious when it is construed as existing absolutely and universally, divorced from the particular circumstances of particular persons.

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***Scarecrow* Revisited: John Mellencamp, Rural Identity, and the Cultural Politics of Place**

ANTHONY ESPOSITO and RONALD K. RAYMOND

Musicians and bands closely associated with cities, regions, or states, whether in the United States or abroad, are common in popular music. In the United States, numerous artists have cultivated identities tied to their hometowns or cultural communities. Examples include Billy Joel and New York; the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Los Angeles, California; Buddy Guy and Chicago, Illinois; the Supremes and Detroit, Michigan; Prince and Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Bruce Springsteen and Freehold, New Jersey. In many cases, regional identity influences not only a musician's sound but also the themes and narratives present in their lyrics. Such lyrics often reflect the social, cultural, and geographic contexts from which they emerge, addressing issues such as socioeconomic class, race, gender, and community.

As a dimension of popular culture, music has long been a productive area of inquiry for scholars interested in rhetoric and cultural studies. Sellnow defines popular culture as “the everyday objects, actions, and events that influence people to believe and behave in certain ways” (3). Music, therefore, functions as a significant rhetorical text, enabling scholars to analyze how artists construct meaning, articulate identities, and engage with broader cultural conversations.

Over the last three presidential election cycles, attention has turned to so-called “flyover states” and Rust Belt communities, such as Youngstown, Ohio, and Erie, Pennsylvania, as well as rural regions across the United States that feel neglected by federal policymakers. Within these rural contexts, relatively few mainstream American musicians outside of country genres have addressed the challenges facing family farms, despite their centrality to the nation's food supply. This study raises an important question for scholars of popular culture: what insights might be gained from examining an album released in 1985 that foregrounds the struggles of American farmers and rural communities? Such an inquiry is particularly valuable because it highlights the cultural significance of rural America and how popular music can both document and interpret the social realities of agricultural life. Moreover, the themes addressed in the album retain resonance in contemporary America, where many rural communities continue to face economic and social challenges. The sections that follow explore these connections in greater detail.

One musician who directly confronted the challenges facing rural America was John Mellencamp, whose seminal 1985 album *Scarecrow* examined the economic and cultural struggles of family farmers in and around his hometown of Seymour, Indiana. The album presented a stark portrait of the decline of American agriculture, while simultaneously celebrating the resilience, values, and communal bonds of small-town life. In doing so, Mellencamp articulated the shifting landscape of rural and Midwestern America and the gradual erosion of a way of life that had long defined the region. Several tracks on the album commemorate this disappearing community, reflecting themes of family, place, local identity, American citizenship, and civic pride. Rees underscores the evocative power of the album when he writes:

To anyone who heard it, and from wherever they might be, *Scarecrow* was powerfully expressive of the American heartland. Seen through John's eyes, the Midwest here took

on the form of a near-mythic archetype, like a Marlboro Man billboard. This is to say somewhere rugged, heroic, and of another era, not so far off but gone forever at the same time. (81)

Although Mellencamp's earlier albums often received tepid or dismissive responses from critics, *Scarecrow* marked a turning point. Reviewers who were typically divided on Mellencamp's musical persona were nearly unanimous in praising the album's thematic maturity and artistic ambition. Listeners responded similarly, helping to make *Scarecrow* both a critical and commercial success. This raises a broader question: What is the lasting significance of the *Scarecrow* album? One answer is that the album narrates the experiences of rural America through the perspective of an Indiana-born artist who sought to give voice to communities frequently overlooked in mainstream rock music.

This article examines Mellencamp's *Scarecrow* and his role as a cultural commentator, focusing particularly on how the album highlights the struggles and stories of rural communities. To demonstrate the significance of this work and its attention to issues affecting rural America, this study will do the following. First, we review previous scholarship in rock studies to identify the relative lack of academic research on John Mellencamp and to establish why this article contributes meaningfully to the study of popular culture and music. Second, we examine the evolving public and critical perception of "John Cougar" and analyze how music critics evaluated Mellencamp's artistic persona during the early stages of his career. Third, we explore the interconnected concepts of place and music—central themes in *Scarecrow*—with particular attention to the album's representations of rural America and of Mellencamp's hometown, Seymour, Indiana. Fourth, we consider the album's creation and Mellencamp's writing process, highlighting how the themes embedded within the songs emerged and took shape. Fifth, we analyze selected tracks from the album to show how some celebrate rural American life, while others evoke a sense of loss, marginalization, or what might be called a "forgotten America" frame of reference. Finally, in the concluding remarks, we will answer why this album and Mellencamp's focus on Middle America can still resonate in today's politically charged environment, and why this is an important topic for popular culture critics in the 21st century.

Music Research and Scholarship on John Mellencamp

During the height of his commercial success in the 1980s, John Mellencamp was frequently compared to contemporaries such as Bruce Springsteen. While both artists drew upon themes of working-class life and American identity, critical reception often positioned Mellencamp as a lesser figure in comparison to Springsteen's perceived musical depth and cultural prestige. These comparisons extended beyond popular criticism and into academic discourse, where Springsteen's work has generated extensive scholarly analysis while Mellencamp's contributions have received comparatively little attention. This disparity raises broader questions about how certain artists become central subjects of cultural scholarship while others—despite commercial success and cultural influence—remain relatively understudied. Mellencamp's songwriting repeatedly foregrounds rural communities, agricultural labor, and the social realities of the American Midwest—topics that remain comparatively underexamined within popular music scholarship.

Despite the significant growth of popular music studies over the past several decades, relatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to the work of John Mellencamp. Although Mellencamp achieved substantial commercial success and cultural visibility during the 1980s

and beyond, academic engagement with his music remains limited. A review of the literature identified only one major biography by Johnson and two academic publications that directly examine Mellencamp's music and legacy: van Elteren's study and the article by Wolfe et al. The most recent of these works was published in 2009, underscoring the absence of sustained scholarly research on Mellencamp in the years since. This study seeks to address that gap by examining Mellencamp's relationship to rural America—particularly his connection to Indiana—and the cultural significance of his 1985 album *Scarecrow*.

Although Mellencamp himself has received relatively little academic attention, the broader field of popular music studies provides a strong theoretical foundation for examining his work. Simon Frith, one of the most influential scholars in music and cultural studies, writes extensively about the relationships among music, performance, and audiences. His scholarship emphasizes the shared experiences created through musical performance and the interpretive frameworks listeners bring to it. As Frith explains, "To grasp the meaning of a piece of music is to hear something not simply present to the ear. It is to understand a musical culture, to have a scheme of interpretation" (249).

The dynamic relationship between musician and audience is central to this study, particularly in the context of Mellencamp's enduring connection to Indiana and the broader Midwest. His songwriting frequently reflects the lived experiences of rural communities and agricultural life, positioning place and regional identity as central themes within his work.

The limited scholarship on Mellencamp stands in contrast to the extensive academic attention devoted to other major figures in American popular music, including Bruce Springsteen (Randall), Elvis Presley (Doss), the Rolling Stones (Baker), and Michael Jackson (Hills). Contemporary artists have likewise generated significant scholarly interest. For example, research has examined Taylor Swift's album *Evermore* and its cultural themes (Kondal et al.), Lady Gaga's relationship with audiences and fan communities (Click et al.), and Chappell Roan's engagement with queer identity in contemporary pop music (Skipp). Richardson's study of home-based music production in the work of Billie Eilish further illustrates how scholars have explored the relationship between artistic creation and domestic space.

The prominence of these studies does not diminish the importance of such artists or their contributions to cultural discourse. Rather, Mellencamp's relative absence from this body of scholarship raises important questions about whose voices are prioritized within popular music research and how certain themes—particularly those related to rural American life—have been historically underexamined.

Recent scholarship has begun to recognize the importance of place, home, and labor in popular music. In a special issue devoted to these themes, the journal *Popular Music and Society* highlighted the significance of musicians' relationships to domestic and local environments. As Prior et al. observe, "We remain struck by the disconnect between glimpses into musicians' home lives and the lack of serious consideration of their implications for scholarship" (528). Mellencamp's songwriting, which frequently draws upon his experiences in rural Indiana and his observations of Midwestern life, offers a particularly compelling example of this relationship between music, place, and community.

Mellencamp's longstanding association with the Midwest—especially his home state of Indiana—has also received renewed public and academic recognition. On March 3, 2023, Indiana University in Bloomington hosted the Mellencamp Symposium, where scholars and music critics examined Mellencamp's cultural significance and his ties to the region. The university further acknowledged his legacy by unveiling a statue of Mellencamp on October 18,

2024 (“John Mellencamp Sculpture Celebration”). These institutional recognitions underscore Mellencamp’s importance within both regional and national cultural history.

Mellencamp’s connection to place draws heavily upon the lived experiences of Midwestern rural communities. Popular music often functions as a site of emotional expression and identification for listeners. Susanne Langer argues that music is deeply embedded in human life, enabling individuals to express and release emotions in meaningful ways (126). Frith similarly notes that listening to music within everyday life allows individuals to negotiate feelings, tensions, and personal identities (73). One of the central powers of popular music lies in its ability to shape listeners’ emotional lives and social interactions.

Tia DeNora reinforces this perspective by demonstrating music’s active role in structuring everyday experience. She writes:

At the level of daily life, music has power. It is implicated in every dimension of social agency... Music may influence how people compose their bodies, how they conduct themselves, how they experience the passage of time, how they feel—in terms of energy and emotion—about themselves, about others, and situations. (16–17)

These theoretical frameworks provide an important foundation for interpreting Mellencamp’s *Scarecrow* as more than a collection of songs. Rather, the album functions as a cultural artifact that reflects the values, struggles, and identities of rural communities during a period of significant social and economic change in the United States. Given the limited scholarly attention to Mellencamp’s work and the growing recognition of his cultural impact, examining *Scarecrow* offers an opportunity to expand the study of popular music’s engagement with rural American life.

This chapter argues that *Scarecrow* represents a significant cultural artifact within American popular music, offering a powerful portrayal of rural life and agricultural struggle during the economic upheavals of the 1980s. Through its lyrical narratives and thematic focus on Midwestern communities, the album articulates a perspective on rural identity that has received comparatively little attention within popular music scholarship. By situating *Scarecrow* within the broader cultural and economic context of rural America, this chapter demonstrates how Mellencamp’s work contributes to ongoing conversations about place, community, and identity in American popular culture. The following section examines the construction of the “John Cougar” persona and its influence on Mellencamp’s early career.

John Cougar

John Mellencamp was born on October 7, 1951, in Seymour, Indiana. As a young musician, he performed in bars throughout the state, developing a style that blended rhythm and blues with rock and roll. Early in his career, Mellencamp’s manager, Tony Defries, insisted that he adopt the stage name “John Cougar,” believing that “Mellencamp” sounded “too rural” for mainstream audiences (Johnson). Mellencamp later reflected that he agreed to the name without hesitation because he was eager to secure a recording contract. He ultimately signed with MCA Records. Recalling that moment in a 2013 interview with *Rolling Stone*, Mellencamp remarked, “I would have signed anything—I would have signed the bottom of a shoe.”

Mellencamp’s first album, *Chestnut Street Incident* (1976), consisted primarily of cover songs and received both poor sales and harsh reviews. As Wawzenek notes, his early career suffered a difficult start: “When his debut album, 1976’s *Chestnut Street Incident*, moved only 12,000 copies and he was excoriated in the press as a slight Bruce Springsteen substitute,

Mellencamp's second LP, *The Kid Inside*, was shelved by Main Man. He soon was dropped by MCA."

Following his departure from MCA, Mellencamp signed with Riva Records. His next two albums—*A Biography* (1978) and *John Cougar* (1979)—failed to gain traction with American audiences. However, *A Biography* did produce a top-five hit in Australia with the single "I Need a Lover." The song later reached number 28 in the United States and was covered by Pat Benatar on her debut album, *In the Heat of the Night*.

Mellencamp began to find broader success in 1980 with the release of *Nothin' Matters and What If It Did*, which generated two Top 40 singles: "This Time" and "Ain't Even Done with the Night" ("John Mellencamp"). This period marked the beginning of Mellencamp's emergence as a recognizable figure in American rock music, even as he continued to navigate the challenges posed by the imposed "John Cougar" persona.

Mellencamp's next album, *American Fool*, was released in 1982 and became his best-selling record to date. The album produced two major hits—"Hurts So Good" and the number-one single "Jack and Diane"—and ultimately sold more than five million copies in the United States. For the first time in his career, Mellencamp began selling out concert venues nationwide. Despite this commercial breakthrough, many critics remained skeptical of his artistic merit. At the time, *Rolling Stone* was the most influential rock publication in the United States, and its review of the album reflected this ongoing ambivalence. In the September 2, 1982 issue, Ken Emerson awarded *American Fool* only two out of five stars, a notably low rating given the album's strong commercial performance. Reviews such as this continued to position Mellencamp as a lesser songwriter compared to Bruce Springsteen, Bob Seger, and Tom Petty.

Mellencamp's commercial momentum continued with the release of *Uh-Huh* in 1983, which became a Top Ten album and featured three successful singles: "Pink Houses," "Crumblin' Down," and "Authority Song." The album sold three million copies in the United States and signaled a shift in critical reception. Reviewers began to acknowledge Mellencamp's emerging brand of Americana songwriting, particularly the political dimensions of "Pink Houses." Even *Rolling Stone*, which had been openly critical of *American Fool*, offered a notably positive assessment. In the December 3, 1983 issue, Errol Somay awarded *Uh-Huh* four out of five stars, marking a departure from the magazine's earlier derision. This album also represented a turning point in Mellencamp's career identity: it was the first to feature the hybrid name "John Cougar Mellencamp" on the cover (DeCurtis).

This section has traced the origins of the "John Cougar" stage name and examined the commercial and critical trajectory of Mellencamp's early albums. The following section shifts focus to the significance of place and community in popular music, establishing the foundation for analyzing Mellencamp's deep connection to Midwestern rural life.

Place, Community, and Music

Popular music in the United States can be understood through a wide range of genres such as rap, rock and roll, country, jazz, and rhythm and blues, each shaped by distinctive cultural and geographic origins. Some of these musical forms emerged from rural or urban environments, while others developed in highly localized regional contexts or within specific states. When an artist chooses to write about place, community, or culture, geography becomes an essential component of analysis. Leyshon et al. emphasize this point, arguing:

Space and place [should be understood] not simply as sites where or about which music happens to be made, or over which music has diffused; rather, here different spatialities are suggested as being formative of the sounding and resounding of music. Such a richer sense of geography highlights the spatiality of music, and the mutually generative relations of musical space. (4)

This perspective illustrates how place and community are integral to understanding a musician's sound and artistic identity. Geography informs not only of the sonic qualities of music but also the cultural narratives to which artists are connected. In this way, place becomes central to interpreting how particular musical styles emerge from specific American regions or cultural communities outside the United States.

Numerous musicians draw on their hometowns or cultural communities as sources of artistic inspiration. Such representations offer listeners insight into the social, cultural, and geographic contexts that shape an artist's work. Bruce Springsteen provides a widely recognized example: his debut album, *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* (1973), explicitly references his New Jersey roots. Similarly, the Beach Boys' music frequently evokes Southern California, Bob Seger is closely identified with Detroit, and Billy Joel draws heavily on his New York upbringing. Many other artists incorporate place into their musical narratives. The Pretenders' "My City Was Gone," written by Akron-born Chrissie Hynde, addresses the effects of deindustrialization in her Midwestern hometown. Other songs that foreground place include "Californication" by the Red Hot Chili Peppers, "South Bronx Boogie" by Down Production, "Empire State of Mind" by Jay-Z and Alicia Keys, and "Welcome to Atlanta" by Jermaine Dupri and Ludacris.

Across these examples, both songs and albums demonstrate how musicians weave place into their creative identities, often producing sounds and narratives deeply connected to regions or cultural communities. Also, a study on Bille Elish, the researcher, emphasized her adherence to recording some songs in her bedroom. According to Richardson, "Billie Eilish's breakthrough songs were recorded at home in close collaboration with her brother, Finneas O'Connell." (549). Geography, therefore, becomes a valuable lens for understanding the relationship between popular culture and music, and in Eilish's case, recording in her bedroom during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Krims explains, "More commonly, however, 'place' becomes something like the geographic equivalent of 'identity,' referring to a discursively constructed notion (or, for those more enamored of agonistic models, sets of 'contested' notions) defining a locality in some way" (141). Krims' argument is directly applicable to John Mellencamp's music and his enduring connection to his Indiana roots.

Place and geography are central to understanding Mellencamp's identity as a musician, particularly his relationship to Seymour, Indiana. This sense of place informs his songwriting, shapes the thematic core of his albums, and underpins the narratives he constructs about rural American life. The following section explores these ideas in more detail.

The Origins of the Album

For scholars of popular culture, understanding the origins of an album or song can reveal significant insights into an artist's worldview and the cultural conditions shaping their work. *Scarecrow* is particularly rich in this regard. Mellencamp wrote the album through the lens of both community and place, specifically Seymour, Indiana, and the surrounding Midwestern landscape. Masciotra notes:

Place and class, along with generational change, have been two of Mellencamp's obsessions, and his loyalty to place is largely what fuels his drive to navigate the class divide in American life. Since the early 1980s, he's lived and recorded almost all of his music in or just outside Bloomington, Indiana—a mere fifty miles from his hometown of Seymour, where his father and many relatives still reside. (247)

Masciotra's observation about Mellencamp's "loyalty to place" is central to understanding the origins of *Scarecrow*. The album reflects what Mellencamp saw unfolding in Seymour and the broader Midwest, the economic hardships, cultural dislocation, and agricultural crisis affecting rural America in the 1980s. Masciotra further emphasizes Mellencamp's rootedness: "When Mellencamp presents life, he often does so from the vantage point of a man born, raised, and currently living in Indiana. His music videos and his film *Falling from Grace* contain scene after scene set in Seymour, Bloomington, or the towns in between" (252).

Written largely at Mellencamp's home in Indiana, *Scarecrow* carries both a "rustic" sonic texture and a thematic commitment to rural cultural identity. The late 1970s and early 1980s saw the decline of the American family farm, a crisis that profoundly affected Mellencamp's home region. A deeper analysis of the album reveals that the songs were written in Mellencamp's home studio and intentionally grounded in the geography, culture, and people of Indiana. As van Elteren explains:

The implied penchant for populist communitarianism in the country is explicitly articulated on the sleeve of the album *Scarecrow* (1985) by co-songwriter George M. Green: The highway between John's house and the studio where these songs were recorded [Belmont Mall Studio, Belmont] cuts through a stretch of Indiana where the land is fertile and full of growth. It is from this land and its people that these songs are born, and though it is not necessary to know this to enjoy and appreciate them, it does lend a certain understanding for those who care to think about such things. (102)

The connection between Mellencamp and his Midwestern roots is audible in both his lyrics and musical arrangements. In preparation for recording *Scarecrow*, Mellencamp instructed his band to study rock and roll from the 1960s, material he had performed as a young bar singer. According to *Rolling Stone*:

John Cougar Mellencamp's band spent a month in rehearsals, playing a hundred rock and roll songs from the 1960s before going into the studio. According to the record's producer, Don Gehman, the idea was to 'learn all these devices from the past and use them in a new way with John's arrangements.' The album was recorded at Mellencamp's own Belmont Mall Studio in Belmont, Indiana.

The album thus emerges at the intersection of two forces: Mellencamp's cultural community and his musical lineage. Its sound draws from earlier rock traditions, while its themes reflect the conditions he observed in rural Indiana. Together, these elements produced one of the most significant works in Mellencamp's artistic evolution. The following sections highlight specific songs and thematic concerns, beginning with the title track, "Rain on the Scarecrow."

Rain on the Scarecrow

Both the album as a whole and the title song, in particular, serve as powerful indicators of place. This connection is visible even in the album's imagery. Rees describes the cover: "The same feeling was conveyed by the stark portrait of John on the album's front cover. He was pictured leaning on a fencepost, a plowed field with a scarecrow in the background, barbed wire

fence binding or else imprisoning him in the hinterland” (80). Such imagery signals the bleakness Mellencamp perceived in his community and the rural Midwest more broadly. From a cultural studies perspective, Mellencamp writes as an “insider” to rural Indiana, raising issues seldom addressed in mainstream rock music and giving voice to experiences largely absent from national cultural discourse. Masciotra explains the severity of the farm crisis:

The decimation of the family farmer and ruination of the rich land, however, did not elicit sweetness in Mellencamp’s music. Resembling a monstrous storm system the 1980s brought devastation to small and midlevel farmers via a convergence and confluence of factors from Wall Street, the Federal Reserve, the international export market, and Washington, D.C. Throughout the Midwest, by the early 1980s, the value of farmland had fallen by 60 percent because of a drop in agricultural need and increased production.

“Rain on the Scarecrow” was written directly in response to this crisis. Mellencamp and his co-writer, George Green, crafted the song after watching televised news reports about farm foreclosures. Johnson details the writing process:

George Green co-wrote ‘Rain on the Scarecrow’ with John after months of hearing about the farm problem on TV while sitting at John’s kitchen table, smoking cigarettes and drinking tea. The ‘79 crosses’ reference came straight from the news. Whenever a farm foreclosure took place, a cross was planted in the local courthouse yard. (72)

The song merges reportage with personal history. Mellencamp’s lyrics evoke both the literal conditions of rural Indiana and the symbolic collapse of generational farming:

Scarecrow on a wooden cross, blackbird in the barn
Four hundred empty acres that used to be my farm
I grew up like my daddy did my grandpa cleared this land
When I was five I walked the fence while grandpa held my hand
Rain on the scarecrow blood on the plow
This land fed a nation this land made me proud
And son I’m just sorry there’s no legacy for you now
Rain on the scarecrow blood on the plow
Rain on the scarecrow blood on the plow

Here, the scarecrow becomes a metaphor for rural deterioration. The decaying figure mirrors the economic decay of American farming communities. Mellencamp’s songwriting often began with direct observation. The artist has noted that he writes by looking out the window. Bauder quotes him as saying, “You don’t have to be the person. You can watch. I’ve had people say to me, ‘John, have you ever had writer’s block?’ And I would say no, all you’ve got to do is look out the window.”

This approach aligns with ethnographic principles: Mellencamp stands as both participant and observer within his rural community. Although musicians are not traditionally described as researchers, Mellencamp’s process parallels ethnographic inquiry, documenting the lived realities of a cultural group from within. As Rosenfield argues, “One characteristic of the rhetorical critic, then, is his interest in observing and discussing instances of rhetorical discourse, be they speeches, essays, or advertisements, from the vantage of the spectator” (51). Later, Rosenfield adds, “What matters is exceptional understanding. Accordingly, ‘critical posture’ refers to the capacity a person has to act as an expert commentator, and the critic, if he is nothing else, must be the one who is capable of fulfilling this role” (52).

Mellencamp, then, functions as both a cultural citizen and a cultural critic. His music articulates the anger, loss, and displacement felt across rural America in the 1980s. This is especially evident in the second verse:

Well, there's ninety-seven crosses planted in the courthouse yard
 Ninety-seven families who lost ninety-seven farms
 I think about my grandpa and my neighbors and my name and some nights
 I feel like dying like that scarecrow in the rain
 Rain on the scarecrow blood on the plow
 This land fed a nation this land made me so proud
 And son I'm just sorry they're just memories for you now
 Rain on the scarecrow blood on the plow
 Rain on the scarecrow blood on the plow

These lyrics return to the themes of familial legacy, community collapse, and the erosion of a once-stable way of life. As rural communities declined, Mellencamp used his platform to amplify their experiences, fulfilling the role of what Rosenfield calls an “expert commentator.” (52).

This discussion of “Rain on the Scarecrow” establishes its significance within the album’s overarching narrative. The next section examines “Small Town,” another key song that reflects Mellencamp’s deep connection to place and community.

“Small Town”

While “Rain on the Scarecrow” foregrounds the collapse of the American family farm and the erosion of rural cultural identity, *Scarecrow* also celebrates the value of small-town life in the Midwest. “Small Town” exemplifies this duality. It offers a portrait of what it means to grow up in and remain connected to a rural farming community. This experience resonated widely with listeners across the United States. Mellencamp continued his practice of “looking out the window” to compose the songs on *Scarecrow*, drawing directly from everyday life. In an interview with Marc Myers, he describes how “Small Town” emerged:

Once the song started to come, it came fast. I’d sing some lyrics, type them out, and play the music on my guitar. Then I’d start at the beginning to sing what I had to inspire additional lines. Eventually, I went upstairs, looked at Vicky and Aunt Tootes, and said, ‘I’m glad you guys think this is so funny.’ They started laughing again. I said, ‘OK, now laugh at this.’ I played them ‘Small Town,’ and they went dead quiet. When you play what you’ve done for a family member and you get that kind of reaction, you know you have something.

This anecdote illustrates Mellencamp’s writing process and the song’s deeply personal origins. As argued earlier in this article, Mellencamp often operates much like a researcher of his own community—an insider engaging in close cultural observation. Although he is a musician rather than an ethnographer, the parallels to ethnographic inquiry are evident. Geertz’s notion of “thick description” is especially useful here: “Doing ethnography is like trying to read a manuscript... written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but transient examples of shaped behavior” (10). Mellencamp’s songwriting reflects these “shaped behaviors,” translating lived rural experience into narrative, imagery, and sound.

“Small Town” resonated deeply with American audiences, reaching No. 6 on *Billboard’s* pop chart in early 1986 (*Rolling Stone*). The song’s opening stanzas present a portrait that is simultaneously affectionate and ambivalent:

Well, I was born in a small town
 And I live in a small town
 Probably die in a small town
 Oh, those small communities
 All my friends are so small town
 My parents live in the same small town
 My job is so small town
 Provides little opportunity, hey
 Educated in a small town
 Taught to fear of Jesus in a small town
 Used to daydream in that small town
 Another boring romantic, that's me

At first glance, the lyrics emphasize limited opportunities, generational rootedness, and the constraints of rural life. Yet the references to family, faith, and daydreaming complicate this picture. The song speaks to listeners who may have longed for a “simpler time” or who recognized aspects of their own upbringing in Mellencamp’s portrayal of community. Booth articulates how such identification occurs: “The singers’ words are sung for us in that he says something that is also said somehow in extension by us, and we are drawn into the state, the pose, the attitudes, the self-offered by the song” (243). In this sense, “Small Town” invites listeners to inhabit Mellencamp’s Midwestern worldview.

The second half of the song shifts in tone, presenting the small town as a place of belonging, joy, and authenticity:

But I've seen it all in a small town
 Had myself a ball in a small town
 Married an L.A. Doll and brought her to this small town
 Now she's small town just like me
 No, I cannot forget from where it is that I come from
 I cannot forget the people who love me
 Yeah, I can be myself here in this small town
 And people let me be just what I want to be

Here, Mellencamp highlights the beauty of his rural community—its familiarity, loyalty, and freedom to “be myself.” The song counters the tendency in popular culture to valorize urban spaces as inherently more exciting or culturally significant. Mellencamp instead validates rural identity, offering a voice for communities often marginalized in mainstream representations of American life. Burke’s concept of identification is particularly apt: “You persuade a man insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his” (49). Mellencamp’s lyrics accomplish this by affirming the lived experiences of rural and Midwestern Americans.

Despite the song’s popularity, Mellencamp has pushed back against being labeled a “heartland rocker” or a cultural spokesman for rural America. In an interview cited by Masciotra, he notes that he never wanted to be the keeper of the small town:

I was just looking out the window and writing a song about where I lived. I was being a reporter, but before I knew it, every newspaper story about me began with ‘the keeper of

the small town' or 'the spokesman for the small town.' I never got it. Mellencamp did understand, however, the resonance of the song. It came from a special and personal place in his life, and it moved people in a special and personal way (246).

Nevertheless, Mellencamp acknowledges the emotional force of the song:

I told the truth and people responded positively. It wasn't that I sang it so great. It was just the bone truth, and people responded to the bone truth. When I am able and at my best...I sometimes strive to write a song that makes people feel good about themselves (246).

Mellencamp, as an artist, uses either his studio near his Indiana home or, in the case of this song, the discourse comes from him writing parts of this album in a social place. Lefebvre, in his research on space and communication, stated:

Everyone knows what is meant when we speak of a "room" in an apartment, the "corner of the street ... and so on. These terms of everyday discourse serve to distinguish ... particular spaces, and in general to describe a social space. They correspond to a specific use of that space, and hence to a spatial practice that they express and constitute. (16)

Lefebvre's remarks are important to understanding how space and place worked in the song above, specifically in the discourse about small-town life that Mellencamp created in this space. Although he disdains the reductive label of "heartland rocker," Mellencamp recognizes that "Small Town" resonated deeply with the American public because its imagery and sentiments were rooted in personal authenticity and both place and community. The next section highlights additional songs on *Scarecrow* to illustrate further the album's thematic engagement with rural American life.

Songs of Endurance and a Critique of America

Thus far, this article has analyzed two central songs from *Scarecrow*—"Rain on the Scarecrow" and "Small Town." The former examines the collapse of the American family farm, while the latter reflects the pride and beauty of small-town Midwestern life. The album that contains both songs became Mellencamp's best-selling record, earning five million sales in the United States and producing five Top 40 hits: "Small Town," "Rain on the Scarecrow," "R.O.C.K. in the U.S.A.," "Lonely Ol' Night," and "Rumbleseat."

"R.O.C.K. in the U.S.A." pays explicit homage to the music of Mellencamp's youth, drawing on the bar-band repertoire his musicians studied in the months leading up to the album's recording. Its sound is consciously retro, evoking an earlier era of American rock and roll. As *Rolling Stone* observes, the album's overarching theme is a "bittersweet, reflective tone," evident in songs such as "The Face of the Nation," "Minutes to Memories," and "Small Town." The album collectively meditates on a fading America, one that many listeners may have felt slipping away.

Several songs on *Scarecrow* extend beyond Mellencamp's Indiana roots to critique the condition of the broader American cultural community. "Minutes to Memories," though partly fictionalized, was inspired by Mellencamp's encounter with an older man on a Greyhound bus. Written from the perspective of an elder imparting life lessons to a younger traveler, the song highlights intergenerational wisdom and endurance, values deeply connected to the Midwestern communities Mellencamp often writes about. The lyrics evoke multiple geographic locations—Jamestown, Gary, the Tennessee line—allowing listeners to travel across regions with the singer:

On a Greyhound thirty miles beyond Jamestown

He saw the sun set on the Tennessee line
 He looked at the young man who was riding beside him
 He said I'm old, kind of worn out inside
 I worked my whole life in the steel mills near Gary
 And my father before me I helped build this land
 Now I'm seventy-seven and with God as my witness
 I earned every dollar that passed through my hands
 My family and friends are the best thing I've known
 Through the eye of the needle I'll carry them home
 Days turn to minutes and minutes to memories
 Life sweeps away the dreams that we have planned
 You are young and you are the future
 So suck it up and tough it out and be the best you can

Here, the themes of place, labor, and personal identity merge. Mellencamp crafts an encounter that affirms the dignity of working-class life and the endurance forged through communal ties. The song continues:

Through the hills of Kentucky 'cross the Ohio River
 The old man kept talking about his life and his times
 He fell asleep with his head against the window
 He said an honest man's pillow is his peace of mind
 This world offers riches, and riches will grow wings
 And I don't take stock in those uncertain things
 Days turn to minutes and minutes to memories
 Life sweeps away the dreams we have planned
 You are young, and you are the future
 Suck it up and tough it out, be the best you can

Again, the geographic journey extends beyond Indiana, echoing, though through a very different lens, Tocqueville's travels in *Democracy in America*. Both men reflect on the variety of American lives encountered in transit. Tocqueville writes that "Feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon another" (515). Mellencamp's narrative mirrors this sentiment: social capital emerges from human connection, shared stories, and communal resilience. Such values recur throughout *Scarecrow*, forming a thematic backbone for many of the album's songs.

If "Minutes to Memories" emphasizes endurance and human connection, "The Face of the Nation" articulates Mellencamp's critique of an America in decline. The song presents scenes of struggle—older adults navigating darkened streets, hungry infants, and a national identity Mellencamp no longer recognizes:

As I run through this life
 Sometimes it breaks my heart
 Seein' old people goin' downtown
 Stumblin' their way through the dark
 And the little babies cry
 For their mothers' warmth
 Sometimes I feel so helpless
 I don't know where to start
 And the face of the nation

Keeps changin' and changin'
 The face of the nation
 I don't recognize it no more
 The face of the nation
 The face of the nation

These lyrics construct a bleak national landscape and reflect Mellencamp's sense that America's cultural and civic fabric had frayed. While it would be speculative to claim Mellencamp speaks for all Americans of the period, his critique resonated with many, especially rural listeners whose communities were disproportionately affected by economic decline. Walser explains why such resonance occurs: "Texts become popular when people find them meaningful in the contexts of their own lives" (150). *Scarecrow*, with its depiction of forgotten communities, offered this sense of meaning precisely.

Underlying these themes is Mellencamp's belief in the centrality of community and social belonging. Masciotra describes this relationship:

Another paradoxical truth of history and philosophy is that authentic individualism is possible only when it rests on the rock of communal involvement. Individuals who maintain connection to community and develop a sense of belonging are better able to activate their agency and express their individuality. Cultures that hit the right balance of 'social capital' are able to empower individuals to make space in their lives for joining and exercising creative impulses (245).

Mellencamp's songs repeatedly return to this paradox: individual identity gains strength through communal participation. Both "Minutes to Memories" and "The Face of the Nation" underscore this idea. One examines how wisdom, endurance, and social capital are transmitted across generations; the other critiques the erosion of communal bonds and national identity. Together, these songs contribute to *Scarecrow*'s larger thematic project, documenting the struggles of rural America, celebrating its resilience, and confronting the broader fractures in American life.

Concluding Remarks

As discussed at the outset of this essay, one of the central questions guiding this study concerns how an album released more than four decades ago can continue to resonate with audiences in the twenty-first century and remain a meaningful subject for popular culture scholarship. Scholars have increasingly recognized music's capacity to communicate across generational boundaries. As Izen et al. note, "music connects people in ways that transcend language, thus providing a unique lens into certain aspects of communication largely overlooked or less relevant in language research" (1). In this sense, John Mellencamp's album *Scarecrow* functions not only as a historical artifact but also as a continuing site of cultural dialogue. While the album initially spoke to audiences confronting the economic and social challenges of rural America during the 1980s, its themes of community, agricultural struggle, and regional identity remain relevant today. Indeed, the album can serve as a valuable pedagogical tool for contemporary listeners who may be unfamiliar with Mellencamp or the historical moment that shaped the work. In this way, Mellencamp's songwriting may be understood as initiating a cultural conversation about community, farming, and the transformation of rural America—one that continues to invite reflection and discussion among new generations of listeners. Examining works such as *Scarecrow*, therefore, not only expands the scholarly understanding of

Mellencamp's contributions but also highlights the continuing relevance of rural narratives within American popular music.

Originally released in 1985 and reissued as a two-disc edition on November 4, 2022, *Scarecrow* continues to invite renewed critical attention nearly four decades later. The album's endurance underscores its cultural significance as a work that both celebrates and critiques Mellencamp's rural Indiana roots while offering a distinctive, resonant voice in American popular music. This study examined *Scarecrow* through the interconnected themes of place and community, elements that Mellencamp focuses on throughout the album's development and lyrical composition. Early in Mellencamp's career, when he performed under the name "John Cougar," critics frequently dismissed his work; however, the release of *Scarecrow* marked a dramatic shift in critical and commercial reception.

Drawing on research in music, place, and cultural studies, this article has highlighted Mellencamp's sustained link to his Midwestern upbringing and the significance of that connection for interpreting the themes embedded in the album. *Scarecrow* was constructed through a deeply place-based process as Mellencamp and his band immersed themselves in earlier musical traditions, rehearsing songs from the 1960s to cultivate the album's intentionally rustic sound. These choices, combined with Mellencamp's personal observations of rural Indiana, shaped a body of work attentive to community identity, cultural memory, and social critique.

Songs such as "Rain on the Scarecrow" and "Small Town" exemplify this duality, illustrating both the devastation caused by the decline of the family farm and the enduring appeal of small-town life. Mellencamp provides a voice for individuals and communities that were largely absent from mainstream rock narratives of the 1980s. As Shepherd argues, the album "reflects and creatively articulates" the lived experiences of Midwestern social groups (71). This authenticity resonated with broader American audiences, many of whom saw in Mellencamp's music a reflection of cultural values and memories associated with a past that felt increasingly distant in the mid-1980s and may seem the same for people from the current generation.

Other tracks, most notably "Minutes to Memories" and "The Face of the Nation," extend the album's perspective beyond Indiana, addressing broader questions of American identity, intergenerational wisdom, and national decline. "Minutes to Memories" foregrounds community through intergenerational dialogue, while "The Face of the Nation" critiques a rapidly changing America and the fraying of communal bonds. Mellencamp's observations echo longstanding cultural concerns about social cohesion, economic decline, and the sense of displacement experienced by communities outside major metropolitan centers. Bloomfield's discussion of authenticity in popular music consumption helps to explain the album's continued resonance in that audiences respond when performers articulate personal experiences that listeners can interpret through the lens of their own lives:

These ideas are critically related to 'ideologies of authenticity' underpinning popular music consumption, where the performer reflects on personal experience that resonates with emotion, embodies the results of that reflection in a musical-narrative form, delivers a performance that serves to bring out fully its (inner) meaning and where listeners read this emotional meaning by bringing their personal experience to bear on the performance (17).

In today's politically polarized environment—marked by tensions between red and blue states as well as between rural and urban America—*Scarecrow* remains a salient cultural text. Alongside the Farm Aid concerts, first organized in 1985 by Willie Nelson, Neil Young, and

John Mellencamp, the album speaks to ongoing instability within American agriculture. As the Farm Aid organization enters its forty-first year in 2026, farmers across the United States continue to confront significant economic pressures. Shoaib notes that “rising economic pressures and inflation have hit the agriculture industry hard in 2025,” with increased input costs and shrinking margins placing unprecedented strain on family farms. Mellencamp’s portrayal of rural hardship in *Scarecrow* therefore remains strikingly relevant in contemporary discussions of agricultural policy, economic inequality, and regional identity.

Recent scholarship on music production further illustrates how artists use intimate spaces to articulate personal and social concerns. Richardson’s research on the recording processes of Billie Eilish and Fiona Apple demonstrates the significance of home recording environments in shaping both the themes and sonic qualities of contemporary music. According to Richardson:

The home environment offered both Eilish and Apple a reflective space where gender, mental health, and neurodivergence (Apple’s OCD; Eilish’s TS; both artists’ experiences of depression), along with other sensitive topics and social critique, could be broached in relative safety. Moreover, recording at home had repercussions for how the music was produced and ended up sounding—the resulting sonic intimacy becoming part and parcel of the songs’ meanings, making them instantly more relatable and personal (561).

Although Mellencamp’s work emerged in a very different technological and cultural context, similar dynamics can be observed in his songwriting. Just as contemporary artists use music to address issues such as mental health and identity, Mellencamp used *Scarecrow* to articulate the concerns of rural communities and agricultural workers during the 1980s farm crisis. In this sense, popular music functions as a medium through which artists give voice to the social realities of their time.

Music can also serve as a powerful pedagogical bridge between generations. Contemporary listeners from earlier generations may gain insight into the cultural experiences and concerns of Generation Z through the music of artists such as Eilish, while younger audiences can likewise engage with earlier cultural moments through albums like *Scarecrow*. Listening to and discussing such works allows students and scholars to explore questions of rural culture, community identity, and regional place, demonstrating how music can foster dialogue across generational and cultural boundaries.

Consequently, scholars of popular culture should continue to examine Mellencamp’s role as a chronicler—and perhaps even an ethnographer—of rural Midwestern life. Through his music, Mellencamp documents the experiences of communities that often exist at the margins of national discourse, communities whose voices and concerns are frequently muted within mainstream cultural institutions. *Scarecrow* therefore stands as an important artifact of American popular culture: a work that amplifies the perspectives of Midwestern and rural communities whose experiences are often underrepresented within national cultural narratives, illuminating both the struggles and resilience of rural communities while reinforcing Mellencamp’s status as a seminal songwriter. In doing so, the album demonstrates that Mellencamp’s narratives remain essential for interpreting the cultural landscape of the United States. More than four decades after its release, *Scarecrow* demonstrates that music rooted in specific places and communities can transcend its historical moment, continuing to illuminate the cultural realities of rural America and the enduring significance of those voices within the broader narrative of American popular culture.

Future research could further expand scholarly understanding of John Mellencamp’s contributions to American popular music by examining how themes of rural identity,

community, and place continue to appear throughout his broader body of work. Comparative studies might also explore how other artists have represented regional identities and rural life within popular music, particularly during periods of economic or social transition. Such work would deepen the growing scholarly conversation surrounding music, place, and cultural memory while further illuminating the ways popular music functions as a cultural record of everyday American life.

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“Record Everything”:

Using *Archive 81* as an Example of Archives in Popular Culture

RENAE RAPP

Introduction

The representations of archivists in popular culture and their impact on the profession have seldom been examined in archival scholarship, and the scholarship primarily focuses on literature and films from the 19th century to the early 20th century. The conclusions of this scholarship concern how representation in popular culture discourages researchers, stakeholders, and the general public from unflattering personalities and the physical space of archives, rather than fostering a generation of new professionals and educating new audiences about archives and the value of historical records. However, more recently, archivists have been writing about their representation in popular culture through personal blogs, interviews with the Society of American Archivists (SAA), and conference presentations. The conclusion of recent scholarship focuses on accuracy rather than impact on the profession and public perception. While all conclusions are valid, these studies call for improved professional attitudes among researchers rather than considering other aspects of the field, such as outreach and stakeholder relations.

The primary critique of the representation of archivists in popular culture is the accuracy of the work and analysis of character rather than the crucial role of archives as a plot device in film and literature, and the impact this representation has on the profession in terms of growth and fundamental changes. Does the accuracy of representation outweigh the importance of archives to a plot? In what ways, outside of recruitment, do depictions of archives in popular culture actually impact the profession? Representation of any profession in popular culture can take decades to fully understand the impact it has on the profession. Why and how popular culture can impact a particular profession is the more interesting question. Archivists have taken representation in popular culture seriously by creating rubrics, analyzing character development, critiquing the usage of archives, and arguing that archives work best in specific genres.

This concern about the poor representation of archivists and their impact on researchers and stakeholders is a reflection of the realities of the profession by archivists themselves. Internal arguments in archives associations, such as the Society of American Archivists and the Academy of Canadian Archivists, persuaded fundamental changes in the profession through theory, practice, and values. Archivists such as Randall Jimerson, Sidney Levy, Albert Robles, and Terry Cook, among others, led decade-long discussions and thrust the profession into the 21st century alongside the rise of digitization and born-digital records. This direct relationship between the fundamental shifts in the profession and archivists' perception of themselves is not recalled nor significant to any studies on the representation of archives in popular culture.

The limits in previous scholarship on archives in popular culture to only novels and films reflect the limited imagination of other forms of popular culture, as well as investigating the way authors and writers use archives as an integral plot device in their stories. One scholar, Peter Gillis, understood this in 1979, as he analyzed the use of archival records in espionage novels.

Unfortunately, this connection was not observed by other scholars. The most recent research on archives in popular culture was in 2015 by Amanda Oliver and Anne Daniel, who categorized over 40 films through an extensive rubric. However, their rubric led to a shortsighted conclusion, asking for more transparency in archival tasks and policies, once again asking for accuracy.

Archive 81, released on April 16, 2016, written and produced by Daniel Powell and Marc Sollinger, is a found-footage, audio-drama that follows fictional Dan Powell, a temporary film archivist for the fictional Housing Historical Committee of New York State (“A Body In A New Place”).¹ Under his new boss, Davenport, Dan must digitize oral histories conducted by Melody Pendas of residents of the mysterious Visser building in Manhattan. Davenport instructs Dan to wear a recording device and insists he keep it on at all times, “and remember, record everything” (“A Body In A New Place”). Through digitizing the tapes, Dan also unravels the mystery of the Visser building and, with the help of his friend, Mark, discovers the truth about Archive 81. By following Dan through his new assignment under Davenport, *Archive 81* provides a unique and accurate insight into the role and personality traits of real archivists. This connection can be confirmed using the Oliver and Daniel rubric.

Although this article will primarily focus on the podcast, it will also note similarities in the Netflix series, released in January 2022 under the same title as an official adaptation, as it is directly related to archives and archivists. For the focus and brevity of this paper, episode one of season one of the podcast will be fully analyzed, as it covers archives and archivists' roles explicitly. Other episodes will be considered for their continued use of archives. The first episode not only sets up the scene, characters, project, and technology, but it is a perfect starting point in analyzing the representation of archives and archivists in popular culture outside of film and literature. Additionally, a different platform deserves a different perspective, as the podcast exclusively relies on sound, which brings a unique sense of reality in working with audio recordings, as one would with oral histories.

Using Gillis' argument as a lens, along with Oliver and Daniel's rubric, this article will explore archives in podcasts, using *Archive 81* as a case study. Several other podcasts utilize archives, but *Archive 81* does not derail from the central location of an archive as others frequently do, and the archivist is the protagonist and narrator. Further conversations and scholarship on the representation of archives in popular culture are needed, especially in light of the drastic changes in the profession over the past thirty years.

Framework “Archival Turn” in Popular Culture

In his 2005 Presidential Address to the SAA Annual Meeting, Randall Jimmerson combined a decade's worth of communal opposition to the current state of the profession. He notes the profession was late to the postmodernist party—nonetheless, the new perspective was already influencing traditional core values (Jimmerson 22).

His speech breaks down archives into three aspects: the temple, the prison, and the restaurant (Jimmerson 24). An archive is like a temple because records are processed through a hierarchy based on archivists' biases and their relationship to memory. As archivists select

¹ In the podcast, Mark Sollinger and Dan Powell use their real names as their respective character names. For this paper, when referencing the real Mark and Dan the term “writer” will proceed them. All other instances of Dan and Mark are presumed to be fictional characters of *Archive 81*.

(appraisal) and create hierarchical schemes (series), records are set apart from others and given heightened legitimacy (Jimmerson 24). An archive is like a restaurant because the archivist performs for the public: “In the archival restaurant, the waitress welcomes the customer, interprets the menu, suggests an entrée or dessert, and collects money before the customer exits” (Jimmerson 27). These imageries underscore the process patrons experience in researching in archives—signing in, looking through a finding aid, selecting certain boxes or folders, and speaking with the archivist. An archive is like a prison because the physical experience of researching in an archive is essentially a panopticon. The prison aspect is directly related to control through physical barriers: “the records are imprisoned (for their own security, of course), but also researchers, who must consult records in closely guarded chambers under vigilant surveillance” (Jimmerson 26). The prison aspect goes beyond the barrier, as archival control can be done through arrangement and description, using archival standards to tame unordered collections and controlled vocabulary. By taking Jimmerson’s aspects into account, an analysis of the representation of archives in popular culture can say more about the field of practice than about the depiction in film and literature alone. Pulling from Gillis’ research, the archives are depicted as a restaurant, and the patron chooses documents from a selection. There is no need to look through the entire collection, and the plot flows easily. This is an excellent example of archive-user expectations, whereas the archivist is the interpreter and mediator between the records and the user (24).

The prison and restaurant aspects are by far the most popular depictions of archives in film, as they are visually compelling and instantly cast away the archives as a storyline pitstop. In *Archive 81*, the archive is a prison; however, more accurately, a panopticon. Dan is imprisoned in the archives as well through security, isolation, and the authority of Davenport. Not only must he record everything he experiences, but he is also being watched by Davenport through the building’s extensive surveillance cameras (as implied in the podcast and shown in the Netflix series). The accuracy of an archive as a panopticon is all too real for users who are constantly watched by either the archivist or a security guard. The representation of archives in *Archive 81* places Dan as both the archivist and the researcher, creating order in chaos and being monitored.

Depictions of archives in film and literature highlight Jimmerson’s aspects and reflect the public’s views and values of archives. This misrepresentation is noted in Jimmerson’s speech, which warns archivists that these aspects reflect a field focused on technicalities and rules that have obscured social and cultural responsibilities (28) and earlier writings encouraging archivists to “understand how others see us” (334). Jimmerson and his contemporaries were a leading force in the “archival turn,” a pivotal movement for records, archivists, and researchers, by breaking traditional attitudes and aspects. The “archival turn,” a term coined by archivists in the last century, pulls practitioners away from the record and towards the usage of the record. The archival profession was born out of historical associations and societies, dividing a single profession into two (Cook, “An Archival Revolution” 194). Early archivists of this professional divide focused on the needs of their counterparts (historians) and were great protectors of records. The record became the official evidence of the past, only available to historians for interpretation.

The archival turn had a great impact on archival theory, working professional attitudes, and expanding records to diverse researchers and scholars (Cook “What is Past” 34; Jimmerson “Redefining Archival Identity” 335). This turn allowed records to be questioned as evidence and other scholarly lenses that brought to life new ideas of the past. However, the archival turn is

interdisciplinary, stretching out to sciences, humanities, and popular culture, which has allowed other stories to be explored outside of the “great white man” narrative (Cook “What is Past” 43; Jimmerson “Embracing the Power” 22). Rather than an archival record serving as truth and unquestionable evidence to support narratives of the founding fathers, for instance, the “archival turn” challenged archivists to bring surrounding narratives to the forefront of the finding aid and/or outreach programs. Over time, this allowed historic homes to reinterpret their sites to include enslaved stories and experiences, and encouraged communities to build their own repositories and other outreach programs. Thus “archival turn” is the driving force of archival representation to the public.

Preceding his presidential speech, Jimmerson cautioned practicing archivists in the late 1980s to change their attitudes towards researchers and themselves before the beginning of the twenty-first century (333-34). He urged archivists not to rely on the product selling itself (i.e., offering records and services archivists believe researchers need) and instead to actively determine what information and records researchers need or want as a drive to provide access to it (Jimmerson 335).

His argument echoes others' calls for immediate action for user-based services in archives, thus beginning a transition from the traditional to the postmodern (Jimmerson 336). The Society of American Archivists *Planning for the Archival Profession* Task Force on Goals and Priorities solidified this call to action along with Jimmerson's six-step program. While not all archivists made these changes immediately, the task force did influence the profession through scholarship and curricula in graduate schools. Understanding one example from this six-step program, one can compare how the stereotypes of archivists are evolving and reflected in popular culture.

The SAA Task Force report asked archivists to view themselves not as custodians but as information processors focusing on the needs of the people (*Planning for the Archival Profession* 6). For example, step four, “identify and reduce barriers of use,” encouraged archivists to review current barriers the public face when visiting an archive, such as limited hours, unfriendly staff, and an image of elitism. By understanding physical and emotional barriers, archivists can better relate to and communicate with their stakeholders and the community at large (Jimmerson 334; *Planning for the Archival Profession* 27). This step emphasizes the influence stakeholders have over how much funding is allocated to the archives and leads to a strong push for becoming user-friendly. This is the major change from traditional ideals of archives to a modern approach that has defined a new generation of archivists. As well, historians and other scholars have noted these efforts.

In Alice Dreger's taxonomy of archivists, *Chronicle of Higher Education* op-ed piece, she characterizes various stereotypes of archivists based on her experience as a researcher. While these taxonomies frustrated archivists, the caricatures reflect attitudes that the SAA Task Force campaigned away from in 1986. According to Dreger's experience, this campaign was a success as she assures new archival researchers that many archivists are welcoming, give you space to work, and are knowledgeable of the collection, “the good news is that a majority of archivists show themselves as mensches” (Dreger). This change in attitude by archivists and personal experiences by researchers has become more prominent in journals as well.

The “archival turn” introduced new theories and practices, which have shown that scholars outside of the field, and traditional counterparts- historians, have noted a great change in the field, not only from personal experience but also through the expansion of their research. The impact of the “archival turn” is the beginning of a new reflection of archives and archivists in

pop culture. The podcast, *Archive 81*, is a prime example of how archivists can see their own reflection through popular culture, as authors of the special edition of the *Journal of Popular Culture* had.

In a December 2020 special issue of *The Journal of Popular Culture*, editors Rüstem Ertuğ Altınay and Olivera Jokić note the limited discussion of the complex relationship between archives and popular culture and use the “archival turn” as a lens to analyze it. Editors of this special edition gathered scholars and practitioners to examine popular culture materials and advance their conceptions of the archives, using the archives as a lens to “enrich the study of popular culture” (Altınay and Jokić, 1261). Archivists can take similar actions by understanding where the “archival turn” has led the profession, and using rubrics and past scholarship to measure public perception within popular culture.

Identity and Isolation

Oliver and Daniel utilized a framework built by Aldred, Burr, and Park to argue that the usage of archives and archivists is represented in films (52-3). The original Aldred, Burr, and Park framework focused on archivist-based stereotypes in literature. It was made more flexible with Oliver and Daniel’s four additional categories, which include film information, character traits, facility and space, and general comments (53).

Their literature review noted how stereotypical archivists are frequently featured in literature and films as quiet, isolated, and generally ambiguous towards the profession (Oliver and Daniel 50-1). By recycling the Aldred, Burr, and Park checklist with Oliver and Daniel additions, other popular culture formats, like podcasts, listeners can comprehend how archivists are portrayed to wider audiences as dynamic characters in the story. In the first episode of *Archive 81*, there is already a significant improvement in the attitude of the archivist.

Oliver and Daniel argue that stripping the names and identities of the archivists in the 40 analyzed films causes a dehumanizing effect, whereas they are no longer characters but attributions such as a job title or behavior (53). Of the 43 films analyzed by Oliver and Daniel, the archivist has a name in 26 films and the title of ‘archivist’ in 20 films (Oliver and Daniel Table 2 and Table 3). By eliminating or downplaying the personalities of any character, audiences do not relate to them or care about their well-being. The role of archives is reduced to a plot device underscored by a nameless, unimportant character waiting to be helpful. Thus, the archivists in the films are essentially extras. This decides that real archives are equally unimportant until desperately needed for one nugget of information tucked away. This leaves a public perception that archivists are waiting to be helpful and are always sitting quietly at a desk rather than actively reaching out to the community.

A lack of a character name, cohesive job title, and screen time supports Oliver and Daniel’s argument of a poor representation of archivists in film. “The protagonist needs information; he or she visits the archives to obtain that information, and the plot continues” (54). However, as *Archive 81* centers on the archivist and revolves around the archives, information is a central plot rather than a convenient pit-stop in the story. There is a prevalent theme of isolated archivists in films and novels, which is also experienced by Dan in *Archive 81*.

In the first few seconds of episode one, protagonist Dan self-identifies as an archivist and his place of employment, the fictional Housing Historical Committee of New York State (“A Body In A New Place”). By doing so, Dan steps away from being only a nameless professional into being the main protagonist, with personality traits that are more relatable. In his first

interaction with his new boss, Mr. Davenport, Dan is casual and timid in his new assignment. Podcast listeners are immediately drawn to Dan and his awkward interactions with Davenport, noting that Dan is intimidated by Davenport, implying not only his self-confidence around others but also his status as a new professional. This intimidating and awkward interaction is a very real experience for new professionals in archives who usually work alone as solo archivists and navigate relationship building with colleagues (in larger libraries or business archives), donors, and community partners.

In a discussion-style post from the Society of American Archivists Review Portal, Camila Zorrilla Tessler, Karlie Herndon, and Sally Blanchard-O'Brien review the podcast and Netflix series. While their commentary mostly focuses on the Netflix series, their conclusion compares and contrasts with the podcast, and the usage (or lack thereof) of archives in the Netflix series is worth mentioning.

One comparison between the podcast and the Netflix series is Dan's inability to work with others. Blanchard-O'Brien notes a reinforcement of archival stereotypes in the show as Dan uses his free time (and disposable income) to preserve tapes he owns or buys, and is surrounded by the outdated technology in his apartment. She argues that this makes Dan a one-dimensional character; however, his loneliness does not constitute being one-dimensional. In both the podcast and Netflix series, Dan alludes to his willingness to be alone as he untangles his own past relationships with his father (Netflix) and girlfriend (podcast). Some audiences may relate to Dan's insistence on being alone with one's feelings and emotions. In an interview with writer Dan Powell, in writing his character, Dan drew from his isolated position in sound preservation for Soundsnap (Wired). Isolation is still prevalent in society, and both the podcast and Netflix series use this as a way to discover oneself.

Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and the following years, many people have dealt with isolation for the first time. By using isolation as a prominent theme in the podcast, listeners have a clearer understanding of real archivists who work alone or with few colleagues and must find their own determination and values in their work (Zamon 205). The theme of isolation noted by Oliver and Daniel goes beyond living and working spaces. Isolation can be through physical appearance, as in their example of Pearl, the archivist in *Blade*, who is severely obese and nude (57-8). Unable to move, Pearl can only communicate with researchers through a computer (57-8). This extreme isolation is similar to Dan's experience and that of other archivists in films and literature. Like Pearl, Dan chose to self-isolate to think about his current relationship with his girlfriend and temporary job (podcast) and his recently deceased father (Netflix series).

In both the Netflix series and podcast, Dan is taken to an old concrete building in a remote un-descriptive wooded area by Davenport. It's isolated due to the sensitivity of the materials. In the middle of the woods, the concrete building is equipped with high security requiring a badge upon entry and blocking cell service ("A Body In A New Place").

In pursuit of accuracy, this is a dangerously truthful portrayal of archives and archivists. Not only are records stored in secured climate-controlled rooms removed from public view, but the archivist must also work in solitude with the records, even in a main office close to the records and typically far away from other offices. Rather than isolation as a form of being rejected by society (as Oliver and Daniels note with Pearl and other examples), *Archive 81* creators give listeners a reason for the isolation (security of records), a motive (Dan's post-breakup retreat). This also reframes isolation to showcase research inquiries and the places that research takes us.

For decades, portrayals of archives and the profession of the archivist in film and novels emphasized isolation from the public. However, these portrayals tend to neglect how researchers use archives. There are some basic guidelines when working with archival records as a researcher, including washing hands, only using pencils, and handling materials delicately. This basic introductory information is overshadowed in films and novels by the personality of the archivist, the location of the space, the state of the records, and the urgency of use.

Isolating the archives and visitors excessively supports the overall theme of archivists as gatekeepers of information. In films and novels, by isolating either the records or the archivist from the outside world through physical barriers, the user (protagonist) dismisses the true nature of archives and their importance: “The research cannot form a connection with the archivist, and the lack of connection prevents him or her from developing a true and accurate understanding of the role of the archivist” (Oliver and Daniel 57). Yet this notion goes beyond the struggles of a humble researcher. Seasoned researchers already have a strong grasp of archivist stereotypes and conditions of materials they have encountered, as Alice Dreger notes in her blunt op-ed piece on the subject (Dreger). Through portrayals of archives and archivists in popular culture, it is the novice researcher and the general public who believe in unrealistic expectations; however, *Archive 81* podcast format offers a more accurate depiction of archives, archivists, and researching with archival materials

Serialization and Accuracy

The format of the podcast brings a new sense to archives- sound. The heavy use of sound gives podcast listeners another sense of realism outside of Dan’s commentary on archives. By hearing not only the contents of the tapes but also the creaky doors, footsteps on old tiles, the whirls of the Ortari 500, and mystery voices from beyond, listeners are drawn to *Archive 81* through the background sounds. The serialized format of the Netflix series or the podcast gives audiences a close-to-real perspective of the long hours of research needed in archives.

In Dan’s case, the tapes are not in any order, another prime example of working with unprocessed collections. This is a common experience archivists and researchers have when working with archives: finding something cool but entirely unrelated to their research queries. This builds a familiar environment for novice and seasoned researchers as more community archives arise. Having no human connection, Dan befriends a rat in Episode 4, with whom he speaks throughout the podcast. Through this animophus friendship and speaking to himself, Dan is leading the listeners through real research experienced by archivists and users. Archival research can take hours to read through documents, listen to oral histories, or browse through photos.

Experienced archive users would prefer a cut scene or two in real life to shorten their own time researching records, as it can take hours to days. For the sake of time and audience attention span, archival research is cut out of films and novels. This distorts real experiences and expectations from reality: “While in real life archival research takes time, popular culture requires a quick discovery of information in order to move the plot forward” (Buckley 99). Movie magic cuts out the amount of time the characters had in the archives looking for one precious document.

This creates several expectations; document needed (with all of the answers) exists in the archives, the process of locating that document takes no time at all, and interacting with the archivist for full access to the archive or to present the document as if they knew the whole time.

Unfortunately, these are fictional expectations that have made it difficult for archivists to demystify the research experience and knowledge and power of the archivists themselves. An older example of fictional researcher expectations showed the value of accuracy and the power of information as the creators themselves utilized archival records for their story building.

Archives in a Detective Genre

The earliest research into the use of archives in popular culture began with popular fiction. Through this medium, archivists poured over hundreds of books, combing out the role of archivists, the character stereotypes, and the importance of information (or lack thereof) (Gillis 3; Buckley 97). An early representation of an archives scholar, Peter Gillis began conversations with fictional espionage in the 1930s, post-Ambler period, noted as the beginning of modern spy novels with a “sense of realism” as authors of the genre began researching and using spy techniques and technologies, geographical areas, and secret service agencies, bringing realism into fantasy (4). This shift in espionage novels is a prime example of how archives and archivists are used as a plot device, and the information discovered is integral to the protagonist and story. By bringing archives to the front of the plot, post-Ambler authors and the creators of *Archive 81* are showcasing that information has value and power, and those with that information are the keepers and deciders of its fate.

Gillis argues that the addition of archives in spy novels introduces two themes, allowing the authors to comment on the nature of archives and their uses: 1) information is power, and 2) the past haunts the present (Gillis 3). These themes allow the archive to serve an important role in the plot's dramatic twists and turns. “This idea has intrigued novelist who have spun many a plot around an agent or protagonist who must search out secret or hidden fact in order to achieve the power and knowledge to crush a plot or cabal” (Gillis 3). Creators of *Archive 81* do this as well in a new format—instead of turning pages in a book for the next twist, audiences binge-listen to a podcast, gasping at every turn.

Another element of realism brought by spy novels and *Archive 81* is through the extensive use of archival records, which suggests that information is power. For spy novels, the agent must gather great amounts of information to understand their enemy fully (Gillis 8). This is also true for Dan, who gathers enormous amounts of information through oral histories not only about Melody and the Visser building but also about why this information is important to Davenport.

As Dan continues to listen to each tape, he is consumed by its contents, Melody's predicament, and Davenport's persistence. He is also “haunted by the past”, as Gillis notes what the power of an archive can do to a character (4). There is a permanency in archival records that can literally “haunt” the present as evidence of a painful truth. While in Gillis' analysis of espionage novels, the present being haunted by the past comes in the form of revealing an identity, in the case of *Archive 81*, the haunt of the past drags Dan into another realm. Not only is Dan attempting to solve the same mystery Melody answers in the tapes, but he is also trying to understand who or what Davenport is and what his motives are.

While *Archive 81* can be tied to the genre of horror and speculative fiction, its focus on archival records allows the podcast to lean into the spy and espionage genres.² In most of Gillis's sample novels, the use of records and a summary of research done by the protagonist

² Horror and detection have a long and storied history.

reconstructs the identity and career of another subject (5). In spy novels and *Archive 81*, the person with information has control over its dissemination (Gillis 7).

This weight of authority with information is also central to *Archive 81*, as it is with many works of science fiction, perhaps most famously, *The X-Files*. Fox Mulder (played by David Duchovny) obsesses over finding the truth through the titular X-Files. Government documents pull him further away from friends and family. His partner, Dana Scully (played by Gillian Anderson), is his anchor to reality as well as an ally. The obsessive behaviors of Mulder and Dan are examples of popular depictions of archivists. What records can uncover about a person, place, or event is not always welcomed by the public or the persons involved.

The obsession both Mulder and Dan experience is not uncommon experiences faced by archivists, as they are the first and sometimes only people to view a record or uncover a missing piece of information. By being the first person to work with the records and collection, leading to historical voyeurism, “the idea of watching another person’s life, success, and failures” (SAA question). Through voyeurism, archivists have begun rejecting the myth of neutrality and becoming honest with the emotional labor experienced by archivists. Recently, small studies asked archivists to keep diaries and were later interviewed on the emotional labor they face daily in terms of collections, donors, workload, and researchers (Duff 349). Archivists are also the first people to make sense of the records and often feel strong emotions towards the record creator or the subject(s) of the record (Sloan 4-5). Tessler makes a good point that archivists often read materials not intended for public use and make the ultimate decision for those records to remain private or become public (Zorrilla Tessler).

The topic of voyeurism also harks back to being observed and watched as Dan follows Melody’s movements through her recordings and Davenport observes Dan through unknown surveillance systems: “There is a mysterious presence that is, in a way, gaining power through this voyeurism: the longer Dan watches [sic listens] the more the presence gains physical form” (Herndon). While Karlie Herndon is alluding to the physical form being real in the podcast and Netflix series, this could also be taken as a metaphorical note. The more we observe and explore archival records, the more real that history becomes, a change that influences how we showcase that history to the public. “*Archive 81* shows the interplay between the right to privacy and the access to knowledge that lies at the heart of many archival functions” (Blanchard-O’Brien). This also relates to Jimmerson’s call for stronger arrangement and description. This discussion-style interview reviews *Archive 81* for accuracy in depictions of archives rather than understanding how the public perceives the archives through this representation.

Zorrilla Tessler argues the podcast reinforces archives as “a place of secrets instead of a public record of history” by eliminating the role of archivists as mediators (Zorrilla Tessler). However, she neglects to connect the secrecy of archives in the podcast and Netflix series as a backdrop for the plot of *Archive 81* as a horror and speculative fiction genre. As in espionage genres, secrets held in archives can become a useful plot device, which is central to *Archive 81* and *X-files* for example. She also neglects Dan’s motivation to break Davenport’s rules by contacting his friend Mark to conduct further research that Dan is unable to do.

Like Mulder, Dan allows his obsession with *Archive 81* to take over him and seeks help from friends to disseminate that information. At the end of episode one, we hear a new voice, Mark Sollinger, a friend of Dan’s. Mark explains that Dan had disappeared right after mailing a small collection of recordings to him (“A Body In A New Place”). Mark decides to make a podcast, releasing Dan’s audio piece by piece, pleading for “help” from listeners to find Dan. This surprise twist points to how *Archive 81* producers understood the value of archivists and the

power they carry: “Popular culture is very aware of the weight of authority that archivists bring to their role as society’s recordkeepers” (Buckley 102). Other genres, like espionage and mystery, heavily use archives to drive stories along. All of these characters choose to withhold information from the public no longer. They risk their lives and the lives of their loved ones to share information, a risk archivists are always asking of themselves.

While archives have been historically open to the public in North America, the level of access has greatly increased over time. Gillis alludes to an important piece of archival standards: strong restriction policies in government archives. “Archivists must fight against the suppression of documents but also at the same time become more attuned to the needs of the agencies and corporations which they will have to serve” (12). This increase not only occurred through federal laws, such as the Freedom of Information Act and Part IV of the Canadian Human Rights Act, but also through archivists’ efforts to make archival research exciting to the general public through various public programs (Gillis 12). While the motives of Dan may not align with archival standards, which protect agencies and disseminate information ethically, there is a strong desire to give the public access to the truth.

Another scholar of archives in popular culture, Karen Buckley, reviewed sixty-nine references to archives in popular culture through novels and films (97). Instead of a lengthy ranking system, like Oliver and Daniel or Alfred, Burr, and Park, she pulled four common themes: 1) protection of records is equal to protecting the truth, 2) archives are closed spaces and experiences are made by one character, 3) records are lost or buried in the archives, and 4) information in records centers around the search for self or truth (Buckley 97-98). All of these themes are touched on by *Archive 81*.

While all but one theme brought by Buckley has been noted and touched on in this article, her last theme, “information centering around self or truth,” is not as obvious. Early in the podcast, Dan becomes obsessed with Melody Pendras and the Visser building. Even though Melody is not related to Dan, nor have their paths ever crossed, he seeks the truth and feels a deep connection to her through the archives (“A Night At An Opera”). As the protagonist and archivist, Dan is constantly trying to bring Melody and the people of the Visser building to life by understanding and sharing their story with the public. A prevalent theme raised by Buckley and Gillis is the power of information within the archives. The information Dan reveals in *Archive 81* is too great for him to hold alone, and it changes the dynamic between him and Davenport.

Donors and Stakeholders

Archivists constantly work alongside donors of collections and stakeholders. Yet Geoff Huth could only find nineteen instances of “donors” mentioned in *The American Archivist*, a peer-reviewed journal published by the Society of American Archivists (201). If working with donors and stakeholders are so fundamental in the profession, why is there little guidance or scholarship on the topic? Instead, archivists’ relationships depicted in popular culture are limited to users and researchers; the need for archives and archivists ends at locating records. The writers of *Archive 81* use the donor archivist relationship as a point of friction to drive Dan’s motivation to uncover the truth and expose it. While accuracy was not intentional, relationships with donors and stakeholders are a difficult and delicate balance.

Huth asks why there is a lack of scholarship on this topic, and he realizes that “dealing with people (rather than being extremely complex) is one of the simplest human activities,

merely because we do it every day” (201). Through graduate school training, books, and professional practice, archivists are paying closer attention to their relationships with stakeholders and underscoring the complexities such relationships bring. *Archive 81* portrays the power dynamic donors have over their collections and the archivists, as well as negotiating terms and defending professional ethics.

The most coveted practice in modern archiving is a deed of gift: a contract between the donor and organization outlining the contents of the collection, materials to reproduce, materials to restrict, and more. This rush by the donor to sign a legally binding document overshadows the complexity of acquiring the materials as well as the fundamental purpose of archives, as one archivist puts it so well, “we construct covenantal meaning in the archives through genuine encounter, a sacred obligation, and piety of service in a common mission on behalf of the public good” (Cline 296). However, when this “common mission” is threatened by the donor by restricting collections from the public, this request puts archivists in the role of gatekeepers. Archivists pay close attention to accuracy and technicalities when working with collections; however, this leaves little room for creativity and storytelling.

Technicalities, Privacy, and Ethics in *Archive 81*

In the Society of American Archivists discussion post between three archivists, Tessler, Herndon, and Blanchard-O’Brien, their attention to *Archives 81* is focused on accurate technical archival jargon that was lacking in another archives-inspired podcast, *The Magnus Archive*.³ Tessler mentions letting go of “nitpicky questions” on Davenport’s insistence that Dan listen to all tapes in full after being impressed by Dan’s knowledge of archival standards. However, they are quick to note the lack of appraisal or description in both the series and podcast, with the focus only being on long-term preservation and storing in archival-quality conditions. While the Netflix series portrays audio/visual preservation and conservation, Karlie notes that the actions are appropriate handling of fragile items, such as Dan wearing white cotton gloves. Again, movie magic makes an hour-long process appear as only two minutes. In previous scholarship, there is little attention paid to actual archiving methods, such as appraisal (Blanchard-O’Brien).

Herndon quickly notes the layers of privacy concerns in *Archive 81*, such as the lack of consent forms for Melody’s interviews and her intention for the interviews to only be used in her dissertation, never to be seen by the public. Blanchard-O’Brien brings a deeply important message of privacy not only by Dan or Melody unknowingly giving up their privacy but also the role of archivists digging up lives of real people, “looking at historical records gives us insight into the lives of people who may have never wanted to be known; in a way, preserving records can violate the rights of individuals to be forgotten” (Blanchard-O’Brien). This touches on a deeper topic of ethics in archives revolving around tracing copyright, transferring ownership through deeds of gift, and understanding the openness and access of a collection.

Oral history collections have complicated copyright and permissions associated with each record. The Belfast Project at Boston College showcases those complexities as archivists and researchers grappled with two legal systems; United States and Northern Ireland. All interviews and materials are restricted unless the interviewee consented or died; however, a subpoena overrides such restrictions (George 53). *Archive 81* touches on these gray areas of archives and

³ The Magnus Archive does have an archivist as the protagonist; instead, this character serves more as a narrator of records in the archives.

privacy. Again, without access to the internet, Dan can only base his findings on Melody's oral histories. His friend, Mark, returns with information not only from online public records but also from other archival records. While his research into Melody does not violate any laws, it does raise the question of personal privacy. At the end of episode one, it becomes clear that Mark uses Melody's oral histories in a (fictional) podcast asking listeners to help find Dan. While the archival profession has ethical codes, Supreme Court cases such as the Belfast Project have yet to determine archival privilege (60-61).

While Gillis's espionage agents are primarily utilizing government and spy organization records, Dan Powell is using oral histories. Oral histories differ from archival documents because of the stronger weight and usage of memory. In the case of *Archive 81*, lying is a strong element in Melody's oral histories, where residents of the Visser building are purposefully vague or outright lie to her ("A Night At An Opera"). As Dan uses these oral histories, the evidence is not as strong as a paper trail would be for spy agents. However, there is an issue of privacy and respect for personal information that both Dan and the spy agents of Gillis' novel sample face. This is answered in modern archives through deed of gifts, copyright transfers, and consent forms; however, older records do not always have such documentation, and the archivist must decide an appropriate approach to accessibility based on many variables, such as content, age, and purpose of research (citation).

Zorrilla Tessler, Blanchard-O'Brien, and Herndon bemoan the lack of archival description and contextualization, questioning whether the Netflix series and podcast are even about archives or a billionaire pet project. Their fierce attention to lack of details points to another stereotype of archivists—the inability to let go of small details and look at the overall picture. This personality or work trait should be paid more attention to in future scholarship, especially as it relates to depictions of archives and archivists. This association with the "archival turn," where archivists were so focused on processing records and curating perfect finding aids that they ignored public perception. Looking at the bigger picture allows us to connect with the community and see the reflection that pop culture is showing us.

The three archivists ultimately decide that *Archive 81* is not an accurate representation of archives and archival work for many of the same reasons Oliver and Daniels note: isolation of the archivist and the collection, lack of understanding of the intricacies of series, descriptions, and underlying goals of the project, and restriction of the collection to others. However, the interviewees note the importance of archives as a plot device: "*Archive 81* does depict archives as an important place to find information and evidence, as well as transcend the boundaries between past and present" (Blanchard-O'Brien). While the consensus among the three critics is negative towards *Archive 81* as a fair representation of the archival profession, they do not appreciate the role archives play as integral parts of the plot, as Gillis does with spy novels.

In *Archive 81*, listeners and audiences are introduced to niche archival techniques and theories. However, past studies pay little attention to the actions of archivists in film and novels outside of their role in the story. Instead, they focus on the relationship between the fictional archivist and fictional researcher with special attention to the archivist's attitude or personality traits and illegal and unethical methods researchers use to gain access to or documents from the archives (Oliver and Daniels 56; Gillis 12; Buckley 109). While 'tasks performed' was a criterion of the Oliver and Daniels checklist, they neglected to share those results, which leads to the conclusion that the only task being performed by the fictional archivist was reference and retrieval. This leads us to the conclusion that archives and archivists merely provide a service to

patrons. By analyzing the role of archives in popular culture, particularly its relationship to the plot, one can understand the current state of representation and its value to society.

Conclusion

Will the field of archives have a “Scully effect” on a new generation of archivists? Does any archival representation in popular culture impact the attitudes of donors or stakeholders? New studies should go beyond films, TV shows, and novels to include podcasts and other popular culture formats. While podcasts may now be overused and losing popularity, like their predecessor, radio, they are being picked up as films and TV shows, as novels and plays once did.

With the “archival turn” almost thirty years old, newer technologies and priorities ask archivists to look at popular culture again to understand how the “archival turn” impacts the representation of archives and archivists. The infamous line from *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* (2012), “if it is not in the archives it does not exist,” alerted archivists to begin paying attention to information-seeking behaviors on the web, and they turned away from any representation in popular culture (Pearce-Moses 2007). Archivists have become so obsessed with how they interact with the public that we forget how the public interacts with us through fictionalized content. Whatever genre or format, the portrayal of archivists in popular culture has changed for the good and the bad of the profession, as well as its influence on stakeholders and the public at large. The field of archives cannot deny the importance of outlook, as the profession is rooted in public service. Therefore, more studies of archival representation in popular culture can showcase the level and direction of impact.

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Movies That Heal: The Sincere Fincher

ZACHARY SHELDON and MAX ROMANOWSKI

David Fincher does not shy away from the darkness. Instead, he has built a career around telling twisted stories of meticulous and gruesome intensity. In interviews, DVD special features and audio commentaries, Fincher seems to revel in this, stating that his career is built on the belief that “people are perverts” (*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*) and expressing an intense dislike for films that don’t make an impression on their audience, stating that he prefers to make “movies that scar” (Salisbury). And scar they do—from the disgusting murders of *Se7en* to the merry violence in *Fight Club* to the horrors of home invasions, rape, and sociopathy in *Panic Room*, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, and *Gone Girl*, respectively, Fincher’s camera does not blink in considering the grimmest aspects of human psychology and behavior. Specializing in such fare has seemed to work out for Fincher. His reputation is as a master of a certain kind of macabre, and the arc of his career is in part the story of his refining a fastidious sense of style appropriate to these kinds of stories.

But there is another side to Fincher’s filmmaking that often goes unremarked upon: that of the sincere Fincher. Some have critiqued Fincher for his at times mechanistic way of approaching his subjects—and there is some truth to such a critique; Fincher himself has expressed an affinity for a camera that is omniscient and detached, one that “doesn’t have any personality to it, it’s very much like what’s happening was doomed to happen” (*David Fincher - And the Other Way Is Wrong*). Fincher’s films are often obsessed with the minutia of communicative processes, technical procedures, and information. They are never boring—they seem to echo Fincher’s eye for detail as much as his intensity—but they can be procedural. At

the same time, Fincher *is* obviously interested in using his meticulous technical vision to connect with audiences by telling real stories about real human beings and relationships.

Across Fincher's oeuvre, three films stand out for their deviation from the intensity that characterizes so much of Fincher's work, and for how they foreground his overlooked concern for human connection. *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, *The Social Network*, and *Mank* are notable in that they seem somewhat strange as films from the same director as *Fight Club* and *Se7en*. But what they share is an abiding concern for specific types of human connection, and in each film, Fincher uses his directorial skill to bring a seemingly unexpected sincerity of emotion to the fore. Notably—and perhaps both curiously *and* predictably—these are the only three of Fincher's eleven features to garner significant attention from the Academy Awards, including his only three Best Picture nominations.

In this article, we read *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, *The Social Network*, and *Mank* as standout entries in Fincher's filmography that showcase the director's concern for human connection. Looking at these films as expressions of cinematic sincerity enables them to be interestingly read as strikingly counter to the ironic posturing that might be expected from a director like Fincher. This chapter proceeds first by framing Fincher's work through the related lenses of cinematic sincerity, melodrama, and affect theory before turning to examine each of these three films to show how they express their emotional core and what they communicate about human interaction. Reading these films this way, we can better understand why departures like these are noteworthy in Fincher's filmography. In addition, this reading allows these films to be seen as statements on dimensions of the most important relationships we have as human beings: from friends, to family, to lovers.

Sincerity / Melodrama / Affect

All films respond to the social and cultural demands of their contemporary cultural moment, positioning them as significant artifacts in helping audiences make sense of the world. This was especially important in the 1990s and early 2000s, when a mix of postmodernism, technofetishism, and socio-political upheaval combined to create a cultural aura of insecurity and suspicion. Consequently, filmmakers like David Fincher were necessarily caught up in responding to this milieu in their art. Cultural theorist Jim Collins argues that artists responded to such shifts either with an aesthetic of either eclectic irony or new sincerity.

In the first case, an aesthetic of “eclectic irony” allowed filmmakers to demonstrate a competency with the hyperlinked spirit of the age by transgressing the limits of genre and history within cinema. Films of this type—including *Back to the Future III* (Collins’s example), amongst others—thrived on a sense of knowing self-referentiality, a self-consciousness of themselves as films linked to other films in a chain of associations and references made constantly relevant by the new availability of films on home video. Though often serious in their dramatic orientation, films of this type displayed an ironic playfulness built on the expectation that audiences will have seen other films as a way of understanding that film. Stylistically, these films embraced postmodern principles of pastiche, building themselves out of shots, lines, and components of other films in an aesthetic of “dissonance” and “juxtaposition” (Collins 541).

Conversely, other films cultivated an aesthetic that knowingly rejected such ironic posturing. This aesthetic of “new sincerity” is defined by its avoidance of irony and “its sanctimonious pursuit of lost purity” in contradistinction to culture’s overwhelmingly technologized aesthetic (Collins 541). *Dances with Wolves*, *Hook*, and *Field of Dreams* are exemplars here, each displaying a fetishized nostalgia for the past that eschews the trappings of postmodern set-dressing in favor of a return to straightforward emotion in storytelling to resolve

the conflicts of its characters. Collins emphasizes, though, that these films are *fantasies*—that is, they are not accurate or display a more acute connection to the real world than other films. *Dances with Wolves*, for instance, foregrounds its fantastical vision of a world untouched by white men to differentiate itself from its generic foundation in the Western, and in so doing offers an entirely mythical narrative of harmony that belies the truth of the era it purports to depict. In striving to communicate a kind of rhetorical authenticity, the narrative oversimplifies a long history of cultural exploitation and crafts a nostalgia for a quasi-sacred vision of nature and human relations that never actually existed. Where ironic eclecticism embraces the form and style of technology and its impact on media culture, new sincerity offers an escape from that same technologically-saturated culture and style.

Though Collins draws a sharp dichotomy between these two stylistic responses, he also acknowledges that they share some crucial common ground. “Both types of these genre films,” he argues, “involve a meta-mythological dimension, in which the cultural terrain that must be mapped is a world already sedimented with layers of popular mythologies” (557). Ironic eclecticism and new sincerity both engage the postmodern terrain, just in distinct ways, though ultimately to the same end of making sense of the contemporary moment. Writing in 1993, Collins’s take is especially intriguing in articulating an intense divide between these two emergent genres.¹ But this explicit stylistic division has arguably decreased some over time, not only in film but in other of the arts (Williams). In this formulation, new sincerity maintains some of its implicitly ironic and nostalgic features, but also acts as a heuristic for understanding artistic attempts to simply elicit genuine connection and emotion from an audience. To be sincere in art

¹ There are certain to be more films that align with Collins’s most explicitly nostalgic formulation of new sincerity in part due to increasingly partisan divides within particular cinematic subcultures given nostalgia’s key role in conservative ideologies.

is not just to make audiences feel a particular nostalgia for a nonexistent past, but is, at times, an attempt to share an idea or a feeling or to create a community around shared emotional experience. Though sincerity is certainly and necessarily always a rhetorical approach that contains ideological content, sometimes the aim of that content is more straightforward than it is insidious. The simplest formation of new sincerity, as rejecting ironic stylization, then, becomes especially useful.

Movements of metamodernism become particularly useful here. In the wake of the postmodernism movement, metamodernism offered a complex and more optimistic response to some of the more skeptical traits of postmodernism. In “Metamodernism – A Conceptual Foundation,” (2015) scholar Ciprian Baciú and their colleagues offer a robust argument as to what metamodernism is and its functionality in our current cultural moment. They explicitly define it as “the stage where one gives up to the skepticism that is specific to postmodernist thinking” and instead focuses on “the constructive effort to find solutions to societal issues...a positive, meditative, reflective, logical, active and proactive thinking” (35). Robin van den Akker and Alison Gibbon illustrate how much of American pop culture in the 21st century is made up of these kinds of sentiments, emphasizing that a certain quirky sentimentality has become increasingly popular, from auteurs like Wes Anderson, Spike Jonze, and Michel Gondry to major movies and TV shows *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013), *Safety Not Guaranteed*, and *New Girl* (2015) (Akker et al. 27). They cite Raymond Williams’ term that metamodernism is a “structure of feeling: a sensibility, a sentiment that is so pervasive as to call it structural” (6). The sentimentality here is markedly different from what preceded postmodernism. It is a recognition of the irony and skepticism that exists in the culture but is actively interested in solutions, an “attempt to move beyond the worn-out sensibilities and emptied practices of the

postmodernists – not by radically parting with their attitudes and techniques but by incorporating and redirecting them toward new positions and horizons” (10). The goal is to not ignore those problems but actively direct those into solutions.

Metamodernism and how it reflects on new sincerity then draws a close connection with the tradition of melodrama. As sensationalized dramatic works that specifically work to elicit emotions, melodramas have at times been derided as overly simplistic or emotionally manipulative. Others, however, have recognized melodrama’s capacity for psychological and semiotic complexity, celebrating the way that the form and values of melodrama are able to respond to historically and socially conditioned modes of experience. Importantly, the form of melodrama is flexible but often relies on an apparent pathos that heightens audience engagement with the drama unfolding onscreen. Thomas Elsaesser argues that historically the archetypal components of melodrama have enabled artists to “put the finger on the texture of their social and human material while still being free to shape this material,” even as melodrama’s dramatic situations lacked verisimilitude (74). All a film’s aesthetic components may be deployed to provoke “clashes and ruptures which not only open up new associations but also redistribute the emotional energies” of whatever suspense and tension have been accumulated due to the machinations of the plot (82). In this way, the melodrama’s ability to play up and play to different emotional extremes in its characters reveals “an inherent dialectic” and “undeniably psychic energy” that filmmakers can ultimately use to “bring home the discontinuities in the structures of emotional experience” in a way that enhances the realism of melodrama (83-84). Unrealistic emotion in the context of the melodrama becomes a way of engaging the emotions of the audience, demonstrating that though melodrama can be simplistic in its emotional approach, it can also be intensely sophisticated in how it approaches, uses, and comments on emotion.

At times, the heightened emotionality of melodramas has seen them branded as “women’s pictures.” But there is an important history of male-oriented, masculine melodramas that arguably ensconce even some of Fincher’s more satirical work within the melodramatic tradition (Sisco King). Thomas Schatz’s study of Hollywood genres identifies “male weepies” as a significant subcategory of melodrama that involves male protagonists navigating the passing of masculine norms and patriarchal roles between generations, with characters typically occupying archetypal roles of inadequate sons and aging fathers, naturally bringing them into conflict (239). Moving beyond an emphasis on family, John Mercer and Martin Shingler argue that masculinity-drenched action films operate in similar territory as more traditional melodramas, using their “excessive, spectacular and overstated nature” to stage extreme conflicts between polarized moral forces of good and evil as a way of exploring the nature of masculinity’s construction and the emotionality of masculinity within heightened, even absurd cinematic situations (99). Viewing the melodrama as a sensibility rather than a stringent set of genre characteristics opens up possibilities for exploring how a variety of genres and orientations towards issues like masculinity and femininity are constructed and engaged via emotional experiences within protagonists and, consequently, audiences.

Importantly, the emotionality of melodramas is capable and even crucial in mythmaking and functions as a microcosm of larger cultural patterns. Melodrama has the capacity for characters to “play out the tragedies of humankind,” such that the genre’s emphasis on pathos is a way of showcasing the relationship of the individual to culture in late modern America (89). The emotions displayed by the characters and employed by filmmakers to engage the audience, then, are significant for what they communicate to the audience about both their culture and themselves. Melodramatic messaging can be complex and far-reaching, and these messages rely

on emotional engagement that is typically forthright in its signifiers and aims. Emotion in melodrama can be employed for strategic ends, but to be effective that emotion must at some level be sincere in its relatability for an audience to see themselves in a film's characters or dramatic context. Even if the communication of emotional sincerity is not the point or purpose of the story, the sincerity of the emotion itself is significant.

This funnels directly into affect theory, which is fundamentally interested in the experiential nature of watching cinema and rejects a dichotomy that relegates melodramas to an inferior state within cinema. Charles Affron posits that the emotional nature of watching movies is one of the primary ways that cinema gets its value for the viewer. This value is deeply significant beyond just the literal experience of watching a movie. The value of the emotional experience of movies is what lets the movie transcend the actual mechanics of the movie making and watching process, and this "is powered by the deployment of cinematic strategies that liberate actors from flesh, objects from matter, emotion from necessity" (23). Deploying these strategies transforms cinema into more than just the communication of information. Affron strongly emphasizes that just because movies that focus intensively on engaging the viewer emotionally are interacting with a less "reliable" state of the human psyche, this does not invalidate the impact movies have on audiences.

Affron sees value in emotion, but scholars like Torben Grodal push this sentiment further. Emotion and cognition are often treated as opposing forces in the brain, hierarchically structured to place cognition as both superior but also complete on its own. In *Moving Pictures*, Grodal asserts that the exact opposite is true. Emotional and cognitive appeals in cinema are not isolated phenomena but are instead inextricably intertwined. Grodal replaces the dominant theory of psychoanalysis to develop the idea that emotions are not a weakness to how we understand

and evaluate cinema but perhaps the only way to fully do so: “cognitive and perceptual processes are intimately linked with emotional processes within a functionally unified psychosomatic whole” (1). To the viewer, there is no difference between cognitive and emotional elements of film; one cannot engage the intellect without also engaging emotion. This perspective is supported further by Carl Plantinga and Greg Smith, echoing Grodal’s sentiment that “fear or love provides a motive force that more often than not work in tandem with thought processes” (2). To illustrate this, they focus on how the ideological climax of *Blade Runner* hinges on the audience’s empathy with antagonist Roy Batty’s (Rutger Hauer) final monologue. As Batty reflects on his impending mortality, the appeal to emotion creates an empathetic response that reinforces the film’s cognitive concern with what it means to be human, and the scene becomes an “emotional and cognitive summation of the ideological project of the film” (252). Moments like this cannot be separated into cognitive and emotional silos, but rather play off each other.

Affect Theory, then, is vital for grappling with what viewers get out of the cinematic experience and what kinds of movies are considered worthy for serious analysis. Historically and culturally, affective, emotional categories of art have been considered lesser despite the significant ways that emotions contribute to our cognitive understandings and appreciations of film. But today more and more scholars are invested in “emphasiz[ing] the role of emotion in shaping thought and memory” (Miller) and the impact that has on the cinematic experience. As such, it makes complete sense that, from a cultural perspective, the collective memory of David Fincher’s oeuvre rarely takes notice of the softer works of Fincher, instead choosing to focus on the grislier corners of his work. Fincher’s perverse portrait of one’s obsession to track down a killer in *Zodiac* speaks much more to the cognitive part of the audience than the doomed romance in *Benjamin Button*. But for however little attention they receive, these other films are

still part of the director's work. With the framing of new sincerity, melodrama, and affect in mind, we now turn to reading the particularities of the works of the sentimental Fincher.

Fincher Unpacked

Mank

Fincher's most recent film—as of this writing—is perhaps his most straightforward in terms of cinematic sincerity. *Mank* (2020) follows Herman J. Mankiewicz through the writing process for *Citizen Kane*, flashing back to the various autobiographical elements Mankiewicz seemed to incorporate into his portrait of William Randolph Hearst, thereby also revealing the depths of Mankiewicz's own struggles. The film is unique for Fincher, for several reasons. First, the film was shot in black and white, mimicking in form and style the aesthetics of films from the 1930s, replete with artificial cue marks appearing onscreen to indicate reel changes—even though the film was, as is Fincher's habit, shot digitally. Second, the film's screenplay was written by Fincher's father, Jack Fincher, who passed away in 2003, which turns this film into something of a family affair and, it would seem, a labor of love for Fincher himself. Most importantly, these two elements combine with the film's subject matter to center nostalgia as a preoccupation of the film, specifically a nostalgia for the connections and care of family. In this, *Mank* is a straightforward expression of Fincher's sincere side because it has no pretensions to anything *but* sincerity.

In *Mank*, the connections between the aesthetics of new sincerity and the aesthetics of affect theory are embodied in the form of the film. An underlying principle of affect theory is that the visual and aural components of film combine to evoke specific emotional responses in viewers. With *Mank*, black and white cinematography and a score that evokes the era of classical

Hollywood are both employed to place the viewer back in the era that the film depicts, embodying a nostalgic aesthetic in every frame. The cinematography is the most obvious evocation of the classic aesthetic, of course. But the score is also especially interesting; Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross successfully imitate the kinds of grandiose orchestral scores that were popular in melodramas of the 30s and 40s, replete with swelling strains to accent the story's emotional cues. Perhaps most importantly, though, the score is noteworthy for not being noteworthy. That is, most scores of this era were useful as material to cue the emotions of viewers but were largely forgettable as music to listen to. Reznor and Ross's score follows in this track by being exactly appropriate for the time period and subject matter of the film, but is also appropriately generic in its execution. Thus, the film's style embodies visual and aural aesthetic qualities of the classic films it evokes.

This is especially striking because these classic films are what gave rise to the notion of affect theory in the first place, and their classic status makes them ripe for consideration and reconstitution as artifacts of nostalgic interest. By using principles of classic Hollywood aesthetics to help place the viewer in the era of the story, the film necessarily preoccupies itself with affect, melodrama, and nostalgia in an unironic, straightforward manner. To do otherwise would be to break the audience's expectations as set up by the film's aesthetic, which would effectively displace them in the world and era of the film. This is worth noting because it does happen in some small moments in the film. In large part, Fincher pulls off the aesthetic mimicry, using the classical Hollywood toolkit to great effect with gorgeous establishing shots, low key lighting, beautiful close-ups, and more. But there are times when Fincher breaks with classical conventions and adopts elements of his usual aesthetic, notably in a few instances where the camera goes mobile in a way unnatural to the era. Tying camera movement to characters and

objects is a key element in Fincher's personal aesthetic (*How David Fincher Hijacks Your Eyes*). But here, camera movement seems largely out of place. In one especially notable moment, a phone rings in the screenwriting bullpen as Mank introduces a writer around and the camera dramatically pushes in as the telephone is pulled over to the man who answers it. The shot only lasts for a couple of seconds, but the overt drama of the movement stands out sharply with the mostly stable camera in the rest of the film, which is more appropriate for the era it is imitating.

What this suggests is that Fincher's film is specifically designed to imitate and *evoke* the classical era and to embody its *aesthetics* without embodying the era itself. This is a fine distinction, but an important one. Fincher is essentially using the aesthetic and emotional markers of the classic era to create a pseudo-representation of that era. The film plays more like a memory of classic film by using the essential characteristics of those films, but without accurately representing them in every minute detail. For instance, a truly pure nostalgic enterprise would likely have shot a film like this *on* celluloid film; Fincher's distaste for celluloid is well known, and so the choice to shoot digitally emphasizes his concern with imitating an aesthetic rather than practicing it in its entirety, even if the film truly *was* shot in black and white with no color version existing even in the digital data (Mink). As a result, the film strangely reverses the formula of what constitutes an ideal depiction of reality from what was *actually* reality. To watch movies made in the 30s and 40s is, in this instance, to see an idealized vision of a world that never existed—one devoid of sex, swearing, and evildoing. *Mank*, ironically, is more sincere in its depiction of the 30s by virtue of its willingness to strip down the artifice of its aesthetic in terms of how it depicts its characters as real, complicated, even vulgar people. Treating its characters with a modern sensibility in terms of dialogue and crassness *becomes* an ironic aesthetic of sincerity in opposition to the otherwise squeaky-clean movies that it imitates.

This slight, ironic revision of the new sincerity paradigm extends to and exemplifies the human relationships in the film and underscores the film's sincere thematic concern with family. The main throughline of the story is Mankiewicz essentially coming to grips with the potential fallout of his decision to write into *Citizen Kane* various personal details about his friends. Dealing with these difficulties in the present-day cues the film's flashbacks, giving us insights into the formation of especially his relationship and deep connection with Marion Davies (Amanda Seyfried). Here, the film walks an especially fine and careful line in establishing their relationship as entirely platonic. Melodramatically, the film sets up a dynamic where the younger Davies is caught between two patriarchs in Mankiewicz and Hearst, engaging the dramatic situation of generational conflict and usurpation, but with a gendered and platonic twist made all the more interesting by having Mankiewicz as the main character. The scenes where Mank and Davies form their friendship are beautiful, with the classical lighting of any romantic scene from a movie from the 1930s, but the acting is grounded in a modern sensibility such that the characters almost seem to be ignoring the heightened romance of their setting even as they move through and occupy those spaces onscreen. Interestingly, these sincere elements that emphasize the importance of family and family-like relationships are curiously absent from the actual familial relationships depicted in the film. The film's style distances Mank from his actual family even as he distances himself from his platonic adopted daughter, Davies, and adopts a new one in Rita (Lily Collins).

All these interpersonal relationships emerge organically out of the assumed shared knowledge of *Citizen Kane* as a tragedy. The strength of that narrative is how it singularly showcases the rise and fall of one of America's most powerful figures. Charles Foster Kane amasses wealth, fame, and status while at the same time alienating everyone he cares about from

his life, destined to die alone as all his material possessions are literally incinerated—most notably the Rosebud sled that symbolizes the time in his life where those connections were still intact. *Mank* is here navigating similar concerns, struggling to balance his unhealthy workstyle and desire to write with maintaining authentic connections to his friends and family. The final act of the film consists of various loved ones coming to his house to challenge him on his decision to write such a scathing rendition of Hurst in his script. It is telling too that the relationship with his respected collaborator Orson Welles sours as well, acting as another ironic turn of art becoming life and echoing the ego of Kane (and Hurst).

Here we are left to reflect on the relationships that Mank has yet to ruin, perhaps with the hope that he has not yet fallen as far as the doomed protagonist he has penned. This is where the metadata of the production process also informs our reading. Whether intentional or not, Jack Fincher's script is in some way communicating with his son in a similar manner. *Mank* tells the story of a troubled man writing about the story of another troubled man, both stuck in political and social power, all the while being brought to screen by a man at the peak of his critical and cultural fame. Fincher's decision to work with his dad's script inevitably marks a connection point between the two, and considering the cautionary nature of both the story and the story nested inside of that story, the implied family affair that the film becomes also highlights the movement of sincerity. The insistence in the film to focus on the relationships that matter and avoid souring them is bolstered as a posthumous farewell from a father to a son. This then acts as a metamodern handoff of generational communication, where Fincher's follows begins a work that Fincher himself can bring to life. It feels counter to Fincher's icy perfectionism to adapt and update a script his father wrote, but the very themes of the film fold in on themselves naturally make this work. At the risk of reading too far into the nuances between writer and director, father

and son, the subject nature of the film lends itself to these kinds of parallels in a way that cannot be avoided. The fact that the move originated as a family affair affirms the position of the film, that while on the surface is about the struggle for power, fame, and success, ultimately encourages an emotional and sentimental reading to care more fully for those closest to us, lest we die in regret. This is a fundamental tenet of metamodernism and highlights a major articulation of the film that is mirrored in Fincher's behind the scenes decisions as well.

The Social Network

On the surface, David Fincher seems like an odd choice to direct a “based on a true story” biopic about tech billionaires. But even though *Social Network* is based on true events, Fincher's version of the story is only minimally *about* the events that it depicts. Instead, the film sees Fincher crafting a project that feels remarkably like a period piece set in the present moment, using the heightened emotions and relationships of its characters to tell a story about Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, and the founding of Facebook that is, for Fincher, the story of the consequences of digital technology for friendship and belonging.

The actual core story of *The Social Network* is simple. Mark Zuckerberg is a too-smart whiz with tech who has few close friends and few social skills; when he is jilted by his girlfriend, he turns to the thing he does best: computers, and in so doing, founds the entity that becomes the Facebook we know today. The ensuing drama centers around the success of Zuckerberg's invention, the jealousy of the athletic and well-connected Winklevoss twins claiming a right to his invention, and interpersonal conflict between Zuckerberg and his best friend about just what to do with their invention and newfound success. All of which is to say that most of the drama present in *The Social Network* would not be out of place in almost any movie made about teenagers. The experiences depicted are universal, from getting dumped to having friendships

break to the archetypal jousting between brains and jocks. Key here, though, is the way that Fincher engages the mechanisms of cinematic melodrama and affect to tell this story in a way that underscores its core messaging about technology's impacts on society and people.

First and foremost, Fincher's treatment of the story emphasizes its melodramatic qualities simply in its sincere perspective towards its characters. Though the protagonists of the film are college-aged and many of their experiences and troubles are almost stereotypical in nature, the film takes them seriously and treats them like the adults they see themselves as, even when their problems are arguably teenage in their orientation. Their problems are treated as seriously as the characters themselves feel them, with a resonance emblematic of their youth even as the situations they find themselves in escalate far beyond anything they could have anticipated. The nature of their problems, too, is always centered around their relationships to one another. Facebook's success was unexpected, and the drama of this success—namely, the lawsuits about the site's authorship and ownership that frame the story—is essential to the telling of the story. But Fincher's film is not, ultimately, about corporate maneuverings and tactics. It's a story of rejected teens and broken relationships of many kinds.

The film makes this orientation clear in its opening sequence, famous for its fast-paced introduction to Zuckerberg and his then-girlfriend, Erica. Aaron Sorkin's razor-sharp dialog takes viewers through the dissolution of their relationship, culminating in dumping him. Played primarily in a series of intercutting medium shots, the sequence lets the audience observe not only in terms of listening in on this conversation, but especially in seeing its effects. Ending with Mark alone, Mark is here depicted as so helpless, so pathetic that it is hard not to feel sorry for him. At the same time, Mark's intelligence and obvious aloofness underscore that Erica's pronouncement is absolutely on the mark. Right from the start, then, we see Fincher engaging in

an affective game, enticing the audience to feel a complicated mix of emotions about a character in the relatable experience of being dumped.

When read from the perspective of melodrama and affect theory, the way that Fincher's camera and direction handle the film's key emotional moments can appear strangely trite. The film's core emotional story, that begins with Mark's rejection, revolves around his friendship with Eduardo Saverin. The film takes great pains to emphasize the connections between the two young men even as the film's structure spoils for us their eventual fallout.

Another clearly effective melodramatic and affective moment is the pivotal moment between Mark and Eduardo after Facebook has partnered with Sean Parker, achieved massive success in investor valuations, and is approaching its millionth member, where Eduardo learns he has been cut out of the company. Eduardo's rage in this moment is palpable, aided significantly by the affective construction of the moment via framing and camera movement. The moment in the plot is melodramatic, letting the vivid emotions of its protagonists play themselves out in a bombastic display that is the culmination of the film's emotional setup. The intercut timelines have already told us that there was a fracture in Mark and Eduardo's relationship, cuing us to anticipate some momentous fallout; finally seeing it onscreen after the film's buildup dramatically increases the melodramatic importance of the moment for our affective and intellectual understandings of both Mark and Eduardo. Using simple setups and visual rhetorical devices, Fincher can clearly communicate the affective, melodramatic importance of these moments, but is also able to innovate editorially in order to give these simple setups their momentous emotional impact.

All of this is brought to a head in the film's closing scene. After a day of depositions, Mark sits alone in a law firm conference room, fiddling on a laptop. Marilyn, one of the

attorneys working his case, steps in and comments on his presence in the room after everyone else has gone. Mark questions her about what happens next, and in one of Aaron Sorkin's best speeches in the film, Marilyn lays out exactly why Mark is going to settle these lawsuits, which in part stems from how jurors will perceive him—as a geek who has few close friends and few social skills. The two end their interaction on what seem like good terms, with Marilyn echoing Erica's curse on Mark from the film's opening scene, here altered to "You're not an asshole, Mark. You're just trying so hard to be." These words spark some sense of recognition in Mark, and he turns back to the computer where he navigates to Facebook and searches for Erica, the one who got away and whose spurn, in this telling of events, started the whole crazy mess. With a longing and uncertain look in his eyes, Mark clicks the button to add Erica as a friend...and then sits back and refreshes the page...and refreshes it again and again as the film comes to a close.

What we have in the ending to *The Social Network* is the integration of the film's melodrama and affective components into a form characterized by the new sincerity aesthetic. Recall that this aesthetic avoids irony in the pursuit of a kind of imagined purity and consequently fetishizes a certain nostalgia through a kind of latent technophobia. Where many of Fincher's earlier films arguably reveled in the postmodern moment, this story is played effectively straight—Fincher's choices in shot, movement, performance, and music only ever invite us to get closer to the characters. The camera never tells us what to think about the emotions the characters are feeling, it invites us to feel them alongside the characters. In taking his college-aged subjects as seriously as they take themselves, Fincher lets their emotions and responses to one another take on epic, tragic proportions. All of these emotions center on the joys and pains of friendship—fitting given Facebook's emphasis on "friends." At the end of the film,

after inventing the most ingenious social networking and ostensibly friendship-enabling social media platform imaginable, Mark Zuckerberg sits alone in a law firm conference room, hoping that his ex-girlfriend will accept his friend request. For a film where the plot revolves around the creation of a high-tech solution to making friends, Fincher's sincere approach to style and emotion highlights the consequences of technology on real relationships and intimates that digital tools are no substitute for the real connections that Mark has so tragically lost.

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button

The most fully realized understanding of Fincher's sincere work comes into focus with *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, which tells the story of a man cursed with an unusual condition: he is born an old man and gets younger as he ages. This peculiar conceit sets the stage for the final iteration of sincere relationships in Fincher's films; first family, then friends, and now lovers. At its core, *Benjamin Button* is a love story, telling the tale of doomed romance between Benjamin Button (Brad Pitt) and Daisy Fuller (Cate Blanchett). At the same time, it also engages some of the formations of a masculine melodrama, including a significant subplot regarding the identity of Benjamin's father and questions of family connection and legacy.

Benjamin and Daisy first meet as kids. Despite Benjamin's aged appearance they immediately strike up a kinship, finding commonality in the unusual setting of the nursing home where Benjamin lives. As he gets older but looks younger, Benjamin decides to strike out on his own, and Daisy makes him promise to write to her as he travels. Despite this promise, they slowly drift apart. They spend the next chunk of the film being misaligned in different stages of life, never quite being in the same physical/emotional place to be together. These ships in the night do finally get a moment of connection when Daisy returns from Europe nearly two decades

later. Now, at last, they are both externally and internally the same age. The stars have aligned, and they get a short moment to be together—retreating to a coastal getaway, they spend their days sailing and making love. However, this moment cannot last forever. As Benjamin gets younger and Daisy older, he realizes that he will cease to be a father for his daughter and become just another child for Daisy to take care of. Because of this he chooses to leave Daisy and his daughter to live in isolation. The only resolution left for them is tragedy.

The last time their paths cross, Benjamin has aged so much that he is now a young boy but is crippled with a case of dementia. With Daisy's husband now dead and her daughter set out on her own, she agrees to care for Benjamin in his ailing state. With Daisy now old and Benjamin young, they come full circle—two lives passing by each other, never destined to be together. The closing moments of the film are mired with a cloud of melancholy as Benjamin communicates that “there's this whole life I had, and I can't remember what it was.” Slowly he loses the ability to talk, and then to walk. During the final moments of Benjamin's life, Daisy holds him, looking no older than an infant, and he looks at her directly in her eyes. In this brief instant Daisy believes that Benjamin recognized her and remembered the life that they shared together. Then, without warning, he breathes his final breath. The story of their romance concludes in the reverse of how it began.

In what was considered revolutionary at the time, *Benjamin Button* pioneers ambitious special and visual effects techniques to tell the story. In telling the story of a man aging backwards, the creative team faced a problem of method: How do you show a character appearing old as a child, and then getting progressively younger, without casting different actors? They tackled this problem with the help of digital technology, casting body actors for the various stages of Benjamin's childhood and digitally placing Brad Pitt's face onto their bodies.

This allowed the audience to stay connected with the same physical person for the entirety of the movie and is of paramount significance for the film's affective payoff. To continually switch out actors would have repeatedly connected and severed our identification with the character.

Instead, we are immediately bonded with Brad Pitt's performance, so the Benjamin we meet as a child both literally is and feels like the same person to the audience. This only stops once he slowly becomes a child, requiring Fincher to cast someone else to take over the role at that point in the film (Prince). However, whereas severing the connection early in the film is unhelpful for forming a bond with the character, here at the end it actively serves the story. As Benjamin loses his mind to dementia and no longer remembers Daisy or their life together, he ceases to be the character we fell in love with just as Daisy no longer feels like she is taking care of the person she shared a life with. The affective weight of the technological decision feeds back into the functionality of the movie and its thematic purpose.

The theme of nostalgia permeates this film as well. The narrative spans most of the twentieth century, but focuses heavily on the context immediately before, during, and after the second world war, most prominently in New Orleans. Scenes set in the modern day, with Daisy in the hospital, are shot in cold and clinical blues, constantly overcast with the oncoming of a hurricane; but the locations of yesteryear are warm and inviting, coated in cozy orange light. When the movie transports the viewer back in time, the staging deliberately encourages a sense of comfort, whether it be in Benjamin's childhood home, the nighttime lobby of his boating hotel, or his and Daisy's idyllic beachside getaway.

Additionally, the film is bookended with the story of Mr. Gateau, a blind clockmaker Daisy knew when she was a child. In 1918, he was commissioned with designing a large clock for a train station. Instead of making a traditional device to tell time, he unveiled an ornate clock

face that does not move forward, but instead ticks backwards, which he says stands as a memorial for those who lost their children in World War I. Placed at the beginning of the movie, this functions as a statement piece for what the film is directly interested in: the movie itself operates as a backwards clock, not only as its titular character ages backwards, but also as we the audience fall backwards in time with the character. This is true of the period the movie inhabits but also the mentality of the characters. At various points both lovers find themselves wishing to undo the past for one reason or another: Daisy yearns to go back to a time before her injuries prevented her from dancing, Benjamin wishes to return to his chance encounter with Daisy immediately after the war, and they both long for the short window in time where the chaos of their lives briefly subsided and they could be together. Benjamin himself notes this when he and Daisy stare into the mirror, both finally having met in the middle of aging, saying, “I want to remember us as we are now.” This is a movie full of romance, but also regret.

Just like the doomed lovers who had their time together briefly only for it to pass, the movie reminds us of the universality of this phenomenon. In the concluding moments of the film, Daisy returns to Mr. Gateau’s clock. It is now 2002, and his memorial clock has been taken down. It is replaced by a functional digital clock, now properly telling time and no longer a testament to a time gone by. Collins’ warning of technological trappings is embodied here in the replacement of the nostalgic memory. This acts, in effect, as a eulogy for the past. Daisy and Benjamin are now both dead and time has moved on without them. No amount of yearning and longing and hoping can bring back those characters, or that time—the audience is left to mourn.

But Collins’ paradoxical sincerity can still be seen here. Even as the movie’s nostalgia grieves for a bygone time, it also allows for the continuation of the thing it declares dead. In the final moments of the film, Benjamin takes us on a brief tour through the people he—and as an

extension we—have met throughout the sprawling narrative. Each mention of the person is accompanied by a detailed visual of them in perhaps their purist form, or maybe just how Benjamin wants to remember them. The final character is his beloved Daisy, doing what she loved to do the most: dancing. This is all tagged with the final shot of the film, Mr. Gateau's memorial clock, now covered up in a storage room, still ticking backwards. The implication is apparent: in telling these stories to the audience, these people, these places, these times—they live on. Collins' new sincerity is made alive here in how Fincher uses this doomed romance to paradoxically mourn the death of a simpler era while simultaneously attempting to preserve it.

Conclusion

It is no surprise that the above films are less discussed in critical circles. By Fincher's own admission, movies that leave harsh imprints are the most evocative and therefore likely the most memorable. If a director's job is to elicit emotions from people—which Fincher himself has said—then jarring, even scarring experiences are going to especially stand out as meaningful (Hellerman). However, Fincher still chooses to engage with melodramatic elements despite his own insistence on how certain types of movies affect the audience watching. Building on top of that is the elemental traits that melodramas take. While likely not intentional, the way that the films examined here spin outwards into commenting on family, friends, and lovers works to cover an expansive range of human emotion and connection. Fincher sends us to the darkest pits of the human condition and then walks us back from the line to let us fall on softer graces.

Fincher's work offers another vantage point to the appeal to the sincere. Perhaps what makes these works stand out as so significant is that their sincerity matters more when audiences, scholars, and critics know the director's previous relationship with humanity. It seems

unfathomable for a director who concluded the film *Se7en* with the line, “Ernest Hemingway said the world is a beautiful place and worth fighting for. I agree with the second part,” is the same filmmaker who concludes *Benjamin Button* by showing the entire cast of characters in their happiest state of bliss. As thematic statements in each respective movie, they are quite contradictory. *Benjamin Button* certainly finds the world to be a beautiful place. But, crucially, that insistence on beauty permeates each film. Released in the order they were *Benjamin Button* seems to refuse *Se7en* the final word on humanity.

Even more so, the idea that a creator can help craft a world as sinister as *Se7en* and yet still create a statement piece on beauty adds weight to that message. In many ways, David Fincher’s own career seems to mirror the ethos of the metamodern movement. He is aware that the postmodern world contains the horrors as depicted in *Se7en*, and yet still chooses to produce work like *Mank*, *The Social Network*, and particularly *Benjamin Button*. Taken on their own, they could be considered unique pieces of metamodern cinema. But in the context of their filmmaker, they not only embody the metamodern tenets but also mimic the cultural trajectory that produced the movement in the first place. The dark and the light interact with each other such that the light has that much more power after having passed through that much dark. Metaphorically, Fincher passed through *Se7en* to somehow be able to still make a feature like *Benjamin Button*, and in doing so creates a metatextual appeal to sentiment that viewing that film alone or out of context cannot fully reveal. As such, the affective nature of cinema shows itself again to have utility just beyond making someone laugh or cry. David Fincher pushes the range of the affective experience so aggressively in both directions, and in doing so highlights the weight and power each of them must horrify us, and sometimes only because we have endured the horror, to make us feel whole.

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The Symbolism of Las Vegas and Thebes in *Horizon Forbidden West*

AMY M. GREEN

Introduction – Dreams of Las Vegas and Thebes

The events of *Horizon Forbidden West*, which immediately follow those of *Horizon Zero Dawn*, find protagonist Aloy searching for a way to avert ecological collapse and a subsequent catastrophic second devastation of life on Earth. Aloy's journey takes her ever closer to what is modern-day America's western coast, with the story concluding in the ruins of San Francisco. On her way west, her journey includes exploration of the ruins of the Las Vegas Strip and a lavish, elaborate survival bunker called Thebes that was designed to look like an ancient Egyptian palace. These two locations, one an iteration of the ruins of a real-world location and the other a decadent and ridiculous imagining of an ancient Egyptian city, provide an important throughway for understanding some of the game's major narrative themes. By Aloy's time, most of the truth about the world that existed before the development and deployment of the Zero Dawn plan has been unintentionally lost. One consequence of this loss of knowledge relates to history and geography. When Aloy explores the ruins of the Strip, she does so with little understanding that Las Vegas had once been a major tourist attraction and uncovers more about what it once was during her time there. Similarly, the time she spends in Thebes is divorced from a larger sense of the historical context of the ancient Egyptian images that Faro, the antagonist of *Horizon Zero Dawn*, has appropriated to decorate his bunker. Here, though, the lavish decorations mimic ancient Egyptian designs, but lack deeper meaning or accuracy. While Aloy will not learn about the history of ancient Egypt while she is in this bunker, its symbolic narrative purpose is important to consider. The two locations, both existing in desert environments, find points of connection in the real world via the Luxor casino and a more general fascination in the West with ancient Egypt. *Forbidden West* makes smart use of both locations to present a nuanced and complex commentary on history, tourism, nostalgia, and cultural appropriation. As for Aloy, her motivation lies in looking to avert another apocalyptic event, as opposed to her seeking out relics and history in and of themselves. However, that is not to say that she has no interest in learning about the past, or those who existed before the events that nearly brought human civilization to an end. She is inquisitive and understands that knowledge of the past is a critical thread in understanding what led to the collapse of civilization.

In *Horizon Forbidden West*, Aloy searches for an uncorrupted copy of GAIA¹ to avert environmental collapse due to the program's malfunctioning. By Aloy's time, some 1000 years after the apocalyptic event that ended nearly all life on the planet, most of the truth about the world that existed before the development and deployment of Zero Dawn² has been

¹ GAIA is a complex AI system created to govern Earth's environmental functions and the repopulation of life after the events of *Horizon Zero Dawn*. In the centuries since the Faro Plague, GAIA has evolved and carried out its duties in the ways in which it has seen fit.

² The Faro Plague occurs in 2064, about 1000 years prior to the events of *Horizon Zero Dawn*. Elizabeth Sobek led the effort to enact the Zero Dawn project, which could not avert the massive

unintentionally lost. Ted Faro, whose war machines were responsible for the apocalypse, purged the APOLLO program from GAIA's systems before Zero Dawn's final deployment. APOLLO was created to be a database of all accumulated human knowledge and was intended to be used to educate the new human population.³ What remained for those humans who were created to repopulate the Earth constituted a basic, elementary-level education. One consequence of this loss of knowledge relates to history and geography. As Aloy journeys across the scarred landscape, she uncovers information, sometimes larger discoveries, sometimes smaller details about the lives of people leading up to and into the Faro Plague. She is in possession of a rare piece of old world technology, a Focus⁴, that allows her to access computer files and locked locations that would otherwise be inaccessible, which gives her the advantage of gaining more information about the world that once was.

Aloy's exploration of both the Strip and Thebes comment on the postapocalyptic world of the game and the real world via the throughways connecting the two locations. In the game's world, the Strip lies long buried under the desert sands, as much in ruins as the remains of ancient Egypt. In the real world, Vegas is a living city, a thriving oasis of splendor and excess in the desert that exists in many ways in denial of its own history, while Thebes is a dead city that evokes daydreams and fantasies of the ancient Egyptian civilization, far removed from historical realities. Importantly, both are tourist attractions that provide a sense of escape, and many of the tourists who visit are uninterested in understanding the location's historical background or context. Irazábal argues of the tourist experience of the Strip:

The suspension of real time and space in these resort casino complexes in Las Vegas is aimed at both facilitating the naturalization of constructed urban landscapes and producing ideal sites for pleasure and consumption. For many tourists who visit the hyperkitschy setups of the cities represented on the Strip rather than the real cities themselves, these representations become the visitors' most vivid mental images of those cities (Irazábal, 215).

Aloy, who has no working knowledge of Las Vegas or ancient Egypt, has only the ruins of the Strip and Faro's hyperbolic recreation to consider. Her Focus provides her with limited information on Las Vegas as she explores the ruins, mostly related to what the casinos looked like in their prime and the specific history of the man who revitalized the Strip after Las Vegas ran out of water. The first reads much like typical light tourist informational fare, the latter filtered through the experiences of a wealthy entrepreneur. The complex realities of Las Vegas as a tourist destination, the particulars of the tourism economy, and how casinos sought to continuously reinvent themselves are not part of what she learns, but the player, for whom Las Vegas is a living city and tourist destination, approaches these scenes from greater understanding. For both Aloy and the player, the interaction with Thebes has an added layer of complexity in

loss of life on the planet but put in place a complex AI system to gradually restore the Earth's environment and repopulate it. By the time of the events of *Horizon Forbidden West*, GAIA, this AI system, is failing, and its inability to regulate Earth's ecological systems will result in a second apocalyptic event

³ ELEUTHIA, one of GAIA's subprograms, was responsible for gestating human embryos in tanks once the Earth was safe for habitation again, and it was also supposed to provide the humans with a full education.

⁴ A Focus is worn just over the ear and is a sophisticated personal data device, creating a 3D interface overlaying the user's environment.

that Thebes exists in the distant past. In the game, Thebes exists only in a fictionalized construct of Faro's, a grandiose vision to suit his own ego, removed from any real sense of accuracy in portraying the culture from which its imagery originates. The player, too, sees the complexity of history through Faro's Thebes, and how ancient Egypt's geography and architecture are often reduced in the real world to tourist attractions like Las Vegas's Luxor casino.

This idea of the transformation of Las Vegas in *Forbidden West* – from tourist destination to abandoned city to thriving tourist destination once again – invites broader consideration of how Las Vegas's unforgiving desert landscape ties it to Thebes. Coniam notes that “ninety-five percent of Egypt is desert. Hot, featureless, and incapable of sustaining life, it is nonetheless exceptionally good at one thing: it *preserves*” (9). Although artifice may sometimes lull tourists into thinking otherwise, Las Vegas, too, exists within an oftentimes brutally hot desert landscape, and a reliable supply of water to the city is increasingly imperiled. Certainly, Las Vegas does not house the ruins of an ancient and advanced civilization beneath its sand. Indeed, Las Vegas is instead marked by the transformative nature of its landscape, a city characterized by aversion to the preservation of its own history in favor of demolition and rebuilding anew. The game takes this historical progression of Las Vegas – demolition and rebuilding – and envisions it as a cycle of apocalypse/utter destruction, to a post-apocalyptic ruin, to a burgeoning tourist site. Where Thebes signifies a fantasy recreation of an ancient civilization, one of many based on appropriating ancient Egyptian imagery, Las Vegas exists as a city in the popular imagination, most especially embodied by the Strip, with an ever-changing, ever-rewritten landscape. That the city of Las Vegas itself is populated by millions of people living an urban and suburban life akin to that in any other American city of its size is lost in the vivid artifice of the Strip.

The tactile nature of *Forbidden West*, which includes overland transversal by foot or machine mount, climbing, grappling, and swimming, provides players with an immersive means by which to navigate its world. Given the vast open world the game provides, the player embodying Aloy can choose to explore areas that are not directly related to the narrative or any of the quests. Instead, exploration can be performed for the joy and freedom of it, and for the sense of awe created by Aloy's physicality; few players are likely to emulate her physical dexterity and strength. This transcends the idea of the “power fantasy” games may provide to the player and instead, Aloy's careful navigation of formidable terrain rewards the player with further vistas. This emphasis on physical transversal provides a tactile interaction with the ruins left behind after the Faro Plague and makes that event more impactful. Players embodying Aloy do not just see ruins in the distance that are almost completely reclaimed by nature and mostly inaccessible. Instead, they move through the vestiges of humanity that once was. In the case of Las Vegas, through an extended series of main and side quests, the player embodying Aloy explores the submerged, partially flooded remains of the Las Vegas Strip, which now lies deep under the sands. In the case of Thebes, Aloy discovers an artificial, fictional imagining of the ancient Egyptian city, one designed by—and feeding into—Ted Faro's unbridled ego and malice. Qvortrup says of how cyberspace creates a sense of place, “My position is that cyberspace indeed is a representation—however, not of space per se, but of space experience. When we build cyberspaces we neither build parallel worlds with their own ontologies, nor do we build models that simply reflect the real space or the real world. When we build cyberspaces we build space experience representations” (6). Applying this theory to *Horizon Forbidden West*, and indeed to even those video games that attempt a high degree of accuracy in their real-world recreations, like the games in the *Assassin's Creed* series, an intriguing point emerges in that for many players, the virtual experience of geography – of space and place – may be their only

opportunity. That experience of geography—the sensation of climbing, and leaping, and looking out onto stunning vistas—connects players to the histories out of which these games draw all or portions of their stories. While not all games intend to recreate history or ask players to consider history in compelling ways, many, as in these examples, engage the player with history in a dynamic fashion.

Horizon Forbidden West presents a post-apocalyptic landscape based upon the geography of the United States—including the ruins of the Las Vegas Strip—but the apocalyptic event and the 1000 years elapsing before the start of *Horizon Zero Dawn* frequently denude the landscape of any distinctive landmarks. Those landmarks that do exist have no contextual meaning to the inhabitants of the game, although the player may recognize them and thus intuit the location, as is the case with the Las Vegas Strip. Falkenhayner considers how video games impact player perceptions:

Especially due to the visceral elements of gameplay, the aesthetic experience of video games also entails elements of aisthesis, a term that describes the sensual element of perception. Aisthesis denotes a form of making sense of representations that is connected to the affective dimension of reception: a kind of sensual knowledge that develops out of the visceral, embodied aspects of perception (3).

This aisthesis finds form in *Forbidden West* in distinct ways with regard to Las Vegas and Thebes. With Las Vegas, the player likely experiences a moment of recognition as they enter the area. While the Strip in the game is not a recreation of the existing area, a few casinos, especially the Paris and its replica of the Eiffel Tower, remain recognizable enough in their ruined state to begin to provide this sensual element of perception. Regarding Thebes, given that it is not even an accurate presentation of the ancient Egyptian city, the player would likely not recognize it as a version of that city were it not named Thebes, but would recognize it as a facsimile of an ancient Egyptian tomb or palace. Ruins are a tangible tie to history, a means by which the past can be understood. Ruins also invite imagination, encouraging players to consider the imaginative construct of a city or civilization alongside the historical.

Before moving into deeper analysis of *Horizon Forbidden West*, considering the larger role of video games and their presentation of history, space, and place, as well as the importance of this article's focus on Aloy's journey, provide an important scaffold. Video games explore the idea of history and ruins through varying lenses, capturing a sense of wonder in some cases, unease or fear in others. The immersive and tactile nature of video games allows for players to interact with ruins in ways that bring to bear the questions of history—whether in the real world or the fictional—profoundly. Post-apocalyptic games showcase the fragility of human life. *Death Stranding* features a lonely and dangerous American landscape devoid of nearly all human life, with all its major cities abandoned or destroyed. *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part 2* allow the player to explore through ruins mostly reclaimed by nature, their previous forms lost to growing vegetation, and neighborhoods abandoned as the Cordyceps plague ravaged humanity. The *Bioshock* series features two fictional cities, Rapture and Columbia, built on hubris and falling into horror. Rapture, already fallen, teems with twisted Splicers, the underwater structures groaning and starting to fail and rust due to lack of maintenance. Columbia, beautiful and pristine at the start of the game, features a rotten core of violence and racism that turns outward, with the city ravaged by civil war by the end. Games not focused on dystopian or post-apocalyptic scenarios also have much to offer about history and ruins. The *Assassin's Creed* series imagines Animus technology whereby a person can travel to any point in the past using ancestral DNA, meaning that someone could embody and experience the life of their great-great-

great grandparents, or even further back than that. This creates a narrative structure whereby the player is embodied as someone in the Animus experiencing the past of the real world. For example, *Assassin's Creed 2* allows the player to experience a recreation of Renaissance Italy. What was once only found in history books or the ruins remaining in the present now comes to life as the player is immersed in these ruins brought back to life. Video games, by virtue of embodiment and immersion, allow a unique and powerful way for players to consider history and the record of lives lived found in ruins.

Scholars in game studies and digital archaeology have set a framework by which to consider ways in which video games consider history and ruins. This article situates *Horizon Forbidden West* as a game that can be considered through the lens of history and ruins, in addition to its overall narrative. It situates *Horizon Forbidden West* as one of a number of video games whose physical environments not only explore exploration, but do so with an eye to both encourage reflection in the player and to deepen their narratives. It also considers the ways in which the physical settings of games can lead to explorations of the interplay between lived history versus fictional constructions of history, nostalgia, and cultural appropriation.

Sustained analysis of the symbolism and roles of Las Vegas and Thebes in *Forbidden West* reveals a sophisticated consideration of how imagination shapes cities and how these two locations share ties in both the fictive game space and the real world. Politopoulos et al. argue of the *Assassin's Creed* series and its intersection with cities of the ancient past: "The developers went to great lengths to create an authentic representation of ancient Greece. Several historians and archaeologists were consulted, and the developers visited Greece to get a firsthand experience of the landscape and locations they were recreating" (321). Of *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, they further note that "despite its compressed size and the artistic liberties taken with the layout of neighborhoods, a player feels as if he or she is exploring the actual city – particularly because of the rich and detailed reconstructed area of the Acropolis and the Agora" (Ibid). A relatively small explorable area of Athens serves to provide a sense of the whole, to immerse a player in history, even though Athens is not rendered in *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* at a 1:1 scale. *Horizon Forbidden West* takes similar liberties in its reconstruction of a post-apocalyptic Vegas, which is immediately recognizable as a version of a Las Vegas Strip that has been remade countless times and then, finally, destroyed. The area of Las Vegas Aloy explores is relatively small, with only limited ruins visible, and one set of casino ruins explored. Yet this brief glimpse serves to touch upon the idea of the whole, both of the Las Vegas that had once existed and the post-apocalyptic version. Thebes, Ted Faro's bunker, is never intended to be real, or realistic, and is instead the vision of a megalomaniac who has fetishized ancient Egyptian culture, deliberately refusing to give players a true sense of Thebes.

Ruins of the Pre-Zero Dawn World and the Pull of Nostalgia and Wonder

Horizon Forbidden West uses history – specifically via the ruins of Las Vegas and the hyperbolic presentation of Thebes – as commentaries on loss and nostalgia. All humans encountered by the player in this post-apocalyptic world share a fascination with the technology of the old world and the "Old Ones," the term used by many tribes to refer to the humans who lived before the Faro Plague. What most lack is the historical record that would provide greater context for what they observe. The ruins of their cities and broken or inaccessible technologies are all that remain of the humans who had lived before the Faro Plague. Fraser says of the symbolic role of ruins:

Ruins – and associated rubble and wastelands – are key signifiers of the apocalypse through which the catastrophic end of civilization can be immediately and tangibly expressed... As communicative and symbolic tropes, contemporary ruins have been read as indicators of the anxious history of the post 9/11 era, even as an ontological imperative, reaching back to anxieties of hyper-technological Cold War annihilation – or worse (as often portrayed in post-apocalyptic sci-fi), survival (122).

For the new humans of Earth, the ruins of the Old Ones serve such a purpose, providing a sense of wonder, imagination, nostalgia, and even fear. Yet although these ruins spark the imagination, these new humans also have no way to tie what they see to any concrete history, as knowledge of the preapocalyptic world has mostly been lost.

The concept of nostalgia as it relates to the conception of cities, both ruined and standing, provides an important context for the role of Las Vegas and Thebes in *Forbidden West*. Tuan conceives of the idea of nostalgia and its impact on how people view the idea of cities in this way:

The dream of a serene life in the midst of nature, however, is far from being confined to disaffected individuals possessed with the means to withdraw from society when it proves too burdensome and frustrating. Older, more widespread, and politically more potent is the dream of Eden; that is, of the existence of a composed life, not alone but with others, in an unspoiled natural setting (174).

In one sense, the Earth of *Zero Dawn* and *Forbidden West* returned to an Edenic-type state as the environment slowly recovered from the Faro Plague, and the very few humans who were reintroduced into it lacked the technology and knowledge to begin to destroy it once again. Much of the player's time as Aloy exploring in both games consists of traversing beautiful and unspoiled vistas that are punctuated only uncommonly by larger human settlements, and more frequently by small tribal enclaves. However, *Derangement*⁵ creates a scenario wherein the Edenic state becomes a more dangerous state of being. The machines under the influence of the Derangement are hostile on sight and discourage the average person from exploring. Safety lies in both numbers and within the relative security of established settlements. The ruins of the Old One's cities might appear to have been havens against the machines of the Faro Plague, but those cities have long since fallen, its populace dead. History, reflected in these ruins, reflects humanity's inability to stave off their destruction – they were only able to look forward far into the future to a time when the world could be replenished.

Cities, whether viewed from the insider perspective of one who has always lived in a densely inhabited urban space or from the perspective of one imagining what such a life would be like, have a role in the modern-day imagination. Johnson and Tulloch focus on how modern urban cities lend themselves to stories taking them to dire dystopian outcomes, writing that “the modern metropolis, in short, is ripe for dystopian imaginings: when things go bad, they accelerate fast, and it is always a collective matter, even if the collectives are minorities. The modern city, then, even of brutalist design, is a fragile entity” (247). Indeed, games like *The Last of Us* explore the idea of how quickly a sprawling, seemingly well-run city can fall to pieces, its citizens scrambling for survival within a matter of weeks. In *Zero Dawn*, living in a city offers

⁵ While the narrative history is complex, the *Derangement*, more simply, is what humans use to describe the change in machine behavior from one where they were not hostile and tended to avoid humans while carrying out their pre-programmed functions to overtly hostile on sight. This is due to a breakdown in part of GAIA's program.

no protection against the Faro Plague, and *Forbidden West* provides players with complex engagement with real locations, from the ruins of Las Vegas to the ruins of the Golden Gate Bridge, in a way that encourages players to consider how easily civilization might fail.

Wrethed's work explores both the end of civilization and its possible new beginnings: "Release from pain is the ultimate outcome of apocalyptic narratives. There will be signs, and there will be death, and there will be resurrection and a new city" (320). The cities that were standing all those centuries ago now lie in ruins in the games' narrative present. They hint at history and lives lost and lived, but that history remains elusive.

In Thebes, also known in the game as "Faro's tomb," players are not given a real-world location to explore but rather a hyperbolic presentation of the stereotypical signifiers of ancient Egypt – hieroglyphics, statues of pharaohs, and the imagined city in its prime. Tuan argues that the features of cities at their height: "The city offers beauty and more – the sublime, a life enhancing experience laced with stress and pain, for the city is not only life and light, but also darkness and death" (138). The post-apocalyptic story frequently asks its audience to consider the absence of the city, the city that lies in ruins or has become overgrown and reclaimed by nature. In *Forbidden West*, so much time has passed that only the creaking metal skeletal remains of most buildings are extant. More intact ruins, such as a limited number of high-tech, secure facilities, do exist, but given the technology still keeping them locked, few but Aloy and those others with a Focus will ever gain access. Faro's tomb is also a locked ruin, a survival bunker built by Ted Faro so he could continue his lavish lifestyle while the rest of the world suffered and burned. During the time that she is in Thebes, Aloy says nothing about the ancient Egyptian civilization on which it is based, even in critique of Faro's gaudy recreation. The player might consider the larger implications of a theme-park-style vision of ancient Egypt, and the interplay between the fictional story and the player's real-world experiences is fascinating and complex. Coniam considers the role of Egypt as both an archaeological site preserving ancient history and as a tourist destination, writing, "There are two 'dreams of Egypt.' For the original discoverers and explorers, the dream was of the ancient world itself, pristine and uncontaminated by modern triviality, slowly coming to life again as they sifted the sand. For the travelers who followed in their wake on cruises and package tours, fully as strong was the romance of that very process of discovery" (3). While this is certainly true to some extent, it overlooks darker or more superficial intentions. For every tourist who yearns to connect to a part of humanity's ancient past, another takes endless selfies and enjoys checking a destination off their sightseeing list.

Forbidden West raises provocative questions not only about Las Vegas and Thebes as they exist in the game and their meaning in this fictional space, but also about why they might have been chosen as focal points, given the ties between them. In the game, Las Vegas lies in tatters, far from the place marked by reinvention that once beckoned tourists to visit new attractions and brought hope for continued revenue streams. Thebes was an important part of ancient Egyptian civilization, but a closer tie brings the two cities together across thousands of years. One of the most notable features of the current Las Vegas skyline is the Luxor; the beam of light from the top of its pyramid pierces the night sky. The real-world Luxor was once located in the historical Thebes. The push and pull of the real and the imagined, of nostalgia and loss, of ruin and reinvention and history, find representation in *Forbidden West's* use of Las Vegas and Thebes.

Sin City Decaying beneath the Sands and Resurrected Anew

Las Vegas, in both the real world and in *Forbidden West* evolved around an obsession with invention, destruction, and reinvention in a perpetual cycle – a willful denial of the Strip’s own history. In many ways, it exists in the real world always in the immediate now, avoidant of history and the passing of time. Al presents an image of early Las Vegas: “Along a pothole-filled road that was not yet known as “The Strip” once stood the first two of Las Vegas’s casino complexes, cloaked in the theme of the Wild West. However, the image had been unashamedly invented at a time when the days of the Wild West had been gone for half a century” (40). From that point on, the Strip became marked by glitz and excess, became a liminal place where the rules of the real world were suspended. Over the years, casinos have come and gone, with one resort ceding its spot to the next shining desert edifice. While the Strip Aloy discovers during *Horizon Forbidden West* is missing any sustained use of Wild West imagery and has laid in ruin for nearly a thousand years, it nonetheless speaks to this idea of fantasy, a place that relies upon the complex interplay of wonder, awe, and nostalgia ignited in tourists. Certainly, it combines with the hopes many tourists have of winning some—or a significant—amount of money gambling and the promise of revenue such tourists bring to casino owners. *Forbidden West* requires the player to spend a significant amount of time in the ruins of Las Vegas as part of a main quest and provides further opportunities for the player to assist NPCs. Focused analysis of the main quest underscores the narrative’s thoughtful consideration of the Las Vegas of the real world, its role in popular culture and imagination, and how such a city continues to find ways to be resurrected and reinvented, writing and rewriting its history.

The main quest, “The Sea of Sands,” finds Aloy in the Las Vegas desert, which has now swallowed the entirety of the city. As the player approaches the ruins of the Las Vegas Strip, it is not initially identifiable as such. The buildings are mostly skeletal scaffolding and beams and are blanketed under a heavy layer of sand. The area is called Dunehollow in the game’s present day and is presented to the player as such, rather than the game telling the player what they are looking at. One of the first definitive landmarks that identifies this as the Strip for the player is the half-buried ruin of the Paris resort’s Eiffel Tower. Aloy does not know these ruins as Las Vegas or that this is a recreation of the original Paris landmark, and she has no conception of Vegas as the tourist, gambling, and resort hotspot that it is now. Her lack of historical knowledge differs in this regard from that of many of the players embodying her, who are likely to realize where they are geographically when they see the Eiffel Tower. It is a deliberately disorienting vista for any who have visited the Strip, as it is both in ruin and different from what exists today, so this one definitive landmark allows players a point of orientation and concrete tie to the present-day strip. However, importantly, the Strip today is not the same iteration as what existed a decade ago, or a decade before that, or what will exist a decade or two from now. Perhaps one day, the Paris resort will also give way to something new. This futuristic, post-apocalyptic Vegas, though, shares much in common, in broader strokes, with its real-world counterpart. For example, ruins of a pagoda-like building allow Aloy access to a larger area of flooded, more intact, buildings. As they are below ground, they have been less exposed to the ravages of the desert’s sand and heat. The pagoda serves as the landmark for a stereotypically Asian/Chinese-themed casino into which Aloy enters, one marked by very bland and generalized “Asian-inspired” imagery, like a dragon and lanterns; it feels, even its ruined state, like a gimmick designed to entrance a primarily white, Western consumer with little knowledge of, or interest in, Asian cultures as they actually are. While there is not currently a direct counterpart to this fictional casino in Las Vegas, it has had similarly themed resorts, including the Imperial Palace and the Lucky Dragon. The presence of both the pagoda and the Eiffel Tower create an

incongruity between these two ruined casinos that share the same temporal space on a post-apocalyptic Las Vegas Strip. Players likely know Vegas primarily by its signifiers, even when just a few scattered structures remain recognizable, and the pagoda, while only existing in the game, is given the appearance of belonging on the Strip to such an extent that the player might believe that it exists in the real world as well.

Aloy, concerned with her mission, gives little thought to the ruins when she first encounters them. It is only once she restores power to the flooded, and better preserved, casino structure beneath the sands that she is perhaps a bit taken in by the sight, given its haunting beauty. Neon lights and digital displays, focused on fish and marine life, fill the ruins with a simulacrum of life. Beyond that, though, Aloy has no reference to Las Vegas as a long-dead tourist destination and no time to spare musing over such matters. Cantillon writes of the imagination of tourists, “Through representations, interactions with others, and subjective experiences, tourists develop mental images of destinations, which influence not only their expectations of what the place will be like, but what kinds of holidays they will have and what memories they will make” (89). The embodied player recognizes that they have reached the Las Vegas Strip, either by virtue of having visited or because of its ubiquitousness in global popular culture, but Aloy views the Strip only as a location in which to achieve her quest. For her, it exists outside of its historical context. She does not arrive at these ruins with the burden of expectation.

Forbidden West’s Strip, even in ruins, focuses primarily on the power and draw of illusion, as it does in the real world. POSEIDON, an AI program that has taken up residence in Las Vegas’s old computer systems and is one of the programs Aloy needs to capture to fix GAIA, has changed all the holograms to make the submerged area look like it is a functioning underwater organic environment, replete with coral reefs, fish, and other marine life as opposed to metal ruins. While POSEIDON’s motivations for doing this are not made explicitly clear, it seems that this complex AI program prefers to exist in a world that is illusory yet beautiful rather than in a reality of crumbling buildings. Once Aloy gets the pump system working over the course of her quest, thus draining most of the water, the ruins of the Strip take on an eerie, haunting, and beautiful note – an Atlantis lost to time and apocalypse. At the end of the quest, she repowers the entire Strip, overlaying the crumbling ruins with holographic overlays that emulate what the buildings looked like in their pre-apocalyptic heyday. A group of three friends Aloy meets, entrepreneurs who see tourist potential once again in these revived ruins, hope to draw in crowds to take in the dazzling light displays.

Aloy’s extended time in Las Vegas investigating the ruins of the Strip centers the player’s attention on the concept of Las Vegas as a place of continuous reinvention, even as it lies in ruins and is partially buried beneath the sands. Fraser observes, “Ruins – and especially ruined cities – serve as some of the most dominant representations of catastrophe and apocalypse, the remnants that survive the end of the world” (122), but the history of Las Vegas, as it is fictionalized in the game, provides significant complexity. The ruins in the game represent a snapshot of the Strip’s history, a version that existed at the end of the world, a transient stop in what had been constant reinvention. Ruins in video games do more than just present an echo of history and civilizations of the past. In the post-apocalyptic context, ruins provide both mystery and the pang of nostalgia, as characters within the game, as well as the players embodying them, consider a world that is lost. In *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part II*, the progression of ruination abounds, as cities are further absorbed back into the natural environment. In games like *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey*, which bring to life ancient civilizations of the past, players are connected to the past in an immersive way that takes history out of documentaries and history books, instead placing the

player in an active role of experiencing what it might have been liked to have lived at that time. Both explorations of history in games, the post-apocalyptic consideration of ruins and the bringing to life of past civilizations, allow for the uniquely immersive medium of video games to consider history in complex ways.

While the Strip forms an important geographical component as post-apocalyptic ruins Aloy encounters on her journey, consideration of the Luxor casino forms an important throughway that ties *Forbidden West*'s use of Las Vegas with its later naming of Faro's bunker as Thebes. The ties are compelling and continue to deepen the exploration of ruin, imagination, and nostalgia and how they function with the larger issue of history. The Luxor is markedly absent from the game's post-apocalyptic ruins of the Strip, but it haunts them, especially considering the pointed use of ancient Egyptian imagery in the main quest "Faro's Tomb." The Luxor need not be specifically present in *Horizon Forbidden West* in order for the real-life player to call to mind images of the Strip as it exists today, with the Luxor as a dominant part of its landscape. Hell and Steinmetz write of early Las Vegas casinos: "Another strand of iconic casino images was connected to European colonialism. Many of the new casinos built during the 1950s evoked North or sub-Saharan Africa, areas still under the control of European powers. These included the Desert Inn, the Sands Casino, and the Algiers Hotel" (1056). In the present day, all these have given way to new attractions, such as the Luxor, which has a dominating presence on the Strip—the pyramid's beam of light pierces the night sky. Cass and Dennis further this consideration with their analysis of the Luxor and its ties to ancient Egypt, "Thus, the pyramids represent the colonization project as much as they do cultural authenticity, for the presence of the white archaeologists obliquely alludes to the Luxor's own rise from the Nevadan desert, a tribute to American capitalist, colonialist ingenuity that appropriates Orientalist culture as profitably as they once stole actual relics" (1996, n.p.). Both real-world Las Vegas and Ted Faro of *Forbidden West* appropriate the architecture and art of ancient Egypt as a means of creating a fantasy world that is insulated from the real.

Thebes, Egyptomania, and "Faro's Tomb"

Thebes exists in *Forbidden West* as a caricature of its historical counterpart in the real world. "Faro's Tomb," a main quest, finds Aloy in the sealed stronghold Faro utilized once machines began to destroy the world. It represents not only his culpability in creating the Faro Plague, but his refusal to ever take responsibility for his actions. Its interior remains remarkably intact. This part of the story puts her in the path of the Quen, a tribe who are also trying to get into the facility at the behest of their "Ceo."⁶ Faro favors pyramid imagery in his "Thebes" facility, but the ancient city of Thebes, while known for its necropolis and tombs, did not feature pyramids. Faro's fascination with ancient Egypt and his ostentatious "recreation" of it consist of lies, misinformation, and egotistical fantasy. That his name "Faro" is a homophone to "Pharoah" and thus he crowns himself absolute ruler over his bunker and the small group of other survivors he has allowed to stay says much about his personality. The use of pyramid imagery provides a throughway back to the game's use of Las Vegas as a major setting and the real-world familiarity of the Luxor resort. It also ties into the Ceo and his aspirations to temporal and divine power, as

⁶ The Quen do not seem to realize that Ceo is the acronym CEO, so they pronounce it as 'see-oh.' The Quen have a larger supply of Focuses and have thus accessed history related to the Old Ones.

he believes he is a reincarnation of sorts of Ted Faro and wants proof of that to further his influence Sharr's work on the relationship between a given place and what it might say of the people who built and inhabited it writing, "Architecture expresses the values involved in its inhabitation, construction, procurement, and design. It traces the thinking of the individuals who have participated in it, their relationships, and their involvement with the cultures where they have lived and worked" (113). So too does "Faro's Tomb" reveal the egomania, arrogance, and greed that form the cores of Ted Faro and the Ceo. Neither of them care one whit for history or understanding their place in it, as they crave only power.

Finally, the depiction of Thebes in the game provides commentary on white Western culture's fetishization of ancient Egypt. Coniam writes of Hollywood's enduring fascination with mummy movies, "It is only fitting therefore that the mummy should in itself become the ultimate visual symbol of the ancients' reflection in the pop cultural mirror: nothing more vividly divides the fact from the fantasy than respective attitudes to this strange, essentially tragic artefact" (11). Instead of wanting to learn more about the historical ancient Egypt, many are content with experiencing it via the mummy, rejecting history in favor of hyperbolic fiction. A monster of sorts does lie at the heart of Faro's tomb, but it is a monstrosity evolved from greed and ego. The tomb, a survival bunker intended to allow Ted Faro to survive the Faro Plague, is constructed with artifice and fantasy in mind; it is the creation of a man driven by his own sense of self-importance such that he would want his bunker, a place where he might need to live for decades, to take on the likeness of a fictional, popular culture construction of an ancient Egyptian pharaoh's tomb rather than in any way consider its historicity.

Faro's tomb provides *Forbidden West* with a throughline back to its use of Las Vegas as another major setting. The Luxor resort, built in 1993, remains an immediately recognizable part of the Las Vegas skyline and is designed to present tourists with a popular culture version of ancient Egyptian culture, one rooted far more in expected signs and symbols than in historical accuracy. Davies writes of the Luxor's likely fleeting place on the Strip: "Given the momentum of change in Las Vegas, the magical city which is never complete, we can expect the Luxor to be torn down and replaced well before the other attractions mentioned here" (57). While it has managed to escape destruction for some time, in the larger cycle of the Strip, it will likely eventually cede its place to something dazzling and new. While some might argue that the use of ancient Egyptian symbols—from hieroglyphics to the grand pyramid to the Sphinx—is harmless because the civilization is long dead, that belies the reality of the harm of cultural appropriation and commodification. Cantillon argues that "cultivating and sustaining this imaginary entails the commodification of culture and nature, people and places, as spectacles for the tourist gaze" (Cantillon 90), and the Strip's Luxor casino embodies just such a commodification. Faro's Thebes has far more in common with Las Vegas's Egyptomania-tinted, fantasy version of ancient Egypt than it does with the real-world location and history.

The design of Faro's Thebes is all gaudy grandeur replete with outsized, golden Egyptian statues. However, they appear devoid of meaning and comically stereotypical, an appropriation of culture at the hands of a homicidal megalomaniac. Faro designed Thebes to resemble the imagined inside of a pyramid, perhaps combined with a royal palace, in defiance of the historical reality that Thebes was not an area where pyramids were built. His insistence on conflating these has two possible origins. The first is that he is ignorant and knows only superficial information about ancient Egypt. The second is that he is deliberate in his arrogance and wants his stronghold to represent both a seat of power – the historical Thebes – and the opulence of the Giza burial pyramids. At the heart of the Thebes bunker, in the main reception area, is a giant gold statue of

Faro, the arms of which are crossed against his chest in a pharaoh-style pose. Näser describes two distinct spaces in the Thebes World Heritage site:

a public one, to which everybody has access and which constitutes the arena of unregulated tourist–local interactions, and a ‘semi-public,’ ‘enclaved’ one into which tourists can withdraw in order to avoid contact with local residents. While the public sphere is connected to the social reality of today’s Egypt in that it is part of this reality and presents certain facets of ‘real life’ to tourists, the ‘enclaved’ spaces are very much secluded and removed from this reality (419).

These enclaves refer to hotels and specific heritage sites that limit access to locals. This idea of segregated space accessible only to the guests of hotels – one presumes this also includes expensive luxury resorts – corresponds to Faro’s design of the bunker as an exclusive space for himself and his sycophants.

Faro’s design choices are not indicative of an attempt to be playful or even ironic – he believes himself to be pharaoh-like, above punishment or reproach, and the Ceo shares this egotistical attitude. Faro’s actions led to the destruction of the world, and during its dying gasp, as people suffered and died, he hid away in luxury. While Faro could have selected any ancient culture as the basis for his design, ancient Egypt and the mystique it holds, especially for the West, lines up with his ego. Given that, it is also likely that Faro recognizes that his name is a homophone for “pharaoh.” Sharr argues of the Luxor and the Strip, “In the 1990s, the Strip became densified as land values rose, its new image dominated by massive theme hotels which are replicas of a sort: giant cartoon-like simulacra... These city-block size hotels are dressed as signs of cities, making tongue-in-cheek claims to the supposed glamour of their referents” (120-121). While replicas like the Luxor, the Paris, and the Venetian are fantasy reproductions of the originals, to say that they are tongue-in-cheek implies that their creators – not just the architects but also the business owners financing their commission – are in on the joke. The reality is far more nuanced. Certainly, playfulness and humor can be seen in some of the mega-resorts on the Strip, but these are also businesses designed to attract tourist dollars. Faro’s design choices dovetail with longstanding cultural appropriation of ancient Egyptian culture by outsiders, perhaps most exemplified by white American and European cultures’ obsessions. Saglia’s writing furthers Sharr’s thoughts: “Images of Egyptian excess therefore migrate from considerations on history, nature, and humankind to the more circumscribed, though no less culturally relevant, areas of ‘consumer orientalism’ and luxury” (322). Against this consideration of consumerism and appropriation, the player is shown the shared and ugly trajectories of the Ceo and Faro.

Faro’s end comes as a result of him trying to use medical technology to achieve immortality. Malamud describes the Luxor as part of an architectural genre “which responds to the public’s desire for historical reproductions, entertainment, and novel retail experiences. The Luxor capitalizes on a positive set of images Americans have of ancient Egypt, and it caters to the New Age interest in Egypt as a source of occult wisdom” (Malamud 120-121). While in Thebes, Faro was trying to achieve immortality via experimental treatments from his private doctor, but he ends up instead a hideous mutation, a monstrous imitation of a human being. While this involved neither magic nor use of the occult, the advanced nature of the technology must surely seem like magic to those in the game’s world who have no understanding of technology. Faro eventually hooks his mutating form up to the small nuclear plant that generates Thebes’ power, where he has remained for all of that time. There is great irony in this callback to the development of the atomic bomb and the horror that technological advancement can

engender. The Ceo, horrified at what remains of Faro, orders Faro's destruction and a cover-up of what was found. The Ceo is crushed by the head of a giant statue of Faro as he tries to flee the ensuing meltdown that the attempted destruction of Faro instigates. Thebes collapses with the Ceo dead inside, stamping his story with a deliberately unceremonious and cowardly end.

The ignominious end of the Ceo and the obliteration of Thebes provide a fitting end to this portion of the story. Saglia writes of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century white consumers of Egyptian-inspired ware:

Sphinxes, lions, and deities were surrounded by wreathes of fake hieroglyphs, while a peculiarly popular form from the late eighteenth until the mid-nineteenth century was the Canopic vase, an object related to death and funeral rites, as it was originally employed to hold the entrails of an embalmed body. Since furniture-makers and designers adopted a similar type of tamed monumentality and death symbolism, their luxury objects also contributed to disseminate orientalist decorations as well as potential sources of cultural uneasiness (317).

Hieroglyphics abound in Faro's bunker, but what they actually communicate would require a great deal of player investment to attempt a translation, and the game offers none. The strong implication is that this choice on behalf of the game's developers is deliberate. The design choices are presented narratively as Faro's—it is therefore in line with his personality that he chose the hieroglyphics at random, probably only considering aesthetics. Therefore, the hieroglyphics likely have no translatable meaning. Given Saglia's analysis of the rise of fake hieroglyphics as design tools and given that the game provides no means to translate the hieroglyphs in the bunks, and taking into consideration Faro's own arrogance, there is a strong chance that they are decorative only, reiterating Faro's co-opting of ancient Egyptian culture to amplify his creation of hollow grandeur. Malamud observes of the Luxor's extravagance, "Yet in the end, the Luxor is, of course, about America. Casinos like the Luxor and Las Vegas itself are celebrations of consumption, excess, and technological showmanship" (38). *Forbidden West* posits that such displays ultimately end in ruins, with Faro's bunker serving as an example of meaningless excess.

Las Vegas and Thebes: Ruin, Loss, and Possibility

Both of the *Horizon* games have engaged the player with history and what it might mean to exist in a postapocalyptic world without any knowledge of the past. Rost, Aloy's adopted father, contemplates loss and ruin in his monologue over the opening scenes of *Horizon Zero Dawn*. He considers in part, "To us were left the wonders of creation: beasts of air, water, earth...and steel," despite a sense of awe in the word, their overall tone denotes sadness, longing for a past that is as incomprehensible as it is out of reach. The legacy of the world that was consists of ruined and half-buried structures and the puzzle and wonder of the machine beasts. These opening lines remind the player that while the game is a compelling and thrilling adventure, scaffolded by a deeply immersive science fiction story, at the core of the story lies the remains of the past. The *Horizon* games posit the longing and loss left to the survivors in a post-apocalyptic world with no way to engage with their historical past. Within that loss lies the grip and mystery of history, as players and characters within the game world consider remnants of a past that no longer exist and are unlikely to be recreated as they once were. In ruins lies the historical record of humanity, of the tracking of giving way of buildings and civilizations to time and change, whether by normal progression of one era of history to the next, or by calamity.

Horizon Forbidden West imagines a Las Vegas submerged and ruined beneath the sands, reclaimed by nature over nearly a thousand years. In the real world, Las Vegas continues to thrive as a tourist destination, although the increasing scarcity of water is a consistent threat, as it is in the game's narrative before the spread of the Faro Plague. Against this backdrop of destruction, Aloy and her friends, bolstered by the bonds they create and the risks they take to protect the world, pervade the game with a sense of optimism in the face of ruin. Falkenhayner writes that *Horizon Zero Dawn* "can be understood as enabling an aesthetic experience of posthuman futurity which is not dystopic, and that this affordance for futurity in an optimistic mode is deeply embedded both in its basic structure as a video game and in its narrative" (2). Such a sense of forward-looking positivity is also infused throughout *Horizon Forbidden West*. The game's narrative does not posit that optimism and doing the right thing are easy but that they are possible and worth fighting for.

Forbidden West ends with a new and devastating threat making its way to Earth in the form of an AI named Nemesis, which appears to be bringing with it an armada of machines and the threat of war. Aloy and her friends are poised to combat the threat, which has the potential to bring about a new apocalyptic event and a new cycle of ruin. Murphie and Potts ask, "What do we wish to conserve in our new configuring of the world? And here we do not mean what do we wish to preserve in formaldehyde. We mean a more dynamic sense of ecology – in the sense of which relations, possibility or degree of complexity of relation, we wish to conserve, or even enhance" (199). They consider a broader concept of conservation than just the ecological – this concept might also include the technological. *Horizon Forbidden West* concludes with Las Vegas existing in partially restored glory, with the possibility of it being further excavated and/or developed into a tourist attraction for this post-apocalyptic world, and with the destruction of Thebes, that gaudy pastiche of elements of ancient Egyptian culture. The game ends with both an imminent threat and the possibility of hope for a world that continues to rebuild. What the cities of the game's world might look like remain far in the story's future, but the narrative gives hope that the humans of this revitalized Earth, while remaining in awe of and perhaps even building additional grand tourist escapes like Las Vegas, will be affected enough by the experience of living on a planet marked by ecological upheaval to temper their willingness to destroy the environment. Even though their world's past lies in post-apocalyptic ruin, Aloy and her allies seek to learn what they can of humanity's history.

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The *Bourne* Movies, CIA Office Workers, and Models for Change, or, The Zorn Identity

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How many confirmed kills had Jason Bourne? Who cares? Better to ask who put Jason Bourne in the position to do Jason Bourne things like kill presidents of un-named African nations, and who put other operatives in place to do Jason Bourne things to Jason Bourne? The Matt Damon *Bourne* movies offer 465 minutes of run time; minus credits, the *Bourne* series offers about seven and a half hours of movie. Jason Bourne takes up most of that time. For instance, in the 1:51:26 of screen time in *The Bourne Identity* (Doug Liman, 2002), scenes without Bourne's direct involvement amount to twenty-two and a half minutes, about 20% of the film. While these glimpses of *Bourne* without Bourne are partial and incomplete, I want to analyse non-Bourne CIA work, however briefly glimpsed.

The *Bourne* movies visualize the intelligence that the CIA can access to track down anyone anywhere in scenes set in front of a wall of screens showing maps, video footage, and biographical details. These scenes entail a high-ranking person – Conklin (no first name ever given, played by Chris Cooper) in *The Bourne Identity*, Pamela Landy (Joan Allen) in *The Bourne Supremacy* (Paul Greengrass, 2004), and Heather Lee (Alicia Vikander) and Robert Dewey (Tommy Lee Jones) in *Jason Bourne* (Paul Greengrass, 2016) – telling underlings to find a specific detail in the ocean of information available to them. Not intelligence work but management. Conklin, Landy, Lee, Dewey, and Ward Abbott (Brian Cox) come to understand Bourne through the work of the lower-level CIA workers. This support work is, unsurprisingly, secondary to a big decision or happens off-screen.

In *The Bourne Identity* Danny Zorn (Gabriel Mann) ably serves two superiors: first Conklin and later Abbott. Conklin becomes a liability and is eliminated. But Danny lands on his feet, finding a job with Conklin's boss, Abbott, before Conklin's body is cold. In the sequel *The Bourne Supremacy*, Danny does his job well enough that he learns something that gets him killed. Abbott kills Danny for getting too close to the truth. CIA occupational hazard. In *The Bourne Identity*, when Bourne shoots The Professor (Clive Owen), an asset sent to kill him, The Professor sums up the life of the CIA assassin with the *Bourne* series refrain, "Look at this. Look at what they make you give" (*Identity* 1:30:27 – 1:30:33). Danny gets shivved in a stairwell and shares no last words of hard-earned spy wisdom. Danny gets no poetry and dies as he lived, a functional cog in the CIA-machine and *Bourne*-series narrative. In *The One vs. The Many*, Alex Woloch sees *Iliad*'s Thersites as the first minor character in literature, noting, "It is not simply that he has a subordinate narrative role, but that his striking fictional identity emerges *through*, and revolves around, this subordinated position" (4). Woloch could well be describing Danny: subordinate both to Conklin and Abbott on the CIA org chart and their plots, and to the movies' plots and *mise-en-scène*.

Danny Zorn functions as a minor character, but a very important one, narratively and ideologically. How does a minor character like Danny Zorn exist to serve the larger plot? How do the back-office bureaucratic actions necessary to any large institution like the CIA make Bourne's obvious violence both possible and "effective"? Danny offers not the fantasy of an omniscient assassin with a heart of gold, but rather something close to a banal reality: a

qualified office support worker punching the clock, delivering what his managers ask for. On the one hand, this leads to a somewhat obvious reading of Danny as an example of the banality of evil, and the observation that the precondition for spy thrillers is a steady supply of competent nobodies to provide the state capacity for the infrastructure of monstrosity. The Matt Damon-starring *Bourne* series, especially the Danny Zorn parts of *The Bourne Identity* and *The Bourne Supremacy*, generates its sense of tension and immediacy with ground-level hand-held shaky-cam footage. In tandem with this approach, we can see the near-constant background presence of low-level workers when superiors make big decisions. Given that the Damon-*Bourne* series features two different directors – Doug Liman for *Identity*, Paul Greengrass for the rest – the consistency of the style in subordinate-plus-manager shots points to a throughline the entire series.¹ Even more than Bourne's unravelling of his past and the CIA's ill deeds, this shared visual and narrative responsibility presents the critique of CIA power that goes beyond the "a few bad apples" approach common to Hollywood movies.

In *The "War on Terror" and American Film: 9/11 Frames Per Second*, Terence McSweeney offers a fairly standard reading of the shift in American political culture in the first decade of the 21st century through a reading of the first three *Bourne* movies, arguing that, "the defining action hero of the decade was undoubtedly Jason Bourne ... a much more human figure, rendered vulnerable and traumatised by his violent past" (104). Jason Bourne's story echoes the American people, at first volunteering to kill whoever the government identifies as an enemy then coming to regret his decision, echoing the 90% approval rating for President George W. Bush after 9/11 that fell to 34% in his second term. At the end of *The Bourne Ultimatum* (Paul Greengrass, 2007), as McSweeney puts it,

The trilogy ends with Vosen arrested and facing a tribunal, the suggestion being that the bad guys are being brought to justice and that the system, while flawed, works as long as there are people like Bourne and Landy there to 'do the right thing'. Ironically, it is in this denouement that the franchise departs most from reality ... not a single individual was ever prosecuted; only in the realm of a Hollywood thriller could such things happen. (109)

While I agree with this reading, the sequel *Jason Bourne* offers an entry point into both a verification of this reading and an alternative path foreclosed. The failing of the CIA the *Bourne*

¹ While The Danny Zorn-Conklin/Abbott shots in *The Bourne Identity* and *The Bourne Supremacy* show a low-level subordinate working for their boss, *Jason Bourne* climbs the ladder, focusing on the CIA Director Robert Dewey and cybersecurity operations division head Heather Lee. Dewey (Tommy Lee Jones, born 1946) somehow looks more than 42 years older than Lee (Alicia Vikander, born 1988). The repeated contrast in two-shots of the very old-looking Dewey, wrinkled, bags under his eyes, and his young and very young-looking underling with perfectly clear and wrinkle-free skin, makes it clear that the cybersecurity expert is the future arriving (Dewey's other subordinate Craig Jeffers (Ato Essandoh, born 1972) also looks appreciably younger, but does not show Lee's ladder-climbing drive).

movies identify is not poorly-run Super Soldier Assassin programs but rather the daily business of the CIA.²

Jason Bourne is the Protagonist and Danny Zorn is Interesting, and based on *The Bourne Supremacy*'s evidence, Nicky Parsons could be Important. Jason Bourne the secret agent restores (moral) agency to the US imperial project by uncovering its sins, creating room for the reformist vision common to Hollywood movies. The *Bourne* series imagines that the confident action – and possible reform – of the United States as global hegemon could be directed from the top down by a good Deputy Director like Landy.³ CIA officials like Conklin, Abbott, and Landy direct operations and could direct them otherwise. But all that management work is predicated on the work of a bunch of worker cogs in the CIA wheel, of often-uncredited actors fulfilling their role in both the film-world and film-production sense. This is not to say that the techs played by Walton Goggins in *The Bourne Identity*, or Michelle Monaghan in *The Bourne Supremacy* or Danny Zorn are the centre of some alternative Bourne universe. But the background noise of the office support work of intelligence collection and analysis that Danny represents makes the Conklin/Abbott/Landy/Dewey/Lee management villainy and movie-glamour Bourne-network possible. In what follows I will trace Danny's competence in the office and the death it causes. Danny gets killed off in *The Bourne Supremacy* because he does his job too well within the confines of a single (albeit sprawling) case. This violence latent in the system, directed inwards, escalates, as sequels tend to, into another CIA officer who realizes something larger: that the CIA mission and purpose is wrong. For the Bourne movies, the more Bourne learns about his past, the more his complicity in the maintenance of American empire disturbs him. He keeps seeking an ally in upper management who might, one, do the right thing to stop future occurrences while, two, letting Bourne drop off the grid forever. The *Bourne* films, as franchise spy thrillers, accept as a given the legitimacy of the CIA. Each installation concludes with a new person at the near-top of the chain, a new broom that might clean up the CIA. The logic of film franchises (more Bourne) and the institutional maintenance of American empire (someone else can sign off on the violence next time) cannot allow this to happen. The possibility of self-correction runs up against not just the logic of sequels requiring continued corruption and the political reality of leaders who have ascended the ranks of the institution having any interest in changing the institution that placed them in a position of power and influence. I thus turn my attention to Nicky Parsons, a sub-management level worker who shows similar competence to Danny, with slightly more autonomy. As much as the national security state depends on high-level decision-makers, a large institution operates less on trigger-pullers and more on file-pullers and mouse-clickers. I argue that the *Bourne* films reveal a key truth of 21st century American work and political life: the actions of regular people—support staff—offer the chance of a bottom-up (real) change, but the needs of (brand, franchise) management foreclose that change every time.

The Bourne Movies' CIA Org Chart and the Work of Intelligence

² I do not engage with *The Bourne Legacy* (Tony Gilroy, 2012) because neither Nicky Parsons nor Danny Zorn appear in the film.

³ See, for instance, *Hollywood and the CIA: Cinema, Defense and Subversion*.

The CIA does not need an assassin like Jason Bourne to make people disappear. When Conklin tries to goad Bourne into foolish action when he says he could have sent any CIA employee to kill Wombosi in *The Bourne Identity*, he's simply stating how the CIA operates. In *Ghost Plane: The True Story of the CIA Torture Program* Stephen Grey provides a selected list of transfers "involving U.S. agents to foreign or military jurisdictions outside the effective control of American civilian courts of law" (269). Between the release of *The Bourne Identity* and *The Bourne Supremacy*, June 2002 and July 2004, 50 extraordinary renditions transferred prisoners to CIA custody (13 times) as well as to sites in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, and Syria (Grey 277-82). CIA drone strikes kill targets identified as terrorists and also kill the children of people deemed enemies of the state, as in the case of Abdulrahman Anwar al-Awlaki. These operations did not entail researching yachts and stowing away for three days waiting for the right moment to strike. They entailed collecting intelligence on where targets could be found, finding an opportune time and place to make the grab or launch the missile, and executing it. Nicky Parsons does that job in the *Bourne* series, which is why I conclude with her.

Senator Frank Church called the CIA a "rogue elephant" that had run out of control, and the Pike Committee in 1975 sought to determine if the CIA was acting outside of executive control and Congressional oversight. If you're asking the question, you already know the answer. Jason Bourne offers the fantasy bribe of the CIA being a self-correcting machine. On accident. The CIA made Bourne and used him improperly. The blowback to Bourne operations – and their subsequent cover-ups – requires Bourne to work for the CIA *again*, except only for the *good* part of the CIA, as a force to drive reform. The fantasy is that self-correction happens at the top: Bourne reluctantly collaborates with Pamela Landy and Heather Lee, and together they head off the worst possible outcomes. Bourne makes temporary alliances to address today's immediate problem, but never addresses the larger problem of an unconstrained CIA. The legitimacy and function of the CIA is taken as a given. It's a good formula for a film series, but a bad formula for a coherent political statement. That is, if we're looking for the protagonist Bourne, and/or the people at the top of the CIA org chart, to deliver that statement. Danny could have ended the series with what he learned in *The Bourne Supremacy*, but Abbott shivved him, continuing the Bourne-Landy entente into *The Bourne Ultimatum*. It seems an unsolvable problem, with Jason Bourne swimming away as the credits run, with no changes to the CIA. However, in the belated fourth entry, *Jason Bourne*, the series comes to an end with the Cybersecurity Deputy Director Heather Lee looking to take over at the top. But while Heather Lee acts vaguely sympathetic to Bourne, the new boss will be more of the same, and Bourne is doomed to repeat his duel with her occupying the antagonist role. Unless we pull on a thread that begins the film but disappears halfway through: the *Bourne* series' vision of CIA self-correction coming from a lower pay grade as the more dangerous option. Consider, in *The Bourne Supremacy* Danny gets shivved when he discovers Abbott's operation. And when Nicky Parsons turns whistleblower in *Jason Bourne* she is quickly neutralized, not as collateral damage to the hunt for Bourne but on her own merits.

The restriction of analysing the *Bourne* films without any reference to Jason Bourne's actions creates room for the support staff. I will first sketch an org chart and job duty descriptions to see the inside of the *Bourne* films' CIA more clearly. I don't presume that this represents the actual CIA org chart. But what the *Bourne* org chart offers is a mass-audience

framework for understanding how the CIA as an institution could be organized. At the least, figures like Danny Zorn and Nicky Parsons are not decision-makers but rather highly-skilled (and gun range trained) order-takers. Functionaries. In the goal-oriented, problem-solving logic of a Hollywood film, this renders them as minor, supporting characters. The film-CIA offers a starting point for larger cultural engagements with and understandings of the CIA (for fairly obvious reasons there's no published org chart of the CIA). One job title appears frequently in the *Bourne* movies: asset, a euphemism for an assassin whom the suits at Langley deploy to solve problems. But other job titles appear less frequently, making the chain of command less clear. In the 1960s David Wise and Thomas Ross wrote three investigations of US intelligence apparatus, *The U-2 Affair*, *The Invisible Government*, and *The Espionage Establishment*. The chapter "CIA: The Inner Workings" of *The Invisible Government* begins with a short description of Senator Frank Church sending a messenger to deliver a message to the Director of the CIA, only to learn later in the day that the messenger was detained by CIA security. After this bit of color, Wise and Ross deliver a clinical description: "The CIA is, of course, the biggest, most important and most influential branch of the Invisible Government. The agency is organized into four divisions: Intelligence, Plans, Research, Support, each headed by a deputy director" (218). The division of Plans became the Directorate of Operations, but the job stayed the same: it's where the clandestine service and covert operations are handled. It's where assets like Jason Bourne work.

A scene early in *The Bourne Identity* shows the CIA chain of command in action. In a large conference room, Martin Marshall (David Selburg) makes a presentation to a group of about twenty men in suits. He shows a video of an interview with a politician, Nykwana Wombosi (Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje), who is "writing a book about the Agency's history in Africa. He's going to name names. It's basically a shakedown. He's demanding the Agency's help. He wants us to put him back in power in six months, or else. In this interview – and I'll make the tape available to anyone who wants it – he goes on to claim that he's just survived an assassination attempt" (*Identity* 12:04 – 12:22). At "assassination attempt" we cut from a long shot of Marshall presenting to a medium shot of Ward Abbott. Marshall continues with his discussion of Wombosi as the camera slowly draws closer to Abbott, identifying him as the deputy director responsible for the failed attempt, underlined by Marshall's statement, "He says it's us. He says he's got proof." The image shifts back to Marshall as he says, "The Director wants to know if there's any possible shred of truth in this accusation. I've already assured him there's nobody that reckless on my senior staff" (*Identity* 12:24 – 12:37). After Marshall establishes that he's a step below the Director of the CIA, and that the people in the conference room are his "senior staff," another cut again takes us to Abbott, this time in a short tracking shot that shows him exiting an elevator and walking down a hallway. A cut takes us to a mostly-empty cafeteria, where Abbott sits across a table from Conklin, asking "a direct question" about Treadstone's involvement with Wombosi (*Identity* 13:04 – 13:06). The chain of command based on this sequence would look something like this:

- CIA Director (un-named, not shown)
- Director of Operations Martin Marshall
- Deputy Director Ward Abbott
- Special Operations Group Officer Conklin

- Paramilitary Operations Officer Jason Bourne (not exactly CIA but rather sheep-dipped from the military)

Across the entire series of films, the org chart would have a few more layers:

- Director of National Intelligence Edwin Russell (*Jason Bourne*)
- CIA Director Ezra Kramer (*Ultimatum*) / CIA Director Robert Dewey (*Jason Bourne*)
- Director of Operations Martin Marshall (*Identity* and *Supremacy*) / Cybersecurity Operations Division Head Heather Lee (*Jason Bourne*)
- Deputy Director Ward Abbott (*Identity* and *Supremacy*) / Deputy Director Pamela Landy (*Supremacy* and *Ultimatum*) / Deputy Director Noah Vosen (*Ultimatum*) / Deputy Director Craig Jeffers (*Jason Bourne*)⁴
- Special Operations Group Officer Conklin (*Identity*) / Tom Cronin (*Supremacy* and *Ultimatum*)
- Officers of various designations, Danny Zorn, Nicky Parsons⁵
- Paramilitary Operations Officer Jason Bourne
- The dozens of people sitting at computers like the research techs played by Walton Goggins (*Identity*) and Michelle Monaghan (*Supremacy*)

The chain of command established in the first fifteen minutes of *The Bourne Identity* focuses attention on the division of the CIA that occupies the greatest amount of the popular imagination: the clandestine service. While, as Victor Marchetti and John D. Marks observe in *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence*, “the CIA – and particularly former Director Richard Helms – has tried to convince the American public that the analysts and technicians of the Directorates for Intelligence and Science and Technology, the clean white tip of the CIA iceberg, are the agency’s key personnel,” the clandestine service’s “missions, methods, and personnel are quite different from those of the CIA’s other two directorates, which account for only less than a third of the agency’s budget and manpower” (74-5). After 9/11, the façade that intelligence collection was the CIA’s real business crumbled. The Operator Culture that emerged in the early 21st century put the Clandestine Services forward as the good guys. While the *Bourne* series puts clandestine paramilitary actions and their effects up front, it also shows the work that goes into putting an Operator like Jason Bourne into the field. While suits like Abbott and Conklin worry about securing funding and testifying at Congressional oversight hearings and the blowback of failed operations; Langley-headquarters-based officers like Danny Zorn and field support officers like Nicky Parsons (Julia Stiles) keep up the daily work of intelligence—clicking the mouse, reading reports, and analysing them—so that Bourne or Abbott or Conklin can put that intelligence to operational use.⁶

⁴ The CIA being the CIA, job titles and cover titles abound. Pamela Landy at one point identifies herself as CIA Supervisor, while Nicky Parsons identifies Landy both as a Task Force Chief and as a Deputy Director.

⁵ Danny and Nicky, though they appear to be lower on the org chart relative to, say, the Deputy Director, would still have fairly high security clearance and a decent salary, which makes Danny’s wardrobe all the more important. He *could* dress better.

⁶ The operations side of the CIA – where Jason Bourne and Treadstone/Blackbriar are based – has long been a boys club, whereas the intelligence side – which is to say *analysis* – was where women first took up roles in the CIA, as Liza Mundy notes in *The Sisterhood: The Secret History of Women at the CIA*.

The CIA's power stems from the information it collects and through analysis turns into actionable intelligence. In an article that considers "information capacity and the modern state," the political scientists Thomas Brambor, Augustín Goenaga, Johannes Lindvall, and Jan Teorell observe that Michael Mann "noted that one of the most important elements of the state's infrastructural power is information" (178). As Mann puts it, "When people in the West today complain of the growing power of the state, they cannot be referring sensibly to the despotic powers of the state elite itself ... [T]he complaint is more justly levelled against the state's infrastructural encroachments. These powers are now immense ... [I]t stores and can recall immediately a massive amount of information about all of us" (189). The infrastructural power of the CIA, in Mann's account, can be found in, first, its ready access to petabyte upon petabyte of information and, second, a staff that can find, analyse, and deploy that intelligence in the service of a policy objective.

The first scene of CIA information-and-intelligence gathering shows precisely what Mann posits as the growing power of the state through information. After Bourne has escaped the US embassy in Switzerland, the CIA operations center goes through surveillance footage of the area. Already, access to not just consulate footage but to nearby CCTV footage is taken as a given. Conklin leans over a research officer's (Josh Hamilton) shoulder, asking, "That's the best angle of the courtyard?" The nameless desk worker answers, "That's the *only* angle." Conklin immediately asks, "Well what do they have of the street or you know the area? They must have something" (*Identity* 31:59 – 32:07). There's always more footage; such is the CIA's ability to recall a massive amount of information. A few moments later the tech says, "Sir, look at this ... It's an angle of the street, it's some sort of alley, but if you." Conklin interrupts, pointing at the screen: "Enhance" (*Identity* 32:17 – 32:25). The image that the tech enhances leads to a demonstration of the extent of the CIA's access to information and ability to understand the situation and act accordingly. Moving from collection to analysis to action. Quickly. From the license plate to a passport photo of Marie Kreutz (Franke Potente), soon a second research worker (Goggins) can narrate:

Marie Helena Kreutz. She's 26, born outside Hanover. Father was a welder, he died in 87. Still don't have the mother. The grandmother she's still there in Hanover, it looks like she's the anchor for this little domestic disaster. And there's a step-brother. It's tough. The girl is a gypsy, I mean she, she pops up on the grid here and there but it's chaotic at best. She paid some electric bills in Spain in 95. Had a phone in her name for three months in Belgium in 96. No taxes no credit. (*Identity* 32:34 – 33:05)

Marie is clearly a German who came of age after the Maastricht Treaty, when European Union-wide internal migration became a norm. But all that information leads Conklin to over-read the situation. "I don't like her. I want to go deep. Get a phone log for granny and the half-brother, anybody we can cross-file. I want to know every place she's slept in the past six years. Have Paris get these out in the field" (*Identity* 33:06 – 33:21). Seeing Marie as a likely sleeper agent from the Bundesnachrichtendienst or who knows where else, Conklin demands still more information. It takes forty-three seconds of screen time to go from Conklin asking the research officer to "enhance" the CCTV footage to a passport photo to a personal history to Conklin deciding he doesn't like Marie. The compressed timeline on one level is economic storytelling.

On another level it indicates how much information the CIA can access in a short time. And how someone has to analyse that information before Conklin makes the call to act on it. In Mann's conception of state power, what we see in *The Bourne Identity*'s tracking of Marie is that the CIA is high on "infrastructural co-ordination" and that level of informational access and co-ordination starts to look a lot like "despotic power" when Conklin sees that Marie has bounced around the EU as a twentysomething. However, Conklin can only access the information because its access is dispersed across a group of desk officers. Conklin – and Abbott above him – only have the information because it was accessed, analysed and then passed to them by one of their subordinates.

To co-ordinate the firehose of information from human and signals sources, a Danny Zorn becomes necessary. Danny keeps Conklin abreast of all the key developments related to Jason Bourne. After the opening scene of *The Bourne Identity*, in which Bourne is picked up by the fishing trawler, there's a cut to the CIA headquarters, where Danny comes into Conklin's office to report something he learned off-screen, independent of Conklin: "It's been confirmed, sir. Mission failed" (*Identity* 6:13 – 6:17). Soon after, Danny meets Conklin in a parking garage. Conklin asks if Bourne is in Zurich and Danny confirms and explains the provenance of the intelligence, "Yes, he just came in ... He went to the bank. Our source at the bank, that's who called" (*Identity* 25:18 – 25:24). As the search for Bourne begins, Danny, phone still at his ear, updates Conklin: "Zurich police are looking for an American man carrying a red bank bag. Just tore up the embassy and he put two cops in the hospital last night" (*Identity* 27:29 – 27:37). Danny gets the closest thing to a hero shot with this bit of intel, briefly appearing alone in a medium shot, holding the phone by its mouthpiece. And in the lead-up to the final confrontation in *The Bourne Identity*, Bourne calls and Danny – not Conklin, not Abbott – handles the call, first asking Bourne to follow protocol and to "code in," and then tracing the call as Bourne talks to Conklin. Among non-executive CIA headquarters workers, Danny Zorn seems to have the greatest amount of access to power, acting as a gatekeeper and information handler, the person who filters the information to deliver the key piece of intelligence to a decision-maker, whether that's Conklin (in *Identity*) or Abbott (in *Supremacy*). Danny Zorn, by the available evidence, is a capable Man Friday.

CIA Staff Operations Officer Is Not an Example of a Bullshit Job but rather a Job that a Minor Character Does

David Graeber introduces the concept of a bullshit job by defining what it is *not*. A mafia hitman, for example, may be socially destructive, but it's not a bullshit job. As Graeber notes, "insofar as he is willing to own up to the nature of his actual occupation at all, [a hitman] will tend to be pretty up front about what he does. He is unlikely to pretend his work is in any way beneficial to society; even to the extent of insisting it contributes to the success of a team that's providing some useful product or service (drugs, prostitution, and so on), or if he does, the pretense is likely to be paper thin" (7). Danny is not himself a literal hitman or assassin. Danny has a job that the CIA website calls Staff Operations Officer, a role that provides "integration between CIA Headquarters and Directorate of Operations field offices, program management, and operational case management to drive clandestine operations" (CIA "Organization"). At

first glance, the bloodless HR language of the job description makes it possible that a Staff Operations Officer could fall into one of the five main bullshit job categories – flunkies, goons, duct tapers, box tickers, and taskmasters – that Graeber describes in *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. Danny is deeply involved in the support work of assassination projects; he could be classed as a goon. However, “Bullshit jobs are not just jobs that are useless or pernicious; typically, there has to be some degree of pretense and fraud involved as well. The jobholder must feel obliged to pretend that there is, in fact, a good reason why her job exists, even if, privately, she finds such claims ridiculous. There has to be some kind of gap between pretense and reality” (Graeber 8). There’s no pretense in the CIA. As Oliver Boyd Barrett, David Herrera, and James Baumann characterise the series,

The Bourne trilogy portrays the CIA as an organization whose covert activities backfire catastrophically, that can be co-opted by or even inspired by criminal entities within it. Yet arguably such flaws, however regrettable, may sometimes be propelled by characters with good intentions or, despite the bad or incompetent people in the agency, there are others that do their very best to serve their nation intelligently and with humanity. (Boyd-Barrett et al 158)

The CIA of the *Bourne* series shows people who believe they’re providing the essential service of assuring US security and global hegemony. Working at the CIA is not a bullshit job, even if the results, depending on your politics, are bullshit.

Danny the CIA support worker does a *distasteful* job, but nevertheless a job he believes in fully, even if it has strong flunky elements. Certainly, Danny usually follows orders like a flunky. When Bourne calls Langley and demands to meet Conklin in Paris, Conklin immediately turns to Danny, leaning in to whisper, “First flight out. Tell Nicky I’ll call from the car. Tell her to find Picot now. Go” (*Identity* 1:34:26 – 1:34:30). Danny clearly knows what he’s doing, as the next shot shows Conklin boarding a small plane and then moments later walking through Paris. However, Danny escapes total flunky-dom by sometimes registering doubts about his supervisors’ orders. For example, immediately after the quasi-heroic image of Danny delivering a key piece of intelligence about Bourne putting cops in the hospital, Conklin points off-screen – at Danny – delivering the order, “Get everybody up. Do it now. I want ’em all activated.” Danny seems incredulous, putting the phone down on the desk, not in its cradle, and asks, “Wait, all of them at the same time?” (*Identity* 27:39 – 27:45). In response to Danny’s question, Conklin’s reaction visually mimics the rapid escalation from investigation to termination. A cut shows Conklin in a medium shot, and then as Conklin leans forward for emphasis a whip pan creates a jump cut effect, moving from the medium shot into a closeup as Conklin’s gives the order, “You heard me. I want Bourne in a body bag by sundown” (*Identity* 27:45 – 27:48). Danny and the other desk workers put Conklin’s plan into action once the direct order is confirmed: A sequence of fingers typing keyboards leads to a montage of three assets – in Barcelona, Hamburg, and Rome – receiving their orders and starting their preparations to track and kill Bourne.

Danny not only does a range of flunky parts of the job, but also does the intelligence part. He provides “operational case management to drive clandestine operations” that his superiors manage. Without Danny’s support, Conklin and Abbott would neither be able to

direct the Treadstone and Blackbriar projects nor to come close to tracking down and neutralizing Bourne. In *The Bourne Supremacy* Danny provides an expository voice, narrating intelligence analysis steps. For instance, when Jason Bourne uses his “Jason Bourne” passport in Naples, Danny asks a roomful of CIA workers the question they would have learned on their first day at work, “Why Naples? Why now?” (*Supremacy* 37:36 – 37:37). Danny models intelligence work as not simply knowing that Bourne is in Naples but knowing *why* Bourne is in Naples. There has to be a reason, and Danny knows to look for it. Ward Abbott’s proximity to power and his ability to act unilaterally to achieve his goals show that high-level CIA jobs are not Bullshit Jobs. Abbott kills Danny for identifying the falsity of the evidence Abbott had planted. Abbott serves his country’s interests *and* lines his pockets along the way. Abbott’s pay grade means he’s in position to cut deals with Russian oligarchs; Danny is too far down the org chart for that. Danny can *expose* Abbott’s under the table deal with the oligarch, but instead learns that being good at his job will get him killed. For bullshit reasons. Woloch’s observation that, “the mass of soldiers is unspeakable *only as it is an aggregation of distinct individuals*, while Thersites is threatening, *not merely as an individual*, but insofar as his hostility might express (or become) the sentiment of the crowd” applies not just to *The Iliad* but also to the CIA (5). The CIA as an institution is a mass of Langley-based desk officers (soldiers of a sort); but a distinct individual like Danny Zorn who exposes the rot at the top – Ward Abbott lining up with a Russian oligarch – could become the sentiment of the crowd within the CIA or more broadly, as a larger cultural turn away from and/or distrust of covert action and the CIA’s execution of policy.

As I noted above, as a minor character Danny’s “fictional identity emerges *through*, and revolves around, this subordinated position.” and this subordinated position appears in his plot function as well as in his place in the *mise-en-scène* (Woloch 4). Which is not to say that Danny has no agency, but rather that his agency – and fellow minor character Nicky Parsons’, as I’ll show later – is circumscribed. In the conclusion to their book-length study of minor character elaborations in novels like *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *A Thousand Acres*, and *Ahab’s Wife*, Jeremy Rosen argues that, “minor-character elaborations work to expand type into full personhood. Minor characters frequently strike readers as flat, not fully fleshed out, unsatisfying, or ideological – stereotyped – insofar as they are typological” (179-80). Both Woloch and Rosen integrate E.M. Forster’s idea of flat characters into their analysis. As Rosen notes, “Flat characters, in Forster’s account, lack the internal conflict that *must* persist in every individual, even servants!” (28). Woloch, making a case for the political work of the sympathetic imagination minor characters can generate, argues that, “In terms of their essential formal position (the subordinate beings who are delimited in themselves while performing a function for someone else), *minor characters are the proletariat of the novel*” (27). If we put these two claims together, Rosen’s framing of a minor character elaboration’s effect – “Agency, autonomy, individuality conveyed through rich interiority, the right to be heard – these are the often explicit claims made on behalf of minor characters” (28) – would, if we were to get *The Danny Zorn Identity*, see the agency and autonomy in a capable CIA Staff Operations Officer like Danny or an able Program and Plans Officer like Nicky. But, as interesting as a “justice for the unsung government bureaucrat” film might be, a rehabilitative reading of Danny or Nicky that makes them the centre of some alternative Bourne universe minor character elaboration does not interest me. Rather, I take their minor status as essential

to understanding the *Bourne* series' politics. Precisely *because* Danny and Nicky do non-bullshit jobs at the CIA – and ones that are far more common than Jason Bourne's – taking the films at their word to see what agency Danny and Nicky *do* have, both within the narrative and more allegorically, and why that potential agency gets closed off will show the boundaries of plausible reforms to the CIA *and* the logic behind those boundaries.

The Bourne Identity establishes the template for the Bourne-chasing the CIA does throughout the series. Bourne appears and the CIA sets up a control centre staffed by computer-bound officers who find the information a manager requests. When Conklin establishes his control centre Danny repeatedly appears in two-shots with him (Fig. 1, Fig. 2). After Conklin says that he wants Bourne “in a body bag by sundown”, he micromanages to the extent that he indicates exactly where he wants a map placed on a wall. After exhorting the office to “work it!”, a two-shot shows Conklin looking back at Danny after “available agents in location” have been identified, followed by the same sequence of establishing shots of city-agent introduced in long shot-agent gets orders on their phone. While Conklin does appear alone in the frame in the original control centre scene, two-shots show minor characters like Danny, subordinates one step above the nameless order-taking CIA officers, play a key role in the operation. For instance, Nicky Parsons calls CIA Langley headquarters to inform Conklin that “Wombosi went to the morgue. He saw the body. He didn't buy it” (*Identity* 58:10 – 58:14). Conklin hangs up but remains silent after the end of the call. Much like the Naples scene described above, Danny narrates a step in the intelligence process. With just the tip of his head visible on the edge of the frame, Danny's almost disembodied voice stands in for Conklin's thinking, asking “Sir, what do you want to do?” (*Identity* 58:33 – 58:35). The disembodied voice of intelligence activities appears again, halfway through the film, when Danny delivers news of the Bourne pursuit. A handheld follow shot of Danny entering Conklin's office keeps Danny in the front left of the image, creating a two-shot for the line of dialog “Paris police have found the vehicle”, followed by a closeup of Conklin registering shock (*Identity* 1:08:31 – 1:08:34). Danny's update of the situation in Paris comes after Nicky Parsons is shown monitoring the Paris police scanner. Nicky collects the intelligence in the field; Danny delivers an intelligence report to Conklin at HQ; sometimes Danny relays the intelligence-collection priorities. When Bourne calls in after killing The Professor, Conklin tells Danny to tell Nicky “find Picot now” in a close-in two-shot. When Abbott starts taking a more hands-on interest in the situation, the two-shots during the Bourne call to Conklin change from Danny-Conklin to Conklin-Abbott, showing the boss-subordinate relationship in a similar way. That is, two-shots formally mediate Danny's boss's thinking – the very thing a capable subordinate does – and also make visible the ways Danny narratively mediates the work of his colleagues for his boss.



Figure 1. *The Bourne Identity* Danny Zorn and Conklin two shot 1



Figure 2. *The Bourne Identity* Danny Zorn and Conklin two shot 2

When Conklin gives Danny an order to pass on to Nicky, the chain of command comes across clearly, both in who is included verbally and who is excluded visually. The dialog finds Conklin giving the order to Danny who will in turn relay the order to Nicky. The two-shot of Conklin and Danny visually isolates them from the other person in the office during the scene: Deputy Director Abbott. It's still Conklin's operation at this point. Conklin's operation fails, but Danny keeps his job because he adheres to the chain of command like a good subordinate. When Bourne can't be brought in, Abbott eliminates Conklin with the asset Conklin himself ordered into place via Danny and then Nicky. The same sequence, with a new figure at the head. The last scenes of *The Bourne Identity* cement this new partnership (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4).

At first, Abbott lurks on the edge of the frame or in the dark background as he tells Danny to shut down the control centre Conklin established. Later, at a Congressional committee meeting, Abbott sits front and centre with Danny behind him, half a dozen binders piled on his lap, serving the new boss by handling all the information and providing the right binder when necessary. By the time *The Bourne Supremacy* takes place, Danny has become Abbott's trusted subordinate. For instance, in the Berlin control centre that Landy sets up to pursue Bourne, Abbott and Landy butt heads over the search. As their discussion ends, Danny goes over to the kitchenette where Abbott is standing and whispers "I need to show you something" (*Supremacy* 59:29- 59:32). The two-shot shows Danny leaning over Abbott, almost whispering into the top of his head, promising the delivery of intelligence directly into Abbott's brain. During the sequence that follows, Danny enumerates how the false flag Abbott staged worked well *and* how it was over-engineered in a way that doesn't make sense for someone as skilled as Bourne. Danny takes Abbott to the building where the prints were planted and explains (Abbott-via-Kirill's) tradecraft in a sequence that uses three kinds of shot: close-ups of the details Danny narrates, a two-shot with Danny's face in focus and Abbott a fuzzy presence in the foreground, and a two-shot with Abbott's face in focus and Danny a fuzzy presence. The closer Danny gets to explaining how Abbott's plan failed, the closer the shots get to faces. The shots remain two shots, even as Abbott shivs Danny, to emphasise that the two are bound together, even as Abbott's plan fails. Post-Danny-killing, Abbott shows two key differences between minor characters and antagonists in *The Bourne Supremacy*. After Bourne escapes from the Hotel Brecker, Abbott arrives at the scene and acts as Deputy Director in need of an update. Teddy says that Bourne has disappeared, but that Nicky is back at the Westin hotel. Still thrown off by Danny's discovery, Abbott ham-fistedly starts establishing an alibi for the killing, asking, "Where's Danny Zorn? He oughtta head over there and debrief her" (*Supremacy* 1:12:15 – 1:12:20). Within the film narrative, not even an hour after he's shivved Danny, Abbott faux-naively asks after his right-hand man, someone who consistently shares two-shots with him at key moments. His Danny-less presence and poorly feigned confusion over Danny's whereabouts indicate that Abbott knows the end is coming for him soon. In narrative terms, Abbott has a stronger grasp of the big picture. But beyond the film world, in the realm of Hollywood entertainment, Abbott, as played by Brian Cox, gets to be *funny*. Danny, on the other hand, does his job well and kisses his superior's ass but Gabriel Mann gets no spotlight scene like Brian Cox's faux-naif "where's Danny Zorn?" Danny/Gabriel Man acts, but as a minor character. In the end he's acted on. He works for the Agency but exercises no agency. The boundaries of Danny's ability as an agent – his agency – are drawn with Abbott's knife point. Dying at work, worked to death, he is, in a way, the proletariat of the *Bourne* series (Woloch 27).

Here I want to emphasise that I'm not saying Danny and/or Nicky are part of the proletariat (they're not), but that they occupy that role in the *Bourne* series; they're *minor characters* and the "*proletariat of the [film]*" according to the critical logic I draw from Woloch and Rosen. However, if we look at costuming and casting, it's pretty clear that Danny is a state-university-graduate striver, relationally subordinate in a number of ways (rank, social capital, etc). The costuming for Danny gives him poor fitting suits and bad ties; Danny finds a way to awkwardly wear his ID card lanyard. Even at the level of appearance, Danny is not part of the establishment. He's a scholarship boy made good not the Yale/Ivy elite that Abbott, Landy,

and Nicky clearly are. Gabriel Mann's acting career resembles Danny's CIA career. Before the *Bourne* movies he had played supporting roles on television and film, never the lead. The elite states for Abbott, Landy, and Nicky appear both within the narrative and within the performers' career arcs. Abbott has a practiced East Coast accent and wears nice suits; Brian Cox is a Scottish Olivier-award winning stage actor putting on that East Coast accent. Landy wears well-tailored suits and shows mastery of details borne of education and experience; Joan Allen is also a highly decorated stage actor, winner of Drama Desk and Tony Awards, and had been nominated for an Oscar three times before playing Landy. Finally, Nicky's cover story is that she's a graduate student studying in France, not exactly the stuff of directional state university graduates; Julia Stiles made her mark in *10 Things I Hate About You* and *Save the Last Dance*, ending both films as an accepted student at prestige schools Sarah Lawrence and Julliard. Jason Bourne splits the difference. He's military and wears tactical gear half the time, but his father was in the foreign service; Matt Damon became a star and above the title leading man playing a smart janitor in *Good Will Hunting*, and that residual working-class position lingers in many of his later roles.



Figure 3. *The Bourne Identity* “it’s done”



Figure 4. *The Bourne Identity* Congressional testimony two shot

Conclusion: Danny's Death, Nicky's Trip to Iceland, and Taming the Rogue Elephant

Before he gets killed, Danny narratively mediates work done in the field, delivering updates to his superiors at CIA headquarters in Langley. The two-shots Danny shares with Conklin and later Abbott thus carry with them the *other* subordinate CIA officers whose work Danny mediates. To return to my analysis of Danny above, *Nicky Parsons* calls CIA Langley headquarters to inform Conklin that "Wombosi went to the morgue" and Danny in turn relays her intelligence. Later, Danny tells Conklin that, "Paris police have found the vehicle" after *Nicky Parsons* appears monitoring the Paris police scanner. In the other direction, Danny relays Conklin's order to activate the assassin Picot to *Nicky Parsons*. Danny acting as the embodiment of the work CIA field officers like Nicky Parsons lines up with McSweeney's critique of the series:

While the Bourne series seems to be politically progressive, far removed from the overt revenge dramas of Rambo and Taken in its sustained criticism of American foreign policy, it still embodies a narrative in which personal redemption is achieved through violence and features highly stereotyped (if more human than in the Bond series) representations of women. (108)

In the extended analysis that follows, McSweeney focuses on Marie and Landy. But as McSweeney was writing before *Jason Bourne* was made, I want to close by analysing Nicky not only *The Bourne Identity* and *The Bourne Supremacy*, but also in *Jason Bourne*, a film in which she plays a more substantial role. My analysis will not focus on gender politics (*Jason Bourne* does nothing to call for an update to McSweeney's account), but on the way the series' views on foreign policy, when seen through Nicky's actions and example, are not exactly "politically progressive". The stereotypical representation of an invisible woman working in

the CIA comes across clearly in *The Bourne Supremacy*, when Nicky is called in because of her previous operational interactions with Bourne (and implied romance). Not only does she exist only as an adjunct to Bourne, but her job is something of a mystery to Landy and her deputy Cronin. Nicky delivers her CIA cover, “student in Paris,” in an isolating closeup (*Supremacy* 35:42 – 35:44). But when Cronin mentions Treadstone, a cut switches to a wide shot that includes not just Cronin and Nicky, but also Abbott and Danny, all sharing the frame, with a significant cut away to Abbott just as Nicky begins her job description, indicating that the next answer may not be entirely true. “I had two responsibilities. One was to coordinate logistical operations. The other was to monitor the health of the agents... Their mental health. Because of what they had been through they were prone to a variety of problems” (*Supremacy* 35:47 – 35:58). Within *The Bourne Supremacy*’s narrative, Nicky has to reinforce the Bourne mythology, and the scene plays with new-to-the-case Landy not knowing exactly what she does. But to be fair to Landy, what Nicky says she does is not exactly on view in *The Bourne Identity*. In the first film of the series, Nicky maintains and starts to break down a safe house, monitors police radio and collects open source sigint and delivers orders to assets like Castel and The Professor. She does most of this without sharing the frame with Conklin or Abbott. She has greater autonomy, narratively and formally. But when her job description scene ends, Landy tells Nicky, “you’re coming with us” with Nicky trapped in a frame between Landy’s deputy Cronin and Abbott. So much for Nicky’s autonomy (*Supremacy* 36:20 – 36:22). For the moment. As soon as the team gets set up in their Berlin control centre, Cronin argues that Bourne “is making his first mistake” by surfacing in Naples. Nicky corrects him. “It’s not a mistake. They don’t make mistakes. They don’t do random. There’s always an objective, always a target” (*Supremacy* 37:42 – 37:52). Nicky’s dialog comes in an uninterrupted six-second closeup, an extremely long shot duration in the film’s choppy editing style (*The Bourne Supremacy* has an average shot length of 2.4 seconds and a median shot length of 1.7 seconds) (Quieroz). A whip pan moves over to Danny, and Landy’s voice serves as a sound bridge from Danny to a medium shot of Landy with her subordinate Cronin and the support officer Kim (Michelle Monaghan) as she says “the objectives and targets always came from us. Who’s giving them to him now?” A cut goes to a tight closeup of Nicky as she answers, “Scary version?” and then after a reaction shot of Landy in extreme closeup, Nicky appears between Danny on the left of the frame and Abbott on the right: “He is” (*Supremacy* 37:53 – 37:59). Nicky’s position as a more autonomous field officer who supported Bourne makes her more aware – and more dangerous – than Danny. Nicky may know a little more on her own, but she remains squeezed between the people who run Treadstone from CIA Langley headquarters (Fig. 5). Brandon Taylor describes the “paperwork movie” as “a competence fantasy, a fantasy in the power of paying attention and the dangers of not reading the fine print. But actual life is like. Well, nobody is reading the fine print and our financial and healthcare systems are failing because of it.” He opposes the power of reading the fine print to the way competence appears in most Hollywood films of the 21st century: “Competence Porn is too shooty shooty gun bang bang” (@blgtlyr). Why not both? Jason Bourne’s “shooty shooty gun bang bang” competence comes *after* Nicky’s support worker competence; the fights and chases arrive as the result of paperwork. In this light, a highly skilled back-office support worker like Nicky could be the lever to the *Bourne* series’ “politically progressive” critique of the CIA; her access to

intelligence and operations offers to wedge open the CIA, to give Bourne the access to make the necessary changes. *Jason Bourne* closes off that potential.

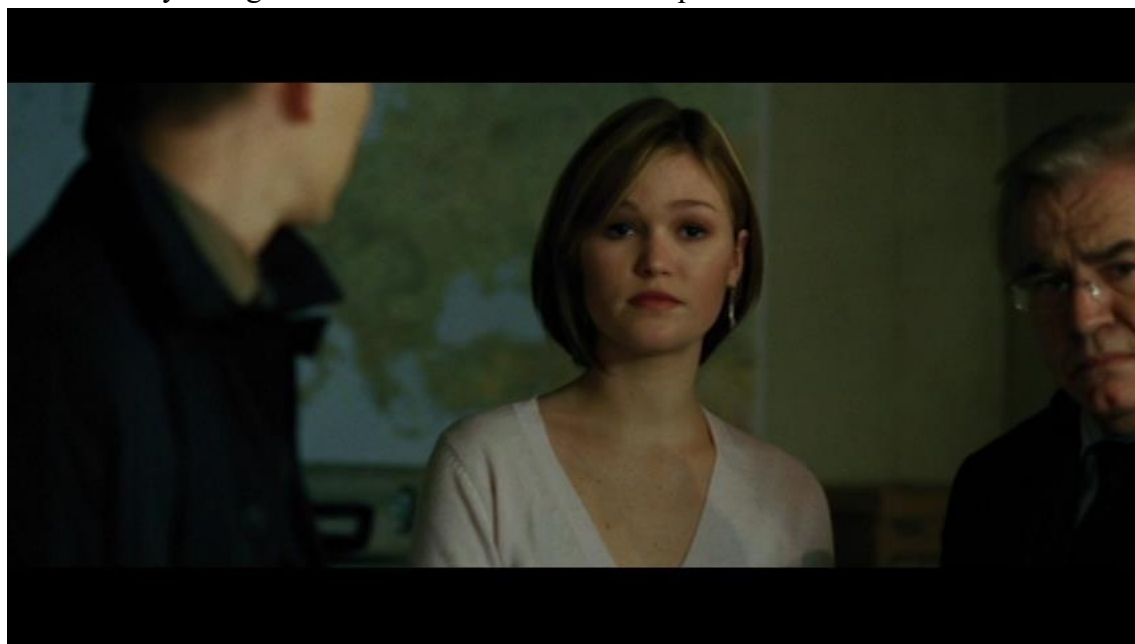


Figure 5. *The Bourne Supremacy* “Scary version? He is.”

Jason Bourne introduces what seems to be its conflict with Nicky going to a Reykjavik hacker space, a grotty mirror image of the CIA Control Room, to access the CIA mainframe for black ops material. Nicky goes to Reykjavik to help Julian Assange stand-in Christian Dassault, and while she goes through the file tree, she appears alone in closeups. Nicky then meets with Bourne in Athens, seeking his help to change the CIA from without and within. The meeting at the Athens protest echoes the Nicky-Bourne meeting at a Berlin protest in *The Bourne Supremacy*. The series has a particular affection for compulsive repetition of stagings and dialog. Nicky enacts this repetition, telling Bourne there’s a *new* program, Iron Hand, that’s even worse than all the previous ones. A two shot follows Nicky and Bourne as they navigate the escalating danger of police at the protest and discuss the importance of Nicky’s discovery and how sharing it with Dassault will make a difference (Fig. 6). That is, Nicky has access to the files of what the CIA actually does, which can heal Bourne and change the CIA.⁷ Narratively this makes her a danger and necessitates killing her off. Repeating Marie’s death, during the escape The Asset (Vincent Cassel) aims for Bourne but hits Nicky. Repeating Danny’s death, Nicky shares no wise words. But as a field officer *somewhat* similar to the Professor, Nicky gets partway there, gasping out “no, don’t” while she throws a USB with the key data on it (*Jason Bourne* 33:38 – 33:49). Nicky dies in Athens, last seen in an extreme long shot, a dead body lit up by a police helicopter’s spotlight, a last ironic moment alone in the frame, in the spotlight. However, the Dassault echt-wikileaks narrative thread disappears after Bourne meets Dassault in Berlin. Instead, the film’s interest turns to the Mark Zuckerberg stand-in Aaron Kalloor (Riz Ahmed) narrative. Nicky and Dassault disappear not only because

⁷ The lower-level office worker providing the necessary access to key information to the system-fighting hero, often at significant professional and personal risk, is a staple in journalism, private investigator, and espionage/CIA-linked movies, to name but three genres.

the files were deleted (and Bourne beats Dassault severely) but also because they would short-circuit the way the films create their own sequels. Formally, while Matt Damon was getting on a bit, 46 at the time *Jason Bourne* came out, and the odds of another sequel were negligible, the logic of franchise filmmaking means that Bourne can never resolve his conflict with the CIA, especially with information and initiative from the lower orders like Nicky.



Figure 6. *Jason Bourne* Jason Bourne and Nicky Parsons at Athens protest

In the *Bourne* series, CIA work stands in for work as well as American politics, and the films imagine the potential to change both for the better. Reform might *possibly* come from the upper management level. But reform never comes to pass. *Bourne* movies treat sheep-dipped special forces operatives and executives as the motor of history. Support workers like Nicky and Danny deliver key information and sometimes perform key “politically progressive” actions alone in the frame, even in closeup. But to be alone in a closeup invites danger. Minor characters might briefly appear in closeup, but not for long. The minor characters who might help Bourne, who might deliver on a “politically progressive” change to the CIA, are always subordinated, narratively, formally, and politically. Bourne and the CIA higher-ups can survive in closeups because they embody Hollywood’s reified Great (Hit)Man Theory of history. The *Bourne* series shows the CIA is run by a corrupt leadership cadre and even goes so far as to show that the CIA is institutionally corrupt. And the rot goes to where any potential for change might be found. Danny Zorn and Nicky Parsons’ minor character action shows that not only is the real work of the CIA to be found in crowded open-plan offices where desk jockeys pound away at keyboards, but also that’s where we can find a path out of the formula that keeps making Bourne and Bourne narratives necessary. If CIA office jobs that manage global hegemony are just like any other office job, and reform that must always come from the top can be perpetually deferred, what remains but the fantasy of the magic bullet of change that only a trained assassin can offer?

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Rieger, Christopher. *Faulkner's Fashion: Gender, Race, Class, and Clothing*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2025.

Clothing, one of life's most powerful and most pervasive stories, represents a tale that is told before we can speak, before we can explain, and before we can fully understand or appreciate the associated plot and themes. Sometimes the story is one told with intention, through iterative drafting and narration. Other times, clothing's story is told for us. Because "clothing is so bound up in the self we present to the world," (Rieger 56) the premise of clothing as story sits quietly behind much of what human beings do every day: we read the clothes others wear, we select garments with intention or subconsciously out of habit, and we move through a world stitched of fabrics, labor, histories, and assumptions.

In *Faulkner's Fashion*, Rieger takes this everyday reality and turns it into an expansive critical analysis that treats clothing not as a decorative detail interspersed throughout William Faulkner's fiction, but as a materially grounded force that shapes, if not fashions, identity, power, and interpretation. Here, clothing becomes a main character, a plot-driver, and a voice framed with intentionality. The result is a purposeful study of clothing that fits well in the wardrobe of existing Faulkner scholarship and feels especially timely in an era attuned to bodies, objects, and what our material choices say about us.

Sylvia Plath's (1962) *The Applicant* (line 30), "naked as paper to start," comes to mind, as Rieger unites paper and body, both naked at origin, in a richly descriptive and highly readable text. By treating clothing as a readable system of everyday meaning, one that organizes bodies, visibility, and belonging as it conceals shared nakedness, *Faulkner's Fashion* engages directly with material culture, identity, and the social life of objects. Rieger demonstrates that clothing

matters in Faulkner's work not only as symbol (of self, identity, desire, shame, authority, and more) but also as object (thing, artifact, actant, and evidence).

Throughout *Faulkner's Fashion*, Rieger makes space for readers to continuously recalibrate and refine the fabric of their attention. The *Introduction* functions as both orientation and invitation: it reviews existing scholarship, establishes why fashion deserves sustained analysis, and frames clothing as a subject worthy of sustained attention. The book is organized into four parts: an Introduction followed by three sections that map clothing onto gender, race, and class (Rieger 31). This structure creates space for focused inquiry and establishes fashion as a connective tissue across Faulkner's corpus, linking intimate scenes to broader social systems. This richly detailed and well-suited argument is then threaded through close reading and conceptual framing, as Rieger demonstrates, using Faulkner's work as an example, that clothing is both object and actant. Garments *do* things. They constrain bodies, invite judgment, signal belonging or exclusion, carry histories of production, and sometimes become the very medium through which violence or vulnerability is expressed and reinforced.

The text's three main sections apply this lens to Faulkner texts. One of the book's greatest pleasures is its propensity to send readers back to familiar novels with freshly sharpened eyes. In *Clothing and Gender*, for example, Rieger explores how clothing participates in the construction and policing of gendered identity, including how garments become a script for performance, a site of anxiety, and/or a tool of regulation. Readers encounter Faulkner's characters dressed into and of social expectations that can be embraced, resisted, or weaponized. In *Clothing and Race*, clothing becomes a material index of racialized power: who is permitted dignity, whose labor produces the cloth, whose body is exposed or protected, and how style or uniform can encode domination. *Clothing and Class* similarly presses clothing into the foreground as a marker of

aspiration, inheritance, scarcity, and social sorting, where the difference between “having” and “appearing to have” can be as consequential as money itself.

Across these sections, Rieger successfully establishes clothing as possibly the single most important material thread running through Faulkner’s corpus. The argument is persuasive in its cumulative effect: once you begin tracking garments, textiles, uniforms, dresses, workwear, and the language of fabric, it becomes impossible not to see (both literally and thematically) how frequently material culture is doing narrative and ideological work. Clothing becomes a tool for observation, interpretation, and even generation: it helps readers “read” Faulkner’s characters, settings, and conflicts, while also offering readers a concrete entry point into challenging themes. Not only is the text itself highly readable, but like any good fashion trend, it inspires modeling and invites ongoing conversation. The text’s expansive pedagogical usefulness is another of the book’s quiet triumphs. *Faulkner’s Fashion* does not require a reader to arrive dressed as a Faulkner specialist. Rather, readers will grow to appreciate that “Faulkner understood and manipulated the connection between clothing and identity (real and perceived) through his life” and work (Rieger 28).

The text functions as both vest and opening, something readers can “wear” as a guide while entering (or re-entering) Faulkner’s novels. Because clothing is both immediate and complex, it provides infinite opportunities to move analysis from the tangible (i.e., what is worn, what is it made of, who made it, who notices it) to the interpretative (i.e., what is signaled, what is concealed, what systems are enforced). Rieger’s approach models a form of inquiry that is accessible without being simplistic: the object stays in view even as the analysis expands. Because fashion is one of popular culture’s most legible systems, circulating through bodies, media, labor, and consumption, Rieger’s study has relevance far beyond Faulkner studies.

Ultimately, *Faulkner's Fashion* is masterfully stitched. It offers a deeper appreciation for clothing as both storyteller and story. It centers Faulkner while also creating space for broader contemplation about bodies, objects, and identity. Readers will come away not only with a deeper understanding of Faulkner's fiction, but with a heightened awareness of their own daily negotiations with clothing: the choices we make, the messages we broadcast (intentionally or not), and the stories our garments carry. *Faulkner's Fashion* is a highly accessible and versatile work that offers opportunities for critical analysis and reflection of today's fashion and forms of address. With more of Faulkner's work released into the public domain in 2026 (The Author's Guild 2026) and even more available on Project Gutenberg (2026), now might be the perfect time to try on, or try again, Faulkner's collection. Enjoy this timeless work and the stories it brings to life.

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“Martin, Jr., Alfred L. *Fandom For Us, By Us: The Pleasures and Practices of Black Audiences*. NYC: NYC Press, 191 pages.

As an audience researcher, I have often found myself despairing over how white-focused my self-selecting respondent pools can be and the knock-on impact such demographics have on wider fan studies. To that end, Martin Jr’s book, focusing specifically upon Black American audiences, is a welcome addition to the literature. Perhaps most interestingly, however, is Martin Jr’s choice to focus upon the *why* of Black fandoms rather than the *how*. This is an important distinction—mechanisms of fan activities are often socio-culturally and socio-economically limited and can often be stigmatised in such a way that an already marginalised audience may be unwilling to discuss them with an academic writing a book for public consumption. Focusing upon the reasons behind Black fandoms also constitutes looking at Black fan identities as positively-constructed rather than negatively (i.e., focusing upon what it is not) because that sort of construction would potentially turn the book into a comparison between Black and white/non-Black fandoms, which is counter to Martin Jr’s stated aim of centring Black fan practices. While avoiding that does mean that some aspects of contemporary fan theory are left out of the book—though no book can encompass everything—by learning about the whys of Black fandoms and fan practices, Martin Jr creates a strong foundation for future research on the how(s).

Martin Jr structures his work with a chapter on each of his four ‘C’s: class (prima ballerina Misty Copeland), clout (*Black Panther*), canon (*The Wiz*), and comfort (*The Golden Girls*). Of particular delight to me is the fact that not only does Martin Jr include his list of questions in an appendix but also gives a great deal of detail on his respondents in three of the four case studies (members of *The Wiz* fan group Potluck are not described in this way). While I realise that may seem irrelevant to scholars outside fan/audience or other ethnographic research, for those of us who engage with audiences regularly, this information is critical for us to truly understand why people engage in certain practices or why they become fans of something in the first place. That aspect of the book alone makes it invaluable.

The first chapter, focusing upon fans of Black prima ballerina Misty Copeland, shows how Black fans, particularly Black women, use ‘classed distinctions’ (54) regarding the idea that she can be a role model for other Black dancers as well as making perceived high-culture accessible to Black audiences. The second chapter, on fans of the Marvel film *Black Panther*, analyses the linked idea of clout, or the use of influence for a social good. In the case of the film, Martin Jr argues that Black fans who spent money to see the film (so that its financial success would lead to similar content being produced), enjoyed its Afrofuturism and saw its characters as role models. He also notes the complexity of the fandom and its relationships with both Black activism and with the undeniably racist media industries which would also make for a great research project. The third chapter focuses upon Black ‘canon,’ or a group of accepted Black texts that serve a communal cultural function. Canonical texts are often also intergenerational; one of the key points Martin Jr raises throughout all three of these chapters is the need for and expectation of Black role models for younger Black people expressed through the chosen texts.

While all three of the previous chapters are extremely interesting and could easily be expanded into books of their own, for me, it is the chapter on comfort where Martin Jr’s work truly excels. Drawing upon qualitative interviews with fans of *The Golden Girls*, he finds that his respondents find joy and comfort in the series because, as he states, “when Black bodies are absent, there is no need to make Black viewing political” (160). The connections between the series’ representations upon a chosen or found family who engage in verbal sparring and the attendant construction of home can lead to the series resonating with Black fans— i.e., “feeling seen” (128), which is another common thread of why Black audiences become fans— but, he also suggests that such fandom if home-focused rather than leading to engagement with wider fandom or with fan activities like conventions. While Martin Jr acknowledges that potential sociocultural and socioeconomic barriers to such participation, as I noted earlier on in this review, I would have liked to see a bit more depth of discussion regarding that possibility rather than the assumption that ties the fandom to private/domestic spheres. That said, no book can accomplish absolutely everything,

and this chapter, like the others before it, provides a solid foundation for future research on Black fans' participation in public or semi-public fan events.

By centering the whys of Black audiences, Martin Jr has provided a critically important window into fans and fan practices that have otherwise been shut to the majority-white areas of fan studies. Not only is his work excellent in its own right, but it also illustrates the importance of diversity in academia, as he notes that his shared identity and culture made his respondents more comfortable sharing information with him. In many ways, Martin Jr has become a role model for young Black scholars who dream of becoming professors or researchers. Hopefully, his work will inspire others to build upon it and give us all a greater understanding of the many fandoms that so many of us around the world share.

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No Other Choice. Dir. Park Chan-wook. Screenplay by Park Chan-wook, Lee Kyoung-mi, Don McKellar, Jahye Lee, based on the Donald E. Westlake novel, *The Ax*. Perf. Lee Byung-hun, Son Ye-jin, Park Hee-soon, Lee Sung-min, Yeom Hye-ran, Cha Seung-won, Kim Woo-seung, Choi So-yul. Moho Film, 2025.

No Other Choice is a dark comedy depicting the threat of the collapse of the Korean middle class through the desperate struggle of a patriarch, Man-su (Lee Byung-hun) who represents Korean Generation X. Director Park Chan-wook illustrates how a Korean patriarch's job loss leads to a crisis of the Korean middle class, and the director links this crisis to the threat of losing a home, which serves as the physical symbol of the family. Man-su desperately tries to protect his family and home at the expense of his soul, which Ty Burr also points out in his review (par. 8). This review will explore the plot of the film and discuss how Park portrays the threat to the Korean middle class socioeconomically and psychologically.

The following section contains a major plot of the film; therefore, the reader's discretion is advised. The film opens by depicting a happy Korean middle-class family barbecuing eels that Man-su received from his paper-manufacturing company. Before they enjoy dinner, Man-su suggests a one-minute family hug and says, "I have it all." However, this middle-class family's happiness abruptly ends when Man-su is laid off by the new American owners of the company. He shares this news with his wife, Miri (Son Ye-jin), but contrary to his expectations, she consoles him and cuts unnecessary spending. Three months pass, but none of Man-su's interviews were successful, and Miri decides to sell their house due to financial hardship.

One day, while Man-su is watching a YouTube video about Choi Sun Chul (Park Hee-soon), a famous line manager at Moon Paper Company. Miri says Man-su is much better than

Choi to boost his morale, adding, “Why can’t he get hit by lightning?” Her remark gives Man-su an idea that he may have a chance to be reemployed if he can eliminate his potential competitors, including Choi. Man-su narrows his tentative victims to two: Gu Bum-mo (Lee Sung-min), who has immersed himself in liquor, mourning the loss of his job, and Go Sijo (Cha Seung-won), who became a shoe shop owner after being fired from a paper company. Unfortunately, Man-su’s murder scheme does not go as smoothly as he planned. What makes matters worse is that Man-su’s son, Si-won (Kim Woo-seung), is arrested for robbing a cell phone shop. As his family teeters on the brink of collapse, Man-su becomes more adamant about confronting the family crisis. Miri, realizing Man-su’s suspicious behavior and what he has done for the family, embraces him wholeheartedly. Finally, Man-su is successfully reemployed after removing his competitors, and the film ends with a scene where he works alone in the middle of an AI-automated paper-manufacturing factory.

From the very beginning of the film, Park emphasizes the threat of losing a house, which ultimately symbolizes the collapse of the Korean middle class. Man-su encounters the crisis of losing his childhood home when Miri puts the property up for sale due to the financial hardship caused by Man-su’s unexpectedly prolonged unemployment. For Man-su, selling his house does not merely mean a change of residence; it is the loss of the nostalgic family haven he has striven to build for years. The family crises that relentlessly torment Man-su ironically emphasize the agony of the unemployed Korean Generation X patriarch as Man-su finds it overwhelming to eliminate his competitors and secure reemployment as a breadwinner. The diegetic situation in which employment opportunities are desperately scarce for a man in his fifties—to the point where Man-su *has no choice* but to kill all his competitors for one job opening—is not significantly different from the reality in which audiences reside. For this reason, this dark

comedy adds an extra layer of bitterness to the dire situation of Man-su, who represents the desperate Korean Generation X patriarch.

To illustrate Man-su's downward spiral psychologically, Park utilizes brutal corporeal symbolism that has become his directorial trademark. For audiences familiar with Park's other signature work, *Oldboy* (2003), a thematically connected scene will not go unnoticed in this film as well. Man-su's toothache begins after he loses his job. Although his wife works as a dental hygienist, he leaves it untreated. Then, in the latter half of the film, just before he kills Sun Chul, he breaks his nine-year sobriety and, as if a leash had finally been cut loose, he yanks out the very tooth with a wrench. From this moment on, Man-su becomes bold, even brazen, as though he had transformed into an entirely different person. His sobriety had been a form of penance and a kind of promise made to his wife and family, stemming from a past mistake in which he was drunk and struck his son. In other words, abstaining from alcohol was the moral baseline Man-su had established: a vow not to hurt others. Breaking that vow signifies that he is no longer willing to be bound by morality. And yet, the weight of being a breadwinner who must provide for his family, combined with the brutal reality that opportunities for employment only open when someone else is murdered, continuously subjects Man-su to pangs of conscience and inner conflict. The toothache symbolizes the last remaining bastion of conscience and self-reproach that has tormented him. Once he crosses the forbidden line of alcohol, he pulls out that bastion without hesitation. The notes he had habitually jotted down on his hand served as moral signposts of conscience for the pure-hearted and tender Man-su. But, for Man-su, who has now crossed his last moral threshold, these signposts are no longer needed. The fact that he endured the toothache for so long reflects the prolonged inner struggle he had been quietly wrestling with all along.

After the film ends, audiences will find themselves turning to the question it poses over in their minds: if you were placed in Man-su's situation within a neoliberal capitalist society, would you choose to live on as the good-natured Man-su, enduring a toothache, or would you become the Man-su who pulls out his own tooth and eliminates the rivals standing in his way, even at the cost of abandoning his own moral values?

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Burr, Ty. "'No Other Choice:' Four Stars and a Full Body Count." *The Washington Post*, 8 Jan. 2026, www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/movies/2026/01/08/no-other-choice-korean-movie-review. Accessed 8 Feb. 2026.

Peterson, Jon. *Playing at the World, Volume 1: The Invention of Dungeons and Dragons*. The MIT Press, 2024.

Nothing exists in a vacuum—least of all the complex beast that is Dungeons and Dragons. Created and produced in 1974, this infinitely varied collaborative storytelling game has become increasingly popular, prompting a surge in efforts to slow down and study the beast, its style and inception. Enter Jon Peterson and his rework of his influential 2012 text, *Playing at the World*. In this second edition and volume 1 of 2, published in 2024, Peterson approaches game studies from a historical perspective, using D&D to explore a larger point about how our history influences what, and how, we play. In volume 1, *The Invention of Dungeons and Dragons*, Peterson studies the creation of the game, using research-based information about how role-playing games were originally made to argue that the context and origins of D&D are important to understanding its structure and later popularity.

A large portion of this book discusses the individual rules that make D&D unique and their origin. The rules come from many different places—older wargames, miniature games, collaboration through fanzines or Amateur Press Associations (APAs), and of course, from the minds of its creators. Peterson gives the rules of the game context, and details how roleplaying games rose from several disparate gaming and sci-fi fantasy communities and the fandom information networks which connected them. The book covers the “invention and release” of the first edition of D&D and its development between the years 1964-1976 (XI). First, Peterson gives examples of early iterations of games that would later inspire D&D. Wargamers in the 60s played two distinct types of games that were later combined in innovative ways—miniature games and paper and pencil board games. These war games were not prolific, and thus often had to be played

through mail-in games found through the “Opponents Wanted” section of the *Avalon Hill General*, which connected some of the first minds that spawned D&D. Within those pages, Gary Gygax, one of the creators of D&D, first claimed his willingness to “collaborate on game design” (30). He would be taken up on this offer many times, most importantly with Dave Arneson, D&D’s co-creator. Peterson then shows the shift to a fantasy setting with groups like the “Castle and Crusade Society,” wargamers who decided that a more fantastical and personalized approach was needed (45). The communication and gathering of wargamers is also discussed through the development of GenCon and other conventions, and the fan zines and magazines that brought it to a wider audience.

Several specific gaming scenes are then explained, with more information about why they were integral to the production and proliferation of D&D. Dave Arneson’s Twin-Cities-based gaming group developed many of the ideas that went on to become the blueprints of D&D. Arneson collaborated with Gygax and showed him some of the rules that he had created for his *Blackmoor* campaign, which was in turn partially based on Gygax’s own *Chainmail*, another preceding wargaming title. On the other hand, the Los Angeles gaming scene grabbed D&D and ran with it, making blueprints all their own. Peterson uses the LA wargaming scene as a case study for how local rules and the amateur press associations (APAs) that published them helped this game go, in terms of the 1970s, viral. Peterson also analyzes how these fan-made rules and additions were legislated and/or incorporated by Gygax’s new company, Tactical Studies Rules (TSR). Peterson discusses how the collaborative nature of the game and its design created problems for TSR, raising questions about who owns a game—the people who play it, or the creators?

This text goes through extensive primary research to show how tabletop gaming spaces worked in the 1960s and 70s. As much of this research comes directly from independent fan

publications, Peterson pays close attention to how information circulated through collaboration and (mostly unpaid) fan efforts to create something new. He collates primary sources and organizes them within a helpful index and largely prefers to present facts in the order in which they occur, rather than making any sort of moral or methodological claim about why these facts occurred. The only claims he makes are informed by primary texts, such as his documentation of the first use of the term “role playing game” (239). He describes this term as it seemed to be used: “boardless, free-form, victory-agonistic games” (239). However, he does not make a clear claim about the validity of this definition; only how it was historically used. This objective perspective assists him in his effort to put forward a comprehensive game history to be used as a source for future scholarship on the subject.

The second volume covers the origins of some of the more specific rules of D&D, such as character and setting concepts. The scope of volume 1 is very insular and focuses on the game’s history itself—if you are looking for how wider society was affected by D&D or how world events changed its inception, this is not the book for you. However, Peterson does include words in bold to specify terms that are discussed more fully in volume 2.

This is a well-researched and thoughtful piece of work for anyone who wants to understand the origins of D&D and the specific gaming movements that inspired it. Many avenues for future scholarship stem from this text, including analysis of how the events of the 1960s and ‘70s (including the Vietnam War and countercultural movements associated with it) led to escapism in gaming, as well as methodological studies on how narrative storytelling is presented in improv and pretend play. This book provides an engaging history of D&D and is a valuable collation and detailed explanation of primary sources. In analyzing this history, Peterson preserves and highlights it to remind us how collective effort can grow an idea into a phenomenon.

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Marez, Curtis. *Producing Precarity: The Costs of Making TV in Poor Places*. New York University Press, 2025.

‘Hollywood’ is sometimes considered to be a familiar second culture to global audiences, with its constructed Americanness functioning as soft power as well as an economic engine. Yet, of late, film industries have broadened their geographic range in the US, spurred on by tax rebates and other filming incentives. While that would, on the face of it, seem to suggest both an increasing range of representation and an increasing range of economic benefit for different parts of the US, Marez’s analysis argues much the opposite. More specifically, he states that “...the content and production process of TV shows made in poor parts of the United States constitute powerful, interrelated forms of racial capitalism in place. If racial capitalism names capitalism’s development in racial directions, ‘racial capitalism in place’ describes those developments locally, in places where media are made” (2). Much of his work centers on the overall contradictions of trying to engage in sociocultural critique whilst simultaneously abetting that which is being critiqued (e.g., police-supported racial capitalism, gentrification, etc.), and it is an interrogation of these seeming contradictions that, in my view, is the book’s strength.

It is the contradictions and impacts of the intersections and imbalances between power/wealth and race that drive the arguments throughout the book. After a thorough review of racial capitalism and its associations with the television industry, each of the five main chapters focus on a specific genre where series are filmed in poor places, which he considers to be areas having a large population, often Black, Latinx, and/or Indigenous communities, living below the poverty line (Chapter One, *passim*). The first covers crime dramas, focusing upon how, despite diverse casting and seemingly progressive sociopolitical ends, crime series shot in poor regions of the US, like New Mexico and Georgia, still replicate racist representations such as the Mexican drug traffickers discussed in this chapter (65). This juxtaposition further exploits and disempowers marginalised groups in that area through symbolic violence. The second chapter covers horror, and

the third chapter science fiction; those of us who study cult television may quibble slightly about the distinction between the two genres, but that does not negatively impact the arguments of the two chapters. Chapter Two notes that horror allows for some of the series to engage in allegorical sociocultural critique at a remove (as it is distanced from reality) whilst simultaneously engaging in oppressing marginalised communities through racial capitalism. Chapter Three finds much the same for science fiction, noting that Black superheroes challenge and critique white supremacy whilst supporting it through the film incentives. These incentives, as Marez notes throughout the book, drive an increase in socioeconomic inequality. In addition, he points out that filming on Indigenous land with Indigenous characters in New Mexico reinforces the association between filming and settler colonialism through displacing or eliding/erasing local histories of oppression. Thus, the juxtaposition and its attendant deepening of oppression and exploitation are not confined by genre, e.g., it is not only ‘copaganda’ replicating negative racial or cultural representations but also genres which can appropriate or otherwise engage in similar symbolic violence to non-white cultures through the allegories commonly associated with horror and science fiction. Because the production teams who benefit from these film incentives are often from higher sociocultural and socioeconomic brackets than those from marginalised communities, Marez argues that this further redirects wealth and power away from the marginalised.

The fourth chapter looks specifically at Black Atlanta, focusing on a series of case studies that are all shot in the city rather than looking at a specific genre as in the previous chapters. Each case study, however, involves ‘Representations of Black respectability [which] justify the political economy of local TV production based in corporate subsidies and the upward redistribution of wealth from poor Black people to more privileged Black creatives’ (142). He acknowledges that such representation and redistribution can be gestured toward in the texts (143), but the same contradiction between representation and economics of production applies as discussed in the chapters summarised above. Finally, the book concludes with a look at what Marez terms ‘Gentrification TV,’ which he notes both promotes and engages in gentrification through its

building of filming infrastructure, something he argues is a form of settler colonialism which, again, has the same elements of redistribution.

Though all the chapters are well-written, the one of most interest to me (purely based on my own academic interests) is the final one, which details the idea of streaming in reverse, which, as Marez puts it, ‘...makes visible the poverty that both attracts TV production and prompts popular protests’ (177). The goal of reconnecting a text to its physical filming location is a laudable one, particularly as it may draw attention to the fact that the local economy receives a very limited benefit from production and often replicates and contributes to racial capitalism and other forms of inequality. I would hope to see this idea taken up in the future by Marez or other scholars to see if and how such connections become emplaced.

For all of these chapters, I might have liked to see a representative example analysed in-depth rather than multiple series discussed, which were shot in New Mexico or Georgia-- this is what he does in the chapter on Black Atlanta TV-- but I also recognise that Marez’s goal of centring the place rather than the text would argue against that. The only (mild) criticisms I have mostly relate to my own interests, which are aligned with many aspects of the book. Marez addresses production in poor places in the US rather than comparing with international (co-)productions or work on international (co-)productions that address similar inequalities, but no book can cover everything, and I can understand why the author would want to maintain focus. I suspect the news came out after the book was in production, but I would be interested in seeing Marez examine the exodus from Georgia of Marvel Studios to the UK due to the British National Health Service (socialised medicine) making it cheaper than paying for a production team’s healthcare in the US. I would also like to see audience research done in the affected communities to see how they specifically read these representations, though, again, no book can cover every potential aspect of a topic.

At its core, *Producing Precarity* is about the contradictions between increasing representation and the neoliberal capitalist and supremacist oppressions that are inextricably bound

with making any of these series possible. Marez's book is a valuable contribution to debates surrounding political economies of film/TV as well as to the current cultural moment in which the television industry exists. Though it is unlikely that these contradictions will truly be resolved any time soon, this book reminds us that, though the diegeses exist on the screen, the people and places they impact are very real, and we should all be mindful of that.

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Grady, William. *Redrawing the Western: A History of American Comics and the Mythic West*. University of Texas Press, 2024.

One of the most underappreciated genres of comics is the Western. In comparison to superhero comics that garner the most attention, Western comics tend to be undervalued as inconsequential and unworthy of serious consideration.

According to William Grady in his new book, *Redrawing the Western: A History of American Comics and the Mythic West*, Western comics are vital to the story of American popular culture because they deeply reflect the cares and concerns of the times in which they are created. Grady, a UK-based independent scholar and librarian, explores the genre of Western comics in all its different expressions—nineteenth century illustrations, newspaper comic strips, comic books, humor comic magazines, and graphic novels over 150 years of Western comics.

Grady's thesis is that there is a cultural shift that happens when the Western frontier is officially declared “closed” with the publication of Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” Without an actual frontier, Americans created a “mythic” Western frontier expressing those frontier ideals of individualism and self-reliance which define the American national character. These ideals are further shaped and refined by larger historical, sociopolitical, and cultural forces, like the Cold War.

Redrawing the Western is composed of an introduction, seven chapters, and a lengthy coda. The chapters are divided into two parts. Part 1 (1800s–1930s) covers the nineteenth-century illustrated press, early newspaper comic strips, and Western strips during the Great Depression (Chapters 1–3). Part 2 (1940s–1970s) examines the rise of Western comics after WWII, their Cold War connections, genre subversion through humor, and the political unrest of the 1960s–70s (Chapters 4–7).

The coda traces the cowboy's migration into other genres from the 1980s—early 2020s—superhero and zombie comics—and closes with indigenous comics by indigenous comic creators. Included is an extensive notes section for each chapter, a bibliography, and a comprehensive appendix.

At 313 pages, it is a compact and highly readable introduction to the field of Western comics. However, it's not an all-encompassing history of Western comics. Grady himself states that it “should be read as a useful starting point into a rich area of study that has been largely overlooked” (245).

This book also showcases a high degree of research and scholarship. Grady firmly situates himself into the scholarship of comic studies, Western studies, Western films, and (most importantly) Western comics. For instance, in his detailed discussion of the cultural fallout from the close of the Western frontier in Chapter 1, Grady cites a bevy of other scholars apart from Turner who have shaped our view of the closure of the Western frontier.

Grady also uses memorable comic examples to illustrate his points. In Chapter 5 dealing with the Cold War, Grady references the story “Swift Deer and the Russian Bear” from *Buffalo Bill* #9. In this story, an indigenous warrior named Swift Deer must contend with Russian settlers. He has a vision of future Soviet leader Joseph Stalin which his Medicine Man interprets as a warning that Russians are not to be trusted. Grady writes that this absurd story “captures the atmosphere of the time, imagining, rather ridiculously, how even Native Americans from the nineteenth-century West could not escape the torment from the Communist menace” (Grady 117).

Grady also uses examples from Western films of the era to show a commonality of ideas between Western comics and Western films. In Chapter 7, Grady discusses Sam Peckinpah's 1969 Western *The Wild Bunch* as an example of the “sense of disillusionment with the [Western]

genre and its mythos” (194) that typifies the late 1960s. He then connects that same disillusionment to a story from *Weird Western Tales* #43.

Finally, Grady has insightful commentary on the “Golden Age of Western Comics” (1945 to 1970) within Chapters 4–6. Grady connects Western comics to different aspects of the Cold War in ways I had not thought about. He beautifully sums up the didactic nature of Western comics from this era whose “thrilling stories of vengeance and justice reveal a compelling rationale for how postwar Western comic books could instruct readers on pressing foreign and domestic Cold War imperatives, and [that] these texts exist as a vibrant document of consensus America” (Grady 139).

While I give this book a positive review, there are a few omissions. As a scholar of Romance comics, I was disappointed that Grady devoted only two pages to Western Romance comics. Many Western Romance comics were produced during their heyday (1948-1955). Using Michelle Nolan's *Catalog of American Romance Comics* in the appendix of her book *Love on the Racks: A History of American Romance Comics*, there were 23 separate Western-only titles, totaling 91 issues containing between 364 to 546 printed stories (211-220). Hopefully these comics will one day receive fuller treatment.

Also omitted is a thorough discussion of indigenous people in Western comics and the Western landscape. While discussed at length in the coda, they are scarcely mentioned throughout the book. When they are, indigenous peoples are reduced to examples of larger historical and cultural movements (see the fate of Geronimo EC comic discussed in Chapter 6). They deserve more attention. Similarly, Grady is largely silent on the Western landscape itself, only talking about it within the latter half of Chapter 3 with respect to early Western tourism. Those stark terrains and expansive vistas that we associate with the West (a result of John Ford's

films shot in Monument Valley), can be read as a symbolic extension of the “mythic” West and deserve discussion.

In closing, *Redrawing the Western* is a great primer for Western comics, the historical movements informing them, and their connections to Western film. As someone working on a podcast about the history of comics, I have revised some of my own views concerning Western comics, particularly those from the 1950s to 1960s. I have a new appreciation for these previously undervalued cultural artifacts.

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- Film
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- Television
- Sports
- Celebrity Culture
- Technology
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