

**THROUGH THE [IMAGE]INARY DOOR: LYOTARD,
BAUDRILLARD, JAMESON AND POSTMODERNISM IN FILM**

A Senior Honors Thesis

By

SARAH DIANE FORBEY

Submitted to the Office of Honors Programs
& Academic Scholarships
Texas A&M University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

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April 2000

Group: Cultural Studies

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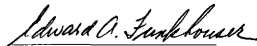
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ABSTRACT

Through the [Image]inary Door: Lyotard, Baudrillard, Jameson and
Postmodernism in Film. (April 2000)

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Through the [Image]inary Door: Lyotard, Baudrillard, Jameson and
Postmodernism in Film combines a chronological history of postmodernism in the work
of Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson with a section of film
analysis, where prominent themes of postmodernism are traced throughout *Rashomon*,
Orlando and *Playtime*. Postmodernism entails more than a certain style of art, film,
literature or architecture. What we call postmodernism is part of the larger system of
global capitalism, or what Jameson calls “late capitalism.” In this total system,
everything, including art, is assigned monetary value. The theorists agree that the telling
attributes of postmodernism are responses to (and characteristics of) this system. Lyotard
writes from a perspective that is extremely skeptical of total systems. Lyotard is equally
wary of teleology and the unified subject, since these both suggest a totality in which
everyone must agree—without questioning—to realities dictated by the system.
Baudrillard believes that in the age of world capitalism, objects become separated from
their value, and signs from their supposed referents. Now, when a consumer buys an

article of clothing, or a car, he or she is not buying a utilitarian item. Instead, a brand name, or an intangible quality is purchased, which is then perceived to be transferred to the consumer. What is being acquired, then, is floating signs, unconnected to any object. The relationship between word and meaning, object and referent is broken. Jameson clashes with Lyotard on a crucial point of postmodern theory. One of Lyotard's major additions to the field, the breakdown of master narratives, is insufficient to convince Jameson, since Lyotard's own account of the end of master narratives is itself a narrative. At the same time, Jameson agrees with Baudrillard's main complaint that: "aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production." That is to say, art is stripped of aesthetic value and imbued with monetary worth. In *Through the [Image]inary Door*, these postmodern themes may be recognized not only in the content of films, but also in the circumstances under which they were produced.

For Linda Bow

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CHAPTER ONE

LYOTARD

In “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” Lyotard claims that architects’ rejection of the Bauhaus movement, or move to incorporate the cutting edge styles of modern art into everyday life, coincides with a larger “end to experimentation”¹ that includes historians demanding that the avant-garde linguistic “reign of terror” of the 1960s and 70s be put right by forcing a common historical language on intellectuals. Lyotard mentions several writers he has encountered who seem to be concerned with rejecting the artistic and linguistic experimentation associated with modernism (Lyotard’s own “language games”) and “restor[ing] a solid anchorage of language in the referent.”²

Lyotard especially notes Jürgen Habermas, who wrote that the failure of modernism was the “splintering” of culture from life. Habermas proposes that the ultimate purpose for the arts is to help unify “cognitive, ethical and political discourses” forming a “totality” of experience, and to help solve the problems of existence.³ Lyotard, who lived through the horror of the Nazi regime, wants to challenge the ideas of “totalizing” experience, the “unitary end of history” (teleology) and the subject.⁴

Lyotard emphasizes that the writers to whom he refers wish to “liquidate the heritage of the avant-gardes” by demanding “some referent (and objective reality), some sense (and credible transcendence), an addressee (and audience), or an addressor (and

This thesis follows the style and format of *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

subjective expressiveness) or some communicational consensus (and a general code of exchanges, such as the genre of historical discourse).”⁵ Common to all these demands is a desire for “order. . . unity. . . identity. . . security. . . popularity” because these are the elements that attract a broad public audience, making artistic endeavors financially feasible.⁶ What is problematic, Lyotard suggests, is not that artists wish to appeal to the public, but that the move to eliminate the avant-garde has political origins. Lyotard mentions that the first action a totalitarian party takes after assuming office is to ban the avant-garde and define what will be “real”—the “correct” images, narratives and forms. For this reason, Lyotard resists any enforced “reality” or “unity, simplicity, communicability.”⁷

If instead of a totalitarian party, exchange value (in a capitalist system) decides what is precious, and therefore “art,” money replaces aesthetic criteria, causing confusion. Lyotard says that the “postmodern” response to this problem will be eclecticism or “anything goes” because “the value of works of art [is judged] according to profits they yield.”⁸ In this same capitalist system, the “art and book market” further threatens experimentation, because the public only buys books on subjects it understands or art whose system of signifiers it can decipher—making it impossible for an experimental artist to earn a living. Science is also subject to the money-criterion of worth: what is desirable in science and technology is that which produces the “best possible performance”⁹ or elicits approval by the awarding of grants.

By discussing science, Lyotard moves into a discussion of the nature of reality. He says that reality in science exists only when “testified by a consensus between

partners over a certain knowledge and certain commitments” and that reality, or the rules of the game, is ever evolving, as is shown in the falsification of old theories, and their replacement with new ones. Thus he parallels reality and modernism, noting that both are based on the smashing of previous certainties and the realization that reality is temporary, existing only until replaced by a new “reality.”¹⁰

Experimental art to Lyotard should be that which hints at what cannot be presented, or the sublime. Lyotard calls the sublime that which is so large, overpowering or all-inclusive that it is impossible for the human mind to comprehend. He uses the term to describe the world capitalism system: it is so far-reaching that it is impossible to find a point outside the system from which to form a critique. Thus, art should enable us to represent the capitalist system despite our positions inside it. It attempts to “enable us to see only by making it impossible to see.”¹¹ It examines and challenges reality and the “techniques to make us believe in it.”¹² Habermas and his followers wish to end this experimentation with the nature of the real and replace it with a consensus-defined “unity and reality.”

In the early chapters of *The Postmodern Condition*, the state of knowledge in consumer or postindustrial societies is said to be affected by technology in two ways: research and transmission. Lyotard makes it clear that changes in technology have as much impact on knowledge as on transportation or the media.¹³ For instance, knowledge that is unsuitable for transfer through computers will either be modified for use within computer systems or become unimportant. Instead of retaining pure use value, knowledge will be bought and sold, solely valuable as a commodity in the cycle of

production. Already, in post-industrial countries the composition of the workforce has been altered as jobs in information exchange become crucial. For example, from 1951 to 1971 in the US, the number of workers in factories and industrial jobs declined, while the number of workers in professional, technical and white-collar jobs rose.¹⁴ Here it is important to look forward to Jameson's questioning of the term "post-industrial."

Jameson points out that though America may be in a post-industrial period, many other countries are just becoming industrialized. In these countries, the workforce is not greatly made up of "knowledge workers." This is why postmodern theory has roots in American culture. As the transformation of the workforce continues, and knowledge becomes increasingly more important, with countries possibly fighting for control of knowledge rather than control of territory, the question will arise whether knowledge belongs to the state or whether the state interferes with the communication of knowledge. As Jameson asked in the foreword, will the knowledge produced and transmitted by technology belong to the bureaucracy or to a new class, a "technocracy?" If IBM puts an information collecting satellite in orbit around the earth, will the state be in control of the gathered knowledge, or will the state be simply another client? The state's authority in matters of information and economics has already been undermined by *multinational corporations*.¹⁵

Liotard lists factors affecting states' roles in investment, including the end of the dominance of American capitalism, the opening of the world market, and the probable opening of the Chinese market. He says that knowledge will guide how states react to these changes, and that the information to which only states once had access will now be

available to many. Since more people will have access to knowledge, it will be used for two purposes: as payment (for survival) and investment (for optimal performance). If the state were not involved in the payment and investment of knowledge, the system would be similar to a liberal economic one.¹⁶

Lyotard calls this change in the use of knowledge the “computerization of society” and discusses the effects of the computerization on power and civil institutions in “The Problem: Legitimation.” He defines two types of knowledge, scientific and narrative. Narrative knowledge depends on a contract between speaker, listener and referent (as well as the knowledge of how to speak and how to listen). In the example Lyotard gives of a Cashinahua storyteller, there is an equilibrium in the passing of knowledge: once the storyteller has related his tale, each audience member from then on has the authority to repeat the tale in the same manner. There is also “conviviality” in this exchange—an active sharing in the narrative between the storyteller and the audience. Scientific knowledge, on the other hand, has always been more separate from its user than narrative knowledge. Scientific language uses primarily denotative utterances, while narrative operates using denotative, interrogative, evaluative and deontic statements. The conviviality is missing from scientific knowledge; no one shares in the lab report with the scientist. The scientist also does not automatically possess the authority to confer knowledge by receiving it herself—the way any Cashinahua audience member can repeat the story he has heard. She must first establish herself as a valid source/channel of knowledge (this determined by legitimation, or a consensus on what may be determined true and real). Lyotard says this alienation of

knowledge from user may lead to the demoralization of the scientist.¹⁷ This demoralization may be aggravated by the commodification of knowledge, and separation from its use value.¹⁸

Demoralization of scientists affects scientific legitimation, or “the right to decide what is true” as well as who has the right to decide. Since science is often judged successful or not by the technology it can produce to make profit, knowledge is affected by and affects technology, and government finds power in the knowledge it can sell and invest, science, government and knowledge are closely linked.

Lytard emphasizes the importance of the meaningfulness (or mechanization) of language within the question of knowledge-ownership. He describes the different linguistic categories of utterances, including denotative, performative and prescriptive. Lytard’s denotative utterance, “The university is sick,” involves three parts: the sender, who utters the statement, the addressee, who receives the statement, and the referent, or the object to which the statement points.¹⁹ The sender and addressee each have parts to play in the communication of the statement. Wittgenstein called the different categories of utterances and rules governing their use, as well as the moves and counter-moves among senders and addressees, “language games.”²⁰ The rules of language games themselves are subject to three guidelines: first, the rules do not create legitimation; second, “if there are no rules, there is no game;” and third, each utterance is a move.²¹ Language moves make up the social bond.

Two general models for societies exist: first, the Marxist model, where society is divided in two by class struggles, and second, the model of society as a functional

whole. The goal of the second model is the upkeep of the society—everything that occurs in the society either contributes to its upkeep or its downfall. This model is exemplified in post-industrial societies whose aim after the Second World War was economic competitiveness. Since everything in the functional-whole model must be regulated to keep the society healthy, the society becomes sealed and “paranoid,” or suspicious of anything that might harm the system. Here Lyotard differentiates between traditional theory and critical theory. Traditional theory calls for an absolute, totalizing truth, and since the functional-whole model is also totalized and sealed, traditional theory can be absorbed into the system, then regulated and used to the system’s benefit.²² Critical theory, such as that of Horkheimer and Adorno, should be able to avoid absorption through its native wariness of synthesis. In liberal countries, “struggles and their instruments” have been absorbed and transformed into system-regulators. In Communist countries, “the struggles... have simply been deprived of the right to exist.”²³ Lyotard describes the use of knowledge in the two societal models by calling it necessary for the functioning of “the great machine” in the model of society as a functional whole, or useful for the “critical function” in the divided Marxist model. This forces a choice between “functional and critical knowledge.”²⁴

The knowledge used to make decisions will be increasingly removed from the hands of administrators and placed in the data banks of machines. Access to this data will still belong to the ruling class, but the composition of that class is changing. It’s now made of leaders of corporations and other organizations.²⁵ This means that previous indicators of status such as professions and leadership of nation-states or

institutions will lose importance, amounting to the end of the Grand Narratives, or stories of great actors in history, great events, great institutions. Jameson and Lyotard clash on the end of grand narratives—Jameson reminds Lyotard that his very account of their demise is a narrative itself. Given Lyotard's perspective on the abolition of the narratives, some may fear that the individual will have no criterion by which to make judgments, no way to place him or herself properly within the society. Lyotard says this is untrue, that the position of the individual in the society will be determined by language games—establishing the person as “sender, addressed or referent.”²⁶ The society contains these language games and uses them to improve itself, and the social bond is composed of language games. To find a way to thwart totalization, Lyotard suggests the goal should be to disrupt the language games in some way, to perform a new move. Thus examples of traditional, accepted language moves would be “orders in the army, prayer in church, denotation in the schools, narration in families, questions in philosophy,” but what if we “tell stories in a cabinet meeting? Advocate a cause in the barracks?” Then we have created a new move and “the limits of the old institution are displaced.”²⁷ This challenges what is beneficial to the system, as well as who declares what beneficial (legitimate) or inadmissible—in other words the power structure in the society. The goal is to destabilize the old rules and boundaries of the system.²⁸

CHAPTER TWO

BAUDRILLARD

Jean Baudrillard moves the analysis of organization of society to the realm of consumption. While Lyotard places the responsibility for the formation of social bonds on language games, Baudrillard implies society members are oriented according to linguistic categories created by advertising. According to Mark Poster, Baudrillard uses these linguistic categories instead of analyzing consumer society from a Freudian or Marxist perspective. Advertising creates the categories by assigning consumer products attributes designed to differentiate them from one another, giving the consumer the illusion of choice among many different products. Due to the advertising, the products possess an empty “meaningless” meaning, which is transferred to the consumer. For example, advertising invents a “brave” running shoe, a “noble” set of cutlery. The consumer purchases the object in the hope of becoming brave and noble.

The nonsense word Baudrillard devises, GARAP, illustrates how a product is able to receive its meaning from advertising. If GARAP is displayed all over a city, plastered on walls, painted on billboards, eventually people come to “believe” in it, even though it signifies only itself. (This “arbitrary and systematic” assigning of a meaningless word to a product seems similar to those commercials that leave the specific product they are advertising in mystery.) People are conditioned to accept and buy before they know what GARAP is selling.¹

Baudrillard explains conditioning by describing the fallacies of competition in production, and “free choice” in consumption. Instead of competition to make the best

product, thousands of products are made with only marginal differences. Then the consumer is misled into believing he is exercising freedom by choosing among these products, when actually consumption is carefully controlled. In other words, the consumer is offered this range of very similar products, and believes the sheer number of choices is wonderful, but nonetheless must choose among the carefully prepared slate of products. Or, the consumer may choose which camera brand to buy, but must still buy a camera, and buy one that is offered, and they're not as dissimilar as one might think.

In America (not necessarily in the rest of the world, which hasn't advanced to quite the same degree of consumption) consumers want the best of what other people have. They want both what others have and don't have, simultaneously. Thus the television ads that are addressed to the "elite" or the "renegades" or "individualists" but yet play at peak TV-watching hours are not contradictory in the slightest. Americans want the best product available, and so compete with one another, but there is an upper cap set—one model which is the "best" and which all "normal" consumers desire. Baudrillard emphasizes this duality of advertising: provoking us to compete, but at the same time enforcing a uniformity, a *monotony* of consumption.²

A shift occurs from competition to self-fulfillment when consumers stop competing for the best products, and instead begin to look to products (advertising) for actualization. Advertisers say that when consumers' personalities are expressed by the products they consume, this expression is turned into a language, a claim Baudrillard later disputes. The encouragement of consumers to find self-fulfillment in products leads to new societal moral norms—the ideal becomes hedonistic instead of puritan.³

Advertisers claim to free people to pursue happiness, by allowing a man to act like a child, for instance, but what advertising actually does is to free people to imbue products with their desires. Advertising provides “conceded” freedoms.⁴

Even while providing so-called freedoms, advertisers are careful not to promise happiness. Instead, the goal is to allow objects to remove the mental blocks holding back drives such as guilt. When a consumer is able to release a dangerous drive onto an object, he is returned to equilibrium—not happiness, but a neutral state. Expert advertisers call the freedom to possess the “ultimate in morality.” Instead of releasing the desires in a way potentially damaging to society, the consumer simply purchases a product, both quelling the dangerous drive and maintaining social harmony.

To be considered a language, objects must “instruct needs and structure them in a new way,” creating new social structures.⁵ Baudrillard calls needs “fluid and contingent,” analogous to the artisan system of production, which responds to needs on a case by case basis. The system of products, then, is strictly classified, and more similar to industrial mass manufacturing. The system of needs and the system of products are not happily integrated; instead fluid and singular needs are forcibly squished into the rigid grid of products.⁶ The range of products available defines needs and makes them coherent. If needs can be neatly arranged, classified, made lucid, then they can be controlled, which is the economic goal of advertising.⁷

Baudrillard lists certain language structures that can be identified in the combination of needs and products, such as internal structuration and simplification, but clearly distinguishes between the existence of “a set of expressions” and “language.”

The product “language” is used to describe the non-concrete aspects of a product, such as “form, color, shape and ‘social standing.’”⁸ The products speak without reciprocity. Product language is also the language of the inessential—since advertising focuses on the intangible aspects of the product (its “personality”). Baudrillard concludes that advertising constitutes a “system of classification, and not a language.”⁹

In “Consumer Society,” Baudrillard claims that consumption has become conspicuous. The wealthy are now surrounded by objects, instead of other wealthy people as they were in the past, because ambience, or an environment created by objects, has replaced human society. As people now live surrounded by objects, Baudrillard maintains that they become functional, just as the child who lives among wolves becomes wolf-like.¹⁰ By functional, Baudrillard means that consumers are valuable to the capitalistic society only for the economic role they play: they buy what is “good for the economy.” Since humans are constantly surrounded by products, we are apt to forget that products are produced by humans. They are not natural, and thus their dearth or abundance is controlled by exchange value, not natural laws.¹¹

The overabundance of objects in malls and grocery stores creates a false sense of affluence. Instead of worrying that there is not enough, we worry that there is too much. We are lulled into the sense-of-affluence trap, even while rampant scarcity still exists—often in the countries that produced or packaged the mountains of products we see. The availability of a seemingly unlimited supply of products encourages the sensation of a constant feast.¹² Objects are not merely abundant, but they are also organized for purchase into displays, which are designed to give the objects a relationship to each

other. Objects become more than utilitarian pieces of equipment when they are grouped together: the brand name must be considered, as well as the collective meaning of the object set, making the set a total vision. The arrangements are designed to structure the buying process, to set logical buying paths for the consumer to follow. This is why the abundance of commodities alone does not engender reckless purchasing. To explain the concept of logical buying paths, it's useful to consider buying a dress for a special occasion. Purchasing the dress alone is just the beginning of the process. One must then proceed logically to buy the shoes, the accessories, etc. Then a car to complement the dress... all these objects signify each other, aiding in structured, organized purchasing. Baudrillard considers the shopping mall the locus of both the abundance of objects and their logical arrangement. All products are incorporated into a climate-controlled mini-city, where everything in the city: "clothing, restaurant, cinema, book store, café" is for sale in one form or another. Consumption is the culture of this city. The mall levels the differences between products and culture by treating as equals "a gourmet shop and an art gallery." It is a complete environment of consumption that is not satisfied with selling "only" products. The products interplay with art and intellectual matters, as is exemplified by a certain mall that offers a language lab, advertised as a "bit of gray matter."¹³ In malls and airports, action and time are completely conditioned by "networks of objects."¹⁴ The mall is a microcosm of "consumption as the total organization of everyday life."¹⁵ All worries are taken care of at the mall. Weather is controlled, the mall is accessible day or night, seven days a week, one may eat and be entertained there, and one doesn't even have to worry about anxiety-causing bills, thanks

to credit. All stress-inducing factors are removed, allowing only blissful shopping. All activities of life are brought together in the mall and equalized (“activity, labor, conflict”) by being digested and stripped of meaning. When it is impossible to distinguish between an art gallery and a gourmet shop, between *Playboy* and “a bit of gray matter,” the themes of life that are based on difference, such as “metaphor and contradiction” disappear.¹⁶ When Baudrillard talks about the equalization of objects and art, and the reduction of their meaning to exchange value, he means to say that a \$500 washing machine and a \$500 painting are counterbalanced in that their only value comes from what a person is willing to pay to possess them. This implies that the painting holds no sort of special aesthetic quality that may be considered impossible to price and sell, and results in a stripping away of aesthetic criteria.

The idea of a consumer with needs that direct her toward objects from which she will receive satisfaction is false.¹⁷ Just as consumption is a social activity, not individual, one’s needs are conditioned by the society. The consumer does not influence the manufacturer through the market. Instead, the manufacturer controls behavior, social attitudes and needs. It is necessary to control needs because now the industrial problem is no longer how best to produce products, but how to sell them. Galbraith said “Man has become the object of science for man only since automobiles have become harder to sell than to manufacture.”¹⁸ The decision of what to purchase is taken from the hands of the consumer and placed in those of the producer.³⁸ The illusion of “freedom of choice” is offered in the fulfilling of “psychological” needs, or those which may be filled with discretionary income. Advertising does not attempt to identify needs of customers; it

announces the existence of needs that will further the industrial system's goals, and then urges those goals as the goals of society.²⁰ For example, a need created by the system might be every American's need for a car—everyone will be encouraged to buy a car, because it would be good for the economy, and therefore good for America, something every good American should want. Since the consumer is informed of his needs by advertising, there can be no real choice. Baudrillard asserts that freedom of choice is imposed, but since it is an empty gesture, it seems to be nonexistent rather than imposed. He compares it to a form of voting where the choice has essentially already been made before the voter reaches the booth.

Baudrillard describes the system of needs, and what makes the current system of production different from previous systems. Productive machines/forces have replaced traditional tools, capital has replaced traditional wealth, the wage/labor force has replaced workmanship, and the system of needs has replaced the individual elements of pleasure and satisfaction, as well as the relationship between an individual and an object. In this way, exchange value is divorced from concrete or personal value.²¹ Just as all aesthetic criteria are removed from art and replaced with exchange value, any personal value is irrelevant in the face of the exchange value, allowing the equalization of any thing and everything if monetary value is equal.

Baudrillard compares the connotative qualities of objects to hysterical and psychosomatic symptoms. For example, in the denotative realm, a washing machine is simply a piece of household equipment. However, in the connotative realm, the washing machine is a sign of affluence or comfort or domestic boredom or anything else. The

washing machine may signify anything, just as other objects may signify affluence or comfort. What Baudrillard calls hysterical symptoms are not necessarily attached to a physical problem, and are instead floating and arbitrary, making it impossible to find a specific bodily organ to treat so that the symptom may disappear. "Desire, which is insatiable because it is founded on a lack," may be fluidly signified in any number of objects.²² Desire will never be satisfied in objects, since needs are indefinable.²³

The system of consumption is a sort of communication within the society. It is removed from nature in that it does not allow satisfaction and pleasure. Instead, it provides a system of organization. This is similar to the way arranged marriages form alliances, power concentrations and hierarchical structures in a society, instead of natural or biological relations. These rules of marriage form a language.²⁴ In arranged marriages women are distributed like commodities. Just as a system of arranged marriage is not based on natural elements such as love, the system of consumption is not based on need or desire/pleasure/satisfaction. The proof that pleasure isn't the "basis or objective of consumption" is that fun is now the duty of the consumer. The consumer must never rest in the pursuit of fun and pleasure, and in the quenching of constant curiosity.²⁵ This "constant curiosity" or anything-goes mentality is mentioned in Jameson's work as a result of the confusion that results from the removal of aesthetic criteria. The same phenomenon was described by Lyotard in his discussion of eclecticism.

The system of consumption claims to satisfy individual needs, but instead it assigns the individual consumer a place in a great organizational code. We consume in masses, but are still isolated and powerless (an example given is the crowd at a movie

theatre. Near in physical presence, but isolated and impersonally friendly at best.) Baudrillard closes by comparing the powerless state of the consumer to pre-labor union workers, and suggests that a “consumer union” is in order.

In “Simulacra and Simulations,” Baudrillard introduces and defines the simulacrum. The simulacrum is a copy (sometimes of a copy, of a copy, of a copy, and so on through many generations) for which there is no original. Baudrillard illustrates the paradox of the simulacrum using the example of a map of the Roman Empire. The map recreates in detail the Empire at the height of its power. Then, as the Empire decays, the map still exists, but the original does not—at least not in the same way as when the map was first drawn. Thus there is a copy (the map) without an original (the Empire) Baudrillard complicates the matter by noting how the map itself rots into shreds literally, in tandem with the figurative rotting of the Empire.

Today, Baudrillard fears the real is no longer simulated. Instead, simulation precedes the real, or “the map precedes the territory.”²⁶ The real is designed by the maker of the map or model. The difference between simulacrum and real has disappeared, since the real is exchanged for signs of the real. Eventually, the real itself will have to be produced.

Simulation threatens reality by creating what is not there. A dissimulator hides the truth, while a simulator produces what he or she claims to be true. Baudrillard gives an example of a person who dissimulates by pretending to be ill. It would be easy enough to discover that the person has no symptoms. It becomes trickier when someone simulates illness by actually producing symptoms. If symptoms are present, it’s

impossible to tell whether the person is simulating the illness or not, and equally impossible to treat him or her.²⁷ The dissolution of the boundary between simulation and the real is problematic in the Army, which Baudrillard says “treats” those who simulate what it considers to be illnesses without attempting to discover which behaviors are simulated and which are real. A similar problem exists in religion. Iconoclasts do not tolerate idols because idols substitute a belief in icons for a belief in God. Baudrillard suggests that the real reason iconoclasts must destroy idols is that they fear not that the worship of idols replaces the worship of God, but rather that the idols are all that exists, with no God behind them. In contrast, the idolaters are able to accept that the idea of God is represented in idols, and so allow them. They also suspect that there is no God behind the idols, but have also realized “that it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them.”²⁸ In the system of signs it is even possible for God to be simulated.

One may trace the transformation of the image into the simulacrum through four steps: first, the image “is the reflection of a basic reality,” second, the image “masks and perverts a basic reality,” third, the image masks the “absence of a basic reality,” fourth, the image “bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.”²⁹ The last stage is the domain of postmodernism. In the final stage, referents disappear—making it impossible to judge true and false. When the lack of a referent is realized, there is a desperate attempt to produce something real.

Disneyland exemplifies illusion and simulation. However, the illusion Disneyland creates is not designed to provide an escape from the “real” world. It is there

to provide a contrast between imaginary/Disneyland and “real”/Los Angeles/America outside Disneyland. That is to say, it is there to make sure people know that there is a difference—that the rest of America is real, while it is Disneyland that is fake. This is a way of imposing a boundary between true and false, to say that what exists inside Disneyland, such as adults reverting to childlike behavior, does not exist outside in America, or that simulations of American values exist inside Disneyland, while the real values exist in the rest of the country. Baudrillard holds that reality is produced in this way—by creating a sign for something unreal, and using it to provide a contrast with a “reality” sign. This connects to earlier essays in which he talks about the impossibility of differentiation between objects when everything is signs—metaphor is impossible and a dialectic must be forcibly created to allow difference to exist. The same idea surrounds Watergate. A scandal was invented to contrast with a supposed world outside the scandal, thus implying that both a scandal-ridden and a scandal-free world existed. Baudrillard implies there can be no scandal in a capitalistic society built on the ultimately amoral capital system, itself unanswerable to society’s moral laws.

If the real becomes a simulation, then the ability to form an actual illusion disappears. The only way to combat this is “to reinject realness and referentiality everywhere” with such slogans as “Take your desires for power!”³⁰ As long as capital removes the “distinction between true and false, good and evil,” leaving only “equivalence and exchange,” it will be necessary to replace the lost real with a produced hyperreal. Power hides the fact that it doesn’t really exist by creating social, economic and political signs of power—such as the political scandal, Watergate. Material

production, too, yields objects that are designed to take the place of the real.³¹ Essentially, capitalism has replaced the real with a system of equivalence—replaced moral values like true and false with money value—and this has resulted in a crisis of the real. So simulated objects, power and religion are created in an attempt to form a reality, or to replace the reality that capitalism has destroyed.

Baudrillard warns that along with power, religion and the real, society itself could break down. People will be powerless and isolated, unable to prevent the loss of the real. Thus, a hyperreal society would be created—a society completely “dependent . . . on production and mass consumption.”³² Since most Americans no longer work only to subsist, but rather to enjoy discretionary income, work will become more and more disconnected from any visible outcome, and people will work harder and produce more only to feed the system through mass consumption. But the idea of work and the sign of work will be even more important—since they must simulate a work-reality. In other words, work would be simulated to make sure the system remains intact. This suggests that even though work could conceivably one day be abolished, if people worked only to pay for signs of affluence rather than necessities of life, it will nonetheless continue to exist in simulated form to maintain the system and keep order. The only way to combat simulation is to restore truth and objectivity.

CHAPTER THREE

JAMESON

Jameson recognizes the importance of the image in postmodern theory, especially as he describes the postmodern environment in “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” The concept of postmodernism exists mainly in “theorizing its own condition of possibility,” and if one probes postmodernism itself, instead of the changes in culture it attempts to catalogue, one may find that the “contents are just more images.”¹ Postmodernism is a very human field in that the study of culture has replaced the study of nature. A succinct description of postmodernism is found in Jameson’s introduction; he calls postmodern theory “the effort to take the temperature of the age without instruments and in a situation in which we are not even sure there is so coherent a thing as an ‘age’.” Lyotard’s major addition to postmodern theory, the breakdown of master narratives, is insufficient to convince Jameson, since Lyotard’s own account of the end of master narratives is a narrative. In his own approach to postmodernism, Jameson explores four themes: “interpretation, Utopia, survivals of the modern, and ‘returns of the repressed’ of historicity.”² Postmodernism bears several shifting and interchangeable names throughout the book, including “multinational capitalism,” “image society,” “media capitalism” and “the world system.”³ By “late capitalism” Jameson means ballooned bureaucratic control and “interpenetration of government and big business” in a world market that resembles Marx’s late stage of capitalism.⁴ The world market is dominated by America, so it follows that the theory of the postmodern must find its base in American culture.⁵

Postmodernism owes its existence to endings or crises in other cultural institutions, including “ideology, art, social class . . . Leninism, social democracy, the welfare state” and modernism, meaning “abstract expressionism . . . existentialism . . . representation in the novel, the films of the great *auteurs*.”⁶ When these cultural institutions end, their replacements are “heterogeneous,” including the fusion of classical and popular styles and experimentation in film. These postmodern differences in aesthetic production are especially noticeable in architecture, where one finds the “effacement . . . of the older frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture.”⁷ This meeting of “high” and “low” cultures, which would have been anathema to high-modernism, is found in architect Frank Gehry’s house in Santa Monica, California. The home, designed by a notable architect with access to a wide range of materials, utilizes “metal, plywood, glass and chain-link fencing—all very inexpensive.”⁸

Postmodern theory touches the organization of history as well as culture. Any postmodern study must admit the existence of the purest historical stage of capitalism, multinational or global capitalism. Jameson wishes to characterize postmodernism as a historical period, but he admits that periodization, or the division of history into stages, is dubious, and largely replaced by “genealogy.”⁹ Periodizing tends to give the false impression of homogeneity within a period, with differences only noticeable at the prominent dividing lines between periods. Jameson is aware of Lyotard’s critique of teleology, and so he defends his desire to periodize postmodernism by explaining that it

is “essential to grasp postmodernism not as a style but rather as a cultural dominant . . . which allows for the presence . . . of a range of very different . . . features.”¹⁰

Jameson echoes Baudrillard’s main complaint: “aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production.”¹¹ Baudrillard claimed consumers were becoming functional. Jameson adds that aesthetic production performs an “increasingly essential structural function.”¹² That art has become functional is shown in economic incentives for artists, such as grants and museums. This merging of art and economics brings about a central feature of postmodernism: depthlessness, or the omnipresence of the simulacrum, which is described in detail in Baudrillard’s work.

Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* is used to illustrate a dilemma of self. The subject is often thought of as containing expression, which is projected outward. To be able to express, though, there must be a difference, a boundary, between subject and others which some might consider isolation. The subject-figure of *The Scream* projects his emotion in the closed, silent realm of a painting, from which it is impossible to connect with an other. Jameson says the postmodern dissolution of self at least solves this problem of isolation, along with the removing individual psychopathologies and ego. Unfortunately, the individual is also cured of personal style, and Jameson fears “not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling.”¹³ Jameson and Baudrillard differ on the existence of a self. According to Baudrillard, a self must be present in order to experience the alienation of consuming products that falsely promise happiness and popularity. Products are marketed both to the group and the individual. Thus,

instead of the liberation from alienation Jameson claims by the destruction of the self, alienation is compounded—consumers are millions of individually isolated *Scream*-type monads. Baudrillard points out that affluent consumers who in times past were surrounded by people (other affluent people, servants, etc.) are now surrounded by objects—cut off from others. Jameson’s statement that “concepts such as anxiety and alienation . . . are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern” is contradicted later in his own essay with the description of the Westin Bonaventure hotel, where the self is present to experience the anxiety of being disoriented and overwhelmed.

Jameson’s theory of the dissolution of self is critical to his description of pastiche, which appears when personal style is no longer available. Pastiche is different from parody, which tends to satirize eccentric personal style in the secure knowledge that some “normal” style exists. Free from humor, pastiche simply collects and codes dead styles. Whereas high-modernism celebrated personal style, postmodernism eliminates it, leaving new artists to imitate dead styles in a process called “historicism” or “the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion.”¹⁴ Style becomes a code of images, and in late capitalist culture images, or Baudrillard’s simulacra, dominate the consumer market.

Simulacra influence history itself. Photographic images dominate the telling of history. In postmodern theory, the past as referent is erased, eventually leaving nothing but texts. Images of the past are often now arranged into “nostalgia films” which project pastiche “onto a collective and social level,”¹⁵ while desperately trying to aesthetically recreate a lost and desirable past. Nostalgia films invariably avoid “representing” the

past itself, in favor of a certain style that is accepted as representative of the past. Thus a shiny T-Bird represents the 1950s and Disney's Frontierland represents early America. Filmmakers may complicate the nostalgia film by attempting to aesthetically recreate the present, as is done in *Body Heat*. Images exist in the film that evoke the past, such as art deco credits, and the filmmakers are careful to avoid any contemporary references. Thus the film is contemporary, but summons the type of nostalgia one might feel for the 1930s. This type of artificial nostalgia evoked by stereotypes demonstrates how we are "increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience" and must instead rely on stereotypes and signs.¹⁶

Schizophrenia dominates some of the cultural production of postmodernism. Jameson's broken, non-unified subject loses the ability "to organize its past and future into coherent experience,"¹⁷ leaving fragments. When the link between signifier and signified snaps, as when René Magritte draws attention to the fact that his picture of a pipe is not a pipe, but a representation,¹⁸ meaning is expunged, resulting in a schizophrenic "rubble of . . . unrelated signifiers."¹⁹ That the break of the linguistic signifying chain results in schizophrenia suggests that personal identity requires the unification of past, future and present, and that language itself is the unifier.²⁰ Schizophrenia is generally associated with a sense of disjointedness, of being overwhelmed by the present, but Jameson exchanges the negative connotations of schizophrenia for the "euphoria" of a poem such as Bob Perelman's "China," which uses a fragmented style.²¹

In a schizophrenic environment, where representation and reality have no relationship, difference cannot exist. By this I mean to say that when confronted with a group of floating signifiers, none of which is related to a specific referent, any of the group could represent any referent, or shift among referents, representing different ones at random. There would be no solid set of anchored signifiers which could be used as starting point from which to differentiate. Some postmodern works attempt to restore meaning to the concepts of *relationship and difference*, and relationship through difference.²² Jameson offers the example of Nam June Paik's "TV Garden," where the postmodern viewer can grasp the relationship among the screens only by viewing all of them at once, rather than attempting to focus on a single TV. The differentiation among the images on the screens holds the key to the relationship, not an image on any individual screen.³¹

Jameson claims the postmodern cultural experience is characterized by "euphoria" and "intensities." "Exhilaration" is used to describe both the surfaces of gleaming automobile wrecks and "alienation of daily life in the city."²⁴ A similar feeling of exhilaration is elicited by viewing Duane Hanson's lifelike human-figure simulacra, which almost seem, by comparison, to transform "real human beings . . . for the briefest instant into so many dead and flesh-colored simulacra in their own right."²⁵ Jameson's exhilaration is related to the "astonishment, stupor and awe" one experiences when confronted with the sublime. Rather than the old notion of the sublime, that of a God or Nature which could altogether snuff out human life, the postmodern sublime is the "world system of a present-day multinational capitalism."²⁶ The reaction of the

postmodern subject when confronted with this system is confusion, and the inability to cognitively map one's orientation in the system.

John Portman's Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles exemplifies the postmodern formation of space. Jameson suggests that human beings' perceptions haven't kept pace with the new mutations of space in postmodern buildings. The space in and outside is so governed that the hotel appears to be "a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city." Thus there is no grand entryway; the entrances seem to almost be afterthoughts, and lead only in roundabout ways to the lobby. The passages to the outside are designed to minimize the connection of the Bonaventure to the city, since the hotel is supposed to take the city's place. Yet the Bonaventure differs from high modern buildings in that it makes no attempt "to insert . . . an elevated, a new Utopian language into the tawdry and commercial sign system of the surrounding city, rather [it seeks] to speak that very language."²⁷ It is indeed a popular tourist spot, but it still possesses a postmodern agenda: to exist within the city, while simultaneously replacing the city. The glass outer surface of the building reflects the image of the surrounding area, while at the same time repelling it.

Attempting to navigate the interior of the building, one is confused by the absence of orienting landmarks. To the chagrin of the gift shopkeepers, those customers who confusedly stumble on their shops are unlikely to do so again, forcing them to sell everything desperately cheaply. The impossibility "to get your bearings" shows that the postmodern formation of space, what Jameson calls "hyperspace," overpowers "the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself."²⁸

Jameson is quick to caution that the postmodern notion of space is not stylistic, or only visible in the design of a hotel or painting. It must be thought of historically and culturally as well. But it's difficult to critique a cultural dominant when one is surrounded by it. To critique postmodernism, Jameson suggests Marx's materialist dialectic, which was used to "think the historical development of capitalism . . . positively and negatively all at once"—both as "catastrophe and progress."²⁹ Marx wrote that humanity progressed through confrontation. A dialectic critique requires both a "moment of truth" and a "moment of falsehood." As postmodernism is inseparable from the cultural, economic and spatial expansion of capitalism around the globe, the "moment of truth" involves the end of the separation of culture from "the practical world of the existent."³⁰ Instead of being confined to certain designated areas, culture expands to include every aspect of social life. This coincides with Warhol and others' reconciling of pop with high art. "Culture" is no longer something which exists "above" the concerns of daily life as in high modernism. Not only has culture expanded, but capitalism has also expanded so that it is impossible for anything to be outside its reach, especially culture. This moment of postmodern truth is also the postmodern sublime: there exists a system so large (capitalism) that it is impossible for its postmodern consumer/subjects to achieve any distance, this being the origin of postmodern spatial disorientation. The positive side to the "world system" of capitalism is the emergence of "the framework, and the precondition for the achievement of some new and more comprehensive socialism."³¹

To help the individual position him or her self in confusing postmodern space, a turn to cognitive mapping is necessary. Cognitive mapping allows a person to conquer the “alienated city” which has no points of reference such as “monuments, nodes, natural boundaries” by the “construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory.”³² These cognitive maps provide a position for the individual relative to society’s larger structures. Ideology, too, serves this function of reconciling the subject’s mental life with existential life, a mapping of the individual’s relationship to the whole. The object of political postmodernism should be to facilitate individual cognitive mapping on a global scale.

In “Surrealism Without the Unconscious” Jameson defends video as the representative medium of postmodernism. The present age is not dominated by one form, because the terms of literary language, forms and genres, have been replaced with the technological term, media. “Media” signals “an artistic mode or specific form of aesthetic production . . . a specific technology, generally organized around a central apparatus or machine . . . and . . . a social institution.”³³ Literary terminology is replaced with media terminology when life has become mostly linguistic—everything is a text. The dominant art form of the twentieth century, film, is mediatic and has overtaken literature as the main modernist language. Certain film and literature are postmodern, but neither prevails in the postmodern cultural situation. That distinction belongs to video.

Jameson divides video into two categories: commercial and experimental. If capitalism reaches everything and everyone, however, it is difficult to draw a distinction

between commercial and experimental video. If we do assign categories, we must consider videos that are not meant ever to be on TV, but aren't really experimental either—like a collection of family photos on video, or even a video that is made to be sold and exhibited on TV, but never quite makes it—because of lack of interest or other problems. Using Jameson's definition, commercial video made for TV is shown in a system of "total flow" where images are streaming ceaselessly day and night—uninterrupted except by "commercials."³⁴ A common misconception is that TV exists to provide entertainment, when actually it provides an audience for advertising. Jameson makes no distinction between separate "commercials" and commercial video—since both sell product, more or less overtly—except to notice how commercials impose artificial time schedules, supposedly dividing the total flow into 30 minute and hour-long segments. This is meant to simulate the ending of a play or movie, when TV actually flows ceaselessly. Total flow annihilates the "critical distance" that still exists in film or theater—the latter two end at some point, with a raising of the lights or dropping of curtain, but TV may be turned on at any hour of day or night, constantly flashing images. Time is very different in TV and film or theater. Whereas film suggests the passing of time through various techniques ("fictive time") and the filmgoer is returned to real time after a couple of hours, TV creates a new kind of machine-manufactured time—constant one hour or 30-minute segments broken by illusory commercial relief (it's actually closer to 5 or 10 minute segments). Film time is fake, but at least it ends. TV is a closed system, where even the apparent breaks in fictive time are an illusion, "the appearance of beginnings and endings . . . the second-degree simulation of what is already, in other art

forms, some first-degree illusory fictiveness or temporality.”³⁵ In an ideal TV-watching environment, the viewer would never leave.

It’s possible to approach a critique of commercial video through experimental video. But first, Jameson insists that it must be agreed not to use the term “boring” or the value judgments “good” or “bad” since in postmodern theory any concept of “great videos” has been abandoned with that of “great books” or masterworks and replaced with “texts.” To understand the methods of experimental video, we can examine the technological medium. Jameson compares video spectators to daguerrotype portrait subjects, who had to be physically clamped into their seats for ten minutes in order for the process to work. They became part of the technology. Video viewers, too, are helplessly assimilated into the video technology by the attention necessitated by TV’s total flow. The video viewer is functional—he or she is a “registering apparatus” for total flow. The viewer disappears into the machine—parallel to Jameson’s postmodern disappearance of the subject.

Animation is the closest ancestor of video, first, because it is a match between musical and visual language, and second, because animated characters obey produced laws of writing and drawing—not real laws such as verisimilitude or gravity.³⁶ Animation teaches “the reading of material signifiers (rather than the narrative apprenticeship of objects of representation—character, actions and the like).”³⁷ The same textual language of animation has replaced everywhere “the older language of the ‘work’—the work of art, the masterwork.”³⁸ If videos are read as texts, as part of a larger textual system, then it is fruitless to analyze one video, one fragment. This is why

a school of “video theory” does not exist in the same form as film theory—where one analyzes individual films or studies auteurs’ signatures.

Though Jameson admits the ideal way to view video is “a kind of random succession of three or four hours of tapes at regular intervals” he chooses one video, *AlienNATION*, to explore as “concrete text.” *AlienNATION* is a combination of connotations of high and low culture, a flow of information without formal markers. To receive and register all of this information, Jameson suggests “reducing the phenomenon to its simplest form, namely, the interaction of two such elements or signals.”³⁹ The theory applied to two elements may be described as “subject and predicate,” “topic and comment,” or “tenor and vehicle.” An interpretation of *AlienNATION*, though, is difficult. The thematic answer to “What is it about?” is “alienation of a whole nation, or . . . a nation organized around alienation itself.”⁴⁰ *AlienNATION* resists this kind of interpretation because in the total flow of experimental video, constituents constantly rotate—with nothing occupying one space long enough to be deemed interpretant. This is the postmodern text: a “sign flow which resists meaning.”⁴¹

Jameson discusses video’s Modernist predecessor in “Nostalgia for the Present.” Philip K. Dick’s novel, *Time Out of Joint*, evokes the fifties not through “facts or historical realities” but through stereotypes: “President Eisenhower’s stroke; Main Street, U.S.A.; Marilyn Monroe; a world of neighbors and PTAs.”⁴² Jameson wishes to ask whether any of these 1950s clichés are found in 1950s literature—if those living during the period would have used the same list to describe their present. Opposition, too, existed to “positive” 1950s culture, in the form of Beat poets, early rock and roll and

pioneering theorists—but even these rejections of the halcyon 1950s themes imply that there is something to reject.

High-modern artists avoid treating small-town fifties life, so the only “realistic” representations are found in sitcoms and other mass representation, which are the source of most 1950s stereotypes. This same mass-culture-presented small town acted as a miniature of America’s situation in the postwar world: isolated, autonomous, “secure in the sense of its radical difference from other populations and cultures.”⁴³ Now, as the US has become part of a global network, small towns too are no longer isolated havens. The same products and businesses such as McDonald’s or Wal-Mart are found in both small towns and big cities across the country.

This shift from the isolation of small towns to their connection through technology and products accompanies a shift “from the realities of the 1950s to the representation of that rather different thing, the ‘fifties,’” where the cultural attributes of the period are drawn from TV, “in other words, its own representation of itself.”⁴⁴ This raises the issue of the simulacrum—in the sense that *Father Knows Best* is an exact copy of the “fifties” that never existed. Jameson admits that television is not supposed to be a “realistic” portrayal of a period, but notes that interesting conclusions can be drawn about a generation from “its own representation of itself.”⁴⁵ He warns, though, that “the sense people have of themselves and their own moment of history may ultimately have *nothing* to do with its reality.”⁴⁶

The Nietzschean position on periods says that there is no connection between formed ideas of periods and reality—that our imposed classifications of styles, decades,

names of monarchs are bunk. This implies both the nonexistence of periods and of history. This idea is explored in Dick's *Time Out of Joint*. The novel is labeled science fiction due to the falseness of the small fifties town in which the main character lives. The town is really an elaborate fantasy, constructed by the government in the future, 1997. Science fiction describes the death of historicity, or the attempt to think the present from a critical distance—as history—in contrast with the historical novel, which helped give birth to “strong post-eighteenth-century [historical] sense.”⁴⁷ Historicity was easier when history was seen as a chain of events, each one the sequel to the one before. In a postmodern environment, where teleology no longer dominates, the present may be read “as the past of a specific future,” transformed into a “memory and a reconstruction,” as in Dick's book.⁴⁸ This means that the ‘fifties’ or the ‘eighties’ become a thing we can build.

The new relationship built by using the future to read the present eliminates fears of the future as an unfamiliar and frightening scenario. We are no longer shocked and terrified by threats of overpopulation and violence, not because we have become accustomed to the threats, but because we live in and around them—the “catastrophes” now belong to us. Nietzsche says not to worry, because “whatever social and spatial form our future misery may take, it will not be alien because it will by definition be ours.”⁴⁹ Contemporary culture signals that historicism is still alive—in the constant revival of “dead styles and fashions.”⁵⁰ There is a difference between current historicity and Dick's science fiction: the former approaches the present by way of the past, and the latter approaches the present by way of the future.

David Lynch's *Something Wild* and *Blue Velvet* both historicize the present through the past. *Something Wild* is a modern gothic, a form which depends on archetypes of evil men pursuing innocent women. The evil character in this case, Ray, is an ex-convict and petty criminal, but he is not truly evil. He simulates evil, just as his clothing and hair simulate the fifties. Ray's simulated evil corresponds to Baudrillard's example of a simulated bank robbery. Jameson tells us that we should be able to reach "a sober and political decision as to the people and forces who are collectively "evil" in our contemporary world" in the same way that we determine what is or isn't scandalous. If capitalism allows evil, which we accept, while at the same time decriing other things as evil, evil should be an economic or political judgment rather than a moral one. Ray represents the "fearful and ominous" fifties, which are contrasted with the "desirable" and "fascinating" sixties.⁵¹ In addition to presenting the threat of real violence inherent to the fifties, Ray fulfills a "romantic representation" of the loner hero made famous by actors like James Dean. But Jameson notes that Ray's type of "lower class" crime is designed to oppose Charley's minor white-collar crimes, calling into question the exact nature of "something wild." The ideological purpose of the film is to make Charley into a hero—not the same type as Ray—but a hero who conquers his subjection to his corporate job. The change is manifested by Charley's shedding of his suit for more "unpredictable" clothing: t-shirt and shorts.

Both *Blue Velvet* and *Something Wild* attempt at the same time to identify their present by "the wearing of the costumes of the great moments of the past" and "illuminate the failure of this attempt."⁵² It's problematic to identify a historical period

by the mood of the generation: the sixties, for example, were marked by a strong generational identity—but subsequent decades have been void of such identity (Jameson mentions, in particular, the seventies). Postmodernism replaces “generational pasts” which are unable to provide genuine historicity.⁵³

Thus, having concluded an overview of some of the important texts by Jean Lyotard, Jean-Francois Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson, I continue the thesis by examining the films *Rashomon*, *Orlando* and *Playtime* for postmodern themes in the second half, chapters four through six.

CHAPTER FOUR

RASHOMON

In the spirit of Citizen Kane, the enigma turns out to be the nature of storytelling itself, involving the mystery of who is the keeper of knowledge. Whose story is this? Who is telling the tale and to what ends? Whose point of view are we invited to explore?

—*Marcia Landy and Lucy Fischer*

If postmodernism is commonly periodized “from 1975–present”¹ where does Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*, begun before 1948 and released in 1950, fit in? *Rashomon* serves as the postmodern template for many subsequent non-traditional narrative films, such as *Sliding Doors*. Maureen Turim grudgingly answers this question in the style of Jean-François Lyotard, characterizing movies as modern or postmodern by their content, rather than year of release. In this way *Mouchette* and *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle*, both 1966 films, are modernist and postmodernist, respectively. This is a Lyotardian classification precisely because teleology is irrelevant; changes in art or knowledge are not part of an inevitable build to a final goal. Instead, they ebb and flow independent of what might come after.

Kurosawa drew *Rashomon* from two short stories by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, “Rashomon” and “In a Grove.” “In a Grove” is a collection of court testimonies regarding a rape and murder. Seven versions are offered, with no resolution or clues as to what “really” happened. “Rashomon” provides the framing story for Kurosawa’s film, though Kurosawa adapted the short story so loosely little of it remains other than

the chance meeting of characters sheltering from the rain in an abandoned building. In the movie, a priest, woodcutter and commoner in a temple pass the rainy day arguing the facts of a murder case. A man was found dead in the forest, and the only people who might know the “truth” are the man himself, his wife, a bandit and the sole outside witness, a woodcutter. From the initial sequences in the temple, Kurosawa dissolves to the woodcutter’s version of the story. He claims he didn’t see the murder, but merely discovered the body. From there, the story is recounted six more times, with Kurosawa returning either to the framing story in the temple or a court scene between the “recreations.” The bandit says he raped the woman and killed her husband when she demanded that her honor be upheld in a duel. The woman says she killed her husband after he unrightfully blamed her for her own rape by the bandit. The husband (through a medium) says he killed himself out of shame and grief after the woman chose her rapist, the bandit, betraying him. The woodcutter then retells his story, saying he did indeed see the murder: the bandit killed the husband and the woman ran away. (The other versions of the story are told by the priest and a police officer, neither were directly involved.) The movie closes with a return to the temple, where the priest, commoner and woodcutter complain that none of it makes sense. The priest and woodcutter then find the commoner trying to steal the clothing of a baby he discovered in a corner of the temple, an element not found in either “Rashomon” or “In a Grove.” The priest scolds the commoner, then the woodcutter volunteers to adopt the baby since he has six children of his own and “one more won’t make it any more difficult.” In one of the final scenes, the priest thanks the woodcutter for restoring his faith in humanity.

A Lyotardian postmodern reading of *Rashomon* clearly presents itself, since Lyotard is well known for his rejection of grand narratives. *Rashomon* challenges the possibility of identifying one infallible Truth through various and contradictory versions of what at first glance might appear to be a straightforward murder story. In this sense, Lyotard's unrepresentable, or sublime, is represented. Lyotard believes the object of art is to represent the sublime, and in the case of *Rashomon* the sublime is manifested as the vague and uncharted realm of possibility existing behind any confident declaration of "this is what really happened." As those who conduct experiments know, one can never prove something right, only wrong. Thus, old scientific certainties ("flat earth") provide their years of faithful service until they are disproved or a new theory serves our needs better. What is considered fact or scientific law is not timeless and immutable. *Rashomon* replaces a detective story-style quest for truth and explanation with a concession of uncertainty and, importantly, a demand to know exactly who arbitrates among the different accounts, choosing the correct one.

In *Rashomon*, with whom does the responsibility of selecting the right account rest? Certainly not with the woodcutter, priest and commoner, who express their frustrated confusion. Neither does the court provide any comforting pillars of verity (the court scenes consist of each witness kneeling and addressing the camera, and therefore the viewer, as the "judge.") The most facile answer would be the viewer him or herself, who leaves the film with the task of making sense of unresolved questions. Lyotard complicates further the nature of truth when he addresses the problem of legitimation. Legitimation in a broad sense asks who has the authority to create laws, or truths or

norms—"who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided."² With the breakdown of master narratives came the "flattening," or the reduction in importance, of those at the "top" of a hierarchical society, such as an aristocracy. Thus, society is no longer under the authority of one dominant group, but is instead a collection of different interrelated systems. If one ruling group is not dictating the truth for its subordinates, it is impossible to "write a universal narrative," a narrative that would be in any case be repulsive to Lyotard, who absolutely rejects any sort of totalitarianism.³ What we find in the postmodern world, then, in lieu of grand narratives, are medleys of experience. We make room for a variety of perspectives, which leads to the discovery and promotion of previously marginalized voices, such as those of African-Americans and women. What makes *Rashomon* interesting is not really the story, a run of the mill rape/murder, but how the story is told: "In the spirit of *Citizen Kane*, the enigma turns out to be the nature of storytelling itself, involving the mystery of who is the keeper of knowledge. Whose story is this? Who is telling the tale and to what ends? Whose point of view are we invited to explore?"⁴ One authoritative ruling like "The bandit's version is the most plausible" is irrelevant.

What might be forgotten in a discussion of the various story-versions' merits is the very nature of the film medium. With the proper editing, anything in a filmic universe is real. For instance, movie audiences are accustomed to certain time-saving film conventions that represent their real-life counterparts: "The traditional technique for dealing with doors in films is the cut. The actor enters. Cut. Reverse angle. The actor

comes out on the other side. [This conveys] door-icity: not a “real” door, the physical entity of a door, but the idea of doorness—the image of the door.”⁵

In any case, it is impossible for any action to “really” take place on-screen; movies are composed entirely of images—images that, when gathered and arranged in a certain manner, are able to create the illusion of belonging together, of relating to one another in some way. Movies may be set in the Sahara having been shot in California; weather machines are used to produce on-the-spot precipitation; what the audience sees when a character looks out a window is probably not what was happening at the time (if a window actually even existed where the scene was shot). Despite knowing these techniques (at least latently) and accepting them, we become contemptuous when gore makeup or an action sequence doesn’t look “real” enough. Here we arrive at Jean Baudrillard’s simulacrum, the copy of a copy, or the copy with no original. To simulate is “to feign to have what one doesn’t”⁶ to “mask the *absence* of a basic reality.”⁷ What does a movie do but create the image of an entire filmic universe from nothing? The “reality” is rolls of celluloid and complicated equipment and years of pre- and post-production—none of which is reflected in the typical modern film. The images in *Rashomon* of the priest or Tajomaru are not “reflections of a basic reality”⁸ but rather “copies without originals,” film images of actors playing imaginary characters sprung from the minds of Akutagawa and Kurosawa. When Baudrillard said the Gulf War didn’t take place, his “(rather opaque) point was that our apprehension of the war was completely circumscribed by simulation, by our immersion in video-game-like images.”⁹

The same is true for film and TV images—even the most remote suggestion of reality in film is simulated and mediated for our ingestion.

That film images are simulacra is nothing new. *Rashomon's* particular postmodernity comes in part from its self-conscious attention to the media and technical conventions of film. Early in the movie there is a wide shot of the woodcutter and priest seated beneath the arch of the temple. The arch is square and about the size of a typical movie screen—the length of the shot and its framing evoke a stage unmistakably. The characters are positioned in what would be downstage center, facing the camera or “audience.” Behind the characters and temple lies an infinite stretch of landscape, and between actors and camera a light curtain of rain falls. Invaluable to the film, this shot painstakingly introduces, first, the characters as “players” who will relate the story to us (since we weren’t there and don’t know what “really” happened) and second, the movie as “staged” spectacle. Kurosawa knew that the audience would be at the characters’ mercy—we must trust them to provide coherent accounts from which we can piece together the story, subject to their biases and self-interest—so he simultaneously presents them as characters/participants, and actors/storytellers. The shot literally and figuratively frames the actors in the framing story. Kurosawa reminds us to consider the technical state of film as celluloid images by creating his own “screen,” that of the rain, between action and camera. This screen parallels our own TV or movie screens, impassable barriers to the filmic world.

The same sort of theme arises later in the film in the court scenes, which consist of a large open courtyard and a character kneeling in the foreground, conversational

distance from the camera. We know this is a court from the way the character (the priest, for example) “testifies” directly to the camera and the language she or he uses. We also know that no court official is “really” there—that the aim is to relate the story to us, the viewers. Kurosawa again reminds us of the image/spectacle by placing another figure in the far background, observing the action. This spectator watches us watching the priest; his very physical presence/placement (small in the background in proportion to the large, dominant figure in the foreground) reinforces the movie’s theme of the existence of different perspectives. Easily, Kurosawa might have included the spectator telling the story of the murder mediated through the priest’s story he heard in court. Continual underlining of the movie as staged event returns us to Baudrillard’s theory of capital-driven destruction of the real and its replacement with simulacra.

Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard agree on the danger exchange value poses to aesthetic value. Jameson asserts that the difficulty the postmodern citizen faces in orienting him or herself within the world capitalist system due to lack of aesthetic or moral markers is expressed in a schizophrenic cannibalization of styles, called pastiche, and ultimately the dissolution of the subject. High modernism depends on the prominent individual styles of great writers and artists, whereas the postmodern subject is too confused to do more than sample and rearrange (if there is a subject at all). *Rashomon*, with its lack of one dominant point of view, rejects high modernism in favor of a postmodern narrative arrangement. Each storyteller is given equal weight: priest and bandit, commoner and wealthy husband. At no time does an authority figure arrive to set the facts straight, and though the court is present, no ruling is shown. The

woodcutter articulates his confusion near the end of the film, after we see the stories of bandit, husband and wife: "I don't understand any of them—they don't make sense."¹⁰

The *Rashomon* players search for some sort of order and explanation, but as is inevitable in a capital-dominated society (where the only value is monetary) none is to be found. Orientation problems confronting the postmodern citizen lead to a crisis of identity and a state of "anything goes" where everything is tried (superficially) with no application of value judgements. When capital is the equalizer, it is art that suffers being deemed equivalent to any utilitarian object with the same price tag.¹¹ Jameson's postmodern subjects stumble from purchase to purchase in this dizzying and boundless wasteland, with no guideposts to show where they fit in or even what is worth buying except advertising, a series of empty images that signify only themselves. *Rashomon's* abandoned infant represents this loss of identity. The priest and woodcutter discover both the baby and simultaneously, the commoner stripping its clothing. Jameson would find interesting the commoner's suppression of the adult protective instinct in favor of the prospective clothing sale. The moral code that would generally apply, or even the societal norm that prohibits preying on children, is absent. All that remains is the code of capital. Kurosawa does allow for a hopeful ending, with the baby's adoption by the woodcutter, but even his motives are questionable. The infant itself resembles Jameson's idea of the postmodern consumer: lost, helpless and impotent. Jameson describes the consumer's role in the global economy as merely "functional." To be "good" and responsible, the consumer/citizen must perform only one task: the stimulation of the economy. As in Baudrillard's model of society as functional whole,

finding and fulfilling what is good for the system is the sole moral obligation.

Therefore, the baby is useful to the commoner immediately for the objects it possesses which might be sold and profited from. The baby has performed its “function” on which its worth is based. No identity may be formed outside basic functionality. I examine other forms of identity make-up in the following chapter on Sally Potter’s *Orlando*.

CHAPTER FIVE

ORLANDO

So Orlando, at the turn by the barn, called "Orlando?" Orlando did not come. "All right then," Orlando said, and tried another. For she had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand.

—Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*

If identity is determined by functional value in *Rashomon*, *Orlando* casts doubt on its very existence in the traditional sense. Sally Potter directed the 1992 movie, based on Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel. Orlando (Tilda Swinton), when first encountered, is a young aristocrat boy serving an aging Queen Elizabeth I (Quentin Crisp). "He—for there could be no doubt of his sex,"¹ becomes the queen's favorite, and she blesses him with perpetual youth. We follow Orlando through his service in the Queen's court to his affair with a visiting Russian princess, Sasha, who scorns him and leaves him cursing the treachery of women. King Charles later sends the still-youthful Orlando as ambassador to Istanbul. Before returning to England, Orlando falls into a deep sleep and, with little ado, awakens as a woman. The aristocratic pleasures Orlando enjoyed as a man are immediately threatened and her centuries-old family home is almost seized. She receives an offer of marriage from a lord who admired her as a man, and is equally attracted to her as a woman. Centuries and their fashions slide by, the ever-youthful

Orlando taking all in stride. Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine (Billy Zane) enters sometime in the nineteenth century, Orlando's instant soul mate and eventual husband. The book and movie diverge after Shelmerdine and Orlando marry; in Potter's version Orlando has a daughter (a plot twist missing from the book), and the movie ends in approximately modern times.

A consequence of global capitalism is dissolved barriers—physical, cultural and economic—accompanied by the encroachment of (mainly US) products, in whatever form. To Jameson, this is what fragments and disorients the putative subject. Postmodernism shares common ground with Judith Butler's style of feminism in what could be interpreted as identity destabilization, precisely because Butler challenges the notion of masculine or feminine gender as integral to identity. As national boundaries are dissolved in an economic sense, the same press of capital leads to the questioning of identity make-up. "Indeterminate gender positioning and the loss of boundaries"² must be discussed hand in hand with postmodernism and its treatment of identity. *Orlando* provides an excellent forum in which to discuss Judith Butler's thoughts on gender as social construction, and her fear that feminism falls short by insisting on a "stable subject... a seamless category of women... [despite] fragmentation within feminism and the paradoxical opposition to feminism from 'women' whom feminism claims to represent."³

Orlando's first appearance is as a man. This point is so crucial (or ambiguous) that the film's narrator takes care to inform us that "there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it."⁴ The opening sequence of

the film shows Orlando pacing before a huge oak, dressed in Elizabethan tunic and tights. In a close-up of Orlando seated with his back to the tree, it's clear the wardrobe person and cinematographer used "masculine" colors in the background and Orlando's clothing: earthtones of brown, grey and green. This is the first of many uses of costume to suggest gender difference when nothing else might distinguish a male character from a female one. The male Orlando's relationship with the aging Queen Elizabeth quickly approaches mother/son, even as Elizabeth longs for her youth when a romantic relationship would have been more feasible. He is privy to perks and plum jobs as a man that would be inaccessible to a woman. Elizabeth is as much attracted to his youth as to his beauty, and along with the gifts of a stellar political career and mansion, she demands that he agree to never age, magically bestowing unending *jeunesse* as well. As if to confirm Orlando's masculinity and heterosexuality, after Elizabeth's death he has an affair with Sasha, the Russian princess, an affair that is paralleled in the movie's second half by the female Orlando's affair with Shelmerdine.

After Elizabeth's death and Orlando's squelched love affair with Sasha, he wishes to escape these painful memories and England. Potter toys with supposedly masculine characteristics during Orlando's stint as ambassador to Istanbul. Orlando and the Khan compete in a ceremonial toasting contest in the wilting desert heat. Buried under a heavy jacket and immense powdered wig, Orlando struggles to match the clean-shaven, relatively undecorated, "more masculine" Khan drink for drink. Orlando proves the weaker, unable to "hold his liquor" as men are "expected" to do. The choice of the drinking contest as arbitrary determiner of masculinity corresponds with Butler's themes

of gender-socialization. "Gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities."⁵

Consistent with Jameson's postmodern superficiality of the image, time passage is mostly notable by changes in Orlando's dress. Woolf says "there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking."⁶ When Orlando spontaneously transforms from male to female, Potter's best visual tools to emphasize the change are costume and makeup. The shift in sex transforms Orlando's body into spectacle; an early post-change scene shows Orlando rigged in complex Restoration style—including a towering grey wig and a complicated dress with such a wide hoop skirt that she must awkwardly flop down on a specially-made chair. The company she meets in this dress, a group of literary notables such as Alexander Pope, slyly smile at her difficulty in maneuvering in the ridiculous costume (a real woman should be more graceful). They then insult her in conversation, remarking that woman's mind is not equipped for substantial thoughts, such as learning Greek, and, as is proved by her own get-up, the flimsy female intellect is more suited to pretty dresses and child rearing. The dress itself is used against her: women spend too much time vainly adorning themselves, even though their proper occupation should be ornamentation. Pope and the other writers seem overjoyed to have put the woman in her place. But the balance of power within the conversation is not simply tipped toward the men to the absolute exclusion of women. Potter shows Pope deftly crushing a less-witty

male member of the group who challenges him. At that point a competition is in progress, where the most masculine member of the group is the cleverest. A woman is allowed in the circle, but she is not as youthful and pretty as Orlando, so perhaps the men consider her mind sufficiently undistracted by frilly things to join them. The older woman has the right to the masculine pursuit of conversational wit, which she has won by age or purchased by becoming a writers' patron.

Orlando faces far more vexing problems after her transformation than uncomfortable garments. Representatives of the British government arrive at her home to serve a lawsuit based dually on her reported death as a man, and her new female state—both of which result in her legal inability to own property. Old friend Archduke Harry offers to rescue Orlando from financial straits through marriage. He finds her at least as fascinating as a woman as he did as a man: "Orlando, to me you were and always will be, whether male or female, the pink, the pearl and the perfection of your sex."⁷ Orlando discovers that as a woman, she is now the potential legal property of aristocrats like Harry:

Archduke Harry: I'm offering you my hand.

Orlando: Archduke! That's very kind, yes. I can't accept.

Archduke Harry: *But, I am England, and you are mine!*

Orlando: I see. On what grounds?

Archduke Harry: Because...I adore you.⁸

After Orlando refuses, Harry predicts the loss of all her possessions and her death as an old maid.

The adjustments in Orlando's dress, behavior and social status on becoming a woman support Butler's "culturally constructed" gender differences:

A gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way... when the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.⁹

In other words, it's quite possible for a person of male sex to possess "masculine" or "feminine" characteristics or both. An example of socially imposed gender categories is the pink and blue baby blankets hospitals sometimes use since there would be no other way for visitors to the nursery window to tell the babies apart. The female actor, Tilda Swinton, is able to fabricate the relevant gender signifiers with ease—suggesting that moving from man to woman is not unlike exchanging Restoration gowns for Victorian garb for 1930s trousers. Potter refuses to let this point slip by unnoticed. By casting Swinton as Orlando and male actor Quentin Crisp as Elizabeth I, she shows that actors of different sexes can simulate gender attributes of each age or country or social class if they can read and interpret the code. There is no unique connection between signifier (gender) and signified (sex). The relationship between Orlando and her lover Shelmerdine exemplifies Butler's persuasion that masculine and feminine characteristics may be manifested by the same person. Potter's camera lingers on Billy Zane's attractive face (a face that could quite justly be described as pretty) in a way that is unusual for male film stars. Men are often in close-up when in pain, or angry, but rarely as purely aesthetic objects. This matter is explored in greater detail in the book, where it is revealed that Shelmerdine has a past quite similar to Orlando's:

"Oh! Shel, don't leave me!" she cried. "I'm passionately in love with you," she said. No sooner had the words left her mouth than an awful suspicion rushed into both their minds simultaneously.
 "You're a woman, Shel!" she cried.

“You’re a man, Orlando!” he cried.¹⁰

And later, “Are you positive you aren’t a man?” he would ask anxiously, and she would echo, “Can it be possible you’re not a woman?”¹¹

Potter’s bedroom scene between Orlando and Shelmerdine neatly reverses the conventional film technique of focusing on the woman’s body. Shelmerdine’s body receives Orlando’s rapt attention, as she explores and caresses his face, arms and chest. Shelmerdine lies passive, as the object of Orlando and the film audience’s gaze. Upsetting of traditional gender roles fills the lovers’ relationship, not least of which is Orlando’s immediate marriage proposal to Shelmerdine on their first meeting:

(Orlando lies face down on the ground)

Shelmerdine: (leaping from his horse) You’re hurt, ma’am!

Orlando: I’m dead, sir.

Shelmerdine: Dead. That’s serious. Can I help?

Orlando: Will you marry me?

Shelmerdine: Ma’am... I would gladly, but I fear my ankle is sprained.¹²

Orlando is a very American film, in Baudrillard’s sense that “America now has become illustrative of the condition of a postmodern world...[in its] rootlessness and its emphasis on appearances.”¹³ And like Ingmar Bergman’s film *Fanny and Alexander*, *Orlando* too plays with androgyny, “[destabilizing] modernist social constructs of sexuality in general...[and] fall[ing] into the postmodern realm of sexuality as is characterized by Baudrillard’s seduction theory [by] the subversion of patriarchal power, the breakdown of the normative in sexuality and language.”¹⁴ By establishing the androgyny of its characters, *Orlando* illustrates Jameson’s “split subjectivity or multiply-constructed self”¹⁵ while simultaneously questioning one of the most time-ingrained constituents of identity, gender.

Orlando exhibits in its technical makeup some distinctly postmodern themes, beginning in the opening sequence. Potter has introduced us to the undisputedly male Orlando pacing in front of his beloved oak. She then cuts to a tight close-up of Orlando with his back against the tree trunk as he directly addresses the camera. This is the first of many instances in the story where the audience is invited to penetrate the barrier between film world and real world, to admit to a kind of personal collaboration with the character. After the curious change in Orlando's body, she studies herself in the mirror and then again turns to the camera to deliver her crucial line, "Same person. No difference at all... just a different sex."¹⁶ By drawing attention to the presence of the camera this way, giving the audience insight into the manufacture of the film, Potter helps illuminate its theme of gender as manufactured by society. Strangely enough, this sort of self-conscious admittance of the existence of a camera within the film, has a tendency to appear less "real" than the usual movie practice of hiding all technical apparatus. Or to put it another way, the acknowledgement that film is completely constructed and artificial, though more "honest" and "real," seems somehow more jolting than the sustaining of the illusion. Perhaps this is related to Baudrillard's discussion of the orders of simulation: a traditional narrative structure, where technical production is hidden, allows the viewer to imagine something real existing behind the celluloid image. But when the camera jiggles, or a slate is seen, or a boom mic drops from the top of the frame, it's a harsh reminder that film is a meticulous and costly, utterly constructed, fake world—a series of images.

Potter repeatedly parallels the superficial and socially imposed nature of gender attributes with the shallow and contrived film image. In the Elizabethan period of the film, the male version of Orlando in masculine attire stands arm in arm with a young woman in full Elizabethan dress, both facing the camera. Behind them, on the wall of Orlando's family home, is an oil painting of Orlando's ancestors: a man and woman in exactly the same stance as their living counterparts. Orlando and the woman make the perfect "picture" of a proper couple, a universal binary masculine/feminine couple whose image is ingrained deeply in social history. By filming Orlando and the young woman in a comparative arrangement with the painting, Potter shows how possible it is to model and mimic cultural gender norms—Orlando can "paint" himself as man or woman without penetrating the surface.

As mentioned above, when Orlando serves as ambassador to Istanbul Potter takes the opportunity to juxtapose two countries' ideas of proper masculine appearance and behavior. Orlando's flowing powdered wig and ornate suits contrast with the plainer style of the Turkish men. The toasting contest described above visually depicts masculine domination through physical strength. But in addition to setting up masculine characteristics as mutable and dependent on culture and the image, Potter goes so far as to literally separate the sound portion of the film from the picture—a device that reinforces the theme of gender/image as unrelated to interior/substance. We see Orlando asleep in his beautiful all-white canopy bed, draped in gauzy material. After a few moments of watching him sleep, and directly before the next transition, we hear dialogue faintly echoing through the bedchamber that comes from the next scene, (the drinking

contest) in which the currently sleeping Orlando is an active participant. So Potter recorded the sound from the toasting scene, and then added it to the image of Orlando asleep. Divorcing the macho banter of the contest from the peaceful bedroom image allows us to understand the separation between a person and the gender he or she simulates. Much as gender is depicted as just superficial image in *Orlando, Playtime* satirizes the shallowness of modern 1960s life.

CHAPTER SIX

PLAYTIME

The machine on both sides, then; the machine as subject and object, alike and indifferently: the machine of the photographic apparatus peering across like a gun barrel at the subject, whose body is clamped into its mechanical correlative in some apparatus of registration/reception. The living room, to be sure, seems an unlikely place for this assimilation of human subjects to the technological: yet a voluntary attention is demanded by the total flow of the videotext in time.

—Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*

Few films offer as many examples of Baudrillard's mediated images as Jacques Tati's *Playtime*, released in 1967. Throughout the film we see images reflected in glass doors, images through car windows, even photographic images of founders frowning down from their spots on corporate walls. Tati co-wrote, directed and starred in the film, which exists commonly now on video, though shot on 70mm film. Tati plays Monsieur Hulot, who simply wishes to keep his *rendez-vous* with an American businessman, but is sabotaged by the Parisian high-tech world, filled with gadgets and customs he doesn't understand and people solemnly performing their ridiculous modern jobs. He stumbles through the city, constantly perplexed by what appears to be the utter mechanization of all aspects of life, from food to family quality time. The commercialization and modernization are so complete that a simple street flower vendor has become a novelty, almost an oddity.

To describe M. Hulot's overwhelmed state we can look to Lyotard's description of the sublime. The sublime is that which can be conceived, but for whatever reason (incapacity of the human mind, lack of medium in which to express) cannot be presented. For example, "we have the Idea of the world (the totality of what is), but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it."¹ The sublime hinted at in *Playtime* may be compared to Jameson's postmodern confusion, because what bewilders Hulot is exactly what makes it impossible for Jameson's subject to find bearings. Hulot marvels at the seeming ludicrousness of the sterile cage-like offices and the inedible drugstore food, but he shouldn't—it's all in place to make money, to remove human elements of error and chance, and replace them with economic efficiency. Of course Tati's character makes this point a bit more charmingly than Jameson's grim and hopeless subjects, but it's clear that *Playtime*'s comically muddled environment refers to Jameson's sublime global capitalism. If Jameson's description of the Westin Bonaventure hotel in Los Angeles were to be rendered on video or film, I would imagine the subject would encounter many of the same adventures Hulot has in the great glass office building. The same spatial confusion, lack of clear signs, mystery doorways and blind choice of elevator destinations.

No wonder the characters in *Playtime* are confused. They serve as cogs in the economic machine. We notice the most striking example of functional men and women early on when Hulot happens on the large office space, filled wall to wall with identical cubicles. Clearly the people in these anonymous cubicles have lost their volition and value as independent thinkers. They are valuable only for the role they fulfill, much as

an automatic gas pump or vending machine possesses as much value as product, and when the product is depleted, the machine becomes a worthless hulk.

According to Baudrillard's work, this is the same type of function the consumer plays in a capitalist (American) system. The machine hums along if every good citizen does his or her part through the execution of regular purchases. The moral import of doing one's best for the economy may be confirmed at the highest levels of American government; President Bill Clinton displayed a small sign reading "It's the economy, stupid" to remind himself daily that no matter what else may be wrong, if the economy is okay the people are generally pacified. In the center of this grid of cubicles a secretary sits in her glass box, visible from the waist up, continually speaking in a pleasant, perfectly modulated but machine-like voice. As Hulot passes by, he is given pause as much by her fixed and vacant smile as by her beauty. The secretary's box is arranged with phones on each interior side, so as Hulot traverses the various aisles of the grid, she may smoothly turn to face him. Her movements are graceful but quite measured and efficient. Hulot naturally becomes lost in the maze of cubicles, since it's impossible to use the secretary's desk as a point of reference. Each direction he travels, he may look back to find her returning his gaze. Tati emphasizes that the eerie person in the glass box is not primarily human, but rather human only secondarily to her first function as phone-answering device. Hulot expresses on-screen our natural movie audience reaction to this completely functional person, a mixture of pity at her lot and unsettlement at the creepy situation.

This theme of human-as-cog continues as Hulot pays an evening visit to a friend's apartment, which consists of a series of rooms lining the wall of the building. Each room is equipped with a large picture window and lighted, creating the effect of a chain of television screens set into the building's side. The family receives Hulot in the first "screen" then they pass through the others until they reach the television viewing room. The family sits together, each facing the right side of the room where the TV is built into the wall, and all conversation is arrested as they are bathed in the blue light of their favorite program. This set-up mocks the notion of "family viewing," as they sit perfectly still in a state of rapt attention, close in proximity but utterly isolated, individually. Another apartment begins on the other side of the TV wall, with that family's TV built into the wall the two apartments share. The opposite apartment's inhabitants are arranged in precisely the same fashion, each facing the TV wall, so the illusion of people sitting face-to-face, possibly deep in conversation, is created between the two apartments. By having the two families appear to face each other when they are really facing the screen, Tati sends up the ridiculousness of adults performing an inherently individual activity, silent television watching, and considering it time well spent as a group.

The two television-viewing families may be described as machine-like in accordance with Jameson's video theory, as mentioned above in the Jameson section. In his chapter entitled "Surrealism Without the Unconscious," where video is discussed as most representative artistic medium of postmodernism, Jameson details nineteenth-century daguerrotype photography, which required its subjects to sit absolutely still for

up to ten minutes to ensure correct exposure. Daguerrotype technicians would physically attach the subject to his or her chair using some type of metal head gear, removing all margin for twitching. Thus, the subject would literally become a part of the apparatus. Now consider the “total flow” of images washing over the TV viewer as he or she sits comfortably on sofa or in recliner in the dark, all attention focused on streaming light and sound. If we begin with the assumption that commercial television exists not to provide “entertainment” to its audience, but rather to provide an audience for advertisers, then we find that the viewer serves as a “registering apparatus” for advertising. “The living room, to be sure, seems an unlikely place for this assimilation of human subjects to the technological: yet a voluntary attention is demanded by the total flow of the videotext in time which is scarcely relaxed at all.”² Each viewer fulfills his or her duty as a functional “good consumer” by passively receiving (and later acting on, of course) these commercial messages. Subject disappears into machine, and machine hums along, feeding the great global system of product exchange.

Again, we see the people of the city acting as pistons in a machine in the vast, epic-like climax sequence. From what appears to be a crane, the camera looks down on a traffic circle filled with vehicles of every description: cars, delivery trucks, buses, motorcycles. A tall red-and-white-striped pole marks the center of the circle. As carnival music fills the background, the traffic slowly begins to creep around the pole. Tati then cuts to ground-level shots of the individual vehicles making the round, emphasizing a young couple on a motorcycle—as the man drives, the woman moves up and down, mimicking the action of riding a merry-go-round horse. The carousel scene

illustrates quite appropriately Jameson's disappearance of the postmodern subject into the engine of global capitalism. No individuals exist in the traffic circle, only mechanized components which, in combination, allow the system to operate. Like Jameson's confused capitalist citizen, no one on the carousel knows where he or she is, or why the inching around the pole continues, but inch they do, nonetheless.

When we discuss confusion and lack of rules or boundaries, we refer to Jameson's theory of how American-style capitalism penetrates every aspect of life in even the farthest reaches of the globe—and the way everything may be equalized through the use of exchange value. In *Playtime*, this idea may be noted in two main areas: the influence of American culture on the film, and the bizarre products one may buy.

No subtitles are necessary in *Playtime*. In a film written and directed by a French filmmaker, set entirely in France, and populated mostly by French actors, the minimal amount of important dialogue is simple and obvious enough in context to be understood by speakers of any language. The version of the film I saw (on video) contained just as much English as French, although it's not clear whether this was the case for the original 70mm film print or if parts of the video had been dubbed. Nevertheless, one culture, specifically American, (introduced symbolically by the provincial US tour group) permeates the film, rivaling the influence of French culture. As the current world economic power, America exports culture-product with aplomb, often to the chagrin of other countries' conservatives who wish to retain the uniqueness of their own culture. This is why we consider postmodernism to be based in American culture, since America

heads the world economy. With most characters speaking English, and Hulot barely speaking at all, it's hard to note with certainty any linguistic place markers. The movie could be set in almost any large city, except for certain images that connote "Franceness"—the reflection of the Eiffel Tower in the glass door, for example, or the PARIS sign at the airport. Jameson complains that this is how history is represented in film—by selecting certain styles (of clothing, cars, architecture, hair) that represent a time period, rather than attempting to "really" represent the past—if it's even possible.³ So we are left with a disorienting environment, an amalgamation of styles and cultures, not least American, that we are told is France. Part of Monsieur Hulot's confusion is borne of this dissolution of international boundaries, which is made clear in the drug store dessert scene.

The chain drug store Hulot chooses for his purchase of a quick snack is of the kind common to the US, but more rare in France (at least in the period the film was made). It's generic, clean and brightly lighted. He surveys the dessert case, which happens to be under a separate green neon light. As he halfheartedly pokes at one of the elaborate, colorful and completely unidentifiable desserts, another customer approaches and tries something shaped vaguely like a beanic. The two men mutely appeal to each other in the midst of the sickly alien light. They both know the drugstore worker has assembled these desserts in bulk from elements only dubiously found in nature, and allowed them to sit under the warming light since morning. They know they will be overcharged for the desserts and then will be quite lucky if they can choke them down. Even so, they are the only ones available and so, will have to do.⁴ Here the

encroachment of specifically American capitalism broadcasts itself plainly. Americans had been accustomed for some time to pre-packaging and mass production—to food whose primary purpose is profit, not appeal to any known sense. Now even French desserts become subject to the same guidelines of marketability. The two men want to scream, to express their disgust and disappointment—but instead they are obedient consumers; they feed the machine by paying the assigned price for the product, and they remain powerless and isolated.

The desserts are not the only strange modern products Hulot confronts—he is also mesmerized by the saleswoman in the department store who postures ridiculously as she attempts to convince gawking tourists of their absolute need for a pair of eyeglasses specifically designed for makeup application. The ladies coo and exclaim as the salesclerk flips up one side of the glasses, then the other, demonstrating the wonderful innovation that will allow them to watch through a magnifying lens with one eye as the other is lined and shadowed. The salesclerk is so convincing that Hulot almost feels the urge to purchase a pair of the glasses. What “need” could this possibly fulfill for him? If we consider needs according to Baudrillard’s theory, it’s not the need that motivates the purchase but rather the object that defines the need, creating a scenario of “I didn’t know I wanted it until I saw it.” Baudrillard says that this applies equally to basic food products and “superfluous” items, such as jewelry. He quotes John Galbraith, noting that “there is no proof that an expensive woman obtains the same satisfaction from yet another gown as does a hungry man from a hamburger. But there is no proof that she does not. Since it cannot be proven that she does not, her desire, it is held, must be

accorded equal standing with that of a poor man for meat.”⁵ Desires being fluid, it’s impossible to judge from the outside what is superfluous or direly necessary: “from the perspective of the satisfaction of the consumer, there is no basis on which to define what is ‘artificial’ and what is not.”⁶ In short, this new makeup gadget was not invented in response to a single need; the gadget came first, and the need was identified second. “*The system of needs is the product of the system of production.*”⁷ “Purchasing choice,” then, is an illusion, precisely because the product system is in place first—then consumers “discover” what they need based on the slate of available products.

Baudrillard’s theories may be traced throughout *Playtime*, in the product-purchasing commentary as well as in the treatment of the image. In a nod to the general fakeness of movies, Tati includes several sight gags in which a character cannot or does not notice a glass division. One of the first scenes of the movie shows two men talking and gesturing as the camera tracks left, eventually revealing a glass door. The men had actually been attempting to communicate through the invisible (to us as movie audience) glass wall of the building. This is a reminder that the filmmaker retains control over what he wants us to see—had Tati not shown the door, and added dialogue to the image of the signaling men, this *trompe l’oeil* would have convinced any movie audience that an ordinary, “real” conversation was taking place. The image of the glass door returns during the night club scene, where a careless patron smashes through the glass main entrance. The doorman immediately picks up the handle and holds it in the same position it had occupied when the door was intact—he then gracefully swings “open” the pretend door for each new customer, no one even noticing the missing door until much

later. This scene quite plainly illustrates Hayes' concept of "dooriness," or the way movies simulate the real through the use of a type of shorthand, a code film audiences understand and accept. In each movie I discussed, reality is simulated by an agreement between filmmaker and audience on the nature of that reality, just as *Playtime's* nightclubbers conspire with the doorman to continue the door illusion. In *Rashomon* the players create a court by addressing the invisible audience through the camera, and in *Orlando* the title character creates masculinity or femininity with a costume change. We see through *Playtime's* bogus glass door the constructed nature of movie images and their reflection of postmodern theory.

NOTES

CHAPTER ONE: LYOTARD

1. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 71.
2. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 72.
3. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 72.
4. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 73.
5. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 73.
6. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 73.
7. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 75.
8. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 76.
9. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 77.
10. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 77.
11. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 78.
12. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 79.
13. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 3.
14. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 4.
15. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 6.
16. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 6.
17. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 7.
18. I will return to this theme of alienation in the postmodern world in Chapter Three: Jameson.
19. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 9.
20. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 10.
21. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 10.
22. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 12.
23. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 13.
24. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 13.
25. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 14.
26. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 15.
27. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 17.
28. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 17.

CHAPTER TWO: BAUDRILLARD

1. Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 10.
2. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 11.
3. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 13.
4. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 13.

5. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 14.
6. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 14.
7. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 15.
8. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 15.
9. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 16.
10. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 29.
11. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 30.
12. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 30.
13. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 32.
14. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 33.
15. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 34.
16. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 35.
17. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 35.
18. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 39.
19. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 38.
20. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 39.
21. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 42.
22. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 45.

23. See Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 40 for an example: the need/desire of a rich woman for another dress is declared equal to the need/desire of a hungry man for food because there is no way to judge which need is real and which is artificial based only on "satisfaction of the consumer."

24. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 47.
25. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 48.
26. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 166.
27. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 168.
28. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 169.
29. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 170.
30. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 179.
31. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 180.
32. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 181.

CHAPTER THREE: JAMESON

1. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), ix.
2. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, xv.
3. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, xviii.
4. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, xix.
5. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 5.
6. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 1.
7. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 2.
8. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 8.

9. See Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996.), 45-68, for a counter-perspective to postmodern treatments of history.
10. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 4.
11. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 4.
12. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 5.
13. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 15.
14. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 18.
15. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 19.
16. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 21.
17. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 25.
18. See also José Lauro Mata, *Cookie Cutter Master*, music video, Cenozoic Studios, 2000. Mata's video explores the link between signified and signifier and the postmodern use of the image: in one scene the picture of a coffin is buried in the earth.
19. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 26.
20. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 27.
21. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 29.
22. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 31.
23. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 31.
24. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 33.
25. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 34.
26. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 37.
27. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 39.
28. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 44.
29. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 47.
30. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 48.
31. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 50.
32. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 51.
33. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 67.
34. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 70.
35. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 76.
36. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 77.
37. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 77.
38. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 77.
39. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 87.
40. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 89.
41. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 91.
42. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 279.
43. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 281.
44. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 281.
45. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 281.
46. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 281.
47. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 284.
48. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 285.
49. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 286.

50. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 286.
51. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 291.
52. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 296.
53. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 296.

CHAPTER FOUR: *RASHOMON*

1. Maureen Turim, "Cinemas of Modernity and Postmodernity," in *Zeitgeist in Babel: the Postmodern Controversy*, ed. Ingeborg Hoesterey (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 178.
2. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 9.
3. William Rasch, "In Search of the Lyotard Archipelago, or: How to Live with Paradox and Learn to Like It," *New German Critique*, 61 (1994): 70.
4. Marcia Landy and Lucy Fischer, "Dead Again or A-Live Again: Postmodern or Postmortem?" *Cinema Journal*, 33 (1994): 7.
5. Jarrod Hayes, "The Seduction of Alexander Behind the Postmodern Door: Ingmar Bergman and Baudrillard's *De la séduction*," in *Literature Film Quarterly*, 25 (1997): 42.
6. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 167.
7. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 170.
8. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 170.
9. Randy Schroeder, "Playspace Invaders: Huizinga, Baudrillard and Video Game Violence," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 30 (1996): 148.
10. *Rashomon*, Dir. Akira Kurosawa. Perf. Toshiro Mifune, Takashi Shimura, Machiko Kyo. Daiei, 1950.
11. See above example of painting and washing machine.

CHAPTER FIVE: *ORLANDO*

1. Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Orlando: Harcourt and Brace, 1956), 13.
2. Landy and Fischer, "Dead Again," 9.
3. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 4.
4. *Orlando*, Dir. Sally Potter. Perf. Tilda Swinton, Billy Zane, Quentin Crisp. Adventure Pictures, 1992.
5. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 3.
6. Woolf, *Orlando*, 188.
7. *Orlando*, Dir. Potter.
8. *Orlando*, Dir. Potter.
9. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 6.
10. Woolf, *Orlando*, 252.
11. Woolf, *Orlando*, 258.

12. *Orlando*, Dir. Potter.
13. Duco van Oostrum, "Wim Wenders' Euro-American Construction Site: Paris, Texas or Texas, Paris," in *Social and Political Change in Literature and Film: Selected Papers from the Sixteenth Annual Florida State University Conference on Literature and Film*, ed. Richard Chapple (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 8.
14. Hayes, "The Seduction of Alexander," 46.
15. Linda Mizejewski, "Total Recoil: The Schwarzenegger Body on Postmodern Mars." *Post Script*, 12 (1994): 30.
16. *Orlando*, Dir. Potter.

CHAPTER SIX: PLAYTIME

1. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 78.
2. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 74.
3. See Roger Luckhurst, "Shut(ing) the Fuck Up: Narrating *Blue Velvet* in the Postmodernist Frame." *Bête Noire*, 8-9 (1990): 171, for a discussion of representations of the past.
4. See my discussion of the illusion of free choice in the Baudrillard chapter.
5. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 40.
6. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 40.
7. Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 42.

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