POPULAR CULTURE REVIEW

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Amy M. Green, editor-in-chief

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Editor's Note
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I hope that you will enjoy this latest issue! On an exciting note, as of January 15th, 2024, *Popular Culture Review* will now be published by Wiley. We are thrilled at the increased exposure the journal will have as a result of this. From January 15th forward, authors will want to use this site for submissions: https://wiley.atyponrex.com/journal/PCR4.

First in the issue is my interview with Dr. Ann-Gee Lee, the winner of the 2024 Felicia Campbell Memorial Innovative Contributions to Popular Culture Studies Award. Dr. Lee is a professor of English and the Assistant Chair at the University of Arkansas, Fort Smith. Her contributions to popular culture are profound and represent an astonishing breadth of knowledge. My interview with Dr. Lee focuses on a number of areas of her work, including K-dramas (Korean dramas), Nüshu, and the #MeToo movement. A full list of her publications and presentations is available here https://anngeelee. wordpress.com/curriculum-vitae/.

In "The Sorcerer in *Sword Art Online*: A Glance at the Archetype," Todd Moffett considers how the anime presents intriguing and different takes on sorcerers. Moffett also analyzes important examples of the sorcerer character in both Japanese and Western stories.

Douglas Rasmussen considers the characterization of Sharon Tate in "Rewriting Sharon Tate's history in *Once Upon A Time in… Hollywood"* and why this alternate history consideration of Tate's life is noteworthy.

G. Christopher Williams explores the use of nudity in "Dr. Manhattan's Penis: Traditions of Modesty and Morality in

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen.*" He traces how Dr. Manhattan's nudity invites a reconsideration of the concept of morality.

In "Is Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* Fascist? Resolving the Paradoxes of Heroic Violence," Carlos Tkacz provides an in-depth analysis of Batman and different constructions of the superhero and specifically in *The Dark Knight Returns,* how Batman mediates attitudes between the political left and right.

Emily Hoffman asserts in "This is the Legacy of Garry's Show: Restoring *It's Garry Shandling's Show* to the American Sitcom Canon" that this show, often forgotten, deserves a prominent place as a precursor to the modern American sitcom.

Sam Coley, in "Get Things Done: The Commodification of David Bowie in 1983," traces Bowie's rise to superstardom in the early part of the 1980s. He analyzes the release and marketing of *Let's Dance* with depth.

Destiny Pinder-Buckley reviews the outstanding graphic novel *The Many Deaths of Laila Starr.* The story incorporates elements of Indian mythology into a powerful treatise about mortality and loss.

If you enjoyed our articles in this issue, I have included here some past articles we have published on similar topics.

Kawasaki, Denise. "The Case of the Dying Kimono: Kimono Revival and Fusion in the United States." *Popular Culture Review,* 25.1 (Winter 2013), 39-50. https://www.popularculturereview.org/pcr-25-1-winter-2013.html.

Reich, Paul D. and Emily O'Malley. "The Future Thanks You for Your Service": HBO's Watchmen as Instructive Dis-

course." *Popular Culture Review,* 33.1 (Spring 2022), 59-102. https://www.popularculturereview.org/pcr33-1.html.

Soares, Michael. "Batroversy: Counterpublics and Antecedent Rhetorics in the Casting of Batman." *Popular Culture Review,* 27.2 (Summer 2016), 49-69. https://www.popularculturereview.org/pcr-272-summer-2016.html.

Finally, many of you may know that UNLV suffered the horror of an on-campus shooting on December 6, 2023, that took the lives of 3 innocent people and seriously injured a fourth. I lack the words to properly express the grief, anger, and trauma I feel, and that all the members of our campus community feel. Instead, I will share a quote by Ezra Klein about violent incidents like these: "Only with gun violence do we respond to repeated tragedies by saying that mourning is acceptable but discussing how to prevent more tragedies is not. But that's unacceptable. As others have observed, talking about how to stop a mass shooting in the aftermath of a string of mass shootings isn't 'too soon.' It's much too late."

Editor's Interview with Dr. Ann-Gee Lee, Winner of the 2024 Felicia Campbell Memorial Innovative Contributions to Popular Culture Studies Award

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Your work encompasses a number of inter-secting points of interest for popular cul-ture scholars. These include K-dramas, *The Walking Dead, The Big Bang Theory, Community,* and American Chinese food, just to name a few. What draws you to the study of various areas of popular culture? Why is it an important scholarly field?

When I disclose that I get to watch TV as part of my job and publish articles on certain shows, people don't usually take me seriously—not even family. So I make sure to tell my students that writing about popular culture or media, which may fall under qualitative analysis, is not always considered real research. Yet popular culture is closer to the daily interactions and social issues that affect us. Through media consumption, we learn a little about cultures worldwide and different aspects of language without traveling. We practice all kinds of critical-thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills based on character choices; we learn what *not* to do with a smidge of schadenfreude. We superficially learn what it's like to be from different sexualities, social classes, races, abilities, etc. Most of all, we hopefully learn to be more em-pathetic toward one another.

K-dramas are an interesting product of globalization. Every-one reacts to them differently. The same can be argued with

any show. *The Walking Dead* isn't just zombie media—it's a playing field for various leadership styles. *The Big Bang Theory* isn't just about science but how cultural imperialism and gender come into play. *Community* isn't just about college culture but how to navigate friendships and odd social situations. Examining American Chinese food brings to light an interesting racial history that is still problematic. While I still think we learn more from reading, popular culture in its various forms, if shown accurately, can be a great teacher as well.

2 You were co-editor of the book *The Rise of K-Dramas: Essays on Korean Television and Its Global Consumption* and contributed an article to it entitled "Korean Dramas as Chinese 'She Economy.'" In that article, you talk about the consumption of K-dramas in China and how popular these shows are. What are some of the distinguishing features of the K-drama fandom in China?

K-culture's effect on other countries is strangely political, making media consumption a soft power. China is a huge market and geographically close to Korea, so K-companies think trying to appeal to Chinese is just common sense. Chinese are also quick to follow fads, so media consumption takes up a large part of the culture. Genuine designer products appearing in K-dramas sell out quickly, leading some to resort to similar K-beauty brands or counterfeit Chinese versions. There are also *wanghong* or internet celebrities capitalizing on K-beauty products or knockoffs, though these *wanghong* can also be exploited. K-beauty and K-fashion were especially popular along with the Korean Wave, but during COVID, C-beauty companies were able to catch up, create more appealing products, and market knowingly to

their own. Since the K-beauty industry has been losing Chinese consumers quickly, I have been arguing that they should expand their color palettes and come to the U.S., where fans eagerly await.

3   K-dramas are now gaining a strong foothold in the American streaming market. Popular shows range in genre from *Squid Games* to *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha* to *The Glory.* Why do you think that K-dramas are finding such a strong and passionate audience in America?

Popular culture is how I connect to my students. More than one student kept telling me about *Squid Game* because it's unlike anything else they watch. Viewers may not really think about it, but there's a K-drama for anybody. For example, I'm a foodie, so I prefer K-dramas, such as *My Lovely Sam Soon* (2005), *Coffee Prince* (2007), and *Pasta* (2010). In between all the food is people trying to figure things out. To me, K-dramas also bring out more realistic and innocent romantic aspects. There is the usual meet-cute and the build-up to the first kiss, but also fun to watch are all the misunderstandings and adorable awkward moments when getting to know a person. Along with K-dramas is K-pop that has been immersing itself into American culture. I can hear BTS songs on the radio, students flock to K-pop concerts in different states, our university has a K-pop Appreciation and Dance Group, and because of both K-dramas and K-pop, students especially want to study in Korea or travel there. I felt the same anticipation of traveling to Seoul for a conference because what I knew about Korea, I learned from friends and K-dramas. Lastly, the Korean language is a lot easier to learn than Mandarin with fewer characters (I know as a Mandarin teacher),

and the Korean language contains a lot of loan words from English that also sound like English.

4   I found your work considering Nüshu to be fascinating. Can you briefly describe what Nüshu is for readers? You mention in your article about Nüshu that it exists in the modern day, but that materials that once would have been made by hand are now bought in stores, and that the styles and forms are geared toward consumers. You also indicate that there are very few left who are able to transmit traditional knowledge about Nüshu. Do you think that the commercialization of Nüshu can eventually help to draw women to learn more about its roots? Will this commercialization eventually take over traditional Nüshu completely?

Nüshu is a written secret language used by women in a small area of China to communicate with one another in a time when women weren't allowed to be educated; it was sung, written, and embroidered. It proliferated through Third-Day Books or multimedia scrapbooks women gave one another as wedding gifts. Inside these books, they would insert advice, poems, stories, letters, or drawings; embroidery floss, a papercut decoration, or a clump of silk for ink; in the back of the book would be blank pages for women to keep as a diary. With Nüshu, women's mental health improved.

Though Nüshu was "discovered" as an academic topic in the 1980s, a small group of scholars have tried to preserve it electronically. However, it took Lisa See, an American, to write a novel, S*now Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005), also a film (2011), for people worldwide to care about it. People from

China don't really know about Nüshu. In the 1970s, authorities thought it was witchcraft. Moreover, authentic Nüshu artifacts were burned during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) or buried with the women who used them. As a written language, Nüshu can be difficult to learn, but it can only survive with people's appreciation of the art form through replicas and hence its commercialization.

5   You have presented a number of papers and led discussions on issues related to feminist study. For example, you have considered what it means to teach in the era of #Me-Too. Would you share a bit more about the connections you see to your areas of interest in feminist study and popular culture?

In graduate school, we had an entire year of feminist studies. My first semester in Fall 2004, my professor shared an article with me about Huanyi Yang, the last woman to use Nüshu in her life. I knew right then Nüshu would be my dissertation topic. I also learned about feminist historiography, about the women who have been left out of history, and the academic value of women's private and public practices. We learned about Aspasia, who was supposedly Socrates's teacher. I have always been interested in covert forms of rhetoric, which includes nonverbal communication. Along this line, women's contributions in history have been silenced. It took them a while to be included in the literary canon and even much later to include women of color.

Some colleagues and I went to the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville to listen to Tarana Burke speak on #MeToo before we held a panel on what it means to teach in relation to the issue. I was more like the moderator, asking professors from different fields about their life experiences and how

those translate to their teaching. They had grown up with accepted sexism and were uncomfortable with it. How this all ties to popular culture is that we get to see that type of mistreatment of women in historical shows such as *Mad Men*, *Lessons in Chemistry*, etc. Fortunately, we can also see stronger characters in novels and films such as *Enola Holmes* and different forms of masculinity and mental health in shows like *Ted Lasso*. In class, we discuss the importance of representation in media in terms of intersectionality as well.

6 Where will your areas of interest take you next? Are there any projects you are working on that you might share with us?

I get ideas for writing by scouring the University of Pennsylvania's English Department's CFPs; I post for collections I am working on there as well. I never know what I will be writing about, but my interests are vast. Also, I know that if I miss the chance to write something one time, it will come back around again. For example, I found out about a collection on American Chinese Cuisine in 2015 and was only able to peer review for them; I had planned to write about the material rhetoric aspects and cultural meanings of Chinese food dish names. However, I recently submitted a draft to a new edited collection on food, diaspora, and memory for which I can write about the history of American Chinese Cuisine, its interesting social implications, and some thoughts from family and friends. Academic writing also takes time. The first time we wrote about *The Walking Dead* was when the first season of the show came out; when working on a new, more recent iteration of the article, we needed to include all the seasons and mention the spinoffs.

The Sorcerer in *Sword Art Online*: A Glance at the Archetype

By Todd Moffett

ABSTRACT

Some villains in the anime *Sword Art Online* are influenced by the sorcerer archetype, drawn from legends of fairyland, medieval tales of hostile magicians, and the ancient figure of the shaman. The concentration of sorcerers in *SAO* makes it fertile ground for tracing the archetype in both Western and Japanese sources before turning to how *SAO* uses those influences in its world-building and in the development of its own brand of sorcerer.

Keywords: Parzifal, Sword Art Online, Clinschor, Nobuyuki Sugou (Oberon), Kirito (Kazuto Kirigaya), virtual reality games, anime, Japanese popular culture, Arthurian literature

Los hechiceros en *Sword Art Online*: Una mirada al arquetipo

RESUMEN

Algunos villanos del anime *Sword Art Online* están influenciados por el arquetipo del hechicero, extraído de leyendas del país de las hadas, cuentos medievales de magos hostiles y la antigua figura del chamán. La concentración de hechiceros en SAO lo convierte en un terreno fértil para rastrear el arquetipo en fuentes occidentales y japonesas antes de ver cómo SAO usa esas influencias en la construcción de su mundo y en el desarrollo de su propia marca de hechicero.

Biografía: Todd Moffett, profesor de inglés en el College of Southern Nevada, descubrió recientemente el mundo del

anime. No tiene conocimientos prácticos de hechicería. Anteriormente publicó un artículo en *Popular Culture Review* titulado "The Blacksmith."

《刀剑神域》中的巫师：原型一览

摘要

动漫《刀剑神域》（SAO）中的一些反派受到巫师原型的影响，这些原型来自仙境传说、关于邪恶魔法师的中世纪故事、以及古代萨满。《刀剑神域》中的大量巫师为追溯西方和日本的巫师原型提供了肥沃的土壤。本文探究了《刀剑神域》如何在其故事建构和独特巫师类型的发展中使用这些影响。

作者简介

南内华达社区学院的英语系教授Todd　Moffett最近开始探究动漫世界。他没有实际的巫术知识。他曾在《大众文化评论》上发表过一篇题为"The Blacksmith"的文章。

关键词

T he anime *Sword Art Online* (*SAO*),[1] based on the light novels written by Reki Kawahara and illustrated by abec, has in its four current seasons become one of the defining franchises of the genre. It follows Kazuto Kirigaya, known better by his avatar, Kirito, as he fights to survive in several (take a deep breath) virtual reality massive multiplayer online role-playing games (VRMMORPG). To enter these games, players don either a NerveGear helmet or AmuSphere goggles to connect the simulations directly to the sensory centers of the brain and—beyond what the latest Oculus or Apple Vision Pro systems do—immerse themselves within self-contained worlds of lifelike detail. Kirito's first adventure, the story arc of Aincrad, takes place in a one-hundred-story floating castle created by inscrutable world builder Akihiko Kayaba, during which Kirito and partner Asuna Yuuki free 6,000 survivors from a lethal role-playing game. In the Fairy Dance arc, Kirito liberates Asuna from Nobuyuki Sugou at the sinister heart of the world of Alfheim. In the Phantom Bullet arc, Kirito, with new partner Shino Asada, tracks down Death Gun, who kills real-world players by destroying their avatars in the game of Gun Gale Online. In the Alicization arc, Kirito ventures with new Soul Translator technology to Underworld, where he meets and rescues an AI named Alice (the allusions to Lewis Carroll are intentional) first from the dominating and manipulative Quinella and then from the rogue gamer and gun-for-hire Subtilizer.

Being at the center of the *shōnen* ("boy") and the *isekai* ("otherworld") subgenres, Kirito's stories feature digital magic, swordplay, fantastic beings, and dangerous enemies. A cursory look at some of these enemies reveals them to be influenced by the archetype of the sorcerer, which, in turn, one may argue, is drawn not just from the beguiling legends of a fairyland, or from medieval tales of hostile magicians, but

also from the ancient figure of the shaman. The concentration of sorcerers in *SAO*, with the otherworldly settings of each story arc, makes the series fertile ground for analyzing the archetype. Since Kawahara was inspired by Western literature for *SAO*,[2] and since American viewers are a sizable part of its fan base, the roots for the archetype will be traced in both Western and Japanese sources before the discussion turns to how *SAO* uses those influences in its world-building and in the development of its own brand of sorcerers.

THE SHAMAN AND THE SORCERER

Through the ages, two of the sorcerer's defining powers have been necromancy and communication with—or control over—various daemons in various supernatural realms. Stories of a darkly cowled figure summoning a djinn by rubbing a lamp, or a demon by drawing a circled pentangle, or the shades of the dead by pouring out a blood sacrifice stretch back centuries. These stories in turn lead to one possible source for the archetype, a source highly relevant to the story arcs of *SAO*: the shaman. Traditionally, for humans and animals, the Other World is the land of the dead, but a place also where the souls of the living may wander in dream or illness (Eliade 215, 415). A prime function of the shaman is to rescue such souls before they come to peril by employing a special technique: the mastery of an "ecstasy" (Eliade 4) that allows her to make contact at will with the supernatural. There are two kinds of ecstasy. One, which occurs in Siberian shamanism and its offshoots, is the migratory "soul-flight" (Vitebsky 48) by which the shaman "is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld" (Eliade 5). The second, more prevalent in Japan, is the possession trance, during which a transcendental being enters an object controlled by the shaman or enters the shaman herself (Fairchild 41; Waida 461, 462).

One source of peril is the sorcerer, who, like the shaman, can communicate with the daemons and souls in the other realm. The sorcerer is an "inversion and perversion of the healing shaman" (Vitebsky 112), using his powers to harm the souls that have wandered into, or that he has lured into, the spirit realm (Vitebsky 100; Eliade 182). The harm sickens not only the souls but also the physical bodies of the victims (Vitebsky 45), who then must be rescued by a shaman who battles the sorcerer (Vitebsky 74). Sometimes the sorcerer can direct hostile spirits against people in the waking world. Sacrifices or cursed objects buried under or near a victim's dwelling, darts embedded into a victim's flesh, and effigies formed in the victim's image may all be issuing points from which harmful spirits attack the living (Fairchild 35, 77; Kieckhefer 159, 162-3; Vitebsky 24; Aston 186-7), and Alaskan black shamans can reanimate animal "bones, skin, and sinews" to send them on "deadly missions" (Vitebsky 89).

There are countless legends of lost souls brought back to the mortal plane, one of the most famous being that of Orpheus and Eurydice. The Japanese have the identical tale of Izanagi's pursuit of his wife Izanami to Yomi, the land of the dead. There are also several stories in which a shamanic hero rescues souls kidnapped by a sorcerer, one being the Hopi story "Son of Light Kills the Monster," in which Man-Eagle seizes Son of Light's wife and flies her to his lair above the clouds. With the aid of Spider Woman, the Piñon Maidens, and Mole, Son of Light finds Man-Eagle and defeats him in a number of contests ("Son" 211-16). However, the stories play out, in whatever culture or time they appear, they contain terrifying landscapes filled with danger and inhabited by actors with fantastic powers.

THE REALM OF THE FAIRY QUEEN

Because the *isekai* genre in general tends to rely on a "vaguely medieval world used in fantasy novels and games" as the backdrop of its otherworldly setting (Alverson), the sorcerer's environment also has relevance to a discussion of *SAO*. Being an operator in the Other World, the sorcerer may establish residency in that world or in a remote land which strongly resembles, or which connects to, a supernatural realm. In Western literature, an early example is Circe, whose house, isolated on a desert island, surrounded by humans she has transformed into animals, immediately stamps her as unearthly. In Japanese legend appears a similar figure: Himiko, the shaman-empress who led the Yamatai confederation at the end of the Yayoi period (c. CE 250). Recognized in the Chinese *Wei zhi* (*Record of Wei*), Himiko ruled through her younger brother and isolated herself in a heavily fortified stockade attended by a thousand women and a single male servant who brought her meals and acted as her medium of communication (Kidder 16).

A second source of the features that populate the sorcerer's environment springs from a cache of stories in which a queen of the Sidhe, and mistress of a domain within a fairy hill, is under attack by the people of a neighboring hill. A young hero, led to the queen's hill by "some animal or will-o'-the-wisp" (Campbell 7), beats off the attackers and then stays to become her consort. The legends of Tanhäuser, Oisín, Porsenna, Ogier-le-Danois, Thomas of Ercildoune, Fernando de Alma, and Conle the Redhaired share features of these tales but add a sinister twist (Baring-Gould 118-19, 305-309; Kieckhefer 53-54). The heroes are lured to a realm where all (except de Alma) become the consort of a fairy queen, and from which all return (except Conle, who is never seen by mortal eyes again) to find that decades and

centuries have passed, or that their actions in the other realm prevent them from reintegrating with the society they have left. An eighth-century Japanese version of this tale, "Urashima Taro," relates how a fisherman spends three years with the princess of Ryugu, the kingdom at the bottom of the sea, but returns home to find that three generations have passed ("Urashima" 112-114). Another medieval Japanese tale, reversing the years-thought-days motif, tells of a middle-aged man who follows a *kitsune* (an evil fox spirit) to her sumptuous and "handsome" house; he remains her husband for thirteen years before returning to his family, for whom only thirteen days have passed (Ury 102-5).

Perhaps the most important feature of the landscape surrounding the sorcerer is the Cosmic Center. This feature is central to the art of shamanism, though it also appears in every major religion. Considered at once the Center of the World, the Cosmic Axis, and the Navel of the Earth (Eliade 266-69), the Cosmic Center is the connecting point between the three universal zones, upper, middle, and lower, and thus for the migrating shaman the pathway he takes to the spirit realms in the sky (269) or the earth (202). It is commonly represented by two landmarks: the Sacred Mountain and the Cosmic Tree (Eliade 269-70; Fairchild 29; Rutherford 103).[3] Being the Navel (or *omphalos*) of the Earth, the Center is the place where the universe (and humankind) was created, and where intrepid heroes may journey to obtain a portion of that creative power for their own uses. The journey to the Center, however, is fraught with difficulties, the pathway leading either into a labyrinth (Eliade 51), across a narrow bridge (Eliade 202, 482; Rutherford 103), over or through a treacherous body of water (Eliade 311, 355, 457; Vitebsky 71; Rutherford 103), or to the foot of a guardian monster

(Eliade 122) that the shamanic hero must defeat before accessing the Center itself.

PRIOR ITERATIONS

Before examining the sorcerers in *SAO*, a brief look at some important transitional figures in Western and Japanese literature would be in order. In the West, two of the most recognizable characterizations of the sorcerer are (for women) the Witch and (for men) the Scholar-Priest. Circe, referenced above, is one such model for the Witch. She teaches Odysseus a form of necromancy, using the blood of sacrificed animals, by which he can summon the dead in Hades. Another Witch in the *Odyssey*, Kalypso, detains the hero on her island, a Cosmic Center located at the "navel of all the waters" (1.50), for seven years. The two goddesses entice the hero to stay with them not just with their magical powers but with their sexuality. That sexual initiative in women is already seen as taboo is evidenced by Kalypso's famous complaint when Hermes arrives to demand Odysseus's release: "[Y]ou are resentful toward the goddesses for sleeping / openly with such men . . ." (5.119-20).[4] By the end of the classical period, the view that characterized Witches—through and well beyond the Middle Ages—was that they were either sirens who used their wiles for "amorous purposes" (Kieckhefer 33) or hags who defiled graves or dismembered the living for body parts with which to create their dread spells (Kieckhefer 32).

Similar categorizations for the Witch seem to have surfaced in Japanese literature as well. Himiko, unmarried and of advanced age by the time of her mention in the *Wei zhi*, was known to be skilled in the "Way of Demons" and frequently depicted holding a mirror (Miller, "Rebranding" 182; Kidder xiii, 16), not only one of the regalia of Japanese royalty

but also a tool used by shamans to "see the world" or contact the souls of the dead (Eliade 154).[5] Another legendary shaman of Japan, Yamato-totohi-momoso-hime, was a forecaster of some skill who married a snake-god. However, her fright one morning upon viewing him in his true form caused him to abandon her. In remorse, she killed herself by plunging a chopstick into her pudenda (*Nihongi* 158-59). Another shaman, the Empress Jingu, would prophecy while her husband played the *koto* (zither). After her husband's death, Jingu, while pregnant, sailed to Korea and won a great military victory; three years later, she gave birth to the next emperor (*Nihongi* 221-232). Perhaps the most powerful—and fearful—Witch of all Japanese literature is Tamamo no Mae, a nine-tailed *kitsune* of such deviousness that she could keep herself young and beautiful over the course of three thousand years. Posing as a courtesan or a young girl, she brought down, with her tastes for cruelty and sexual depravity, two Chinese dynasties and another in India before arriving in secret in Japan around CE 700. Four hundred years later, after becoming the consort of Emperor Toba, she tried to assassinate him but was caught and killed. The strife that she caused led to the Genpei War and the end of the long and peaceful Heian period (CE 794–1185) in Japan (Meyer, "Tamamo"). Admittedly, the examples glossed above for both Western and Japanese literature are a small part of their canons, but they do seem to point to an underlying trend: between the extremes of the Crone and the Siren, the Witches are sought for their power, celebrated (or feared) for their ability to bear special children, shunned for the frank expression of their sexuality, or demonized by being assigned some form of deviance.

The Scholar-Priest concedes no ground to the Witch in his own histories. In Western literature, the persona developed during the Middle Ages, when advanced forms of spellcast-

ing such as necromancy, alchemy, and sorcery were strongly identified with the clergy in part because such magic could not be studied or even known by anyone but "educated clerics" since the spells that invoked demonic spirits, often based on "church rituals," were "highly structured" and could be found only in books written in Latin (Bailey 965-66). The characterization of the poet Virgil, who outgrew his origins as a mere scribbler to become both a fearsome spell-caster and the butt of a well-known escapade, may serve as an example. In classical and early medieval times, he was a beneficent figure, the prophet of Christ's birth, the founder and defender of Naples, a healer with magical powers, a protector against the winds of Mount Vesuvius, and the banisher of harmful flies and snakes (Tuchel 252-53). He was also a craftsman of "magical artifacts," at one time creating a mirror—note the similarity with Himiko—that could see events throughout the Roman Empire (Kieckhefer 113). But by the thirteenth century, he had acquired magical powers from demons (Kieckhefer 113), and in the bold and bawdy story of the Basket Adventure, he earns a reputation for sexual license, the tale telling of how, seeking the adulterous love of a beautiful woman, he agrees to ascend to her chamber in a rope-drawn basket, only to be left suspended halfway, the mockery of Rome (Tuchel 255-56).[6]

Virgil's literary example gave rise to another Scholar-Priest who has had a strong influence on the modern characterization of the sorcerer, the villain of Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (c. CE 1210): Clinschor. He is described in the poem as a "cleric who [speaks] magic spells" (book 2, verse 66) and who "practice[s] the art of black magic [*nigrômanzî*], and with sorcery [*zouber*] . . . can compel both women and men" (12.617; McFarland 283). That he has some control over the daemons of the Other World is also attested to: "[He] has

power over all *les mauvaises* and *les belles gens* dwelling between the firmament and the earth, save those whom God desires to protect" (13.658). Wolfram makes Clinschor Virgil's kinsman expressly by referencing Virgil's magical abilities (13.656). Surprisingly, Clinschor never appears in the poem, never casts a spell, never confronts the hero, the Arthurian knight Gawain, who rescues the four hundred noblewomen and four queens that the sorcerer has lured to his magical Castle of Wonders. The dangers Gawain faces—the Wonder Bed, the five hundred spears and slings, the giant lion—are, like mousetraps, set to engage when activated.

What first strikes the reader about Clinschor is that unlike Circe and Kalypso, who seem like passive dwellers in realms not of their shaping, he actively engages in the type of world-building that inspires awe in the other characters. When Gawain first approaches the Castle of Wonders, he encounters the amazing sight of a citadel that seems to spin "like a top around [a] hill" (10.508), that is "built up with defenses" against "all sieges" (11.564). Clinschor also has placed atop the highest tower the unbreakable pillar that "[casts] its glow" for "six miles round the countryside" and gives the viewer a "true report" of anything that happens within that area (12.592). In these details appear the outlines of a man-made Cosmic Center: a Celestial City built on a hill, the spinning which suggests the turning about the Cosmic Axis, and a Pillar that grants far sight—Wolfram borrowing, from the legends of Virgil, the poet's mirror as Clinschor's *pièce de résistance* (Kieckhefer 113). The final barrier to Clinschor's fortress is a river which Gawain must cross by paying a toll to the ferryman, Plippalinot, thus evoking not only the myths in which boatmen such as Charon and Urshanabi transport heroes to the Other World, but also the voyage across water that is a frequent occurrence in the shaman's journey to

the land of spirits (Eliade 202, 311; Vitebsky 44; Rutherford 103). Just before the river crossing, as a confirmation that the terrain Gawain will enter is of an extraordinary quality, Plippalinot tells him, "[T]his whole country here is a land of fantastic adventure" (10.548).

The second detail that strikes the reader about Clinschor is his own dark sexual history. His violation of the "moral code of his world" has to do "with *minne* [courtly love]," and he is "punished for it with impotence" (McFarland 285). Queen Arnive, one of his prisoners, relates his backstory to Gawain, that for the crime of adultery with Queen Iblis of Sicily he has been castrated by Iblis's husband, King Ibert (13.656-57). Clinschor, driven to learn magic to punish the "courtly society that . . . robbed him of his sexual power" (Clason 308), robs the women he has captured of their own sexuality (Tuchel 249). The worldview Wolfram establishes in the poem is the importance of love—the proper expression of *agape*, *eros*, and *minne*. Against this panorama, Clinschor's crimes are of the worst kind, for he has used his powers not to promote these feelings in the universe of the poem but to suppress them.

The same model of the Scholar-Priest appears in Japanese literature at almost the same moment as Wolfram's *Parzival*. Perhaps the most famous example is Abe no Seimei (CE 921–1005), considered Japan's greatest *onmyōji* ("yin-and-yang master," a practicer of *onmyōdō* divination), who, like Virgil, would surely be surprised to see the extraordinary turn his life has taken in the tales that arose about him after his death. According to the *Konjaku monogatarishu* (*Tales of Times Past*) and the *Uji shui monogatari* (*Tales from the Later Gleanings of Uji*), compiled late in the Heian and early in the Kamakura (CE 1185–1333) periods, he was born of an *onmyōji* father and a *kitsune* mother, and by the time he was five, he could

already influence *oni* (ogres) and perceive his mother's spirit form (Meyer, "Abe"; Meyer, "Kuzunoha"; Miller, "Extreme" 32). Fearing that her son would turn to evil because of her own *kitsune* nature, she abandoned him—though she also granted him the ability to understand animals (Meyer, "Abe"; Meyer, "Kuzunoha"; Miller, "Extreme" 33). By the time he is an adult, he can "channel or command" *shikigami*, or supernatural spirits (Miller, "Extreme" 33). Seimei demonstrates his powers by stripping one sorcerer, Chitoku Hōshi, of his *shikigami*, and in another incident, by interpreting the unusual behavior of a noble's dog to warn of a curse planted by another sorcerer, Ashiya Dōman, in the ground beneath the entrance to a shrine (*Konjaku II* 301-02, 306; Mills 339-40, 411-12; Meyer, "Abe"). The contests between Seimei and Dōman gain much attention in the stories, Dōman himself being an *onmyōji* of some fame but also of much arrogance, bent on causing trouble for Seimei, challenging him to a number of magical duels and eventually bringing their rivalry to a fatal climax by seducing Seimei's wife, stealing his book of magic, and cutting his throat (Meyer, "Abe"; Mills 412). Seimei, though, after being resurrected by a Chinese mage, avenges himself on the lovers by cutting their throats in turn (Meyer, "Abe"). Seimei lives on as a hero to this day, having been transformed from a middle-aged man into the *bishōnen* ("beautiful boy") protagonist of Baku Yumemakura's *Onmyōji* novels (Miller, "Extreme" 31, 33); it's Dōman, with his penchant for magical mischief and his errant sexuality—another story of adultery, no less—whose characteristics resurface in the modern-day sorcerers.

THE SETTING IN *SAO*

The mood of the series is established in the very first episode. The viewers, along with the unsuspecting gamers, learn that

all ten thousand contestants have been sealed in the world of Aincrad by Akihiko Kayaba. On the evening that the game opens, he informs the players that they cannot log out, and that they cannot lose their hit points and leave the game by "dying" in the virtual world. If they do, a microwave burst from their NerveGear helmets will destroy their brains. The same will happen if someone in the real world tries to remove the helmets. The only way to escape Aincrad alive is for the players to clear all one hundred floors of the bosses that await. Unfortunately, four thousand players either perish in the game or die in the real world when they can no longer care for their comatose bodies; Kirito, Asuna, and many other survivors are transferred to hospitals, still wearing their NerveGear helmets. After two years pass within SAO, Kirito and Asuna discover that Kayaba has an avatar—Heathcliff—in the game as well. By killing Heathcliff, they clear the game.

This formula, with modifications, repeats through the four major story arcs listed in the introduction. The key feature of *SAO*'s formula, the feature that most directly connects the VRMMORPG worlds to the worlds and figures of the sorcerer, is the headsets—the NerveGear helmet or the AmuSphere goggles—and the Soul Translator, which, because they induce a condition identical to the shaman's trance, all must use to visit the virtual realms. Since each of these realms is analogous to the Other World, every player is like a soul who wanders in that world, and as they fight, love, live, and survive in the games, the players are motionless, senseless, and helpless in real life. Whether the trance is migratory or possessive is an interesting question, but one not necessary to answer because in whatever form the condition takes, it presents the same danger for all who enter it—it brings them to the attention of the sorcerers who can attack them not just in the games but in the real world as well.

Another major feature of the VRMMORPG realms is that their world-building relies on the landscapes in which the shaman and the sorcerer operate. For one thing, the same time distortion—and the danger it presents—found in the stories of the fairy queen governs at least two of the worlds, Alfheim and Underworld. Alfheim's sixteen-hour clock forces players to convert time much as people do when moving between time zones. In Underworld, years pass while Kirito adventures there, but only days pass in Japan for those observing his progress. In the fourth season, Kirito and Asuna, after rescuing Alice from Subtilizer,[7] must spend two hundred virtual years in Underworld—a wait that might kill them—before returning to their bodies.

The major landmarks of *SAO* also strongly recall the Cosmic Center and the fortresses of the earlier sorcerers. Kayaba has built the castle of Aincrad on the model of the Celestial City. The floating castle recalls several images of the palaces of the gods drifting in the clouds, from the New Jerusalem of Judeo-Christian belief to the dwellings of the Japanese gods in Takamanohara (the heavenly plains), to Man-Eagle's house, to the city of Laputa in Hayao Miyazaki's film *Castle in the Sky*. Inside, it resembles Clinschor's Castle of Wonders, its labyrinth of dungeons, cities, forests, and other obstacles containing floor bosses and traps that spring when activated. At the top, it connects the universal zones, in this case the world of Aincrad with the real world. Kirito and Asuna, after defeating Heathcliff, are afforded what amounts to a shaman's journey to heaven and an encounter with a deity: a view of Aincrad's disintegration, and a meeting with its creator—Kayaba himself—as they stand among a beautiful array of sunset-tinged clouds ("End" 15:08).

In the Fairy Dance arc, the virtual world of Alfheim has a

centerpiece modeled on Yggdrasil. Called the World Tree, it towers over nine fairy nations, its roots plunging into the dungeon of Jotunheim.[8] The World Tree, like Clinschor's castle, is well defended. It is not possible to climb the tree, and an invisible shield blocks the game-player fairies from flying to the top. At the crown of the tree sits the palace of Nobuyuki Sugou's avatar, the fairy Oberon, which like the top floor of Aincrad connects with the outside world. The entry point to the palace, located in the central city of Alne at the foot of the tree, is heavily guarded by nonplayer fairy knights.[9] Within the bowels of this palace—its own corridors recalling the labyrinth—Sugou, like Clinschor, has imprisoned a host of victims—three hundred comatose Aincrad survivors whose minds he has captured through their NerveGear. He has hidden them in a laboratory where he conducts illegal experiments on their brains. The reduction of his victims into brains, which float in tanks atop rows of pedestals, recalls how Circe transforms her own victims into animals, a stroke of dehumanization that exemplifies both their personalities and the danger they represent to the heroes. In addition to the brains, within a giant birdcage outside this stronghold, Sugou has confined Asuna in the guise of Titania, a situation that suggests both Son of Light's rescue of his wife and the storyline of the fairy queen in need of a protecting hero.

In the Phantom Bullet arc, the world of Gun Gale Online (GGO) presents a vastly different landscape. When Kirito enters the game, he finds a mash-up of ruins—temples, forests, deserts, roadways, cities, Wild West saloons—which serve as cover for the players to blast away at each other with assorted firearms. The central metropolis is a bleak jumble of smoky skies, gray skyscrapers, and grimy streets, a demonic modulation of the Celestial City. In its marketplace, the players can cash in their winnings for supplies, weapons, or even,

if the price is right, new avatars for themselves, thus using the Center to obtain portions of its creative power. Shino helps Kirito navigate the labyrinth of alleys and shops to arrive at the Governor General's Office, which serves as the main point of contact between the players and the outer world. It is here that the gamers register for the Bullet of Bullets, the contest which determines the best player in GGO, and where they are transported to their separate arenas once the contest begins.

In the Alicization arc, by far the longest of the series, the elements of world-building are even more extravagant. Underworld is housed in a massive computer hidden in the Ocean Turtle, a nuclear-powered pyramid floating off the coast of Japan. Thus, both the architecture of the Celestial City and the journey to the Other World across dangerous waters are invoked. Underworld itself is split into two countries, the Human Empire, and the Dark Territory where dwell the ogres, orcs, wolves, witches, and other foes who wait for their chance to attack the humans. The fluctlights (energy pathways that contain the soul) of all inhabitants, human and foe, live in a gigantic cube, composed of smaller cubes, also housed in the Ocean Turtle. At the center of the empire stands the cathedral of the pontifex, Quinella. The cathedral, like the castle of Aincrad, stretches one hundred stories tall; contains a labyrinth of stairs, rooms, and corridors; presents floor bosses (in this case, the Integrity Knights) and traps that must be cleared; and at the top holds an access point to the outer world. This Center is balanced by one other, the World's End Altar in the Dark Territory, that Kirito and Asuna must use to transport themselves and Alice to the real world. Again, the image is of a floating city, decorated by a paradisiacal garden; the altar itself is a computer terminal which contacts the Ocean Turtle.

THE SORCERERS OF *SAO*

The first sorcerer, Akihiko Kayaba, is stamped as a Scholar-Priest at his initial appearance in Aincrad: a godlike giant hovering over the avatars of the gamers, wearing the face-covering cowl of a cleric, telling his listeners how to reach the afterlife (i.e., the real world), and wielding pixels like magic spells. Like Virgil, he is a creator of magical artifacts, starting with the server that hosts the world of Aincrad, and the NerveGear helmet, though he is also the one who corrupts the first into a giant trap and the second into a killing device.[10] His most impressive artifact is the Seed, the world-building software that he bequeaths to Kirito, and that Kirito, for free, offers to programmers worldwide. Without the Seed, the worlds of GGO and Underworld do not exist. Kayaba does not live to see the Seed activated, for at the end of the Aincrad arc, after he vanishes from the presence of Kirito and Asuna, he uploads his own awareness into the virtual world, a process that destroys his physical body. It is in this ghostly state that he gives the Seed to Kirito at the end of the Fairy Dance arc.

The initial impression Kayaba-Heathcliff emanates is of a Clinschor-like sorcerer, controlling and powerful. As the cowled cleric, he stands aloof and apart from other people and from the world he has created. As Heathcliff, he is the leader of the forces attempting to break through to the top of the castle, but he is one of only two immortal objects in the game; thus, unlike the other players, he cannot be killed.[11] Kayaba-Heathcliff also seems motivated to repress any form of sexuality. When Kayaba warns the gamers about the nature of Aincrad, he also shuts down their ability to alter the appearance of their avatars. Men who had been posing as women, and women posing as men, receive a rude shock when their true identities are exposed. Heathcliff is nonsex-

ual, attracted to nobody, attracting nobody, expressing little emotion, visible only in his full plate armor. It turns out, however, that of all the sorcerers in *SAO*, Kayaba demonstrates what might be the most conventional sexuality. Later in the series, viewers learn that Kayaba and one of his colleagues, Rinko Koujiro, had become lovers, Koujiro not only helping him develop SAO but also maintaining his body during his dives into the game. Kayaba's resemblance to the sorcerer, then, is actually closest to the archetype: he recreates (and recreates in others) the shaman's ecstatic trance; he can contact a virtual world indistinguishable from the Other World; he demonstrates extraordinary talent for world-building; he, like Clinschor, has lured hundreds of victims to a magical castle in that world; and when he turns his mind to it, he can cause incredible harm.

The second sorcerer, Nobuyuki Sugou, also seems to fit the mold of the Scholar-Priest. A protégé of Kayaba's, Sugou, despite being in his twenties, is the respectable lab manager of the electronics firm owned by Asuna's family. But then, in Alfheim, Sugou reveals to Asuna that by his experiments he seeks to gain the power of total mind control (Kawahara, *SAO 3* 108; "Captive" 19:27), even threatening to alter Asuna's brain so that she will fall in love with him. These scenes underscore how Sugou, like Clinschor, wields the sorcerer's power to "compel both women and men." Sugou is like Clinschor, and like Dōman, in other important ways. Dōman, as noted above, steals Seimei's magic book. Likewise, Clinschor steals his magic pillar from Queen Secundille of Tabronit (India) and by threat secures the foundation of his castle from King Irot of Rosche Sabins. In the same manner, Sugou builds Alfheim on the stolen shell of Kayaba's Aincrad. As Kirito accuses him during their showdown in Alfheim, "You stole it. You stole this entire world and the people left in it"

(Kawahara, *SAO 4* 150-151). An even stronger tie between Sugou, Dōman, and Clinschor is the nature of their sexuality. Dōman's transgression is limited to adultery; Clinschor's progression from adultery to castration to sexual repressor is more involved. Like Dōman and Clinschor, Sugou brings ruin upon himself by engaging not once, but twice, in a fierce rivalry over a woman. His initial rival is Kayaba, from whom he tries to steal the romantic attentions of Rinko Koujiro. He then enters into a similar rivalry with Kirito over Asuna. Unlike the other sorcerers, however, Sugou fails to win either woman he pursues.

How his rivalry with Kirito plays out emphasizes his character. As Sugou is aware, Kirito and Asuna have already married virtually (if not in fact) in the world of Aincrad. The partners even go so far as to buy a house on Aincrad's twenty-second floor, and in a frolic in the nearby forest, Kirito carries Asuna on his shoulders, his head between her bare thighs, an interaction immediately followed by the discovery of Yui, an AI nonplayer character who takes on the appearance of a young girl and who out of love for Kirito and Asuna gradually learns to call them Papa and Mama ("Girl"). As if to emphasize the contrast between Kirito's virility and his own impotence, when in their final confrontation Sugou begins to brutally molest Asuna, he throws a red ribbon from her bodice that lands before Kirito (Kawahara, *SAO 4* 147; "Gilded" 10:08), an implied reference to the red string of destiny that binds two lovers. Kirito defeats Sugou in Alfheim by cutting off his head and upper torso and stabbing him through the eye with his sword (Kawahara, *SAO 4* 154; "Gilded" 15:56-16:21). In the real world, after Sugou knifes Kirito's arm in the parking lot of Asuna's hospital, Kirito disarms Sugou and holds the blade at his throat, drawing blood with a small cut before dropping the weapon (Kawahara, *SAO 4* 161-65; "World"

0:50-3:58). In terms of its imagery, this climax has a double significance: not only do these literal and figurative beheadings come as close as one possibly can to the castration suffered by Clinschor without actually depicting it on-screen, but the knife at Sugou's throat also recalls Dōman's fate at the hands of his rival, Seimei.

The third sorcerer, Death Gun, offers Kirito and viewers alike a mystery: how is he killing gamers in the real world from the virtual world of GGO? The answer is that Death Gun is not one person but three, operating in both realms simultaneously. Two of the perpetrators, Shouichi Shinkawa and Atsushi Kanamoto, are villains from the Aincrad arc, members of the Laughing Coffin guild that killed other players in SAO. Shouichi has a younger brother, Kyouji, who helps concoct their scheme—while Shouichi fires a gun at the players in GGO, Kyouji and Atsushi, in the real world, break into the quarters of the helpless gamers and paralyze their hearts with a hypodermic of succinylcholine. Their strongest connection to the sorcerer is thus in their method of killing the gamers. As the sorcerer can destroy effigies of his victims to destroy the victims themselves and inflict death and sickness on his victims through the use of darts, so the three conspirators use bullets on avatars (in GGO) and syringes on bodies (in the real world) to achieve a similar effect. Their illusion of killing the gamers from inside GGO is so realistic that Kirito is hired to enter the game himself and investigate whether it is truly possible.

At the end of the Phantom Bullet arc, Kyouji reveals his own brand of sexual depravity. Throughout the arc, Kyouji tries to become Shino's protector in the real world, even saving her from three bullying girls on their way home from school, and attempts to express his romantic feelings for her until in the

climactic scene, when he visits her apartment after the Bullet of Bullets, he attacks her, threatening to inject her, too, with succinylcholine unless she gives in. Only Kirito's sudden appearance saves Shino. Kyouji's portrayal in the climax closely resembles Sugou's in his arc—the same slavering, frantic energy consumes them as they assault the women they supposedly love.

The fourth sorcerer, Quinella, unlike the other sorcerers, does not live in the real world. She is an AI developed by the Alicization project and exists completely in Underworld. However, she has perhaps the most complex connections to the archetype of all the characters in the anime. First, though Quinella is female, she has elements of the Scholar-Priest in her makeup. As noted above, she has a religious title—pontifex—and her cathedral in the capital city of Centoria magically grows as her own power grows; but as a young girl she is assigned by her father, then lord of Centoria, the Sacred Task[12] of researching the Sacred Arts, the system commands that can be used like spells in Underworld. As her influence increases, she establishes herself as head of the Axiom Church, an organization she creates to regulate all other humans within Underworld. The Taboo Index, the gospel of the Axiom Church, is a codex of prohibitions that the humans must obey without question or face execution.[13] As she grows older, she attains administrator-level authority over Underworld, granting herself the power to generate magical artifacts such as the weapons with which she equips the Integrity Knights and builds her most fearsome creation, the sword golem. She even creates an alter ego—Cardinal—who wears the robes and hat of a scholar and who hides in the cathedral's library.

Second, because of her peculiar circumstances, Quinella also displays both the Siren and the Crone aspects of the Witch.

In her Siren aspect, to distract Kirito and his comrade Eugio (and probably several viewers as well) during their climactic battle, she appears before them naked. Ahead of this encounter, in a modulation of the fairy queen's story, she succeeds at seducing Eugio by welcoming him into her bed and, as Kalypso does with Odysseus, offering him a form of immortality in exchange for his becoming one of her Integrity Knights. How Quinella seduces Eugio is instructive. She weaves words by which she corrupts Eugio's love for his mother and for his closest friends—all natural and healthy feelings—into self-doubt and jealousy. She then tells him that if he will give her his love, she can offer him the "ultimate pleasure" ("Seal" 21:20). In truth, what she is doing is lowering his defenses so that he will grant her access to his memories and allow her to transform him into one of her Integrity Knights ("Seal" 22:51). Thus, like Clinschor, she violates the principles of love to make Eugio a permanent resident of the domain she has created for herself within Underworld and separate him from a real life—and real love.

In her Crone aspect, Quinella is even more dangerous. Like the elderly Himiko, she lives in self-isolation, though she does not surround herself exclusively with women. And like Tamamo no Mae, she uses her arts to appear youthful and to live well beyond her natural limit. As she nears the end of her life in Underworld, she finds a system command that will permanently restore her to her teen-aged body and appearance. By the time Kirito meets her, she has already lived over three hundred virtual years. Further, as the hag will create a dread spell by dismembering the living, so does Quinella by devising a ceremony, the Synthesis Ritual, by which she creates the Integrity Knights: she extracts the memories of her victims, leaving them with no recollection of their past, and inserts a false set of memories that make her new knights

blindly loyal to her. But even worse, she dismembers the living on a massive scale, and like a black shaman, reanimates the bones for a deadly mission, to transform three hundred Underworld humans into the sword golem, a towering skeletal killing machine. She tells the horrified Kirito, Eugio, and Alice that she has plans to create more. Thus, like Circe, like Sugou, she renders her victims into less than human forms.

The fifth sorcerer, Gabriel Miller, is an American mercenary hired to strike the Ocean Turtle, extract Alice's fluctlight cube, and seize the Soul Translator technology (STL) that creates and grants access to Underworld.[14]   Also, as viewers learn during the Alicization arc, he is a two-time winner of the Bullet of Bullets contest in GGO. His tie to the sorcerer is seen in his lifelong fascination with the soul. The name of his GGO avatar, Subtilizer, is a translation of the Japanese 魂 を盗む者, "soul stealer," a meaning he makes clear to Shino before attempting to steal hers during their battle in Underworld ("Gabriel"; "Code" 5:25). His backstory shows the progression of his fascination. When he is young, his father tells him that insects don't immediately die if they lose their heads. Miller then begins to wonder where humans keep their souls. When he concludes that his friend Alicia's soul must be housed in her brain, he jabs an awl into her ear. As she dies, he sees her soul rise out of her head ("Dark" 0:10-1:59; 12:28-13:10).

His obsession worsens when he reaches adulthood. Competing against Shino in a new Bullet of Bullets, he throttles her from behind, and with the breathy whisper of a lover muses that her soul must taste sweet ("Final" 18:00; "Code" 4:41). When he first enters Underworld (as Dark Lord Vecta), he kills a Dark Knight, Lipia Zancale, who tries to assassinate him, and when he inhales her departing soul, he grows so ad-

dicted to the sensation that he transfers the focus of his mission from simply obtaining Alice's fluctlight to destroying it so he can experience her soul as well ("Dark" 13:55-14:53). He makes his boldest announcement during his final battle with Shino in Underworld: he wants to know "whether or not one can also suck in the soul of a living human through an STL" ("Code" 4:24)—in other words, whether he can use the new VR technologies to ingest the souls of people in the real world and not just those of the AIs in Underworld. This is more than the declaration of a sorcerer, whose stock in trade is harming the souls who wander into the Other World; it is a chilling warning to the viewers of the potential power of VR to consume not only their time and energy but their very souls as well.

In these scenes, it is clear that Miller has displaced his sexual impulses into his obsession. When the audience first sees Miller with Alicia in the forest where the murder takes place, his hands appear to be on her head in a gesture of tenderness. It's only after the camera changes position that viewers realize that she is bleeding from her ear. After he extracts the weapon, she falls into his arms as if into an embrace. Zancale initially approaches him as if she is offering herself to him. Their struggle takes place on his bed with him astride her, pinning down her hips, restraining her hand, and strangling her. In his duel with Shino in Underworld, he immobilizes her with a spell and pulls her in for a soul-sucking kiss; they are broken apart only when Kirito's memento on Shino's necklace sparks to life. At no time does Miller show interest in the women themselves; to him, they are containers that he would strip away to get to the prize within. It is only fitting that at his death in Underworld—a death, ironically, that also kills and disfigures his body in the real world—Alicia's soul is the one who drags him down to his fate.

CONCLUSIONS

The influence of the sorcerers on the story arcs of *SAO* is too broad to be adequately summarized, but the discussion can profitably be pared down to two major effects. The first is that in a setting of computers and virtual reality, the sorcerers help to create an atmosphere of magic and mysteriousness. The worlds they build and inhabit recall the medieval castles, the otherworldly fairy realms, and the extraordinary powers of the shaman and of the magicians of the Middle Ages. Those worlds, too, recall the romances that served for their audiences as an escape from the dreariness of real life and a chance to indulge in private wishes for characteristics or outcomes that could not be attained by acceptable means in the real world.

The second effect is that they are the primary sources of conflict. On one level, they present dangers to the wellbeing of the heroes. They threaten death, rape, disfigurement, mind control, and other tortures whose forms and methods would be almost unimaginable in real life. On another level, their contests with the heroes represent the struggle between acceptable norms of behavior and deviance from those norms. Taking scientific or technological discoveries too far, exerting authoritarian control over a world, and abusing victims to further one's own questionable goals or act out one's abnormal sexual desires enumerate some of the overarching concerns that the heroes must face along with the immediate obstacles to their own survival. That the adversaries are sorcerers, and that the contests take place within the Other World, lifts these concerns out of the mundane and tinges them with supernatural urgency. But like Clinschor, these sorcerers fall into the same error: their world-building has convinced them that they are free to operate in those realms without limits or consideration. Yet like all wish-fulfilling fantasies, those con-

victions cannot stand when an agent of the real world comes into contact with them. In other words, the sorcerers initially appear to be bigger than the worlds they have constructed, but they have tied themselves so deeply to their creations that the heroes, by entering those worlds and exposing their flaws, can defeat their makers.

Still, the urgency stirred up by these sorcerers charges *SAO* with an energy that is not easy to reproduce even in works of the same genre unless they employ a similar character. The difference is evident in two minor story arcs, Calibur and Mother's Rosario, that appear in season 2 of the anime, and in the special edition episode that aired after the first season. In these arcs, Kirito and his friends do not face Kayaba, Sugou, or a sorcerer of comparable stature, and their adventures— save for the relationship Asuna builds with the terminally ill Yuuki Konno—simply mimic those that participants might experience in a typical role-playing video game. The same problem appears in another popular anime, *Log Horizon*, which began airing a year after season 1 of *SAO*. The series has a similar premise: thousands of gamers trapped in a simulated world with no apparent means of returning to reality. But because no story arc in the anime's three seasons features a sorcerer with the same powers or the same nefarious ends as those in *SAO*, the gamers do not face the same dangers— they don't die if their avatars are terminated—and do not gather the same motivation to start a quest for home. Instead of directing their focus against a world-controlling sorcerer from whom they can force their escape, the gamers either fight among themselves or battle the virtual realm's NPCs and monsters, again replicating the experience of role-playing itself but not seeking a return to normality or confronting any larger questions of ethics or morality as do the characters in the four main story arcs of *SAO*.

Examining the sorcerers of *SAO* in this manner reveals interesting similarities in how the archetype has been treated in Western and Japanese cultures. The exercise also reveals that the sorcerer continues to be a viable character type in modern media. Through interactive games, visually appealing anime, and other avenues, people of all ages, like the gamers of *SAO*, willingly enter the supernatural realms these sorcerers inhabit. Of interest, too, is how *SAO*—if A-1 Pictures continues to produce the anime—will bring to life the mysterious figures who plunge the heroes into the next story arc—Unital Ring. All signs point to the appearance of two more sorcerers—the voice of the girl who announces the newest survival game, and the latest intruder into Underworld. The treacherous, otherworldly landscapes in which the sorcerer operates—no doubt anchored by another Cosmic Center—surely will also figure prominently. However they manifest, Kirito and company will have to navigate the dreadful dangers, defeat the villains, and save the virtual worlds once again.

NOTES

1   Throughout this paper, *SAO* in italics will refer to the name of the series depicted in the anime and in the light novels. SAO (non-italicized) will refer to the game of the same name played within the series.

2   In a press conference at Sakura-Con 2013, Kawahara stated that he was "able to make the virtual world of *Sword Art Online* studying various American sci-fi novelists, movies in the United States that featured virtual reality" (lugiamania).

3   The Center is also represented by symbols such as the Pillar (Eliade 261) and the Celestial City (Eliade 267-9). In Buddha's Temptation under the Bodhi Tree, the Cosmic Center is a still point around which the rest of the universe spins or rotates (Campbell 83).

4   A similar restriction on female initiative is seen in the ceremony Izanagi and Izanami perform before their first sexual union. They circle a heavenly pillar—a Cosmic Center—but because Izanami, the wife, greets Izanagi, the husband, first, their union fails (*Nihongi* 12-17).

5   Modern portrayals of Himiko paint her as everything from a "sober" and "commanding" ruler, to a sexual adventurer, to a "dangerous witch," to the High Priestess in specialized tarot cards (Miller, "Rebranding" 185, 190, 180, 194).

6   The story gets bawdier from this point. Virgil's suspension may be read as impotence—a characteristic carried forward, as seen below, in Clinschor and Sugou. After his humiliation, Virgil extinguishes all the fires in Rome (Tuchel 256). On the assumption that these fires represent hearths, and therefore the creative energy of the womb (Yassif 250), then he has rendered the women of Rome infertile as well. In different continuations of this tale, these fires can be relit only by the genitalia of the woman who spurned him (Yassif 247, 252).

7   This liberation resembles Son of Light's rescue of his wife from Man-Eagle, complete with a journey to a floating house, helpful spirit maidens, and a final duel between the hero and the sorcerer.

8   Urðr, Verðandi, and Skuld appear in Jotunheim, from a lake at the base of the tree, in the Calibur story arc.

9   The goal of each fairy nation is to defeat the guardian knights and reach Oberon's palace to be transformed into Alfs. The nonplayer character knights recreate nearly perfectly the onslaught faced by Gawain in the Castle of Wonders, their attacks on Kirito resembling those of the automated five hundred slings and five hundred crossbows that fire upon Gawain.

10 After clearing the game, Kirito and Asuna, while the three float among the clouds, confront Kayaba about the deadly nature of Aincrad. He expresses no remorse. Instead, he evades, saying that "[he] forgot a long time ago" his reasons for designing

it as he did ("End" 17:36). More important to him was the dream of "creating that castle, a world that surpassed all our laws . . ." (17:49).

11 In his last duel with Kirito, he turns off this feature.

12 Sacred Tasks are vocations assigned to all in Underworld by their town elders.

13 In reality, as seen in the case of Alice, Quinella transforms those who break the Taboo Index into Integrity Knights.

14 There is another sorcerer in Underworld, Dee Eye Ell, one of Dark Lord Vecta's minions. Space does not allow a full treatment of her, but it should be mentioned that her "tentacle rape" of Leafa, the avatar of Kirito's cousin Suguha, in season 4, episode 13, raised a firestorm of criticism on the internet, and is only one aspect of her deviant sexuality.

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Rewriting Sharon Tate's History in *Once Upon A Time in … Hollywood*

By Douglas Rasmussen

ABSTRACT

An examination of how director Quentin Tarantino rewrites the history of the Tate-Labianca murders in the film *Once Upon A Time in… Hollywood.* By revising history and creating an alternate timeline where actress Sharon Tate is not murdered by Manson Family cultists, Tarantino is, in effect, also offering up a commentary on Hollywood itself. My essay will look at the artistic ramifications of these changes and how it affects viewer interpretations.

Bio: For my Master of Arts degree I wrote a thesis on the AMC television series *Breaking Bad* called "Intertextual Representations of Drugs, Violence and Greed in *Breaking Bad,*" which generated two journal articles and a book chapter. I have a number of articles and book chapters in various stages of publication. I have also contributed to a number of online blogs and websites. My main interest is in the field of Film and Television Studies, but I have expanded to other areas of popular culture as well. I wish to continue my research on popular films and discuss how popular media can contribute to a social and political allegory on contemporary issues.

Reescribiendo la historia de Sharon Tate en Érase *una vez en... Hollywood*

RESUMEN

Un examen de cómo el director Quentin Tarantino reescribe la historia de los asesinatos de Tate-Labianca en la película Érase *una vez en... Hollywood*. Al revisar la historia y crear una línea de tiempo alternativa donde la actriz Sharon Tate no es asesinada por los cultistas de la Familia Manson, Tarantino, de hecho, también ofrece un comentario sobre el propio Hollywood. Mi ensayo analizará las ramificaciones artísticas de estos cambios y cómo afectan las interpretaciones de los espectadores.

Bio: Para mi Maestría escribí una tesis sobre la serie de televisión de AMC Breaking Bad llamada "Representaciones intertextuales de drogas, violencia y codicia en Breaking Bad", que generó dos artículos de revista y un capítulo de libro. Cuento con una serie de artículos y capítulos de libros en diversas etapas de publicación. También he contribuido a varios blogs y sitios web en línea. Mi principal interés está en el campo de los Estudios de Cine y Televisión, pero también me he expandido a otras áreas de la cultura popular. Deseo continuar mi investigación sobre películas populares y discutir cómo los medios populares pueden contribuir a una alegoría social y política sobre temas contemporáneos.
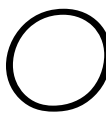
Palabras clave: Sharon Tate, Érase *una vez en… Hollywood*, historia alternativa, la mirada masculina, biopics

标题：重写莎朗·塔特在《好莱坞往事》中的历史

摘要：本文研究了导演昆汀·塔伦蒂诺如何在电影《好莱坞往事》中改写泰特-拉比安卡谋杀案的历史。通过修改历史并创造一个替代时间线（其中女演员莎朗·塔特没有被曼森家族邪教徒谋杀），塔伦蒂诺实际上也在对好莱坞本身进行评论。我的文章将探讨这些变化的艺术影响以及它如何影响观众的解读。

简介：我在攻读文学硕士学位期间撰写了一篇关于AMC电视剧《绝命毒师》的论文，题为《〈绝命毒师〉中毒品、暴力和贪婪的互文表述》(Intertextual Representations of Drugs, Violence and Greed in *Breaking Bad*)，这篇论文产生了两篇期刊文章和一篇书籍章节。我的几篇文章和书籍章节正处于不同的出版阶段。我还为一系列网络博客和网站作贡献。我的主要研究兴趣是电影和电视研究，但我也扩展研究了大众文化的其他领域。我希望继续对大众电影进行研究，并探讨大众媒体如何能为关于当代问题的社会及政治寓言作贡献。

关键词：莎朗·塔特，《好莱坞往事》，替代性历史，男性凝视，传记片

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nce Upon A Time in ... Hollywood (2019) is the ninth film by Quentin Tarantino and the first to be distributed by a company other than Miramax.

Since his debut in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), which was a festival darling that won many awards—including the Independent Spirit Awards—to the *Hateful Eight* (2018), Tarantino's films have almost always had a significant critical and commercial impact. In fact, Tarantino's follow-up to *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction* (1994), would make nine million in its first weekend and would go on to make over two-hundred million during its initial theatrical run and would end up on many critics best-of-the-year lists. *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* would go on to become one of Tarantino's most financially successful films, making approximately three-hundred and seventy million dollars at the box office and receiving an 85% on Rotten Tomatoes. The film marks a transition in Tarantino's career as it shifts into its later stages. Or, rather, the final stages as Tarantino announced he will retire after ten films, making *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* as his penultimate ninth film.

The format Tarantino decided upon for *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* is an alternate history wherein actress Sharon Tate (Margot Robbie) is not murdered by the Manson Family under orders of cult leader Charles Manson. In Tarantino's fantastical re-imagining, the Manson Family are diverted from their original course of action to murder Tate by a random encounter with Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio). The end result is that Tate survives, the Manson Family cultists are violently dispensed with by stuntman/tough guy Cliff Booth (Brad Pitt), and Rick even gets a career reprieve as he is now invited into the inner circle of Tate and her A list director husband Roman Polanski (Rafal Zaiwerucha).

Tarantino's shift in history raises questions about why he decided to opt for an alternate history instead of a straight-forward biopic. What advantages does this format provide? Are

there are aesthetic, historical, or cinematic reasons for choosing to present Tate in such a manner? And, perhaps most significantly, what does this decision mean for the purposes of the Hollywood biopic as a genre? These issues and how they reflect on biopics, and in particular women's roles in biopics, is one of the issues present in the film and affects an analysis of *Once Upon A Time in … Hollywood*.

BIOPICS AND THE DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN FILM

For comparison it is necessary to look at biopics as a genre to determine Tarantino's decision to avoid that format to explore his vision of Sharon Tate and 1969 Los Angeles. The term biopic itself stems from the words "biographical" and "picture," the latter being an outdated term for film. In fact, the use of the word picture in this neologism denotes just how far back the genre dates in Hollywood history. The biopic's history in Hollywood might, indeed, be part of the problem. Robert Burgoyne describes in the biopic in his book *The Hollywood Historical Film* as a "lesser cultural form, a mainstream entertainment that creates mythic figures out of complex human beings. Its style of historiography is also regarded as suspect, a dubious attempt to encapsulate or exemplify a major historical period in the life of an individual protagonist" (Burgoyne 2008; 40). The genre, then, is associated with a type of filmmaking that promotes stereotypical material with formulaic plots and predictable patterns of narrative.

This predictability is most apparent in the rise-and-fall narrative structure that afflicts the majority of biopics being made. Carolyn Anderson and John Lupo, in the essay "Hollywood Lives: The State of the Biopic at the Turn of the Century," describe biopics as depending "heavily on sentimentality. An ironic approach to the biographical enterprise or the bi-

ographical subject was rare, and even then, incomplete" (Anderson & Lupo 2002, 92). The genre itself seems resistant to aesthetic innovation, instead preferring the stale and standard format that is recognizable to audiences as a standard Hollywood biopic.

In part, this would explain Tarantino's decision to avoid the biopic format to tell the story of Tate. Tarantino is not a director prone to repeating formulas and making predictable and recognizable films that conform to audience expectations. The typical biopic, which tends to be a mediocre narrative tracing the rise, success, and pitfalls of notable white men in history, is not well-suited for Tarantino's cinematic styling. Biopics, especially celebrity biopics, have to strike a balance between drama and appealing to a particular fanbase. There is an inherent risk in a biopic of alienating the fanbase of a particular singer and actor, so often a truncated depiction is presented without any of the complexities and flaws that made them who they are as celebrities. The end effect tends to follow a predictable structure depicting their early rise to fame, a middle section which depicts marital troubles, squabbles with fellow band members or film crews, marital difficulties, and then either a tragic end or a redemptive story arc.

The other potential reason is supplied by Dennis Bingham in his essay "The Lives and Times of the Biopic," where he observes that "[t]he downward spiral is the basic narrative structure of the female biopic" (Bingham 2013, 238). The female biopic subject is far less explored in film than the male subject, as biopics tend to favor the great white male figure in history. Not only do male subjects outnumber female subjects by a significant margin—there is a discrepancy in the type of material presented. Biopics on male subjects depicts heroic deeds of notable white men with an eye towards re-

lating their importance to history. By contrast women are depicted as victims, with biopics focusing on their tragic circumstances and downfall far more readily than with male subjects.

Often with biopics, especially those dealing with celebrities rather than historical figures (actors, musicians, and so forth), the studio and the director are in the precarious position of having to sell the film to a fan base, so the risk is to not alienate the audience with a warts-and-all approach. More often than not, when biopics feature male celebrity figures they are presented in a more favorable light, often with a redemptive story arc to finish the film. The female as a subject of a biopic is more often than not a tragic victim caught in a downward spiral. So men become hagiographic subjects in a biopic while women are seemingly punished for approaching greatness. A biopic on Tate would necessarily have to focus on her status as a victim, likely with scenes depicting her troubled marriage to controversial film director Roman Polanski, and then end with her brutal and violent death at the hands of the Manson Family. The inevitable result would be to further victimize Tate, as well highlighting the mythology of Charles Manson even more. If *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* was filmed as a biopic, there would likely be scenes of gratuitous violence against Tate, further reinforcing the iconography of women-as-victims, as well scenes of domestic struggles with Polanski.

RE-IMAGINING THE ICON OF SHARON TATE

To this effect Quentin Tarantino is rewriting Tate's history in order to alter the narrative of Tate as a victim. The iconography of Tate as a murder victim has become so prevalent that it requires a revisionist approach to imagine Tate as a bright,

young actress with a career ahead. When reading biographies or documentaries this facet of Tate is silent. Tarantino is instead sacrificing fidelity to these past events to provide the viewer with an emotive capturing of Tate as an individual without adherence to the painful, and seemingly meaningless, circumstances of her demise. In an interview with *Sight & Sound* magazine, Tarantino outlined his intentions for *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*:

> I'm using the history of what happened and I'm using … *you* may have more knowledge, more than other people, others may have a lack of knowledge—but most people buying a ticket are going to know that Sharon Tate was killed. I had two reasons I could, without using a story, make a day-in-the-life. One, I thought that the three characters were compelling enough. The other thing, and this was the tricky part because some people could say it's in really bad taste, and I risked that—I don't think I made a movie in bad taste, but it's very much open to the observer—is the fact that because you know Sharon is going to get murdered, that adds drama to the piece that wouldn't be there without that knowledge. And it's interesting watching it with audiences because the movie has three acts. It's interesting how you watch it, because I think everyone watches it pretty easy in the first act—when we see Sharon at the airport, when we see Sharon at the Playboy Mansion, we're just enjoying her. We don't have this sense of dread, I don't think.

> But the next day is different. Once that day gets going, every scene with Sharon is getting closer to that murder. Almost like that ticking clock in *Dunkirk*. It's like a ticking tragedy. And the more we like her, the more that means something to us. And it adds weight to the piece. When I get to my ending, I have to earn it. The whole movie I have to earn that ending. (Morgan 2019, 20-21)

In essence, Tarantino wants to capture a version of Tate that is true to her character, but not necessarily true to the events of the past. For however long she is on screen, the viewer sees a happy, joyous version of Tate as a glimpse to what she would have been like if the tragic events of August 9, 1969, did not occur.

Tate was an emerging star in Hollywood who had left her home of Texas for dreams of acting stardom in California. After a few guest spots on a few shows, Tate did secure a recurring role on *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962–1971, appearing in fifteen episodes from 1963–1965). From there Tate would do a few more acting jobs before landing a part in Roman Polanski's *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967). This was the movie on which she would meet and then marry Polanski, in what can only be described as a tumultuous marriage. Tate would do a few more roles, such as *Valley of the Dolls* (1967) and *The Wrecking Crew* (1967), both referenced in *Once Upon A Time in … Hollywood*, before her unfortunate murder, and on the cup of stardom and perhaps roles that would benefit her position in Hollywood much more than the variations of the "blonde ditz" roles she usually performed in movies.

Because Tate's life was cut short by her senseless murder, audiences never got to enjoy the film career of a newly emerging actor. In the world of *Once Upon A Time in … Hollywood*, however, that scenario is given its full potential with Tarantino's alternate history of 1960s America. In this timeline Tate is not murdered, and as a consequence the whole industry is also dramatically altered. In this timeline does the burgeoning New Hollywood movement arrive in the same manner? Would Tate have been a part of the New Hollywood movement? Would she have divorced husband Roman Polanski if she had lived? How does Rick Dalton's presence in her life affect his career and the development of New Hollywood? These are all questions that resonate in the viewer's mind after the final frame of *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* has gone by. Tarantino's re-imagining of the Tate story brings with it considerations of genre and purpose. As has been established, the film not only dispenses with the notion of biopics, it also subversively comments on the limitations of the biopic formula. Tarantino's interpretation of Tate is, in part, a work of speculative fiction that not only rewrites history but uses that alternate history to project a potential career for Tate as an actress who might have gone on to greater success. A biopic would be required to end Tate's career at its historical end point, whereas Tarantino is subverting the expectations of the genre by giving the viewer the opportunity to imagine a prolonged and lengthy career for this fictionalized version of Tate.

Film has always had a contentious relationship with history in terms of categorization and representation. As Johnathan Stubbs observes in the book *Historical Film: A Critical Introduction*: "Any film that dramatizes or restages the past from the perspective of the present necessarily strikes a balance between fact and fiction, regardless of whether or not it pur-

ports to be depicting events that actually occurred" (Stubbs 2013, 17). Tarantino, then, is already facing an uphill struggle in his depiction of the past, as an abbreviated film cannot truly represent the past. Film editing, practical considerations like filming locations, set design, costuming, and so forth, also affect the historical veracity of the visual depiction of the past. In effect the nature of film means that essentially all film is an "alternate history" in that it embodies the director's contemporary interpretation of the past through his ideological lens, and even with great care and attention to detail, film can be nothing more than an approximation of past events.

In this way Tarantino's alternate history is no different than any other historical film. Robert A Rosenstone notes in his essay "The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in A Postliterate Age" that "[h]istorians tend to use written works of history to critique visual history as if that written history were itself solid and unproblematic" (Rosenstone 2001, 52). Just as historians edit and curate historical material when writing a book, Tarantino is editing and rewriting the past for a visual medium. Bias afflicts all historical material to an extent, Tarantino just takes it one step further by using an alternate history that illustrates his bias more clearly, primarily by adopting a distinct fairy tale aspect to his depiction of 1960s Los Angeles.

THE FAIRY TALE IMAGE OF SHARON TATE

Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood deals with the legacy of Tate by rewriting history in order for the actress to continue, at least in the imagination of the viewer, on with her career and her life. Real world intrusions, such as a likely inevitable divorce from the film director Polanski, are largely ignored so as to preserve the fairy tale aspect of the film. This fairy

tale aspect to the film is central to its approach to history, as Tarantino is using a plausible realism to convey the narrative of what-could-be in his alternative vision of 1960s Los Angeles. In essence Tarantino is refuting the idea that film has to be beholden to concepts of classical realism, especially in regard to social commentaries.

While Polanski is referenced in the film, Tarantino ignores the more problematic aspects of Tate and Polanski's marriage in order to better serve the fairy tale aspect of *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*. Polanski is a problematic figure who cheated on Tate with numerous women, and generally mistreated the woman in his life. Polanski once said, "I have a very firm theory about male and female intelligence. It causes an absolute outrage if you say that women on the average are less intelligent than men, but it happens to be true!" (Polanski quoted in King, 2000, 57). Polanski was notoriously chauvinistic, and later in life would become embroiled in sexual assault charges against underage girls. Polanski is a troubling figure in Hollywood history with a terrible history of abuse and sexual assaults, which is alluded to in *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*, but not directly referenced. The alternate history presented by Tarantino side steps these grim and bleak aspects of Tate's real-life story, instead focusing on the mood of the times and Tate as a figure in history to be celebrated, not discussed in such grim and horrific details.

A traditional biopic that unfolds in accordance with the conventions of the genre would necessarily have to depict scenes of domestic violence and infidelity in order to represent Tate's story. The formula of the biopic demands the middle section of a film depicts a struggle where the protagonist sees their lives begin to fall apart. Following Bingham's assertion about the troubled roles women occupy in biop-

ics, this would be especially problematic. The viewer would be witness to a film depicting a young and idealistic starlet, her rise to fame, and then in a truncated narrative would see scenes of marital difficulties and abuse by both her husband Polanski and corrupt studio executives who only want to exploit her, and then immediately followed by a brutal scene of her murder at the hands of the Manson Family cultists. The psychological effect of this would reinforce images of women as victims so prevalent in the biopic genre. *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* instead chooses to portray Tate's life through the veil of historical fantasy.

Reinforcing this idea of history as a fairy tale, the film fades out the score to the 1972 Western *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean*. *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* is a Western starring Paul Newman whose promotional tagline was "Maybe this isn't the way it was ... It's the way it should have been!" The intertextual reference alludes to Tarantino's desire to rewrite history that essentially allows the viewer to get a glimpse of Tate if she had not had her life tragically taken from her. The image of Tate is now so inextricably linked to the cultist leader Manson that it overshadows the public memory of her. *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* is a cinematic corrective to that history that aims to reclaim the image of Tate as young, happy, and optimistic about her future. For the nearly three hour run time viewers can imagine a world where it is possible Tate did have a long and illustrious movie career and was a mother. Cinema is, at its core, a fantastical medium where entirely different worlds can be imagined, so why cannot history be tweaked to show us a different path? Tarantino is taking advantage of cinema's capabilities by presenting this alternate version that nevertheless aims to show the viewer an honest portrayal of who Tate was as a person rather than defining her according to the horrific crimes that would take her life.

ROBBIE AND SCREEN TIME

Despite Tarantino's intentions, there has been significant criticism levied against *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* for its under-representation of Tate and how little screen time or dialogue she receives during the course of the film. This concern came up during a press conference, to which Tarantino bluntly responded "Well, I just reject your hypothesis" (Cannes 2019). Margot Robbie more tactfully answered by saying, "I think the tragedy ultimately was the loss of innocence and to really show those wonderful sides of her I think could be adequately done without speaking. I did like I got a lot of time to explore even without dialogue specifically" (Cannes 2019). Robbie's response does raise the question of whether representation can be effective without dialogue (or much of it anyways) and very little screen time.

Objectively speaking, in terms of screen time, Robbie only takes up approximately thirty minutes of the film's nearly three hour run time. Statistical analysis of screen time and word counts, however, do not inform us as to exactly how Tate is being represented in *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*. We have to look at the context to which she depicted, how her relationship to her male counterparts is played out in the film, what is the direction of the gaze, and even whether the film is intended to be her starring vehicle or is she a supporting character in the film? If it was anyone else other than Robbie being cast, would the viewer have the same expectations?

In part the issue of screen time could also be attributed to genre expectations. Having a known name like Robbie being cast in a role as a well-known public figure brings with it expectations that it will follow a traditional biopic structure. As a genre, biopics tend to follow conventional structure

with predictable and formulaic tropes. There is a rise-and-fall pattern to the narrative, with early scenes of overcoming adversity, the pressures of fame, and either a tragic end or a heroic end (in the case of celebrity biographies the heroic end usually culminates in the actor/musician achieving some form of resolution, often followed by text on the screen that valorizes the celebrity and their struggles), usually followed by an end credits scene where actual footage of the public figure's life is played over blurbs about what happened after the events, whether it is about people responding to their death, or perhaps a triumphant note about getting sober. George F. Custen, in *Bio/pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*, notes that this one of the problems with biopics as a genre—they "routinely integrate disparate historical episodes into a nearly monochromatic 'Hollywood view of history.' One way this integration occurs is through the construction of a highly conventionalized view of fame" (Custen 1992, 3). In part, biographies of famous lives get rewritten to accommodate the demands of the medium, but also to form a coherent narrative framework around the decades of an individual's life and disconnected episodes within life.

Tarantino subverts this by switching the storytelling mode from a rise-and-fall structure attempting to capture the entirety of Tate's life to an alternate history that details one inconsequential day of errands, a movie, and a party at night. In effect Tarantino is deconstructing the biopic as a genre and thereby deconstructing how the audience interprets history. As Custen observes, "In telling history through the individual life, Hollywood has had an enormous impact upon the viewer's conception of history" (Custen 1992, 12). The limited screen time affects the viewer's expectations of a traditional biopic structure and instead of using Tate's story to make some grandiose commentary on history or Hollywood, Tate

is relegated to a supporting role in her own "supposed" biopic, or, rather, what viewers assume will be her biopic.

In part the confusion can be attributed to the promotional material, which heavily featured Robbie, thereby raising expectations about the size of her role in the film. Using Robbie as a main selling point and placing her so prominently on the posters and trailers created expectations of a traditional biopic, which would necessarily feature Tate as the main narrative focal point of the film. Tate, who spends a significant portion of the film alone, thereby making dialogue unnecessary, is instead given a few scenes which highlight her happy and carefree nature instead of a dramatic rise to fame and then tragic death scenario that would constitute a traditional biopic's structure. Tate's sister Debra Tate expressed concerns over the initial project, fearing that it would be a more traditional biopic, complete with brutal, gory depictions of the death of Tate and her friends: "I had concerns over what it was going to be. Was he going to be true to the characters? Was he going to glorify the Manson Family members, as a lot of other film directors have done?" (Miller 2019). In response Tarantino met with Debra, showed her the script, and assured her that his portrayal was going to avoid the Tate-as-victim route so many other cinematic and television depictions have done before.

Because of Robbie's name and the infamy of the Tate-LaBianca murders, there is an expectation that she will feature prominently in the film and that this event will form the primary focus of the film. Tarantino is effectively subverting audience expectations to remind the audience of just how brief Tate's life was, as we are left with only a faded memory of her. Robbie, however, is not the main star of the film, and her brevity in the film signals that in an alternate world where Tate is not murdered, that this day in August would be anoth-

er inconsequential day among many others. The unfortunate events of August 9, 1969, have cemented Tate's image in the public's mind. The tragic circumstances of Tate's murder have become the centralized point in which the public knows and understands Tate as a well-known figure, eclipsing her film and television career. A biopic, then, would have led up to that day with sufficient drama and suspense that the audience would feel the tension building, whereas in the version Tarantino has filmed, August 9, 1969, is just another average day for Tate. The looseness and seemingly meandering nature of the film perfectly encapsulates the feeling of just another day, refusing to build up the suspense with a distinctive narrative arc.

In concordance with Robbie's limited screen time is also the visual depiction of Tate via her fashion and appearance. The criticism is that not only is Robbie denied a significant role in a film ostensibly about Tate's life (or at least that what many critics assumed), when Robbie does appear she has very little dialogue and is adorned in mini-skirts and various revealing outfits. However, the historical relevance of the mini-skirt and Tate's own fashion choices, how she chose to represent herself, also figure into the historicity of *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood.*

The 1960s, and the mini skirt, were a conflicting time in regard to fashion. The mini skirt, developed by British fashion designer Mary Quant, was in part a response to the stifling aesthetics of the 1950's pencil dress. With birth control coming into the picture there was now a recognition that women could, indeed, have sex for pleasure, and not just procreation. The housewife-mother archetype was unraveling at the seams, and fashion was changing to reflect the times. The dominant media image of the beautiful (but not overtly

seductive) housewife doing house chores in high heels and pearls was superseded by more overtly sexualized images of seductresses like Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor, who contradicted the media narrative that preferred pretty and thin, but not curvaceous and fleshy.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s and the rising popularity of rock 'n' roll and Hollywood created a paradoxical relationship between the mini skirt, sexual liberation, and the objectification of women in mass media. The mini skirt, of the type favored by Tate, was a response to the repressive norms of 1950s suburbia that disrupted conventional sexual mores of the submissive housewife, but its increasing popularity also signaled the emergence of the female celebrity as an object of desire.

Tate was certainly one of those women who would become an object of desire for male viewers. It was an expectation that weighed heavily on Tate. Tate would lament the direction of her career—an unfortunately brief career that spanned only five theatrical films and a number of television appearances—and how she was treated by film executives:

> They said they had a plan for me. They would train and prepare me. I was immediately put in training, like a racehorse. I had a job to stay the way I was. They told me, 'Cream your face, Sharon … Put on more eyeliner, Sharon, Stick out your boobs, Sharon." (Debra Tate 2014, 65)

Tate is clearly exasperated by the treatment of her as being a one-dimensional sexpot, a blonde ditz for the audience to enjoy, who does not have much to do in the film. Film producers only viewed Tate through a narrow perspective; a perspective

rooted in the sexist nature of the 1960's Hollywood film industry that disregarded women and their potential for more than just as housewives or sexpots for male gratification.

In evaluating the erotic impact of the female stars, notably Robbie as Tate, we have to discern between how much is a representation of the fashion of the times and how much is catered towards the gratification of the viewer. While undoubtedly some of Robbie's performance is coded for gratification, it is also indicative of how women, especially younger women, dressed in the sixties. Tate specifically did adorn herself in the latest fashions of the sixties, which were geared more towards sex appeal. The erotic impact, then, is a feature of the era as much as it is of the director's vision. Estella Tincknell, in her article "Tragic Blondes, Hollywood and the 'Radical Sixties' Myth: *Seberg* and *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* as Revisionist and Reparative Biopic," focuses on the party at the Playboy Mansion as the basis of her criticism. Tincknell argues that the presence of the Playboy Mansion in the film is problematic and that "by figuring the house as a recreational space for women as well as men, the film offers a dubious gloss on the Playboy ethos, grounded as it is in the objectification of women. The Mansion here is denuded of such problematic associations, becoming the locus merely for sexual playfulness" (Ticknell 2022, 7). In terms of its symbolic relevance in the film, the film does glamorize the Playboy ethos without commenting too much on Hugh Hefner's objectification of women. To do so, however, would shatter the illusion presented by *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*, just as depicting Polanski's infidelities and sexual assault of young girls would shatter the fairy tale aspect of the film.

At the party at the Playboy mansion Steve McQueen (Damien Lewis) tells Connie Stevens (Dreama Walker)

about the love triangle with Sharon Tate, Polanski, and Jay Sebring (Emile Hirsch): "Jay loves Sharon. That's what's up. And he knows, as sure as God made little green apples, that one of these days that Polish prick's gonna' fuck things up, and when he does, Jay's gonna' be there" (Tarantino 2019). There is acknowledgment in *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* of the marital difficulties and unpleasant characteristics of Polanski, however minimal and sparse, but not overtly enough so as to affect the storytelling and fairy tale aspect of the film. This scene in particular also reveals a fundamental flaw in Tate's story, namely that the viewer's information about Tate is given to us through the exposition of a male character, not by her own devices.

The consideration here is whether Tarantino's fairy tale lens exonerates Polanski and his difficulties. In terms of Polanski, he is a director with a complicated and problematic history of a history of sexually assaulting underage girls. After fleeing the United States to Paris to avoid a prison sentence, Polanski has remained a celebrated director—his 2002 film *The Pianist* won Academy Awards for Best Director and Best Picture—whose disturbing history has been glossed over by some figures in Hollywood. Whoopi Goldberg went on record as saying Polanski's sexual assault of a 13-year-old girl was not "rape-rape" (Kennedy 2009). Goldberg's distinction between levels of rape is demeaning and attempts to justify sexual assault. Tarantino himself once defended Polanski on the Howard Stern Show, having since expressed his deep regrets and has apologized for misspeaking (Desta 2018). It could be argued that Tarantino is reflecting on his past and uses the fairy tale aspect not to gloss over and ignore Polanski's troubled history, but to attempt to rectify his own past history by making Tate an aspirational figure.

In determining the possible eroticism of Robbie as Tate it is necessary to look at how she is being framed by the camera. For instance, when Robbie as Tate enters the Bruin to watch her movie, the camera lingers for a lengthy period of time on Robbie's posterior in a white miniskirt as she walks in to find her seat. In another scene, taking place after Tate partied at the Playboy Mansion, we see Robbie in a state of undress, covered only slightly by a bit of white linen. The camera follows the length of her body, from her feet (this is a Tarantino film, after all) to legs and back. With these depictions the question is raised about the functionality or symbolic importance of this scene. Is Tarantino affirming Tate as a sex symbol iconography that dominated her media coverage early in her career? Certainly the film could be interpreted as Tarantino replicating the patterns of the past, eroticizing the image of Tate in a similar fashion as the past. *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* is a complicated film that intends well, and generally succeeds, but it is not an unproblematic representation of the past and is not devoid of ethical or cinematic complications.

Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood succeeds because it is a diversion from the brutal facts of true history. What screen time the viewer does get with Robbie as Tate is instead a pleasant and leisurely paced series of mostly unremarkable events, with the notable exception of the party at the Playboy mansion where she dances with Michelle Philips (Rebecca Rittenhouse). In the Playboy party scene, most of the attention is on her as she is the only person in that scene who is bathed in a spotlight. Other than the off-handed comment by Steve McQueen the turmoil of her personal life is avoided. The viewer is supposed just to bathe in the wonder and beauty of Sharon Tate and not as a historical figure who tends to be overwhelmed by the iconography of her death,

but as a symbol of lightness and hope. Tarantino has said, "When Sharon's on screen we need to slow everything the fuck down. Just slow the whole damn thing down and just hang out with her" (Morgan 2019, 21). Tate is a symbol rather than a more fleshed out character in *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*, allowing the viewer to simply absorb the image of a happy Tate without much reference to her troubled marriage or tragic death.

SHARON TATE AND PUBLIC MEMORY

To the later point, there is also the idea that in real life the public barely got to know Tate before her untimely death at the hands of the Manson Family. Robbie's limited screen time could be attributed to the fact that Tate was murdered at age twenty-six, meaning that Tate exists only as a trace memory by those who lived in that era or as a brief moment in popular culture history. This ephemerality is made apparent in a scene which features Robbie's only significant amount of dialogue in *Once Upon A Time in … Hollywood*. As the scene plays out, we see Sharon Tate running errands, buying a first edition of a Thomas Hardy novel for her husband, and generally being leisurely with her time. Upon seeing a marquee with the film *The Wrecking Crew* (1968), a Matt Helm spy thriller starring Dean Martin, Tate then proceeds to ask if she can see the movie free of charge on the basis that she is in the actual movie itself:

> **Bruin box office girl:** You're in this?
>
> **Sharon Tate:** I play Mrs. Carlson. That's me [bobs head to indicate who she is on the movie poster)
>
> **Bruin box office girl:** But, that's the girl

from *Valley of the Dolls*.

Sharon Tate: Well, that's me. The girl from *Valley of the Dolls*.

Bruin box office girl: Really?

Sharon Tate: Really!

Bruin box office girl: Hey Ruben. Come out here. This is the girl from *Valley of the Dolls*.

Ruben (movie theater manager): Patty Duke?

Bruin box office girl: No, the other one.

Ruben: The girl from *Peyton Place*?

Bruin box office girl: No, the other one.

Sharon Tate: [interjecting] The one who ends up doing dirty movies.

Ruben: Oh.

Bruin box office girl: She's in this movie.

Sharon Tate: [introducing herself by her name] Sharon Tate. (Tarantino 2019)

At this point in her career Sharon Tate is a rising star with enough celebrity capital that people who watch movies might know who she is but was not immediately recognizable or a major figure in the industry. We are given a snapshot of Tate to reflect her potential and to provide a glimpse into the normality of Tate's existence before the historical iconog-

raphy of her death, or even as a major celebrity figure if her career had the opportunity to progress into larger stardom, consumed our interpretation of Sharon Tate. The next scene, which shows Robbie acting as Tate watch the real Tate on the screen further emphasizes that this is a fictionalized interpretation and a very brief glimpse of Tate, and also that the viewer, especially since most viewers will likely not be personally familiar with the socio-historical setting of 1960's Los Angeles, only knows a mediated version of Tate.

Tate watching her own movie at the Bruin contrasts the sweet, optimistic nature of Tate as a young actress when compared to the constantly stressed and neurotic Rick, who seems more concerned with celebrity status at this point. We, the viewer, also get to see the real Tate on screen, as Robbie watches a scene from the actual film *The Wrecking Crew*. Tarantino has said that one of the aspects he enjoyed about watching the film with an audience is when they laugh at the pratfall being performed by the real Tate via actual footage from *The Wrecking Crew*: "I love that Sharon's getting a laugh. The real Sharon Tate gets a laugh" (Tarantino quoted in Morgan, 2019). In effect we get to participate in the joy Tate must have felt by seeing the real person on screen in a contemporary film, reminding us of the symbol that she has become and what she represents in *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*.

The scene in the theater is important because it provides the viewer with a glimpse of Tate through her own eyes rather than as the object of a male gaze. This scene depicts Tate as a young and idealistic person who is hopeful about her career ahead, much in contrast to the actor Rick Dalton, who is depicted as a broken down, cynical, and depressed actor who is not aging gracefully. This contrast between the aging male star who expects to maintain his hierarchy in Hollywood and

the exuberance of Tate as someone who just enjoys the process of making films gives the viewer a sense of her as an individual with a strong sense of self and a clear direction about where she wants her career to proceed.

In this scene the viewer is supposed to just relish in the pure joy Tate has in watching herself on screen. When Tate looks back to see the other patrons it is not out of a narcissistic impulse, but the simple pleasure of knowing she is having an impact on other people through her movies. That we, as the viewers of Robbie as Tate watching the real Tate on screen, get to participate in that indulgence, resonates with the symbolism of *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* as an elegiac ode to the film industry and to Tate as an actor, not as a victim.

As with all of Tarantino's characters, Tate exists as a broad archetype in a stylized world. Tarantino's characters exist as broad archetypes that exist to provide unique dialogue that establishes the hyper-stylized reality in which Tarantino is operating in for each particular film. In this case Tate is a deliberately idealized version parting in an idealized Playboy Mansion grotto, intentionally representing an almost hagiographic interpretation of Tate in order to counterbalance the tragic history. Tate, then, represents the ideal, and Rick's walk up her driveway in the film's final frames is his ascension into the upper echelon of Hollywood, thereby finally achieving his dreams of being one of the inner circle of Hollywood. It is apparent that Rick's aversion to the counterculture movement and their influence on New Hollywood is largely one of jealousy and frustration.

CONCLUSION

The penultimate film in Quentin Tarantino's self-proposed ten film career, *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* is one of the

more intriguing entries in his filmography. *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* is a historical revisionist film—as his last four films have all been—that uses the backdrop of late 1960's Los Angeles to tell a story of Old Hollywood transitioning into New Hollywood. Using this framework Tarantino finds parallels to his own career, from his early days as an emerging young director in the independent scene of the 1990s, to becoming a vanguard of cinema with a three-decade career.

For his second-to-last film, Tarantino frames all this dialogue on the film industry through a reimagining of Sharon Tate's story. In Tarantino's hyper-stylized cinematic universe rules of objective realism were abandoned long ago, and *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* stretches this historical revisionism even further by erasing one of the most infamous crimes in the twentieth century. Tarantino wants us just to enjoy a cinematic reality where we can enjoy Tate's smile, enjoy just the inconsequential mundanity of her doing errands, watching her own movie, and other such activities, even if it is vicariously experienced through Margot Robbie's performance as Tate.

As for Robbie's screen time, there has been criticism regarding its brevity. Yet in part that could be attributed to the public perception of biopics, which often place a heavy emphasis on a rise-and-fall story arc. As such biopics feature the represented celebrity quite extensively, whereas Tate is a supporting character in *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood*. Instead, Tarantino resists the formulaic approach of most biopics, which would surely involve a recreation of Tate's gruesome murder (at least to some degree), thereby reinforcing the iconography of Tate-as-victim. Instead, Tarantino rewrites history so as to subvert this formula and present a brief glimpse into a day of Tate where her supporting role de-emphasizes the biopic nature of the film.

Tarantino is attempting to rectify the public image of Tate as just a victim of a crime, finding it necessary to remove the Tate-Labianca murders from history altogether. As a by-product, overt references to Tate's tumultuous marriage to Roman Polanski, her struggles as an actor dealing with stereotyping that wants to place her in sexpot or blonde ditz roles for the entirety of her career, are also not in the forefront of the film, as they would be in a standard biopic.

This aspect of *Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood* has brought up challenges by various writers and critics that Robbie is merely emblematic of the male gaze. Robbie's limited screen time, her apparel (regardless of how historically accurate her outfits might be), are sources of contention that Tarantino is doing a disservice to the memory of Tate and merely mimics the sexist nature of the industry still prevalent. To bring those other conflicts into the film, however, is beyond the scope of *Once Upon A Time In ... Hollywood* and would negatively affect Tate as a figure of joy, hope, and optimism that, at least in this allohistory, has very little connection to the Manson Family.

Robbie's brief screen time has an impact on the viewer. The film itself is primarily Rick Dalton's story, because in a world where the Manson Family did not kill Tate, it is just a day like any other and Tate would not feature so prominently. The viewer has cultural expectations that because it is Robbie and it is such a notorious crime that the film will necessarily focus on her, but that is not the case. We are here to watch Rick's journey unfold as he travels through the various environs of Hollywood, watching him go from desperation and frustration to finally being accepted into the inner circle of Hollywood.

Once Upon A Time in ... Hollywood plays with the interpretative nature of history and cinema's capacity to bend the rules

of reality to give the viewer an alternative version of the past where Tate did not die. In the standard biopic there would be an attempt to decipher the actions of Manson ordering his acolytes to kill innocent people so as to establish a narrative framework from which the movie would be focused on. Tarantino subverts this and the idea that these crimes can, in fact, be understood and deciphered by any logical or rational person, and instead uses cinema's propensity for fantasy and illusion that, at least for the nearly three hour run time, attempts to correct history rather than explain history. However little time Robbie is given on the screen, at least she is not the subject of an entire film that tries to recreate the brutal and tragic murder of Tate, as most biopic would indeed do.

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Dr. Manhattan's Penis: Traditions of Modesty and Morality in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*

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By G. Christopher Williams

ABSTRACT

Watchmen expresses its internal debate about the understanding of good and evil through its frequent vacillation between images of both costume and nudity. Ultimately, nudity in the comic comes to represent a transcendence of the conventional morality most often represented in superhero comic books. Moore's and Gibbons's story of the shedding of clothing declares the notion that a traditional knowledge of good and evil may be inconvenient when trying to build a utopia.

Keywords: Watchmen, nudity, morality, costumes, self-awareness, clothing, Dr. Manhattan

El pene del Dr. Manhattan: tradiciones de modestia y moralidad en *Watchmen* de Alan Moore y Dave Gibbons

RESUMEN

Watchmen expresa su debate interno sobre la comprensión del bien y del mal a través de su frecuente vacilación entre imágenes tanto de disfraces como de desnudez. En última instancia, la desnudez en el cómic llega a representar una trascendencia de la moralidad convencional representada con mayor frecuencia en los cómics de superhéroes. La historia de Moore y Gibbons sobre el despojo de la ropa declara la noción de que un conocimiento tra-

dicional del bien y del mal puede resultar inconveniente cuando se intenta construir una utopía.

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Palabras clave: Watchmen, desnudez, moralidad, disfraces, autoconciencia, vestimenta, Dr. Manhattan

曼哈顿博士的阴茎：阿兰·摩尔和戴夫·吉本斯联合打造的《守望者》中的谦虚和道德传统

摘要

《守望者》通过在服装图像和裸体图像之间的频繁摇摆来表达其对善恶理解的内部争论。最终，漫画中呈现的裸体代表了一种对超级英雄漫画书中最常见的传统道德的超越。摩尔和吉本斯关于脱衣的故事宣告了这样一个观念：在试图建立一个乌托邦时，传统的善恶知识可能会带来不便。

作者简介

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关键词：《守望者》，裸体，道德，戏服，自我意识，服装，曼哈顿博士

INTRODUCTION

It may not seem immediately obvious that someone who lacks modesty may be essentially understood by society as something inhuman. However, the idea that a human that feels no shame when naked lacks some basic component of humanity is one that may be deeply seated in Western culture. This notion that will be shown to be influenced by the earliest stories in the Judeo-Christian tradition seems like one that was considered on some level by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons when developing the personality, appearance, and presentation of the character of Dr. Manhattan in the comic book series *Watchmen,* especially given the nakedness of that character and what it reflects about his nature. Indeed, this display in the comic book seems to provoke a discomfort, unease, and sense of shame that Moore and Gibbons may have intended, and that Zack Snyder also may have intuited was necessary to associate with the character in his own cinematic version of the story of the *Watchmen*. In both cases, Dr. Manhattan's nudity tells us much about who he is and what he is meant to represent, something inhuman, alien, and amoral. In other words, Dr. Manhattan may represent something more like humankind before its fall and exile from Eden, a creature so lacking in shame that it no longer possesses the knowledge of good and evil, a new kind of "fall" from the experience of morality to an "innocent state" of amorality.

In this regard, while Snyder's film so often closely adapts Moore and Gibbons work, from near duplication of comic book panels in some scenes to adherence to much of the original dialogue from the series, it does fail to represent the process of Dr. Manhattan's unique fall because Snyder doesn't represent the character's change in dress and costume over the course of his history in the same way that

Moore and Gibbons do. This failure is especially apparent in the section of the film in which Snyder adapts the fourth issue of the *Watchmen*, "Watchmaker," which concerns the origin and early development of Dr. Manhattan. In that issue, Moore and Gibbons go to great lengths to visually represent Manhattan discarding his humanity and his sense of good and evil through his slow shedding of his costume over the course of his early career. If one pages through this issue, one notes a kind of slow strip tease performed by Manhattan as his new persona evolves. Such moments are important to *Watchmen* because, as a comic so steeped in the traditions of the superhero, it is concerned with conveying much by exploring masks, unmaskings, dressing, and undressing in the lives of many of its costumed adventurers, not just Dr. Manhattan. *Watchmen* is a book concerned with how its characters are seen, and, thus, explores what they cover up and what they lay bare about their own self-knowledge and their own perception of morality by donning a costume or by shedding it, or put another way, *Watchmen* expresses its internal debate about the human understanding of good and evil through its frequent vacillation between images and discussions of both costume and nudity. Ultimately, in Moore and Gibbon's work, nudity comes to represent a transcendence of traditional morality and a shedding of the conventional morality most often represented in superhero comic books. The Problem of the Penis in Mainstream Publications

Likewise, when directing the cinematic adaptation of this work, Zack Snyder seems also to have recognized the importance of what Moore and Gibbons intended to communicate through the presentation of a most often nude superhero throughout their comic book series. Indeed, Snyder does not hesitate to include Dr. Manhattan's penis in a cinematic subgenre not especially given to such graphic displays. Over the

years, the mainstream superhero comic and the stories that it has inspired in other media have so often been associated with juvenilia after all. When the comic book series *Watchmen* was released in 1986, for instance, most comics published by the big two publishers were still largely targeted towards children and certainly almost universally assumed by adults to be intended for that audience. Most of mainstream culture was not aware of the more adult comics produced in the independent and underground comic book movements. *Watchmen*, though, was a comic book that was sold as what was then referred to as a "direct sales only" title, a comic that could only be purchased at a comic book store, at a time when most, again, mainstream comics were purchased by children at grocery and convenience stores. Most of the public of the time would have been shocked to discover full frontal male nudity in a medium that they assumed was one intended only for children, and even most adult comic book readers were likely shocked to see the often particularly taboo image of a penis on their comic book page. After all, the era of the "Suggested for Mature Audiences" label would only be beginning in the mid to late 1980s. Moore's work on *Swamp Thing* (1984–1987) and *Watchmen* (1986–1987) along with Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) became some of the precursors to more challenging, more adult themed DC comics like Moore's own *The Killing Joke* (1988), Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* (1989-1993), and Grant Morrison's *Doom Patrol* (1989–1993).

In "'Footnotes to Miller and Moore': Monomyth and Transnationality in the 1986 Superhero Comics," Fred Francis notes the significance of Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Moore's *Watchmen* in particular in creating an environment in which specifically the superhero narrative could mature when he says, "The dominant opinion of the contemporary

American superhero narrative states that everything changed in 1986" (289). In this passage, Francis is describing other critics' assertions about the history of superhero comics like those made by Geoff Klock in *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, that postulate that following the publication of *The Dark Knight* and *Watchmen* that "the contemporary superhero narrative might be viewed as a series of footnotes to Miller and Moore" (3). However, this shifting perspective on what a superhero narrative could be still has not necessarily been made evident to the popular culture at large. It would remain true that to the movie going public it would still be clearly unexpected for a superhero movie to include images of the male sex organ—even to an audience in 2009—but especially to those only familiar with superhero fare like the *Batman*, *X-Men*, and *Spider-Man* movies of the late 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. For the most part, those individuals would still be unfamiliar with the idea of a mature comic book series, and this supposition seems to be borne out by the large number of almost embarrassed blogs and articles in the press and on the internet that were written at the time of the movie's release about the presence of Dr. Manhattan's penis in the film. The sense of shame and discomfort that Western culture has about nakedness in general and, perhaps, the display of a naked penis in particular seems reflected in the unease reflected in the words and jokes of these journalists and bloggers.[1]

TRADITIONS OF MODESTY IN WESTERN CULTURE

Some consideration of how nudity might or might not be connected to morality, especially in regard to shame and modesty, has been considered in a variety of anthropological studies. After having discussed some traditional Western cultural views on nudity and modesty in "The Deceit of Dress: Utopian Visions and the Arguments against Clothing," Rich-

ard Martin initially claims that "[f]ew now imagine modesty to have been the baleful first cause of clothing that some thought, given that all cultures possess forms of clothing yet differing senses of the self, body, and modesty" (81). However, he also notes that clothing clearly does not exist for exclusively practical purposes in human culture, like providing "a mandate" for dress because of the human need for warmth. After all, as he says, "clothing exists in societies without such a mandate; tropically warm civilizations nonetheless choose to dress themselves." Indeed, as Lars Allolio-Nacke points out in "Nudity and Clothing from the Perspective of Anthropological Studies," dressing oneself is significant enough to most humans that many anthropologists consider it to be one of the more important markers of human culture in general: "The philosophical antithesis of being naked is clothing. Most of the authors who write about nudity use this distinction with reference to nature and culture. The naked body is nature; when the body is dressed, it reflects culture. Clothing is a feature unique to humans, since only humans have culture" (35). Another feature that distinguishes humanity from most animals is the capability of possessing self-awareness, which also might be considered when attempting to understanding Allolio-Nacke's observations about anthropology's views on clothing and culture. However, it may also fly in the face of Martin's assertion that few current thinkers factor modesty into the reasoning for why humans put on clothes.

To understand the significance of self-awareness to the desire to clothe oneself, one should consider some of the prior reasoning surrounding the purposes of the cultural practice of wearing clothing. For instance, Allolio-Nacke suggests that there were five reasons that nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropologists traditionally gave to explain why humans insist on clothing themselves, all of which he says fall

within the categories of physical, social, moral, esthetic-social, and magic/apotropaic reasons. However, he then explains that currently "[t]he moral and sexual reasons are the preferred explanations for why humans made clothes," citing several contemporary anthropologists, like Hans Peter Duerr and Jean-Claude Bologne, who note that "shame belongs to the essence of human nature" and that "shame is linked to social status" (37). To feel shame requires self-awareness and is clearly linked to a sense of modesty when discussing a human's awareness of his or her own body. While different cultures have different senses of modesty surrounding the body, as Martin suggests, it is still highly unusual for a culture to not develop clothing that at least covers what that culture might consider sexually taboo areas of the body, especially the genitals. Allolio-Nacke notes the near universality of covering the primary sex organs and points out that a sense of modesty even extends to cultures that allow for exposure of the penis and the vagina: "There are [...] indigenous peoples who do not wear anything. They also feel ashamed, but they did not necessarily develop clothes to cover their genitals; rather, they developed social rules that prohibited looking directly at the genitals" (40). As noted earlier, this sense of shame about the body attested to by the aforementioned anthropologists is, of course, one that is embedded deeply in Western culture and the Judeo-Christian tradition in particular.

TRADITIONS OF MODESTY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO MORALITY IN WESTERN CULTURE

The expressions of this idea emerge in this tradition in the earliest chapters of the Bible following Adam and Eve's first act of disobedience towards God, the eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In fact, the first consequence of this action concerns nudity and the desire

to cover it: "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves" (Gen. 3:7). This moment, so crucial to describing this religious tradition's understanding of the nature of evil, sin, and disobedience, immediately connects the notion of morality itself to the body through the experience of shame. When Adam and Eve's eyes are opened to an understanding of good and evil, as the name of the tree makes explicit, they are not meant to merely understand the problem of disobedience rationally, but to feel it directly through their newly awakened self-awareness about their bodies. Thus, while hiding himself after his first sinful act when Adam responds to God's question, "Where are you?" (Gen 3:9), Adam makes it immediately clear how he understands his sense of shame about his actions through his own desire to hide his body from the eyes of God: "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid" (Gen 3:10). For whatever reason—be it as a result of being shaped within this cultural understanding of shame, disobedience, and the body or because "shame belongs to the essence of humanity"—to most Westerners, the idea of feeling discomfort about being naked is a familiar one. Indeed, the idea of being naked without shame, as Adam and Eve were before their exile from Eden, is an alien one, even an alienating one. Martin actually comments on this idea himself when he says, "The Old Testament associates nakedness with poverty, destitution, and exposure" (79). Thus, feeling a lack of concern for one's nakedness seems unnatural because of the idea of the impossibility of a human lacking any sense of modesty or shame at all. It also seems alien to humans to feel a lack of concern for the shame provoked by how others may view the body in such a vulnerable and even destitute state.

THESE TRADITIONS IN WATCHMEN THE COMIC BOOK

Moore and Gibbons introduce some of this discussion in the first issue of *Watchmen* with the introduction of Dr. Manhattan in the main portion of the issue itself and through the textual background feature that comes at the end of the issue, a supposed excerpt of the first few chapters of Hollis Mason's memoir about his time as the superhero Nite Owl that is entitled *Under the Hood.* Dr. Manhattan's introduction to the reader involves a scene concerning the vigilante Rorschach and Manhattan's girlfriend Laurie Juspeczyk, formerly the superhero known as the Silk Spectre. In the first panel in which Manhattan appears in the series, he is represented as a blue giant towering above the two normally sized humans (28). While his penis does not appear in this scene because of the angles that he is drawn from, he is completely nude, which is a fact that is not acknowledged in any way by the other two characters. Assumedly, both are familiar with Jon's frequent decision to remain undressed. The reader, though, likely may find Jon's casual indifference to talking with Rorschach and working in his laboratory while in a state of undress to suggest an inherent strangeness to Dr. Manhattan. Indeed, Jon's disinterest in the seemingly banal (to Manhattan's way of thinking) suggestions by Rorschach about a killer who may be hunting Jon and Laurie and who killed a former associate of theirs also reflects the alien and strangely insouciant nature of Dr. Manhattan. This insouciance about a matter that most humans might feel some concern for, this threat to himself and someone he loves as well as the death of a former colleague, seems bizarre and unnatural: "A live body and a dead body contain the same number of particles. Structurally there's no difference. Life and death are unquantifiable abstracts. Why should I be concerned?" (29). His casual ability to dismiss Rorschach by teleporting him

away mid-sentence further punctuates this point (30). Thus, through the accompanying image of the nude Dr. Manhattan alongside this discussion, Moore and Gibbons introduce us to his character's nudity as a signal of his detachment from the human condition.

By contrast to this introduction of the idea of a lack of modesty representing separation from the human condition, the chapters from Hollis Mason's *Under the Hood* that close this first issue also signal a concern that the book has for exploring a sense of self awareness of shame that is essential to recognizing the human condition. Moore accomplishes communicating this idea through a story that contains descriptions of images associated with lewd behavior and lewd and comical dress and undress. In the first chapter of *Under the Hood*, Mason explains that in order to get an "audience's sympathies on your side," that a writer needs to tell a sad and tragic story to preface his own tale. Mason does so by telling the story of the owner of an auto repair shop, Moe Vernon, who Mason's father worked for when Mason was a kid. Vernon was an opera fan, and one day as a practical joke when Mason and his father were in the shop, Vernon donned a pair of enormous false breasts and remained in his office to surprise whoever brought him the morning mail. While he waited, he listened to a recording of "Ride of the Valkyries." When Moe read the mail, though, he found a letter explaining that his wife was running off with one of his employees, Fred Motz. This revelation leads to the nub of the story, a moment of both comedy and tragedy as Vernon's lewd and silly outfit, a joke based on the shameful qualities of the naked body, seemingly inappropriately coexists with the tragic and melodramatic music surrounding Vernon's own actually tragic situation:

> Framed in the doorway with tears in his

eyes and the crumpled letter in his hand, Moe stood dramatically with all eyes turned towards him. He was still wearing the set of artificial breasts. Almost inaudible above the rising strains of Wagner swelling behind him, he spoke, with so much hurt and outrage and offended dignity fighting for possession of his voice that the end result was almost toneless.

"Fred Motz has had carnal knowledge of my wife Beatrice for the past two years."

And everybody started laughing. (37)

In this moment, the sorrow of the pain that a man can feel when tragedy befalls him is paralleled with the "evil" of the self-knowledge signaled by an awareness of the shamefulness of the body. The men's laughter at the humanity and banality of Vernon's appearance and situation leads to an acknowledgment of the human condition, to know and to understand evil and to have to feel the tragedy of its effects. Indeed, Mason's final conclusion to the story leads to a sense of self knowledge about his own relationship to good and evil: "And although I've never worn a set of false bosoms in my life, I've stood there dressed in something just as strange with tears in my eyes while people died laughing" (38). Here Moore ties dressing up in a costume to the awareness of the horrors of evil and the silliness and shamefulness of the human condition, a condition that requires covering up with silly attire or laughter the very real pain of suffering that results from the evils of the world. It is as if Moore suggests through Mason's memoir that once Mason becomes aware of evil in the world (as he does through his occupation as a policeman prior to his career as a superhero), his desire to quell it comes with

the initial reaction to hide himself, to hide his own identity behind a costume and a mask.

By contrast, by the time of the *Watchmen*'s present story line, which is, of course, set in the 1980s, Jon has given up clothing altogether alongside his sense of the value of human beings themselves. These ideas are represented in a panel in the third issue that depicts Jon sitting on a bed in his room holding and looking at one of Laurie's bras in an almost uncomprehending way. This image of Jon's stupefaction is accompanied by an observation from Laurie, who is speaking to Dan Dreiberg about Jon's mental state: "[Y]ou don't know what it's like ... the way he looks at things, like he can't remember what they are and doesn't particularly care ..." (85). She follows this statement by drawing a conclusion about what this state of mind means about his lack of connection to the reality of other human beings, to himself, and, perhaps also, how those things imply his lack of understanding of the value of humanity, since people don't seem "real" to him. As Laurie says: "This world, the real world, to him it's like walking through mist, and all the people are like shadows ..." It is ironic that it is a bra, which in Western culture partially serves as an instrument of modesty, that Jon fails to seem able to comprehend the purpose of, which then signals this idea of his lack of understanding of people visually. Also, appropriately, this discussion that once again confronts the idea of a lack of awareness of the importance of the meaning of human life is accompanied by a series of panels that depict Jon himself getting dressed. Laurie and Dan's conversation coincides with this sequence, running parallel with it and further comments on the nature of wearing the appropriate clothing under the correct circumstances. Laurie, for example, apologizes for possibly ruining Dan's evening by barging in on him, saying, "Dan, I'm sorry. I've turned up in hysterics when you were

probably about to dress for going out." Dan responds to this apologetic statement by explaining, "Listen, I just wish you'd drop in more often. As for tonight, I'm calling on Hollis ... and he doesn't care how people dress." This final statement "and he doesn't care how people dress," specifically appears in a panel in which Jon dresses, buttoning up his pants while telekinetically lifting his other clothing, shirt, vest, suit coat, and socks, up in the air around him as he goes through the motion of putting on clothes. Obviously, there is an intended irony in the juxtaposition of this phrase with this image, since Jon, like Hollis (although for different reasons) also "doesn't care how people dress." Jon wouldn't be dressing at all at this moment except that he will be giving an interview on television, and as Laurie observes in an earlier issue when Jon is attending the funeral of the Comedian that despite his indifference towards clothing that for the sake of others' sense of propriety being dressed is a state that he endures in such moments: "Jon had to go. Protocol. They made him put clothes on and everything" (43). In other words, Jon is just hanging on to his humanity, quite literally by a thread. Going through the motion of putting on his "threads" is the only indication that he may be concerning himself with human culture and the reasons that it exists in this context, to reduce the embarrassment and shame of nakedness. At that, this concern still only exists because they "made him," though. However, as Yen-Lian Liu notes in "The Masculine Masquerade of Superheroes in *Watchmen*," "Dr. Manhattan's supernatural power [...] renders him visibly distinct from all the other men, and, unlike Superman, he does not need any costume to demonstrate that" (60). However, as Liu further acknowledges, Manhattan's eventual embrace of full nudity indicates that this "distinction also hinders him from building proper relationships with other human beings." Once again, it becomes

clear that Manhattan's relationship to clothing represents his relationship to human culture and community.

Again, this idea makes sense when looking at the history of Jon's growing detachment from humanity as represented by Moore and Gibbons decision to present that history in parallel to Jon's discarding of his clothing and costume. Indeed, perhaps the most telling scene about Jon's loss of a sense of morality as it relates to the value of human life features Jon at least a decade after the accident that turned him into Dr. Manhattan. This scene occurs at the end of the Vietnam war, a war that has been won by the United States because of the deployment of superheroes like the Comedian, aka Edward Blake, but more especially because of the deployment of Dr. Manhattan to aid in that victory. Standing in a bar, the Comedian and Dr. Manhattan look on as the South Vietnamese celebrate their victory on what Jon refers to as "V.V.N. Night," or Victory in Vietnam Day (55). As noted, this is a moment that occurs much later in Dr. Manhattan's career as a superhero. He wears only a small black piece of clothing that covers his genitals in this scene, his "uniform" for the entirety of his time fighting in this conflict. As Blake drinks and Jon ponders the amount of carnage and suffering that occurred as a result of the war, a pregnant woman enters the bar and confronts the Comedian about her pregnancy, a pregnancy for which he is responsible. Blake blows the woman off, intimating that he is leaving soon and doesn't care what state she is in. The woman then attacks him with a broken bottle, scarring him badly and leading to him drawing his gun on her as blood streams down his face. When he does, Manhattan protests, "Blake, don't ..." (56). However, the panel on the next page that follows this directive depicts a fairly passive Dr. Manhattan who only manages to weakly raise a hand in protest as Blake fires. Manhattan then completes his sentence "... do it" (57). This

image of Dr. Manhattan barely putting an effort in to try to stop Blake might seem to contradict Jon's appearance a couple of panels later in which the most often inexpressive Manhattan actually looks angry as he complains to his colleague, "Blake, she was pregnant. You gunned her down" (57). However, as his brief outerwear and lack of modesty in wearing it in public suggest, Manhattan's own self-awareness and his own sense of how little he truly cares about the Comedian's actions here is minimal at best, as Blake himself explains:

> Yeah. Yeah. That's right. Pregnant Woman. Gunned her down. Bang. And you know what?
>
> You watched me.
>
> You coulda changed the gun into steam or the bullets into mercury or the bottle into snowflakes! You coulda teleported either of us to Goddamn Australia ... but you didn't lift a finger!
>
> You don't really care about human beings, I've watched you.
>
> […]
>
> You're driftin' outta touch, Doc.

Once again, Jon's near nudity signals an apathy towards humans for whom, "a live body and a dead body contain the same number of particles" because it signals a lack of awareness of good and evil themselves due to his Adamic ignorance of these concepts in his present form.

Moore and Gibbons continue to contrast Manhattan's strange indifference to his body with Mason's autobiographi-

cal *Under the Hood* feature at the end of the first few issues of the *Watchmen,* in which Mason displays a different sensibility about self-awareness and modesty than Manhattan's. In the third part of *Under the Hood*, Mason begins his discussion of his first years fighting crime as Nite Owl through a description of his own self-awareness about his appearance: "From the moment that I decided somewhere deep inside myself that I wanted to try my hand at being a costumed adventurer, to the moment I first stepped out into the night with a mask on my face and the wind on my bare legs, took about three months. Three months of self-doubt and self-ridicule" (71). In an era in which adult men did not wear shorts in public, the late 1930s and 1940s—little boys might, but not an adult man—Mason is clearly aware that wearing what would essentially be assumed to be athletic wear or swimming attire in public makes him a ridiculous figure. However, so too does the idea of fighting crime in such an unorthodox manner. The unitard that bares Mason's legs to the night air and that Mason wears as Nite Owl resembles something like the costume worn by Robin the Boy Wonder in the 1940s *Batman* comics, a costume whose bottom is so often described as looking more like underwear than outerwear. No wonder Mason feels "self-doubt" in such immodest clothing. He further acknowledges the unusual qualities of baring oneself to the world, saying, "Dressing up in a costume takes a very extreme personality" (73). Basically, he seems to note here that being so outwardly outlandish requires an abnormal perspective on the world in general. As Fredrich Welzein notes about super heroic costuming in "Masque-*ulinities*: Changing Dress as a Display of Masculinity in the Superhero Genre": "The changing of clothes signifies a step outside the realms of normality" (245). In Matthew Joseph Wolf-Meyer's "Batman and Robin in the Nude, or Class and Its Exceptions," Wolf-Meyer similarly notes that "The costume, as a mark of difference,

separates the wearer from the culture at large" (192). However, some of the conventions of polite society would be transformed during the latter part of Mason's career, causing heretofore "abnormal" attitudes to become more common in American culture. Along with such change, though, came the arrival on the scene of Dr. Manhattan himself and an even stranger, more remote perspective on shame about the body. Note, for example, that Mason describes Manhattan's emergence as a superhero alongside changes in the culture concerning clothing: "The '60s, along with the mini-skirt and the Beatles, brought one thing to the world that was significant above all others—its name was Dr. Manhattan" (107). The mini skirt obviously showed the culture's changing attitudes about modesty and shame, an appropriate cultural parallel to a being who would magnify this attitudinal shift much more so and in a much stranger and, perhaps, even inhuman way.

DIFFERENCES IN THE PRESENTATION OF THESE TRADITIONS IN THE COMIC AND THE FILM

However, Moore and Gibbons don't treat this shift in attitude by the culture at large in a sudden or superficial way when describing the psychological development of Dr. Manhattan. As mentioned earlier, the fourth issue of the comic tells the history of how the man, Jon Osterman, would be transformed into the being known as Dr. Manhattan. This history is presented differently in terms of Manhattan's relationship to clothing in that issue than it is in Zack Snyder's cinematic vision of that portion of the story. In that issue of *Watchmen*, following the accident that disintegrates Osterman, portions of Osterman's body, first his brain and ganglia, then his circulatory system, and then his muscled skeleton begin appearing around the Gila Flats military base where he worked as a research scientist (119). These same scenes and the one that

follows it, when the completely reconstituted naked body of Dr. Manhattan reappears levitating in the base's cafeteria, all appear in Snyder's film as well (120). However, in the comic when Moore and Gibbons depict the taping of a television news feature that the government plans on using to introduce Dr. Manhattan to the public, Jon appears dressed in a plain, dark purple costume that basically covers him from head to toe. The outfit includes long sleeves, a belt, boots, and a helmet. The helmet is decorated with stripes and the interlocked oval-like shapes of the symbol commonly associated with the atomic structure. The cameraman asks, "How do you like your new costume? Pretty slick, huh?" to which Jon responds "I don't like it—especially this helmet. What's this symbol for?" (122). In other words, while the government is already attempting to get Jon into an appropriate costume for the public, Jon is already beginning to not see the purpose in defining his identity through his outward appearance in any way that is culturally familiar or acceptable to others. Indeed, he immediately discards that part of the costume, the helmet, before drawing a symbol of his own on his head. He burns a circle onto his forehead with a large dot at the circle's apex and another large dot at its center, saying "If I'm to have a symbol, it shall be one I respect." A scene somewhat like this one appears in the film. However, John appears wearing no shirt in this scene (and presumably only the black underwear-looking garment that he also wears in every one of the rest of similar scenes that represent his past in Snyder's film). In other words, Moore and Gibbons show us how Manhattan's shedding of outward culturally recognizable symbols and outward signs of propriety are part of a process in this being's history, not a sudden occurrence as Snyder's version of the story visually indicates. This indicates an evolution of Manhattan's indifference to humanity, not a sudden shift

away from his culture and community. This process takes time and the scenes in the comic show this idea more clearly.

A number of scenes that feature Manhattan at different points in his career during the 1960s in the comic are duplicated in the film, but the difference between these scenes drawn by Gibbons or filmed by Snyder are largely notable for the difference in what Manhattan wears. Two scenes in the comic book in which Manhattan appears at home with his girlfriend at that time, Janey Slater, show Manhattan in an undershirt and slacks (121) and then in a robe (123). However, also in the comic, Manhattan appears in other scenes in which he is in public, attending a charity event and fighting a group of mafiosos at a restaurant, in the full purple costume (sans helmet) from earlier (124). He also wears what appears to be a three-piece suit while shaking the president's hand in a later panel. In all of these scenes in the movie, Manhattan only wears his black undergarment, as if he has suddenly emerged as a superhero with his lack of shame and concern for others already on full display, his alien nature separating him from humanity already apparent to himself and to others. In the comic, though, these scenes initially suggest a fairly normal and human approach to clothing. He wears full dress in public situations and adopts a more comfortable slightly undressed state when in an intimate setting. However, it is telling that his first appearance with Janey is in pants and an undershirt, but that the next such scene of Manhattan in such a private setting already shows Jon in a greater state of undress, wearing the robe only. He is already progressing towards an indifference to the amount of clothing he wears. He exhibits this tendency first with someone who will be less offended by such less than modest displays, a girlfriend. However, his lack of concern for making people comfortable that are less familiar to him than a lover will grow over the course of the comic book's pages.

In fact, the next two sequences in issue four that move Jon's history forward in time continue to feature his steady discarding of portions of his uniform. When Jon appears in 1964 at the failed first meeting of the newest generation of crime fighters, he wears a black costume that consists only of a unitard, the top of which has a deep V-shaped neckline and no sleeves, the bottom of which bares his legs entirely, like underwear briefs. This costume very much resembles the one that Nite Owl was embarrassed by when his career as a crime fighter was in its infancy. Manhattan exhibits no sense of shame, though. Additionally, he wears no shoes indoors, a particularly striking no-no in Western culture generally, especially in an organized meeting of the sort that he is participating in in this scene. By contrast, in the film and in this same scene, Snyder once again represents Manhattan only wearing his black undergarment. However, Dr. Manhattan's thoughts in this scene in the comic clearly reveal that Moore and Gibbons are interested in demonstrating Manhattan's changing attitudes about the conventionality of dress in human culture through a more gradual process, since he thinks to himself: "It's 1962. I'm informing the Pentagon that I'll no longer be wearing the whole of my costume" (127). Indeed, the comment that follows this one in the same panel suggests his own sense of how his attitudes differ from the people around him, specifically from his peers, other superheroes who always hide themselves fully: "It's 1966. I'm in a room of people wearing disguises." In the middle of the 1960s, Moore and Gibbons clearly seem to indicate that Dr. Manhattan was less concerned with how others see him, discarding seemingly necessary portions of his clothing according to the rules of propriety of the time period (once again, bare legs, an undershirt, and no shoes would still remain extremely unorthodox for an adult male in public in the America of the mid 1960s)

while his fellow heroes hide their appearances in what Manhattan describes not as costumes, but as "disguises."

Dr. Manhattan emerges almost fully undisguised in Moore's and Gibbons's work as Manhattan's origin story moves ahead in time to his experiences in Vietnam. Like Snyder's common depiction of Manhattan throughout his own version of this origin story, Dr. Manhattan appears only in his black undergarment in this scene in the comic. Unlike Snyder's version, though, this is the first time in this part of the story of *Watchmen* in which Jon appears this way, as if Jon's newest choice of attire is related to his actions in the Vietnam conflict. Indeed, the first panel in which Manhattan appears in this fourth issue, he is once again presented to the viewer as a gigantic figure towering far above the enemy soldiers who flee from him and even the friendly helicopters that fly near him, towering just as he did in the first panel introducing him in the comic book series. Once again, such a contrast in stature suggests a distance between himself and humanity in both cases. Additionally, he appears to be simply pointing a finger in this panel and causing an explosion of some magnitude to erupt on the ground before him. In short, he looks anything but human in his enlarged form and in his state of near nudity. That Jon appears godlike at this moment generates an almost holy aspect to Dr. Manhattan, differentiating him from both these "puny humans" and the human condition itself.

As the theologian R. C. Sproul points out in a lecture given on "The Meaning of Holiness," "the primary meaning of the word [holy] is 'separate,' or, if you will, theological apartheid. That which is holy is that which is *other*—that which is different from something else" [emphasis added]. Jon explains the response that his enemies have to him in terms of the kind of holy terror that his appearance and powers evoke in them:

"Often, they ask to surrender themselves personally to me, their terror of me balanced by an almost religious awe. I am reminded of how the Japanese were reported to have viewed the atomic bomb, after Hiroshima" (130). In other words, Jon in his full power and exhibiting complete indifference towards human concerns does not appear like a human soldier, but instead not only as a potential god, but as a force of nature. After all, a force itself is innocent of concerns about good and evil. A tsunami destroys a coastal city. An atomic bomb disintegrates stone and flesh. Neither one concern themselves with the moral quality or consequences of their actions in the world. As noted earlier, nudity is a symbol for the idea of being morally ignorant in the Judeo-Christian tradition, as the story of Adam and Eve attests to. In fact, these musings by Jon about the responses of the soldiers to his power are immediately followed by a memory of the moment in which the Comedian murdered the mother of his child while Manhattan stood by: "It's June, V.V. N. Night, and the Comedian is sliding a gun from its holster, blood streaming from his lacerated face." This significant moment of Jon's own recognition of his lack of moral concern for human life once again is being punctuated by the revelation of Jon's final decision to wear next to nothing anymore when serving in his role as a superhero. His nudity and his lack of a personal sense of morality are most clearly wed in this moment when he emerges as something alien and inhuman, a force in the universe, rather than someone capable of judging his own actions. Ironically, at this moment he has regained the innocence of Eden.

CONCLUSION

In the end, *Watchmen*, a story told within the tradition of the superhero genre, a genre that is, of course, often seen as a moralistic one, ends with its characters, the colorful, seem-

ingly hyper-moralistic figures of comic book fiction, seemingly siding with the amoral pragmatism of Ozymandias and in doing so, perhaps, instead with the amoral ignorance of Dr. Manhattan. When confronted with the knowledge that Adrian Veidt, formerly the hero known as Ozymandias, has set the groundwork for world peace by murdering millions, Nite Owl, Silk Spectre, and Dr. Manhattan agree to compromise by covering up Veidt's "evil" doings in order to preserve that potential for peace. Only Rorschach, by refusing to go along with that cover up, exhibits a commitment to a more traditional sense of a moral order, as Nite Owl's and Rorschach's final words to each other attest to:

> Nite Owl: "Rorschach, wait! Where are you going? This is too big to be hard assed about! We have to compromise ..."

> Rorschach: "No. Not even in the face of Armageddon. Never compromise." (402)

Rorschach desires to preserve a moral order because he, unlike Jon, exists in the very human state of being aware of his own fragility and vulnerability in the universe, which in turn contributes to his sense of knowing what is right and what is terribly wrong. He feels that a positive practical outcome to the situation must be considered morally outrageous because he is committed to the notion of a set of rules and an order that exist outside of material reality, rules that need to be preserved because they serve as markers for and a way of understanding the human condition. Veidt, however, suggests a compromising attitude towards human action and its relation to morality: "I know I've struggled across the backs of murdered innocents to save humanity ... but someone had to take the weight of that necessary crime" (409). He follows this statement by appealing to Manhattan's very different

way of seeing the world from his fellows: "I'd hoped you'd understand, unlike Rorschach ..." To which Jon responds by describing his own state of being now, separate and aloof from being human: "[Y]es, I understand, without condoning or condemning. Human affairs cannot be my concern." This statement, of course, clearly acknowledges his disconnection from human values defined by a moral system that he no longer feels a concern for.

David A. Pizarro and Roy Baumeister observe in "Superhero Comics as Moral Pornography" that "the [...] superhero comic is a form of 'moral pornography'—built to satisfy our moralistic urges" (20) because "[i]n tales of superhero versus supervillain, moral good and moral bad are always the actions of easily identifiable moral agents with unambiguous intentions and actions" (19-20). Thus, in this moment, *Watchmen* becomes fully divorced from the moralistic conventions of the superhero story, conventions adopted originally seemingly for the sake of the majority of its traditional audience, the "morally innocent": children themselves. In their past Marvel and DC Comics had largely presented, described, and imbued in that audience an understanding of the knowledge of good and evil in broad, clear strokes tied to a clear sense of conscience. However, by divorcing the decision making of their universe's heroes from the sense of shame that within the Western tradition of morality is so deeply connected to such a notion of conscience, Moore and Gibbons present a more pragmatic, more utilitarian, and more sociological understanding of morality and how to improve society. The emblem of modesty and the civilizing elements of clothing exist to hide shame, and overdressed superheroes with their emblems and other trappings of moral messaging evaporate in this new context of the superhero story. Ozymandias and Manhattan have taken on a notion of a morality tied to a ra-

tionalistic concern for the greater good that has moved away from the intuited understanding of morality through the framework of personal guilt and shame. Thus, Moore's and Gibbons's story of the shedding of clothing (and, as a result, the shedding of the knowledge of morality) declares the notion that a knowledge of good and evil may be inconvenient when trying to rebuild Utopia from the remains of a broken world. In Eden, there are no villains and there are no heroes.

NOTES

1 For examples of the "unease" felt by journalists in 2009 about Dr. Manhattan's penis, one need look no further than articles like Alan B. Orange's "*Watchmen*'s Zack Snyder Reveals the Truth about Dr. Manhattan's Enormous Manpower!" in which the author which says, "Today, during a first look sneak peak at footage from the film, Manhattan's origins were presented in full, and one amazing fact can't be over looked. The big blue guy is hung in illuminated lengths of greatness. Let's just say that Tommy Lee and John Holmes combined couldn't challenge this guy to a saber duel." Similarly in "Superjunk: *Watchmen* Goes Full Frontal," Ben Walters declares that "[g]ay guys who geek out for superheroes are about to get an eyeful." Finally, on a web site called *The Beat: The Blog of Comics Culture*, Heidi McDonald's article "Breaking News: Movie Dr. Manhattan Hung Like a Horse," is actually accompanied by an image of a large blue condom.

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Watchmen, directed by Zack Snyder, Warner Brothers, 2009.

Is Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* Fascist? Resolving the Paradoxes of Heroic Violence

By Carlos Tkacz

ABSTRACT

The Dark Knight Returns traces the polarizing paradoxes seen between the political left and right in the United States—the right at once advocating for distributed networks of self-defense in widespread firearm availability and keeping the "thin blue line" of state power intact while the left simultaneously rejects both personal defense and policing as viable forms of mediation from bad actors—and then reimagines Batman as a metaphor by which these paradoxes are resolved.

Keywords: superhero; comics; Batman; political violence; fascism; Frank Miller

¿Es fascista *El regreso del caballero oscuro* de Frank Miller? Resolviendo las paradojas de la violencia heroica

RESUMEN

The Dark Knight Returns rastrea las paradojas polarizadoras observadas entre la izquierda y la derecha política en los Estados Unidos: la derecha al mismo tiempo aboga por redes distribuidas de autodefensa con disponibilidad generalizada de armas de fuego y mantiene intacta la "delgada línea azul" del poder estatal mientras el La izquierda rechaza simultáneamente tanto la defensa personal como la vigilancia policial como formas viables de mediación de los malos actores, y luego reimagina a Batman como una metáfora mediante la cual se resuelven estas paradojas.

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Palabras clave: superhéroe; historietas; Batman; violencia política; fascismo; Frank Miller

弗兰克·米勒的《黑暗骑士归来》是法西斯主义吗？解决英雄暴力悖论

摘要

《黑暗骑士归来》追溯了美国政治左右翼之间的极化悖论——右翼一方面倡导在广泛的枪支供应中建立分布式自卫网络，另一方面保持国家权力的"细蓝线"完好无损，而左翼同时拒绝将个人防卫和治安视为与坏人进行调解的可行形式——然后将蝙蝠侠重新想象为一种解决这些悖论的隐喻。

Carlos Tkacz取得了加州州立大学贝克斯菲尔德分校的文学硕士学位，目前是内华达大学拉斯维加斯分校的博士生，他的博士研究聚焦于在全球英语情境下透过生态批判视角研究推理小说和流行文化。他的研究兴趣包括美洲原住民文学、科幻小说、暴力表现、以及叙事理论。

关键词：超级英雄，漫画，蝙蝠侠，政治暴力，法西斯主义，弗兰克·米勒

INTRODUCTION

Alan Moore, acclaimed comic book writer and author of pop culture classics like *The Watchmen* (1986–87) and *V for Vendetta* (1982), famously told *The Guardian* in 2022 that a love of superhero comics can be "a precursor to fascism." In particular, Moore traces in superhero fandom an "urge towards simpler times, towards simpler realities," and he mentions Batman specifically in his assessment. Damien Walter, also in *The Guardian* but in 2016, an important year for the rise of fascism in the United States, offers a similar view, focusing here on Frank Miller's 1986 *The Dark Knight Returns*; Miller, Walter contends, made "Batman a fascist" who "dish[es] out violent retribution as he sees fit." Miller's "fascist imagination" is, according to this reading, comparable to "Donald Trump's bid for presidency," which "relie[d] on the same heroic myth" that Batman operates in. This reasoning engages in a long tradition of criticism against superhero comics, and other critics elsewhere have adequately outlined the problems with these criticisms and defended the genre thus. Indeed, comics scholars have traced elements of fascist ideology in the earliest manifestations of superhero comics. Chris Gavaler, in his discipline-defining book *Superhero Comics* (2017), points out that critiques of superhero comics have traditionally tied the genre to fascism through its emphasis on violence and individual vigilantism (103).[1]

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1 Nicole Deveranne points towards an "analytical tradition" that connects "the superhero comic [with] the darkness at the heart of much nationalist sentiment," in turn "underpinned with Fascist ideology" (49). Devaranne singles out Gershon Legman and Fredric Wertham as beginning this tradition, which lasted through the 90s and has continued into the 21st century. These works, and others, claim that the "fascist origins" of superhero comics "remain embedded in the genre and continue to influence the hero type" (Gavaler 106). Fascist ideology, which manifests itself in contemporary superheroes through "violent, nationalistic, anti-democratic, totalitarian heroism" (Gavaler 103), has become the "one

However, it should be noted that superheroes were "conceived during the threat of fascism, reached their highest popularity with the expansion of fascist-fighting war, and began to wane not at the close of that war, but at the earliest signs of a still distant victory" (Gavaler 102). The genre's close ties to the historical growth and subsequent fall of fascism is a double-edged sword; while it closely ties the genre's character formulas to fascism and allows for the comparison of superhero methods to those of fascist institutions—namely violence, nationalism, and authoritarianism—it also makes clear that the genre was conceived in response to the rise of fascism, in tension with the political problems fascism brings. The fact that superhero comics came to popularity during World War II (Gavaler 103) indicates a more complicated relationship at work, especially in relation to the use of violence, in the genre. As Nicole Devarenne observes, "While the American superhero genre is compatible with nationalist ideology in some respects, its vernacular linguistic format, restrained and regulated, both complies with this ideology and represents the potential for its subversion" (52). Important to this possibility is the concept of crisis, for if superhero comics were developed in response to a crisis, their continued relevance

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of the formula's constants" as "it is always the fist clenched inside the glove" (Gavaler 96). This results, according to critics, in a "romanticized authoritarianism" that remains "a crucial element of the superhero formula" and that reveals "a nostalgia that seeks the fantasy of moral certitude once embraced by democratic society besieged by fascism" (Gavaler 124). *The Virginian*, a western vigilante and frontiersman published in 1902 by Owen Wiser, is credited as one of the first of these "hybrid heroes" and takes on the "godlike role of moral arbiter" that operates in the "western formula" that "both fears and romanticizes border-crossing" and "express[es] the same colonial anxiety that fueled eugenics" (Gavaler 59-60). Gavaler observes that this formulation of vigilantism, which works to "defeat the animal-like degenerate," has been explicitly connected to Batman, who (here, Gavaler quotes Andreas Reichstein) "blurs 'the line between man and beast'" (60).

is tied to the solidifying of crisis as a primary mode of political rhetoric and economic opportunity in the 21st century.[2] This history of shifting and continued relevance undercuts the narrative that superheroes are to blame for the resurgence of fascism in American politics in the 21st century. Rather, superhero comics, with their stunningly successful and continuing transition into film, remain important cultural artifacts that reveal much about the societies that produce them, and they point towards the fact that "we in the real world need fictional superheroes just as much as the diegetic populations" they save (McSweeney 268). In this light, it is clear that superhero comics operate in a much more complex relationship with the societies in which they circulate than accusations of fascist sympathies allow for.

In order to parse out if *The Dark Knight Returns* created a fascist turn in the character, it is necessary to answer the following question: What exactly is Miller's Batman doing? There is no doubt about his violence and his assumed jurisdiction in Gotham City—what are the particular details that allow him to, despite this, avoid authoritarianism and fascism, and what is he doing instead? Or, another way to put the question: if not fascist, then what? For it is quite clear that Miller's 1986 Batman is doing something interesting—the enduring relevance of the text is testament enough to that fact. And the confusion about the nature of this Batman's action is telling in and of itself, for it points towards contradictory feelings about violence broadly and personal and political violence

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2   Naomi Klein calls this particular manifestation of neoliberalism that operates through "orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities," the "'disaster capitalism complex'" (6, 14). For more, see her excellent book *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007).

more specifically. Yet in a world where the call to defund the police—an outcry about the state monopoly on violence—can sit in political proximity to the call to help the Ukrainian military as it defends its country against Russian invasion, it behooves critics and scholars to look more closely, despite the discomfort, at the operations of violence in the social structures at work in the world. This is the surest path to a better understanding of the ethics of violence and, through the act of criticism itself, to a world in which there is less of it. Published in the middle of Ronald Regan's tenure as president of the United States, an era of U.S. politics that has come to define the modern, neoliberal turn towards a more authoritarian rightwing political landscape, *The Dark Knight Returns* is especially well-situated to help answer these questions.

Claims that Batman, in particular Miller's Batman, is fascist or leads to fascist ideology lean heavily on approximately half the definition of fascism: the emphasis on the imposition of will, usually through violence, and the importance of the individual leader—the language of the "superman" makes it easy to connect superheroes to fascism while ignoring the necessary attachment to nationalism.[3]   Yet,the comparison

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3   Carl Plantinga observes that fascism "is a political ideology with a constellation of associated social and ethical commitments" that are historically linked "with the political formations in Germany, Italy, and Japan before and during World War II, and to some extent in Spain until the fall of Francoism in 1975" (22). Plantinga, in defining the term, distills fascism to its "nationalist, elitist, and antiliberal" elements; fascism is "extreme nationalism that attempts to unite a favored people (the "folk"), sometimes with an appeal to a mythic and glorious past, under a strong leader figure who is acceded complete control" (22). Furthermore, the ideology "evinces an ethos of ethnic and national purity, favoring the strong, healthy, and pure over what is thought to be weak, diseased, and impure or inauthentic" and "is also imperialistic in that it promotes the right of the 'naturally superior' to colonize, exploit, and even kill the inferior and 'defective'" (22). Finally, fascism is "is about

does not hold up, as Batman and characters like him fail to fulfill the necessary requirements of state and an adherence to survival of the fittest—though, it is possible, as can be seen through a comparison of Miller's Batman to his Superman, for superheroes to close that gap. Ultimately, Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* is about that very gap, about how narrow yet distinct the difference between fascism and what Batman is engaged in is.[4] Rather than indicating Miller's ability "to package our fantasies into blockbusting money machines" (Walter), Miller's classic Batman graphic novel indexes tensions implicit and explicit in the use of violence

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total stability, control, and homogeneity under the headship of an idealized leader" in charge of "a mythic and idealized nation" (23). Fascism is, at heart, an organizing principal, political and social in nature, that emphasizes the state and dictatorial power and precludes the possibility of opposition. McGill University, on their website, calls fascism "a radical political ideology that combines elements of corporatism, authoritarianism, nationalism, militarism, anti-liberalism and anti-communism." They point out that the word is derived from "the Italian word fascio," which refers to a "bundle, as in a political or militant group, or a nation." Another root word is "fasces (rods bundled around an axe), which was an ancient Roman symbol of the authority of magistrates." The etymology of fascism then indicates "strength through unity; a single rod is easily broken, while the bundle is very difficult to break." The Columbia Encyclopedia offers still more specifics, adding that "most important is the glorification of the state and the total subordination of the individual to it." The state, here, is "an organic whole into which individuals must be absorbed for their own and the state's benefit" and that is "is absolute in its methods and unlimited by law in its control and direction of its citizens." Also important to note that fascism is a form of social Darwinism: "The doctrine of survival of the fittest and the necessity of struggle for life is applied by fascists to the life of a nation-state." This necessitates that "struggle and aggressive militarism" be "a leading characteristic of the fascist state" and leads to "[i]mperialism [as] the logical outcome of this dogma." Finally, the "concept of the leader as hero or superman, fascism's rejection of reason and intelligence and its emphasis on vision, creativeness, and 'the will.'"

4   In the graphic novel, this gap is narrativized in the differences between Batman and Superman.

as a form of social control in any civil society. These tensions can be traced in the polarizing paradoxes seen between the political left and right in the United States—the right at once advocating for distributed networks of self-defense in widespread firearm availability and keeping the "thin blue line" of state power intact while the left simultaneously rejects both personal defense and policing as viable forms of mediation from bad actors. When Batman's actions are closely considered through the relationship among the three participants in each instance of his "crimefighting," described in this article as the triangle of superhero intervention, it becomes clear that his behavior indicates something altogether different than a tendency towards fascism. In the graphic novel, where Bruce Wayne comes out of retirement when a wave of brutality originating both from within and from without Gotham City threatens to overwhelm its inhabitants, Batman operates in the space between the treatments of violence projected by dominant political ideologies. It is exactly in this space between the reality of violence and the perpetuation of that violence in attempts to control it that René Girard's reading of mythology in *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) offers productive ground from which to consider how Miller's Batman functions. Girard posits violence as a fundamental part of the human experience and sees, in particular, ritual sacrifice as a means to curb the spread of violence in a community. Miller's Batman takes on the mantles of both the sacrificer and the sacrificed through the ritualizing of his action by virtue of the genre norms of the superhero hero comic, thereby reimagining Batman as a metaphor through which political and social violence can be rerouted towards productive ends.
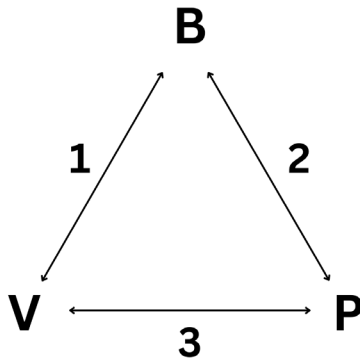
Image 1

THE TRIANGLE OF SUPERHERO INTERVENTION

Chris Yogerst, in "Superhero Films: a Fascist National Complex or Exemplars of Moral Virtue?" observes that, "[i]n order to be truly fascist one must stay in the role of power and retain it" (12). For fascism, the state is not only an implement of violent control—this is the part that Batman detractors focus on—but it is also a necessary component of the continuation of that power. This continuation necessitates several institutional elements that Batman, by virtue of his status as a masked vigilante, does not have—think back to the part of the etymology of the word fascism that emphasizes the "bundle." The state is the aggregate of these institutional structures for the sedimentation of power, built on political control of the *entire* citizenry and on the authority of a cult-of-personality based in a single, individual leader. Batman, first of all, lacks political control over the citizenry—he lacks the kind of biocontrol Foucault defines in his explanations of biopower and biopolitics.[5] This can be seen

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5   For Foucault, one of the principle features of modern human relations is a new form of power that "is applied not to man-as-body but to the living man, to man-as-living-being" and, furthermore, to "man-as-species." He specifies that State discipline, in this newer form, "tries to rule a

in the way in which Batman works— each instance of action that Batman engages in is a kind of triangle made up of the masked hero (represented in image 1 as B), the victim of a crime (V—often, especially in *The Dark Knight Returns*, the victim of a violent crime), and the perpetrator of the crime (here given the designation P). Batman-as-fascist advocates emphasize and focus only on side 2 of this triangle: Batman (B) v. Perpetrator (P). While it is true that, in this literally single-sided view, Batman is using brute force to impose his will on P, this emphasis flattens out the encounter by ignoring sides 1 and 3; it is only through this obfuscation of the entire interaction that the claim of Batman as fascist can be made. It is important to note that, when emphasizing side 2, the initial target of violence, V is ignored. This is not to say that P is not also a kind of victim, for they too suffer (especially in Miller's version of Batman), but to leave out V is to forget that P is also engaged in the same kind of action that Batman-as-fascist advocates focus their arguments one: P is imposing their will, through side 3, on V. When the other, necessary sides are considered, the ways in which Batman's actions circumvent the problems of fascist violence become clear. Side 3 is primary—it always comes first. To conflate side 2 with what happens in side 3 is to ignore the order of operations here, and the order of events is fundamental to understanding the dynamic of the violent interaction represented by this triangle. The temporality here is related to outcome. As Yogerst observes, "Superheroes and fascists both believe they are being altruistic, however, the end result is very different as one saves lives while the other destroys them in hopes of an unattainable utopian future" (18). The differences in outcomes can be conflated only when the chronology is both flattened

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multiplicity of men" through their "individual bodies" with surveillance, training, and punishment" (242).

and narrowed. On a longer timeline, one that takes into account the temporal primacy of side 3, it becomes clear that "[s]uperheroes have legal and ethical boundaries that differ from fascists as evidenced by the fact that superheroes do not strive to become rulers of the societies they protect" (Yogerst 18). When these facts are taken into account, side 3—that between the victim and the perpetrator—is seen to be the actual imposition of the will, is the original, therefore actual, authoritarian act with fascist leanings. If this is all true, then side 2, in which Batman intervenes through violent contact with P, is not a fascist act but, rather, anti-fascist or anti-authoritarian.

This is also why Batman sometimes fails; in *The Dark Knight Returns,* the Joker, who exists somewhat outside of the authoritarian matrix brought into the conversation by the organized nature of the mutant gang, is able to kill many victims before Batman intervenes. Batman lives with the hauntings of these failures—he says to himself, after an explosion masterminded by the Joker destroys an apartment building, "I'll count the dead one by one. I'll add them to the list, Joker. The list of people I've murdered—by letting you live" (Miller 117)—just like he is haunted by the original death of his parents—his origin story. Batman has the resources to become more preventive, more predictive, in his crimefighting,[6] but to do so would be to make the fascist turn he is accused of and always resisting. There is an important tension here between his successes as a "crimefighter" and his failures; those who see Batman as a fascist emphasize his successes but for-

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6   Christopher Nolan's The Dark Knight (2008) includes this possibility in its plot—Batman does create a massive surveillance system in order to stop the Joker and then destroys it due to the problematic ethics. Even as he creates the technology, he sidesteps the fascist possibilities by never allowing himself to be completely in charge of its usage, instead delegating that power to Lucius Fox.

get the degree to which he "generally governed by a shared set of principles that is accepted by much of the free world" (Yogerst)—namely, protection of those unable to protect themselves, his commitment to which means that he will inevitably be too late some of the time. Each of these failures become arguments against his existence. Note how state actors, mainly police, attack him directly after his faceoff with the Joker. At the same time, he is blamed for the Joker's death; the new police commissioner adds murder to Batman's rap sheet. The complicated position Batman embodies, one that is always reactionary and that actively refuses to go farther than that, cannot be reduced to fascism, if not for the reasons outlined above then for the reason that, as Yogerst observes, "If Batman were a true fascist, he would never sacrifice the power of his persona to help a city in crisis" (23). The very positionality Batman occupies puts his actions in direct tension with the kind of power that would be necessary for him to acquire in order to be a fascist.

SACRIFICING AND SACRIFICED

In *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard sets out to understand violence in terms of sacrifice: "We may say that there is … hardly any form of violence that cannot be described in terms of sacrifice" (1). Girard sees in sacrifice a positive social function. To his reading, the "purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community" by "protect[ing] the entire community from its own violence" (8). The "own violence" referenced here is primarily vengeance, "an interminable, infinitely repetitive process" that requires structural violence in order to stop its spread because it is that people "detest violence that [they] make a duty of vengeance" (14, 15). Girard writes of the repetitive nature of violence as being infectious (27) precisely because it self-perpetuates

endlessly: "[o]nly violence can put an end to violence" (26). This fact, for Girard, burns through human feelings about violence and elevates it to something akin to the sacred, as both are "forces whose dominance over man increases or seems to increase in proportion to man's effort to master them" (31). Ritual and sacrifice then become the methods by which this contradiction is potentially resolved. In order to explore this possibility, Girard primarily relies on myth and the study of myth. Emphasizing a few of his sources, Girard reads from Oedipus, for whom the search for the origins of "impure violence" lead back to tragedy and the "surrogate victim" (69, 79), to a reinterpretation of Freud that reads the Oedipus complex in terms of "sacrificial crisis" (177) and then to Structuralism, where he engages with modern, technological violence (240). Ultimately, Girard argues that these ideas, the surrogate victim and its manifestations, are the source of all rituals and therefore are the source of "all the great institutions of mankind, both secular and religious" (306). It is ritual, then, that "gradually leads men away from the sacred.; it permits them to escape their own violence, removes them from violence and bestows on them all the institutions and beliefs that define their humanity" (306). That is to say, humanity is, at least in part, defined by the very thing it considers to be inhumane. With these ideas in mind, the triangle of superhero intervention is a kind of ritual in which the hero, in the case of this essay Batman, transforms himself into both the sacrificer *and* the sacrificed, both the surrogate victim and the one tasked with doing violence to the victim, thus untangling the ethical issues surrounding violence by carrying both the traumas of doing and receiving violence in his mind and body.

Batman's initial reemergence is instructive, as it sets the tone for his action throughout the graphic novel and informs the

Image 2

nature of the ending—which is, in this work, the end of his action for the time being. Bruce Wayne's reemergence as Batman begins on page 28 (Image 2) of the collected edition and has several key features that points towards a more complicated and nuanced form of violence than possible in state forms like fascism. It should be noted that these scenes depicting Batman's return as a crimefighter are interspersed with interjections taken from news outlets, a narrative tool Miller relies on throughout the story in order to contextualize the narrow actions of the characters within the broader context of the city of the Gotham and offers a way for Miller to narrativize several viewpoints at once: that of the mainstream media, which includes the voices of experts, politicians, state actors, and media personalities but rarely that of the people Batman helps. The text itself plays with this juxtaposition; Batman's return begins with a newscaster describ-

ing the weather, reporting that it is "like the wrath of God" is "headed for Gotham" (Miller 27). This characterization, to which the reader is privy only a few moments later, of Batman's work as the "wrath of God" gestures towards the ways in which he operates within the structures of human narratives—the wrath of God being a narrative construction that is often invoked to make sense events that operate beyond the human pale—and outside of them, for the content of the simile turns Batman's actions into something outside the purview of human control and understanding. In the next moment, the reader is shown a woman walking home in the rain, carrying groceries. This person, V in the above formulation of the relationship among the general actors in each moment of Batman's interventions, is given no history—the reader knows nothing about them. Their history is irrelevant, for it is what happens next that defines the parameters of the entire scene. A shadowy figure appears behind the woman, dark except for the reflected light of their glasses. This person, P in my formulation, threatens the woman with a knife and some vaguely sexual commentary. It is now that Batman appears, *after the threat is clear*, to intervene, but only as a shadowy, incomplete figure himself. Batman first appears as a backlit hand grabbing P's knife hand and then his face, pulling him through the glass window of a door. The reader is not privy to what happens next, though it is safe to assume that Batman physically incapacitates P.

The next two interventions, which occur on pages 28-32, follow a similar narrative structure: there is a recognizable setup, some kind of threat, and then an intervention from Batman. The situations into which Batman interjects himself vary—on pages 28 through 29 it is a moment in which a pimp threatens a prostitute in a taxicab, and on 30 into 32 two young women, one of whom will become Robin later

in the story,[7] are threatened by several gang members near an arcade. In each, the reader is given an increasingly clearer view of Batman. In the taxi, the reader sees both his foot and his hand but not shadowed this time. At the arcade, the reader sees his full form, though shadowed and obscured by his cape, as well as perhaps his most famous weapon, the batarang. The reader also sees more and more of the conflict between Batman and the Ps: the reader sees Batman's foot come down on the pimp's hand, and the reader "hears" Batman strike him. Outside the arcade, the reader sees the moment directly before and after Batman throws his batarangs and then one of the gang members is thrown into the electric sign. What is important here is the measured and incremental unveiling of Batman as a physical presence in the pages of the comic; it is not until page 34 that the reader is given a full view of the character in a classic-splash page: the hero coming down from above, cape splayed, arms out, one hand in a fist.

This sequence of unveiling accomplishes several narrative feats important to the argument of this article. First, the incremental nature of "showing" in the introduction of Batman into the story puts the emphasis on the character's actions rather than on his form and self. That is, the reader is introduced to Batman through his intervention in the moment between V and P, at once making clear the narrative triangle explained above and starting the reader off, in each instance,

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7   It is noteworthy that the second time the reader sees Robin, her parents are speaking in the background of the text and are calling Batman "[o]bviously a fascist" who has "never heard of civil rights" (45). Through what little of their conversation that is depicted, the audience understands that her parents are of generation that came out of the aftermath of 1968 (or, perhaps, some analogous, DC universe version); they lament "[a]ll the marching [they] did" and believe the "American conscience died with the Kennedys" (45).

from the perspective of V. This, secondly, amounts to a narrative ritualization of the character's actions. The narrative pattern established in these opening moments of Batman's return hinges on the repetition of a narrative model (which is reinforced through the use grids in the paneling of the pages themselves) that relies on the gradual unveiling of the operative actant in the intervention. These two factors, repetition and the obscuring of the forces at work through shadow (both in the art itself and in the presentation of the art), turn the moment that Batman appears into a kind of ritual that, like all rituals, is a reproducible model that nonetheless is, in each moment and due to the necessity of the other corners of the triangle, unique in each iteration. These two narrative points are strengthened through the juxtaposed dialogue happening in the same sequence of panels; Batman's interventions are, simultaneously for the reader but in different temporal moments in the actual story world of the narrative, described from various media perspectives, including interviews with the victims[1]. This stylistic choice by Miller serves to more directly move Batman's actions into the ritual space. When the characters in this sequence of pages discuss what is happening, using phrases like "bat-like creature" (32), "huge man dressed like Dracula" (32), "wild animal" (34), "with fangs and wings" (34), and "about twelve feet tall" (34), Batman ceases to be Bruce Wayne and becomes a symbolic entity that acts in the world through the ritualization of those actions, as evidenced by the descriptions of those who experience the outcomes of those actions. It is also noteworthy that, up to this point, the reader has already been well-introduced to Wayne, so this second introduction, fully separate in the narrative and in the stylistic choices Miller makes, further serves to separate the man from the bat, Wayne from Batman; as Batman says on page 34, he is "born again" in these moments, becoming something that transcends (as,

again, is seen in the various descriptions witnesses attach to their experiences) the human and the individual.

All of this fits neatly into Girard's conception of ritual violence as being something different from the violence it works to stop, a distinction those who argue that Batman operates through fascist means fail to grasp. The early pages of the text describe a Gotham caught in a "heat wave" of "civil violence" (11); the use of the word "civil" to describe the violence is important, as it points towards a violence that comes from the members of the city themselves (as opposed to from without). This is a form of what Girard calls the community's "own violence" (8), and, again similar to Girard's read on this kind of community violence, the violence in Gotham is "going to get worse before it gets better" (Miller 14). This last statement, made by a TV weatherman, is made in connection to the crime wave hitting Gotham at the same time as the heat wave. The connection of the environmental to the violent operates as a kind of unifying metaphor through which the violence can be conceptualized as Girard sees it, as infectious and as spreading through communities through replication and that must be, somehow, stopped—preferably from within that community itself. It is important to note that Batman operates outside of state-sanctioned violence, a fact noted already and that makes it impossible for Batman's action to be considered fascist. Rather, Batman's interventions act as rituals that stop the spread the violence without becoming structures of violence that further perpetuate.

SIGNALING THE BAT

An important part of this ritual, of the ritualizing of heroic violence, is the way in which Commissioner Gordon calls on Batman in times of need: the bat signal. In Miller's graph-
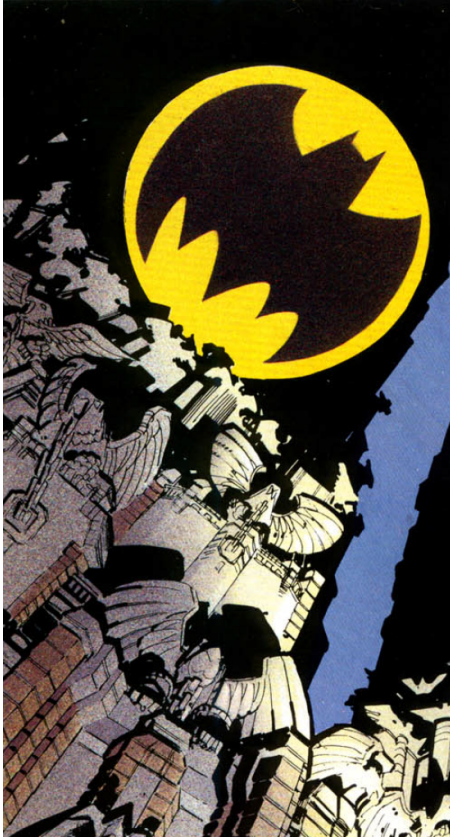
Image 3

ic novel, the bat signal first appears on page 46 (Image 3). When another officer questions its use, Gordon emphasizes that that the bat signal is there "[t]o let everyone know" (45) that Batman is on the way. One way of interpreting this moment, and perhaps the common way to see it, is that the bat signal projects an intention to the rest of the city, innocent and criminal alike, and operates primarily through fear. That is, the bat signal strikes fear into the heart of would-be law breakers and as such is a tool of control through which the

state extends its power. This interpretation, however, misses what is perhaps most important about the bat signal. Just before turning it on, the other officer that helps Gordon references Gallagher, who would not be pleased with the use of the bat signal (46). If the purpose of the signal was simply to let the city know that Batman is on the prowl and thereby reduce crime and violence, then the state apparatus for the control of crime and violence, the police, would surely not object to its use. Yet as the officer who replaces Gordon as commissioner later in the narrative makes clear, Batman's actions— indeed, his very existence—are orthogonal to the state apparatus for the control of crime and violence: Batman's "actions are categorically criminal," and Yindel immediately "issue[s] an arrest warrant for the Batman on charges of assault, breaking and entering, [and] creating a public hazard" (72). This last charge, especially, puts the police department under Yindel squarely in the biopolitical purview Foucault outlined during the Cold War (which, coincidentally, is the sociopolitical context for the Miller's text) and, what is perhaps more important to my argument, excludes Batman from that same category of social control, a decidedly fascist form of control. In this light, then, the bat signal can and should be read in a differently; rather than signaling the inclusion of Batman into the state apparatus for violence, the projection of Batman's symbol (which, in Miller's representation, is done on one of Gotham's twin towers, signs of neoliberal commerce and therefore symbolic of yet another form of control) instead signals the *failure* of the state in its own stated mission of the social control of violence on behalf of the community. Batman's response to the signal, then, is not his inclusion in the state, which would thereby make him fascist; rather, the bat signal makes clear that Batman operates separate from and outside the parameters of the state and its agents of control,

offering another path towards the mitigation of violence in a community.

This is perhaps most clearly seen in Batman's appropriation of the Sons of Batman (the S.O.B.s) towards the end of the graphic novel. After their leader is defeated by Batman, the mutant gang splinters into several rival gangs. This outcome in itself speaks to the differing roles the mutant gang leader and Batman take on and play. Like fascist movements, the gang leader operates through a cult of personality in which he is the center of the group. This fascist tendency is depicted on page 73, where the reader sees the mutant gang leader, raised high and holding a torch, addressing the gang, who are lined up behind him in military-fashion. Note, as well, the gang leader's emphasis on group—"They call *us* a gang" (emphasis added)—on indiscriminate violence and on difference—"Only when *they* die by our hands and see *their women* raped" (emphasis added)—on will and strength—"We have the strength—we have the will"—and, finally, on the centers of power within the organization of the city—"Storm police headquarters" (73). Important, as well, is the way in which this moment is framed just prior to its appearance in the comic. Robin overhears two gang members talking, and one describes the coming speech as "[t]alkin' war" (71). This invocation of war, which is always a structural and measured implementation of organized violence and therefore very different from the interventional triangle described earlier in this article, makes clear that the mutant gang operates closer to the fascist ideology than Batman.

As such, when Batman confronts the S.O.B.s, who are planning to "purge Gotham" (171), on page 172, his emphasis is markedly different. Where the mutant gang leader told his

followers to "[t]ake the guns" (73), Batman says, holding up a gun, "This is the weapon of the enemy … We will not use it" (173). Rather, Batman's methods are the opposite of the indiscriminate methods that typify the mutant gang's actions: "Our weapons are quiet—precise" (173). And when he says that "[t]onight, we are the law" and that he "is the law," we must keep in mind that this is not Bruce Wayne speaking. Because of the necessary distance the mask creates between the superhero and the individual—the ego and the alter-ego—the "I" in this panel is not an individual but a symbol, the symbol of the bat. It is through this process, by ritualizing his own identity, that Batman enters into the spreading violence of the city-wide riot (happening in the aftermath of the detonation of the U.S.S.R's nuclear warhead) and reroutes it towards different ends, effectively turning what would have been an incredible spreading of violence into a way to keep the potential victims of that violence, who are also victims of violence already happening, safe. This moment, the spreading riot, is told through a series of images of the violence itself as well as commentary the various perspectives of people involved in that violence, offering conflicting interpretations of what happens. While the man with the neck brace, who engaged with the riot, says, "It was every man for himself" (180) and then rationalizes his actions by saying, "I did what anybody would've" (181), he never fully attends to the actions he does. Rather, he speaks about them obliquely, using language as a tool by which he can at once justify and avoid what he did. The man in the glasses, who is given voice in the same sequence, is better able to directly address his own actions: "I was strangling somebody when I heard the horses." This man gestures towards the way the violence spreads when he comments, "I still can't believe it got as bad as it did. You'd never have known that just a few minutes earlier, we'd been …" (181). This last comment in interesting, as it has

to do more with the reader's experience than the character's, pointing towards the construction of the narrative. Just before the beginnings of the riot, a very different kind of collective action is depicted; people spontaneously organize in order to fight a growing fire: "A line forms" (176).

The juxtaposition of these two moments, as well as the way they are separated by the scene depicting Superman's trial by fire in which he is caught in the detonation of the nuclear bomb, is necessary. It points towards two very human potentialities—that for organized aide and that for collective violence—that are always present; what tilts the scales from the former to the latter is spillage of the organized violence of war into the civil community through the detonation of the nuclear bomb and the disruption of the city's power grid, which then spreads through the community just a Girard conceives of the process. This is punctuated by the illustrations of fire, which on page 176 begin to take up whole panels. It is in this situational context that Batman and his converted S.O.B.s and mutant gang members—having "appeal[ed]" to their "community spirit" (176)—appear and work to stop the violence with their own mitigated form of it. Even here, two versions of the story are told through the man in the neck brace and the man in the glasses; the former compares Batman to the "Gestapo" (183), a clear reference to fascism, while the latter emphasis how Batman got the fighting people to "fight the fire" (183), a reference to both the actual fire in the narrative and the spreading fire of community violence.

There are three important moments to consider as this sequence comes to an end. The first is that the story of the priest, which began with the start of the material and metaphorical conflagration, comes to an end in a moment of unity; the priest and the "boy with the radio" (184), who began

at odds with one another over the volume of the boy's music, end up tied to one another through their shared experience. The priest, who might be expected to be the more compassionate of the two, admits to having intended to "confront" the boy (179), while in the end it is the boy who "help[ed] the burned" (184). This moment is one that gestures the revolutionary possibility implicit in Batman's path through the paradoxes of heroic violence. At the same time, the very next frame, a half-page splash of the city, gestures towards the consequences of another kind of heroic violence. In the second moment, Superman, who in Miller's imagination is an agent of the state and has been involved throughout the narrative in the United States' escalating conflict with the U.S.S.R, has at this moment survived a nuclear explosion from a missile he diverted. This is a classic instance of super heroism, and yet the ramifications of the act are somber to say the least: "there wasn't any morning," and "one week later, it's still dark at high noon in Gotham City" (184). The blast, which might be read as the conclusion of Superman's deal with the (state) devil and therefore the necessary result of his increased moral corruption through an increased reliance on state sanctioned violence,[8] brings about "completely disrupted" weather patterns, further "riots," "starving," "civil war in the Midwest" (185); that is, Superman's heroic act has the exact opposite result as Batman's, instead proliferating violence rather than stopping it.

The third and most important thing to consider is what Robin observes at the end of this sequence. On page 183, Robin sees Batman as he "sags in his saddle like an old man," witnessing the toll the work described above and in the rest of

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8   Indeed, a large number of the panels in which Superman appears in Miller's graphic novel show him literally engaged in warfare or in discussion with heads of state. See pages 84, 120, 130, and 135 for examples.

the narrative—the work of being both the sacrificer and the sacrificed, of becoming a symbol so as to avoid the pitfalls of heroic violence—takes on Batman the man. The physical toll of being the Batman is evidenced throughout the narrative; Batman makes consistent reference to it himself, and Alfred puts perhaps too fine a point on it when he says, "If it's suicide you're after, Master Bruce, I have the recipe for an old family potion. It's slow in working and quite painful. You'd like it" (43). After this moment of recognition of the humanness of the man behind the mask, behind the symbol, Robin says to herself, "He can't die" (184). This statement operates in two ways: first, it is a recognition of the necessity of something like the Batman. Second, it is a cognization of the fact that he *will* one day die, as all old men eventually do. This is a detection of future absence and, for the reader if not for Robin as well, the realization that Robin is best positioned to fill that absence when it does come. In this way, Robin herself, her position in line with and at the side of Batman, becomes fundamental to the work he accomplishes through the methods described throughout this article. Batman's involvement of Robin, which Commissioner Yindel calls "child endangerment" (138) and to which even Alfred is opposed (93), then becomes a future-oriented act designed to ensure the continuation of the work he has begun with his own actions. This is seen in his treatment of Robin: even though Batman claims that he will not "tolerate insubordination" (115), in fact Batman more than tolerates it. When Robin reprograms (after explicitly being told not to) the commands on the helicopter so that they respond to "peel" instead of "boosters" (129), Batman reaffirms her involvement and even appears amused or proud.

All of this is perhaps best represented, visually, in the splash in page 114 (Image 4): here, the reader sees Batman *and*
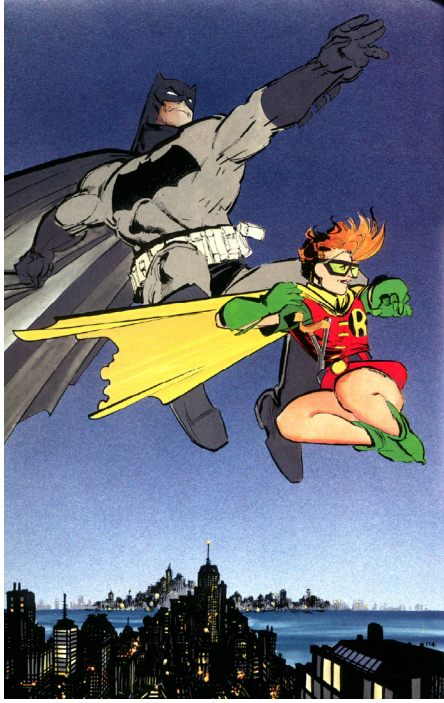
Image 4

Robin, both high above the city, leaping into space. They are both looking off page into some unknown vista; Batman has his left hand thrown forward, as if showing the way, but it is Robin who is slightly out front, already beginning to take the lead. When compared with other, similar splash pages in the novel—such as those on pages 34 and 52 and 78—this image of Batman and Robin contains within a noticeably hopeful aesthetic, an optimism made possible only through the inclusion of Robin and, therefore, through the promise of the continuation of the work Batman does. Batman explicitly recognizes the necessity of Robin to his actions when he thinks, referencing Robin, "Right there … is all the reason I need" (186). It is necessary to note that this kind of emphasis

on the future through generations of youths can in itself be appropriated by oppressive forces as a form of justification: it is common for "political value to be defined in terms of a future *for the children*" that "narrows the terms of the debate to those that ensure the protection of a symbolically innocent 'Child' and the dream of a clean, new future it symbolizes" (Lothian 8). In this mobilization of child as justification, the rhetoric of future generations can and has been used both as a way to justify fascism while at the same time removing the essential note of possibility that comes with thinking of the futurity of the young. When fascists say, "Think of the children," they are generally more interested in defining, with oppressive specificity, the horizon of futures available to those children; we see this in "child endangerment" charge mentioned above. Batman, however, manages to side-step this problem through his radical inclusion of Robin in his work. This is represented in the text, explicitly, when Batman calls her a "good soldier" (138), elevating Robin, and therefore the future generation, to an active co-participant in the production of that future.

CONCLUSION

This inclusion of Robin in the creation of a more equitable future, a future that manages to acknowledge and address the realities of violence and, to some degree, the necessity of it, is further evidenced in the ending of the graphic novel. When Batman fakes his own death, two things happens—he symbolically kills the very source of whatever power he holds over the community in which he has been involved, thereby circumventing the real fascist tendency to hold onto and solidify power over time through the use of symbols and power structures that become in themselves stand-ins for history and therefore make any attempt to move beyond them anti-

thetical to the very notion of progress or possibility. Batman's symbolic death is, if he is to avoid becoming the very thing he is fighting in Superman at the end of the narrative, absolutely necessary—as Albert Camus writes in *The Rebel*, a meditation on how revolutionary projects themselves become totalitarian, the rebel, "in order to be a man, to refuse to be a god" (333). The death of Batman is just this kind of move—it kills the potential for fascism in the symbol while allowing Bruce Wayne the man to return. As the reader, our last image of the main character of the graphic novel is not him as Batman the symbol but as Wayne the man. Second, this symbolic death makes room in the future for new ways of being, ways of being that will necessarily be developed by the upcoming generation. In the final page of the narrative, a page that speaks to the futurist potential of the narrative as a whole, Wayne is distinctly not alone, some icon in the fight for law and order, nor is he to be found in some position of authority within the structures of the state or business. He has given all that up— even Wayne Manor is gone at this point—in favor of a position away from view, a position that allows for the inclusion of Robin, the next generation of his style of heroism, as well as the inclusion of the very people who were his "enemies": the mutant gang and its offshoots. This speaks to the possibility for reconciliation and collectivity even in moments of extreme dissonance and social strife and projects the reconciliatory possibility represented in the riot/fire scene into the horizon of the future. This, finally, points towards a version of heroic violence that is, in the end, the exact opposite of the biopolitical fascism that Batman is often painted as engaging in. Rather, this ending, which is the result of Batman's actions overall, is itself life-affirming: the narrative ends by saying: "This will be a good life … Good enough" (199).

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This is the Legacy of Garry's Show: Restoring *It's Garry Shandling's Show* to the American Sitcom Canon

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by Emily Hoffman

ABSTRACT

Though largely forgotten, *It's Garry Shandling's Show* is a pivotal sitcom text that reclaims the self-reflexive, meta-narrative style of *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*. Shandling births the contemporary sitcom by de-centering the idealized nuclear family; using Brechtian direct address that fuses the sitcom with stand-up comedy; and parodying specific genres, films, and television shows. These destabilizing features turn the calcified genre into the television equivalent of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival.

Keywords: Garry Shandling, sitcom, direct address, parody

Este es el legado del show de Garry: Restaurando *It's Garry Shandling's Show* al canon de las comedias de situación estadounidenses

RESUMEN

Aunque en gran medida olvidado, It's Garry Shandling's Show es un texto fundamental de comedia de situación que recupera el estilo metanarrativo autorreflexivo de The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show. Shandling da origen a la comedia de situación contemporánea al descentrar la familia nuclear idealizada; utilizando la dirección directa brechtiana que fusiona la comedia con el stand-up; y parodiar géneros, películas y programas de televisión específicos. Estas características desestabilizadoras convierten el género calcificado

en el equivalente televisivo del carnaval de Mikhail Bakhtin.

Palabras clave: Garry Shandling, comedia de situación, dirección directa, parodia

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这是盖瑞·山德林节目的遗产：将《这是盖瑞·山德林的节目》恢复为美国情景喜剧经典

摘要

虽然《这是盖瑞·山德林的节目》在很大程度上被遗忘了，但它是一部关键的情景喜剧文本，再现了《乔治·伯恩斯与格雷西·艾伦的节目》的自我反思和元叙事风格。山德林通过对理想化的小家庭进行去中心化，创造了当代情景喜剧；使用布莱希特式的（面向观众）直接陈述，将情景喜剧与单口喜剧融为一体；戏仿特定类型、电影和电视节目。这些不稳定的特征将僵化的流派变成了电视版的米哈伊尔·巴赫金的狂欢节。

关键词：盖瑞·山德林，情景喜剧，（面对观众）直接陈述，戏仿

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*T*he *Larry Sanders Show* (1992–1998) enjoyed widespread critical acclaim during its six-season run on HBO, which translated into three Emmy awards and a spot in *TV Guide*'s 2013 list of 60 Greatest TV Shows of All Time (Fretts and Rousch). Set behind the scenes of a late-night talk show, it starred Garry Shandling, a stand-up comedian who gained fame in the 1980s, as the titular Larry Sanders, a man defined by his vanity and neuroses. It gave Shandling the chance to satirize the corner of the entertainment industry he identified with his greatest dream: taking over *The Tonight Show* from Johnny Carson. (Although Shandling filled in for Carson 39 times during the mid-1980s, Jay Leno would eventually become his permanent replacement.) Conversely, Shandling's first foray into a scripted TV comedy series, Showtime's *It's Garry Shandling's Show* (1986–1990), enjoyed only a modest cult following in a time when traditional family sitcoms, like *The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties*, attracted huge ratings on America's broadcast networks. Judd Apatow's four-and-a-half-hour documentary, *The Zen Diaries of Garry Shandling* (2018) and its companion, *It's Garry Shandling's Book*, briefly renewed interest in Shandling's life, stand-up comedy, late-night talk show hosting, and two TV series. Nevertheless, Shandling's contributions to the sitcom form remain under-appreciated. When it is acknowledged, *The Larry Sanders Show* garners nearly all the attention. A lengthy appreciation of it in *The Independent* to mark its thirtieth anniversary hails it as the show that birthed the modern sitcom. The article celebrates the fact that "it changed the genre for good" but laments that it "remains more obscure to modern audiences … than the many sitcoms it influenced" because "it never crossed over into the mainstream" (Chilton). *The Larry Sanders Show* so seismically shifted the genre because "it completely dispensed with the artifice of the tra-

ditional sitcom." The article devotes just one sentence to *It's Garry Shandling's Show*. Despite spending decades on the outermost fringes of television history, *It's Garry Shandling's Show* is itself a pivotal sitcom text that reclaims the self-reflexive, meta-narrative style pioneered on *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (1950–1958). In doing so, Shandling indeed becomes the father of the modern American sitcom through his affinity for (1) decentering the idealized nuclear sitcom family and its competent patriarch; (2) direct address that fuses the sitcom narrative with stand-up comedy; and (3) elaborate parody of specific genres, films, and television shows. He inaugurated the genre's self-referential "baroque" phase (Schatz 38). Combined, these destabilizing features turn a largely calcified form—the multi-camera situation comedy filmed before a live studio audience—into the television equivalent of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival. In fact, its carnivalesque indulgences rupture the genre, exposing the trite, utopian, didactic wholesomeness so inextricably bound to its artifice. They aid him in both furthering his transgressive upper-class-fool persona and pursuing greater truth through his comedy.

DECENTERING THE SITCOM FAMILY

"Carnival," Bakhtin says in *Rabelais and His World,* "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from established order" (10). "Carnival was … the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed" (10). At the time it aired, *It's Garry Shandling's Show* was, indeed, the "temporary liberation" from the genre's entrenched status quo. According to Shandling, "The theme itself was the structure of the show, which was breaking conventions" (Apatow 169). Its original viewers who sought out other sitcoms would have had

to settle for formally unadventurous series, like *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992), *Family Ties* (1982–1989), *Growing Pains* (1985–1992), *Who's the Boss* (1984–1992), *227* (1985–1990), and *Kate & Allie* (1984–1989), all of which were family sitcoms in the Nielsen Top 20 for the 1986–87 television season, the season *It's Garry Shandling's Show* premiered. And yet, this is just a partial list of those airing on the three major American broadcast networks. Family sitcoms so saturated network schedules that in 1985 family sitcoms aired every night of the week (Leppert 1). Shandling knew how the genre worked, and that, from the perspective of his co-creator, Alan Zweibel, made him the ideal person to undermine them: "Garry, knowing the form of situation comedies given his background of [writing scripts for] *Welcome Back Kotter,* had a certain love/hate relationship with what was the norm. We grew up on the norm, but it was time to put it on its ear just a bit" (Apatow 158).

During the 1980s, American television industry insiders also recognized that the sitcom had reached a creative crossroads. Brandon Tartikoff, while trying to reinvigorate last-place NBC, thought it had reached the same state of generic decline as the western, and Norman Lear, creator of the 1970s "relevancy sitcoms," negatively compared television comedies of the 1980s to those of the 1950s (Leppert 10). All the broadcast networks were hoping to reverse ratings declines, and all of them arrived at the same strategy: embracing the aspirational figure of the working mother who they hoped would attract female viewers. They produced "sitcoms featuring … successful career women who were *emotionally* supported by domesticated dads" (11). It is the woman who is both mother and professional that differentiates these sitcoms from those of the 1950s. However, these characters still strongly resembled their 1950s counterparts because they

"maintained many elements of the homemaker image" (11). Although these sitcoms normalized two-income households, parents, including the often-harried working moms, like Maggie Seaver (Joanna Kerns) on *Growing Pains,* remained attentive and involved and unblemished by flaws that could negatively impact their children. Like their 1950s predecessors, their wisdom, insight, and instincts were unerring, making them ideal role models for their children. These mothers and fathers represent a return to Glennon and Butsch's characterization of fifties and sixties sitcom parents as "superpeople always able to successfully deal with any problems that arise, always rational and wise" and "in harmonious agreement" (268). American TV's throwback family sitcoms from the 1980s were mirrored on cable by the actual shows they recalled from the 1950s and 1960s when cable network Nickelodeon started Nick-at-Nite, its popular, long-running primetime block of classic TV reruns in 1984, coincidentally the same year as Reagan's landslide re-election. During the campaign, he spoke frequently about family, including in his Father's Day weekend radio address: "I think we can and should preserve family values—values of faith, honesty, responsibility, tolerance, kindness and love." Sitcoms, then, reflected the majority of Americans' attitude toward family during the decade, one that had tacked considerably to the right since the counterculture's 1960s heyday.

While the networks tweaked the sitcom family's power dynamics and gender roles, they preserved the overall form. Meanwhile, Shandling "flipped the idea of the sitcom inside out" (Apatow 155). To understand how Shandling, in cooperation with Zweibel, led the sitcom to a carnivalesque space for "becoming" that would illustrate its capacity for "change and renewal," it is first useful to chart how it initially follows a genre's typical evolution and how it reverses course. It is

the reversal that positions it as ripe for an infusion of the carnivalesque anarchy *It's Garry Shandling's Show* supplies. Drawing extensively on Henri Fouillon's *The Life of Forms in Art,* Thomas Schatz outlines the stages of a genre's development:

> [A form] passes through an *experimentalm-* stage, during which its conventions are isolated and established, a *classic* stage, in which the conventions reach their "equilibrium" and are mutually understood by artist and audience, an age of *refinement,* during which certain formal and stylistic details embellish the form, and finally a *baroque* (or "mannerist" or "self-reflexive") stage, when the form and its embellishments are accented to the point where they themselves become the "substance" or "content" of the work. (37-38)

Schatz's "baroque" stage perfectly matches Shandling's claim that his show's theme was its convention-busting form.

The sitcom's experimental stage would include programs like *The Goldbergs* (1949–1956) and *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* that establish conventions like a domestic setting anchored by a married couple and plots devoted to humorous, low-stakes everyday problems, mishaps, and misunderstandings. These early sitcoms, adapted from radio programs, also normalize live audience reactions, especially laughter. The sitcom's classic stage would surely encompass the likes of *Leave it to Beaver* (1957–1963), *Father Knows Best* (1954–1960), and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952–1966). In these iconic sitcoms, parents and young

children receive approximately equal screen time. The mother manages the home and maintains order until the father returns from the office to dispense practical wisdom, and, if necessary, mild disciplinary action that returns peace and harmony to the family while assuring the viewer of character growth. In short, the "superperson," or the more specific "super parent," as Butsch later says, is born. Refinement emerges in a show like *The Brady Bunch* (1969–1974) that embellishes the form, blending two families together through remarriage that expands the number of children from the typical two or three to an almost unwieldy six. The gothic horror elements serving shared themes of alienation and prejudice on *The Munsters* (1964–1966) and *The Addams Family* (1964–1966) provide a different type of embellishment achieved through *mise-en-scene* and a reversion to black and white.

The sitcom appears to enter its baroque phase in the 1970s as some shows begin to question the primacy of the patriarchal nuclear family. *Mary Tyler Moore* (1970–1977) never waivers from its belief that a woman can live a fulfilling life without a husband or children. *All in the Family* (1971–1979) interrogated the unerring wisdom of the sitcom father through Archie Bunker's often racist, sexist rhetoric. He and flustered Edith are anything but super parents. The skepticism and questioning built into the premise of these sitcoms shows the genre reaching Schatz's concept of opacity. These shows' writers, creators, and audiences no longer look through the form (or perhaps into the mirror) to glimpse an idealized self-image; rather we look at the form itself to examine and appreciate its cultural appeal (38). In other words, the sitcom moved "from straightforward storytelling to self-conscious formalism" (38).

On the one hand, *The Cosby Show* may be read as the apex of this phase as it refutes the assumption that the telegenic,

upper-middle class family must be white, yet in doing so, it ironically validates Norman Lear's opinion. It sends the sitcom backward, ushering in a revival of the classic phase that temporarily forecloses a further advance into the still more radical variations of the self-reflexive baroque. Cliff and Claire Huxtable are the ultimate sitcom super parents. Although Claire is a formidable and affectionate presence, Cliff is the head of the household, and the show's presentation of him can be summarized using the words of President Reagan's 1984 Father's Day Proclamation: "The love fathers express … can never be separated from character, from devotion, from good humor, and from every tender virtue. Fathers also provide that discipline that begins with concern and commitment and example." The Huxtables, like other 1980s sitcom families, reverse 1970s trends in which "family members opted out" (55). According to Schatz, a genre's reversion to an earlier, seemingly completed stage, like the sitcom's 1980s return to its classic stage, is not unprecedented. He cites the gangster genre as an example because its conventions prompted resistance from religious groups and made it the target of censorship.

Rather than privilege the family in any form, *It's Garry Shandling Show* relegates it to the background. This is exceptionally subversive because, as Richard Butsch claims, three-fourths of all sitcoms on American TV have been about families while many of the remaining one-fourth have been about those alternative "artificial families" (111). Typically, the sitcom foregrounds a family's daily struggles, and those struggles are regularly complicated or interrupted by the "wacky" neighbor or friend who generates laughs through unannounced, drop-in appearances in most episodes. Steve Urkel on *Family Matters* is among the quintessential examples, but his forebearers include the likes of Ed Norton (Art Carney) on *The*

Honeymooners, Eddie Haskell (Ken Osmond) on *Leave it to Beaver,* and the Fonz (Henry Winkler) on *Happy Days. It's Garry Shandling's Show,* by contrast, takes the "wacky" neighbor, neurotic Garry, and makes him the centerpiece of the show. The show's nuclear family, the Schumakers—father Pete (Michael Tucci), mother Jackie (Bernadette Birkett), and pre-teen son Grant (Scott Nemes)—are displaced, relegated to drop-in status. Moreover, the characterization of the Schumakers is far from the idealized treatment expected during the resurgence of the "superparent" tradition seen in the 50s and early 1960s (Butsch 117). Pete, eager to vicariously experience the single life again, persistently asks Garry for details about his dates. He even goes so far as to have an affair. Rather than doing so themselves, Pete and Jackie ask "Uncle Garry" to chaperone Grant's first date, making them expendable in a plot line that is tailor-made for the parent-child tensions and teachable moments sitcoms mine for plots.

Overall, Pete and Grant Schumaker's screentime far outpaces Jackie's. They appear in seventy-one episodes each, while Jackie appears in just forty-two. Marginalizing the sitcom mom is especially subversive because she was the nurturing heart of the genre. Further, the sitcom has historically been marketed to adult women who, in the genre's early days, could see and then purchase the latest appliances found in the kitchens of their TV counterparts. Jackie Schumaker's irrelevance is highly unorthodox given the networks' desire to connect with the growing demographic of professional women in the 1980s. It would not be unreasonable to link Jackie's marginalization to the obsessive drive toward honesty and authenticity that shaped Shandling's career goals and choices. The handwritten journal entries Apatow reproduces in *It's Garry Shandling's Book* repeatedly return to this concern. The sitcom mom in no way matched his experience with his

own mother, Muriel. The defining moment of his life was the death of his brother, Barry, from cystic fibrosis at age 13 when he was 10 (Apatow 15). From that point forward, he felt smothered by Muriel. In a 2009 journal entry, he writes, "<u>your</u> habit growing up was to escape … [b]ecause you were trapped in the room (house) by your mother" (Apatow 21). For him, the sitcom family living in a nurturing home was a fraud, a fact many viewers could identify with. Thoughts of his childhood home provoked a harsh reaction in 2010: "I'm still choking, suffocated by it." Things—including Barry's death—were not discussed in affirming, teachable moments. Instead, the adults were secretive, remembers Garry's cousin Mike: "All through my childhood, when there was serious stuff to talk about, we didn't really know what was going on" (Apatow 16). During a 1983 interview with the teenaged Apatow, Shandling gave a broad but revealing answer to the clichéd question of where he hoped to be in five years, saying, "I hope that it'll be even more honest than it is now, more personal" (150). Using his own sitcom to deny the central place of a happy American every-family reflects that push for the honest and personal.

By making the "wacky" neighbor the protagonist, the show focuses on another sitcom rarity: the upper-middle-class man as fool. "[T]he most memorable sitcoms," Butsch contends, "have been built around a Fool." The fool is "someone of inferior status" (112). The fool's inferiority derives from gender, class, age, and/or race. Therefore, women and African Americans have often fulfilled the stereotype. When a white man, though, gets identified as a fool through a show's comedic situation that gets recapitulated episode after episode, that man's inferiority almost invariably resides in class and related assumptions about his intelligence, or lack thereof:

> One of the most striking patterns in the fifty years of television situation comedy is the consistency in devaluing working-class men's masculinity and thus confirming that class as a deserved lower status … Working-class men have been persistently represented as fools, middle-class men seldom so … [The working-class man] is more or less a buffoon, dumb, incompetent, irresponsible, immature, lacking good sense … Humor was built around some variant of his inadequacy as a man. (112, 115-16)

The sitcom character "Garry Shandling" is, though, the rare upper-middle-class man portrayed as a fool. Viewers never see him performing stand-up anywhere other than in his condo set, yet no one doubts that he is successful. The show's extreme self-referentiality and meta-narrativity likely makes this unnecessary because the show goes to great lengths to ensure viewers understand they are watching a stand-up comedian with enough name recognition, renown, and talent to star in a sitcom about a thinly fictionalized version of himself. Garry Shandling and "Garry Shandling" intentionally coexist in a liminal state between reality and scripted situation comedy. The success of the two gets reinforced through occasional celebrity cameos, like Gilda Radner and Rob Reiner. They appear in the sitcom's diegesis as friends of "Garry Shandling" because they are, no doubt, friends of the real Garry Shandling. If Garry was not at least middle class, such celebrity friends would be unbelievable. To borrow Butsch's words and call "Garry" dumb or incompetent seems too harsh, yet he certainly qualifies as immature when he enthusiastically greets the delivery of Sea Monkeys he has ordered and immediately places them in water and begins

talking to them. In another episode, he and Nancy (Molly Cheek), who Shandling identifies as his "platonic friend," a likely acknowledgment of the kind of will they/won't they tension popularized by *Cheers* (1982–1993) and *Moonlighting* (1985–1989), end up in a childish slap-fight over a children's boxing game. He becomes jealous when the studio audience whoops, hollers, and applauds at the entrance of Gilda Radner, making her first television appearance since her cancer treatment. He can also lack good sense, as he does when he continues to be ruled by his desire for the *femme fatale* in the episode "Dial L for Laundry" despite witnessing her husband's violent behavior and hearing the threats leveled directly at him. Garry's "inadequacy as a man" serves as a consistent source of comedy on *It's Garry Shandling's Show.* It is the core of his character, and it gets reiterated constantly in the pilot episode. Rather than absorb the mockery of other characters through a reliance on insult humor, Garry willingly volunteers the details of his inadequacy. He often draws negative attention to his appearance, especially his hair, the size of his head, and his weight. He reveals his insecurities in the pilot by showing off the portable generator he has for his hairdryer because, he explains, it is important to try to look good even in an emergency. Later, he laments that "television adds three to five pounds to your lips." In the show's more successful early seasons, he struggles to find dates and never sustains a relationship beyond a single episode. In the pilot, he admits to Nancy, "I've never gone out four nights in a row." He lacks confidence and conviction and is easily dominated by women. Off-camera he has seemingly divulged all of his relationship woes to the officer investigating his condo burglary because the officer, on his way out, says, "I wouldn't call the cable girl until you're feeling a little better about yourself." He does not know what to do when he is sexually attracted

to the cable girl but immediately realizes their interests are incompatible. He calls a Dr. Ruth-style radio show, and the host diagnoses him as impotent before he can even explain his situation. Traditional sitcom dads have their potency tacitly affirmed in series' first episodes through the presence of pre-existing children and often reaffirmed through the mother's clichéd late-series surprise pregnancy plot. In Garry's case, marriage, children, and the traditional role of provider seem unattainable if not outright impossibilities. This unconventional situation that produces *It's Garry Shandling's Show'*s comedy illustrates its embrace of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin says, "The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance" (10). A "shifting from top to bottom" (11) results. The sitcom's hierarchy that historically privileges a functioning, well-adjusted biological family headed by a virile, competent, confident father has been inverted, replaced by single, upper-middle-class fool with no prospects for achieving the genre's domestic ideal.

The thinly fictionalized Garry Shandling gives way to more middle-class and upper middle-class sitcom fools in the 1990s through the present. Many of them anchor series uninterested in family narratives. They range from the now obscure Mayor Randall Winston (Barry Bostwick) on *Spin City* to the problematic Pierce Hawthorne (Chevy Chase) on *Community* to the truly iconic. The iconic middle-class and upper-middle-class fools include George Costanza (Jason Alexander) on *Seinfeld,* Phil Dunphy (Ty Burrell) on *Modern Family,* and Michael Scott (Steve Carrell) on *The Office.*

DIRECT ADDRESS: GOING BACK TO THE FUTURE

It's Garry Shandling's Show uses frequent direct address to skewer the sitcom family and characterize Garry as an up-

per-middle-class fool. It jettisons the super parents from the center of the narrative to mock the sober preaching and conveniently-timed epiphanies of the "very special episode," a uniquely 1980s contribution to the sitcom that brings a show's family into contact with controversial topics. These episodes trade laughs for a heightened didacticism and more serious tone. They highlight the unimpeachable authority of sitcom superparents. They make complex issues (like racism) understandable and put risky behaviors (like drug use and eating disorders) in proper perspective, usually in a stern but loving manner. By episode's end, characters have learned a lesson and their preconceived notions have been challenged and corrected, and, in many cases, viewers have been given a hotline number to call for help or more information. Take, for instance, "Wesley's Friend," the episode of *Mr. Belvedere* (1985–1990) in which Wesley's (Brice Beckham) elementary school classmate contracts AIDS through a blood transfusion, and the Owens family must learn that AIDS is not communicable in the same way as the common cold. Mr. Belvedere (Christopher Hewitt), the family's live-in housekeeper, even calls the CDC to have this information confirmed.

During carnival, "civil and social ceremonies and rituals took on a comic aspect as clowns and fools … mimicked serious rituals" (Bakhtin 5). Shandling-as-fool mimics—and mocks—the serious rituals of the sitcom: the wise parent guiding an adolescent through the milestones on the path to adulthood, its simplistic character growth achieved through an episode's concluding teachable moment and subsequent reflection, and the return to the comforting status quo at episode's end. These elements reach melodramatic critical mass in "very special episodes."

Multiple episodes of *It's Garry Shandling's Show* end with

Garry giving an impractical lesson in direct address, in essence mocking the "super parent" wisdom of the genre. "Dial 'L' for Laundry" ends with him concluding that "I guess we've learned a lesson tonight. If your jokes are good enough, you don't need to resort to violence." The so-called lesson is itself a joke. The mockery of "very special episodes" returns in "Grant's Date." At its conclusion, Garry takes a break from reassuring Grant Schumaker he will have better dates in the future to address the audience: "I hope you enjoyed tonight's show because the explosive issue was chaperoning, and the lesson we learned was I'm no good at it. Next week's explosive issue is pen pals. Do we really need to know what they look like?" Here, too, the lesson is a joke. Chaperoning and pen pals are anything but explosive issues, especially compared to the hot-button, ripped-from-the-headlines topics very special episodes trafficked in. While he is busy counseling Grant and speaking to viewers, Pete and Jackie, the potential super parents, are nowhere to be found.

The show's refusal to treat the family and the genre's dual goals of entertainment plus education with reverence suits its initial home, Showtime, a pay cable network that could take creative risks. Without advertisers' and the FCC's constraints, it, too, with its programming of provocative stand-up comedy, R-rated movies, and risqué adult programming, reflected the overall carnivalesque appeal of cable that lured consumers to subscribe in the 1980s. Showtime provided *It's Garry Shandling's Show* a space where it could audaciously foreshadow the sitcom's shifting attitude toward the family. With the "super parent" hit sitcoms dominating ratings, Shandling and Zweibel understood that this nostalgic return to genre tropes of the 50s and 60s had an imminent expiration date. Perhaps not coincidentally, 1987 marks the debut of *Married … with Children* about the unrefined and

cartoonish Bundys. Then, in 1988, *Roseanne* would premiere, and the idealized white-collar family would be replaced with blue collar parents who brutally mocked and insulted not only each other but their children. Fifteen years later, in 2003, *Arrested Development* introduced the Bluths, the anti-sitcom family, a group of unloving, yet lovable, misfits who can't seem to learn from their mistakes. And they would do so in a form equally steeped in self-reflexivity, parody, and allusion. Other sitcoms, notably *Seinfeld* with its "no hugging, no learning" ethos, abandoned family and its attendant sentimentality altogether. *The Office* pushed back against the workplace family trope. Part of Michael Scott's foolishness resides in his whole-hearted commitment to the delusion that his Dunder-Mifflin coworkers are his family.

It's Garry Shandling's Show propels the sitcom forward not just by using direct address to challenge the primacy of the family but by looking backward to *Burns and Allen*. In fact, Shandling made Zweibel read the book *Say Goodnight, Gracie! The Story of Burns & Allen* before they started developing scripts (Zweibel). By restoring the self-reflexive playfulness of the *Burns and Allen* show, Shandling re-establishes the merging of sitcom narrative with stand-up comedy. The *Burns and Allen* show features the pair playing slightly fictionalized versions of themselves who are also starring in a television show. Following their example, a handful of other early sitcoms, like *The Danny Thomas Show, The Morey Amsterdam Show,* and later seasons of *The Red Buttons Show* used a similar premise. Over time, family sitcoms from the genre's classic phase largely overshadowed them. Shandling, though, resurrects the loosely autobiographical premise of comedian-as-protagonist, which would soon be adopted by Jerry Seinfeld for his "show about nothing." *Seinfeld* episodes often begin with Jerry doing a brief stand-up bit on a topic related

to the plot. These segments take place on a low-lit set resembling a comedy club, and the camera cuts to reaction shots of laughing audience members after each punchline. Years later, Louis C.K. would also incorporate stand-up comedy vignettes in his own semi-autobiographical sitcom, only these were filmed in actual New York City comedy clubs.

On *The Burns and Allen Show,* however, George Burns regularly separates himself from the unfolding action to comment on it in direct address monologues that digress into stand-up riffs on topics related to the plot. In early seasons he does so against a stage backdrop or traverses the set to stand just beyond it to deliver his monologue. In later seasons, these stand-up commentaries take place on the set resembling his real-life house or on the patio. Gracie and the other characters conveniently disappear so that George can speak confidentially to the audience about what has been happening. The monologues and other moments of direct address establish George as the voice of reason, as the opposite of the fool. By using this method to place himself on the intellectual high ground, he introduces a formal tension into the sitcom. Stand-up comedy and the situation comedy are "aesthetically at odds" because the former is "a surviving bastion of individual expression" (Marc 10) while the latter "is the technology of the assembly line brought to art" (11) that Shandling revisits and lays bare.

Shandling opens episodes by entering his condo's main living area from the unseen bedroom to deliver a brief stand-up monologue. Before beginning, he acknowledges the applauding studio audience with sheepish "thank yous," which function both as displays of gratitude and coded entreaties to be quiet, so he can tell his first joke. This resembles the familiar ritualized structure of the late-night talk show, where

Shandling first gained widespread notoriety, and asserts the show's affinity for genre hybridity at the start of each episode. Like Burns, Shandling's direct address also slips into each episode's narrative as he pauses to offer cheeky, confessional asides in the middle of scenes. In the first episode of his show, Shandling's new condo is robbed by the men who just helped him move in because he failed to change the locks. He tells the audience, "I've been robbed. First my girlfriend moves in with another guy. Now my stuff moves in with another guy." This is a bit adapted directly from Shandling's stand-up routines. Male inadequacy is the bread and butter of his stand-up material as his five-minute set on the July 29, 1983 episode of *The Tonight Show* proves:

> I think I've heard every excuse for a woman not going to bed with me. I remember this one girl actually said, "Look, not with this Falkland Islands thing." I said, "That's over a year ago." She said, "I haven't gotten over it yet." I said, "Well, I can understand that, Mrs. Thatcher." So, actually, I'm great in bed. I never fall out. I have guardrails. I have a hospital bed, basically. I have a mirror above my bed and on it, it says, "Objects are larger than they appear."

Stand-up comedy's direct address is, then, the genesis of Garry-as-upper-middle-class-fool. If the stand-up comic achieves a "heroic quality" (11) because he goes before an audience "[w]ithout the protection of the formal mask of a narrative drama," then Shandling sews further tension into the sitcom. Revealing his foolishness through standup performed within a sitcom helps him achieve an unlikely measure of heroism by being anything but traditionally heroic or masculine.

On *It's Garry Shandling's Show,* direct address does more than undermine the sitcom family and establish Garry as a middle-class fool. Shandling uses it to mimic Burns's penchant for acknowledging realities of TV production and amplify the show's baroque self-referentiality. *The Burns and Allen Show* "denies the gap between art and life" (Marc16), using its stand-up and vaudeville interludes to create a "dislocated, absurdist tone" (18). Burns once interrupted an episode to introduce the audience and cast to Larry Keating, the new actor taking over the part of Harry Morton. Shandling embraces the absurd when he draws attention to the need to use an ellipsis to condense time, saying, "All right, here's where we are now in the story … My stuff has been stolen. It was great stuff … Now it's 20 minutes later, and I've got to do this scene where I deal with the cop." Other characters don't acknowledge Burns's temporary departure from the storyline, but Garry's friends know they are part of his television show. Nancy answers his phone, *"It's Garry Shandling's Show."* She also expresses frustration with the show's meta-theme song, which she hates. His nemesis, condo board president Leonard Smith (Paul Wilson), tries to suggest new scenes so that he can be on camera more. Even pre-adolescent Grant Schumaker participates in the self-reflexivity, sarcastically saying, "Thanks for giving me a big part in this week's show, Uncle Garry," when he appears in only one scene.

The prominence of direct address draws the viewer into Shandling's playful, unpredictable story-world and cements the show's identity as a herald of the sitcom's baroque phase. Intimacy between character and audience is one of direct address's most obvious outcomes. It is done "for the sake of encouraging our sympathy or some other kind of special connection with a character" (13). Direct address, then, seems to encourage the carnival experience as Bakhtin describes

it: "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all people" (7). In the case of *It's Garry Shandling's Show,* "everyone" encompasses Shandling, the cast, the crew who also appear on camera, the studio audience, and, thanks to direct address, the viewing audience at home. Everyone is participating in the show's baroque self-referentiality.

David Marc contends that sitting in a sitcom's live studio audience "is to witness the preparation of a drama, not its performance" (23) because audience members likely endure multiple takes while having their view obstructed by the crew, cameras, teleprompters, and other equipment. Conversely, the home audience experiences a given episode as polished performance. Because the *It's Garry Shandling's Show'*s home audience has greater access to the production as a production (or at least the simulacrum of a production as opposed to a finished product), they, too, experience some sense of preparation rather than a polished performance like one would expect when attending, says, a Broadway play or even local repertory theatre. Everyone—whether a member of the studio or home audience—recognizes they are witnessing successful stand-up comic Garry Shandling attempt to succeed as a sitcom star, a logical progression for someone ascending in the field. *It's Garry Shandling's Show* brings the two audiences into alignment in relation to one another and the staged narrative. Both are subject to the "stand-up's refusal to respect sharp distinctions between the 'play' world and the 'real' world [that] results in a violation of a primary convention of western theater" (Marc 14). Shandling's stand-up monologue at the top of each episode, in tandem with the meta-theme song that follows, signals this departure and the invitation to read the show not as his effort to legitimately take up acting through the performance of a distinct char-

acter but to approach it as a documentary of his efforts to elevate his career through an attempt at fusing stand-up comedy with the situation comedy so that he does not have to "act" before a camera in a traditionally performative way that denies its presence. (This aligns the show with Shandling's goal of pursuing greater honesty through his comedy.) The studio audience has never been a sitcom episode's intended audience. At-home viewers take precedence because advertisers need them to buy the products during commercial breaks. Or, for a cable network like Showtime, they need to attract viewers who will continue their subscriptions. In carnivalesque style, the show dismantles the accepted hierarchy. The privileged home audience is denied the opportunity to suspend disbelief and are instead presented with something closer, though not identical to, the spectacle playing out before the live studio audience. It has the look of a production in the state of becoming, not completion.

Historically, direct address had played a limited role in the sitcom. *It's Garry Shandling's Show* bridges the gap from Burns and Allen to 1990s sitcoms like *Saved By the Bell* (1989–1993) and Zack Morris's (Mark-Paul Gosselaar) trademark "time outs" that temporarily freeze the action for brief commentary or *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990–1996), when Will (Will Smith) says "gotcha" to the camera and sends a tricked Carlton (Alfonso Ribiero) running from set to set and into the studio audience screaming. Viewers would not have been unfamiliar with direct address in 1986, when *It's Garry Shandling's Show* debuted. It briefly re-emerged in the sitcom through Sally Field on *Gidget* (1965–1966) and occasional usage on *Green Acres* (1965–1971). However, direct address had become increasingly prevalent in 1970s film comedies. Mel Brooks used it in his genre parody films, like *Blazing Saddles* (1974), and Woody Allen educated moviegoers on

the theories of Marshall McLuhan in *Annie Hall* (1977). Shandling's motivation for using it is the same as those New Hollywood-era directors who deployed it to signal a kind of "'counter-cinema' resistant to the manipulative mainstream" (Brown 6). He, too, is protesting "conservative structures of conventional … representation." Without direct address fueling self-reflexivity, the sitcom is "repressive because it leaves the viewer in a passive, inert position, merely indulged in their escapist voyeurism" (7). Shandling helps to reintroduce what was, for the sitcom, a largely dormant technique. Using it to expose the artifice, predictability, and industrial realities of television and its genres, direct address is an indispensable tool for him to achieve the truth and authenticity he wanted to share with audiences.

Direct address has since become a defining trait of mockumentary sitcoms like *The Office* (2005–2013). Its documentary conceit is so loosely maintained and seldom acknowledged that when characters retreat to the Dunder-Mifflin breakroom for their talking head confessionals, it is easy to feel as if they are talking directly to viewers rather than the film crew that functions as an intermediary. In addition, non-verbal moments of true direct address recur frequently, most often thanks to Jim Halpert (John Krasinski), who, along with Pam Beasley (Jenna Fischer), is one of the audience's surrogates inside the ridiculous world of Dunder Mifflin. Their expressions convey astonishment, realization, bemusement, and disbelief. When confronted with an unexpected piece of information or an inappropriate comment, Jim's gaze meets that of the camera, and he mugs for it, raising his eyebrows or sticking out his bottom lip. *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015) adopts the same conceits, and direct address has become so commonplace in television comedy as to no longer qualify as transgressive. It features in contemporaneous shows like

Modern Family (2009–2020), which brought it fully into the mainstream through its popularity with viewers, critics, and Emmy voters. Its prominence in American TV has continued in recent niche comedies, like *What We Do in the Shadows* (2019–present) and *She-Hulk: Attorney-at-Law* (2022). The most acclaimed use of direct address in a recent TV comedy, though, belongs to BBC's *Fleabag* (2016–2019). Already the subject of mainstream entertainment media criticism as well as a growing body of scholarly inquiry, the similarities and differences between Phoebe Waller-Bridge's "ability to fuse form and content" (Wilson 427) through it and Shandling's merits consideration but exceeds the parameters of this article as it requires attention to the unique aspects of TV comedy's development in the UK. Similarly worthy of exploration is how both Waller-Bridge and Shandling used live stage performance to carefully calibrate "comic abjection" (422) that they then adapt to explicitly postmodern television storytelling.

YOU'VE ENTERED THE PARODY ZONE

Bakhtin identifies parody as an integral ingredient of the carnivalesque. *It's Garry Shandling's Show,* through direct address to both the at-home and studio audiences, invites them to live in "second world" (Bakhtin 11) of carnivalesque parody that operates as "creative criticism" (Gehring 4). In the mid-1970s through early 1980s, television aggressively parodied its other popular genres regularly. It happened on a near-weekly basis on sketch comedy programs like *Saturday Night Live* (1975–present) and the Canadian *SCTV* (1976–1984). The short-lived *Fernwood 2 Night* (1977) parodied late-night local talk shows. *Not Necessarily the News* aired its parody newscasts on HBO from 1983–1990. *Late Night with David Letterman* (1982–1993) staged an episode-long parody of a morning talk show, complete with perky female

cohost, in February 1985. Prior to *It's Garry Shandling's Show* the most formally subversive sitcom may have been Susan Harris's *Soap* (1977–1981), a primetime parody of daytime soap operas that combines defining characteristics of the American daytime drama (a large cast of characters, outrageous plot twists, high-stakes scenarios like infidelity and murder, serialized storytelling) with the sitcom (thirty-minute timeslot, live studio audience, medium and medium long shots rather than soap opera's medium closeups and closeups).The sitcom, though, had largely evaded similar comedic scrutiny. Even *Saturday Night Live* rarely engaged with the sitcom. One exception is the epic, *tour de force* "compound parody" (Gehring 13) of *The Twilight Zone* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* starring host Ricky Nelson, who sends up his own sitcom past as he is trapped in a *Groundhog Day* scenario that finds him unable to get home. He repeatedly thinks he is walking into his family's kitchen only to discover it is the home of another 1950s sitcom family. He is easily fooled because the settings (a suburban, middle-class kitchen) and the people (namely Jane Curtain as sitcom mom in various wigs), and situations (mom offering kids after-school brownies) are nearly identical each time. It is an unmistakable skewering of the family sitcom's homogeneity. Judy Kutulas uses the sketch to support her discussion of the 1960s's youth counterculture's continued assault on the nuclear family into the 1970s (24). However, she undersells its iconoclastic brilliance as it parodies not only those anthology series but five sitcoms: *Leave it to Beaver, Father Knows Best, The Danny Thomas Show, I Love Lucy,* and *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show.* Given the dearth of sitcom parodies, the creatively moribund genre was ripe for both parody of itself by the mid-1980s and, as *Soap* demonstrated, for it to be a site for parodying other genres to revitalize itself.

Saul Austerlitz's book *Sitcom* unsurprisingly omits *It's Garry Shandling's Show* from its history of the genre. It concludes with NBC's *Community.* He identifies it as the moment when the sitcom truly understood itself after spending "its first sixty years slowly discovering its contours, its traditions, its clichés, its ideals" (369). He calls it "dazzling metafiction," a watershed moment when "the sitcom fully comprehends its debts to television past" (370) with no hint at anything similar preceding it. *Community* became a pop culture sensation with its acclaimed Season 1 episode "Modern Warfare" that depicts a Darwinian, campus-wide paintball fight for priority registration using nearly every recognizable action movie trope of both form and content, including many moments of overt homage to specific movies. From this point forward, *Community* repackages itself as largely a series of one-off parody episodes. Several parody other TV genres and specific shows. "Cooperative Calligraphy" is a bottle episode in which Jeff Winger (Joel McHale) and friends never leave their library study room. "Basic Lupine Urology is a meticulous recreation of a *Law & Order* episode. "Pillows and Blankets" parodies the documentary style of Ken Burns, and "Abed's Uncontrollable Christmas" resurrects Rankin/Bass stop-motion animation. While these episodes are hilarious and thrilling in their attention to detail, *It's Garry Shandling's Show* has never been credited for its own set of elaborate parody episodes that pre-date *Community* by 23 years.

Austerlitz's assertion that *Community* "embraces its own self-awareness, refracting the predictable genre exercises of mediocre movies and television through its warped lens" could equally apply to *It's Garry Shandling's Show.* Shandling certainly parodied sitcoms' "very special episodes" through his direct address. In addition, the episode "Laffie" parodies the classic sitcom *Lassie* (1954–1971), complete with

the non-diegetic whistling synonymous with the show and a brief black-and-white title sequence as Garry slips all too easily into the role of the eager and affectionate Timmy when an exceptionally perceptive collie appears outside his patio doors. He immediately recognizes the dog's similarities to Lassie and calls it Laffie because "we couldn't get the rights to use that name." Like Timmy, he can instantly interpret the dog's urgent barks, which helps when Laffie "tells" Garry that Leonard has gotten his foot caught in nearby railroad tracks. With the earnest wholesomeness of *Lassie* hyperbolically amplified, and, therefore, rendered ridiculous, Garry, Nancy, and Laffie reach Leonard and save him just as a miniature model train comes puffing down the tracks that have inexplicably appeared behind Garry's condo. *Lassie'*s star, June Lockhart, dressed in the prim shirt dress and apron of the 1950s homemaker, even makes a heartwarming appearance as Laffie's real owner at the episode's conclusion.

In "Dial L for Laundry," Garry gets sucked into the *film noir*-style web of a mysterious, alluring, and blond *femme fatale* he meets in the condo complex's laundry room. When they meet, the laundry room fills with a blanket of fog reminiscent of the iconic image from *The Big Combo.* A non-diegetic saxophone begins to play a sultry version of George Gershwin's "Summertime." The woman, named Sylvia, bears a passing resemblance to Lauren Bacall, and she talks in the clipped, no-nonsense way of a hardboiled detective's voiceover. She is a predatory female, the whore of *noir,* juggling multiple men: thoroughly bewitched Garry, her thuggish ex who threatens to kill Garry if he ever sees Sylvia again, and Johnny, who has just been released from prison.

And the episode "The Graduate" is, naturally, a skewering of the New Hollywood classic starring Dustin Hoffman. Now

Garry finds himself aggressively pursued by his mother's seductive friend Mrs. Robertson, when he just wants to go out with her daughter, Elaine, who is rarely around because she is away at college in Berkeley. When Mrs. Robertson first flirts with him, Simon and Garfunkel's "Sounds of Silence" suddenly begins to play, and during the opening credits Garry stares into an aquarium filled with plastic fish. As in the "Laffie" episode, Garry is wise to what is going on, telling the audience, "Well, it was weird with that woman, huh? It was like *The Graduate."* Even before the obvious signifiers pile up, the episode lays the foundation for a truly thorough parody. Garry announces that he has "the blahs" and may be experiencing a "mid-series crisis" that leaves him unmotivated to do a monologue. He is becoming the lackadaisical Benjamin Braddock. The easy to miss irony of the episode, which also recreates the shot of Braddock framed by Mrs. Robinson's bent leg, is that a network executive has just announced that the show has been renewed for twelve more episodes. Garry rejects the idea of doing movies now that the show is a success. The episode's script, however, has other ideas as he finds himself starring in a parody of a groundbreaking movie.

Like direct address, parody reflects an anti-establishment sensibility (Gehring 21) that further helps Shandling advance goals of truth and authenticity because it is "an educational tool" (Gehring 4) that uses laughter to jolt audiences out of their passivity and into awareness of narrative conventions. For this reason, parody also allows Shandling to jolt the genre out of complacency, to make "its target part of its own structure, in order to somehow refunction it." Part of that refunctioning is the fact that Shandling is not just parodying other genres, film, and television shows but his own stand-up persona as episodes like "The Graduate" and "Dial L for Laundry" exaggerate his obsessions with his physical

appearance and dating failures and mock his middle-class fool persona.

It's Garry Shandling's Show's high-concept, self-aware sensibility, which had been largely dormant for decades, has become the norm in American television, so that viewers today all but expect sitcoms to incorporate the postmodern techniques Shandling weaves into each episode. Now, viewers can be charmed by, rather than befuddled by *WandaVision*'s (2021) mystery presented through the meticulous recreation of classic sitcoms' *mise-en-scene,* narrative structure, production strategies, and soundtrack. *WandaVision* is not parody because it never rises to "creative criticism." The layers of homage are in service of the standard MCU superhero climactic set pieces, not pop culture critique. Regardless, it can trace its lineage back through *Community* and *It's Garry Shandling's Show* as well as the classic sitcoms it painstakingly recreates. Austerlitz describes viewers' reaction to *Community*'s self-referentiality as "joyous" (382) yet wonders if it "is a dead end, a trap that the sitcom had stumbled into and could never profitably escape" (383). Even if that was true—and Austerlitz does not think that it is—that would not change the fact that *Community*'s self-referentiality is blended with the "heartfelt" (382) and "emotional" (382) to achieve something "more realistic" (382). Shandling could thread that needle, too. To see how, one only needs to watch the episode "Mr. Smith Goes to 'Nam" that poignantly confronts trauma and mortality through Leonard's war experience—a likely nod to 1980s Vietnam movies like *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket*—and Gilda Radner's cancer. The sitcom has become a genre perpetually at odds with itself, straining to separate itself from trite artifice, banal plots, and facile emotions. Like Shandling, it continues to pursue realism and honesty so that a series such as *The Bear* can pack moments of emotional

devastation and astounding character revelation into thirty-minute episodes shot on location yet also provide enough laugh-out-loud moments to merit Emmy Award recognition as a comedy. This is the legacy of Garry's show.

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Get Things Done: The Commodification of David Bowie in 1983

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By Sam Coley

ABSTRACT

1983 was a pivotal point in the career of musician David Bowie. It was a time of personal and artistic renewal, which ultimately transformed him from an "eternal outsider" into a global superstar. The 40th anniversary of his landmark 1983 album *Let's Dance* provides an opportunity to consider the business acumen behind the dramatic repositioning of Bowie's brand, and to reevaluate accusations of 'selling-out' and 'inauthenticity' in his quest for mainstream international success.

Keywords: David Bowie, Let's Dance, Branding, 1983, Popular Music, Authenticity

Hacer las cosas: la mercantilización de David Bowie en 1983

RESUMEN

1983 fue un punto crucial en la carrera del músico David Bowie. Fue una época de renovación personal y artística, que finalmente lo transformó de un "eterno outsider" a una superestrella mundial. El 40.º aniversario de su emblemático álbum de 1983, Let's Dance, brinda la oportunidad de considerar la perspicacia comercial detrás del espectacular reposicionamiento de la marca Bowie y de reevaluar las acusaciones de "vendida" y "falta de autenticidad" en su búsqueda del éxito internacional.

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把事情做好：1983年大卫·鲍伊的商品化

摘要

1983年是音乐家大卫·鲍伊职业生涯的关键点。那是一个个人和艺术革新的时期，最终使他从一个"永远的局外人"变成了全球超级巨星。他在1983年推出的具有里程碑意义的专辑《让我们跳舞吧》已问世40年，让我们有机会思考鲍伊品牌戏剧性重新定位背后的商业头脑，并重新评价在他追求主流国际成功的过程中出现的关于"卖光"和"不真实"的指控。

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INTRODUCTION

I n early 1983, theatre and arts critic Pia Lindström interviewed David Bowie for WNBC-TV, New York. She came away somewhat surprised, commenting "it seems that David Bowie is not just a kinky extrovert who flashed on the scene. He strikes one now as a somewhat shy, thoughtful, and rather serious person. I suspect we are seeing the transformation of David Bowie" (Tanaferry, 2022). At the time, the exact nature of this transformation was still unclear, but Lindström's assessment had presciently identified the emergence of Bowie's latest public persona. His 1983 reinvention would polarise both critical and public opinion, but it was undoubtedly a commercial success. The period had a defining impact on Bowie's career trajectory and, therefore, provides a useful case study to explore the significance of business and enterprise in the creation and presentation of popular music. This paper uses the *Let's Dance* album to illustrate how musicians may incorporate business acumen and entrepreneurial flair as an element of the artistic process. The interplay between music and commerce has been extensively investigated in scholarly literature on popular culture and music. However, in the wide-ranging, interdisciplinary field of Bowie studies, his underlying commercial motivations have been often overlooked or underplayed. This paper explores the tension between Bowie's business instincts and creative output, reflecting on the level of artistic compromise required to achieve mainstream success. To appreciate Bowie's commercial proficiency, it is necessary to understand his early influences and motivations. The paper, therefore, discusses Bowie's initial exposure to commerce and his adoption of Warholian business practices to obtain lasting success. The opening section suggests the creation of art can serve as a form of entrepreneurial practice, framing Bowie's career de-

velopment and output as capitalist activity. The focus then shifts to the establishment, maintenance and commodification of Bowie's brand and sub-brands, followed by an examination of the production, packaging, and presentation of the *Let's Dance* album. This includes theoretical considerations regarding Bowie's personal life and mindset during the early 1980s and how these factors may have functioned as catalysts for his transformative shift towards mainstream appeal. The paper then discusses the accusations of inauthenticity and selling-out which followed the enormous global success of *Let's Dance*. This section applies Keightley's (2011) concept of authenticity in rock culture by viewing the production of *Let's Dance* through the lens of Romanticism and Modernism. The concluding section reviews the album's enduring impact on David Bowie's career trajectory and considers the interplay between artistic expression, commercial success, and personal evolution. The *Let's Dance* era is framed as a pivotal moment in Bowie's career which represented a deliberate shift toward maturity, stability, and a calculated embrace of the mainstream.

The music industry seeks to turn music into commodities, and in doing so "turns musicians into commodities" (Frith, 1983, 134). This transformation is achieved through the creation of stars. In this respect, Bowie's move towards stardom in 1983 can be viewed as a premeditated, yet creative, act of commodification. Bowie's confident, almost mercenary approach is heralded in the opening lines of *Modern Love*, the first track on the *Let's Dance* album. Here, the protagonist lays out his manifesto for productivity: knowing when to "stay in" and "go out" in order to "get things done." According to Blake (2016), this assertive new Bowie presents himself as a metaphorical "Thatcherite go-getter [...] on the trading floor after a lunchtime workout" (82). There was no longer time for

oblique strategies, random cutups, or improvisation. Here was a level-headed, laser-focused Bowie, with a clear sense of purpose. His pithy "get things done" philosophy was "the voice of his new 1980s persona: the businessman, the man of the people, the man who sold the world" (Brooker, 2017, 211). For Buckley (2013) the album's introduction was a mission-statement which announced a renewed sense of purpose, "He knew how to party, but he also now knew that music was serious and that was his job—and that he meant business."

Figure 1. David Bowie, Serious Moonlight Tour, June 1983, Berlin Waldbühne, Bernd Schunack Mauritius Images GmbH / Alamy Stock Photo.

BOWIE AS BUSINESSMAN

On occasion, David Bowie characterized himself as a business construct or consumer product: "I'm an instant star. Just add water and stir" (Halliwell, 2003). In the documentary *The Fine Art of Separating People from Their Money* (Vaske, 1998), which explored the links between creativity and com-

merciality, Bowie referred to the advertising dictum "product plus personality equals brand" and light-heartedly applied it to his own career. An interview with Q magazine featured another flippant retail comparison, "I'm more of a supermarket of things, rather than a craft shop […] I'm less corner shop, more your Woolworths" (Quantik, 1999, 92). While these comments were intended to amuse, they each contained an element of truth. While Bowie may not have enjoyed the business side of his career, he nevertheless approached it with a degree of creativity and valued its importance in terms of career development. The origins of his business ambitions and the first practical steps towards global success, can be found in his early associations with the world of commerce. To some extent, show business was in his blood. According to Kenneth Pitt (1983), Bowie's manager in the late 60s, his father, Haywood Stenton Jones, demonstrated a certain "entrepreneurial flair" (10). In 1933 Jones Snr had hoped to become an "entertainment impresario" by opening a piano bar in London (Marsh and Broackes, 2013, 28). When the venture failed, he then worked as a promotions officer for the Barnardo's children's charity, before being appointed head of public relations in 1956. Through this role, Jones Jr. was able to meet various stars of the day and witness at close hand the basic functions of his Father's job, such as the day-to-day planning and management of campaigns. In 1963, at 16 years of age, David Jones left school to start his first job at an advertising agency, where he was introduced to "new theories on amplifying the effectiveness of mass marketing" and learnt techniques to influence an audience (Marsh and Broackes, 2013, 30). Bowie's short-lived time in advertising was an "Orwellian" experience, which supposedly revealed the industry to be a "dark controlling force" (Dogget, 2011, 29). Yet despite these early misgivings, Bowie's teenage as-

sociation with advertising would subsequently alter how he viewed himself as an artist.

Bowie understood and embraced music business concepts of identity production early in his career, "acquiring a highly reflexive understanding of himself as an object to be fashioned and marketed" (Bennett, 2017, 575). However, gaining mainstream recognition took time. After years of struggle, the song *Space Oddity* finally earned him acclaim in 1969. Yet Bowie and his management had been unable to truly capitalise on the song's popularity. The catalyst he needed ultimately came from the world of fine art. It was the influence of Andy Warhol and the Factory which provided the inspiration for Bowie's future success. Like Bowie, Warhol had worked for a time in advertising. Warhol had successfully drawn on his commercial know-how to combine the world of marketing with his artistic ability and, in doing so, generated lucrative self-publicity for himself and his work (Fillis, 2002). Bowie effectively took Warhol's notion of "celebrity" as an art form and repurposed it for the world of music. Here was a new approach which would allow, and even celebrate, interactions between entrepreneurial business practice and artistic creativity. By embracing mass culture his work could "be sold as art without being cheapened thereby" (Auxier, 2017, 38). The influence of Warhol and his Factory on musicians like Bowie helped usher in a post 60s movement in which "commercialization and consumerism were a means to a radical end" (Van Cagle, 1995, 14). Hoare (2013) goes so far to say that Bowie would not have existed without the inspiration that Warhol provided. His approach to art and marketing gave Bowie permission to be "an artist—a fine artist" (293). Bowie paid tribute with his song *Andy Warhol* in 1971 then, in the 90s, he portrayed the artist in the film Basquiat (1996). When Bowie's manager Tony Defries formed the MainMan

Group of Companies in 1972, the initial staff were select-
ed from the cast of Warhol's infamous play *Pork*, as well as
Factory regulars. They became enablers who helped realise
Defries' strategy of Bowie behaving like a star "in order to
become a star" (Pegg, 2000, 291). The less-than-favourable
contract that Bowie inadvertently entered with MainMan in
1971, which had a lasting impact on his financial well-being
for subsequent decades, served as a pivotal reality check. The
experience compelled him to recognize the critical signifi-
cance of business acumen in shaping his career development.
Nevertheless, Defries' management skills and promotional
flair undoubtably played a part of Bowie's early success.

Instead of rejecting the commodification of rock as being
corrupt, Harron (2016) argues that Bowie "openly used its
machinery and hype to promote himself into its pantheon,"
while simultaneously telling his audience exactly what he
was doing (162). Bowie's 1972 *Ziggy Stardust* album, most-
ly recorded after his first meeting with Warhol, told the tale
of a famous rock star. This foreshadowing narrative was key
in making him an actual rock star (Lampert, 2016, 154-
55). Similarly, his presentation as a suave, successful, media
friendly entertainer around the time of *Let's Dance* fulfilled
its own prophecy, garnering widespread public acceptance
and a subsequent fortune. However, the *Ziggy Stardust* char-
acter did not risk a sizable, already established fan-base. If
the venture failed, he could always try again with relatively
little cost. Conversely, Bowie's *Let's Dance* reinvention could
have conceivably damaged his brand with far greater con-
sequences. There was more to lose. The *Let's Dance* project
was, therefore, informed by the capitalist principles of entre-
preneurship: the development of new business in the hope
of generating a profit, while taking on financial risk. For
Scherdin and Zander (2011) the creation of art "captures

the essence of entrepreneurial activity" (1). There is a need for imagination and an artistic vision to identify a financial opportunity and then conceive a plan to attain it. The venture may require lateral thinking, a calculated risk, or a willingness to bypass traditional thinking. Bowie had taken entrepreneurial approaches throughout his career, disrupting traditional methods of being "sold and marketed as a product" to great effect (Cinque and Redmond, 2019, 27). His initial fame in the early 70s had been achieved by "a radical shift in his creative strategy" (Bennet, 2017, 574). However, by the early 80s he was still regarded as a somewhat cult artist (Trainer, 2003). Bowie had tasted success and was largely feted by critics, but he had not yet gained broad mainstream recognition. Reaching the next level of stardom required another equally radical strategy. To capture a new global audience, Bowie was required to shed some of his existing fan base; those who might question a perceived pandering to mainstream tastes. From a business perspective, it was a risk that made sense. Marketing strategies which attempt to target both new and old customers are generally not effective (Rosenberg and Czepiel, 1984). The *Let's Dance* album and its presentation was an intentional move to reposition Bowie in the public eye and shift him towards a younger audience. This was largely achieved by distancing himself from the art presentation and stylisation of the past (Hall, 2013). Walking away from his established brand as the "eternal outsider" of the 70s was a gamble, with no guarantee of success (Dogget, 2011, 289). There was an established precedent for this behaviour, as countering public expectation was a tried and tested Bowie strategy which had effectively become his trademark. That said, the *Let's Dance* project was certainly a radical break from his presentation in the late 70s and early 80s. Bradbury (2013) claimed the album effectively "took a blow torch" to the enigma he had cultivated throughout the

70s (121). Blake (2016) claimed that Bowie was ripping up his "manual" (82). In truth, he was closely following his manual for drastic reinvention, honing past strategies, and drawing on a wealth of first-hand marketing experience.

The creation and maintenance of a musician's brand is an essential element of their commerciality. This was certainly true for Bowie, who was open to diversification and not coy about deploying his brand for financial gains beyond the music industry. As Buckley (2013) observed, Bowie regularly allowed his name to be branded, "using stardom as a commodity" to transform his "cultural kudos" into revenue streams. Across his career and posthumously, David Bowie's image and musical works have been authorized and replicated in numerous commercial contexts (Cinque and Redmond, 2019). Bowie himself appeared in advertisements for consumer products and strategically sanctioned the use of his music in film, television, and commercial soundtracks. The following section explores Bowie as a brand and considers *Let's Dance* as a rebranding exercise designed to invigorate his flagging U.S. profile in the early 80s.

BRAND BOWIE

Frew and McPherson's (2015) analysis of branding in the music industry argues that musicians are framed within an industrialised, neo-liberal ideology. The artist is part of a production line which takes musicians through stages of evolving from a creative individual to an entrepreneurial artist, culminating in the attainment of a branded celebrity status. They describe the music industry as a mass market, where artists and their music have become managed commodities to be exploited for brand development. This is not a new phenomenon. Stars and their name have always been a form of

brand. They are created and fueled by multimedia strategies and require the ongoing circulation of perceived value to maintain their position in commercial music culture (Frith, 2011). The recognition and consistency of a corporate brand is highly valued and carefully maintained. And yet, Bowie's brand always championed change. He constantly altered his product by "tampering with the brand and switching labels" (McCarthy, 2019, 95). According to Welch (2013), Bowie consistently drew on an "exotic mixture of images, ideas and music" to ensure his brand would "remain both controversial and attractive" (8). His marque was essentially one of transformation. The early adoption of "Bowie" as a stage name is perhaps the most obvious example of his representation as a brand. The creation of David Bowie was initially born from the need to differentiate himself in a crowded marketplace, but it also became a useful method of deflection. Bowie the "celebrity rock star" took the brunt of any criticisms "while David Jones maintains his distance" (Potter and Cobb, 2016, 123). Employing characters throughout his career added yet another layer of separation between the public and David Jones. The creation of his Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, Thin White Duke et al. personas reflect the business principle of sub-branding: the combination of an established name with another to develop a product with "its own brand identity in terms of a given market segment" (Rahman, 2013, 38). In retrospect, the Bowie of 1983 can be viewed as another character. He was, yet again, readjusting his brand to align with a new audience. However, this was unclear at the time. Critics and long-term fans questioned whether the new Bowie was indeed *real*, or just another persona. Was he finally appearing as "himself" or presenting yet another exotic artifact (Sandford, 1997)? As Ammon (2016) suggests, while Bowie "may be a pleasant chap by all accounts" his work also has

a "deeply cynical" aspect to it (27). For Morley (2016) the act of removing the mask, to reveal his real self, was in truth "still another mask, it's still strategic" (429). Tony McGee, a Vogue fashion photographer who shot promotional stills for the *Serious Moonlight* tour, agreed that Bowie's presentation during the *Let's Dance* period was that of a character, as carefully constructed as any of his previous incarnations (Doyle, 2018, 83). Bowie's rebranding required mainstream media coverage to reach broad global audiences. The revealing of his "true self" was a useful media angle, which duly received substantial coverage around the world. In constructing communities of consumers, Frith (2011) identifies a key challenge for the music industry: "record companies depend on media that they don't control" (39). Magazine, newspaper, radio, and television outlets all required a compelling narrative, and Bowie's new look provided a convenient entry point for media interviews. By this point in his career Bowie was adept at providing interviewers with the content they required. As Morley (2016) states, even his most fervent detractors were forced to recognise his ability to generate publicity (27). The central purpose of the rock interview is fundamentally mercenary—to promote a product while selling the performer themselves. According to McCarthy (2019) Bowie used interviews to not only sell his latest album, but to simultaneously sell the "idea of Bowie-as-a-product" (97). The many television interviews conducted to promote *Let's Dance* projected him as a self-assured yet reflective figure. For U.S. viewers, this was an entirely different character from the awkward, cocaine-addicted Bowie who appeared on *The Dick Cavett Show* in 1974, (an interview his own website described as possibly his most bizarre).

The death of David Jones in 2016 mathematically marked the early 80s as his mid-life period. It is important to remember

that the mid-life point in a person's life span is not the same as a midlife *phase* (Freund and Ritter, 2009). Nevertheless, it is worth noting some of the theories surrounding the trials of middle age in relation to Bowie's personal and business circumstances at the start of the 80s. According to Lawrence (1980), prevailing philosophies about this life stage suggest it is a time when individuals face changes in their family and careers and may develop "a more certain knowledge of their degree of career success attainable" (37). The difficult dissolution of Bowie's marriage and a growing dissatisfaction with the RCA record label contributed additional stress to his early thirties. Whether or not these difficulties resulted in the early onset of a mid-life crisis is debatable, yet Buckley (2012) describes the period as being "a difficult time of his life [...] his priorities had changed." The mid-life period can often cause a person to pause and "review their achievements, take stock of what they have and have not yet accomplished" and possibly take "drastic measures to fulfil their dreams" (Freund and Ritter, 2009, 583). By applying this contemplative process to Bowie's state of mind in the early 80s it is possible to view his move towards the mainstream as a form of renewal, conceivably emerging from a period of self-reflection. The conclusion of Bowie's contractual obligations to RCA Records provided a new sense of freedom. He had parted ways with the company in 1982, at which point a deal with former manager Defries, which cost him half of his income and 50% of RCA album royalties, finally came to an end. Bowie's dissatisfaction stemmed from what he believed to be RCA's lack of interest in his *Low* album. Since 1977, relations had deteriorated to the point where both artist and record company made little effort to engage and were simply going through the motions. As Bowie would later state, "I was really quite glad when I was able to terminate that particular contract" (BBC Interview, 1983). 1982 was also

notable as the year Bowie found Bill Zysblat, a business manager he could finally trust. Zysblat went on to become a loyal and valuable associate, taking on increasing responsibilities within Bowie business camp as acting as financial advisor of Bowie's estate. With all the pieces in place, it was now time to create an album which would exploit his newfound earning potential. Any profits would be maximised by his status as a tax exile, with official residence in Switzerland since 1976. According to Bowie's close friend George Underwood, *Let's Dance* was an opportunity to tell the world, "especially his ex-management who had left him almost broke," that he could still write hit records—"I think for the first time he was determined to make some money" (Doyle, 2018, 76). Lawrence (1980) believes the resolution of a mid-life crisis can bring about a "new approach to life" which can symbolise a change in out-look and represent "a radical departure from the interest and desires that characterized the first career" (39). In Ken Tucker's (1983) 4-star album review in Rolling Stone magazine, he refers to the lyrics of *Modern Love* as "a rock statement about growing up and facing commitments" (59). By addressing many of the personal and business difficulties he had faced up to that point, Bowie was ready to re-energise his brand and embark on a creatively fertile and financially lucrative period.

For Buckley (2013), 1983 marked a change in the way David Bowie was promoted; he had become "a guarantor of a certain left-field cool without being that confrontational." The presentation of a friendlier, more accessible persona was part of Bowie's normalization (Savage, 2013). He was now marketed as a mainstream commodity, unlikely to offend the masses. The personal presentation of this new Bowie was, according to O'Leary (2011), that of a "hipster CEO figure" with a blond bouffant and designer suits. Shaar Mur-

ray (2007) described Bowie's urbane look as that of an "alternative Prince Charles" with immaculate suits "beautifully draped from his coat hanger shoulders." Excessive consumption in the 80s and a taste for expensive clothes were reflected in pop culture's return to a more glamorous look (Rettenmund, 1996). Bowie's affluent, suited appearance in 1983 was certainly in sync with the times. When negotiating his new record deal with EMI America, Trynka (2011) claims that record company executives at EMI America initially mistook the "elegant figure striding down their company corridors for a wealthy investor" (317). Frith (2011) refers to the clichéd rock ideology of the artist battling against a gatekeeper as part of an established sales pitch. A narrative which presents the artist and their fans as ultimately triumphing by storming "the conservative commercialism of the suits" (44). That storyline was too predictable for Bowie, who decided instead to become one of the suits, albeit a more stylish one.

At the Claridge's Hotel press conference in London, held in March 1983 to promote the *Let's Dance* album, single and world tour, a rejuvenated, consumer-friendly Bowie was unveiled to the world. The thin, pale physique of the 70s had been replaced with a tanned, more muscular shape, while his light brown hair was now dyed bleach blonde. Gabrielle Pike (2023), a music journalist at the event, commented "none of us really knew what was coming. There was a glamourous looking David Bowie. Not your Ziggy Stardust, not somebody who looked a bit "strange." He just looked amazing. I think everyone took a breath when he walked in through the door." This new look was foregrounded on the album cover of *Let's Dance*. Literally fighting-fit, Bowie was photographed by O'Regan naked from the waist up. Wearing Everlast boxing gloves designed for sparring, his fists are clenched and raised in a boxing stance as he leaned forward into the light of

a projected Derek Boshier painting. Four years earlier he had appeared as a broken-nosed victim on the cover of *Lodger*, another Boshier collaboration. With *Let's Dance*, Bowie had become the aggressor, or was at least ready to defend himself. This arresting new look was far removed from the Pierrot costumed, lipstick wearing character on his last album cover for *Scary Monster (and Super Creeps)*. The conceptual idea of the singer as a boxer was not new. Helen Shapiro (*Helen Hits Out!* 1964) and the Dutch singer, glamour model Patricia Paay (*The Lady Is a Champ*, 1977) had been there before. The Commodores' 1982 *All the Great Hits* compilation had featured a prize-fighter on its cover. However, the image that may have caught Bowie's eye was the artwork on Iggy Pop's 1981 single *Bang, Bang*, where the singer stands in a boxing ring, wearing boxing gloves and Everlast shorts. Bowie would later cover the track on his 1987 album *Never Let Me Down*. Bowie's involvement in Pop's career has been referred to as a form of "sponsorship" (Trynka, 2011, 438), but the transactional nature of the relationship clearly went both ways.

Figure 2. Bang Bang single cover, Arista, 1981;
Let's Dance album cover, EMI America, 1983.

The 1983 *Let's Dance* cover reflected a time when boxing culture was on the rise in the United States. By the late 70s there

had been a lack of interest in the sport, but this was "resuscitated by a riveting series of bouts" beginning in 1980 (Kimball, 2008, xi). High profile U.S. fights, such as Sugar Ray Leonard against Thomas Hearns in 1981 and Larry Holmes against Gerry Cooney in 1982, helped to elevate boxing's status in the public's consciousness. Bowie's appearance as a boxer was more than just a timely, striking image. It was a visual metaphor for his renewed sense of focus and discipline. In the lead up to, and during, his 1983 *Serious Moonlight Tour* Bowie's daily health regime included daily boxing training. As he told reporters at the time, "I want to be in shape" (Pegg, 2000, 492). This physical transformation reflected the idealized male the early 80s, which had moved on from the "sensitivity of the seventies" to the "macho 80s" (Peberdy, 2011, 101). The hard-bodied aesthetic of the 80's was personified by male Hollywood stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, whose bodybuilder physiques exemplified their hypermasculinity (Zaitchik and Mosher, 1993, 227). Tasker's (1993) study of exaggerated masculinity in American cinema, suggests the success of muscle-bound action film stars in the 80s can be read as a form of backlash against 70s feminism and represented a move towards political and sexual conservatism. This growing culture of repression was reflected in Bowie's recantation of his bisexuality in a *Rolling Stone* magazine interview in 1983, when he referred to his landmark 1972 *Melody Maker* interview as "the biggest mistake I ever made" (Loder, 1983). Bowie's more conservative presentation in the U.S. was suited to an era where the liberalism of President Carter had given way to Reagan's more traditional home-town values (Hill and Williams, 1990). In essence, he was revising his more contentious history to present a public-friendly brand that aligned more closely with the political and cultural dynamics of the 1980s. Androgyny and

sexual experimentation had given way to red-blooded heterosexuality and macho theatrics.

As the celebrated graphic designer Milton Glaser once stated, a corporate logo is the "gateway to the brand" (Wheeler, 2012, 35). This is true for the business of popular music, where an eye-catching, instantly recognisable logo is an important element of most successful music brands. The Rolling Stones' lips and tongue logo has undergone various iterations throughout the years; nonetheless, its fundamental design has essentially remained unaltered since 1970. Queen's crest logo has stayed with the band since their first album in 1973. Bowie, conversely, has had multiple logos and typography over the course of his career, each dramatically different, reflecting a certain phase or specific album in his career. According to Peterson et al. (2015) changes to a corporate logo are a form of rebranding, often used to signal new positioning in the marketplace. Similarly, the launch of *Let's Dance* was a rebranding exercise, and therefore was deemed to be an appropriate time to introduce a new Bowie logo. This began appearing in music press adverts ahead of the *Let's Dance* single in March 1983. Graphic designer Mick Haggerty, credited for "package design" on the album, designed a logo which presented Bowie's last name in a low contrast slap serif typeface, in bold caps, distorted with an angular 3D lettering effect (Huot-Marchand, 2022). Appropriately, the style is reminiscent of the Everlast logo, a company renowned for the manufacturing of boxing equipment. The logo successfully communicated a new phase in Bowie's career and subsequently became an enduring symbol of the *Let's Dance* era.

As Reddi (2019) asserts, timing is an important factor in the preparation and execution of successful public relations and

media strategies. Like all well planned campaigns, the release schedule for the *Let's Dance* album in April 1983, and its associated singles, videos advertising, media interviews, and world tour, were carefully considered elements in a precise long-term strategy, designed by a "sophisticated marketing man" and management team (Morley, 2016, 27). There was also a scarcity of Bowie products at the time, leading to the public's heightened desire for a new album. By 1983, Bowie's fan base was eager to see what he would come up with next. His last world tour, *Isolar II* (otherwise known as the *Stage* tour), had taken place five years earlier in 1978 and his fans had endured a three-year wait since the release of his previous album *Scary Monster (and Super Creeps)*. He had had little impact on U.S. radio since the *Golden Years* single reached number 10 in 1976. Although *Ashes to Ashes* had brought him back to the top of the UK hit parade in 1980, the single had not managed to enter the Hot 100 Billboard charts in the U.S. It was deemed "too artful or *outré* for mainstream U.S. tastes" (Doyle, 2018, 74). Similarly, *Under Pressure*, a collaboration with Queen, had been a UK number one, but only briefly entered the American charts, plateauing at 29. The original release of the single *Cat People*, recorded with Giorgio Moroder in 1981 and released in March 1982, managed to reach a modest 26 in the UK charts, but only 67 in the U.S. From a business standpoint, there was a compelling commercial imperative for Bowie to demonstrate his merit in America—the world's largest music market.

THE PRODUCT

The *Let's Dance* album was recorded at the Power Station, New York in late 1982 and took just 17 days to complete. According to producer Nile Rodgers "it cost nothing to make—we did it so fast" (Doyle, 2018, 80). The decision to replace

his trusted, long-time producer Tony Visconti with Rodgers was particularly significant. While Rogers has come to be respected for his impressive hit making credentials, in the early 80s his "stocks were low," tarred by the late 70s back-lash against disco (Marsh and Broackes, 2013, 110). Rodgers had notable success with Sister Sledge, Diana Ross, and his own band Chic, but by 1982 his "magic touch had deserted him," leading to 5 "flops" in succession (Trynka, 2011, 314). Therefore, Bowie's decision to employ him as the arrang-er and producer of *Let's Dance* was not without risk (Pegg, 2000). According to Rodgers (2011), the project's commer-cial ambitions were clear from the start, with Bowie specifi-cally telling him "I want you to make hits" (187). At the time, Rodgers was disappointed by Bowie's populist objective. He had hoped the album would provide an opportunity to gain credibility from a white audience, "but no, David Bowie wanted, if not the Chic sound, then Nile Rodgers hit-making potential" (Buckley, 2013).

Bowie was adept at identifying and repurposing mainstream trends in music, such as Folk, Glam, Soul, German Electro, Industrial, Drum 'n' Bass, and had built a career on the "pop appropriation" of these "authentic" forms of music (Lampert, 2016, 152). Each style time-stamped his output with specific location and cultural mood. Similarly, the accessible sound and stylistic presentation of *Let's Dance* was in "perfect tune" with the 80s, which Doggett (2011) describes as the era of "Armani rock," when "rock rebellion became the sanitized language of mass entertainment" (332). Yet while the album may appear to be a straightforward move towards the mid-dle-ground, there was a degree of jeopardy in Bowie's ap-proach. As discussed, the choice of Nile Rodgers as producer had been a relatively bold step. While the collaboration may have appeared to be a "sure fire winner," according to Tryn-

ka (2011), "it was anything but." Bowie had also chosen to step away from his regular cast of studio musicians, largely placing himself in the hands of Rodgers talent pool. Bowie's previous album, *Scary Monster (and Super Creeps),* had also been recorded at Power Station, so there was an element of familiarity. However, Bob Clearmountain, the engineer for *Let's Dance*, recalled that on the first day of recording Bowie "was actually more nervous than I was," uncertain about the prospect of working with a new team of musicians (Clearmountain, 2013). The *Let's Dance* album marked Bowie's return to the craft of song writing. There had been considerable time spent in preproduction with Rogers in Switzerland. The demo for the song *Let's Dance*, recorded at Mountain Studios in Montreux, is notable for the comment a clearly pleased Bowie makes as the track fades out. The version is only a rough approximation of the polished version to come, yet Bowie can clearly hear its potential, exclaiming "that's it, that's it, got it, got it!" This preparatory groundwork ensured the actual studio recordings in New York moved quickly and cost effectively. This was an important factor in the album's execution, as Bowie was now out of contract and paying for the recording sessions himself.

Clearmountain had been expecting to work on a follow up to *Scary Monster and Super Creeps* and was taken aback by the "pop and dance oriented" sound of *Let's Dance*: "I learned that's what you don't do with David Bowie, you don't expect anything. He'll always surprise you. He took pride in surprising people and coming out with something no one expected" (Clearmountain, 2013). One of the album's key creative elements is the juxtaposition of Rodgers sophisticated New York dance sensibilities with the southern blues of lead guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughan. The decision to combine Vaughan, a virtually unknown guitarist at the time, with Rodgers's

Figure 3. Let's Dance backing singer Frank Simms outside the Power Station, New York. June 2012. S. Coley.

slick sonic production can be seen as a form of experimentation equivalent to his more canonized efforts in the seventies (Buckley, 1999). As Blake (2016) commented "a white South Londoner, a black New Yorker and a good ol' boy from Texas sounds like to set up for a dubious joke. In fact, it was the catalyst for one of the best Bowie albums of the decade" (82). While Vaughan's guitar contribution is easy to distinguish from Rodgers's funky playing style, it becomes more difficult to identify some of the album's other musicians. The crediting of contributors was unusually vague and imprecise, an approach Rodger's had used on his earlier work with Chic. The performance credits on *Let's Dance* are intentionally left open, echoing Warhol's Factory-style, where details were undefined and uncertain. It was impossible not to notice the aggressive and extended drum performances of Tony Thompson and Omar Hakim which featured on most tracks, but it was more difficult to discern which drummer was playing on certain tracks. According to Rodgers "no one knows what songs [drummer] Tony Thompson played on because I never put that in the credits" (Buskin, 2005). The surface sheen of New York disco does not conceal the album's masculine

rock sensibilities, which helped the album's singles, *Let's Dance*, *China Girl*, and *Modern Love* to become sizable radio hits, crossing over from mainstream U.S. top 40 stations into Black and Rock FM formats in the U.S.

By personally funding the album, Bowie was a free agent, able to shop around the *Let's Dance* master tapes to various labels. In the end he signed with EMI America on the 27th of January 1983, for a reported figure of just under $17 million US (Buckley, 1999). The decision quickly paid off for both parties, with *Let's Dance* reaching the number one position on album charts around the world just three months later. Ironically, it was the album RCA had always wanted him to produce. Bowie clearly relished his new freedom commenting "It's much better when nobody's actually telling me what to do" (BBC Interview, 1983). The album's eponymous lead single was released in the U.S. and UK on March 14, 1983, before the launch of the album on April 14. By referencing Black American dance culture, the *Let's Dance* single ended the "previous misgivings of U.S. radio programmers," giving Bowie the widespread airplay that had eluded him for years (Dogget, 2011, 289). The track reached number one on both sides of the Atlantic simultaneously. The first and last time a Bowie single achieved this feat. According to Buckley (1999) the song *Let's Dance* effectively changed the course of Bowie's career forever, while O'Leary (2012) identifies it as the turning point which transformed him into "the colossal celebrity that he had always intended, had always pretended to be" (O'Leary, 2012). Bowie had effectively "exploded across 1983" (Buckley, 2013) and the widespread appeal of the *Let's Dance* album saw him quickly attain the status of international super-star. In that year alone he appeared in three films, released the album *Let's Dance*, and had three global hit singles with accompanying high-rotate music videos.

Bowie capitalized on this success by embarking on an extensive world tour, which saw him perform across Europe, America, Asia, and the Pacific. At the time, the *Serious Moonlight* tour was the longest and biggest of his career. It visited 16 countries, with Bowie performing 96 shows and selling 2,601,196 tickets (Flippo, 1984). This impressive run of success came to an end with the release of the album's fourth and final single *Without You*, which EMI America released in the U.S. in November 1983. The song lacked the energy of its predecessors and only managed 73 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100. Nevertheless, Bowie's *Let's Dance* project was by any standards a success. The campaign had worked and by the end of 1983 Bowie had no financial need to work again. Aside from being contractually obliged to deliver two more albums for EMI America, he could continue to "live comfortably on his investment income alone" (Tremlett, 1996, 318). Rojek (2001) claims that celebrity culture is "irrevocably bound up with commodity culture" (14). It is therefore unsurprising that the height of Bowie's fame in 1983 was accompanied by a substantial increase in his wealth in the "decade of greed" (Thompson, 2006, 14). In one year, David Bowie had earned an estimated $50 million US (Tremlett, 1996, 316). As he succinctly put it, "All that money I'd gone through in the 70s suddenly came back to me" (Doyle, 2018, 84). Bowie had now entered the premier league of wealth and superstardom. However, this mainstream acceptance invited accusations of selling out and raised questions about Bowie's authenticity as an artist.

THE AUTHENTIC BOWIE

The concept of authenticity is widely discussed in popular music studies, but can be a difficult, subjective term to define. Frith (2004) suggests that "bad" music is often deemed to be insincere or inauthentic, while "good" music can be judged

on whether it reflects a musician's sincerity. Authentic music is supposedly grounded in the virtue of self-expression and does not seek financial reward. Conversely, inauthentic music is made with an audience in mind, in the hope of remuneration. For Barker and Taylor (2007, x) authenticity in popular music "is an absolute, a goal that can never be fully attained." A common complaint levelled against the *Let's Dance* album was its perceived lack of authenticity. This was also a longstanding accusation Bowie had faced as a performer and public figure. Some critics complained he was inauthentic due to his constantly changing style—"from queer extra-terrestrial to synth-laced aesthete to blonde and poppy hitmaker" in the space of just one decade (Cooper, 2016, 139). Yet as Critchley (2016) observed, Bowie's "truth" had always been inauthentic, "completely self-conscious and utterly constructed" (36). His sincerity was not at stake as Bowie had never claimed to be the genuine article. Indeed, he had constructed a whole career from a bricolage of popular culture. Another concern, closely linked authenticity, was the question of whether Bowie had sold out. Musicians who seek a more commercial sound are often forced to compromise. While they may manage to secure a larger mainstream audience, they risk alienating early fans (Klein, 2020). *Let's Dance* is a useful exemplar of this trade-off. While Bowie's pivot towards broad acceptance delivered him a sizable international audience, some of his early adopters "cringed" at the populism of his new direction (Blake, 2016, 82). Hesmondhalgh (1999) describes the term "selling out" as the abandonment of "previously held political and aesthetic commitments for financial gain" (36). As indicated, there was undoubtedly a commercial imperative at the heart of *Let's Dance*. Yet the album was not a rejection of Bowie's commitment to artistic endeavour. That would come later. If anything, the album subverts the notion of selling-out, by

repurposing it as a creative statement. Perhaps the charges of selling out emerged from the mistaken notion that Bowie was a "pure" rock artist—who had now become a pop artist. As Lampert (2016) observes, rock artists who are indiscreet in seeking fame, fortune and chart success are open to criticism, while no one would accuse a pop artist of selling out: "pop stars *are packaged and sold*" (160). In any case, Firth (1989) claims that Bowie was largely immune from any accusation of "selling out" as he had always focused on art as the invention of self and never performed on anyone else's behalf: "[W]hatever he does is validated by the fact that he, David Bowie, did it" (132).

The manifestation of selling-out in *Let's Dance* is presumably found in the album's sonic qualities and its accompanying presentation. For Klein (2020), there are certain tropes that identify a more commercial approach to music. These include polished production, "trendy" instrumentation, mainstream content or changes in the language or accent of lyrics (54). Other non-musical concessions may include the artist's appearance, their choice of creative collaborators, or the production values of their touring stage show. *Let's Dance* reflects many of these signifiers. However, by 1983 the concept of selling out had become a somewhat vague and meaningless notion. The term had become increasingly irrelevant as the counterculture movement petered out in the early 70s. Without the illusion of Hippy revolutionary ideals, the world of rock had been revealed for what it truly was, "a commercial enterprise" that sold any message "no matter how anti-commmercialist … for maximum profits" (Harron, 2016, 161). Those who labelled *Let's Dance* a sell-out had short attention spans, as Bowie was no stranger to harnessing the music zeitgeist to achieve his goals. This approach had been central to his early success. He had been quick to identify the potential

of glitter rock. A movement which was indifferent to notions of authenticity, believing instead in the "aesthetic value of commercial pop" (Klein, 2020, 54). Glam provided the perfect vehicle for Bowie's newfound Warholian aesthetic—the artist's and audience's ironic self-awareness of inauthenticity, "repeated at increasingly conscious levels" (Critchley 2016, 21). He had co-opted Glam for his Ziggy Stardust phase, exploiting it as means to raise his profile, before swiftly moving on. There was no subterfuge to mask this manipulation, as demonstrated by the song *Star* on the *Ziggy Stardust* album. A track which brazenly exposed the "grasping self-promotion" central to most popular music (Buckley, 1999, 133). In 1975, Bowie used a similar strategy with the *Young Americans* album. To break the U.S. market, he had utilised the sound of Philadelphia Soul to reach the widest possible American audience. As Hill (2016) remarks, "not only was the album itself an extremely cynical bid for popular success in the American market; it says as much itself" (78). The plan worked, as *Fame*, the second single from *Young Americans*, resulted in Bowie's first U.S. number one. He then repeated the formula with *Let's Dance*, an album which is often viewed as a follow up to *Young Americans*. Once again, the method worked. In May 1983, the eponymous single from *Let's Dance*, became his second (and final) U.S. number one, remaining in the charts for a total of 20 weeks. Vogel (2018) defines the term "cross over artist" as a performer who manages to reach broad, mainstream multiracial audiences (4). In that sense, both *Let's Dance,* and *Young Americans* made Bowie a bona fide cross over artist, who could straddle both black and white music (Morley, 2016).

Keightley (2011) links notions of authenticity to the Romanticism and Modernism movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, citing them as crucial sources of the

mass society critique and, therefore, having a major influence on perceptions of rock culture. The Romantic rock tradition emphasises live performance, direct expression, and the impression of the artist and fan's shared connection, coming from a working-class background. A Modernist approach tends to foreground experimentation within a recording studio environment, the use of multiple pop genres, an awareness of irony, and a sense that the artist is "part of a rock elite" (135). While some musicians firmly align themselves with one of these movements, it is possible to move between these forms of authenticity over the course of a career, or to use both Romantic and Modernist concepts of authenticity together. The success of *Let's Dance* largely derives from Bowie's mutual use of these movements. On the surface, the album appears to be Romantic in its execution. Aside from the possible exception of *Ricochet*, the songs themselves are easily accessible, with traditional structures, R&B influences, tight harmonies, and musicianship supplanting experimentation. Despite the album's high production values, Tremlett (1996) considers *Let's Dance* to be "at its heart a simple, minimal album with its impact coming from musicianship rather than electronic effects" (317-318). It was also the first Bowie album on which he did not play a note. In terms of its use of Modernism, the album's lyrics draw on Bowie's typical impressionistic style. They are arguably more direct, yet still open to a degree of interpretation. However, it is the highly polished, radio-friendly production, provided by Rodgers and Clearmountain, which made the album so different from its predecessors and transported the traditional R&B elements into the 80s. The central conceit of the album is experimental and, therefore, rooted in Modernism. Prior to the album's release, there was no precedent for the contrast of Southern Blues guitar set against a backdrop of New York disco, or any assurance this creative decision would succeed.

As Marsh and Broackes (2013) point out, the popularity of *Let's Dance* is often "retroactively assessed […] but at the time there was no guarantee that it would work" (110). Ultimately, the album follows Keightley's (2011) assertion that Romantic and Modernist notions of authenticity can be used against each other to "produce work that is celebrated for its complexity, energy and artistic innovation" (139). The use of both philosophies in *Let's Dance* helped to create a "deluxe fantasy of the mainstream potential of pop music" (Morley, 2016, 428).

Bowie's mainstream sound and visual re-branding provided an accessible entry point for an entirely new audience, who were unaware or unconcerned about the possibility of him selling out. This introduction would subsequently lead to many new fans then discovering (and purchasing) his sizable back catalogue. Broadcaster Mark Kermode suggests there is a generation of Bowie fans who saw everything before *Modern Love* as a preamble to the point at which he became "danceable and mainstream" (Broackes and Marsh, 2013, 292). Many of these converts were youthful Americans, who first became conscious of Bowie through the music videos created for the first three *Let's Dance* singles. These were played in high rotation on the newly established cable channel MTV, which had started just two years earlier. Popular music academic Jennifer Otter Bickerdike (2013) was twelve years old living in California when she first heard the single *Let's Dance* "blasting out of every house." She referred to the album as a "gateway," which inspired Bowie's new followers to investigate his back catalogue—"it introduced David Bowie to a completely new fan base, who would have never ever in a million years listened to him. Without *Let's Dance,* people of my age, the Gen X'ers of the world, probably never would have learned about him." To earn this new au-

dience, Wilcken (2005) describes a transactional trade-off, in which Bowie forfeited his "artistic mystique in exchange for mega-stardom as a stadium entertainer" (2). While the album's success financially paid off in the short term, it was to cause him difficulties for the remainder of the 80s. By courting middle-of-the-road acceptance Bowie had stepped into unknown territory, which would ultimately threaten his integrity as an artist, "corrode his former glory" and eventually lead to subsequent "creative misfires" (Dogget, 2011, 332). For Egan (2013), *Let's Dance* represented a surrender to "fashionable empty gloss" and was part of a larger "career trough" (12). As indicated, many of Bowie's early fans were also dubious about Bowie's *Let's Dance* phase. The business world defines customer loyalty as a positive belief in the value of a company which, over the course of multiple interactions, leads to increased purchases over time (Oracle, 2005). Similarly, Bowie's loyal fan base had built a sense of trust in his brand, which resulted in ongoing purchases despite, or because of, his ever-evolving style. The run of albums from *Station to Station* to *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)* had all demonstrated a large degree of risk and experimentation and had garnered critical praise, yet they had not given him a broad, international fan-base. The move towards a more mainstream sound was arguably in keeping with his tendency to second-guess his fan-base. But for many of Bowie's early fans, it compromised his artistic integrity. As Egan (2013) claimed, *Let's Dance* and the subsequent album *Tonight*, cost Bowie's hard-core fans "who could forgive any career direction except pedestrianism" (12). However, the prospect of losing fans was a calculated risk that Bowie evidently thought was worthwhile. In business terms, it was not a straightforward decision to make. According to Khan (2013), customer loyalty is a key factor in business success, as it costs "more than five to six times as much to obtain a new customer than

to keep an existing one" (168). The safer option was to focus on satisfying hard-earned fans by continuing to produce more esoteric, "cult" content. Nevertheless, the strategy to court new fans to reinvigorating his customer base was not an uncommon strategy in the early 80s. Rosenberg and Czepiel (1984) claimed this period saw many marketing companies lavishing resources on attracting new consumers, rather than satisfying their existing customer base. Nevertheless, Bowie appeared to be untroubled by any criticisms that followed his mainstream reinvention. Tremlett (1996) claims he was immune to any negativity and rose over the heads of those who dismissed *Let's Dance*. Bowie projected an upbeat positive outlook in various interviews and press conferences and, according to Shaar Murray (2007), seemed to be wearing "a permanent grin" throughout 1983. Backing vocalist Frank Simms (2008) recalled him being "always in a wonderful mood. Very happy, very up, very positive" throughout the *Let's Dance* recording sessions and the accompanying world tour. Denis O'Regan, the *Serious Moonlight* photographer, agreed, commenting the period was "the happiest he'd ever been. It was the most successful he's ever been. He really, really enjoyed it" (Eccleston, 2018, 78).

THE AFTERMATH OF *LET'S DANCE*

Bowie's impressive earnings and global celebrity in 1983 chimed with what Page (1992) called the heightened materialism of the 80s. For Hewitt and Elmes (2012), the success and financial wealth which accompanied *Let's Dance* were wholly justified. Bowie had offered his audience so much in the 70s that it was permissible to take something for himself in the 80s. From a commercial standpoint, *Let's Dance* remains Bowie's most popular album. However, as discussed in the previous section, it inevitably had its detractors and has

since become a contentious marker in his career, signalling the end of an imperial phase and the beginning of a creative decline. Many reviewers and biographers have retrospectively questioned Bowie's move towards a mainstream audience, who were "willing to buy the whole Bowie package" (Tremlett, 1996, 317). Sputnik Music (2011) described the album as a mixed effort which, aside from the opening salvo of hits, was uncompelling, and the first point since before the 70s, when Bowie wasn't "ahead of the curve." In a BBC music review, Quantick (2011) described *Let's Dance* as "often mundane." Dogget (2011) was equally unconvinced. Although he commended the album as being "impeccably crafted and effortlessly commercial" he was dubious about Bowie's motives, stating he "questioned nothing, risked nothing, stood for nothing" (332). There was also a concern that the album represented a decline in Bowie's song writing abilities, given that several tracks were not original compositions. Both *China Girl* and *Cat People* were re-workings of past releases. In Bowie's defence, the inclusion of *China Girl* was a deliberate move to improve the co-author Iggy Pop's dire financial situation at the time. This was not a simple handout. By revisiting the song Bowie was "hedging against the decline in his song writing in the eighties" (O'Leary, 2019, 34). On *Tonight*, Bowie's next album, his growing writer's block was addressed by the inclusion of two cover versions and five tracks co-authored by Pop. Their professional relationship continued until 1986, when Bowie co-produced Pop's *Blah Blah Blah* album, their final collaboration. This was another blatantly commercial enterprise, which succeeded in earning Pop his first top 50 hit, *Real Wild Child (Wild One)*. Appel's (2018) criticism of *Let's Dance* focused on the recording of *Criminal World*, a cover of a 1977 track by the English band Metro. Bowie's version made lyrical changes which removed

the original song's suggestion of bisexuality. In doing so, Bowie typified the narrative of "artistic decline [...] establishing a triple equation between Bowie's global commercial success, lack of transgressive content, and 'heterosexualization'" (205). Sheffield (2016) claims the album "squandered years of hard-earned mystique" and began "a long phase of Let's Not Dance" (163). According to Pegg (2002), the album is "perhaps Bowie's least challenging album" which led to an "immediate and detrimental effect" on his career (239). As discussed in the previous section, the album raised questions about Bowie's supposed authenticity and brought accusations of selling out. Yet he was immune to these charges. "Selling out" was not the abandonment of artist credibility. It was part of a modus operandi, strategically employed throughout his career. In many ways, Bowie was open about his use of the mainstream as a trojan horse for his artistry. Johnson (2015) noted that Bowie's commercial appeal and "slick professionalism" were often seen as an indicator of artistic compromise, yet his "creation of sophisticated and eminently saleable work can be more convincingly and coherently interpreted as part of the process of becoming a 'medium'" (15). For Klein (2020), Bowie used his established credibility to "chip away at the foundations" of outdated notions of selling out (54). In the postmodern age, there was little differentiation between commercial and artistic production (Cooper, 2016). This blurring of boundaries had been largely initiated by the pioneering work of Andy Warhol decades earlier. Warhol was unashamed in commodifying his creative endeavours, stating "being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art. Making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art" (Warhol, 1975, 92). From this perspective, the *Let's Dance* album can be viewed as the ultimate manifestation of Bowie's Warholian aspirations—a

seamless amalgamation of artistic expression and financial judgement. Nevertheless, Bowie's mainstream metamorphosis was more than a money-making marketing strategy. It was also an expression of his personal evolution and a move towards middle-age which reflected the stabilising of his personal life and business dealings. Buckley (2013) refers to *Let's Dance* as an attempt to "strip away the layers of artifice, and to become a more caring and humanitarian human being." Bowie himself noticed a new sense of maturity, commenting "there's a period when you have to decide not to try and grasp frantically for the feelings of desperation and anger that you have when you're in your mid-twenties. If you can relax into the idea that being in your mid-thirties is quite a nice place to be with an amount of experience behind you" (Jensen, 1983).

It is important not to underplay Bowie's ability as an artist and this paper does not suggest his motivations were purely financial. While his business endeavors co-existed with his creativity, they were not central to his ambition. Bowie's financial acumen served as a means to an end, functioning as a tool to afford him the freedom to live a desired lifestyle and to pursue projects aligned to his interests. Looking back, producer Nile Rogers viewed the success of *Let's Dance* as the result of a carefully considered plan to create hits, commenting "the fact that it's the biggest record of his career is not an accident; it's what he wanted" (Turner, 2013). Global success may have been Bowie's ambition, but it was never a certainty. His pivot towards the mainstream was an entrepreneurial gamble, requiring considerable self-belief and creativity. In this respect, the *Let's Dance* album represented a degree of risk and experimentation, of equal status to other more celebrated records in his canon. The success of Bowie's mid-career reinvention underscores an adept understanding

of business and marketing practices. Throughout his career Bowie and his management team continued to deploy his brand across a range of lucrative entrepreneurial enterprises. He demonstrated prescient awareness of the threat posed by digital media to the established music industry and took pro-active measures to offset potential lost revenues. Numerous endorsements and sponsorship arrangements, credit card ventures, online subscription and music services, interactive CD-ROMs, a video game, and his speculative "Bowie Bonds" initiative all demonstrate an ability to capitalize on marketing opportunities.

Considering popular musicians as corporate brands does not diminish their achievements. In Bowie's case, he was fully cognisant of his place in the music landscape and "al-most painfully aware of his own brand" (Morley, 2016, 27). Woodward (2017) asks whether the concept of "celebrity" is essentially a corporate construct led by financial motiva-tion and self-interest, and questions whether Bowie is "just a set of fabricated images, which are reiterated and reinvented in the pursuit of celebrity?" (504). But for Lampert (2016) there is no confusion: ""David Bowie" has always only ever been an "image"" (152). The musician Bowie exists only as a brand. While questions were raised about his supposed sin-cerity at the time of *Let's Dance*, it seems churlish to doubt the authenticity of yet another character in a long line of media constructs. Indeed, the element of "truth" in Bowie's art "is not compromised by its fakery. It is enabled by it" (Critchley, 2016, 46-47). The *Let's Dance* album may well have marked the "normalization" of David Bowie, yet Marsh and Broackes (2013) suggest "there is another side to that story" (110). *Let's Dance* was the "smart, efficient work of a superstar singer with a superstar producer, knowing how to play to a superstar audience" (Morley, 2016, 426). As Klein (2004) points out,

interpreting whether an artist has "sold out" or "gone commercial" requires a certain amount of guesswork. Artists can always justify their decisions as being governed by artistic vision, rather than a quick opportunity to cash in. Whatever the motivation, *Let's Dance* provided Bowie with a sizable new international audience, alongside financial security. The album also distanced him from the pressures of constantly having to reference youth culture. He was at last "freed to be what he is: an individual and an adult" (Marsh and Broackes, 2013, 110). For critics like Perone (2007), *Let's Dance* can be viewed as "something of a double-edged sword" among Bowie's albums, while his accompanying transition from outsider to insider was "a decidedly negative career move" (90). Bowie himself recognised the difficulties the album brought with it but did not identify it as a misstep, stating "I like *Let's Dance*. I don't include it as one of the crap 80s albums. It just put me in a place where I shouldn't have been" (Perry, 2013, 88).

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Book Review:
The Many Deaths of Laila Starr
by Ram V and Filipe Andrade

The Many Deaths of Laila Starr by **Ram V (author) and Filipe Andrade illustrator). BOOM! Studios, 2022. 128 pages. ISBN: 1684158052**

o be or not to be? With a name like Destiny, I've pondered my whole life what it means "to be"—if fate is real, if we really have any control over the major events in our lives, if the future is set in stone. Are bad things *supposed* to happen? Equally, are good things *supposed* to happen? Or is it random—one of the few things about the human condition, like death, we cannot pin down to definite science?

Everyone thinks about these things at some point, but I feel like I came out of the womb cursed to endure puns on my name and the weight of its ambiguous meaning. So what makes a book about this human squandering special?

It is no mistake *The Many Deaths of Laila Starr* landed in my lap. In our time of pandemics, wars, and natural disasters leading to unprecedented death, this graphic novel is a comfort—a guide for grief. The narrator is the god of Life, consoling us that "...life is worthy and beautiful even if it is not always pretty." Ram V's precise storytelling and refined economy of language tells readers, in less than 130 pages, the secret to cheating death. The Wes Anderson-esque coloring of Filipe Andrade's art adds to the magic realism and soothes the reader, even when the text is melancholic.

The story begins split between two backdrops, a busy Mumbai and the corporate hell that is apparently where immortal

gods live, to introduce the main cast of characters: a pregnant woman in labor stuck in traffic; a young woman smoking a cigarette at a college party; and a blue-skinned, several-armed "girl boss"—the god of Death. Things happen in threes. A baby is born, the college girl "mysteriously" falls from a highrise window, and the god of Death is fired despite her literal eternal commitment to the company. Turns out, that baby born will grow up to invent immortality, so they need to "downsize" the whole Death department since mortals will soon stop being, well, mortal. As part of Death's severance package for her unexpected layoff, she gets handed a brochure that explains how she will be given a mortal body for one lifetime on Earth.

I enjoy the play on corporate culture to define the matters of Life and Death, making the ordeal feel cold and clinical, like a business, further adding to the disconnect of these concepts between mortals and immortals. And it wouldn't be a big, powerful business without some corruption. Holding a box full of her old office decor, including a sword and a Venus flytrap, Death asks the assistant of the three-headed god CEO to put her in a mortal body near where the baby was born, thinking it would be easy to kill him to revive her career— and that's how we meet Laila Starr.

Laila Starr is the girl who fell from the window, who also happens to die at the same Mumbai hospital the "evil" baby, Darius Shah, is born. Death is reincarnated in Laila's mortal body. Much like a Shakespearian play, Laila dies in a variety of absurd, darkly comical ways. Luckily, Death's secret admirer, who she calls "Pranah," is willing to bring her back to her mortal body. But each time, it takes several more years to re-animate Death into Laila's young woman body, meaning her adversary, Darius, is getting significantly older every time she dies. It seems as if she is fated to fail.

This novel expertly plays on the stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance—in each chapter. For the first time, Death begins to comprehend the mortal rituals around funerals: "It's the one thing that's theirs. Not death itself, but what you leave behind," a talking crow tells Laila on the shore of Walkeshwar. But, as in real life, we don't always take wisdom seriously long after we've heard it. In the next chapter, Laila tells a fellow partygoer, "The point of life, my friend, is to be smoked," before she ironically dies in a fire started from cigarette ashes. I struggled to place this quote as a stage of grief. Was it depression, a sort of resignation? Was it denial, using that phrase as a deflection? Was it a nihilistic acceptance that nothing matters in the end, a la Linkin Park style? Precisely, this is what I love most about this book. The hard definition between the stages of grief and the timeline for each are blurred. It is a realistic portrayal of grieving.

I wish I could have had the pleasure to read this when my mother unexpectedly died over a decade ago. I sought all kinds of literature as escapism, but never found a hopeful narrative about grief that felt as all-encompassing yet open-ended and raw and bittersweet as *The Many Deaths of Laila Starr*. I found myself adoring Death's character, laughing, crying, re-reading quotes, watching her navigate through "... mortal pleasures—in food and drink and sex … lost phone numbers, morning coffees, and … cigarettes." All the little things that make up life.

The text itself references the basics of literature and titles the last chapter "Poetry." Laila, trying to figure out what to say to her frenemy Darius, buys a book of poetry at the airport for inspiration. The author of this fictional poetry book is Akur Puri, an anagram of Rupi Kaur (the famous Indian-Canadian poet who wrote *milk and honey*). Mimicking Kaur's all low-

ercase letter style in brief, fragmented poems, this segment celebrates the comfort found in words. This is yet another example of the expert craft and attentive detail that layers the text, using parody to reference the familiar in the unfamiliar.

Off the page, is life as meticulously crafted, planned, reworked? That is the question.

The Many Deaths of Laila Starr reimagines the concept of death, but, more importantly, this novel teaches and reminds you how to live. However imperfect, to *be*.

Reviewed by Destiny Pinder-Buckley

Authors' Biographies

Sam Coley is an Associate Professor at Birmingham City University, where he teaches radio production. He is a researcher in popular music and has written articles and produced several audio documentaries about the musicians Prince and David Bowie. He continues to work as a freelance radio documentary producer.

Emily Hoffman is a Professor of English at Arkansas Tech University, where she teaches film and television studies as well as literature and creative writing. Her publications cover films and television series like *A Place in the Sun, Mad Men, Band of Brothers, Bergerac*, and Hanna-Barbera's *Snagglepuss*.

Ann-Gee Lee, professor of English, rhetoric, and writing, has been teaching at UAFS since fall 2010. Over the years, she has taught Composition I & II in various capacities, Textual Research Methods, Writing for the Workplace, Rhetorics and Poetics, Arguing Public Issues, Literature of Diverse Cultures with an Asian-American focus, Second Language Assessment, and recently, Introduction to Film. She is the faculty advisor of Cultural Network, a student-run organization for students, faculty, staff, and the community, and teaches their free Mandarin Chinese course. Her research interests lie in various aspects of rhetoric (secret codes and languages) as well as women's studies, popular culture, art and design, languages, and play pedagogy.

Todd Moffett, a professor of English at the College of Southern Nevada, has only recently discovered the world of anime. He has no practical knowledge of sorcery. He previously published an article in *Popular Culture Review* titled "The Blacksmith."

Douglas Rasmussen wrote his Masters thesis on the AMC television series *Breaking Bad* called "Intertextual Representations of Drugs, Violence and Greed in *Breaking Bad*," which generated two journal articles and a book chapter. He has a number of articles and book chapters in various stages of publication. He has also contributed to a number of online blogs and websites. His main interest is in the field of Film and Television Studies but has expanded to other areas of popular culture as well. He wishes to continue research on popular films and discuss how popular media can contribute to a social and political allegory on contemporary issues.

Carlos Tkacz has an MA from California State University, Bakersfield, and is currently a PhD student at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he studies speculative fiction and pop-culture through an ecocritical lens in the Global Anglophone context. His interests are Native American Literature, science fiction, representations of violence, and narrative theory.

G. Christopher Williams is a Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. His research interests include storytelling expressed in traditional literature, but also in film, in comic books, and in video games. He has published essays in *Film Criticism*, *PostScript*, and the *Popular Culture Review*.

BOOK REVIEWERS

Destiny Pinder-Buckley is currently getting her MFA in Nonfiction Creative Writing from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She received a dual bachelor's degree in English and French from Augustana University in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Her essay, "Pandemic: You Are Here," is published in an anthology about Sioux Falls by Belt Publishing.