THE EMERGENCE OF UNDERGROUNDS: CONSPIRACY, TERROR, AND PUNK AT THE CLOSE OF THE CENTURY

By

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This project explores the cultural and political landscape produced by the metaphor of the underground. The metaphor is used both to describe real and imagined populations and the real and imagined spaces those populations occupy. The work here is not an attempt to examine any particular configuration of the metaphor but rather a labor to describe and to intervene into the ways the metaphor participates in, if not produces, political alienation. The project examines the way the metaphor indexes productive social bonds but also the way the metaphor indexes the outside of any social configuration and, in many ways, participates in the discourses that work to map that outside terrain as threatening. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the production of threat and the capitalization on the insecurity market has in many ways disabled a growing and productive unease with global capital as the century closed. This project uses the metaphor of the underground—particularly as inflected in figures of conspiracy, terror, and punk—to reread cultural labor at the emergence of globalization and the postmodern cultural logic. In doing so, the project seeks to articulate a politics of attention that can coordinate much of the countercultural and subversive gestures performed at the close of the century and made available by and through this figurative language. Of course, such work must be prepared to contend with the paranoid styles and recourses too brought into relief in the simple proposition
of an underground networking or of an underground history. This semantic tangling is explored through readings of War on Terror-themed television dramas, Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, Francis Ford Coppola’s conspiracy thriller *The Conversation*, and the emergence of punk subculture, particularly through the punk slogans articulated by Johnny Rotten and The Sex Pistols.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

“We can ignore or forget the fact that the ground we live on is little other than a field of multiple destructions. Our ignorance only has this incontestable effect: It causes us to undergo what we could bring about in our own way, if we understood.”

—Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Volume I*

Popular and academic discourses alike tell us there is an underground.¹ This dissertation does not ask the formidable question: what all is going on down there? This work is by no means an exact attempt to articulate exactly what “underground” means or has meant or can mean at every point of articulation and signification. Rather, I use the very premise that there is an underground—the ideological division of bodies in our apprehension of space—to analyze how that spatial division exerts pressures on daily life and on interpretation. To some extent, this figurative language participates in the very discursive defining of an “everyday life,” containing that which exists outside its legal parameters, establishing the veil of the normal, and outlining that which does not pass for propriety.² Since the language points in multiple directions—pointing toward the secret, toward the buried, toward the shadowy, toward the fugitive, toward

¹ At my local book retailer, the magazine *Punk Planet* subtitles itself *Notes from Underground.* In Jacques Derrida’s *Limited Inc* (1988), he offers, “the terrain” that receives any reply “is slippery and shifting, mined and undermined. And that ground is, by essence, an underground” (34).

² Ben Highmore’s *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (2002) is a useful survey of the critical work that has explored the discursive labors of defining the everyday. The work of Judith Butler, and particularly *Bodies That Matter* (1993), is useful here for its theorization of the abject, “those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of subject” (3). Butler then theorizes “the persistence of disidentification” (4), which seems like an apt description of much that defines itself as underground, even if at all indices the same kind of injurious abjection as the one Butler theorizes is not at stake.
the networked, toward the minor, toward the alternative, toward the resistant, toward the
subversive—in directions both terrifying and hopeful (and sometimes to indices simultaneously
both), this dissertation uses the figure of and the production of an underground space to corral
divergent practices for reading. Part of what we must recognize in this figure is how it works as
a reading practice. To figure an underground space is to economize the social in particular ways.
To produce an underground space is to have read the social—or a social moment or a social
product—in some particular way that articulates the dissatisfaction or the unease produced in
that reading. Thus, to figure or produce an underground is to have imagined the ground, too,
under which one’s underground forms.

The figure of and production of underground space, this work argues, does nothing short
of indexing for us the distribution of survival. It reminds that survival is, in fact, distributed. It
describes and participates in the operational work of capital in identifying who and what lives in

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3 Paul Mann’s 1999 essay “Stupid Undergrounds” is helpful in articulating the many inflections
of the metaphor “underground.” Mann’s more particular subject, however, is the 90s rise of
what he deems “stupid” undergrounds, the “manic codification of the inane, the willingness to
pursue, absolutely at the risk of abject humiliation,…lines of inquiry that official intelligence
would rather have shut down” (136). Mann is interested in, for example, the S/M, body
modification, and industrial music subcultures represented by Re/Search Laboratories and the
conspiratorial, paranoiac, and anti-work micro-publishing of Loompanics Unlimited. For him,
the most important work of these undergrounds is how they render a criticism desperate for its
own marketable niche, in which to rehearse a reflexive criticism, ultimately stupid. Thus, while
Mann’s essay discusses the multiple inflections of the term, I am ultimately interested in how
those inflections broaden the purview of objects of study beyond subcultures. See also Stephen

4 Etienne Balibar (2004) writes, “The traditional institution of borders mainly works as an
instrument of security control, social segregation, and unequal access to the means of existence,
and sometimes as an institutional distribution of survival and death” (117). I do believe the
representational topography of undergrounds is both a way to secure and attack the concept of
“borders.”
capital’s logic of loss and gain, the sacrificial economy that characterizes the social. Certainly, the claim to an underground art practice acknowledges that market survival or cultural intelligibility is a competitive task. The metaphor names both those who resist the normalizing appeals of the contemporary form and those whose appreciation is cultist, keeping the work “alive” in the cultural niches of its reception. Aesthetic posterity aside, I believe, ultimately, the metaphor “underground” is often applied when the distribution of survival for human bodies is more explicitly at stake. When the metaphor is applied to the covert planning of militants or militias, progressive and reactionary alike, we may recognize some desperate attempt, whether by violent action or hostile withdrawal, to communicate—even if paranoid—some recognition of precariousness in the social field. If undergrounds exist as a mode of survival, then they

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5 Here, I take my lead from, of course, Bataille, but also the more recent work of Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* (1998), Butler’s *Antigone’s Claim* (2002) and Slavoj Žižek’s *Tarrying with the Negative* (1993), all of which are attempts to articulate the costs (psychic costs, yes, but the material cost of lives, as well) inherent in formations of the social. Agamben’s book argues that modern state power, the power of the sovereign, is defined by its power to render human subject as “bare life,” “situated at the intersection of a capacity to be killed and yet not sacrificed, outside both human and divine law” (73). In the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks, Agamben’s theorization has been used in several reflections on those events and the resultant War on Terror, including Butler’s *Precarious Life* (2004), Žižek’s *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002), Randy Martin’s *An Empire of Indifference* and David Simpson’s *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*. Agamben’s language becomes a way to name at various times in these volumes the hijackers, the detainees at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, the casualties of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and even the 9/11 victims. Furthermore, A. Samuel Kimball’s *The Infanticidal Logic of Evolution and Culture* (2008) reminds that “existence costs,” and, thus, all societies—and members within a society—must shift their energy costs onto others. While Kimball is not particularly interested in pursuing this (perhaps, because it is obvious), capitalism has been the solution to economizing costs, economizing sacrifices. Of course, this unspoken—call it underground—knowledge has been part of the work of religion—and even Science Fiction—in codifying and managing the psychic pressures of such sacrifices. What Kimball argues, in part, is that the language of thought as generative, as conception, has, in part, obscured the costliness, the deathliness, of existence. Perhaps, a book like Evan Watkins’ *Throwaways* (1993) has a new resonance if tied to Kimball’s analysis: “Survivals are relics, throwaways, isolated groups of the population who haven’t moved with the times, and who now litter the social landscape and require the moral attention of cleanup crews, the containing apparatus of police and prisons, the financial drain of ‘safety nets,’ the immense maintenance bureaucracies of the state” (3).
recognize some precariousness in social arrangement. This project seeks to extrapolate from these lessons in precariousness in the hopes of articulating a shared precariousness.

Whether the signifier emerges from above or below ground, the indexing of others or of self as threatening or threatened does some cultural and political work that when attended can do work for how—and why—we read. And, thus, it also provides the opportunity to revisit the moments of an underground’s emergence, whether it be al Qaeda’s terror attacks or punk’s efforts to antagonize, or figured in Pynchon’s representation of the Sixties’ countercultures or the conspiracy narrative’s representations of our unwieldy corporate and political systems. This dissertation reads those emergences in the four chapters that comprise its close readings. I believe through them we are able to re-read our own historical moment, described to us in the theoretical pairing of postmodernism and globalization, which characterizes, borrowing from Alain Badiou (2007), the close of the century. The figurative language that describes and sometimes produces an underground allows us to attend to Bataille’s description that serves as epigraph here. After all, globalization can be understood as the preparing of the ground for unbridled capitalism⁶, and postmodernism becomes the cultural logic that facilitates—and covers

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⁶ Globalization is, of course, an ambivalent term, as Fredric Jameson (1998) argues in “Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue.” I use globalization to suggest the work making capitalism the only viable option for economizing the costs of existence. To this end, David Harvey (2000) has offered that globalization is “uneven geographical development”: “Globalization entails, for example, a great deal of self-destruction, devaluation and bankruptcy at different scales and in different locations. It renders whole populations selectively vulnerable to the violence of down-sizing, unemployment, collapse of services, degradation in living standards, and loss of resources and environmental qualities” (81).
up—those operations, those, at some points, destructions.\(^7\) I, then, hope to offer what a description of the subject as *underground* can do for a way to imagine a ground beyond destruction.

I do want to attempt to parse the multiple significations of the term to show how the term bends toward that which is anxious and toward that which is hopeful. I will then use that tension to open some texts and cultural works beyond the inevitable diagnosis of a cultural paranoia.\(^8\)

Most strongly, the adjective “underground,” of course, demarcates “secret,” withheld from perception, a play on what literality would do to the object: obstruct it from view, bury it. This secrecy can be willed or can simply exist as actions are done outside the purview of any

\(^7\) I take postmodernism to be a “cultural logic of late capitalism,” as Fredric Jameson describes it in *Postmodernism* (1991). Throughout my project, Jameson’s articulation of the spatial dilemmas of postmodernism and the loss of history postmodernism performs are used as “strategies of containment” for the apprehension of globalization as Harvey describes it, particularly as “self-destruction.” A “strategy of containment” is theorized in Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* (1981). I might offer, in that volume, Jameson writes:

> History is therefore the experience of Necessity...History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to the individual as well as collective praxis, which its ‘ruses’ turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention. But this History can be apprehended only through its effects, and never directly as some reified force. This is indeed the ultimate sense in which History as ground and untranscendable horizon need no particular theoretical justification: we may be sure that its alienating necessities will not forget us, however much we might prefer to ignore them.

\(^8\) Here, again, Jameson’s work is important to me. In Jameson’s “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” a 1979 essay collected in *Signatures of the Visible* (1992), he argues “anxiety and hope are two faces of the same collective consciousness, so that the works of mass culture, even if their function lies in the legitimation of the existing order—or some worse one—cannot do their job without deflecting in the latter’s service the deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies of the collectivity” (30). In that essay Jameson reads the underworld family of *The Godfather* to be both a figure for “American capitalism in its most systematized and computerized, dehumanized, ‘multinational’ and corporate form” and for “a figure of collectivity and as the object of a Utopian longing” (32). The metaphor “underground” seems to always carry with it this sort of double inflection. A snapshot vision of disorder when needed: the terrorist plot, the scandalous youth subculture, the crime family. A snapshot vision of a hopeful new world order no matter how you envision it: counter-cultural revolution or perfectly invisible—and, thus, hygienic—police state counter-terrorism.
mediation. Trafficking is done underground and, while its connections and routes are kept secret from the law, trafficking itself is no secret\(^9\). Thus, an underground is a shared secrecy or veiled secrecy depending on where one stands. Underground also suggests “fugitive.” To go underground as the Weather Underground did was both to avoid prosecution and to co-ordinate actions in secrecy.\(^10\) The “underground economy” attempts to describe the labor of buying, selling, and trading goods outside the purviews of those authorities that may police it or tax it.\(^11\)

Of course, this inflection of the term is not without its partiality. The terror plot conceived underground is meant to have visible effect or else, of course, “terrorism” has no

\(^9\) The Stephen Frears 2002 film *Dirty Pretty Things*—a film in which the protagonists stumble upon an organ trafficking network—had the tag line “Some things are too dangerous to keep secret.” Of course, the ambiguity is rich, for what too was secret in the film was the illegal immigrant status of the film’s protagonists, one having fled the military violence of his African homeland and the other working in an illegal sweatshop. The crime the protagonists commit ultimately secures them new identities and with an illegal passport one immigrates to the US.

\(^10\) A member of The Weather Underground, Bill Ayers entitled his 2001 memoir *Fugitive Days*.

\(^11\) In his journalistic account of the United States black market *Reefer Madness* (2003), Eric Schlosser describes the black market economy of the US as an “underground” economy. In doing so he establishes a relationship between underground and ground, whereby “mainstream business” (that is, legal business) learns from “the American underground,” “where economic activities remain off the books, where they are unrecorded, unreported, and in violation of the law” (4). I find this line particularly interesting: “These activities range from the commonplace (an electrician demanding payment in cash and failing to declare the payment as income) to the criminal (a gang member selling methamphetamine).” Thus, one becomes part of the underground at various points of contact. It has vectors that cross with an everyday good standing. To be underground is much like Agamben’s theorization of *homo sacer*. Where one finds oneself in a given moment can be precarious.
value. In a sense, it is a bringing into view that which would otherwise be kept hidden: the politics of the network to which the cell is only one point of contact. The networking is underground, while the network itself communicates openly. Thus, we are reminded that “underground” too points toward networking and the networked. Paul Mann (1999) reminds that the term draws its signification from “the space of tunnels and hence also of communication—subways, fiberoptics, sewers—and of escape under the walls” (133). As Galloway and Thacker (2007) offer, “The network, it appears, has emerged as a dominant form describing the nature of control today, as well as resistance to it” (4). They further remind, “Human subjects constitute and construct networks, but always in a highly distributed and unequal fashion. Human subjects thrive on network interaction (kin groups, clans, the social), yet the moments when the network logic takes over—in the mob or the swarm, in contagion or infection—are the moments that are the most disorienting, the most threatening to the integrity of the human ego” (5). As such, the

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12 On the value of terrorism, see Inside Terrorism by Bruce Hoffman, who reminds, in separating the terrorist from the criminal, “the terrorist is fundamentally an altruist” (43). Terrorism is plotted underground, but it may not have any desire to be an underground. Of course, Jean Baudrillard’s The Spirit of Terrorism (2002) may importantly extrapolate what plotted may mean for us here: “Terrorism is the act that restores an irreducible singularity to the heart of a system of generalized exchange. All the singularities (species, individuals and cultures) that have paid with their deaths for the installation of a global circulation governed by a single power are taking their revenge today through this terroristic situational transfer” (9). As for the “underground” plotting, in Steve Coll’s Ghost Wars (2005), an account of the build up to September 11, the Hamburg cell, which eventually arrives in the US, made home in Germany’s urban, industrial city: “Prostitutes, heroin dealers, and underemployed immigrants shared the streets.” Coll writes, “Even in the dim cement block dormitories and rental apartments of polytechnic Hamburg, the Al Quds crew saw themselves as members of a global Islamist underground. They used cell phones, the Internet, and prepaid calling cards to communicate with other mosques, guest houses in Afghanistan, and dissident preachers in Saudi Arabia” (475).

13 Here, it may be interesting to note both the subtitle to Coll’s book—The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, From the Soviet Union Invasion to September 10, 2001—and the title of a collection of communiqués by bin Laden: Messages to the World (2005).
production of underground networking can either tap into its potential as resistance or its potential as threat, but the figure of an underground network, I will suggest, plays a part in re-orienting attention toward—and sometimes dis-orienting attention from—the hegemonic networking of capital.

Of course, the adjective also points to that which is “alternative” or “resistant” or “subversive.” The “underground press” marked a collection of activist voices seeking to widen the purview of the media, to expose the otherwise ignored. This press was counterpoised to a “mainstream” or “straight” press locked into its own vested interests. “Underground film” may have in part earned its name by using basements as alternative screening spaces, but it soon became a description for artists interested in alternative contents and forms. Jack Kerouac’s *The Subterraneans* (1958) famously documented the “subterranean hip generation tendencies to silence, bohemian mystery, drugs, beard, semiholiness” (23), the formation of a different set of values and mores that would soon take on the nomenclature of “dropping out,” withdrawing from the characteristic routine and security of an everyday life figured as such. “Subterranean” and “underground” here point to the body, the abject, the sensual, the libidinous, what Paul Mann calls a “metaphysics of verticality,” whereby “underground” suggests a threat to and, as

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well, a threat from the “repressive order” (133). The underground becomes a space for miscegenation, for cultural mixing and invention. In Todd Gitlin’s account of the sixties, a chapter is devoted to “underground channels,” the emergence of those figures of rebellion, juvenile delinquency, and “smirking” satire (Marlon Brando, rock music, and Mad Magazine) that figured, ultimately, the proper “estrangement” from the everyday for the emerging counter-culture. The post-60s experience of culture has been a process of “underground channels” coming into cultural intelligibility.\(^{17}\)

The language of the underground adheres to the rise of—and, with cultural studies, almost certainly the rise of attention paid to—subcultures. As Dick Hebdige says in his famous account Subculture: The Meaning of Style (1979), the word “subculture” is “loaded down with mystery. It suggests secrecy, Masonic oaths, an Underworld” (4), but subculture is, too, the “expressive forms and rituals of subordinate groups” (3). An underground is a communication; it is a protest. As a spatial assemblage of networks and affiliations, an underground is populated by any number of punks, garage bands, cyberpunks, zinesters, scenesters, cartoonists, graffiti

\(^{17}\) The once “underground” provocations of hip hop, for instance, becomes a cultural dominant on the pop charts but not before shedding its Afro-centric and black consciousness raising tendencies in the early 1990s for, on the one hand, a more designer-friendly, marketable lifestyle imagery (“Puff” Daddy) and, on the other, the more menacing gangsta rap (Ice Cube), both of which ultimately gave way to hyperbolic narratives of mass consumption. And, thus, the previously “underground channel” of hip hop emerged in such a way that “underground hip hop” thus emerges. Underground hip hop maintained and carried into other directions hip hop’s politicized roots. It too championed the hip hop collective, as well as network and scene building, which had been lost in the aggrandizement of the celebrity. It continued to imagine the “posse” as collaborative assemblage rather than a group of hangers on, as it had become in the evolving imagery of gangsta. Underground hip hop, too, became a space for the hip hop voice of other groups, most notably Latinos and whites. From a certain perspective, “underground” marks a certain romanticism, a point of return for holding onto potentially “lost” strands of cultural work, the labor of raising the dead or of keeping certain strains of thought alive. It is this romanticism, clinging at so many points to the metaphor and its figurations, that I believe is important to the history I will advance in the following chapters. See Jeff Chang, Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop (2005).
artists, culture jammers, pranksters, cultists, avant garde artists, anarchists, fetishists, hackers, activists, conspiracy theorists, exhibitionists, zealots, fight clubs, freaks, geeks, and other outsiders. In a footnote in Subculture, Hebdige, citing Stuart Hall, marks the difference between the counter-culture and a subculture. The counter-culture can be marked by its “explicitly political” opposition to dominant culture and by its “elaboration of ‘alternative’ institutions.” Subcultures, in contrast, are “displaced into symbolic forms of resistance” (148). The articles preceding the terms (the counter-culture and a subculture) may just as easily speak to the difference and may even more pointedly speak to the historical realities of the postmodern.\(^{18}\)

Furthermore, as it is quite possible to consider, for example, punk as a rather overt elaboration of alternative institutions—the alternative nation (as Hebdige believes punk attempts to create), the alternative recording industry, the alternative touring circuit—it might be necessary to wonder if the subcultural is not in fact the inherited postmodern form of the counter-cultural. As the micropolitics produced in and by postmodernism gives us, to use a phrase from Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, “so many undergrounds,” the globalizing and aestheticizing of culture becomes both the site and target of their interventions.

But for now, it is important to note how “underground” has been a label for cultural vanguards, the insistence to work against a cultural dominant, a faith that resists the hygienic image of cultural domination, that embraces those values of baseness, of grit, of, what Alain Badiou (2007), will call “a passion for the real.” In fact, Badiou’s description of the 20\(^{th}\) century’s signifying feature will necessarily bind itself to any operation—cultural or aesthetic work—that exists as an underground: an attention committed to some other purview of

\(^{18}\) Jameson speaks to these realities in *Postmodernism*, p. 318–331, where he laments the “new social movements.” Of course, there are more sympathetic readings, for example, in Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* (2000), which I will discuss in my second chapter.
attention, a passion attached to that which either feels authentic or is otherwise unsanctioned. As such, the underground—its heterogeneous assortment of “survivalists” of one stripe or another—can show us how dispersed and uncoordinated these passions can be in the postmodern and simultaneously how precarious and threatened reality itself can be if so many figure (or so much figures, as the case may be) otherwise. And so this bifurcation of the social is interesting because it registers and obscures the multiplicity of cultural vantage points. And yet it, in its description of multiplicity, obscures the singular force of this shared passion that the real is illusive and elusive. The passion for the real as a determined and, thus, sacrificial cultural vantage point reminds that the competition for attention is intense. This sacrificial focus is important, for it resists what I will ultimately argue is an ignorance to the sacrificial economy in and of capital. Badiou says that the passion for the real is a refusal of the passion for ignorance.

Part of what this dissertation will lay out is how the underground can ultimately become emblematic of the excess of space that an increasingly mediatized “global” produces, for, in addition to that cadre of expressive subcultures listed above, global space is, too, populated by revolutionaries, counter-revolutionaries, terrorists, racists, militias, arms dealers, spies, counter-spies, agents, counter-agents, and an array of conspirators, who too have a passion for the real, but for whom that passion is expressed less upon their own body than on a purge of other bodies. These figures are both real and imagined, and the objects of many of the narratives—fictional and cultural—that attempt to imagine for us the spaces that exceed the purview of our own attention. This global space must be economized into some vision. The figure of the

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19 Fugitives and vigilantes, paramilitary groups and radical insurgencies, populate many of our narrative genres. Science fiction has often figured a secret cabal or shadowy presence that torments daily life. The work of Phillip K. Dick is replete with images of shady corporations, conspiratorial governments, political factions, stealth police operations, and drug underworlds. The espionage thriller depicts a world where, beyond the view of the average citizen, a network
underground can in ways lead to an understanding of how that global vision has been economized, over-coded as menace and threat. This is a mediated space available for the politics of fear, if not a space opened up and created in the politics of demonology that have characterized Cold War politics for a long time. In fact, part of the operations of global financial capital have been to over-code much of the so-called Third World as an underground space, making that space, I would suggest, available for sacrifice, if the case need be.

So, this project does something quite different than attempt to define “underground” or to describe any particular “underground.” Rather I look at what the very spatial presence of an underground does, is doing. Henri Lefebvre’s classic study *The Production of Space* (1991) theorizes the “the operational or instrumental” role of space as “knowledge and action” (11). The discourse of the underground is used to describe the way some operate in space, how some of spies wrangle over trade secrets and plot subterfuges, and, inevitably, stumble upon renegade bureaucrats or financial power brokers, who, as James Bond learns in *Dr. No* and other novels, keep the real operations of power literally underground. The work of Philip K. Dick and Ian Fleming may imagine and figure very different political relationships to power and its corralling but both pull from the same spatial imagination that suggests power circulates elsewhere in ways that can or could (were it not for police power, so says Fleming) contagion an otherwise oblivious everyday. For more on Dick, see Carl Freedman, *The Incomplete Projects* (2002). For more on Fleming, see Michael Denning, *Cover Stories* (1987).

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20 See Thomas Doherty’s *Cool War, Cool Medium* and Michael Rogen’s *Ronald Reagan The Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology*. Most importantly for my purposes and an argument I will use to read several texts, Evan Watkins argues in *Everyday Exchanges* (1998) that the rhetorical ability to project embittered others and poaching others secures the exploitation of human capital.

21 This is the argument made in Randy Martin’s *An Empire of Indifference*. Martin writes, “Bush has parted Reagan’s mists and done to America what area studies had once done to the world: now population is assembled into areas or concentrations of risk, not geographical regions. These areas have frayed the domesticity of the United States, so that the foreign in our midst, figured by the terrorist, can now be generalized to the population left behind” (58). The implicit critique of area studies in Martin’s piece is repeated in Rey Chow’s *The Age of the World Target* (2006), which, too, is about the economization of global space, economized into a target.
produce spaces of their own, and how some avoid and circumvent the way space has been appropriated for them. The discourse of the underground, too, is put to use to describe these actions in a labor to control the knowledge of them. And certainly, part of the production of underground space is to obstruct and refuse the very pedagogical work of codifying space, of geopolitically drawing borders and of drawing lines. In fact, Lefebvre’s own use of the metaphor is telling, as these two quotes are to illustrate:

…[S]pace may be said to embrace a multitude of intersections, each with its assigned location. As for representations of the relations of production, which subsume power relations, these too occur in space: space contains them in the form of buildings, monuments, and works of art. Such frontal (and hence brutal) expressions of these relations do not completely crowd out their more clandestine or underground aspects; all power must have its accomplice—and its police. (33)

…Nor has the working class said its last word. It continues on its way, sometimes underground, sometimes in the light of day. (23)

Lefebvre’s work is a labor to articulate the competition over space, both the production of concrete spaces and the invisible—ideological—struggle over how space is to be abstracted. In his own spatial vocabulary, the underground figures as both the space of police work and of revolutionary promise, of fear and of hope, of the grip of stasis and of the prospect for change. From Lefebvre, I take the metaphor of underground as a production of space to provide, ultimately, a way to read—using a concept certainly semantically tangled with the topography of undergrounds—the alienated subject of late capitalism.

Underground names a space for hiding out, for perhaps plotting an emergence or for perhaps just waiting it out, whatever it may be. Underground names a conspired space for plotting, for counter-plotting or un-plotting, exiting this or that narrative of social responsibility. I am interested in the underground as the demarcation of the space in which subjects conspire (work together, work against) and the imagined space in which others conspire (work against, do
the dirty work). The signifier, too, points to the complicated, undocumented spaces in which subjects have conspired. Frederic Jameson himself will note in Postmodernism that “every rich political experiment continues to feed the tradition in underground ways” (414). So “underground” is a complicated signifier that points to what could have been and what could yet be. So one very important concept that the language of the underground too conjures is the possibility for return; underground, too, refers to all those social (and labor) pacts that are undocumented and so their import awaits us. Here, I believe the work of Walter Benjamin will be of great significance, as outlined in the next chapter, for we need not take the fact that so much cultural work is mindful of an underground presence of one sort or another as a reason to subscribe to the easy cultural analysis of paranoia22; we may, rather, recognize that texts contend with the burden—as Benjamin would suggest, the barbarism—of history by figuring and insisting upon the presence of cultural and political nooks and crannies, of underground spaces.

Fredric Jameson’s work on postmodernism as a cultural logic, then, becomes particularly useful to me, for it offers the postmodern as a spatial dilemma. Recognizing that our abilities to register local, national, and international realities are complicated by the postmodernist or multinational moment, Jameson (1991) argues, “At this point, cognitive mapping in the broader sense comes to require the coordination of existential data (the empirical position of the subject) with unlived, abstract conceptions of the geographic totality” (52). Many narratives after the 1960s, such as The Matrix discussed below, attempt to perform this drama—a subject’s position is challenged by the discovery of some underground (that is to say, by some other position, the discovery of “positionality,” as it were)—and attempt to offer a representation of coordination

This problem posed to spatial practice makes particularly important Lefebvre’s work, for it allows for a reading of undergrounds as a particular production of social space, a “counter-space,” produced in and by what Lefebvre (1991) theorizes as the dialectic of command and demand. Undergrounds, I’d like to propose, are demands made on space. Thus, such attempts to represent undergrounds or to confront the symbolic works of undergrounds themselves require attending to their demands: “The real task...is to uncover and stimulate demands even at the risk of their wavering in face of the imposition of oppressive and repressive commands” (95). Undergrounds are attempts to alter the coordinates of lived space. Lived space, the “dominated” space “which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate,” writes Lefebvre, is “alive: it speaks.” To an extent every underground produced—whether an actualized “counter-space” of unaccountable bodies intent on their own itinerary or a representation of encountering those very possibilities in a narrative—is a demand made on our conceptions of space, a demand for a new conceptualizing of spatial possibilities. What are we to learn from these demands? How do we hear and listen—that is, respond—to these demands? And thus what demands as political subjects are we to make upon another’s demands? In this regard, this project seeks a new practice of hearing, an aesthetics of listening into the underground, a politics of attention.

This project takes as its historical object the 1960s into the current “War on Terror,” for, I will argue, the aftermath of the 1960s has demanded its own new politics of attention. In a sense, Jameson’s essay “Periodizing the 60s” suggests that postmodernism is the particular

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23 As example, I would offer a whole host of 1980s films, in which a bored suburbanite or an uptight professional discovers in underground nightlife and, inevitably, criminal underworlds, the violence their existence both ignores and, in some ways, produces: Jonathan Demme’s *Something Wild* (1986), John Landis’s *Into the Night* (1985), Martin Scorsese’s *After Hours* (1985), Susan Seidelman’s *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985).
inheritance—the particular inherited political “situation”—of the generations after the sixties: “the world of microgroups and micropolitics” (192), “a now absolutely fragmented and anarchic social reality” (201), and, most significantly, “the fall of politics back into the world in the form of a very different style of political practice indeed...one that seeks to dramatize features of state power” (203). Undergrounds are, I believe, very much a product of this inheritance but ones that agonize with that position. Thus, I will argue that listening to the underground affords one route to understanding “politics” as it attempts to respond to—resist the commands of, formulate its own demands to—the postmodern and globalization. Thus, this project becomes I believe appropriately book ended, first, by Oedipa’s wrestling with a utopian moment of possibility, the possibility of undergrounds “truly communicating,” and the equally conceivable “plot...mounted against you” and, finally, by the panicked scurrying of television dramas to represent the World Trade Center attacks of September 11, 2001, an event that has seemingly made the greatest demand upon American political subjectivity since the 1960s.

Certainly the language of undergrounds, particularly as it clings to the work of subcultures, is important to cultural studies, but what I want to avoid—and this is certainly why I insist on the multiple inflections of the term—is focusing on any one particular manifestation and argue for its “undergroundedness,” articulating what it resists or what it cannot resist ultimately in forecasting its co-opting. Such an approach has become the trapdoor of cultural studies Meaghan Morris (1990) has outlined. Contemporary cultural studies would have us investigate

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24 Morris’s article outlines a certain gridlock in contemporary cultural studies, polarized between Baudrillardian fatalism and pop-theory utopianism, which, as Morris reveals, becomes, ultimately, a rehearsal of identifying a cultural dopism. As such, cultural studies becomes a search for new objects to reinforce the critic’s powers of revelation. Morris proceeds to discuss Michel de Certeau’s The Practice of Everyday Life. In her articulation of de Certeau’s theory of “polemological space,” she writes:
the particularity of each underground or each social organization. How does it resist? Here, however, I seek to resist the hegemonic insistence of particularity. I am interested rather in the generalized function of this discursive bifurcation. Rather than ask what each social organization communicates, I will ask, what does social organization itself suggest?

Meaghan Morris’s essay “Great Moments in Social Climbing” is an important rejoinder to approaches that would have it otherwise. Her essay understands “the collective production of knowledge,” and thus its movement through a range of productive sites—advertisements, films, comic books, theory, architecture, stunts—provides a useful productivity of its own. Morris’s cautionary tale—or perhaps, telling—continually attempts to displace cultural studies’ retreat into binary oppositions, which tend to validate only the simplest of observations: here’s power, and there’s resistance. It is not enough (as Evan Watkins, too, argues) to locate victim and agent; rather, the task is to resist such logics and dead ends. Morris’s essay, ultimately, is interesting as a mapping in its own right, as a series of movements that resists a reading of any one object (the plural of the title then carries great freight) and that rather reads, as she writes, “those locally circulating discourses in which the social significance of my objects of study, and thus the stakes involved in studying them, may be defined” (125). Thus, the gesture to locate underground/ground—and the rather mundane observation of the difference—would seem to produce, well, nothing. When Morris reads the documentary A Spire as an “allegory of

The basic assumption of a polemological space is summed up by a quotation from a Maghrebian syndicalist at Billancourt: ‘They always fuck us over.’ This is a sentence that seems inadmissible in contemporary cultural studies: it defines a space of struggle, and mendacity (“the strong always win, and words always deceive”).

Part of what I hope to do here is reaffirm this space that seems barred by a cultural studies that insists on subversive productivity. In a sense, I do not want to disown these spaces. Hence, in my chapter on Pynchon, I argue for paranoia (as it describes a reading practice), and, in my chapter, on punk, I believe, I show how the punk intervention is produced by insisting on having been “fucked over.”
resistance,” this conclusion is not enough; people resist, now what? The demand, rather, should be “to learn something from A Spire—to respond to, and extend, its productivity” (143). Thus, I imagine, one gesture that may need to be made is the translation of the objects of this dissertation into their gerunds. This is done in the spirit of Watkins’ thoughts on conspiracy theorizing and, of course, Jameson’s proposition of a pedagogy of cognitive mapping. What could undergrounding mean? What do various undergroundings produce? What does the fact of so many undergroundings produce? In the chapters that follow, I will ask, as well, what does conspiring do? What does so much conspiring do? What does punking do? What can punking do?

Part of what such a cultural studies provides, I do believe, in its very recognition is the need to resist the command to attend locally, and part of what I hope to do in what follows is to restore to some texts—TV drama, Pynchon, the conspiracy narrative, punk—the way in which they engage with the global. Part of what I believe occurs in the conflicted figurative language of undergrounds is the simultaneous insistence on the small as the register of attention and the demand for attention to be widened, globalized. The fundamental problem of postmodernity, of globalization, is the very difficult task of making sense of anything since we cannot possibly make sense of “the everything” that a seemingly non-homogenized or totalized vision of the global need take into account. Of course, the resistance to such an apprehension of the global produces the strong localizing gestures that inform both collective actions—as subcultures, as grass roots efforts, as racist militias, as ethnic tribes—and the reception of collective actions, from multiculturalism to populist cultural studies. The metaphor of the underground, I will argue, in part serves to maintain the register of the small as the dominant mode of attention as we move into the age of globalization. The micro-politics of undergrounds and the micro-criticisms
of cultural studies have reinforced precisely the ground needed to secure the hegemony of the knowable as the immediate and the visible. Of course, the important part of this hegemony is that the visible becomes defined as the immediately knowable, and “the world” is virtualized.25 Thus, the “small” knowledge of our own eyes secures the spatial “complexity” of, say, market forces, finance capital, the media, and geopolitics. I will not make an argument that such things are not complex, but the rhetorical gestures that secure that they be perceived as such, I will ultimately argue, are ideological. The larger and larger the depth of out there becomes—figured as an excessive and threatening underground space—the more comforting to act and think locally, which as Hardt and Negri’s Empire argues is a false claim to “local identities that are in some sense outside and protected against the global flows of capital and Empire” (45).

Hardt and Negri’s text poses many questions to the conceptualization of undergrounds in a global context. Their text argues for the necessity of producing “alternatives within Empire.” The prepositional positioning of alternatives to Empire is central to their argument and project. In their analysis, the flow of global capital in the postmodern has proven the impossibility of locating struggle outside capital. Yet, a post-1960s politics has valorized the “localization of struggles,” “place based’ movements or politics, in which the boundaries of place (conceived either as identity or as territory) are posed against the undifferentiated and homogenous space of global networks” (44). Hardt and Negri call for a conceptualization of struggle within Empire, the globalization of struggles. So while the production of an “underground” may often be the production of a locale, I do believe it necessary to understand that locale as within Empire (even

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25 For Rey Chow, the virtualizing of the world begins with the dropping of the atomic bomb and accelerates, of course, with the rise of “speed technologies.” For her, with the bombings on Japan, we enter a new episteme in which war organizes the attention paid to others, particularly as the US sees the rest of the world. In The Age of the World Target, Chow argues area studies see the world with the same “preemptive” attention that has organized its military policy.
while it negotiates its place against “the world system”). I do believe it necessary to understand the production of counter-space not as some found or formed outside space but as, in fact, some alternative space produced within any given lived space. Those practices that become conceptualized as “terror” are the most salient reminders that these undergrounds do not imagine themselves as some hermetically sealed outside untouched by the ground they are under. The production of an underground may very well be the production of some perceived sanctuary, the production of a space for private communications, but it is not recourse to or retreat into some ultimately silent place. The underground becomes misunderstood if only understood in a discourse of outsiders and as a discourse amongst outsiders. The emergence of an underground on 9/11 certainly provided a global moment, the recognition that a held-at-bay outside is purely imagined.

Ultimately, though, I believe a reading of the “terror underground” should not attempt to assign particular motivations to such an underground, but it should instead understand the emergence of this underground as making some demand upon my ability to attend now to both ground and underground, that is, my ability to attend globally. Of course, one such demand is to begin to reconsider the complicated fault lines of the local/global conception of space. Here again is where I believe a reading of undergrounds is useful, for the practices corralled under that term necessarily force this sort of theorizing. They seem to be produced at that fault line as one attempts to negotiate the constantly folding conceptual nature of these undergrounds; their practices engage with their own perceived outside in ways that would seem to challenge the integrity of the perceived divide between inside and outside. Most importantly, the demand seems to be to resist the permanence of any conception of local/global, for, as I’ve been arguing, a sense of the porous nature of that line is understood in these “underground” practices. Hardt
and Negri’s response to this very demand is to “delve into the ontological substrate of the concrete forces acting in the historical context,” to attend to “a horizon of activities, resistances, wills, and desires that refuse the hegemonic order, propose lines of flight, and forge alternative constitutive itineraries” (48). This ontological substrate is what becomes overcoded as “underground,” the very discourse that subjects such “living labor” to paranoid response or to its own “incommunicability,” unable to translate one’s own work and the work of others into a global context of struggle (54). Thus, “counter-globalization,” for Hardt and Negri, cannot be confused with anti-globalization (206–7), just as, I believe, “counter-space” cannot be confused with just some other space. While our conceptions of globalization and space may be the products of a unilateral command, the production of undergrounds must be read as demands to rethink those conceptions. Globalization must become rather the production of the possibility to “be against in every place” (212). Hardt and Negri’s figure for this “will to be against” is the deserter, the nomad. For me, the production of “undergrounds” offers a rich possibility as a figure for the “clandestine migrations” of these nomads: “through circulation the multitude reappropriates space and constitutes itself as an active subject” (397). The burden though, again, becomes what to do with the demands of these new active subjects, the punk and the terrorist alike. It is here, where the radical demand of “No Future,” to re-iterate punk’s “impossible demand,” as Greil Marcus (1989) described it, will move us toward having to negotiate how this “will to be against” must contend with the demands of the death drive.26

26 In his book No Future (2004), Lee Edelman will define the death drive as “the negativity opposed to every form of social viability” (9). He argues the queer is called forth to figure this death drive. I would argue the potential terrorist is so too called forth. Edelman argues for accepting “the structural position of queerness” (27), that is, of course, “taking seriously the place of the death drive” (30). This is a premise I believe punk, too, attempted to insist upon. I argue this in this project’s final chapter.
I would like to conclude this introduction by illustrating how the ambivalence of the term underground can open up a text to its most radical questions. The 1999 science fiction film *The Matrix* illustrates how the signifier points to that which is to be feared—the conspiring other, the embittered other—and, even simultaneously, points to the dream whereby the victim (of this or that conspiracy, for instance) can become the agent of change. *The Matrix* has been one of the most talked about films of the last decades, particularly for what many critics would call its descriptive powers, its effort to figure postmodernity.²⁷ In the film’s exposition, Thomas Anderson (Keanu Reeves) comes to recognize his position as victim, slave to the matrix, a computer simulated world that is regenerated by feeding off the human life plugged into its system. At this point, a previously underground conspiracy is revealed: a hidden, secret operation securing the imperial hegemony of a global order by virtue of its very invisibility. In this sense, Anderson’s everyday existence is by definition a foreclosure to global reality. Yet, this very figuration—Anderson blinded as such to the “underground” of his everyday—can all too easily serve a critical function that would read any conspiracy as a representational symptom. Here is the figure of conspiracy that points to a “cultural paranoia” that emerges after World War II. Here, the figure also emerges to illustrate a postwar “agency panic,” a sense that political agency is depleted in the growth of more and more unwieldy systemic operations of capital and geopolitics, which the matrix seems to represent.²⁸ As Morris suggests, celebrating the text’s


²⁸ Here, I reference in particular two texts published in 2000 as representative of many critical approaches to the emergence of the conspiracy narrative in all of its many guises. “Cultural paranoia” is diagnosed by Patrick O’Donnell in *Latent Destinies*. “Agency panic” as a description of our psychic wherewithal after World War II is elaborated by Timothy Melley in *Empire of Conspiracy*. My third chapter contends with these texts.
descriptive power is never enough. What it confirms about what we fear is less significant than, I would suggest, discovering what it truly offers to frighten us.

As Anderson is unplugged from the matrix, he joins an underground resistance, a band of outsiders (literally outside of the matrix) holed up literally underground, underneath the charred remains of a destroyed earth. This drama somewhat redoubles yet amplifies the drama of Anderson’s simulated everyday existence in which he has his “respectable” cubicle job and his “other life” as the computer hacker Neo, the alias that becomes his name once un-plugged from the matrix. The matrix itself knows in simulating reality that the allure of anonymity and escape nourishes the sustainability of cubicle life. Once outside the matrix, the “real” world is now a competition between “undergrounds,” but the simulated reality that remains for most humans is an precarious ignorance in which undergrounds—secret police agents and freedom fighters—contend for discursive rights to social reality.

As protagonist, Neo is figured as the freedom fighter, less the conspiracy victim that may have populated the genre in the 1970s and into the 1980s and more so the empowered operative. The conspiracy is thoroughly apprehended as conspiracy; its revelation is not the issue. Rather, Neo seeks its un-doing (but this is, ultimately, future work, charting the course for sequels, which did emerge in 2003). As the film concludes Neo places a phone call to the matrix and promises a “world without [the matrix]” and “a world where anything is possible.” As Phillip Wegner (2009) notes, the film’s rhetoric and vision participates in the post-1989 emergence of “the contemporary counter-globalization movements, a struggle for the collective rather than the corporate control of the global commons.” Of course, in the very way this “underground” struggle is staged, the presumed agents of change may too be seen as reactionary. As A. Samuel Kimball’s reading of the film suggests (2002), Neo’s vowed destruction of the matrix, for as
much as it connotes a militancy, an opening of the world to possibility, it also marks “a war between a parent human generation and its cyber offspring” (94). From an angle, the matrix itself was a resistance movement, and Neo’s ambition—the restoration of the regenerative violence that would restore a properly human (read: paternal) hegemony—emerges from the “dread” of an, ultimately, “inconceivable” future. Neo’s underground resistance should mark the death drive of the global order signified by the matrix; however, to the extent the matrix’s underground conspiracy too figures the coming into being of some unknown power, the undoing of the conspiracy expresses a desire to disavow the very death drive that is in part the structural necessity of making anything possible, particularly if this way of being is precisely the blocking of possibility.

Such moments of apocalyptic promise in narratives become conflicted moments because they are attempting to figure both the desire for radical change and the impossibility in our present of acting the radical ways necessary. In this film, this structural ambivalence may very well be in part due to how the film itself participates as entertainment. That is, the filmmakers need political subjects who will want to play but not those that, ultimately, want to destroy. (No doubt in the way “underground” is often attached to subcultural hobbyists and niche markets, there is certainly an extent to which the inflection of the term can and has been purged of the sting to which I believe it is being put to representational work in the film, but certainly from a marketing standpoint the former connotations cannot hurt.) As Wegner (2009) will note, the “radical enthusiasms” that are, in part, figured in the film will ultimately arrive in the sequels as a vision of the post-human as dedicated videogame player (42). This, one can argue, has too been the drift of cultural studies: the critical labors of giving play its sting and, in turn, draining
resistance itself of its proper bite, hence the drift of the signifier “underground” from the
Weather Underground to a marketing term.

But what the film makes available in its figured spatial topography is precisely how the
ground itself is produced in “a field of multiple destructions.” Neo’s underground uprising, after
all, is the (almost) dead—the life-supported—returning to make their claim on a present that did
not deliver for what they now perceive as their sacrifice, even if what they had been given was,
in fact, the slightly unsatisfying but leisured everyday existence they had seemingly let proceed
until some other “life” form rose and demanded otherwise. Conceptually, sacrifice is
compromised if one imagines the expense of their giving being only some sustaining fantastical
potential to imagine an otherwise. Joshua Clover’s description of the film (2004) aptly describes
the world the matrix has simulated for its victims: “The nightmare haunting The Matrix is that
1999’s expanding construct—the working week and the workstation, the economy, the corporate
sphere—can’t be stormed at all. Architecture can only stand in its place.” For Clover, Neo’s
matrix-simulated cubicle in the film and the cubicle itself in the contemporary world serves as
infrastructural emblem of the everyday ground that feels alien. The feeding vestibule in which
human subjects are plugged into the matrix becomes their real cubicle. Thus, I would argue, in
The Matrix the cubicle is a product of the competition going on underneath it. So, the film’s
structural contradiction may, in fact, simultaneously reveal and contain a dream of access: the
ability to perceive cubicle work as a production of multiple destructions. This is, in part, what
the figurative topography of the underground attempts to do. The film’s spatial architecture
presents the humdrum work week cubicle as the bearable if not satisfactory ground of First
World existence, but the underground is where the action—for better or worse—is. The very
proposition of this bifurcated space proposes a sphere that foregrounds what the cubicle space obscures: a competitive sphere, a sense that the stakes are raised, perhaps, that there are stakes.

What the staging of The Matrix offers is a figure of how that competition produces the ground sacrificially. If all evacuate their cubicles, something dies. If all remain in their cubicles, something dies. This is a much different and more frightening problematic from the one which turns on questions of whether there is or is not an outside to the matrix, an outside to the postmodern. The matrix is but one way to organize who or what dies; the underground represents the burdens of that organization. And so I do believe the language and figuring of undergrounds clings to this knowledge of survival’s distribution, even if—and maybe especially when—we only grasp it as the proverbial “better life.” At stake for The Matrix is the unplugging of the cord of a leisured sustainability (relative to the “barbarians at the gate” who may otherwise threaten it); yet, terminating the matrix cannot promise the rise of something better, and may even deliver something worse, figured in precisely how the underground resistance runs the risk of participating in the same sorts of regenerative violence that inform a history of colonial domination, particularly in the United States.  

And so, in The Matrix the proposition of an underground space both marks a way to figure the film’s radical enthusiasms and brings forth the very anxieties part and parcel with such enthusiasm. And, thus, what I want to suggest in what follows is how the metaphor of the underground can be used to bring to the fore this tension between—and, here, the work of Fredric Jameson is so important—anxiety and hope. Furthermore, as this reading of The Matrix is to suggest, by providing for tropes of escape and of threat, the language can obscure the cost of any and all configurations of ground and

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29 For a discussion of this history, see Richard Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation (1992).
underground, which in the film, and elsewhere I will argue, is the obscuring of the costs in any and all configurations of the social.
CHAPTER 2
(RE)READING THE CLOSE OF THE CENTURY

As the reading of The Matrix was to illustrate, this project is, ultimately, about economic violence: the costs and the expense of any configuration of the social, the costs and expense of any form of attention. To understand the economic violence of our present, I study figures of terrorism, punk, and conspiracy at what I will call—following Alain Badiou—the close of the century. In his volume on the 20th century entitled The Century (2007) Badiou describes the final decades of the century as “the second Restoration.” These decades clear the path for the emergent stranglehold of liberal globalization (the victory of capitalist solutions over revolutionary possibility) and the postmodern cultural logic (the victory of semblance and spectacle over any passion for the real) (26–29). Yet, the particular chapter in which Badiou outlines this close to the century is titled “The Unreconciled.” Thus, for Badiou the century may come to a close but this does not mean its work is finally resolved. In this sense, as I will offer more thoroughly below, Walter Benjamin’s vision of history as redemptive is instructive. If any appraisals of the 20th century or of our present are to be made, they can only be done so by taking into account what the century itself, so to speak, learns. The century does not so much close as disappear, as many of its creative energies are closed off from the field of available political options.30

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30 Francis Fukuyama’s declaration of the so-called “end of history,” let alone the end of a century, is addressed in Derrida’s Specters of Marx (1994) and a collection of reaction pieces to Derrida’s text edited by Michael Sprinker, Ghostly Demarcations (1999). Those volumes discuss the opening up of the possibilities for revolutionary promise. Fredric Jameson’s piece in that volume ends with his hope that “Marx’s purloined letter” may exist, as Derrida read Poe’s, as “a wandering signifier capable of keeping any number of conspiratorial futures alive” (65). My project works to discover a future for conspiring, for the possibility in conspiratorial thinking.
For Badiou, the 20th century’s vital feature is the insistence—violent in its course—on making the 19th century’s dream of “the new” a reality. Badiou, again, calls this drive and force “the passion for the real.” This passion is an “obsession” in locating the “definitive.” This “longing for the definitive,” Badiou writes, “is realized as the beyond of a destruction” (36).

Badiou’s account of the century is the parsing of the lessons learned from the courses—unfortunate or instructive—such passions can take. However, any lesson learned from the 20th century’s passions must be pried loose from the sedimentary history that unquestioningly condemns them. On the one hand, such histories record only the atrocities and violent failures of those endeavors. With the other, they accept the liquidation of this passion in the concessions made to “the automatisms of profit” (10) and in “the obsession of security” (66). These lessons must be pried loose from a history that seems to have ended, seems to have properly foreclosed any alternatives. In a sense, the possibility for destruction must be salvaged. As Badiou easily accounts, we have not eclipsed atrocity in our time and thus a vocation remains for destruction. Badiou’s polemic argues for a fidelity to certain modernist experiments and tendencies. These are passions for the real that refuse channeling their longing for the definitive toward the “path of terroristic nihilism” (64). Rather, the “comfort of repetition”—that is, belief in an end to any need for the new—must be destroyed by subtracting from such comforts, particularly the comforts made available in certain frames of attention that ignore the sacrifices made in focusing. We remain locked in the close of the century—even as a new century begins—until the apparent closure can be done asunder by reinvesting in the possibility for “subjective novelty” (66). Exploring this possibility is the trajectory of the following chapters of this project that attempt to re-read cultural work from this Second Restoration with an awareness of competing frames of attention.
While the close of the century may be read as the settling of the passion for the real into reassuring pacts with the inevitability of capitalism (Jameson, 1991, 318–331), I do believe what is otherwise read as the closing of the century offers glimpses into alternatives. Here, I am more judicious than Badiou in rendering a verdict on the closing of the century. I am not sure any verdict of a “Second Restoration” can be complete. Certainly, the response to the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the institution of the military and cultural logics of a subsequent War on Terror seem to powerfully control the discourse of destruction, censoring any passion that may question the dream of mass security envisioned in global capital.\(^{31}\) Any sense of closure violently contains the presence of competing passions. The emergent counter-globalization movement, various anti-systemic movements, and numerous political and cultural protest movements since the 1960s have debated—and, thus, in their very presence and necessity, debunked—any assurance of a neo-liberally wrought security for all.\(^{32}\) September 11, 2001, however, seems to signal an end to some of the political and cultural energies after the 1960s (and, again, after 1989) that promised to remain faithful to the prospects for possibility. As Fredric Jameson’s reaction piece to the attack of September 11 (2002) notes, “The opponents of an antiglobalization politics will certainly be quick to identify bin Laden’s politics with the antiglobalization movement generally and to posit ‘terrorism’ as the horrible outcome of that misguided antagonism to the logic of late capitalism and its world market” (303).

\(^{31}\) The Retort Collective’s reflections on the vanguard ideal in \textit{Afflicted Powers} address many of these concerns.

\(^{32}\) Emmanuel Wallerstein’s “New Revolts against the System” and the other essay collected in \textit{A Movement of Movements} (2004), edited by Tom Mertes, provides history of post-1960s “anti-systemic” movements.
The politics of attention that proceed after September 11 introduce—or, in keeping with our metaphoric, foreground—the problematic that initiates, if not necessitates, the need for revisiting with a new attentive faculty the close of the century. The “restorative” force with which a War on Terror proceeds certainly demands reflection on any and all diagnoses of some inevitable and reassuring neoliberal rise of global capital. This project then turns to that Second Restoration—the end of the 1960s’ political energies (as anticipated by Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49) and the decades that follow—in an effort to describe a passion for the real obscured in what may appear as concessions to or retreats from the demands of an increasingly global capital. The metaphor of the underground is important here because it can point us toward—often in the imagining of underground threats that suture a national grounding—the production of social bonds (that is, the production of social comforts), often at the expense of others, that leave their violent trace. And yet it can point too toward social bonding produced precisely in some shared unease with the hegemonic social comforts offered in, say, nationalism or, as Paul Smith (1997) describes, capitalist fundamentalism; punk subculture seems to be formed in precisely such discomforts In fact, the close of the century offers the Seattle protests


34 Jello Biafra’s explication of his group’s moniker—The Dead Kennedys—available in archived footage at youtube.com (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVrTW7AukoM)—illustrates as much. For him, the assassinations of the Kennedys bury the “outward” purview of the American people and “set[s] them up to be the corporate serving rodents they are today.” His five minute interview from 1980, discussing the band’s debut album, may very well illustrate how punk serves as the post-1960s labor of “keeping any number of conspiratorial futures alive.” Biafra’s rhetoric here—and certainly in his band’s album *Fresh Fruit for Rotting Vegetables*—repeats much of the volatile conspiratorial critique against capitalist imperial hegemony initiated by, say, The Weather Underground. Yet here is Biafra, talking with his mouth full, in the clear light of day. This migration—for better or worse—I will discuss throughout this work.
against the World Trade Organization, which illustrated rather starkly the fissures in the otherwise overbearing traction neoliberal globalization held in the collective imagination. Yet, as this project describes, it is the very new energies of a counter-globalization movement, the possibilities that “another world is possible,” that are dispensed with when the future is terrorized.

The force of the counter-globalization movement is most saliently described in Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*, a work that figures prominently in my project, particularly as it attempts to describe—and to coordinate—the “evacuations from the places of power” performed by the global proletariat at the close of the century (212). The passion of Hardt and Negri’s work is precisely the possibilities for coordinating. They offer in *Empire*, “The depths of the modern world and its subterranean passageways have in postmodernity all become superficial” (57). This project is an investigation of such superficiality. Yet, the very ubiquitous and evocative metaphor “underground” seems to connote just how compromised this superficiality may be. To

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35 T. V. Reed’s *The Art of Protest* (2005) offers a useful history of social protest movements leading up to Seattle. While punk is not mentioned in Reed’s account, the migration of punk protest certainly arrives in Seattle. Punk as protest emerges most forcefully in London but quickly migrates to the militant strands of hardcore California punk. The Dead Kennedys were a San Francisco band and that city’s rich political history certainly flavors their world view. See David E. James’s chapter “Poetry/Punk/Production” in his *Power Misses* (1996) for thoughts on California hardcore, LA in particular. Punk goes further underground throughout the later 80s but reappears prominently in both the Riot Grrrl movement and, more publicly, in grunge. Both Riot Grrrl and grunge are Pacific Northwest responses to, on the one hand, the hardlining of punk, its narrowness, and, on the other, its perceived ineffectual cultural hanging on, its domesticity. Riot Grrrl—with networked points in Washington, DC and London—was much more cosmopolitan than grunge. Riot Grrrl is certainly a politicized punk; grunge may be an extreme disavowal of politics to the point of being archly political. My concluding chapter’s thoughts on the death drive are certainly amplified by Kurt Cobain’s suicide. Greil Marcus thoughts on Cobain’s death in *Double Trouble* (2001) may be instructive. On Riot Grrrl, see Nadine Modem’s edited volume *Riot Grrrl: Revolution Girl Style Now*. Both articulations fostered the more progressive leanings of the punk aesthetic. In the Don Letts documentary *Punk: Attitude* (2005), Jello Biafra offers, “Punk definitely had a major influence on the eruption of militant anti-corporate activism that first came to light over here in the Seattle protests.”
describe this postmodern superficiality, Hardt and Negri reference Marx’s mole, an image evoked by Marx to describe the continuity of proletarian struggles. Marx’s mole would surface in times of class conflict only to retreat underground, not to hibernate but to burrow, “pushing forward with history.” This mole, Hardt and Negri suggest, has died but not in any way that is entirely lamentable. Because of the reach of Empire, each struggle now “leaps immediately to the global level and attacks the imperial constitution in its generality” (56). Furthermore, all struggles are now “at once economic, political, and cultural—and hence they are biopolitical struggles, struggles over the form of life…creating new public spaces and new forms of community.” Herein lies the virtue within Empire; since the “virtual center of Empire” can be “accessed immediately from any point across its surface,” “any singular point of revolt” can be all the more powerful. However, these struggles do not communicate. There is, Hardt and Negri confess, “the lack of well-structured, communicating tunnels” (58). That is, to say, there is no common, global subterranean. There is a competition, I will argue throughout this volume, for apprehending or conceding the generality of imperial constitution, yet no doubt one of the more significant features of our post-1960s history has been the disappearance and re-emergence of a struggle over “the common” (300–303). It is, as well, in this situation, that the very language of undergrounds, of the underground, of the simultaneous but contradictory movement of those who insist on a reappropriation of the global commons and of those who insist on forging the “uncommon,” so enthusiastically clings to all such points of revolt. The superficiality remains not at all self-evident.

What remains interesting to me is Hardt and Negri’s consideration of “singular points of revolt.” The points are given singular geographic names: Tiananmen Square, Los Angeles, Paris, and Seoul. Hardt and Negri’s charge is for us to “delve into the ontological substrate of
the concrete alternatives continually pushed forward by the *res gestae*, the subjective forces acting in the historical context” (48). Their enthusiasm stems from the possibility of reading “a horizon of activities, resistances, wills, and desires that refuse the hegemonic order, propose lines of flight, and forge alternative constitutive itineraries.” Later in their volume as they give name to the subjects of these itineraries—the multitude—they offer, “The movements of the multitude designate new spaces, and its journeys establish new residences” (397). For Hardt and Negri, the multitude’s power is the “power to reappropriate control over space and thus to design the new cartography” (400). And with this point they introduce again the language of the underground: “[We] can see that the new spaces are described by unusual topologies, by subterranean and uncontainable rhizomes—by geographical mythologies that mark the new paths of destiny” (399). So while they find hope in the superficiality available to us in globalization, their language to express this enthusiasm for locating “alternatives within Empire” imagines itineraries that find new underground enclaves as much as it must propose an available realm of underground movement: residences and itineraries, holding patterns and lines of flight.

Therefore, I wonder if the metaphors of “points of revolt” does not begin to occlude us from apprehending the complicated and tangled stops and starts of what Hardt and Negri call “the will to be against” (58) that arrive, both willfully and accidentally, in geographic sites such as Seattle in 1999 but the makings of which, we know, are in immeasurable and unaccountable struggles prior. Thus, the particular line of flight this project takes is to confront the messiness handed over to me by a metaphor that can be used—in keeping with the thought of Deleuze and Guattari, from whom Hardt and Negri borrow—to reinforce territory, to build borders, to striate
space, and, thus, ultimately, to contain movement, of both thought and political action.\textsuperscript{36} In the chapters to follow, the naming and narrating of underground space produces an ideological distribution of bodies. It is an attempt to economize the excesses of attention that can, too, be labeled “the common” or “the global.” The metaphors of “the underground” has provided useful—if not, in its own ways, obscuring—indices for the messiness of the social that resists the hegemonic hold of the social imperatives in larger narratives of, for example, national identity. We choose often the metaphor of “underground” to describe exactly that which seems to forge an alternative itinerary. That the reactionary and progressive force of movement can both be described through the ambivalent inflections of the term makes available the very dynamic of the incommunicability of struggles, for, as much it may describe the various movements of the multitude, it too conjures the very spectral, virtual presence of threat, of risk, of catastrophe, that politically alienates.

The semantic tangling of undergrounds has its most real effects in the way the Seattle Protests of 1999, in which a counter-globalization underground emerged in the United States, and the attacks of September 11, 2001, in which a very different sort of underground emerged, could be coordinated. No doubt the “generality” of underground movement—of conspiracies here, there, and everywhere—as a historically available reservoir of demonization tapped into from McCarthyism to Reaganomics has lubricated this entangling. In fact, in Hardt and Negri’s follow-up volume to \textit{Empire} entitled \textit{Multitude} (2004), the authors note how the media was “quick after the September 11 attacks to equate the monstrosity of the globalization protest movements with the monstrosity of the terrorist attacks” (218). In this formulation, it is important to understand both Hardt and Negri’s insistence on the figure of the monstrous and the

\textsuperscript{36}See, in particular, Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion in \textit{A Thousand Plateaus} of smooth space and striated space, pp. 474-500.
The privileging of Seattle as an index to the counter-globalization’s potential monstrosity.

Monstrosity is not to be reduced to violence. As Hardt and Negri note, “It is absurd, of course, to equate the violence of breaking the windows of McDonald’s at a demonstration with the violence of murdering nearly three thousand people…Clearly, not all monsters are the same.”

Elsewhere, however, Hardt and Negri, in an appreciation of the cultural circulation of the image of the vampire, will suggest “We are all monsters” (193). How are we to understand the term if it must be qualified in such a way? In the very rhetorical ease with which counter-globalization protestors and al Qaeda can be conjoined, we may too arrive at the very, very problematic core of the incommunicability of struggle. Such incomprehensibility, such flights from easy translation and conscription, however, will become a virtue in the post-9/11 volume Multitude (2004) that must make sense of and space for the emergence of such a different course for counter-globalization. I believe my own project takes part of the project to speculate on the very proposition of different and shared monstrosities.

The centrality of Seattle to Hardt and Negri and for a vision of counter-globalization is important. Seattle allows for an elaboration of Hardt and Negri’s thoughts on monstrosity, which—despite its own semantic problems—can offer some coherence to our inherited mess. In Hardt and Negri, Seattle becomes central first, I would offer, because “Seattle,” as a signifier marking a true movement of movements in the actualization of a unifying force in Seattle, becomes a relatively concrete signified for “monstrosity.” “Today,” they write, “we need new giants and new monsters to put together nature and history, labor and politics, art and invention in order to demonstrate the new power that is being born in the multitude. We need a new Rabelais, or, rather, many” (194). Seattle, they argue, was “the first global protest.” (286). The many movements that had arisen forcibly—but always with limits to their force in the two
preceding decades—had always appeared “incomprehensible and threatening,” even to the institutional Left. Seattle demonstrated “the coherence of the lists of grievances against the global system” (282). The micropolitics and the presumably competing agendas of micro-groups had come together as a new mutation. Therefore, as I advance readings of texts that mostly prefigure Seattle, I am arguing “Seattle”—what it comes to figure—is in the textual background of each and every text. Even the texts I read that follow Seattle, particularly those that attempt to make sense of September 11, have Seattle—the monstrosity of the new—as a looming presence. In the ways texts economize an “underground space”—in the ways texts proposition both threatening and hopeful populations—the possibility for a Seattle—and, as I would suggest, a repeating of Seattle, as well—is there. Jameson (1995) argues that the ideologeme “conspiracy”—which I use to read the texts I have chosen—operates to account for the excessive demographies of an increasingly globalized economic system. Often these demographic pressures will manifest in panic and fear, but it is important to recognize that, as those anxieties manifest in these texts, so too the monstrosity indeed of Seattle’s becoming is there and awaits reading.

For Hardt and Negri, the drive toward a new monstrosity requires an “anthropological exodus,” movement into a “creative, indeterminate zone au milieu, in between and without regard for …boundaries” (Empire, 27). In Empire, this exodus is first figured as a flight into a “new barbarism”: “the new barbarians destroy with an affirmative violence and trace new paths of life through their own material existence.” Citing Walter Benjamin, they add, the new barbarian “sees nothing permanent.” In fact, Benjamin’s project was to make available the sense of volatility that informs all historical moments, so as to add a sense of volatility to the present, to provide an open-ended future. The citation is important because it begins to open up another
portal through which the signifier “underground” must be apprehended, as the signifier affixes to gestures that fundamentally understand impermanence and forge alternative itineraries. Certainly, in our present, when the “end of history” narratives have been thoroughly deconstructed yet continue to have a significant material presence in the continued expansion of both neoliberalism and coercive democratization, the reassurance of such volatility is needed.\footnote{Wendy Brown’s “American Nightmare” is instructive on this expansion.}

Hardt and Negri will briefly allude to “punk fashion” as an example of an “initial indication of [the] corporeal transformation” needed in such an anthropological exodus. Yet, they offer that “punk fashion” does not ultimately offer “the kind of radical mutation needed here” (216). What is needed is the body that is “incapable of adapting to family life, to factory discipline, to the regulations of a traditional sex life, and so forth.” If Hardt and Negri refer to the evolution of punk into a commodified fashion—a fabricated safety pin earring rather than a safety pin as piercing device—then they are certainly right. As my project’s final chapter will argue, however, the initial punk self-fashioning may have offered precisely the sort of monstrosity Hardt and Negri go on to describe in \textit{Multitude}. There, Hardt and Negri, in discussing the contemporary (and welcomed) allure of vampires, again, write, “their monstrosity helps others to recognize that we are all monsters—high school outcasts, sexual deviants, freaks, survivors of pathological families, and so forth” (193). I think the initial punk emergence can be attended to in such a way that can begin to flesh out Hardt and Negri’s concept. The “flesh of the multitude,” they propose, “is an elemental power that continuously expands social being.” A detour back through punk—and certainly the ways it communicates with the discourse of the underground, and specifically as it is inflected through the discourses of “terrorism” and “conspiracy”—can help us to understand the volatility immanent to the flesh of the multitude.
Thus, I think it is important here to offer the importance of Walter Benjamin’s theorization of history. What I take most importantly from Walter Benjamin’s work is his understanding of history as the contested subject in a politics of attention. For Benjamin, history is told from the perspective of the victors. Traditional historians see history as the closed continuum of “progress.” As Slavoj Žižek (1989) explains, such a gaze “leaves out of consideration what failed in history, what has to be denied so that the continuity of ‘what really happened’ could establish itself” (138). From Benjamin’s perspective, the charge is to attend to the ignored (and I choose ignored here to invoke, once again, the epigraph to this project but also because Badiou will offer that a passion for ignorance competes with any and all passions for the real); Benjamin, writes in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” “The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption…In the voices we hear, isn’t there an echo of now silent ones?” (266). Benjamin’s historical materialism is an attempt to “arrest” these voices, to amplify what came to be with what could have been and, thus, what can come to be. Michel Lowy’s analysis of Benjamin’s theses (2005) illustrates how Benjamin offers a “revolutionary Romanticism,” the aim of which “is not a return to the past, but a detour through the past on the way to a utopian future” (5). My project is an attempt to offer such a detour. Again, it is not about bemoaning missed opportunities; it is about giving new force to what had otherwise been historicized as local gestures by connecting them to Benjamin’s “secret index” and, thus, increasing the burden of responsibility to attend globally.

The metaphor “underground” brings to the fore a virtual archive of resistances, of failed revolutionary gestures, and a way to track alternative itineraries. It offers, I believe, access to a “secret index,” or, at times, an index to our secrets. That is, to say, the “underground” can give us access to our ignored and our ignoring; in fact, the discourse exists precisely in the knowledge
our attention is always compromised, always sacrificial. Here, let me borrow (and perhaps strain) two images from Benjamin’s “Theses.” The first comes from Benjamin’s description of “the angel of history,” who “sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (257). The angel is “propel[led] into the future…while the pile of debris before him grows skyward” (258). The underground, I would like to offer, exists as what has survived the attempts to sanitize this “pile of debris” as “progress.” That is, to say, the underground registers the actual piles of debris; it acknowledges the “wreckage.” The texts that comprise my four readings will each offer their image of rubble and trash—from collapsed buildings to “throwaway populations” to trash aesthetics—and the texts contend with and, thus, *superficialize* how we contend or fail to contend with the clearing ground of history.

Thus, I think it is also necessary to recognize Benjamin’s metaphor for the work of reading history. From this secret index, Benjamin repeatedly stresses the need to “blast out” or “blast open” the continuum of history. To me, the metaphor insinuates the need to insist upon a certain force in reading. Thus, part of what will follow requires, for example, forcing connections, of practicing a particular kind of paranoia, that is to say, of practicing a particular kind of “monstrous” reading. In fact, in what follows, I admittedly try to find, and force my way through, detours in the imagery made available in the omnibus applications of the descriptor “underground.”

Furthermore, I think it is important when we read to be less concerned with

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38 I take great inspiration from the conclusion to “Great Moments in Social Climbing” by Meaghan Morris. In reading a short TV documentary highlighting one man’s scaling of The Sydney Tour, Morris takes her own detour through multiple popular culture texts and representations to understand the figure of resistance offered by her climber. Morris confesses a certain paranoia may color her reading. She writes, “Since my analysis is fanciful (a paranoid reading), perhaps nothing as serious as a rethinking ideologies of home and voyage can really be at stake in a short video about an eccentric and inconsequential episode in the history of the inner city.” “Yet,” she writes, in subsequent airings of that documentary, “the very elements” to which she has attended—making sense of them through connections to other images and gestures—
the “success” and “failure” of texts—as Benjamin’s own work asserts, those terms are perpetually compromised—and more with what they make available, what they make volatile.

I work through my triad terrorism, punk, and conspiracy so as to introduce—blast out, as the case may be—a bit of the monstrous into the possibility of understanding the history that brings us Seattle and then Seattle punked. I take each of those terms to offer an enveloping rubric for corraling practices and products that offer ways of attending to an emergent world system. In fact, the approach of the following chapters is to suggest how the reading practices and cultural productions that participate in the fluid discursive parameters of those terms offer us a way of recognizing a counter-globalization politics prefiguring the emergence of a “movement of movements” in the decades between the end of the 1960s and 1989. By returning to the indices available in attending to these terms, there remains, I will argue, the possibility for apprehending a certain force in those politics not otherwise available if we attend to them as failed images at the close of the century. Benjamin’s theorization of history suggests every historical image is incomplete; it waits. Benjamin calls this “dialectics at a standstill,” the past frozen not in its failure to figure adequately its revolutionary promise but in our inability to attend properly to what I want to describe as its global import. Every image of history, every political figuration or labor, is impoverished if it cannot be amply revisited as participating in a larger field of contest. This work is a work of amplification.

were “sufficiently serious” to be excised from the film. Here, then, “paranoia” is resignified, an attempt to pry certain interpretative practices loose from pathological connotations that can contaminate those practices. This is the subject of my fourth chapter.
CHAPTER 3
WHEN UNDERGROUNDS EMERGE: CATASTROPHE AND CRISIS IN WAR ON TERROR TELEVISION

When undergrounds emerge the contours of our everyday lives become reshaped. We have to make space for, open ourselves up to, contend with, the new demands of some population at work of whose work we had neither been familiar with nor knowingly threatened by. A new vigilance, for example, is demanded, widening and sharpening the gaze of the everyday surveying of our surroundings as anti-terrorism hotlines are created. “What haunts the post-9/11 world,” writes Susan Willis (2005), “is the specter of the real, the horror that we might one day exceed the code yellow and orange alerts and go all the way to red. Only then will we know what a real catastrophe is” (76). Perhaps, I should feel somewhat compelled to change “when undergrounds emerge” to “when undergrounds attack” in the common nomenclature of the Fox Network’s surveillance footage spectacles, for such panicked responses, such validations of our panic, have, as Willis notes, become one strategy to contain and capitalize on these moments when undergrounds do, in fact, attack.

The attack of September 11, 2001 made visible to a significantly larger population the previously underground terrorist operations of Al Qaeda. In a sense, it made an underground familiar, incorporated it into our everyday experience ultimately in a “War on Terror,” as terror updates and threat levels became as integral a part of the daily news ticker as stock quotes, sports scores, and celebrity gossip. The pervasiveness of the news ticker itself became a part of the reshaping of the frame of our view after September 11. What too emerges with this underground is our awareness of the fracturing of knowledge, the outsourcing, as it were, of our attention, for certainly terrorist bombings and daily terror threats were not new to other parts of the world. The 9-11 Commission Report (2004) shows that that this particular underground cell was not even operating in entire secrecy: “The System was Blinking Red” titles one section. The term
“chatter” was introduced to the public, a term that reminds us both that some already knew to listen and only some know how. Perhaps, Donald Rumsfeld’s invocation of “unknown unknowns,” a defensive posturing in the scope of demands for more information, may then uncannily suggest some public awareness of the need to know more and, ultimately, of a new will to know more.

When an underground emerges, when some conspiracy is uncovered, the inevitable fallout is a fact-finding mission: who knew what and when. September 11 certainly inspired a frantic one. The same line of thought produces, too, conspiracy theories: who really knew what and when. And certainly September 11, too, has inspired such theorizing as no other event since the Kennedy assassination, each event traumatic, each complicated by the global politics of the time, with each theory variant imagining black-op government factions colluding with other equally shadowy parties. Also, each trauma has its video capture and, as well, its unsatisfying lack of more video. The Zapruder film is notorious for what it shows and, more importantly, for what it suggests without corroboration. The WTC impact was captured on video from multiple angles and vantage points, but the missing video of the Pentagon attack (which contributes to the success of Therry Meyssan’s CIA-plotted attack theory) introduced a whole set of questions about what one was seeing or not seeing in the footage of the Towers. The question “What really happened?” is inspired by, made possible in, the lack of a totalizing capture of the past: the accurate record of the moment some underground emerges from a previous obscurity.

Such conspiracy theorizing would seem to be a manifestation of what Žižek (2002) describes, borrowing from Alain Badiou, as “the passion for the real” that recognizes in the televised spectacle something (some thing) lacking. Whether by official fact-finding committee or by populist conspiracy theorizing, the “passion for the real” seizes the event—the catastrophic
moment—and recognizes that our first experience of it—its first moment of impact—is already compromised, made unreal in its mediation. To ask “What happened?” or “What really happened?” though in this context—with these methods of knowing dominating—defines the parameters of the questioning. The question “Who knew what?” is really “Who knew more? Who knew more about what appeared before my very eyes?” As Žižek writes, “The problem with the twentieth-century ‘passion for the Real’ was not that it was a passion for the Real, but that it was a fake passion whose ruthless pursuit of the Real behind appearances was the ultimate stratagem to avoid confronting the Real” (24). The pursuit of the man who knew more becomes a personal scapegoat to avoid confronting the real question: why did this happen? In fact, the oft-asked popular manipulation of this question is much more telling: “How could this have happened?” The question is interesting both for what it disavows—that this was ever a possibility—and what it rather somewhat paradoxically yet starkly confesses: how the questions “Who knew?” or “What really happened?” are, in fact, avoidances, how the real question needs to address and interrogate the context that produces this, the production of these undergrounds in the first place.

It is, of course, from this questioning desire for more and the unsatisfying experience of the moment (or the moment’s capture) that the raw material of, the potential for drama is produced. As September 11 inaugurated the War on Terror a market is produced for representing “terrorism,” a market produced to capitalize on the panicked state of information and knowledge. As I believe a reading of the “War on Terror”-themed dramas will illustrate, the fictionalized access to, a fictionalized knowledge of, underground terror cells becomes a way to hold at bay the persistence of that latter question—“How could this have happened?”—that demands a context for, a history of the production of these undergrounds. I turn to television
here because for television that question must ultimately be avoided, for it threatens the very ideology upon which television functions, the ideology of “liveness” whereby television capitalizes on its production of the signifying necessity of the *here and now*.

I am interested here in pursuing how, given the content and context of a post-9/11 War on Terror, cultural producers used this new source material as a survival mechanism, even as the source material, I will argue, threatens the very foundation of the televisual. The persistence of that latter question—“How could this have happened?”—I want to argue is a crisis for American television, and yet there is something to learn, to behold from the panicked excesses of the new dramatic forms that manage this crisis by anticipating the *next time*. It is ultimately the access to an advanced knowledge of the future, the promise of intervention before the next catastrophe, which makes these representations work, and, ultimately, which makes these representations’ work important to understand. What these representations foreground and what they repress of this new content to ensure the survival of an ideology can, ultimately, be useful in articulating the work of undergrounds that threatens that survival; thus, a reading diagram for other representations is produced. Here the crisis produced by the emergence of an underground is averted in forcing the drive of any desire for knowledge to be bracketed at one end by a rehearsal of the catastrophe of 9-11 (rather than attending to the crises preceding and producing that moment) and bracketed at the other end by the diverting panic that anticipates the future catastrophe (the underground inevitably emerging again, emerging at “home,” making impossible the thinking of a future outside the threat). The War on Terror-themed dramas produced in the wake of 9-11 are televised panic attacks, hyper-productions of the historical moment that manage the long stretch of crisis by sustaining what Žižek calls the “Master-Signifier” of a War on Terror: “the signifier of potentiality, of potential threat, of a threat which,
in order to function as such, has to remain potential.” Willis’s “real catastrophe” in wait, the
always here and now of terrifying possibility.

**Local News**

Certainly to no surprise to those attuned to the mechanisms of televisual “flow,” the local
news program following Fox’s December 9, 2003 telecast of the counter-terrorism drama *24*
promises in its promotional segments during multiple commercial breaks “the latest on the war
on terror.” Tonight, Jane Feuer’s reconceptualization of Raymond Williams’ concept of
“flow”—as “segmentation without closure”—is almost transparent, almost nakedly mechanical
in its effort to hold us over. The program *24* ends, and we are told to “stay tuned for scenes from
an all new *24*” as Keifer Sutherland’s Jack Bauer stands against a backdrop of computer
generated graphics. Dennis Haysbert (or is it his character on *24*, President David Palmer?)
pitches us All-State insurance. The local Fox anchor tells us to “tune in” to “see how this jet is
being used in the War on Terror.” We are shown tantalizing scenes from next week’s *24*, and,
then, the local news broadcast begins.

“Flow, as seamless scanning of the world,” writes Feuer (1983), “is valorized at the
expense of an equally great fragmentation” (16). With their fades to black and slow dissolves
and other transitional elements, the fragments here are discernable; the program *24*, the sponsor’s
advertisement, the show’s own advertisement, the news lead-in, the news broadcast itself—these
are identifiable units, and we may imagine, as well, that their functions—to entertain, to sell, to
inform—are easily identifiable and are singular to the fragments themselves, but any such easy
appointments—fragment form to function—becomes expended in the flow. So while “flow”
blurs entertainment, information, and advertisement, “flow,” also, as a network practice, makes
its own act of blurring visible. Yet, as “flow and unity are emphasized,” television is given its
sense of what Feuer calls “liveness,” “a sense of immediacy and wholeness.” And, perhaps, in
the desire to see “the latest” in the war on terror, and in television’s own mechanism to consume the questions these fragments may propose for and to each other in its flow, the viewer arrives at the news program without consideration of what the confluence of these fragments may openly suggest, for example, about the appropriation of terrorism for entertainment or about the blurred boundaries of the news media and entertainment. For contradictions in and of flow and fragmentation become trumped by, deflected by, secondary to television’s offer of “liveness,” of its alleged access to the immediate. In fact, whatever uneasiness this particular example of televisual flow may raise in regard to the appropriation of terrorism for commercial gain and to the very commercialism involved in the news’ own “latest on the war of terrorism” feature can be easily assuaged if the news can deliver an “update” on the War on Terror.

For tonight’s broadcast, tonight’s update, though, the “latest” is somehow unsatisfying if we imagine the “latest” to hold some sense of urgency. This update is obviously framed as urgent—the anchor certainly used his most commanding voice in the lead-in when stating, “We’ll show you how this Florida jet is being used to help in the War on Terror.” The local affiliate’s report, though, betrays any built-up urgency as it merely shows the ceremonial opening of an anti-terrorism training facility—the space of the retired jet—in Florida. It is the kind of story that denies this anchor an opportunity to say his favorite transitional intros: “Happening tonight in Baghdad,” or “Happening tonight in the world.” In fact, this “new tool against terror” is truly no such innovation. Its only novelty is its placement in Florida. The rhetorical operation does show how the spatial—the closeness of this anti-terror tool—can recuperate the missing temporal urgency when there is apparently no new news to report from the “terror front.” But whatever residual dissatisfaction may emerge from the focal shift is no threat to the TV’s “liveness” tonight, for local news is “happening” tonight.
In the early morning hours of December 9, 2003, a local man, resisting arrest, died after being stunned by a police officer’s Taser gun. The number of blasts, and the duration and voltage of those blasts, were withheld from the media by the Sheriff’s spokesman. The suspect died sometime during his transport from the scene to the hospital. After the standard news report of the event—including footage of the crime scene, eyewitness accounts, the spokesman’s account, relevant file footage (this time, something appearing to be a police department’s training video simulating a Taser blast)—WAWS FOX 30 decides to further educate its audience on the Taser gun itself. Amidst the specter of this man’s death after the Taser’s stun and with no verifiable evidence that the death was caused by anything other than the Taser’s stun, the news reporter submits himself and his cameraman to a blast to put on display the “weapon’s power.” Only the highly serious context keeps the twisting and convulsing bodies (and, in the case of the cameraman, the uncontrollable profanity) from becoming anything other than sensational. Although such exhibition is not uncommon (officers themselves are submitted to such field tests to “learn for themselves the weapon’s effects”), such an exhibition in this context can only be understood as blithely stupid or profoundly arrogant. That an evening without much “happening,” with no decisive terrorist activity to report, with no terrorist crime scene to take us to (“FOX takes you there,” their standard slogan), that such an evening resorts to so morbid a tactic to display its authoritative “liveness,” to offer so vigorously a defense of a technological apparatus, is emblematic of so much television during our “war on terror”: this is desperate television when undergounds attack.

**The Impossibility of a Crisis Mode**

As Mary Ann Doane’s essay “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe” (1990) argues, television is not equipped—or, more precisely, as I will argue, is unable and unwilling—to manage crisis,
to conceptualize crisis. The crisis of international terrorism is the context and cause of television’s present panic mode. To argue this requires first a reading of Doane’s essay.

In Doane’s lexicon, Feuer’s “liveness” becomes “present-ness,” television’s “celebration of the instantaneous.” Thus, television trades in “the potential trauma and explosiveness of the present”: “Television fills time by ensuring that something happens—it organizes itself around the event” (222). For Doane, television offers “three different modes of apprehending the event—information, crisis, and catastrophe” (223). Information is the “steady stream of daily ‘newsworthy’ events, . . . always there, a constant and steady presence” (223). The crisis “names an event of some duration which is startling and momentous precisely because it demands resolution within a limited period of time”; it suggests “the necessity of human agency” (223). The catastrophe, the “ultimate drama of the instantaneous” (222), becomes “the most critical of crisis for its timing is that of the instantaneous, the moment, the punctual” (223). Doane suggests television practice is a conjuncture of the informational and catastrophic modes of apprehension.

For Doane, television is an information-intensive technology, tending toward “the leveling of signification, toward banalization and nondifferentiation” (225), and television, like information, “inhabits a moment of time and is then lost to memory,” its continuity an inherent problem (226). Television, she writes, “thrives on its own forgettability.” The “fantasy” of “liveness,” then, serves to transform television’s instantly forgettable, insignificant recorded images into an “immediacy,” “covering over the extreme discontinuity which is in fact typical of television in the US” (228). The fantasy of liveness is most tangibly available in the “televisional construction of catastrophe,” which “seeks both to preserve and to annihilate indeterminacy, discontinuity” (234). Television, says Doane, “is a kind of catastrophe machine”: “Catastrophe
is necessary to television, as the corroboration of its own signifying problematic.” Television translates, presents, and remembers an event as catastrophic because “the catastrophe” is like television.

Doane’s description though, I believe, leads to a more complicated conclusion as to why television has adopted a catastrophic mode for apprehending the event: “what underlines/haunts catastrophe but is constantly overshadowed by it is the potential of another type of catastrophe altogether—that of economic crisis” (236). Television (re)presents any economic crisis as a catastrophe, “sudden, discontinuous, and unpredictable”:

Catastrophe makes concrete and immediate, and therefore deflects attention from, the more abstract horror of potential economic crisis. For the catastrophe, insofar as it is perceived as the accidental failure of technology (and one which can be rectified with little tinkering—O-rings can be fixed, engines redesigned), is singular, asystematic—it does not touch the system of commodity capitalism. (237).

For Doane, television’s translation of economic crisis into catastrophe is a necessary containment of threats to capitalism. Thus, television’s insistence on a “catastrophic mode” of perception, I believe, is the necessary containment of its very foundational crisis, the very crisis in the material base that allows commercial television to exist and media conglomerates to thrive. While the catastrophic mode certainly manages crises of and in capitalism, the catastrophic mode more importantly always short-circuits the ability to comprehend crisis, to comprehend capitalism itself as an economic crisis.

Terrorism presents a challenge to capitalism. Susan Buck-Morss’ volume on terrorism (2003) suggests that terrorism (in our present context after September 11, 2001 and through the war in Iraq) becomes an ideological over-determination of Islamism, “a compelling, if troubling, critique of the way ‘modernity’ has been experienced by millions of Muslims in the so-called Third World” (2). To equate terrorism with Islam is an attempt to silence “a contemporary
discourse of opposition and debate, dealing with issues of social justice, legitimate power, and ethical life in a way that challenges the hegemony of Western political and cultural norms.”

Silencing is always necessitated by a message heard somewhere. If the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 brought from the underground to the consciousness of the United State the existence of such counter-discourses to capitalist hegemony (popularized by such short-hands as “Jihad vs. McWorld”), the subsequent “War on Terror,” as it necessarily imagines another such attack, becomes a crisis situation, the temporal persistence of that counter-discourse. The anticipatory constant such a war initiates and the lingering psychological effects of terror (a necessary precondition if some act in fact was terroristic) creates a temporality that cannot easily be represented as catastrophe, cannot easily be represented by television in “catastrophe mode.”

The discourse lingers; a crisis seeks resolution. As a result, a televisual panic is put in play. While television makes a desperate effort to represent terrorism as catastrophe, The War on Terror itself necessitates an anxious insistence by television on its own institutional importance. TV news will chug along inadequately, its “liveness” suspended indefinitely as the crisis of the War on Terror proceeds, and, so TV drama have become both the index of television’s panic in this crisis and the site for something like a television PR campaign. They become, as well, something like the televising, as it were, of the processes of cultural reception and, in turn, cultural production that proceeds from the emergence of an underground: this is to say, it becomes a figure for how we avoid crisis, avoid “the Real.” As some of the first products of response, these dramas become interesting for what they must disavow of the message heard, how they must disavow the crisis from which the message was produced. Quite simply, ultimately, there are no undergrounds in these representations but everything of the panic they produce.
Boston Public and Very Special Episodes

September 11 was almost immediately memorialized by television. The postponement of the fall 2001 season by television’s catastrophe coverage allowed television’s creative engineers to build September 11 into the Fall season. The West Wing responded first by presenting on October 3rd of that year a quickly penned and minimally produced “very special episode” about a group of students caught in the 9-11 lockdown of the White House and offered a history lesson by the show’s cast of characters. Third Watch’s October 22nd season premiere was entitled “September 10th” and that season’s second episode, broadcast October 29th, takes place on September 21 and reflects on the previous 10 days. NYPD Blue’s November 6 season premiere is set in the immediate aftermath of September 11, as well.

As these shows are set in the very sites of the terrorist attacks—New York and the Washington, D.C. area—and as they aspire to a certain realism, to not acknowledge the terrorist attacks would be an act of bad faith. But, as well, these acts of remembering become post-catastrophe coverage assemblages of catastrophe coverage’s work. Patricia Mellencamp (1990) writes, “Catastrophe coverage, ‘the time of the now,’ is represented as a moment when thinking stops, a moment of danger that might portend change, which paradoxically is both thrill and preclusion” (243). “Anxiety,” she adds, “is television’s affect.” Thus, television “promises shock and trauma containment over time via narration of the real” (254). Repetition, as it attempts to achieve “mastery over loss,” becomes the operative mode of this narration (258). “Very special episodes” after the catastrophe coverage ends become post-traumatic narratives collecting, and further attempting to master, the anxious remainder that eludes the catastrophe coverage proper.

Very special episodes in 2003 suggest the trauma of 9-11 has eluded mastery, but the ongoing War on Terror would seem to preclude such a thing anyway. When creators of Fox’s
Boston Public want to address this War on Terror—and lengthy discourses on the curtailing of civil liberties, on racial profiling, and the ambivalence towards both in a “time of terror” suggest this is the program’s objective—recourse to the trauma of 9-11 becomes the only way to both symbolize terrorism and to authorize a dialogue about terrorism. As the show begins with vice-principal Scott Guber discovering the school library’s computers have been used to access a “terrorist site,” the camera pans onto the computer screen displaying 9-11 television footage surrounded by Arabic letters. As Mellencamp writes, “TV triggers memories of TV in an endless chain of TV referentiality” (242). The self-referentiality here conditions a certain context (a foregrounding of effect, never of cause) for attending to terrorism in the show. When the FBI is called in response to the rupture in the everyday school lives of the show’s characters, the ethical questioning of post-9/11 governmental policing is the subject of office banter; when the specter of fascism is cast by the show’s Jewish character (“This is how it starts; tattoos on their arms will be next”), the FBI agent appeals to our televisual memories of “the force of those jets crashing into those buildings” as indexical evidence of the FBI’s ethical ground and walks away from the discussion and a silenced faculty. The current crisis cannot be framed as a durable challenge to our “way of life”; it becomes, rather, by reference to and appeal to the televisually constructed catastrophic memory, an extension of that catastrophe, a repetition and re-remembering of it.

In fact, the show’s climactic moment—when the Arab-American student investigated as a terrorist is confronted by a throng of hostile students—is coded as “catastrophic,” as well. Coming to the girl’s rescue after having had a bottle thrown at her, Harvey Lipschitz, the Jewish faculty member and Holocaust survivor who’s already analogized the current panic to the Holocaust, offers an empathetic embrace. From a character known for his bigoted and
reactionary prejudices developed and played for laughs in numerous episodes, this gestures transfers the catastrophic trauma of the Holocaust onto the discursive field of the War on Terror. There is probably a richer political critique mandated by this symbolic move, but, for the purposes here, the scene operates to figure the War on Terror in a catastrophic frame rather than the frame of crisis. Principal Stephen Harper’s episode-concluding speech in front of an assembled student body reinforces this move. The students investigated were not terrorists, he says forcefully, “but this past week we were.” The violent attack, the name-calling, the suspicious glances, and the silent condoning of such behaviors all become implicated as evidence of the school’s intolerance. Terrorism is punctuated by single intolerant acts, small and private catastrophes of conscience. The inferential command for soul-searching as a mechanism to comprehend and confront terrorism, while certainly preferable to the behaviors framed by this conceptual formation, works to short-circuit the radical discourses to capitalism that may have been the untranslated and uninterrogated content of the catalytic website that puts this drama into action. “I was curious,” says Kahlid, when asked why the website was accessed. Curiosity is attention in crisis. Television has no time for that.

Television’s self-referentiality in this episode does not end with that website’s inaugural image. A subplot on this episode follows assistant principal Ronnie Cooke’s crusade to create a space for a “real” dialogue about sex that the school’s “abstinence only” policy forecloses. The subplot rehearses an oft-covered television plot; that a television show centering on a school and teenagers would eventually broach this subject may be obvious, but the question specific to Boston Public, having avoided this hackneyed plot and topic for two seasons, might be, Why now? Has the show in season three reached the point of narrative exhaustion? But, as the show’s main plot suggests, the show desires to be timely.
Sasha Torres’ essay “King TV” illustrates how the very crisis George Halliday’s video of the Rodney King beating created for television—the need to “reclaim for itself the functions of immediacy and presence that Halliday’s video . . . threatened to usurp” (143)—was managed away by the fictional forms that recuperated that “liveness” through their own representations of the L.A. riots. Likewise, this *Boston Public* subplot works as a recuperative metanarrative of television’s mode of address. Cook’s promotion and defense of her unsanctioned “safe sex club” becomes a pretense seemingly for the dissemination of facts and statistics: “Did you know teenage girls are the highest rising demographic for HIV infection?” she asks over coffee in the faculty lounge. At stake in the bureaucratic and reactionary impediments to the formation of her club is the free and timely flow of information. Vice-principal Scott Goober’s solution: “All we have is our voice. I have found that public access television can be a wonderful tool for changing people’s views.” Fortuitously, the school is equipped with a camera and a satellite feed to the local public access station, and Cook delivers her message: “We are not protecting our students by keeping information from them. Keep them informed, keep them safe.” This exhausted talk-show debate of sex education in the schools becomes the locus for figuring information itself into the text because finally the content of the information does not matter, is not the matter, but rather the exaltation of the “free market” access to information that television provides is this plotline’s raison d’être. Furthermore, by falling back on conventional material, television forecloses yet another time and space to new discourses, the very such threat that has necessitated this rather banal insistence on its own importance within the context of its other terrorist plot.

**Threat Matrix and Televisual Celebration**

While terrorism-themed shows *Alias* and *24* were already in production prior to September 11, *Threat Matrix*, debuting September 18, 2003 on ABC, as it is the representation
of the homeland security team, itself a reaction-formation to September 11, became the first terrorism-themed show developed and produced specifically in response to the War on Terror. Unlike Alias and 24, Threat Matrix does not present the serialized uncovering and containing of a terror plot over the course of its season. Rather, the conventional shape of a Threat Matrix episode begins with some punctuated event, some minor catastrophe—a car bomb explodes, a hostage is taken, an informant is murdered—and this event is always discovered to portend some greater threat, to reveal some larger plot. The denouement of each episode is the coming together of the various trails of intelligence gathering the initial event has set into motion. The intelligence failures before and up to the terrorist attacks of September 11 have been widely reported. To a certain extent, each episode of Threat Matrix stages an impossible fantasy of recuperation of those errors. Less impossible, though, is the staging of a fantasy of intelligence totalization, the fantasy of information gathering technologies always necessarily working, capturing any and all threats within their scope. Television manages to include itself in the celebration of technology these fantasies stage.

The signal event of the September 25\textsuperscript{th} episode of Threat Matrix—“Veteran’s Day”—is the detonation of a car bomb killing a federal agent. Forensic reports, the collection of intelligence chatter, and footage from a surveillance camera allow the homeland security team to conclude that this detonation is a precursor to and trial for a larger attack on Veteran’s Day, just two days away. In the representation of “intelligence gathering” offered by the text, team leader, John Kilmer, quickly but assuredly, asks for information from each of his agents. Following Kilmer, seemingly over his shoulder, the camera goes from agent to agent, recording the many computer terminals, surveillance monitors, microscopes, precision lights, and other anonymous technological apparatuses in this work place. While not a single running shot, the edited effect
of the camera’s surveying path is much the same as the mobile camera attends to each of Kilmer’s agents as they report their information. A computer tech reports his finding from various computer databases and surveillance technologies; a criminal profiler provides data based on psychological histories and draws conclusions from the vocal pitches registered in a surveillance tape; a forensic scientist reports on “blast patterns,” “residue signatures,” and “fingerprint tracings”; another computer tech agent provides findings from traceable bank records and marked cash, marked in such a way the agent can “pinpoint exactly where it came from.” The scene not only records the accumulation of data, but the roaming camera, focusing in on the essential visual markers coinciding with the rapid high-tech speech, compensating for the loss of information that exceeds our comprehension with its visual signals, stitches the information together; when Kilmer arrives at his conclusions, it is television for the viewer that is there for us, that was there first.

To conceive of terrorism as crisis is to jeopardize such allegorical claims to television’s “liveness.” In this regard, Threat Matrix is a compensatory fantasy. But, in another regard, Threat Matrix, by figuring the War on Terror as a technological and informational arms race, becomes the coup de grace of its own ideological formation, canceling the very question of crisis. The previous scene’s intelligence gathering leads the homeland security team to an underground Arizona meth lab, where a military veteran has become the unwitting sponsor of an underground Islamic terrorist group. The vet agrees to assist the Feds in apprehending the terrorists, whose cellphone—and the directory of numbers inside—needs to be acquired to eliminate the threat of the terrorist act. The intercept of the cellphone is compromised first by a local ATF agent’s drug abuse (losing sight of her surveillance subject while snorting coke in a bathroom) and then by the military vet’s own redemptive act of vigilantism (wanting to avenge
the federal agent’s death and unaware the terrorists need to be captured alive). These intervening
subplots have as their subtexts the incrimination of personal and moral failings, not technological
or economic failings, as the failures with truly catastrophic consequences.

As the underground drug trade-terror trade connection is certainly the target of the
show’s moralizing, the episode concludes with the Secretary of Homeland Security announcing
the capture of the terrorist cell, and, more importantly, expressing his own indignation: "We are,
ironically, our own worst enemies. Terrorizing ourselves ... Fighting a war of dependency ... that,
unfortunately, makes veterans of us all." However, the framing of the scene, of this speech, does
not seem to demarcate the severity of the admonishment. The mis-en-scene is all too familiar:
the familiar podium and microphone, the familiar blue-curtained backdrop, the familiar Federal
seal. The camera watches from a remove. We’ve seen these banal shots before. They lack the
magic of an earlier sequence as the Federal agents intercept the terrorist’s cell phone. The
critical measure is the sending and tracing of a signal from that cell phone. The show switches to
a computer-enhanced sequence that represents the rapid-fire trajectory of the digital signal as it is
routed through an animated network of pathways. This is a sequence borrowed from the highly-
rated program CSI, whose animated sequences of bullets travelling through bone and tissue, for
example, have become not only a signature element of that show but an indexical trace of TV’s
ascendancy to the stature of film, adopting its aesthetic look and feel (the widescreen format of
ER another example). In this scene, when stockpiled technology—a telephone tracing device
here—“works” to save the day, American technology ingenuity becomes captured in television’s
own celebratory moment. The victory in the technological arms race represented in the episode
carries television in its scope. While the moral pontificating may occupy a prime spot at the
episode’s closing, the visual aggrandizement focuses attention to the more pressing matters of
television’s own status: its internal celebration. If American recuperative narratives of intelligence failures are performed on TV, TV, as the obvious site of that performance, asserts its own immunity to the charge of failure.

**24: Melodrama and Cameras**

An infected body and the threat to unleash the very virus that has eaten through this body signal the beginning of the latest terror plot in which counter-terrorist agent Jack Bauer finds himself embroiled. Fox’s *24* then proceeds with its own enumeration of the technological advances destined to facilitate the eventual eradication of this threat. Bauer’s CTU agents begin to perform “global capability” searches, to seek access codes, to conduct “ID analysis,” to locate “data encryption keys,” to unscramble satellite signals, to observe “satellite surveillance grids.” Here, as in *Threat Matrix*, is a similar confusion of information ultimately intended to console us, for it will all mean something, will all amount to something for Jack Bauer when he inevitably foils this terror plot. But, as this confounding display of empowering technological pile-up could be registered as a meaningful analog to television’s own power in a single episode’s resolution, the serialization of *24* demands some other televisual construction to manipulate *24*’s pleasure in its technological fantasies into a validation of television’s own practices.

I want to suggest that a particular melodramatic mode—in what I have described as the current panic in television during the War on Terror—achieves the assertion of television’s self-importance for *24*. For Lynne Joyrich (1996), melodrama is “the preferred form for TV” (46). Melodrama, writes Joyrich, is marked by “dramatic intensification,” “heightened by concentrated visual metaphors and gestural codes.” *24*’s 2003 season, its third season, begins with a hand placed upon a screen, a bright red light scans the hand, a Technicolor hand imprint is generated, and an image of our hero is retrieved from a database and displayed on a monitor, accompanied
by the soundtrack’s first crescendo. Now we see our hero for the first time. The identity recognition system has signified the sensitivity of the place, the sensitivity of the operation, but, as well, I want to suggest, it metaphorically prefigures the text’s reach. The conventional flash of a badge is certainly inadequate, and even a fingerprint match is insufficient, for the work ahead for Jack Bauer, for the work of counter-terrorism. 24’s melodramatic mode, I believe, becomes a way to signify the show’s desire for a more far-reaching surveillance system to confront the crisis terrorism suggests.

As Joyrich further defines it, melodrama certainly does seem like an operative mode for the repression of crisis in television’s representation of terrorism: “…in the explicitly fictional melodrama, conflicts are brought to the surface and expressed through contrasts that rehearse and flatten out the issues,” thus, “forego[ing] in-depth analysis” (49). Certainly 24’s third season premiere is operating this way as it introduces its new villain, Ramon Salazar: Jack reports, “Salazar does not respond to physical interrogation, doesn’t care about another living soul—including his own children.” Such a recourse to melodrama, argues Joyrich (citing Peter Brooks), “expresses the desire to find sure stakes of meaning, morality, and truth” (54). For Joyrich, this desire is precipitated by the postmodern break in capitalism:

Paradoxically, while capitalism was the first system to destroy the referential by establishing a law of equivalence in which all is exchangeable through the medium of money, it must now protect itself from the subversion of order inherent in the simulacrum. America has therefore hardened itself against its own hyperreality. As Baudrillard remarks, “a panic-stricken production of the real” and the referential today overtakes the drive toward material production. We exhibit an obsession with signs of reality, tradition, and lived experience as nostalgia engulfs us in a hysterical attempt to find stakes of meaning. (53-54)

Joyrich, then, in keeping with Baudrillard, argues that we attempt to locate these stakes in “the past”: “we stockpile the past to guarantee authenticity.” The stakes of meaning in melodramatic
television during the War on Terror, I believe, are found not in the stockpiling of the past, but, as both Congressional fact-finding and popular conspiracy theorizing suggest, in the stockpiling of information. 24’s obsessive displays of computer flat screens, video monitors, satellite imaging, surveillance cameras, news cameras, radar, and tracking devices are the visual registers of that stockpiling. Of course, the “target” of this stockpiling in 24 is always the other’s plotting. 24—Threat Matrix and Alias, as well—in their desire to find sure stakes of meaning, become something like paranoid melodramas, finding those sure stakes in the other’s continuous plotting, where the truth is out there in the bits and blips of data processed through sophisticated soft and hard wares.

As Jane Feuer (1984) has noted, the signature mark of any melodrama is “excess.” I want to suggest that in the paranoid melodramas during the War on Terror the most salient excessive feature is in the work of the program’s cameras. The aesthetics of 24’s camera work is marked by its framing of a scene through multiple shots, taken from multiple—and difficult—angles: In a prison scene, the camera seems to be located above, a view from, perhaps, a surveillance camera. Also, these camera angles are never clean. 24 is obsessed with shots that include barriers to a clean shot: shots taken through windows, through screens, over computer monitors, through blinds, through clear cubicle walls, through prison bars, over an actor’s shoulder. Often the barrier is foreground and then dissolved in the camera’s intensified focus. This hysteria of shots reveals a desire for the camera to penetrate and to consume completely its objects, any conception of an underground plotting disappearing in the camera’s pan.

In The Emergence of Cinematic Time (2002) Mary Ann Doane describes an analogous situation in CNN’s live coverage of the demolition of the Alfred P. Murrah Building in
Oklahoma City, which was significant for its inclusion of footage from a camera inside the building as it was demolished. Doane writes:

Such an excessive technique registers the extraordinary desire of “liveness”—to be there at the instant of the catastrophic event, to witness death as the ultimate referent or as the collision with the real in all its intractability. The liveness and presence of the camera at the instant of the implosion act as forms of compensation for the absence of a camera at the original bombing/explosion on April 19, 1995. The mourning of this loss—that of an image of the Ur-event—accompanies and fortifies the mourning for the loss of lives in the explosion. (207)

As 24 is a drama always anticipating some rupture—whether it be the imagined Ur-event that initiates and drives the plot or Salazar’s unexpected murder of his attorney early in the premiere—24’s camera aesthetic becomes an analog to TV’s “desire of ‘liveness’,” its desire to be there at the moment of im/ex-plosion. 24’s desire for its cameras is to occupy the space of, to posit television itself as, the all-consuming, penetrating surveillance camera. This reaction-formation is not a compensatory fantasy for any absence of the camera on September 11—the cameras were there—but rather this is a compensatory fantasy mourning all the records the repression of the crisis of terrorism (terrorism as crisis) had made impossible, for we know not for what we are looking, we know only for what we are awaiting.

Capturing

In fact, this impossible fantasy of “liveness” finds its most conspicuous realization not in 24, but rather in CBS’s NavyCIS. The achievement is not aesthetic but literal. In the show’s November 25th episode—“Minimum Security”—Mark Harmon’s Gibbs arrives at Gitmo to investigate an Islamic translator’s death. When Gibbs discovers that a detainee being transferred from maximum to minimum security aims to execute a fellow prisoner, who Naval officers have failed to identify as Bin Laden’s son-in-law, the ultimate surveillance fantasy becomes the best way to accurately identify the prized intelligence source. Unbeknownst to the assassin, before he
is transferred to minimum security, a miniature spy camera is embedded in his Muslim prayer cap, rendering the very thing that terrorizes into an instrument of its own suppression. The camera’s penetration of the enemy, now documenting in real time precisely what the enemy sees, is the ultimate fantasy of ‘liveness’ in a war on terror.

Here, what television fantasizes about quickly obscures the very thing that mandates this episode. Guanatamo Bay becomes the stuff of which drama is made because it occupied several months of air time as television news; however, it occupied that air time in such a way the camera was rendered inadequate, where repeated establishment shots could not show us in, could show us only recycled views of prison wire and men in orange jump suits. In NavyCIS, the fantasy of seeing all, for example, suspends the questions of torture, which is never a question with such technological virtuosity, even as torture at Gitmo is the very reality upon which this drama finds resonance. Is not then the suppression of the question of violence as method one of the very questions avoided in our post-9/11 questioning? Lost in asking “Who did this?” are such questions as “Why this violence was committed?,” let alone “Why this violence had to be committed?” (While 24, it should be noted, addresses torture, it is less as question and more as editorial: Jack Bauer tortures and it works.)

Television in these moments—when the establishment of moral high grounds and the urgency and proficiency of information management are represented as imperatives, when anxieties over counter-discourse, causality, vulnerability, ethical ambiguity, and violence are repressed or done asunder—becomes a metaphor for our own sense-making of the new spaces of globalization and global struggle (new in that we now recognize these other spaces are populated, are antagonistic, and their populations, like Cold War spies and homegrown militias, plot, too, and now threaten the homeland). These panicked productions seem to suggest that
sense-making, ultimately, takes the guise of figuring how to secure our own viability as subject as undergrounds plot our demise. Panic remains a palpable, thus, in some sense, comforting, affect of survival; it is real. But, panic, too, is un-real, supported by a sense of the future, marked by an oppressive potentiality of threat, constructed in the very narratives we use to mediate between our everyday experience and the unknown scenes of where undergrounds plot and a “War on Terror” happens. The task then is to read representations of undergrounds—and in some moments underground representations—to read the panic figured and the panic produced, to hear what these representations have to say about questions of survival: who survives and how? And who might fear not surviving and why? And how should, in fact, the threat to one’s survival posed by one whose own survival feels threatened be received? How can threat be undone? What makes living possible in these times? Desperation and panic may be enemies of a certain critical distance but they may be our educational allies here, as panic registers an awareness of, an anxiety over, an unsatisfying answer to the very crisis that commands such responses.
Television in the texts read in the previous chapter serves as its own incommensurable figure in the representation of the emergence of undergrounds, needing to represent more so itself in dramas that promise to represent undergrounds. Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* seems to anticipate this panicked “near death experience” picture tube in the opening pages of the novel as Oedipa Maas is “stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube” (1). Named executor, “or she supposed executrix,” of investor Pierce Inverarity’s “tangled” estate, Oedipa turns the television on as distracting devise. She hopes to shake the thought of her pending responsibilities, tries “to feel as drunk as possible,” but these things “did not work.” Distraction is certainly an operative term throughout Pynchon’s text—as missed opportunities, failed follow-ups, non sequiturs, and wandering diversions plague what Oedipa desires to be a fact-finding mission—and distraction is certainly a useful term for understanding what happens, as Pynchon’s plot recounts, when undergrounds emerge.

My introduction of the word “distraction” here, of course, points to its gentler connotations as diversionary, to its playful use in politics as a way to suggest that those who distract (politicians, the media) and those who are distracted (the media, the audience) are already fully aware of that from which their attention is being diverted. That is to say, there never really are any real distractions except those in which I choose to participate. But we also live with an equally prevalent sense distraction is *modus operandi* of power, that power functions with an endless dexterity of machination, even if it’s true aim can be reduced to shorthand: “Blood for Oil.” Others still refuse to acknowledge this or that Doomsday in wait. An economy of distraction emerges: “They are distracted. They are distracting. We are not distracted. We cannot be distracted.” Community could be defined as the way a population economizes their
attention; of course, as Žižek (2006) argues community, too, needs to impugn the way the Other organizes the enjoyment of their own economy.

I don’t turn from contemporary television drama to “great American literature” to argue for or against any high/low cultural distractions. Rather, I turn to Pynchon’s text because it too is about the very problem television dramas wrestle with ideologically that overdetermines how those representations finally unfold formally: survival in the face of the emergence of an underground. While those television dramas may (have to) be distracting, Pynchon’s text I will argue is more importantly about distractions. Here, I want to invoke the word “distraction” in its etymologically more intense connotation. As the OED states, a “distraction” can certainly be something other than pleasurable: “Violent perturbation or disturbance of mind or feelings, approaching to temporary madness.” Oedipa’s attempt to distract herself in The Crying of Lot 49’s opening scene is an attempt to find that pleasure which would make impossible her ultimate distraction as the plot of the novel unfolds: Oedipa saying to herself, “You are a nut, Oedipa, out of your skull” (141). Having traveled beyond her normal everyday confines and having had her world reorganized at the emergence of new populations with new demands, Oedipa, in disbelief that so many people may have formed a community in secret, will speculate if her madness is paranoia. While it’s doubtful the paranoid truly self-diagnoses, that Oedipa’s crisis of attention insists on its own explication in pathology—that others couldn’t possibly be living within the nation with their own organizing structures of community, their own mythologies, their own networks of communication, that to believe this to be true must be insanity—speaks to an overarching insistence upon some other explanation—some other story—to hold true: the same old story, the everyday plodding along (plotting along) of her life, which has effectively excluded these others in that plotting. Here, perhaps the self-diagnosis is a desire for paranoia,
the wish for all that which “distracts” to disappear. The recourse to paranoia works as a
distancing from contact too close to another, to “another world.”

Paranoia here provides for a certain relationship to others that allows different and, in
fact, more distracting relationships to be managed. In the text’s many represented distractions,
in its representations of paranoid attention, the turning away is from a distribution of violence
that were it not for this paranoid attention would connect all bodies in a structural logic. Thus,
the question asked to Pynchon’s text must be: Are the paranoid performances of the characters a
way to argue for a real plot against them, a way to argue for a certain need to be really paranoid?
Paranoia here, of course, quickly elides its clinical applications. Is Pynchon speculating about
the possibilities of wrenching a positive valence for the various hermeneutic practices that can be
labeled—and, then, instantly degraded—as paranoid? The common parlance of Pynchon
criticism is to note just how paranoid Pynchon’s texts tend to be (O’Donnell, 2000; Johnston,
1991), but my particular aim is to wonder what is then to be made of this Pynchonian insistence
of those practices of spatial collapse that are vulnerable to the claims of reductionism, the charge
of paranoia. The Pynchonian insistence may best be summed up by Gravity’s Rainbow’s
signature line: “Everything is connected.” The totalizing of this line cannot—in today’s critical
environment of particularity and localism—resist the indictment of paranoia. Cultural paranoia,
after all, is most often understood to be the reactionary response to the cultural work of the
sixties that sought to make impossible totalizing operations and to the emergence of the
postmodern. Contemporary observers of cultural paranoia—in using Pynchon’s text as
exemplary of its hermeneutic practices—identify a presumed paranoid consistency in Pynchon at
the formal level: at every point the “text” is paranoid. By attending to the novel’s use of the
discourse of the underground—already a figure that distributes and acknowledges different
economies of attention throughout the social field—allows on the figural level for a consideration of Pynchon’s rhetoric on paranoid hermeneutics: plural, precisely, because from this accounting the figures perform differently, and in such an accounting a rhetoric for a particular economy of attention emerges which must contend with, as much as it must relate to, the discursive force of the language of paranoia.

David Pike’s study *Passage Through Hell* (1997) believes one of the more significant tropes of Modernism was the descent into the Underworld. As Hell functioned as a “repository for the past,” Pike argues that the “most characteristic strategy of the [narrative of] descent is to stress its own complexity and novelty in contrast with a simple and outmoded past” (2). With Pynchon’s narrative of descent—where Hell (the underworld) has been replaced by the underground—the speculation is that a descent such as Pike describes is itself now outmoded. Jameson writes in *Postmodernism* (1991) that “our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time” (16). Thus, any attempt to comprehend the complexity of our current “cultural logic” may be impossible as a study against another time but must rather take shape as, may only be perceived as, a working out, a thinking through, of space and spatial concepts produced in the emergence of the postmodern. *The Crying of Lot 49* is a descent into the underground, into confrontations with secret histories, spaces, and populations. Distraction is the look away. The narrative of descent rather forces a necessary looking at, a narrative of observation where the looking at is focused on what had otherwise been underground, had otherwise been “invisible.” Undergrounds name the dis-tracted parties, the divided, scattered populations no longer visible in, either violently drawn out of or withdrawn from, the frame of, Oedipa’s “printed circuit,” “the ordered swirl of houses and streets” (14). The descent begins in “the situation”—using Fredric Jameson’s
words (1984)—of the 60s. The emergence of the postmodern (and attendant concerns of anti-imperialism, globalization, civil rights, identity politics) creates new demands on the subject to which one must attend. *The Crying of Lot 49* enacts the drama of its historical moment: the repositioning of the subject in relation to the new global demands for political subjectivity and the reorientation of the subject within the reshaped “cultural logic,” which finds its figuration in this text, I believe, in Oedipa’s attempts to apprehend the emergence of “so many undergrounds.” Pynchon’s text arrives as projects of ownership and reclamation (anti-imperial struggles, new forms of nationalism) emerge as part of what Jameson will describe as the 60s construction of the “new subjects of history” (181). Pynchon’s novel emerges in the great moment of, the “situation” of, decolonization whereby “all these ‘natives’ become human beings, and this internally as well as externally: those inner colonized of the first world—‘minorities,’ marginals, and women—fully as much as its external subjects and official ‘natives’.” Pynchon’s novel arrives as, Mike Davis (2002) contends, the “real engine” of the 60s in the United States begins to churn more radically: the transformation of the urban ghetto in a fight for “substantive control over community space” (221). *The Crying of Lot 49*—with both its concerns about the colonizing agent of paranoia and its figures of community space—seems be a working through anxieties about the spatial reorganization generated in the 1960s.

Cultural paranoia, as suggested, will often be described as the work to maintain distance; its naming—the production of a “they”—territorializes space so as to distribute bodies to the space to which “they” belong. For Patrick O’Donnell (2000), cultural paranoia is “a narrative process by means of which an individual constructs a historical or cultural identity,” spatializing history into “a process of interpretation that compresses contingent events, memories, or traumas into a singular story that manifest the real of self or nation as organized around a central paranoid
‘truth’” (20). Thus, “plotting” becomes an order-producing machinery—paranoia as postmodern reaction formation—which produces, it seems, a concomitant panic over—of fear of—others’ (the other’s) plotting. The formation of collectives that invoke the metaphor of “underground” for description, as well as the need to name a collective as such, has much to do with globalization, has much to do with the dilemma of shared space and the ideological distribution of bodies. It, too, becomes a way to locate, to register, to mark the sites of the other’s plotting.

As capital creates new social interdependencies across great distances, and, as Virilio (1997) argues, as “the primacy of real time” as media fact and existential experience collapses our sense of the gap between time and those great distances, claustrophobia is the affective outcome. In the situation of the 1960s, as neighbors in a the McLuhanite “global village,” living among others takes on a global reach; yet, this can be perceived as a pressure cooker, when living among seems a mere politic for competing with, when the number of those others explodes, when the freeing and loosening of the barriers to capital lubricates the actual borders for the flow of bodies ever so forebodingly (from the perspective of globalization’s 9/11 crux). While the initiation of globalization in the late 50s might have unleashed the possibility for more and more subjects to make their claim for subjectivity, it too unleashes a heightened sense of the claustrophobia which Frances Ferguson (1984) argues is “inspired by the pressures of intersubjectivity” (9). Against the actual and perceived encroachment of others, and as the parallel movement of the de-centering of the subject in postmodernity threatens the self, paranoid forms of attention become the “price paid for the strongest possible construction of discrete self and other,” writes Paul Smith (1988, 96). In fact, paranoia substitutes this claustrophobia with a device that is “claustrophiliac, having vital interest in the security and comfort that can be derived from its own fundamentally unnegotiable closure of the categories, self and other” (97).
I believe one of the primary meditations of Pynchon’s narrative will be on the pressing matter of how to share space (how to think shared space) in postmodernity.

My reading agenda here is to show first how Pynchon figures the paranoid attention in many of these terms as the lockdown of the liberal subject, as the conserving of functional mythologies of agency, in this shift in space. But, I will then turn to speculating if the language of paranoia doesn’t in fact contaminate attempts to think and map interconnectedness. It seems to me one aim of Pynchon’s novel is to suggest that the microcommunities he calls and we recognize as undergro unds are in fact formed by conspiracies around us everyday. In fact, much of what I find interesting in the text occurs before Oedipa takes her night journey into the underground; it occurs in (or as) the everyday experiences of Mucho Maas and Oedipa Maas, in the everyday paranoia in which they articulate their subjectivity. The everyday way they relate to the world and its shifting dynamics reveals much about why and how a culture produces both undergro unds and a discourse to explain them. One important question is whether the paranoia that conserves the liberal subject and informs undergro unds does not in fact aid and abet those real conspiracies. To invoke the phrase “real conspiracies” unavoidably privileges the discourse of paranoia as the perceptive frame—the default setting—for attending to interconnectedness. Thus, I wonder if the possibility of saying anything useful about interconnectedness does not always occur in a field of skepticism, of disbelief.

**Undergro unds and the Uncommon**

Oedipa Maas, performing as executor of Pierce Inverarity’s estate, will evacuate her everyday existence—a life bored, vapid, figured as cast in the plasticity of Tupperware and Muzak (1-2)—and discover, she thinks, “a secret richness,” “a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know” (141). Oedipa discovers “a network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating whilst
reserving their lies, recitations of routine, arid betrayals of spiritual poverty, for the official government system.” This subversion of the US mail has attached itself to the muted post horn symbol of the now dormant Tristero and named itself in deference to its promise, what it promised in its existing form: W. A. S. T. E., “We Await Silent Trystero’s Empire.” If the structure is the exiting of the everyday and the entering of the not everyday of this underground, then, thinking through what is exactly contained in that concept—the everyday—provides a certain ground from which the fiction finds its resonance for its construction of the not everyday of the underground.

Pynchon’s narrative suggests in a not uncommon figuration that the everyday is the world of steady rhythms: the boredom of the housewife, the business of tupperware sales, the tedium within the cubicle. In his Everyday Life and Cultural Theory (2002), Ben Highmore suggests the assembly line and the clock became the defining machines of our modernity and produced the everydayness of each and every day, produced the “synchronization” of every day as “the everyday,” and produced perhaps the single most pervasive conceptual overlaying of our experience: the everyday as the experience of boredom. Wondering if anything unusual in her life coincided with the drafting of Pierce Inverarity’s will, Oedipa thinks through “a fat deckful of days which seemed (wouldn’t she be first to admit it?) more or less identical” (2). The desire to transcend boredom will seemingly be the narrative agent of the descent. Boredom is the emotional ground tone from which a descent, an escape, is envisioned once “the underground” emerges. And yet, as Highmore’s text affirms, the everyday is a characterization, the aggregate of the various privileged conceptions of life used to describe the everyday. Boredom as a subjective register of one’s everyday requires a certain privilege to the claims made for an everyday. That privilege is supported by one’s position in geopolitical space, supported by all
the same interpellations that support geopolitical borders, and class, gender, and race lines, as well. It is in this regard that the reorganization of the everyday by the emergence of undergrounds in the narrative becomes an allegory for the reorganization of the commonplace by the emergence of a deconstruction of “the common place” as part of the process of the 1960s. The 60s could be viewed as the foregrounding of other everydays (others’ everydays), of different experiences of each day, of how—to borrow from Freud’s figuring of every day in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901)—“commonplace exchanges” for one (commonplace exchanges with one’s lover, friends, doctors) may not have been so common for others (commonplace exchange with the police, with the State, with the imperial magistrate). The spatial dynamic in “commonplace” is not merely metaphorical; as Lefebvre’s contribution to thinking space shows (1991), space—our orientation in relation to other bodies—is very much so conditioned by the Symbolic. If as Jameson argues the 60s do in fact contain a transitional phase for capital (1984, 206-209), then space, too, according to Lefebvre, is being altered, and that alteration will very much take place in the way we relate to other bodies. Thus, the language of relating—interior/exterior (discussed in part one of this chapter) and global/local (part two)—should be subject to alteration itself in the shifting of spatial practice, but paranoia, in part, will be a panicked holding on to its former uses.

The reading tact, I believe, should be to think through the everyday structures that necessitate the filling of voids (the everyday as boring, lacking) which the descent provides. This is to say, if the emergence of undergrounds includes a demand to rethink one’s relationship, to think how one is connected, to others in this world, then, the construction of the everyday provides a sense of not only the positioning and the connection already imagined (and now menaced) but also the stakes one has in the way things have always otherwise proceeded. The
everyday in *The Crying of Lot 49* is constructed as interminable boredom: Oedipa’s “endless” “identical days” will be figured as imprisonment, trapped in a “Rapunzel-like role,” confined to a tower. “Boredom,” writes McKenzie Wark (2006), “arises out of the absence of necessity” (155). It is the “ambivalent gift of the surplus [of production],” which, Bataille tells us, must be spent. Power, Wark imagines, asks, “What to do with energies that so easily spill over into riot or revolt?” In fact, Mike Davis (2002) offers the close of drag strips for hot-rod racing as a catalyst for some white youths to emerge as political agents at the turn of the 1960s (207-226). Boredom is insufferable, and the close of community space brings it closer.

In Wark’s terms, boredom, at first, knows not what to do with itself. It suggests the freedom to act but not knowing where and at what moment to intervene. It would seem a perfect emotional ground tone for the imposition of the paranoid form. Timothy Melley’s (1999) conception of “agency panic” seems apropos to boredom’s compositional anxiety. Melley’s central thesis concerns a symptomatic reading of a postwar “agency panic” whereby, in the gaze of larger corporate systems, the possibility for individual agency is questioned and transferred onto those larger power-wielding systems: “Conspiracy theory, paranoia, and anxiety about human agency, in other words, are all parts of the paradox in which a supposedly individualist culture conserves its individualism by continually imagining it to be in imminent peril” (6). Agency panic is the conservative response to the challenges informational technologies and social organization bring to bear on liberal individualism: “Its widespread appearance on the postwar landscape indicates a broad cultural refusal to modify a concept of self that is no longer wholly accurate or useful, but that still underpins a long-standing national fantasy of subjectivity” (15). While *The Crying of Lot 49* is Oedipa’s story, it is her husband’s “story”
which is told first and serves as a template for understanding the everyday experience—not only of boredom, but, I believe, of agency panic—from which relief is sought.

**Paranoia I: Much Ado About Mucho Maas**

“Today was another defeat,” Mucho Maas says. Oedipa concurs but allows her husband to tell his story first. Mucho’s story constructs the everyday as defeat. Mucho’s defeat is not the sort of energy that “spills over into riot or revolt.” His defeat confirms everything is working.

How can the everyday as defeat serve as a sustaining fiction of order? Wark will theorize that “the military entertainment complex” intervenes to distract boredom, to make boredom less distracting, but, here, in the text, the irruption, it would seem, is short-circuited by belief:

Mucho’s story labors over the locating of things in which to believe—working at the car lot—and in which not to believe—disc jockeying at a radio station. The locating of the believable supports and sustains Mucho’s many defeats. It is the condition of those defeats. In the cars, Mucho believes he can locate in their vacuumed litter “the actual residue” of the lives of the owners (5); from the “ash, condensed exhaust, dust, body waste,” he could locate traces of the daily existence of others, “people poorer than him…Negro, Mexican, cracker” (4): “when the cars were swept out you had to look at the actual residue of these lives.” The lines are significant in the course of a narrative that desires to locate the “actual residue” of another object: the Tristero. Mucho believes this “actual residue” will provide some tangible experience otherwise not taken or denied. Here, it would seem the belief is in the materiality of the litter, that this residue provides some substantial experience denied in Mucho’s merely perfunctory dealings with these people, that it truly indexes that something otherwise denied. Mucho seems to acknowledge some failure of attention, some poverty in the client-customer relationship: “what their whole lives must be like, out there for anybody, a stranger like himself, to look at, frame cockeyed, rusty underneath, fender repainted just off enough to depress the value.”
superficial residue of his interpersonal experience with other people (other people he has noted as his racial, ethnic, and class others) is compromised; the “actual residue” is beyond manipulation. The “actual residue” should give back that which Mucho is denied seeing in “these lives” as lived, “these lives” that he has already marked as his Others.

Mucho believes the lot—the collection of waste it contains—gives back the actual. Žižek’s lesson on belief (1989) teaches belief is “radically exterior, embodied in the practical, effective procedure of the people” (34). Belief supports the “fantasy which regulates social reality,” social reality supported by an operative “as if.” Mucho lives his everyday life as if there is an actual. In the belief the lot will provide some trace evidence of the actual, the actual is only the actualization of the belief in it: “we find reasons attesting our belief because we already believe” (37). A belief in some deeper actuality testifies to some (what should be) obvious poverty. Mucho’s belief embodies an agency panic. His lived experience—in which communication and intersubjectivity are compromised by the deal, by difference—leaves him desperate, but agency will be conserved in an investment in the actual, in the paranoid interpretation belief in such a thing provides: “you had to look at the actual residue, and there was no way of telling what things had been truly refused…and what had simply (perhaps, tragically) been lost” (5). If truly refused is counterpoint to simple loss, then, both—as signs for Mucho—point to the desire to read into this residue signs of refusal. The residue of refusal points to an act of volition, of choice, serves as trace evidence of agency. Here, even “simple” loss, a dislodging from the conditions of necessity, demarcates a space for agency in apathy, in wastefulness. The signs then work, not so magically, but paranoically. Signs of refusal are the very stuff of the national fantasy of subjectivity.
Melley historicizes “agency panic” as a post-war phenomenon, proceeding from accounts by Vance Packard (*The Hidden Persuaders*) and J. Edgar Hoover (*Masters of Deceit*), whereby the conjuncture of a structural agency argued on the one hand and an intention-driven program of mass control argued for on the other displays the messy, anxious sorting out of agency in that moment. Mark Seltzer’s *Bodies and Machines* (1992) locates a similar operation in the late nineteenth century, at which point transition in information technologies and machinic reproduction begin to stir fantasies of mass production begetting mass man. The production of a “mass,” though, may be read as an anxious elaboration of the unknown forms the heightened production of an underclass (as the by-product of the shift in production) will create. While Melley’s conception of “agency panic” is certainly tied to the reorganization of production, the necessary supplement to that is the creation of newly-constituted subjects and the reorganization of space in, for example, the anti-imperial struggles worldwide and the black community’s migration to and reclaiming of the city in the US. In Seltzer’s account, the disorganization of bodies (in both an agency panic and a proliferating underclass) necessitates the reorganization of bodies in the simultaneous production of surveillance technologies (policing and sociology) and of fantasies of surveillance, in which fiction plays no small part. In a self-reflexive interpretive moment of Crane’s *Maggie*, Seltzer argues that Maggie’s paroxysm of sympathy at a performance of “slum theater” is a rehearsal of Crane’s own “transcendental realism,” in which the text “at once ratifies an inevitable difference between those who are included and those who are excluded, it also and paradoxically promotes a desire to transcend this difference and…to imitate the privileged interior” (94). But, from Maggie’s position in relation to exclusionary borders, the scene does not only figure Maggie’s desire to see and to imitate but also Maggie’s “desire to have an interior”: “the subject of realism is formed from the outside in—filled, as it
were, with the social...[T]he realist desire to see is also necessarily a desire to make visible: to embody, physically or materially, character, persons, and inner states, and collaterally, to ‘open’ these states” (94-95). Mucho’s insistence on the actual—as traceable in the interior of cars—seems to be a performance of realist desire, if not more appropriately, realist faith.

Reading these signs of refusal gives back a “privileged interior.” Granted, Mucho’s own exclusion is the obverse of the hegemonic operation of exclusion. It is now the hegemonically excluded, Gramsci’s subalterns, who are, at this juncture of history, constructed as the true agents of History. An “agency panic,” again, is a paranoid form that performs a subjective lockdown as recourse to a repositioning in the Symbolic: here, in the 60s deconstruction of the common place, Mucho is either outside the “actual” location of agency or inside the very dilemma of agency in sum. Mucho’s recovered signs of refusal work to give him back the actualization of agency, that “privileged interior.” Despite the “endless rituals of trade-in, week after week,” which seem to suggest business as usual, Mucho seems to believe this “actual residue” should offer him the “naked” reality of the historical moment, figured here as the intersubjectivities denied to him, he believes, in the hardening of micro-communities (which his need to name those communities here in their difference suggests), those communities formed by the failure of actually existing community at the national level. That is, sympathy with the excluded, the desire for transcendence, or trace evidence of “true refusal,” all support the need to have an interior, each allows one to operate as if possessive individualism is an actuality, even as its “essence” is only “possessed” when it is projected onto another. This passionate attachment does not incorporate Mucho into any movement or into any revolution. A paranoiac investment, again, is a conservative lockdown; signs of “true refusal”—no matter how or to what extent Mucho rationalizes his own “defeats”—allow him to remain vested in the “privileged interior” of
national mythologies. In fact, as “true refusal” secures hegemonic models of subjectivity, the traces of true refusal and waste (as a certain refusal in its own right)—signs of freedom wrestled from necessity—ultimately seem the paranoid desire for the Other’s narrative—whose demands for participation in the sphere of such freedoms come to bear on the historical moment—to be attached to the national mythologies of choice, of self-determinacy, of equal opportunity failure. This works to defuse the anxieties over social mobilization by securing the liberal subject by suggesting the Other—in their refusal and waste—enjoys an excess of agency, the surplus which demarcates the “believable” real of agency. The waste here becomes the location of the actual, the subjectively dis-located outside which feed backs (is feedback) to support the vacuous (bored) interior of the self. In much the same way, W.A.S.T.E. performs this for Oedipa. Thus, the question of agency is belabored here not only because Mucho’s obsession gives substance to his everyday life but because the external locating of agency to verify agency reverberates in the discourse that produces undergrounds, too. Mucho’s belief in “actual residue” seems to be an extrapolation of the politics of authenticity that informs much of the energies of the 1960s. The positing of an authentic realm within or beyond culture—the politics of authenticity—becomes a defining characteristic of much of the thought that characterizes the 60s (Rossinow, 1998). The locating of authenticity (from Lefebvre’s earliest interventions in the study of everyday life to Existentialism and the Situationists) was an engine catalyzing the energies of the 60s and even becomes one of the questions for which the lack of answer becomes a defusing of those energies. Stanley Aronowitz’s “When the New Left was New” (1984), for example, documents the competition for control of the New Left, which seemed highly invested in efforts to locate the authentic site of struggle.
It is here where the discourse of the everyday and the discourse of the underground become mutually reflective. For example, I believe quite a bit is captured in the transposition of the term “underground” in Todd Gitlin’s history *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (1993) from its initial use in a chapter entitled “Underground Channels,” whereby it demarcates the important cultural trends of the fifties which produce “the Sixties” as a cultural event, to its use as adopted by the Weatherman, whose re-christening as the Weather Underground at the end of the sixties, is recounted by Gitlin some 300 pages later in a chapter titled “The Implosion.” Early in the history, the underground is a life-force, the bloodstream, Pynchon’s “hypodermic needle, inserted somewhere ahead into the vein of a freeway, a vein nourishing the mainliner” (15). Gitlin’s “underground channels” name trends in popular culture, the creation of figures for rebellion, as necessary antecedents for enacting the actual pose. “Rebel without a cause” iconography, a *Mad* magazine cynicism, the “electric subcurrent” of rock ‘n’ roll: these cultural products “pried open a cultural territory which became available for radical transmutation” (36). Thus, the use of “underground” marks the space for cultural experimentation, for subversive cultural practice. The Sixties brings to light the underground and recast the everyday in a new color; Gitlin writes, “In a world that adult ideologies had defined as black and white—America versus totalitarianism, respectability versus crime, obedience versus delinquency, affluence versus barbarism, suburbia versus degradation and filth—they [these ‘underground channels’] did help to establish the possibility of gray” (36). The “underground channel” becomes the bearer of the revitalization of the everyday. “Underground” marks that which makes space for subaltern or minoritarian living that at the other end of the Sixties will no longer be necessarily underground. This inflection of the metaphor—the underground as the site of lives lived otherwise—is where the metaphor is imbued with democratic possibility.
Gitlin’s invocation of the word later in his text is in the context of the Weathermen, who in 1969 “go underground.” “Underground,” here signifies secrecy and fugitive status, which, of course, is the longer genealogy of the term. The Weather Underground marks a point where an underground is a localized cell but where localization is marked as fanatical, even “fundamentalist” (Varon, 2004). Whatever democratic possibility is embedded in the term dissolves in the metaphor’s attachment to focalized dissidence and shadowy ops. But more interestingly, I believe, is how Gitlin, even as he attempts to argue that a certain death knell of the 60s positive energies is reached when the radical politics of the 60s decide to go (rather than are forced to go, as might be the counter-reading of the participants) underground, he cannot evacuate the term of its association with a certain vitality: “These hip outlaws made revolution look like fun” (386). Thus, while we should be on the cusp of quite a different inflection of the metaphor, when revelry gives way to militancy, the metaphor cannot eclipse its association with a certain romance of more authentic living. Bill Ayers, a member of the Weather Underground, described militancy as “a stance in the world, a way of being in the world that says that I’m going to put my body somehow in the way of the normal functioning of things… Militancy was the standard by which we measured our aliveness” (cited in Varon, 87). The position against “normalcy”—which in every inflection defines the underground—is equated here once again with a certain “aliveness,” a better living. Žižek (2002), following Alain Badiou, describes this as a “passion for the real.” For Žižek, this passion for the real, which certainly conceptually captures the politics of authenticity, the quest for depth that informs the 60s history described above, is “a key feature of the twentieth century”:

In the trenches of World War I, Ernst Junger was already celebrating face-to-face combat as the authentic intersubjective encounter: authenticity resides in the act of violent transgression, from the Lacanian Real—the Thing Antigone confronts when she violates the order of the City—to the Bataillean excess. (6)
This “passion for real” describes the move of some of the political energies of the 60s underground. But may too describe the cultural discourse of “underground channels” (cultural undergrounds) that informs and proceeds from the 60s. The underground of any cultural form may be seen as the “actual residue” of some violence; recognizing (or presuming) some violence done to culture, whether it be in terms of co-optation or control, the underground describes the spaces where people try to evade or undo the cultural norm, or the cultural momentum, and rather insist on its disruption, a new point of departure, and—to defend its authenticity—take an offensive. This is to say, they plot otherwise.

Mucho’s “passion for the real” may have to be described as the everyday passion for the real, the banal “passion” that doesn’t reach the point of needing to take up militant or cultural arms. Rather it finds its balm in paranoid forms of attention as a certain short-circuit to, a distraction from, “the direct experience of the Real as opposed to everyday social reality—the Real in its extreme violence” (Žižek, 5-6). If Mucho has a passion for the real it cannot move beyond his own construction of the “actual,” a paranoid investment in the subject, insulating it from the very violence toward which the passion ultimately aims. If Mucho’s paranoia is an economizing of the crisis of subjectivity, then, its locating of agency in the vitality of the Other’s refusal of hegemonic violence always keeps at bay the violence which is seemingly the constitutive feature of the Real that gives back sustenance to an otherwise impoverished everyday reality. We could call this the construction of the acceptable terms of defeat: I know there is violence out there which makes all this seem all the more real but I prefer being defeated in my efforts to experience it.
Thus, it is unsurprising to learn Mucho is haunted by the violence he cannot experience at the lot, by the accident’s violation of the substantial: “An accident is in fact an assault on the propriety of substance, an unveiling of its nakedness,” writes Virilio (2005, 28). The violence causing these wrecks, we are told, was “far enough away” from Mucho so as to seem “miraculous,” but its stain seems to contaminate the dealings: “the endless rituals of trade-ins, week after week, never got as far as violence or blood, and so were too plausible.” Plausibility is cancer to passion. Here, the Other is all too human, the lot’s dealings all too mechanical: “each owner, each shadow, filed in only to exchange a dented, malfunctioning version of himself for another, just as futureless, automotive projection of somebody else’s life.” Not witness to the violence necessitating the trade-in, Mucho witnesses only the rituals of exchange; the habitual leaves little room for true refusals. No refusal is here, only puny conspicuous consumption. Whatever power may have been given to another is impugned in the extrapolation of impotence to all: the “rituals of trade-in” as “endless, convoluted incest.” Mucho registers his “horror”—“as if it were the most natural thing to do”—implying some fundamental nature of refusal he can’t muster but knows to be real. To register one’s own horror may be to create distance from that which is too close. His horror over the “trade-in” denies, again, its necessity: the need to actually replace one’s junk with another’s better junk.

While Mucho believes himself too far from the violence, it is rather right under his nose as the lot performs the economy of violence in the violence of its economy: one’s loss is another’s gain. In fact, the mirror of this exchange is to be found in Mucho’s shaving: “Hyperaware of what that profession [car salesman] had come to mean,” Mucho “shaved his upperlip every morning three times with, three times against the grain to remove any remotest breath of a moustache, new blades he drew blood invariably but kept at it” (4). Is this ritual
bloodletting not the “ritual of trade-in” he finds all “too plausible” so as to be never necessitated by anything other than the “exchange” for a “projection of somebody else’s life”? Mucho’s paranoid overidentification with the not used car salesman is conscripted by his passion for the real. The self-mutilation to expunge the trace of appearance inevitably fails: “He walked out of a party one night because somebody used the word ‘creampuff,’ it seemed maliciously, in his hearing.” The signifier was used by a pastry cook, but, in a sense, reached its destination to reveal Mucho’s self-infliction as a performance of gender as much as a refusal to be attached to shyster economics. Refusal is coordinated within and already conditioned by a limiting symbolic economy; having been bled by its demands, Mucho discovers himself as the trade-in victim unable to refuse. Mucho’s paranoia is a claustrophobic/claustrophiliac attempt to secure the self from this identification with the Other by violently insisting on masculine self-identity. As the lot brings too close the lack of agency, Mucho moves to the radio station (in which he can’t believe) in order to maintain his belief in what the lot should provide.

Mucho’s investment in the lot is a conjuncture of refusal and defeat. It may be possible to believe in the residue of refusal in the lot’s waste—the signs of a willful subject, acting beyond necessity—but too it gives back the irrefutability of defeat, the inescapability of a structural economic logic that produces destructive subject positions. Hence, Mucho’s construction of the everyday as defeat takes hold. As Mucho resigns himself to the radio station—a distraction producing machine in its own right—his everyday as defeat is, he believes, a resignation: a resigning—“a calculated withdrawal,” he would imagine—although the “act” is both made bearable and supported (as an act of refusal) by the vital outside still projected as the lot. As Mucho’s paranoid working-out of subject positions (subject-positioning) requires a certain exteriorizing of the vital, the discourse that informs undergrounds does something quite
similar in its demarcation of that which is underground as being the authentic, vital terrain of existence. Defeat is a viable subject position above ground because everyone knows (or doesn’t know they know, in Žižekian parlance) the underground—whether it be cultural or conspiratorial—keeps things really moving along. Paranoia, then, supports the liberal subject. But, it also supports the belief that one is not the subject of violence, as violence happens elsewhere, not in the logics that inform the everyday positioning of subjects.

**Paranoia II: A Very Special Episode**

In the work of Jacques Attali (1985) and Dick Hebdige (1979), for example, noise serves as a metaphor for thinking about social organization. It comes to mean a friction, a disruption of the production of harmony in hegemony. Pynchon, rather, figures this “harmony” in hegemony as noise, a constant chattering and blabbering, that works in part as salve: Mucho lets “the Top 200, and even the news copy that came jabbering out of the machine—all the fraudulent dreams of teenage appetites—be a buffer between him and that lot.” Noise as buffer. The machine, providing accompaniment to the position of defeat, is another fraud, but as the business of the radio rather than the lot, the fraud buffers rather than agitates. For Mucho the lot painfully brings an economic logic to bear; Mucho wants automobiles and their damage to be metaphors for lives in ways they cannot quite deliver, but as signs they still carry freight, still come to initiate horror, still seem believable and real. The radio simply jabbers endlessly, endlessly distracts. The noise of the everyday helps to constitute the ground from which Oedipa descends. The emerging domination of what Jameson (1991) describes as “machines of reproduction,” a signature feature of an emerging postmodernism, is a central concern of *The Crying of Lot 49*.

As industrialization advanced, the attendant concern (the consequential panic) was over automation and the vision of the automaton. The subject loses the ability to act in the world. Mucho’s withdrawal falls short of that; conceivably, he can still act in the world; the machine of
reproduction merely buffers, reproduces the here and now, and perpetually reproduces the moment in which no action seems necessarily required. The radio merely creates the space in which Mucho can relent, can be insulated in his defeat.

The advancement of informational technologies though creates a situation where the opportunity to act in the world seems to be increasingly liquidated by the machinery of reproduction and its reproduction of the world in its own image. Oedipa wonders if a palpable sense of the real world isn’t evaporating for her: “There had hung the sense of buffering, insulation, she had noticed the absence of intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus” (10). In the interpretive self-reflection, the text maintains a space for Oedipa to be positioned as an agent. Thus, Oedipa’s everyday is not a fatal simulation—as she is able to note an absence—but merely the bored space of waiting. Wark argues boredom is a “suspended animation, made possible by the absence of a certain relation to space, a certain quality of labor.” Wark argues that entertainment does not only distract but also dilutes boredom, so it does not become dis-tracted, does not demand a qualitative change in the space around it: “what is good for the war on boredom, which, like the war on drugs or the war on terror, is never to be won, merely displaced, as the boredom index rises and falls.” Wark’s “military entertainment complex,” therefore, is not only a distraction machine but also a fine-tuning conspiracy: the insulation provided by machines is the reproduction of that which captures your attention but makes no demands on your immediate attention.

Pynchon’s text in its opening does a quick survey of information technology—from Mucho’s radio station gig to Oedipa’s film metaphor to the lengthy scene between Oedipa and Metzger spent in front of the TV—and, curiously, the proportion of time spent with the TV is telling in regards to the cultural work of these machines in the early 60s. Gitlin’s “underground
channels” begin to emerge in the radio, as particularly black soul music and folk music engage with the historical moment (Garafolo, 1992), and film, as “underground cinema” begins to contest identity and power norms (Tyler, 1995); the TV though is able to increasingly command a larger audience, while at the same time, because of its weighty and consolidated institutional infrastructure, is rather impervious to critique from an “underground channel.” In fact, its engagement with the countercultural movements as the 60s proceeded tended to be topical rather than tactical (Spigel & Curtin, 1997). There wasn’t much to be done with the media; it was seemingly impossible to position anything within the media as subversively uncommon.

Television begins to position itself as the insurmountable bedrock between “the masses” and “the revolution” (“The Revolution Will Not Be Televised”). On the origins of postmodernity, Perry Anderson (1998) writes, “The capacity of television to command the attention of its ‘audiences’ is immeasurably greater [than other forms of mass communication], because they are not simply such: the eye is caught before the ear is cocked…The saturation of the imaginary is of another order” (88). It is a “saturation” which has to become claustrophobic, which, in turns, produces the claustrophiliac-paranoid reaction.

Jameson (2001) argues, emerging from the rise of machines of reproduction, is a “high tech paranoia,” “in which circuits and networks of some putative global computer hookup are narratively mobilized by labyrinthine conspiracies of autonomous but deadly interlocking and competing information agencies in a complexity often beyond the capacity of the normal reading mind” (38). For Jameson, this paranoia, as paranoia does, substitutes for (distracts from), an even more difficult dilemma of agency to manage—the possibility of “grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself” (38). Jameson’s periodization of
the 60s (1984) suggests late capitalism’s work in the 60s will be to colonize the “last vestiges of noncommodified or traditional space within and outside the advance world…namely the third world and the unconscious” (207), but that moment “simultaneously produced an immense freeing or unbinding of social energies, a prodigious release of untheorized new forces: the ethnic forces of black and ‘minority’ or third world movements everywhere, regionalisms, the development of new and militant bearers of ‘surplus consciousness’ in the student and women’s movements, as well as in a host of struggles of other kinds” (208). From this constellation, the complicated relationship between the global and the local comes to the forefront as situational crisis. Processing the global decentering of capital is contained by the centering, localizing hermeneutics of paranoia. The discourse of global struggle is complicated by the production of “the unequal, fragmented, or local resistances” (Jameson) to the process of globalized capital and their divergent locating of the points of intervention. The discourse of “global TV”—promised to be the institutional power of the medium—contends with the United States’ insertion of itself as hegemonic center, as disseminating center of televisual flow, within that field of possibility (Curtin, 1998). Pynchon’s novel seems very much an engagement with the complex processing of the possibilities of thinking the global and the local. Oedipa’s confusion before the Tristero finds its dynamic in these terms. Either the Tristero is an actual large-scale interpellation of dissidents or a contingent assortment of various undergrounds, a global counterplotting or a coincidental coordination of localized alternative plottings. If no Tristero, in fact, exists, the global scale of attention has been centered on Oedipa, as the target of conspiracy, or localized within Oedipa, as paranoid investment. What happens in this assemblage is a rather powerful interpretive problem: paranoid subjects are produced by conspiracies which are immune from “revelation,” for the locating of the conspiracy sounds paranoid: “the military entertainment
complex,” “the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself.” Jon Simons’ reading of the novel (2000), for example, uses Pynchon’s text to make problematic Jameson’s theorization of the postmodern, but he ignores Jameson’s insistence on the pedagogical function of thinking capital and space as such and ignores what is indicted in the novel but simultaneously insisted upon: the possibilities for thinking connection. It is the insistence on doing so that seems to me to be the pedagogical imperative of the novel.

The television in the novel is a placeholder for the embedding of these thematic and historical concerns within the text. Oedipa believes herself ensnared in a “seduction plot,” as Metzger’s visit to her hotel room ever so conveniently coincides with the televising of a film from his childhood acting days. Oedipa’s life as filmic is a figure for the subject seduced into nonbeing; Mucho’s story is the seduction into non-acting. Framing information technologies as distraction/fine-tuning devices is the positing of a seduction plot. Plots themselves in the emergency of postmodernism—as competing metanarratives—are seductions (Lyotard, 1984). Agency panic—as described by Melley—and its paranoid recourse is a recognition of the seductions from “the outside;” Mucho’s resolution was the paranoid investment in the “exterior” location of agency most seductive. Strategically deployed, the concepts of the global and the local contend for the attention of the subject; their hold on the discourse in which the subject metaphorically describes their positioning in the world transforms the subject’s relationship and interconnectedness to others and to space (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 44-46). Either relationship holds seductive possibilities for agency, whether the subject imagines their connectedness to the world in its enormity (as vastly possible or as incomprehensibly vast) or in its limited contingencies (as malleable to desire or as impregnably random). Each relationship carries a different seduction of attention; the concepts perform exclusions, demarcate not only how
attention will be seduced but also how it will be distracted; that is to say, they each produce in their signification unmanageable and uncomfortable excess. The paranoid form works to resolve this crisis of attention by negating the problem. Paranoia is attention that forecloses the Real (O’Donnell, 117). By incorporating everything into a singular, effectively connected narrative, the paranoid form of attention leaves no possibility for exclusion. The problem, though, as Oedipa discovers, then, is in trusting the seductiveness of your own connections. Oedipa will wonder, at various times, if she’s in a plot orchestrated by God, by Pierce Inverarity, or an aligned multitude. She’ll, then, wonder if she’s paranoid, though the real paranoid wouldn’t have to speculate—they’d be invested. The contemporary critics of cultural paranoia (O’Donnell, Smith, Melley) would tell her she’s paranoid for believing she’s in a plot. However, to argue against plottedness would seem to avoid the Real of the very seductiveness of plots. How does one, then, attend to the real conspiracies around you? Is Oedipa’s wavering the only way to combat paranoia’s stain? There are conspiracies that have global reach: the ones that inform the very way we think—or don’t think—the global.

The novel’s “TV scene” as it were, I believe, allows for thinking about interconnectedness. As the technology dominating the scene, TV’s insusceptibility to underground critique—that is, I believe, its imperviousness to having to accommodate different plottings and, thus, the possibility for better plottings—forms “the paranoia” of the scene. The paranoia Oedipa exhibits here leaves something to be desired. In the TV transmission of a WWII film, shown out of sequence, interrupted by commercials, the television seductively positions itself as an agent of not only Metzger’s seduction plot, but the seduction plot of postmodernism, as it indexes all the temporal dislocations created in the image’s domination. Yet, the novel’s TV scene is remarkable for the intervening moment of Oedipa’s brush with low-
tech malfeasance. Metzger’s seduction is interrupted by a hair spray can’s flight: “The can, hissing malignantly, bounced off the toilet and whizzed by Metzger’s ear” (25). The attribution of malignancy to the can accords the can its own agency, its own performance of motivated action. Yet, this “low tech paranoia” is quickly conscripted onto a high tech paranoia, a higher order high tech paranoia in line with so many visions of the humankind conquering computer: “The can knew where it was going, she sensed, or something fast enough, God or a digital machine, might have computed in advance the complex web of its travel.” Oedipa’s persistence in mapping so many occurrences and coincidences onto a conspiracy against her as she ventures forth is an almost understandable formation; however, the paranoia here seems to speak to some other order of paranoia, much more fundamental to her being in the world. The recourse to a larger conspiracy in which to frame the seemingly instinctive interpretation of the can’s agency (its malignancy) suggests the immediate paranoid recovery of some more problematic—and that is to say, in keeping with Mucho’s paranoid operation, some more possible yet horrible—proposition: the can’s flight was, in fact, a conspiracy against her.

A similar conflation of the object with subjectivity populates the novels of Philip K. Dick; those representations provoked Carl Freedman’s (2002) observations on paranoia’s relationship to commodities. The “confusion between person and things, between human beings and objects,” according to Freedman, has always been the “central evil of capitalism,” the “ruthless objectification” of humans supported by commodity fetishism (148). When writing about the “quasi-living” of things—the apparent humanization of inanimate matter as the “necessary dialectical obverse” of dehumanization—Dick, Freedman observes, applies the discourse of paranoia within the text. The same holds true for Pynchon. How does the “ruthless hermeneutic” structure of paranoia become the privileged language to interrogate commodity
fetishism? As paranoia is the securing, the hardening, of the Imaginary relationships the individual has between self and its own constitutive division, Lacan shows how such a foreclosure is a constitutive necessity of the bourgeois ego: “there is no basis for a sharp distinction between the paranoiac and the ‘normal’ subject of capitalist society” (151). The operative question, then, as Freedman asks, is, “What is it about the workings of capitalism that interpellates individuals as paranoid subjects?” (152). If paranoia works a hermeneutic function, what are subjects under capitalism compelled to interpret? Freedman answers, they are compelled to interpret value. As both “the basic economic cell of capitalism and a mystifying signifier,” value seems the object of interpretation: “If we are economically constituted as capitalists and workers who must buy and sell human labor that is commodified into labor power, then we are psychically constituted as paranoid subjects who must seek to interpret the signification of objects—commodities—which define us and which, in a quasi-living manner, mystify the way that they and we are defined.” The increasing domination of exchange value—in the entrenchment of the “society of the spectacle” (Debord, 1995)—creates, in an overwhelming demand for interpretations of value, I believe, a panicked assertion of value in the subject herself. Isn’t this what Oedipa is confronted with as a hairspray can menaces her?

In a cluster of ways, she arrives at a moment bearing witness to her own worthlessness as “individual” (though, as I’ll show, not as body). The car ride to this locale bore witness to Pierce Inverarity’s life, his capital having carved space to his design, San Narciso as monumental testimony to the weight of his existence, surviving even after his death, Pierce having successfully plotted both the land and his afterlife. Imagining a hairspray can’s (or God’s) menace—it plotting her death, she positioning herself at the plot’s center—is an imagining of worth, a hermeneutic extrapolation of value as the “real life” intensity of the moment is
textualized, made exchangeable, made filmic: subjectivity, its own machine of reproduction. Her paranoia gives consistency to her life; imagining the can’s flight as motivated is certainly more comfortable than bearing witness to its utter contingency and the terrible possibility of a death like that, futureless, plotless. The bathroom mirror shatters in the can’s flight; when later she tries to find her image, she has “a moment of nearly pure terror” (29), nearly, not only because she remembers the mirror’s actual fate, but also nearly because the paranoid interpretation has already performed the mirror’s function, has allowed for the misrecognition of consistency and permanence the mirror typically provides (Lacan, 1982).

The paranoid attention—as much as it gives strength and support to the tenuous relationship the subject has with the worth and integrity of the self—also supports a mystifying relationship to the object. The ruthlessness of the interpretation (Oedipa at the center of some divinely engineered conspiracy) contains the ruthlessness inherent in the object as commodity: the domination of exchange value to the point of the violent annihilation of the subject. Doesn’t the recourse to paranoia—imagining the malignancy of the can—contain the thought she could be the victim of the malignant engineering of this can? Would it not be unbearable for Oedipa to locate herself in the subject position of the economic variable? To imagine in the demand for profit, factored in risk and reward scenarios, factored somewhere else, she and Metzger are “X number” Americans?

A motif of distraction throughout the text informs these paranoid moments of everyday experience. The can’s violent flight coincides with the television’s representational violence; the television provides the soundtrack: “from the other room came a slow, deep crescendo of naval bombardment, machine-gun, howitzer and small-arms fire, screams and chopped-off prayers of dying infantry” (25). The film’s soundtrack becomes the noisy accompaniment required to
fictionalize her brush with death. What we have is a hyperbolic playing out of Benjamin’s “absent-minded examiner,” “reception in a state of distraction” (240-241). Oedipa—the postmodern hyper-interpreter—is busy plotting the violence before her, distracted from the narrated violence on the picture tube. Oedipa’s plotting of the real violence closes the narration to interpretation: with either God or computer (and Oedipa gives no indication it matters which, either will do) coordinating the violence, both acting beyond intervention, Oedipa is the hapless victim. In the collapse of TV movie and real life horror, which is perceived as real life cartoon, is this not Oedipa’s total absorption of the fictionalizing of the everyday? The complete investment in the construction of the everyday as buffered, insulated, as like a film? And the total capture of her life in an impossibly impenetrable cosmic conspiracy that proceeds with only her at its center? Real life violence seems so unreal; this confrontation with the Real negated in the attention paid it. Here, the paranoia—the “War on Oedipa,” as it were—reproduces that which captures your attention but makes no demands on your immediate attention and resolves the anxiety of global and local seductions as the location of the plot is in an absolute no-place, that virtual stomping ground of Communists, terrorists, God-like digital machines.

Oedipa is distracted from the violence on the screen but her interpretation of the violence in her real life is distracted, dislocated from its possible realities (of which I provided one above) and grafted onto a singular fantasy, foreclosing any need to be moved by the violence, any possibility to be—as Benjamin would say of a work of art, and I would say of an interpretation—absorbed by it. Later she will accuse the TV movie of committing “one of those Hollywood distortions in probability” (30). Curiously, it is a distortion that allows for sparing, the TV movie’s father figure surviving against the odds to eulogize his dead infant. Someone must survive, the son having been “electrocuted, thrashing back and forth and screaming horribly.”
Someone must plot this violence, bring some sense to it, accommodate it for the big Other, translate the on-screen thrashing into an “off-screen” “real world” narrative of sacrifice, the costs of war (Žižek, 1989). But whereas the representation of violence requires a distortion to be satisfying (and in that very distortion the imaginary resolution is rendered ultimately unsatisfying), Oedipa’s paranoid interpretation leaves no trace of distortion; it satisfies in its ultra-global explanatory power, which need not trouble itself with the improbability of utter contingency or the uncomfortable satisfaction of probability.

Thus, the motif of distraction, I believe, licenses my own insistence on another interpretation, a possible way of attending to that violence. In both Mucho’s and Oedipa’s scenes of reading—which I read as emblematic of a way of living the everyday—a paranoid form of attention distracts from some violence being performed for which these subjects—to constitute themselves as subjects, as agents, as subjects of value—must pay no mind. This does not mean these are willful denials, in fact, the very discomfort (the perception of “buffering”) in the scenes suggests some anxiety over the spaces of violence they cannot perceive; but, for as much as highly constructed, culturally engineered paradigms of attention inform their readings, produce the subject of late capitalism, the production seems mutually befitting: securing the subject of late capitalism in the very sense of security it provides. The paranoid subject is secure in the maintenance of the liberal subject, yes, but the paranoid subject is secure, too, in the paranoid construction of the global that is not porous, that maintains the lived space of insides and outsides, the sorts of imaginary relations to space that maintains borders as an operative working category. But, this violent assertion of worth, the paranoid lockdown, is performed from a position already invested as worthwhile to hold (even if something never feels just right). There remain those who find themselves instead in the position of the variable: those
undergrounds that will soon populate Oedipa’s life. This *uncommon ground* is precisely what allows me to imagine a different subject in Oedipa’s position as the can threatens: there persist different conditions of being threatened and perceiving threat. Certainly the moment—as Freedman argues—demands interpretation, paranoid investment, constructions of value (it is, after all, a thing dominating the scene), but Oedipa’s interpretation, her paranoia, is already invested in a paradigm of worth, of what constitutes value, of how to translate the precarious situation, the precarious cultural state of value, into worth. My reading (corporate conspiracy) probably sounds paranoid, as well, but it tells a different story that acknowledges the precariousness of the moment, if not of all moments, and proceeds from a different paradigm of worth. Is this to say there are competing paranoias? And if so, are there better paranoias?

Evan Watkins’ reading of conspiracy in his chapter “Done In” (1998), on the projection of conspiracies *everywhere* in the social field, asks the question this way: Are some conspiracies better than other conspiracies? For Watkins, conspiracy is the form *du jour* of an information commodity economy that exploits *human* capital in new and mystifying ways. In Watkins’ reading, the most repressive effect of the continual circulation and renewal of information as commodity is the way it implicates human agency in its commodity form as a “constitutive component,” and, as such, like information itself, the human agent is constantly in need of retooling: “You face the sudden realization that you’ve become a victim of the ‘march of knowledge’ controlled and capitalized from somewhere else” (107). That *somewhere else* is mapped onto a conspiracy of which you are a different sort of victim, a victim to unfair cultural practice or to unfair political decisions. Thus, any pedagogical possibility of being “victimized” by the very commodity form and its hermeneutics of value is short-circuited by the way “conspiracy” is put to work; conspiracy promulgation (the strategic invocation of conspiracies
that endanger the nation, the family, the race) puts conspiracy to work by performing in its “continually shifting constellation of (victimizing) forces” a mystification of the effects of human capital exploitation. This mystification occurs behind an “epistemology of motivation” which perpetually attempts to locate those forces elsewhere so as “to reconstitute—‘retool’—powers of agency ‘here,’ by exploiting the possibilities of a new ‘origin’ in the position of victim” (115). Both Mucho and Oedipa’s paranoid interpretive practices aim for such; both ultimately imagine themselves in the victim position most accommodating for them, the victim position impossible to overcome, the one made possible by its very information processing.

Thus, for Watkins, conspiracy seemingly produces an interpretative challenge: to resist an “epistemology of motivation” and rather to produce pedagogy—“an education for survival” (97)—that begins in “theorizing a ‘conspiracy of effects’” (121). Rather than focusing on any one reading of a “conspiracy theory”, whereby rhetorically “conspiracy” seems to mark a place—a center for plotting, a site of paranoid projection, as I’ve argued above—Watkins advocates “conspiracy theorizing,” “how to make use of what resources are available to make sure you don’t disappear as victimized” (103). Here, “conspiracy theorizing” would seem to belong alongside other critical practices—“cognitive mapping” (Fredric Jameson), “making do” (de Certeau)—that understand space as a “social production” as Lefebvre (1992) theorizes it; Watkins writes, “conspiracy discourse invites a continual recognition of the forces within which revolutionary political agency must be developed. They recognize the continually shifting web of knowledges tuned to the mechanisms of replacement that would obliterate subject positions from any purchase in social fields” (126). By conspiracy theorizing, the subject navigates that web of knowledge and begins to locate the sites of its own replacement, of its own obsolescence, the points at which you as subject become replaced as demographic, as information, as logical
consequence, as variable in economic calculation. Thus, I imagined the conspiracy theorizing seemingly unavailable to Oedipa as the text’s unspoken politic of thinking victimization: either one consoles oneself in the culturally-produced paranoid form of attention or one imagines one’s self as disposable (this being, I will show, the constitutive ground of undergrounds for Pynchon). The latter is precisely what Oedipa is unable to do: imagine herself as almost “done in.” Were the can to have struck her dead, her death becomes exchanged for information: from the more conscientious outcome, the information required to retool the can, to lesser conscientious outcomes, the information necessary to weigh the cost of retooling the can versus the cost of settling this claim and future claims. Granted, “lesser conscientious” could very easily be translated to “more paranoid,” as the language of paranoia often works to pathologize the way the Other marks interconnectedness. If the paranoid subject is the subject of late capitalism, something must be happening when the charge of paranoia forecloses interpretation. But, as Watkins suggests, there is something productive to be said about distinguishing between the conspiracy by which you think the world and actively imagining the conspiracy by which the world thinks you, between being paranoid and practicing paranoia.

**Undergrounding as Foregrounding**

“A pedagogy of conspiracy,” writes Watkins, “is a narrative in which you are irreplaceable” (122). If a “conspiracy theory” mystifies how you (as information, as human capital) have been put to use, then, in contrast, conspiracy theorizing produces the pedagogical field that makes possible an understanding of agency as the work which makes “impossible the capitalization of replacement” (124-25). Were Oedipa to have imagined another conspiracy, the insight is not radical in itself, although it does contain the necessary foothold: recognizing the replaceability of the subject in the exchange of information, following from an interpretive paradigm that recognizes in the violence of the everyday the simply unremarked upon
disposability of the subject. While Mucho’s agency panic may have ultimately resolved itself by projecting an “underground” of vitality, Oedipa’s encounter with “so many undergrounds” only proves that such form may suggest that vitality is a function of survival, not of actively pursuing “a passion for the real.”

“So many undergrounds” is an operative phrase here. When Oedipa ends a night following the WASTE network (the underground) she emerges at first not wondering if she’s paranoid (this happens only as her trails of information and leads are one by one “done in”) but rather hoping she is: “She wanted Hilarius to tell her she was some kind of a nut” (107). “She wanted,” pointing to the crux of the matter, “to know why the chance of its being real should menace her so.” By passing through the underground, Oedipa interrogates her own structure of threat. Unlike the paranoid explanatory power with which she attends her near-death experience, the interconnectedness of these lives—Can we call them near-death experienced lives? — provokes some other form of attention, paranoid, perhaps, as she does remain menaced by the virtual, yet the critical questioning dislodges her from the certainty and closure an everyday paranoia provides.

If one way of conceiving an underground is as a community for a shared passion for the real, Pynchon wonders if the community isn’t formed first, seeking its passionate attachment later. First, Mike Fallopian, the right wing paranoid himself, posits that Stanley Koteks, the embittered Yoyodyne employee, might belong to an “underground of the unbalanced,” faithful to “the Myth of the American Inventor…[but instead] being ground into anonymity”: “What’s it like, Oedipa, being all alone in a nightmare like that? Of course they stick together, they keep in touch” (70). Later, in describing the formation of the Anonymous Inamorato, an anonymous revealer describes, “A whole underground of suicides who failed. All keeping in touch through
that secret delivery system,” and asks, without answering, “What do they tell each other?” And certainly such uses conform to our understanding of the metaphor; here, undergrounds are secret organizations, faithful to some fundamental identification, and, yet, for Pynchon, undergrounds share some relationship to failure and to anonymity, not an anonymity of action and motive (which the understanding of underground as “secret” captures) but an anonymity that defines existence were it not for belonging to an underground, anonymity as a lived relationship to the world, the sense that one would not matter outside their underground. Pynchon’s text wonders if undergrounds aren’t formed as communities—communications—for survival, their “passions for the real,” then, only some explanation to how aboveground failed them, a naming to fill in the void of anonymity.

The provocative conjuncture produced by the text is the possibility of thinking the underground as the real space of the vital and of thinking the underground as a real space formed in and by necessity. While Melley and O’Donnell may describe paranoid forms of attention as the outcome of the perceived peril of agency in the emergence of postmodernism, Pynchon’s text speculates about “the conspiracy of effects” of that paranoia, that paranoia which precludes thinking about bodies in jeopardy, of the violence that constitutes the ground of those subject positions. One of the capsule histories of an underground Oedipa hears on her descent is the story of how a Yoyodyne executive became founder of Inamorati Anonymous. This executive finds himself “automated out of a job,…trained to do absolutely nothing but sign his name to specialized memoranda he could not begin to understand and to take blame for running-amok of specialized programs that failed for specialized reasons he had to have explained to him” (91). Before Pynchon’s comedic performance here is deemed a parody of post-Fordist paranoia, Watkins’ work on obsolescence (1993) shows how the production of a “throwaway population”
is “produced by and indispensable to present social organization” (7). It is not paranoid to
discover the actual production of “the unfit.” When the “executive’s first thoughts were
naturally of suicide,” the punchline betrays the plausibility of the instinct; is not the suicide the
limit case of the unfit to proceed, the absolute ideological subject position produced in strategic
obsolescence? The comedy proceeds, “previous training got the better of him: he could not
make the decision without hearing the ideas of a committee” (91-92). The comic relief here (and
this I believe to be the general economy of the comedy in Pynchon’s text) on the one hand
betrays the anxiety that motivates the text but on the other creates the necessary distance to keep
the critique itself— one very much invested in the interconnectedness of systems and economies,
an argument for, I believe, a better paranoid performance—from being contaminated by the
functioning discourse of paranoia, whereby the paranoid is always serious and always wrong.
The text’s immanently underwritten sense of hyperbole, particularly in these moments when the
text presses the issue of violence, work, as Samuel Kimball (2001) argues of hyperbolic
representations of violence, as a compensatory catharsis of the fear of annihilation. Hyperbole is
then a performative materialization of the text’s own capture in its insistence on an attention to
structural violence.

When the muted post horn appears to capture the attention of the executive, he responds,
“A sign… is what it is.” The joke, of course, is the paranoid investment in the arbitrary
appearance of a signifier: the very gasoline in which he had planned to douse himself reveals the
muted post horn to be the call to go on living. Presumably, the sign is found because the sign
was desired, another paranoid performance securing the subject. Yet, what the text doesn’t
account for, what the telling of this originary tale can’t account for— since its teller (someone
Oedipa communicates with because he wears the sign on a lapel pin) “never thought there was a
history to it”—is the executive’s experience with the sign before its revelation here, his history with it. Every paranoid joke gathers its cache in the excess to which the paranoid (or the reader of the textualized paranoid) doesn’t attend (In fact, if one enjoys the irony in the literalness of the line, then one’s humor is paranoid, believing in a literal without excess). What has been learned from prior experience with the muted post horn? Its presence, after all, is everywhere. What do “they,” in fact, say to each other? For the paranoid everything is said; nothing is left unsaid. In Stefan Mattessich’s reading of the novel (2002), the “basis…for any freedom from the malignancy of social power in late capitalist America, or for any implied redemption of agency, is precisely the novel’s refusal to mean” (57). But, it seems in both its excesses and its precarious figurations of refusal, the novel more so enacts an insistence on meaning, of being available for meaning. In fact, the argument here is the novel requires a choice between systems of meaning, between paranoias, either the paranoia that believes it has refused, believes in refusals, believes it can evade the interpellation into the structures of disposable bodies (that is, being paranoid) or the paranoia that connects in all those moments, in all the labor of believing as such, the connective tissue of a determining violence (that is, practicing paranoia). If by practicing paranoia, by conspiracy theorizing, the world takes on a total vision, this is not to leave the world spoken for, rather this means the ground for communication has been located. The redemption of agency is in the insistence on meaning, on common ground, in thinking interconnectedness. Reading the sign is to be in on the secret.

The novel’s construction suggests that the everyday carries on with what Michael Taussig (1999) calls the “the public secret”—“that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated”—in tact (6). For Taussig, knowledge is not necessarily power, but rather that “active not knowing makes it so;” for him, the everyday is composed of “the all-consuming
banality of the fact that [the] negativity of knowing what not to know lies at the heart of a vast range of social powers and knowledges intertwined with those powers” (6). The everyday moves along noisily with everyone sensing fully (though not knowing fully) the structural violence within the capitalist relation but proceeding as if they are fully vested, safely positioned agents. Žižek’s reading (2006) of the Abu Ghraib torture photos suggests the tortures can be made sensible—rather than shocking, rather than exceptional—when they are located within the field of “obscene underground practices that sustain an ideological edifice” (368). For Žižek that “obscene underside” to US culture is “the initiatic rituals of torture and humiliation one has to undergo in order to be accepted into a closed community” (367). In Pynchon’s text isn’t the ritual to belong precisely to submit one’s self to disposability? The “underground,” then for Pynchon, is in fact the materialization of this obscene underside of American culture, abjection the price one pays for knowledge, for insisting on knowing what should otherwise not be known. But, this is precisely what allows an underground to form: freedom to share in the secret since you are or perceive to be already hurt by it.

The very organization of Inamorati Anonymous becomes an obscene version of the very ground under which it forms. In the swearing off of love, I. A.’s founder forms a “society of isolates” (94). A society of isolates is, in fact, a literalizing of the fantasy space of the everyday, where bodies proceed as if they were not in a society of isolates (as isolated variables). I. A. has taken the position of defeat and turned it into a project which desires to not repeat the “big mistake” as the founder sees it; that is, to plot otherwise. He has created subject positions that cannot be automated as they are the very work of intimation. Yet, I.A.—in its very project—is as “futureless” as the lot, as if that is plotting’s limit, a nowhere truly to go. This underground form is a working out of the condition of irreplaceability but one that remains bound to the logic of the
system. The passion for the real may overidentify with the system (and may begin to understand why such forms take violence as an operating practice). Thus, the IA underground may not be necessarily effective—if the effect is to reshape the ground—but the underground form is the necessary foregrounding of the buried secrets of the scenes of reading in the text’s presentation of the everyday. Unless of course, to be positioned in the underground is to be positioned in wait, in safe wait, waiting for the intervention of the Tristero; then, the target of I.A.’s plotting is precisely and literally to not reproduce as social reproduction is very much contingent upon the reproduction not only of disposable subject positions but of disposable bodies.

**By Way of “Concluding” for Now**

I.A.’s motivation remains indeterminate. Its micropolitical agenda remains its own, and may too be trapped in a paranoid performance of its own, if it imagines itself complete, if it can’t coordinate with other such foregroundings of the “conspiracy of effects.” Still, there is much to be learned from these shared performances of paranoia, these communities insisting on their own plotting, how they organize their own situated peril, how they particularly imagine “doing in” rather than being “done in.” The concluding chapter will look more closely at the emergence of punk subculture in these terms. But politics must intervene at some point, particularly at points when plots violently diverge. Conspiracy theorizing, Watkins writes, only “borders on politics,” as the “border sign of something happening in the colonies, the cultural recognition of disruptive market economic practices that enables the formation of agency necessary to challenge the political dominance of transnational capital” (127). The Tristero stands in for the unimagined—though perhaps only unavailable and unrepresented—cultural work of doing something with recognition, of plotting it a future against every attempt to make “futureless”-ness the condition to which each body can be reduced. The Tristero matters as the gravitational pull to coordinate the reducible connection in “so many undergrounds.” It is the common place
location from which the question “What now?” proceeds, as the construction of a somewhere in which to act. But that common place’s recognition—as Pynchon’s novel shows—requires the language that cannot be spoken seriously.

As much as paranoia is a lockdown of the liberal subject, paranoia—at least as descriptive of ways of attending to the world—also describes a vigorous pursuit of interconnectedness. One important concern that must be parsed from the language of paranoia to describe characters and text—and critical approaches, too—is how paranoia—the charge of paranoia—pathologizes and condemns pursuits of interconnectedness that *seem too vigorous* (Fenster, 1999, 20-21). A certain insistence on interconnectedness can be seen as unseemly: Oedipa knows this. Simon’s essay cited above concludes by suggesting Pynchon’s novel is a lesson about the costs of “totalizing or paranoid thinking.” I have to think the novel is a lesson on the cost of such an equation; the correlation should be impossible if only by recognizing totalizing as an exercise in thinking and paranoia as condition for thinking (unless of course it would be possible to inflect paranoia as something we *do* rather than something we *are*). Paul Smith uses the term “holistic inquiry” to evade the inherent pathological connotations in paranoia but the charge against remains: holistic inquiry, argues Smith, first, privileges a “mostly speculative and certainly abstract relation” to the social and, second, requires a “full subjectivity” of its agents (93). In Smith’s scope, Jameson’s claim for narrative—that it be guided by a vision of totality—“encourages an elision of the reality of individual histories” (92-93). Jameson’s own intervention on postmodernism illustrates how late capitalism makes problematic claims to perceiving concrete relations and, in that very problem, complicates any claim to full subjectivity; Pynchon’s novel is a figuration of this very dilemma, as well. In Pynchon there is a knowing insistence on thinking interconnectedness against the distractions that attempt to short-
circuit thinking about connections as an effective economizing of attention. Insisting on interconnectedness does not conclude the world. Practicing paranoia, again, is about collecting knowledge(s), and proceeding from there. Locating undergrounds, I believe, can be an index to thinking starting points.

The work of Etienne Balibar in an essay titled “Outline of a Topography of Cruelty” (2004) proceeds from such an economizing of attention, which could be indicted as paranoid, if it weren’t for the bodies produced in the “conspiracy of effects” he describes. Balibar’s focus in the essay is the “systemic use of extreme violence and mass insecurity to prevent collective moments” (116). If the “superstructural credit” (to use Jameson’s phrase) of the long 60s allowed for the transformation of the institutional violence under capital, liberating some subjects, producing public space for others, capital’s reorganization in postmodernity and globalization has liquidated that credit and reorganized its “institutional distribution of survival and death” (117). Balibar suggests that extreme violence has been “globalized,” preying upon subjects vulnerable to the hardened, segregated borders of internally unsettled nation-states and to the unequal material distribution flowing transnationally. Current politics, itself an ambivalent and ineffective product of the 60s insistence on no common place and the conservative (paranoid) reactions to it, Balibar argues, are not a true politics for the moment. Politics must find its place in recognizing and undoing the possibilities for the “production for elimination” of populations, which Balibar recognizes in a “chain” of “processes of extermination,” “a series of connected processes—[that] do not have one and the same ‘cause,’ but they produce cumulative effects” (126). Balibar’s list of processes includes war, ethnic “cleansings,” famines, and “seemingly ‘natural’ catastrophes, which in fact are killing on a mass scale because they are overdetermined by social, economic, and political structures.” Elsewhere in his work, Balibar
(2002) suggests such productions of “throw away” populations in structural and objective violence exist, in turn, alongside “ultra-subjective forms of violence,” of which fundamentalist “terrorism” may serve as example (25-27). This is to say, we find ourselves in a new crisis in shared space, which seems more and more to be resolving itself in violence, from which no one is immune, especially if we believe the paranoias that support a War on Terror. The paranoid form proceeding from a previous crisis in shared space may actually lubricate the flow of violence, for immunity from thinking one’s self as disposable, seems very much its end game. Politics, Balibar would argue, must proceed from recognizing these interconnected processes, structural violences, and a reducible condition of citizenship. As I hope to show in this project’s concluding chapter, the idea of “undergrounds” plays no small part in thinking through these processes, but Balibar is inserted here because he identifies a functioning and threatening conspiracy in a language I believe can be argued for as a competing discourse of paranoia, one that adopts—insists upon—its forbidden practices.
CHAPTER 5
THE LABOR OF UNDERGROUND THREATS IN THE CONVERSATION

As Chapter One argues, the discourse of catastrophe has a hegemonic hold on attention. Its hold is unchanged by any reality of a “post 9/11” world as it informs the way that very event is received and remembered. Pynchon’s novel then recognizes at the onset of postmodernization the demand for the mind to refuse both the hegemony of attention and any discursive attempts (such as the discourse of “paranoia”) to police attention. In fact, we might say his novel less prefigures a need for a countercultural “movement” as it does the so-called “movement of movements,” already recognizing—and this is the burden of a revolutionary politics—the very threat in (and, thus, to) organization. As Oedipa’s own cognitive mapping becomes more organized, she is, after all, caught in the crosshairs of bullets, even if we can never know if she is their intended. And so, again, it is Pynchon’s “society of isolates” which becomes his privileged figure, impossible to target in both its radical commitment to refusing to reproduce the body conducive to this particular regime of labor (that is, a radical commitment to a “conspiracy theorized” position) and its radical commitment not to organize and not to make any particular demand. Yet, were it to become some dominant network, I.A.’s refusal would simply be demanding and impossible to refuse. In this regard, the necessarily fluid composition of I.A. is precisely what allows them to persist properly underground and as underground.

At this point, Francis Ford Coppola’s The Conversation (1974) becomes a seemingly odd centerpiece to this work, but I believe it to be informed by the very discourse of catastrophe, of potential threat, that narrates (and, as such, disarms) the labor of refusal. I believe it also to be available as a figuration of refusal directly aimed at that discourse. This is to say, Harry Caul—the film’s protagonist—strikes me as a possible figure for the un-narrated work of Pynchon’s I. A., a way to continue to think about that work without the Trystero anywhere in sight, something
of our post-60s situation, in fact, as a strong persistence of “so many undergrounds” without the Trystero anywhere in sight. While it may seem a violence of interpretation to take Coppola’s celebrated vision of post-60s malaise, with its isolated and anti-social anti-hero, and make it available as a figure for refusal in the postmodern, I hope the first reading of this project may license such an attention to the text by suggesting the critical attention given to the film in failing to attend to the text as a powerful figure for the crisis of postmodern labor has performed its own violence.

The opening scene of Francis Ford Coppola’s The Conversation quite nimbly orients the viewer to the spatial consternation explored in the narrative. That dexterity though begins in what emerges as the film’s opening sensory confusion, as a fractured, distorted, and dense soundtrack counterpoints a roving, promiscuous surveying of San Francisco’s Union Square. Orientation and information processing—and in no small part the means to those ends—are very much at the heart of the thematic constellation that emerges in The Conversation but only after this disorienting accounting of the Square, inserting the viewer into the “historically original dilemma” of postmodern space. Jameson (1991) describes this space as “our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentering of global capital itself” (413). The film begins with the camera’s slow focus down into this public space. A mime antagonizes, getting too close for the comfort of, the first mark of the camera, the film’s protagonist, Harry Caul (Gene Hackman). Here, the filmmaker performs in part the drama of the film, as it will soon be Harry who is the expert surveillance operative, but for now the camera moves to various other targets before settling on its mark. The unwieldy soundtrack begins to compose itself. As sight and sound begin to cohere around a particular
couple in the park, the viewer’s attention to and incorporation into the scene begins to cohere and collude with a surveillance operation underway, the trope of surveillance appropriate to this process of fixing attention to its necessary target in this new chaotic space.

The production of the discontinuous realities of postmodern space—as both private conversation and public space become invaded—allows for the panicked imagining of being targeted. As Stephen Paul Miller (1999) notes, the exposition’s most captivating image cues the audience “to the ominousness of [Harry Caul’s] work when a microphone atop a building overlooking Union Square in San Francisco appears like a rifle” (89). The language of targeting—so much a part of the conspiratorial imagination (in its “who’s out to get whom” processing)—has returned in a post-September 11 world, as imagined potential invasions here justify invasions there, and, as such, the conspiracy text it seems serves as a defense of (if not already a mourning for) the public-private distinction beginning to be lost to a here-there spatial apparatus, which, for even as much as it supports security measures, becomes itself malleable to globalization’s discontinuous realities; the construction of a “here” is, of course, subject to a spatial consternation, for the maintenance of a properly “secure” here mandates compliance to what Jameson will call a “synchronic blackmail” (353), accepting the terms of no less than what Evan Watkins (1998) calls “human capital exploitation” as an absolute present—forever and always making one’s self available for retooling to whatever shifting ground asserts itself long enough for you to toil in it—in exchange for something like credit in advance of potential catastrophes (so long as that threat there does not come to pass here). This sort of bartered continuity makes the radical discontinuities of globalization manageable and bearable, even if the unaccountability of “threats” becomes their organizing principle. Spatial consternation is settled in an organizing of space as a particular spatial consternation. Space is ordered in a
narrative of peril that provides its contours. The “imm(a)(i)nence of the accident,” argues Brian Massumi (1993), becomes the constitutive ground for consumption as a solution, the market mandate for more productivity satisfied in spending power as accident proofing, a purchase in the present, “buying off fear” (12).

In Postmodernism, the phrase “synchronic blackmail” appears in Jameson’s accounting of how the social order reproduces itself in the postmodern, how “the staff and maintenance personnel of the postmodern” are reproduced in “a certain synchronic blackmail...locked into time perception and simultaneously repressed (as though it were the most natural thing in the world)...[and so] It is as though you were part of a computer game whose constellations are subject to change without notice and include you among their optional tokens” (353). Jameson writes elsewhere in his text that “since we now grasp social reality synchronically—in its strongest sense, which has lately been revealed as that of a spatial system—changes and modifications in daily life must henceforth be deduced after the fact rather than experienced” (350). Synchronic blackmail speaks to a bartered persistence of a “here and now,” never apprehended in the making, in which the threat itself is not accessible but is given over to narratives that overwrite threat-making; conspiracy theories are available for redressing wounds, but conspiracy theorizing as an attempt to think about change is unavailable for address: “The discussions in a boardroom,” writes Jameson, “are thus difficult to link up narratively to changes in daily life that are themselves only perceivable ex post facto, and not in the making.” The persistence of the present intervenes to assuage any doubt it could be otherwise, if there were such a thing as an otherwise, for attention has been directed to the possibilities of damage from elsewhere and to a properly terrorized elsewhen, how this is always better than that.
The synchronic nature of the blackmail is, in fact, sealed in by a spatial consternation, where one is sheltered not from but by threat’s embodiment in virtual character(s): better to play this game than be vulnerable to those other violences out there, better to believe this damage to me has been plotted in calculated ways to which and by unethical persons to whom I never had access than by brute data and systemic demand. The “synchronic blackmail” is a threat produced in and by this functioning “cognitive map” that manages to map the world by including the extra spatio-temporal dimension whereby the demographic distribution includes their threat, how it is only a matter of time before the promised disaster emerges from them, from there. One’s loss is now only and always just a mere hiccup, never registered as precisely an indifferent belch for the system’s digestive health. This secures submission to the terms of viability where exploitation and survival begin to look the same: “A new kind of fear—rather than Lenin’s famous bribes—now seals the system in, since you have a personal stake in its smooth and unobstructed reproduction” (350).

One of the targets of the film’s narrative is the control of work, the foregone intimacy of no longer private conversations something of a stand-in for the more political drama of an alienation inherent to postmodernization; in an information market—of which surveillance is perhaps the most insidious and accurate trope—the drama of retooling, argues Watkins, becomes the site of the exploitation of human capital. The control of one’s labor is subject to a context of which one has limited access; the site of exchange—where conceptualizations of how data is to be used as information are produced in a division of labor separated from providing or collecting its material—occurs somewhere else. The establishing shots of The Conversation are the slow revelation of a somewhere else. They thus recreate precisely a dilemma in perception, recreate an excess of data in which the fine-tuning of attention is performed for you, the film work and
surveillance work directing attention based on an agenda to which you have no access: Why this place? These people? This time?

While the text will seemingly insist on the thematics of privacy, its central trope for its danger—surveillance—forecloses its conceptualization and inculcates some irony at every moment when “privacy” seems to be the stakes. The opening scene stages the commodification potentially—and this is the drive of late capitalism—of all points subjective or otherwise of any space; privacy has to be outmoded. As Harry Caul’s associate talks dirtily to two young females, unaware of his presence behind tinted glass, the whole scene is coded as an assault, an intrusion, an invasion. If the invasion of privacy is the point of the scene and yet privacy remains a conceptual problem, I would argue the scene provides rather and more to the point the collapsing of the topography of the everyday and the underground. Harry and his surveillance apparatus serve as the figuration of a public Imaginary that maps its imperceptible excess as imminent danger and conspiracy. There are two scenes here: outside two young girls have their privacy invaded by a hidden and secret (underground) surveillance operation, but inside this surveillance truck, two men labor, or, more properly, distract themselves from laboring. “Sometimes it’s nice to be entertained,” says the associate. To which Harry replies, “I don’t care what they are talking about. All I want is a nice fat recording.” In Miller’s reading, it is precisely here where Caul’s desire “to be a kind of self-reflexive, modernist artist” is revealed, the desire to transcend the surveillance logic of discipline by obscuring its presence with detachment. What we might find in the fidelity to the “nice fat recording” is in turn ambivalence to the undergrounding of this labor, to, yes, its buried ethics and legalities, but more so to its virtual complications to invasion, to the conspiracies and undergrounds off-stage that finally put it to use. That Harry’s recordings must be exchanged at some other site for some (preferably) unknown use inverts the scene here,
placing Harry on the other side of that two-way mirror. That Harry himself is antagonized by the emergence of an underground reminds us that part of the conception of underground space—the space for underground populations—is its unaccountability and its contagion; there is always more of it. Underground space is in excess; some other, more-underground underground is lurking somewhere else. Even as these surveillance operatives invade this scene, they are bankrolled from afar, that somewhere else which haunts the scene. Surveillance remains incomplete, and yet its production is incumbent upon its failure; there will always be more, and more threatening, somewhere elses.

The object of this study is precisely the ways the film begins to economize this underground space. While a conspiracy narrative by its nature “reunites,” as Jameson (1995) notes, the dimensions of “a potentially infinite network, along with a plausible explanation of its invisibility” (9) and, as Watkins notes, necessarily accrues its narratival centrifugal force around the politics of information, The Conversation offers a drama of a conspiratorial imagination that begins to economize its attention around an isolated victim (a female in peril, which already begins to assert frames of attention policing the procedures for theorizing the conspiracy) rather than being able to hold reflectively the victimizing forces—and, we might say, multiple conspiracies—endemic to the situation we as viewers have just been inserted. In part, Jameson’s work on the conspiracy narrative restores to those texts the sense by which they proceed as an engagement with the drama of the subject’s new global immersion into unwieldy information networks and among growing demographies which exert new and unimagined pressures on all who labor in this now world system. But conspiracy—particularly as propped up here by surveillance—too becomes a figurative vessel for all that which must be feared in that
new global immersion and for the recognition of *all that which must be feared* as a leveragable good.

In addition to its conventions that provide the allegorical possibilities Jameson assigns it, *The Conversations* is too a “surveillance narrative”—to which we might add all the dramas of this sort of voyeurism—providing a figure for the accounting of those other bodies that occupy the space the protagonist attempts to map, reminding that attempts to figure one’s place in the new global dimension requires precisely an accounting of other bodies who materialize in the very laboring of surveillance as evasive and invasive. Congealing then around the trope of surveillance is a fantasmatic background that supports the geopolitical incursion of the new postcolonial competition for space and resources, capital’s extensive expansion *over there, somewhere else*. As Slavoj Žižek (2006) has argued, the twentieth century has been defined by its shifting discourses of threat to “the nation,” which in its increasingly available tenuousness as an empty signifier has more and more had to define itself by the invoking of a “potential threat, of a threat which, in order to function as such, has to remain potential” (372). In the twentieth century this threat in potentiality has its addendum in a threat in invisibility: “it is the invisible (and for that very reason all-powerful and omnipresent) threat of the Enemy that legitimizes the permanent state of emergency of the existing Power” (373).

The virtual overlay of threat—an underground of threat existing at each point in geopolitical space outside the nation-state, each population harboring both its terrorists and its resentments—provides for not only the reification of those laboring concrete bodies of the global proletariat as a host of abstract potentialities but too allows for—in keeping with David Harvey’s description of globalization (2000) as “uneven geographical development”—an uneven distribution of what Agamben (1998) calls “bare life,” human life existing in a purview
unsupported by the symbolic and institutional edifices that can secure its viability. It is, then,
expendable life. The latest deployment of “the state of exemption”—framing its deployment
preemptively to scenes imagined to require it—rationalizes and rations the uneven distribution of
survival. A political operation underwritten by threat conceals its economic logic (Žižek, 374).
This virtualization of the enemy beyond geopolitical indices provides for a general condition of
threat. The legitimizing of a threat is work done in different registers and through various
discourses. Yet, as virtual, threat is in our presence beyond any legitimating process; threat has
acquired a cumulative character. Threat, as Brian Massumi says, “subsists.” Thus, this reading
takes The Conversation as a privileged conspiracy text, which by virtue of its central trope
foregrounds the underground space that girds each and every scene (and text) of globalization;
this underground to the text—an accounting of both the presence and disavowal of competing
bodies available both in its figures and by intervening acts of interpretation—allows this text to
be available for a conversation about globalization’s effects on lives, on both the figured
characters and the un-figured lives available in surveillance’s necessary “other scene” (Balibar,
2002). And so the metaphor of the underground is teased throughout this reading to suggest the
ways its presence—as virtualized economy for accounting for Other bodies and as a mode for
managing disparities economically—allows the film’s figures for personal survival (against the
conspiracy) to foreground the politics of survival inherent in globalization.

The metaphor of the underground is used to index how the world’s population—obscured
in the language of threat—exists now as accompanying feature to each step taken in the
postmodern. The beginning of the narrative seems very much a figuration for postmodern labor,
a certain productivity enforced by virtue of the virtual presence of other bodies who we never see
but for whom Harry Caul’s accounting is very much evident; he is underground and hiding
because he is menaced by an underground. When Caul makes his descent “underground,” when Caul proceeds to uncover the conspiracy, however, the angle of his investigation—from at least a certain vantage point and against the narrative norms of the thriller—Caul’s movement seems very much in keeping with the withdrawal and fugitivity another inflection of underground suggests. That is to say, I think it is possible to read in the text the movement of Caul from positioned against, in response to, undergrounds to positioned as underground, as a threat himself to that which needs to organize threats. I believe at a certain juncture Caul is in position to recognize the blackmail to which he is subjected, at which point emerges the necessity to disrupt that smooth flow of spatial consternation by being spatially disconcerting in a way that—as I.A. from Pynchon’s novel teaches—refuses to reproduce the social body required for such blackmail.

Conspiracy and So Many Bodies

If, as Chapter One argued, in a War on Terror our fantasies of totalizing visual surveillance (the you’re always in the camera’s eye of the postmodern panoptic) become soothing, perhaps the imperceptibility of “chatter”—the sounds which can’t be comprehended as intelligence—becomes rather the agonizing and perpetuating material for an unproductive paranoia. In the conspiracy thriller’s figure of plotting as always elsewhere, the emergence of the conspiratorial underground is the figurative exercise of embodying the chatter that haunts the postmodern scene’s “ocularcentrism” (Jay, 1994), and the conspiracy thriller’s trajectory is toward sense-making, toward putting the pieces of a threat together. At two points in The Geopolitical Aesthetic, Fredric Jameson remarks on a motif in the conspiracy films of the 70s and 80s that points to some recognition of the status of sound in the emerging postmodern. Twice Jameson remarks something needs to be made of the move from Antonioni’s Blow Up
(something of a modernist triumph) to Brian DePalma’s *Blow Out* (something of another postmodern defeat). Jameson speculates toward the end of his volume:

Perhaps we need to drive a wedge more dramatically between the senses after the great synaesthesias of the modern period, and to restore some of the liberating freshness and horror of the auditory image in a society that has become one immense collection of visual spectacles. Is this then finally perhaps the deeper meaning the sequence whereby *Blow-up’s* postmodern sequels—DePalma’s *Blow Out* (1981) and Coppola’s *The Conversation* (1974)—transfer the visible clue to the realm of sound: the unconscious, Utopian longing to be awakened from the spell of images, and to be awakened by sounds as piercing as shots or whispers? (141-142)

The current fascination with “chatter” gives, I think, particularly salient meaning to Jameson’s “piercing whispers”—the need for noise to produce at least an accountable whisper. By their status in the field of attention (as the metaphor connotes), “underground” sounds demand our attention in new and demanding ways, less they not be heard. In one of *The Conversation*’s most crucial scenes—the one, in fact, that suggests some violence is being plotted elsewhere, being plotted underground—Harry Caul’s skillful rendering of a “complete” conversation is performed by piecing the conversation together from multiple sources and eliminating the distortion, which precisely is the sheer volume (in both senses) of other voices from the recording scene. This bracketing of what we might now call the global seems at first to allow Caul to organize his own motivations and agenda around this “fat” (meaningful) recording and what it suggests, but ultimately this work from noise to signal extradites from comprehension the very competition—in fact, *the logic of competition* we might recognize in voices competing to be heard in a crowd—that underwrites the conspiracy as actually orchestrated (a corporate takeover) rather than the one Caul imagines (an extramarital conspiracy). When the film arrives then at a piercing scream as sheer noise in its climactic moment, I believe it is important to recognize in part the delivery of that scream—a delivery provided by what I believe can be read as a militant indecisiveness—a desire to hear that scream (or to be in the place where that scream is
definitively not heard, a piercing silence) rather than be beholden always to its threatening to be heard.

The critical blindspot inherent to The Conversation interestingly enough then hinges on the film’s placement of sound at the very crux of its narrative; the textual tensions between the ocular and the aural necessitate conversation. Criticism of the film, then, always turns on protagonist Harry Caul’s faith in simulation, in the purity of the “fat recording,” and then toward the film’s deconstruction of that “fatness” in recording, the mythic sense of presence in even the recorded voice. Critics such as Dennis Turner (1985), with typical post-structural attention, attend to Harry’s desire for “fatness,” focus on—and use the text as pedagogical example of—the postmodern turn toward discursivity and the consequential de-centering of the subject, and, true to the narrative of postmodern subjectivity, the paranoid recourse to regain a sense of wholeness. Of the film’s centerpiece dream sequence, Turner writes, “Throughout this remarkable convergence of reveries of childhood, dreams of mother, memories of immobility, and encounters with God, runs the promise of a unified and coherent subjectivity” (18). The film, granted, is at every turn the representation of that impossibility figured in the hermeneutic problems encountered in interpreting one recorded line—“He’d kill us if he had the chance”—a recorded line devoid of a context that cannot be assembled by instruments of surveillance, for, no matter how much the film may proffer the loss of the private and the public alike in the explosion of surveillance technology (and that is, in the market of and for paranoia) as a dominant trope, that which eludes capture by surveillance—no matter how frighteningly refined the film may frame such technologies—continues to be the stain that subverts subjective wholeness and self-sufficiency in this spatial organization.
Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner (1988) include The Conversation in with a host of “crisis films” produced in the wake of “the legitimacy crisis” in American institutional life, its figuration of diminished agency in Harry Caul then the rub of a “a psychology at odds with [a] corporate modernity” (71). The film’s Watergate relevancy and post-Vietnam thematics of guilt do tend toward the illegitimating of “the corporate,” and the film can seem to reflect what Ryan and Kellner identify as something of a Coppola gestalt: the figuring of “retreats into compensatory, overcoded private representations” (74). When Ryan and Kellner note Coppola’s common practice—as index to his desire to “return to a fused state of non-separation from the mother, a narcissistic paradise of static spatial harmony” (70)—of ending his films “with images of lone males cut off from a world that cannot be trusted or that has proven threatening,” that Harry Caul’s labor is producing “threats” allows the materialism that produces the “world that threatens” to be an accompanying and ironic figure to the concluding image of this film: Caul “alone” in is his destroyed apartment yet under surveillance. “Cut off” would be the wrong assessment. And, thus, if such drives to “static spatial harmony” are to suggest (by negative example, here), the call for some violently regenerated masculinity that may, as Richard Slotkin (1998) has suggested, too, desire a secure nation, the text’s own production of spatial consternation undermines it, for the nation as surveillance object is a patently insecure place. As such the film’s masculinist and nationalist availability need to be read as figures in the text rather than as the work of the text.

Particularly interesting may be the choice of “impotence”—a word chosen by Turner but certainly in keeping with Ryan and Kellner’s reading—to frame Caul’s “failed” redemption, his presumed inability to act. Even as Caul’s “implication” is a real question, even as his involvement is part of his own persistence, the critical maneuver is always to assert his
“responsibility,” presume his accepting of that responsibility, and then judge him (and the text) accordingly: the staging of impotence. The reading of the scene of impotence becomes, it seems, the negative side of the generic expectation of heroic virility and, as such, the film—if too easily conceding to the generic availability of the conspiracy narrative as a figure for a lost agency—can only be available as a figure of paranoia and the text itself can only be deemed paranoid: a negative figuration desiring—calling upon—the public myth of regenerative violence as a nostalgic national enterprise and, most importantly, as an order-producing engine that disavows a much more chaotic real. Foreclosed to a reading otherwise, the film appears to perform its own “synchronic blackmail,” performing a foreclosure of thinking an alternative to the chaos managed by nationalist and sexist orders. Yet, as Žižek has argued, the very defense of a chaotic real—by reading and criticizing the film’s nostalgic subtext—can work ideologically itself in the contemporary to obscure the dynamic of order, such as the “well-organized and coordinated process” of contemporary globalization the film, I will argue, figures.

The narrative is motivated by Harry’s own psychic investment in a particular interpretation of a recorded line (that a philandering wife is in danger from her husband, who, by virtue of Harry’s recording, now has knowledge of the affair, and, presumably, now a reason to kill); yet Harry’s narrative too appears a stammering of action, a hedging in every attempt to intervene in the conspiracy. I do not believe the stammering and hedging stem from any “scandal of primal disunity” (Turner, 18) concomitant to a postmodern subjectivity. Rather it occurs by virtue of a spatialization difficult to register and only managed in the shorthand of threat. The command to anticipate, to labor preemptively, will be shown to be the scandal of information labor, and its egregiously felt effects on Caul burden a reading of his lack of intervention, which at some figurative level must be addressed as a subterfuge, a subverting, a
turning away from the command to accept the terms of generic expectations, not only those ordering representations but those ordering daily life. The conspiracy film appears then as a critique of a certain symbolic efficacy in the canceling of a synchronic blackmail, and in that very critique the text, as Jameson suggests, yearns for the (inter)connections that would make the self sufficient to comprehend the speed and scope of the global constellation of the world system.

Harry’s intensely private and hermetic existence in San Francisco, we learn, is a flight from his East Coast job that resulted in a family’s butchering. His sense that his latest assignment may have potentially murderous ramifications suggests a repetition of the former trauma, provoking the uneasy thought such complicity materializes with labor as some untoward logic, but such thought is only available if Caul is able to follow the conspiracy. That Caul makes it his labor to grasp “the plot” will create a recovery we might call paranoid in its access to meaning and its valorization of narrative closure, yet, if paranoia is precisely the “effect” of attempting to dramatize for the self the very alienation involved in information commodification, then were one to deny, so to speak, their paranoia, were this tenuous relationship to one’s labor to insist on its contingency, this would be the ideological victory. Rather, Harry’s “paranoia”—his insistence on anticipating some peril in the potential use of the recording—creates the chain of custody providing the fantasy relief map indexing how Harry’s labor has conspired unwittingly with other motivations and other acts, in ways, were he place-bound, he would not be able to access.

**Going Underground**

As with *The Crying of Lot 49* the expository figuration of the everyday is of as much interest as the emergence of the underground which is to be counterpoised against it. In *The Conversation* what is of particular interest is how threat—both the menace of other bodies (much of which becomes expressed in terms of “responsibility”) and the synchronic blackmail which
organizes labor—has made for a supposedly sustainable existence, of which the emergence of a conspiracy and the shaping materialization of underground space (which otherwise works as virtual) begins to effect the presumed sustainability. The everyday existence of Harry Caul is one mindful of an irruption of an underground, a pre-emptive posture at every turn, a posture, we’ll see, which makes him more and more productive, that is, available for exploitation.

Harry Caul’s apartment is an interesting display of the interior design of surveillance, an attempt to ward off the contagion of the threatening outside. Four deadbolts anticipate the invasion of an apartment containing the sparsest of furnishings and admittedly nothing “personal,” nothing “of value.” To evacuate the apartment of belonging in anticipation suggests how the production of threat undergrounds space. These protective measures are not—the film makes clear—the work of a paranoid. Harry’s apartment has been invaded by his landlady, who has delivered a birthday gift inside the apartment and read his birthday cards. When the landlady escapes having acquired only his birth date, the violation’s egregiousness cannot be reduced to what appears the paucity of the score, for data in the emergence of the postmodern has the possibility for new life in demographic targeting, data returning in the tremendous pile of junk mail Caul has in hand as he enters his apartment. The “theft” though actually secures some sense marketing may return addressed to you rather than a generic “you,” for, as Watkins notes, one’s subjection to “the objective status of information as a commodity” performs the exclusion whereby—“excluded from participation in [the] circuit of information production, circulation, and exchange”—“you” emerge “as a body of information rather than ‘you’ as a body subject to pleasures or desires, excessive or not” (120-1).

But the subject as subject of information actually informs subjectivity in the postmodern. As Žižek (1999) reminds, the circulation of information from you and on you in “corporate
cyberspace” determines “what we effectively are for the big Other of the power structure…and we are in this sense ‘interpellated’ by institutions even without being aware of it,” and yet subjectivity in this scene is affected by recognizing this “objective interpellation,” by the very untraceability and excess of specific points of contact in the process, giving “rise to the specific proto-paranoid mode of subjectivization characteristic of today’s subject: it constitutes me as a subject inherently related to and hassled by an elusive piece of database in which, beyond my reach, ‘my fate is writ large’” (260). The logic of threat production, then, offers a certain viability in this antagonism, the subject surviving as the subject of theft, of harassment. The subject of threat restores the evaporation of subjectivity that otherwise—or we might say elsewhere—occurs, and, thus, the subject of threat short-circuits the possibility for imagining the subject in a precarious position in the actual production of information, which, as Watkins suggests, occurs both as the commodification of your information actually bars you in its capitalization and as you—in a verb Watkins’ emphasizes throughout his piece—“disappear” as victimized, for your victimization has been abstracted when, in fact, that victimization is actualized in your very disappearance from the scene whereby “your informational body” has contributed a yield elsewhere to the “accumulation of human capital.” As in The Crying of Lot 49, to read the text as a performance of paranoia fails to recognize paranoia’s inscription in everyday life that the descent underground (by looking like paranoia) offers at a distance.

But, I would suggest too the subject of threat begins to displace imagining the subject as threat. In part the ambiguities in figuring Harry Caul’s defenses oscillate between reading them as defenses against his own sense of being threatened and as attempts to shield himself from complicity in the carrying out of the threats his work occasions. The ambivalence of “disappearance” will be registered in two ways: first, in Harry Caul’s clinical organization of
relationships, seemingly disinterested in his client’s “personal lives,” disavowing the content of his labor (they disappear as victims of his work and he disappears as victimizer), and, second, in Harry Caul’s antiseptic spatial organization, compartmentalizing his life. Between this emptied-out private space and the dark lair of his workshop and the secluded apartment he rents for his lover, work, rest, and play never touch. This self-organization suggests the protection from threat as two-fold: actual self-preservation (from a reprisal for past transgressions) and the shielding of responsibility (how the guilty conscience itself threatens). But, of course, as the production of threat makes visible—and to this end the plot of the film moves—self-preservation has become the shielding of responsibility made possible only in such radical self-sufficiency. The severity with which Caul responds to his neighbor’s violation highlights its transgression of the abstraction now inscribed into social relations.

Žižek (2002) argues “late capitalist daily life involves an unprecedented disavowal of the other’s experience”: “The Lacanian big Other is, among other things, one of the names for this Wall which enables us to maintain the proper distance, guaranteeing that the other’s proximity will not overwhelm us” (205). Capitalist subjectivity emerges, then, “as a form of abstraction inscribed in and determined by the very nexus of ‘objective’ social relations.” In a market economy (and certainly this becomes exacerbated in an affective labor market) abstraction is inscribed into everyday experience, “inscribed into the way we relate to others at the most immediate level:” “the fundamental ‘coldness’ of the late capitalist subject is supplanted/concealed by the phantom of a rich private emotional life which serves as a fantasy-screen protecting us from the shattering experience of the Real of other people’s suffering” (206). And certainly we can sense this in the affront taken when the warm greeting exchanged between Caul and his landlady as paths cross coming and going is denied its ideological
function, betrayed in his detection of her access to his sterile home. What is more of interest, I believe, is Harry’s identification (concealed from his neighbors or not) with this fundamental coldness. In the liquidation of “a rich private emotional life,” in his efforts to police social life, in this hermetical seal from responsibility, his life is already contaminated by having taken upon himself the responsibility of committing to the abstraction of lives not only symbolically but operatively.

Harry’s lover (Terri Garr) is seemingly a kept woman, in an apartment paid for by Harry, whose relationship with Harry we are led to believe never leaves this space. She will ask on Harry’s birthday, “Does something special happen between us on your birthday? …Something personal?” This sequestering of intimacy, confining it to this apartment and not allowing even the content of conversation to breach its borders, is to imagine this relationship to have no unaccountable life. But in the confining of the affair to its lone site, in the compartmentalizing of his life into these hidden and secret bunkers, a cellular existence is forged. Having gone underground, in a sense, Harry aggravates the targeting for whatever reprisal Harry may imagine himself in the crosshairs. Of course, Harry is a celebrity surveillance operative (“preeminent in the field” reads the article that advertises his appearance at a surveillance trade show), and so total anonymity is not the motivating force behind his undergrounding. And, thus, it appears the fear here is ultimately less of the violence of a specific retribution and more of the reprisal of violence as it returns to Harry in the form of contact only “responsibility” names.

In the flight of his labor to uncertain futures (this temporal rub a function again of the spatial consternation in which his laboring acts find themselves) and in this micromanaging of his personal life (what I might suggest is the forging of local spaces in response to the former) Harry Caul attempts to control or master here when it is elsewhere that in its dominating excess
truly organizes daily life. David Harvey’s thoughts on the production of spatial scales (2000) might be useful here in showing how the text represents a scalar shift in the postmodern, which appears as the prefiguring of what becomes known as globalization. Spatial scales exist as an organizational and conceptual apparatus for attending to the world; these scales—global, national, local, household/personal—exist as “a nested hierarchy” that appears “immutable or even wholly natural, rather than systemic products of changing technologies, modes of human organization and political struggle” (75). As the global begins to appear fugitive, Harry Caul makes a concerted effort to police what might exist as the scales of immediate apprehension, those organizational scales that do not exceed one’s perceptual apparatus, and, thus, the home and office (and even in whatever confusion of home and office Harry’s exchanges with his paramour exist) there is an attempt at mastery at one scale, which not only forecloses the global but too concedes ever apprehending how globalization entails “a great deal of self-destruction…at different scales and in different locations” (81). Thus, what is discovered in the way Harry Caul’s existence is represented is a figure of radical self-sufficiency as the displacement of self-destruction not only in this multiplicity of identities he performs but of self-destruction itself as an economic outcome. If this cellular existence can evoke a certain self-destruction, the preventive, anticipatory function fails to register how his production was not only commodified elsewhere but also capitalized on in a way that has dispossessed him of what we might call a “social security.” From one angle the film’s narrative trajectory organizes itself around a specific trauma and its possible repetition and thus, the desire to be redeemed. From another angle, however, the film can be said to be organized around the trauma of the economic necessity to be self-destructive and, thus, reborn of necessity. The production of threat which
girds the personal scale is shown to make the threat product precisely “self-sufficiency” and, thus, the subject ultimately malleable to job market demand.

The error of Harry’s organization—in the error that makes the narrative drive this correction—is in the reification and immutability of scale that cannot register how even this desperation begins to take on the character of those pressures exerted from the un-policed excess of this particular spatial organization. In the necessary abstraction of a virtualized enemy and in the embrace of “coldness,” the production of threat as a relational artifice contains actually not antagonizing others but rather, as Harvey suggests in the failure to attend to multiple scales, the apprehension of “pattern and the systemic qualities of the damage being wrought across geographical scales” (81). While Harvey is referring specifically to neoliberalism, in this text the very systemic pattern at stake (and in no small part at stake to facilitate neoliberalism) is the spatial consternation underwriting an information economy. As Žižek suggests, postmodernization more and more begins to be written as a scene of harassment displacing the basic social antagonisms of that economy. That each scale seems defined by and threatened by foreign, alien, and antagonistic pressures (though they may take on different character and names), the general economy of harassment begins to obscure the fact that scales need be registered in their difference. Harry Caul’s abstraction of personal lives into information has materialized elsewhere in violence—and in this case, the big Other has failed him—and now, in his commitment to the abstraction of social lives as a starting point, he has merely lubricated the functional dynamic of his labor, the dynamic that has produced him as threat and positioned him as threatened. As his own life has become a series of highly sterile compartmentalized “calculated satisfactions” in an effort to prevent further failures, isn’t this the “objective interpellation” of postmodernization, the submission to “making do” (to borrow from Michel de
Certeau) with this reality, what Jameson calls a “synchronic blackmail”? The reorganization of his social life—his “retooling” of scales—has amounted to assuring he can keep his job.

**The Quotidian Gothic**

In the lone scene in which Harry Caul’s lover appears, depicted as Harry’s emotional hostage, as their interpersonal exchange reaches for her the moment they should now reveal themselves—to each other and to a public audience—Harry severs the relationship. Harry leaves a payment for either the sexual enterprise or the shelter fund. The scene, I would suggest, hints toward Jameson’s thoughts on the gothic (1991), “where—on the individualized level—a sheltered woman of some kind is terrorized and victimized by an ‘evil’ male” (289). Here might be a more banal gothic where “evil” and “victimized” slide into a general queasiness over the exchange. The “construction of evil” in the film is an ambiguous sort, for Caul’s “management” of his relationship is composed of a sort of protective coldness, a mistreatment that one imagines will be justified when the “real evil” is revealed, but in such things it might be important to recognize how Caul stages his “gothic,” how he imparts a certain desire for the gothic, and we too should recognize a certain appeal to a quotidian gothic that underwrites social organization, in the mobilizing appeals to nation, in the general fraying of privacy as lost to the virtuality of invasion. The gothic, writes Jameson, is “ultimately a class fantasy (or nightmare) in which the dialectic of privilege and shelter is exercised: your privileges seal you off from other people, but by the same token they constitute a protective wall through which you cannot see, and behind which therefore all kinds of envious forces may be imagined in the process of assembling, plotting, preparing to give assault.” The function then of the gothic is a reversal of “the sheltered” into “the victim.” As Jameson suggests, the antagonized character of the gothic can be raised to the collective, figuring “the U.S. public, which now lives out the anxieties of its economic privileges and its sheltered ‘exceptionalism’ in the pseudo-political version of the
gothic—under the threats of stereotypical madmen and ‘terrorists’.” But, in being both subject of and subject to that narrative, one economic “privilege” remains your disappearance (as victimized) at different scales and, as such, being subject to this “synchronic blackmail.” This desire for the gothic is a desire to hold in place the status of victim and victimizer, to resolve its imbalance, to assure one’s self of being on the right side of harassment. And, as Watkins’ reminds, human capital itself requires victimization as a resource for the retooling it exploits.

Thus, narrating victimization becomes an attempt both to control that resource (narrations of victimization as “a resource for new forms of determining political direction”) and to disperse the production of real victims lost in the rhetorical contest. The way vulnerability functions as a narrative and a commodifiable resource is to salve the way it functions systemically. Jameson suggests that on a national level this sort of narrated victimization shelters its constituents from dealing with their privilege (which is postmodernization’s triumph, “privilege” as having resources for retooling, that is, the privilege of being regeneratively available for exploitation). Certainly too—as Watkins shows—the competition to narrate victimization within the nation (while for most still sheltering from Third World horror) must take on different lives depending on its direction: salving one’s self from the system that privileges them relatively as it exploits them or salving one’s self from one’s underprivileged victimization by imagining its cause in those whose power and privilege make them untouchable. Threat production, then, secures the distribution of victimization. That “victimization” emerges as of value and can be narrated from any point in the social field obscures the uneven distribution of capitalizing on that victimization. Though the formation of undergrounds—from both progressive protest movements to fundamentalist, reactionary, or radical organizations for violence—may point to these inequities, it too highlights—by their different narrations of their
own precariousness—how the economy of victimization gets appropriated in a discourse of threat that disperses a systemic victimization to the fate of information capitalization. Thus, here for Watkins is where the labor of conspiracy theorizing must emerge. Too often rhetorical and representational deployments obsessed with locating causal agents fail to provide “elaborate epistemologies of how you know that you know you’ve been fucked over,” which may then be made available “to realize altogether unexpected tactics for change” (103). Watkins believes the tendency for thinking through what appears as a conspiracy must begin to work pedagogically, need not be “about how to secure recognition as victim…but how to make use of what resources are available to make sure you don’t disappear as victimized” (102-3).

And yet in The Conversation—before even “the conspiracy” has emerged and attempts to theorize it are then pedagogically available—Harry Caul has chosen in the recognition of his labor’s materialization in violent futures to disappear to avoid victimization. In his retooling of daily life to accommodate his marketability, his disappearance as victimized (for what choice did he have?) is secured. If the last conspiracy in which he participated (not unwittingly to its conspiratorial organization but unwittingly in his role in aiding and abetting its murderous outcome) has occasioned this disappearance, then the reversal of threat which locates him as the target, which mandates these social reorganizations to thwart further implications in such plots, these efforts to foreclose further responsibility, has only made him more and more subject to the systemic demands of the marketplace of threat production. This may in part be acknowledged in how the idea of “free-lance” labor figured here—and certainly when Harry identifies himself as a “free-lance musician” this is all the more poignant—works to preserve a semblance of control over labor, how what his labor does (ultimately) is not what he does. “Free-lancing” in postmodernization, always at the hinge of employment and unemployment, begins to capture the
very nature of postmodern (un)employment. And while Harry’s “free-lancing” may become something of a freedom to move within the constantly shifting field of “the blank sequence of ‘rebirths’” (Watkins, 107) that defines information labor, its accompanying drive to abstraction to secure its “freedom” from the responsibilities of its materialization only reproduces—and reproduces severely—what Žižek argues is the fantasy antagonism of harassment, victimization emerging as a performance of narrative (self) will. In such gestures is the “split of victimization” (Žižek) or the “disappearance” of victimization (Watkins), in which being the victim, the victim of petty thefts, the victim of anticipated reprisals, provides some consistency both to the subject as subject of threat and to the excess of space, to underground space, as belonging to threatening populations narrated in such a way as to make the violence for which I feel responsible not my work.

Violence, then, is either an irrational outburst or the product of plotting agents, but never perceived as conditioned by the very production of threat that narrates victimization. And here Harry’s everyday reality is supplemented by its miming of, its making of virtue, disappearance. Harry has effectively (the effect pointing less toward success and more so to style) “gone underground.” Harry Caul, after all, is a celebrity surveillance operative, and so total anonymity is not the motivating force behind his compartmentalizing, his cellular existence, his secrecy. To imagine one’s self as underground in the ambiguity by which that position is one under threat and one as threat attempts to draw from the mystique in that abstraction. To be underground as a performance re-writes the terms of threat: I’m not a threat because it is my business; I am a threat because I am threatened and driven here. His lover cannot see him in the light of day because that would place her in the crosshairs of his being threatened. In a sense, this affords his coldness to seem a pre-emptive strike, the accepting of responsibility performed in the
anticipation of the actualization of violence that may or may not occur and, if it did, may or may not be accountable to him. No longer is responsibility in labor located at the juncture of a causal conversion, for these exchanges have been dislodged from one’s own devices, require travel through entirely different fields of production, and are given multiple futures. As such, in the feedback loop figured here in the convergence of production and social reproduction, causality is “no longer what it was (or what we perhaps nostalgically desire it to have been)” (Massumi, 30). Thus, the taking of responsibility is precisely what is denied Caul in the alienation of the work; he can only ever suspect it having had belonged to him, the agitation of may being responsible more so aggravating than being responsible, for in the latter is the possession of that which is now dislodged from one’s laboring.

Responsibility, it seems, must be re-tooled to the mandates of the particular spatio-temporal organization of the market; it can only be speculative and, then, one can only be responsible to the market (responsibility geared to risk). Capitalism, Brian Massumi argues, finds its compliant subjectivity organized around the “imm(i)(a)nence of the accident” (12), the accident as “advent and threat,” sudden initial outbursts of violence and their (always) uncertain recurrence (anywhere). In this uncertain ground, says Massumi, the subject avails itself to the mandates of consumption, the commodity filling in that temporal gap with a purchase in (as) the present, “filling in the gap with presence-effects.” Buying into threat, in the social purchase of the other’s attention, secures this mode of operation, as well. In doing so, the consumerist impulse is not only secured but more importantly secured is the “capitalist expression of the virtual,” where possibility (in all its Deleuzian expressions of becomings) is “reduced to the possibility of disaster,” and, to this end, the narrative of victimization that “secures” the self is itself secured. That things can only end badly—that ends have already been written—seems to be
the vision of Harry Caul’s existence; thus, this secrecy, this *undergrounding*, is the expression—rather than ever being able to express a responsibility *for*—of a responsibility *to*—of being responsible to, of being response enabled only toward—“deterrence”: “the empty present of watching and weighing with an eye to avert” (22), the reproduction of a synchronic blackmail organized in our spatial consternation. Responsibility names an economical packaging of ethical demands without any real burdens or fixed sites of encounter. Yet, the text after this expository figuration will have Caul perform unethically; he will appear radically irresponsible. The argument made below is that such “indiscretion” is the properly “conspiracy theorized” position.

**Being Screwed and Becoming (An) Underground**

In the film, this undergrounding (this pre-emptive posture) to avoid the antagonisms of the virtual threat, the underground that supplements his strategic relationships to other bodies, gives way to the emergence of yet another underground, a conspiratorial agency that threatens to undo his labor. With this threat of a new emergence, a new emergence materializing in what can then only be registered as a failure in retooling, as a disconcertion of the gothic that he had hoped to have settle into place, Caul, I will argue, will not retool his undergrounding as much as rededicate it. With the burden of a failed undergrounding, threatened anew and positioned as threat himself, Caul can only emerge *as* underground or be, returning to Watkins’ blunt poignancy, fucked all over again. Thus, I’m interested in thinking about that climactic moment when Caul appears unable to intervene in the violence he assumed would happen and appears to be happening in an adjoining hotel room. My argument will be that what unfolds in the text when the possibility of this violence emerges is dedication to not reproducing the body (and the body of logics) which the film’s exposition figures. Caul will be able to recognize how those logics of threat secure his compliance to his own victimization within the field of production outlined by threat. Therefore, my contention will be Caul’s “impotency” is, in fact, rather his
refusal to decide, a militant indecision, which is irresponsible to a command to prevent intransitively, a violent indecision. Through the frame of Pynchon’s thoughts on the underground, developed in the previous chapter, this text can be seen to do a different sort of work and makes available the economic content as a not necessary fatal and foreclosed blackmail. The tact, then, is to read Caul as if he were one of Pynchon’s “society of isolates.” As isolated as Caul has been by his own manufacture, in Pynchon’s inflection “the isolate” is not he who is isolated but he who has decided to refuse the mandates of social reproduction. The concretizing of Caul’s dilemma for his own assessment rededicates his isolation toward its more radical character.

When Caul goes to exchange his work with his client, the director’s assistant (Harrison Ford) attempts to conduct the transaction. When Caul refuses anything less than a direct personal hand-off to the client—the attempt to mitigate the possible fugitive futures of his labor—the assistant says, “Don’t get involved. Those tapes are dangerous. You know what I mean. Someone may get hurt.” In this utterance—both a threat and an invocation of the very disavowed nature of the good (its threatening future)—a virtual underground emerges beneath the transaction; an anonymous plotting body—hit men and surveillance operatives—is conjured to seal the deal of the exchange. This undergrounding to the scene of transaction only exists by virtue of the anticipated violence elsewhere. Thus, “the conspiracy” emerges not as the threatening other itself but as the power to conjure, to invoke, threatening populations rhetorically to obscure its own work, which as the conspiracy narrative teaches in mapping the conspiracy is the very collapse of the scene of production with the scene of commodification. The underside of any threat is precisely the closing in of an imaginary population the vocalization of threat brings to bear, conjures not into existence but conjures into imaginary
space, undergrounding the space the subject to the threat now moves. A synchronic blackmail is brought into relief, for the future—both now the site of use-value and too the site of fearful violence—is terrorized. Invoking his past (the indexical evidence of threat’s potential) and the potential of return (the threat itself) affords the very supporting logic of his stated fidelity, an opportunity to recede back into it, and yet the threat contains in content the very failure of anaesthetizing the scenes of these transactions. He is involved; this is irrevocable.

After wrestling the tapes away from the assistant and refusing payment for them, Caul returns to his lab and proceeds to continue to labor over the recording. Harry then discovers the line (“He’d kill us if he got the chance”) that increases his anxiety over his responsibility to a possibly violent future. It is, of course, a strange imbalance whereby at once the labor here approaches being un-alienated (the labor exerted to provide useful information for Caul himself) but becomes even more exploited: he has to make a qualitatively improved recording which remains exchanged for the same price (He is paid only after the tapes are, in fact, stolen from him). Žižek’s reading of capitalistic dynamics in *Tarrying the Negative* (1993) works toward an explication for the authoritarian nationalism that follows 1989, but it may well be possible to recognize these processes within the national scale of the US at the incursion of postmodernization, training globalization’s hegemon to the structural imbalances of global capital in advance of globalization proper. Žižek begins by acknowledging capitalism’s “*inherent structural imbalance*, its innermost antagonistic character,…the permanent production of an excess” (209). The postmodern turn is in part, according to Jameson (1984), this expansion intensively, the commodification of that which had been called privacy, for example. This is dramatically figured in the film in Caul’s desire—the fine-tuning of his own desire—to better
serve the client qua capitalist. Now, even the satisfaction of one’s own curiosity makes a more refined product.

Production does not only satisfy need but produces more needs to be satisfied. Žižek notes Lacan’s distinction of capitalism as “the discourse of the hysteric”: “this vicious circle of a desire, whose apparent satisfaction only widens the gap of its dissatisfaction, is what defines hysteria” (209). Žižek then makes a parallel between capitalism and the superego: “The basic paradox of the superego also concerns a certain structural imbalance: the more we obey its command, the more we feel guilty, so that renunciation entails only a demand for more renunciation, repentance more guilt—as in capitalism, where an increase in production to fill out the lack only widens the lack” (210). We return to a synchronic blackmail, as capitalism’s motoring of Necessity is locked in by the inability to perceive change as anything other than as a command to retool, to obey guiltily. Guilt was to have resolved itself in Caul’s spatial organization, but as it has made him a more refined producer of threats he is even guiltier. “Guilt” then becomes a figure for the excess of labor in this text. Guilt first names that excess (in much the way Žižek recognizes “stress” as a name for the “too muchness” of contemporary capitalist relations) and then makes of it a workable resource for managing that excess, a substance to slide into an economic framework such as the gothic; Caul’s movement to a confessional is precisely because the confessional knows what to do with guilt. In sliding this experience into a narrative frame of redemption, the past violence as rupture (as rupture whose effects have occasioned and have attempted to be corralled in a failed retooling) is contained in this concession to the future pre-determined as the necessary violence that will both happen and redeem the past transgression. The invocation of future violence promises that this fear matters.
The invocation of religion, this drive to symbolic efficacy in this scene to stop-gap overwhelming production, is unsurprising. Žižek offers that the discourse of the Master emerges to “dominate the excess,” “the antagonism that causes [the system’s] structural imbalance” (210). Žižek offers the nationalist impulse as just such a “‘shock absorber’ against the sudden exposure to the capitalist openness and imbalance.” The master emerges to name the national enemy, to displace antagonism “by locating its cause in a clearly delimited social agency.” The emergence of late capitalism as performed in the capitalist nations need not produce its necessarily national enemy (always with an eye to globalization) as much as the capitalist enemy, something (some ones) more generic than the national enemy, who may too be conjured but never in any exclusive form. Thus, the generic conspiratorial agent, unsatisfied with this way of being, is conjured; the plotting enemy, the enemy to “our” future, the future sold as an assurance of this present’s reproduction as an assurance of “our” survival, is invoked. As a generic figure this enemy exists as an “imm(i)(a)ment” threat, produced in part when the available or that’s to counter this have been thoroughly narrated as disastrous to us who only persist as and in this, have been thoroughly narrated as an or else, as your replacement, either in some disaster or in your firing.

In danger, Harry returns to his lab to refine the surveillance equipment that will protect him and make him a more valuable market commodity. Market fundamentalism and a fundamental faith in the “imm(a)(i)nence of the accident” perform the discourse of the master to assure his manic production. Yet, Caul’s movements are not satisfied with this retooling and now insist on—rather than continue to perform as if the threat is real—seeing if this threat is real. When the discourse of the master figured in the text is recognized in the voicing of threat as the material exercise of the otherwise unspoken contract of labor in the postmodern, when the discourses of the master and the hysteric coincide in the issuing of an actual threat, as the
disciplining virtuality of threat is uncloaked, when threat is literalized, Caul is in the unique position of recognizing, returning to Watkins’ blunt poignancy once again, not only that he is but also how he is fucked. He is effectively held hostage by threat. It is what commands his manic production. The only available tactical maneuver in this hostage taking is to see if the threat is real, to see if the threat actualizes in violence at whatever the cost. So while from one direction the film does appear to suggest a nostalgic desire for self-sufficiency, wholeness, certainty, security, in another the drive is very much toward undermining the current spatio-temporal logic that secures such things in postmodernization, for as much as what appears a proverbial mustering of the courage to act may be a mustering of the courage to see this through, “the passion for the real” figured in the withdrawal from the bartered terms of involvement in the conspiratorial suturing of participants to their own economic self-destruction. In his attempts to secure his own resourceful retooling of his victimization under the guise of securing himself from the guilt of the production of more victims, he has failed. The discourse of the master that righted him previously has failed, and the self-correction here is the act of seeing this through, disrupting the conspiratorial logic of these discourses to his screwing. If threat-making coordinates every situation, there is no real of the situation unless one elides the anxiety of threat-making. How else is one to no longer be terrorized by the somewhere else that in its menace has become the constitutive ground for one’s own undoing?

Confessing

When Caul is faced with his complicity in an anticipated violence, he attends confessional, an occasion which seemingly encodes the narrative as a tale of redemption and, too, for some, encodes its ending as the staging of impotence, for, in terms of redemption, Caul fails, handing the availability of the text over to a “dreadful nihilism” (Kolker, 1980). Yet, as the confession moves toward its anticipated revelation, after a series of hesitant and hedged
confessions of sins, Harry’s mouth, which had been framed by shadows, is now encased by them; his mouth seems to be moving but is no longer synced with the soundtrack. The voice emerges from elsewhere. Harry’s voice loses its echo, comes in clearer, and is slightly louder, sounding closer: “I’ve been involved in some work that I believe will hurt these two young people. People have been hurt because of my work; I’m afraid it could happen again. I was not responsible. I’m not responsible.” For a text thematically organizing itself so much around the sound signifier, here the sound signifier itself makes its greatest demand; such moments of radical intimacy, Jameson (1995) reminds, speak to “the discovery that we are caught in a collective network without knowing it, that people are already up much closer than we realized” (66). If the very mechanisms for distance have failed, then this moment, I want to argue, further suggests that Caul’s conspiracy theorizing as it advances textually has less to do with the pursuit of the causal agent (the proof of guilt or innocence) and more to do with registering and—in a term I believe descriptive of the voice’s work here and particularly salient when one considers how threat itself becomes an economic indicator in postmodern “risk society”—divesting from the economies that police one’s relationship to other bodies (here, captured as “guilt”), for those very economies reproduce—as Caul has learned—a vulnerability on a personal scale. The drive here is to the threatened scene of the crime, the terrorized scene of the future; it is toward the very site of exposure where either nothing or the worst may happen but in anticipation of such a moment one must refuse the temptation to act generically.

By disengaging the voice from the scene, we know we do not get a true confession. In the formal presentation of this “confession,” the economy of redemption (as institutionalized) is set as background; the tendency is to expect from this dislodging the voice to register as disingenuous, that its withdrawal from the sacred ground of reception is a performance of guilt
not yet fully avowed. But it might be important to recognize the partiality of this “disavowal.” There is no way to tell if responsibility here is organizing itself in an indexical mode, whereby causality has been established but Caul disavows responsibility for the hurt he has caused but does so with such naked disavowal so as to provide in actuality a confession. Or if responsibility is available as a commitment to—as a responsibility to—some generalized economy (of redemption, of decision-making, of social organization), by which regard Caul is claiming his failure to bear that burden, that is, this is a confession. What we are left with is only the force of this voice removed from the confessional, in many ways dissolving responsibility in its ambiguity. The economy of redemption offered, it seems, has been refused. The force of the voice is that which seems to want to own its guilt or the burden of its guilt, its irresolvable composition.

Might we then discover something of the Kafkaesque in the composition of the postmodern? Given to the fugitive futures of the laboring act and the networked necessity of information, the guilt—the “too muchness”—of postmodern labor accrues its burden in a constitutive evasion of any true content or index, guilt without the proper charges. Žižek notes something of this Kafkaesque character in the contemporary scene of “risk society,” the deadlock in the gap between knowledge and decision as the scandal of the postmodern (336). As Žižek shows, risk society organizes decision-making so as to conceal the “radical openness and uncertainty” of decision by formulating a “risk,” economizing attention to fixed points, even if then what emerges is “an anxiety-provoking obscene gamble,” the pre-emptive, speculative decision whose “truth” is learned “only—if ever—when it is already too late” (338). I might suggest then the thriller as genre offers something of the curtailing of the Kafkaesque character of decision, for the thriller itself begins to look as training for risk management, the
informational anxiety of threat focused in a sanctioned myopia that calculates risk and forces decision. Randy Martin argues that the hegemonic ideal subject of capital as it moves into financialization (as capitalization of the “risk society”) is the “investor.” Doesn’t the conspiracy thriller offer the ideal figure of the investor in the protagonist who from the accumulation of data is able to assess risk, accept risk, and pre-empt the crime, instilling as virtue the properly speculative mode of being? And in a sense one might then see from the thriller the subject in production in one regard becoming inimical to “the Subject Supposed to Know,” the “secret invisible Master” behind the conspiracy who has already invested in some preventive transactions and who will continue to invest to secure self survival; do not many of these thrillers often finally arrive at revealing the financier behind the dirty work of operatives? What we then tend to see is an overarching irrefutable narrative of risk-taking which reduces the critical work of reading the text to assigning (what appears as) the fundamental competitive stakes, i.e. the film as an argument for from where “decision” should emerge. But of course the grain of this film is a bit different in that its protagonist never, in fact, settles into such a decision, for his dedication here does not agonize over any cost-reward financing in advance. He becomes rather than a figure for the conspiracy theorist as successful investor a figure for the “conspiracy theorizing” subject, dedicated, I suggest, to the confusion of spatial relationships otherwise captured in the conceptual apparatus that makes them competitively narrated (responsibility, privilege, guilt, victimization), that is, a dedication to that confusion that refuses to resolve itself in available economies and insists on accounting for the “collusive coherence”—the “conspiracy of effects”—of being threatened (Watkins, 121), that is, the impossibility of decision when one suspends the “ethical” force of threat. As such the text becomes available in a resistant narrative
trajectory as a figure of conspiracy pedagogy that grates against its generic uses as a possible figure for investment pedagogy.

As Žižek suggests, risk society’s argument for rationalizing decision as symbolic efficiency breaks down obfuscates how these risks are “rooted” in concrete socioeconomic efforts to increase productivity; the film, I would suggest, rather than staging a nostalgic return to symbolic efficiency is uncannily aware that the very prospect of a “symbolic inefficiency” obscures that prospect’s own symbolically efficient mandate to manage threats. The film’s figurative convergence of productivity with threat, an agitation perhaps available in all conspiracy thrillers, would be contained were the general function of threat to be reduced to “risk.” In decision-making based on risk calculation, threat becomes a measure of something else and obscured as a social process unto itself; this or that risk has a tendency to push underground the generalizable victimization in the process. Holding onto the Kafkaesque kernal of guilt resists the passage of threat into risk, the refusal of the economy of attention that may represent back to him, formalize, concretize threat in this actualization yet would offer no help with threat management in sum; this is a divestment from the command to make decisions and to intervene in ways that support the general economy of threat production which secures victimization. Preemptive action, Martin reminds, “makes its imagined future come to pass [whereby] we are condemned to live this perpetual present” (63). Risk-taking and retooling both require a terrorized future. And this, I hope, begins to inform how the generic transgression of the film foregrounds how the generic satisfaction at the anticipated scene of the crime is performed at—if not as—the sacrifice of the Real of threat. Divestment here proceeds as an operation not to see this threat through, which moves into the terrain of risk calculation, but to see a threat through for which the desire is to de-terrorize the future. If violence were to pervade
the scene, divestment produces the scene of the crime as a mutant, composite, bloody, and properly messy crime scene where many hands are dirty and for which no predetermined accounting is available. Divestment from the sacred scene in particular allows as well to cling to this tactical operation something of, to borrow from Jameson’s reading of the cult figures in Videodrome (1995), a “quasi-religious longing for social transubstantiation into another flesh and another reality,” bound as it may be to “loathing for the new beings we ourselves are bound to become in the shedding of the skins of all current values” (28). The “joyous nature of Kafka’s nightmares,” Jameson (1991) has noted, is the “hunger for the sheer event,” when “the worst is better than nothing at all” (309)

**At the Screaming Point and Where it Leads**

What this film lets unfold here is the anticipated scene in every thriller that otherwise dissolves and evaporates in the action, for preemption of such deadly violence or disaster is in part the generic narrative function. Here, the scene that had existed in probability, as menacing possibility, materializes. When Caul extracts details of a location from his recordings, he goes to the site. His attempt to stay in Room 773 may appear an effort to disrupt the proceedings, to dislocate them so as to have no longer any complicit knowledge of their possibility, but when the room is, of course, occupied, Caul asks, “Do you have a room that would be, uh, adjoining?” In his adjacent room Caul begins to survey the room for its best surveillance vantage points. Adjoining here perfectly captures Caul’s divestment from the advance narrating of that room (its threat) and too his desire to be completely undistracted from the action itself (his passion for the real beyond that threat) yet purely dis-tracted from the fantasy that otherwise conditions decision here. The best vantage point becomes a spot underneath the bathroom sink and beside the toilet, which Caul flushes twice to make his operational maneuvering undetectable. He recoils in horror as the confrontation between husband and wife begins to intensify as his tapes are played.
For as much as Caul is something of the immoral accomplice to this violence, he is disrupting the accompanying surplus extraction from his production—his own capitalizable fear—which is otherwise achieved in the labor of maintaining an imaginary life for that violence; this fearful withdrawal promises something other than a regenerated productivity by virtue of fear. Yet, Caul retreats to the balcony as the threat is actualized, just as the collapsing of his work and its violence performs as expected. At this point, he hears a scream and sees a bloody handprint against the frosted glass that separates his balcony from theirs.

The scream is pointedly displaced in the soundtrack. Its intensity and its reverberation (counter-pointed by a spike in the film score) suggest it is less than particular and more, as Michel Chion (1999) has described, “the screaming point,” which must “explode at a precise moment, at the crossroads of converging plot lines, at the end of an often convoluted trajectory” (77). It emerges as the “unrepresentability inside representation.” In part, this screaming point punctuates an impossible delivery of the space otherwise somewhere else available in this insistence upon being here, the radical gesture of watching and waiting without an eye to avert. And so, too, we are offered the terrorized scene of “the future,” the one to be evaded at all costs, the one even acts of self-immolation were to forestall, the future now accessible precisely in its difference from its terrorized virtuality, accessible precisely from not regenerating but aborting the logic that would otherwise abort this future. Yet, any figured narrative payoff cannot equal its desire, for closure and “payoff” are precisely a part of the “conspiracy of effects” whereby the specific crime and the conspiracy (which in conspiracy theorizing had begun to take shape as the conspiratorial) begin to merge back in ways the very act of conspiracy theorizing was to sever.

As this scream is figured as a woman’s, Chion reminds, it connotes a narrative drive toward mastery. To anticipate being awakened from a spell by this “piercing” moment is still to
confer a certain revelatory power in this holding off of the discourse of threat, a new access to
stakes, a demystified presence of motives and agendas. Thus, the narrative offers something of a
valorizing “insight,” an insight that slices into the figuration of conspiracy theorizing by offering
a crystallized picture of this conspiracy. As such there’s a sense the narrative drive is to
mastering attention, targeting its spectators, and fixing attention to its proper target. Quickly the
radicality of the gesture of this possible remove from terror is liquidated. And as readings hold,
the virtual hold of the terrorized scene to which you would not commit—and its imagined
content now a sacrificial price for not being beholden to its terror—now cleaves more tightly to
Caul then what any revelation beyond terror can offer. Even as this insight is narrated, part of
the narrative, it seems, can never move beyond what returns as a moral stain. With a scream the
tactic of refusing social mandates now has an actual cost, and Caul’s perceived moral
compunction becomes a cut in the otherwise radical gesture. The narrative then feels compelled
to relieve this burden with an exchange of revelation.

The conspiracy is a business arrangement organized around greed, the uncloaking of a
conspiracy not equal to the one to which Caul has been subjected, for discovering the
constituency of the conspiracy has the possibility to obfuscate the much more systemic
imperatives which have sutured Caul’s attention to this conspiracy at the possible expense of
recognizing how those imperatives make him vulnerable regardless of the shape of this
conspiracy. Now we discover Caul as the little guy caught up in these corporate machinations, a
conspiracy ordered by greed for controlling interest, conspiracy now as crime with its ethical hue
emboldened by Coppola’s originally sanctified female victim revealed the femme fatale. Just as
Jameson (1992) described the function of the mafia in Coppola’s Godfather films, these
criminals work ideologically, figuring “an organized conspiracy against the public,” namely
American business, but, in the substitution of crime for business, displacing the purely economic matter of profit motive into a narrative of ethical concerns, “moral corruption whose ultimate mythic source lies in the pure Evil” of the specific business figure, there, the mafia, here, the femme fatale, whose Evil is constituted in part in the unfolding betrayal of the psychic investment (though suspended) Caul had placed in her as the redeemable figure for past violence (32). Of course, when we discover the director is our murder victim, we must wonder if in fact that scream was a woman’s? There’s an excess to the piercing scream that cannot be appropriated back into this insight. And, of course, this irruption of the “smoothing” logics of postmodernism was—beyond this insight—the desire within divestment. This scream’s content—what it may be attempting to enunciate—is most certainly lost in the dereliction in Caul’s surveillance of his own labor’s capitalization, all withdrawals not being equal, a recoil from the horror recognized as securing the very constitutive fugitivity within attention that makes surveillance marketable; the cold objective singular attention of the individual unequal to the horror to which it has been directed. This reiteration of the founding problem for which surveillance has offered a solution could now be seen rededicated to a need for collective supplementary counter-surveillances (as much as counters to surveillance logic as coordinated surveillance operations themselves) in a spirit that may keep conspiracy theorizing alive. Even as we are given “the conspiracy” we are too now introduced to “the global” as that excess that exists by virtue of not intervening: militant indecisiveness as the incendiary charge which shatters the sheltering from such a dizzyingly demanding field of attention. How many other terrorized imaginary scenes have we narrated wrongly?

In fact, before having the crime unveiled to him, Caul flees the crime scene and crosses city space to the board room, although at this point it is hard to know where the board room
actually exists, for the first conversation to note of its new regime was, in fact, the initial conversation of this drama, a conversation which has now spilled onto and effected all sorts of other scenes. And, as Caul traverses the city landscape he poignantly is filmed running toward us with a background occupied by an abandoned, demolished building site, “corruption” in part restored to some of its literality. As conspiracy theorizing threatens to be dissolved in a moral shellacking and as a singular embodiment of the destructive processes that have at every turn facilitated just such a conspiracy, this blindness to those shambles seems ominous (for his steadfast tunnel vision here seems perfectly blind) but at the same time its reversal as the very site he will see upon putting the two plus two of this crime together offers the very objective corollary to the subjective experience of conspiracy theorizing, for even this demolition or decay marks not some passage into uncertain fate or some indeterminate zone of possibility but holds the in-between space of revitalization, the same play of demolition and viability that operates upon laboring subjects.

The Dialectic of (Bringing On) Disaster

The film’s ending, again, is famous for its “dreadful nihilism.” The “impotent” Caul now on to the conspiracy becomes the object of their surveillance and, demeaned as a surveillance operative, impotently destroys his now invaded apartment in search of the surveillance device; he is left to play the saxophone part he has throughout the film simulated atop a recorded version. But, by reading his situation in relation to the information commodity and how his labor has become more and more “conspiracy theorized,” I think it is interesting to note the dynamic by which Caul has emerged from the corporate standpoint, the corporate ground, as underground, as that which needs its surveillance. For as much as Caul becomes some “enemy” of the conspiracy, possessed with some secret knowledge, the more important representation is in how he becomes something “worth” the resources of surveillance, for whatever threat he is to the
uncovering of the crime, his assassination—like it was for the family that was slaughtered to silence at some earlier juncture in his career—is not what is threatened, rather simply his silence is commanded. Now even the drain on corporate resources for surveillance—their own investment—is no longer the “drain” we might imagine by virtue of the information commodity, which promises to make all surveillance valuable both by virtue of an indexical “threat” it can sell and by the very promise data holds in its potentiality to be conceived as “useful.” For as much as we may get a vision of the omnipotence of the corporation as some paranoid exclamation mark on the film, Caul is not put in the crosshairs of some assassin but rather in the crosshairs of surveillance: his policing is certainly valuable to them but his “potentiality” as information even more so, as the problem he has presented formally makes the informational yield of his body all the more valuable as information capitalism is the business of solving informational problems and capitalizing upon informational invention. The trouble of saying no, of militant indecisiveness, of the option of irresponsibility, feeds right back into the machinery.

Thus, the film ends with an ambivalent vision of what it might mean to be the object of attention, to be positioned as threat. The very gesture of wanting out brings Caul back in the scope of what had already emerged as a bio-powered imperial order in the regime of immaterial labor, not only in the issuing of commands that would discipline and control but now too in the much more aggravating purview of surveillance that not only disciplines but accumulates to unknown ends. What the film offers is a hyperbolic hiring and firing in the postmodern, such private surveillance swooping in so quickly to contain Caul, such a virtuoso performance of replacement highlighting Caul’s readymade obsolescence, bringing to the fore once again the pool of always replaceable and thus always available laboring subjects that have been off-screen and are always necessarily off-screen retooling or plotting. We return at the film’s conclusion to
an image of a particular split in the population between the retooled laborer who fills in the gap created by Caul’s exodus and Caul’s (momentarily) paralyzed dissidence. What options does it have?

Randy Martin contends the immaterial regime has fashioned itself as an “empire of indifference,” that whatever resistant dissonances emerge are ultimately met *indifferently*, their demand loses its specificity, for the dominant cut in the population aligns investors/risk takers against “at risk” populations, those resistant to the regime of financialization, a rhetorical work that even aligns imperiled peoples with resistant populations and, thus, maintaining that any peril is simply a resistance to invest. But as much as financialization requires “at risk” sites, prevention becomes an ideology which requires its indexical germinations in real bodies and real communities as targets, always—despite any difference in situation—narrated as a resistance and, thus, making the case for not only the language of but the practice of war to intercede. Baudrillard’s use of the word “contraception” for prevention in his late pieces on terrorism (2005) reminds that such refusal to reproduce the appropriate social body becomes in some “species” that which must be aborted to avoid some new begetting that this film cannot get us to. What the film illustrates though is a figure of the dialectic of resistance that will proceed into postmodernization. “The system” needs “problems,” requires disobedience so as to reach a certain tentative equilibrium underneath these crises that forecloses the one space that renders the system impossible: the introduction of the thought of otherwise, which, as I will discuss in the next chapter, Samual Kimball (2002), in fact, describes as “contra-ceiving the future.”

Rather, the postmodern insists on a regenerative violence operating now as a self-immolation to compliment whatever other imperial exercises are conducted geopolitically. When isolation presents itself as a solution to the command to constantly and violently
regenerate, the “society” of isolates is precisely what forms under the rubric of “concentrations of risk” by contending the community of isolates can be indexed. (The current cultural work of simultaneously connecting yet reducing the many agendas of violent action as the work of “the terrorists” serves as an example of such concentration for market purposes.) The “society of isolates” as “concentration of risk” is precisely what Caul joins when he is even more emphatically isolated, fixed, and spatialized under surveillance. Whatever “terror” Caul has wrought upon the hegemonic logics, the very business of “contraception” that is finance makes his indiscretion valuable, opens a new market. This is the problem with insurrection; it is big business. And, as Jameson offers, “Everyone today is, if not organized, then at least organizable” (322). Jameson’s wariness (if not foreboding) regarding the possible production of “new subjects of history” stems not from the severity of surveillance technology but from the severity of informational politics that informs it. Language, Jameson notes, does as much work as Big Brother. How to form any society, how to communicate without performing the labor of risk “indexing” for the market, becomes the question of the postmodern? And we might then need to read the tangled labor of the Weather Underground—deciding to commit violence despite its potential dialectical reversal—and punk subculture—deciding to submit protest to the constraints of the commodity—not under the light of failure but as precise cuts into their (our) situation: to make available some productivity in their own contrceptions. What is to be understood in the drama whereby contraception must be contracepted? Doesn’t such intervention as prevention highlight the force of the underground intervention? What does playing the drama of the dialectic of contraception out as spectacle (acknowledging the swift purview of special attention) offer us as we begin to think about the possibilities for refusal?
Caul Like Bartleby

While it is precisely the concluding scanning shot of Caul which suggests a “dreadful nihilism,” a victory of surveillance and control that has even infected the final point of view of the camerawork, one must still recognize how the panoptical work of surveillance is not a final statement, for surveillance in this text emphasizes the value of informational accumulation. And so in this final image of the film—a scanning surveillance-like shot recording Caul reproducing exactly a saxophone solo without any apparent signature, no virtuoso flourish, precisely the solo he has mimed throughout the film—while there may be a disciplining of Caul’s movements, a certain hostage taking, it is important to note how yet again Caul refuses to provide any surplus extraction of his movements; to refuse whatever excessive informational yield his body may possess, Caul offers up only a simulation. As conspiracy theorizing is a wrestling with the fugitivity of value in the postmodern, Caul in his final gesture emerges as a fugitive from value. He gives only pantomime. He offers absolutely nothing of value. It is, of course, in the exhaustion of the currency of surprise that blackmail loses its currency. The insistent stance of impotence here, then, is quite different from its fatalism.

The elevation of the figure of Bartleby in recent theoretical work, including prominently Hardt and Negri (2001) and then Žižek’s response (2006), makes a great deal of sense under these circumstances. The narrating machinery of the regime of immaterial labor requires problems, as Empire, notes Hardt and Negri, is “calmed by the panic and anxieties it engenders” (202). Thus, “the absoluteness of [Bartleby’s] refusal”—in Melville’s short story his repeated declarative “I would prefer not to” at every command to labor—situates him on “a level of ontological purity.” He does not redirect his energies into some other act(s) of resistance, which concentrate themselves as risk, but dedicates his energies to this stance: “the power of subtracting ourselves from the relationship of domination” (204). Hardt and Negri emphasize
this as a beginning, for such lines of flight “continuously tread on the verge of suicide,” necessitating the need for “community.” Of course, both Pynchon’s IA and Harry Caul proceed from the suicidal (Caul expresses a death wish he’s carried since infancy in a dream that precedes his divestment from the crime); their death drive (as it were) emerges from the suicidal in the fabric of getting by and hyperbolizes and foregrounds that sacrificial economy. The IA underground is a commitment to subtraction—to non-reproducibility—that finds some less severity perhaps in Caul’s manipulation of value, the suicidal in its strictly adjectival relationship as a flirtation with the disaster, as the disastrous itself, the worst as edifying. Punk will return us to a discussion of the death drive and, as well, this moment of aesthetic simulation, of cold engineering.

For Žižek, it is the stubborn insistsence to not move beyond this “violence” of the “impassive refusal” that should become a sustaining principle. For Žižek, there is no need to interject with a “And now what?,” for Bartleby’s inertia is his unbearable freight. Frantic movements and the frantic anticipation of movement is precisely the postmodernized game of capital, and, as Žižek’s oeuvre argues, the totalized postmodernization which we might call globalization has made resistance amendable to productivity as a reproductive participation. Here, in this film, the subject hailed to do something discovers an ambivalent irresponsibility that is not an ignorance of, a blind eye to, or distraction from the surcharge of such a hailing, but discovers in the refusal of such a hailing that such refusal accommodates the logic that secures manic self-immolation or, in doing something else, opens a market or indexes a problem for finance, reinforcing the very narrative of threat. For Žižek, Bartleby’s inertia—and this I read finally in Caul’s figuratively suicidal denouement—does not offer the negation which can be captured, opening up a new capitalizable site within “underground space,” but rather opens in
Žižek’s words a new “outside” to “the hegemonic position and its negation,” a proper underground, only by virtue of its insistence on being a part of nothing, a part of the nothing, the “subtraction” that may need continue as a sustaining principle, a response to each and every command. Žižek’s point is precisely that the eventual site to which such persistent refusal might lead is the impossible-to-imagine “nothing” the revolutionary stance demands. When postmodern resistance has been commandeered by the Super-Ego injunction to do something, to get involved (as if you aren’t “involved”), as he oft says, to Enjoy!, engaged doing, the engaged work of constructing a new order, requires some commitment to the negativity Bartleby offers, or it runs the risk of losing sight of the necessity of the gesture. Of course, for the sake of cultural studies, for pedagogy, what is to be said, to be taught? In part, I argue the force of ambivalence that runs through the underground (to be exemplified here by punk subculture) must frame a discussion of what cultural studies in part has done to the signification of resistance, and to wonder how it may be possible to ask, How is one to negotiate the desire to do something with the death drive, of being purely and perhaps impossibly underground to this way of doing, of the radical requirement for doing nothing? Don’t both the militant action of post-60s revolutionaries and punk subculture ask how to destroy and yet make new?
CHAPTER 6
THE EMERGENCE OF PUNK AND THE PROSPECTS FOR OUR (NO) FUTURE

The turn from Coppola’s *The Conversation* to punk subculture is not arbitrary; I would suggest the coda to the film unknowingly beckons punk, Caul’s short-circuitry looking for the collective gestures that can communicate it outside the trashed apartment, that can direct the trashing elsewhere, looking for its underground, its safe harbor, its hope for communicability. Our context shifts nationally, yes, but in the anxiety in and of labor—as a figure of “agency panic” as impotence—the text’s rather explicit homophobic moments (“bugging,” which Harry does for a living, is later the subject of a homophobic joke) reinforce the language whereby Harry is a punk, punked, fucked over, in the discursive tangle whereby productivity and masculinity and heteronormativity are reinforcing discourses. Of course, punk subculture is the rearticulation of the term “punk,” not in any way that is not conflicted and ambivalent, surely.

On the one hand, it is translated into a hyper-productivity, or, as Jameson (1991) describes, “the relief of the postmodern” as a liberalization and democratization of production (316). Yet, as Jameson notes, this “indulgence” would seem to betray the situation but, of course, it feeds into “consumerism,” and, ultimately, emerges as “compensation for an economic impotence.” On the other, punk is translated into an insistence on victimization made spectacular in style, fashion, noise, and what we might call the staged street scene of punk. The former translation allows for the cultural studies and popular work of indexing the various permutations of punk’s co-opting and re-configuring; as such, *that* punk endlessly re-inscribes the endless “objective situation that does not change.” This *endlessness*, I suppose, is the point of rethinking punk here. The latter serves as the more neglected and the more complicated knot of punk labor. As for the former, Craig O’Hara’s *The Philosophy of Punk* (1999) outlines the do-it-yourself aesthetic and cultural (lifestyle) politics of punk where the question of “what counts as punk” is central. The answer: a
fidelity to doing it for yourself that arrives in self-expression, self-satisfaction, self-discipline, and, finally, community—can we call them “family”?—values, which, ultimately, seem more faithful to the “subject of value” of capital (Smith, 1997) than they do to the punk event. In a telling line in *The Century*, Alain Badiou suggests that “‘modernization,’ as our masters like to call it, amounts to being a good little dad, a good little mum, a good little son, to becoming an efficient employee, enriching oneself as much as possible” (66). An entrenched or policed punk “value system” concedes to the command to enrich one’s self by taking responsibility for one’s own terms of enrichment. Yet, the cost is having first to expel the demand for “No future,” which must poignantly target for destruction the “practically unassailable value” of the family that characterizes the close of the century. In Mark Sinker’s autobiographically rendered analysis of punk (1999), he suggests punk expresses “the refusal to reach out, to express the desire that the community should continue, to set out obligations of duty toward its nurturing” (126). The punk event, which I want to suggest in what follows, is much more about the prospects for being a significantly more monstrous offspring, is much more a thinking through and about victimization and precariousness than the hyper-productive dismissal of such that proceeds as punk allows.

For Paul Smith, the “subject of value”—“the site where political, economic, and cultural formations as it were intersect,” amendable now to the dream of neoliberal globalization—is “a subject committed to the practice of interested rationality, one convinced of the principle of private property, and one for whom the ideologies of equality and freedom depend upon and feed into the other two definitions” (152). Thus, this perfectly philosophical punk may very well be the exemplary figure, for its labor to produce authenticity and autonomy—as if contrary to the presumed dominant subjectivity it imagines itself not to be—may show us how this subject of
value can very easily be perceived as a closed horizon in the postmodern. If a “philosophy” of punk exists (call it, an “ethics,” as Badiou may, “a vague way of regulating our commentary” on punk) then, the only visible and strangely viable screwing that occurs is within the discursive limits of the signifier’s slipperiness (“What counted as punk is no longer, so how do I become punk again?”), obscuring again what is happening at the very interstices of human capital, which, as Watkins demonstrates, requires a constant abjection and re-tooling—a do-it-yourself screwing—that constantly reproduces one’s grounding into the postmodern, again, into the impossibility of thinking an otherwise. Punk ethics, therefore, is a distraction. That is, no matter what politics are played out in a re-tooled and re-tooling punk discourse, no matter what variables for punk identity are made intelligible and resistant, you are, over at your job, to borrow Watkins’ (and punk’s) terse vocabulary, getting fucked. Thus, punk today exists missing its traumatic core, which is the being punked or the becoming-punk that recognizes a social situation much better at producing punks than a language—an ethics or philosophy—could be at policing them.

Language in the postmodern, Jameson reminds, has seized a purview larger than any configuration of Big Brotheresque surveillance and “seeks tirelessly to classify and categorize, to transform the individual into the labeled group, and to constrict and expel the last spaces for…the unique and the unnameable, the mystical private property of the ineffable and the unspeakable horror of the incomparable” (322). A punk demographic today betrays the punk Event as such: while “punk” may be better—a better to way to live, to make do—it is certainly not worse. Johnny Rotten, echoing Jameson in my previous chapter, frames punk’s “evental” drive as such: “We want chaos to come. Life’s not going to get any better for kids on the dole until it gets worse first” (cited in Savage, 1992, 231). This is to say, punk subculture no longer
intervenes, in Badiou’s parlance, in “the material course” in which it is situated, in the “truth-process” of its particular “passion for the real.” The punk Event, however, can and should be interrogated through the main slogans of punk formation: “Destroy” and “No future,” the framings of punk’s death drive. This chapter attempts to process what is lost in the general erasure or neglect of them not only in punk subculture but more importantly in the very proposition that there is a punk subculture (since a critique of such sociality and naming seems to be a part of its Event) and that somehow—if there is a punk subculture or punk underground—there is a subculture without punks (and with, rather, those who have eclipsed the victimizing forces of globalized capital, a punkless punk, I suppose). As punk has resolved itself, resigned itself, into a self-affirming, bunkerized underground, it has lost its motivating energy and performative force: its ambivalence. Defined now as a crude fidelity to the indexical policing of its own “undergroundedness,” punk attention has lost sight of its founding—its undergrounding—as a severe infidelity to the language of value and—as Pynchon’s novel taught of the discourse of “undergrounds”—as a foregrounding of the damage done by an epistemology of such “value.”

One approach I want to advance here concerns the topography created in the discourse of the underground. As suggested, the “underground” as a fantasy space concerns an ideological distribution of bodies. The contradiction of the discourse of the underground—and a contradiction when attended makes the term useful as an index to critical projects—is that it is the site of both—like Jameson says of the cultural product—anxiety and hope. At some points, the underground is a site where secret plotting—bureaucratic conspiracy or terror plotting—occurs, and, as such, appeals to security are made and, thus, distributions of survival are fortified (and fetishized). Our fear: there are outlaws about. At some points, it is the presumed site of
invention and intensity, of the vanguard and cultural outlaws. Our hope: there are outlaws about!

But, as suggested in previous chapters, such projection that “everything—for better or for worse—is happening elsewhere” speaks to an agency panic that ultimately is assuaged in a secure here. No matter what future you may dream—conservation or progress—your here is a secure here: an in-law, sutured by outlaws and the disciplining discursive supplement that assures the membrane is leaky, which offers an entry point for the work of Giorgio Agamben below. In citing Agamben, Tavia Nyong’o (2005) will suggest “We are all in punk city,” we are all punks; as so, this is precisely why this underground needs to be grounded, needs to be our (all too) obscene ground.

Punk as underground is not placed here merely because it fills that void—as part of a long list of subcultures, criminals, militants, and boogeymen who populate underground space—in its own particular way, but rather, as I will suggest, because it offers a particular engagement with the very materials of the crisis in and of postmodern capital and labor not available, for example, to Harry Caul in The Conversation or Oedipa Maas in The Crying of Lot 49. If the previous two chapters elaborate how laboring subjectivity necessitates expense, a vulnerability to being expendable, and self-immolation even in its most privileged sites, then punk would seem to announce itself as a “semiotic guerrilla warfare” (Hebdige, 1992, 105) committed to a stubborn resistance to victimization, an attempt at self-adjudication. But this is precisely how I do not want to read it, not exclusively, anyways. I am more interested in the fact that the warfare—the hyper-productivity of symbolic activity that resists the victim status—emerges from a status as economic victim, as worthless, as expendable, as trash. And while certainly the production of a subculture, of a reappropriation and resignification of “the loaded surfaces of life,” gives testimony to the significance—the meaningfulness and, thus, value—of the
productive life, the recognition or the concession that makes the rejuvenation of the subject possible here is the taboo material of the postmodern, where everything (everyone) matters, where everything is valuable (exchangeable), where the very manic disavowal of that victim position is—as Watkins says—your human capital. How can punk be something other—and certainly in the ways it insists on the imagery of victimization, it doesn’t just shed this skin—than a mere re-tooling of one’s obsolescence into another field of capitalist expropriation? What are the prospects not for re-tooling one’s de-valuing but for un-valuing in sum? For cultural studies too often one underground inflection (a screen—no matter how distorted—for the Real of costs) is cast off to emphasize the other (life force, creation). The scandal of postmodernism may be its “prodigious” release—and commodification—of self-expressions: the mediation of the testimony of the victim suspends the victimization. Capital has given what it expends voice, new life. This is certainly the scandal of punk. Does the language with which we think production—as creation, as rejuvenating—rise here to snuff out the ambivalence—and, I would argue, the force—of the punk intervention? Ambivalence is contaminated by the deathliness (the abject, the cost, the Real) that valence (meaning, interpellation) entails and otherwise disavows. What is the punk labor of the ambivalent?

First, “What are the politics of boredom?” This was the question posed by punk’s provocateur, Malcolm McLaren, the Situationist-studied marketer (Savage, 32). The subject of value is subject to value, and a punk that proceeds only in its valorization of hyper-productivity is antithetical to boredom. But McLaren’s question, the one embraced by punk and, for all practical purposes, the one it sought to answer, asked, how boredom itself was political, what charge could be found in it? Their boredom, after all, was both the punks’ lot and their social castigation. Unemployment and squatting were economic realities, but they were too used as
political indices to indict the youth and the migrant, those populations hardest hit by England’s eroded empire (Gilroy, 1991, 152-222). But the transcendence of boredom—the liberalization of production as the lasting effect of the punk subculture—eschews the burden of such boredom, the force in boredom, in evading the social command to do something with yourself, the social experiment of being bored together, of producing a bored noise. The Clash: “I’m so bored with the USA.” The Buzzcocks’ “Boredom”: “I’m living in this movie/but it doesn’t move me.” “I’m living in this movie”: a dissatisfied recognition or an emphatic insinuation? “It doesn’t move me”: disappointment or resistance? The restless ambivalence: both the wariness of not being able to answer and the relief in not being compelled by the social imperative to reanimate, to rejuvenate, to make something of one’s self. McKenzie Wark (2007) cites this Buzzcocks’ line in his treatise on boredom, in which he argues, “Boredom is the ambivalent gift of surplus.” For Wark this boredom emerges from a paucity of necessity, a tangible bankruptcy in the narrative line. He asks, “What might be the content of [a] positive freedom,” arising for the “absence of necessity” and the “demand,” in turn, for “new necessities”? As Mark Sinker offers, “All we wanted was not to need” (136). Can the desire to not need be a political horizon?

Punk becomes, it would seem, a belated answer to Baudrillard’s somewhat abandoned thought that concludes For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign (1981). As that volume concludes, Baudrillard recounts an American countercultural protest theater demonstration in which a supermarket was raided, and shoppers were invited—liberated—to take at will. Yet, in his account, the shoppers were paralyzed by this liberation. The shoppers’ exasperation reveals—as is the argument reiterated throughout the text—how—in the erasure of exchange value—use value and, thus, need itself emerge as ideologically constructed; value emerges as “totalitarian” (206). The “official imperative” effectively brought to the fore and
deconstructed is the command to need. Baudrillard’s shoppers found the liberation boring. And for him, at that point, they become much more interesting political subjects. More interesting than either the unfulfilled promise of liberated shoplifters or the presumed impotence of the liberated consumer is the displacement of the “contrary demand: to lose, misplace, dispossess oneself, or give up” (207). Surging through the “failure” of the symbolic unleashing is a failure that exposes the exclusionary realm—the underground—of value: this ambivalence, “the incessant potentiality of [value’s] annulment (209), the “death instinct…[tending toward] the abolition of the symbolic in the repetitive cycle of value” (208). Harry Caul’s exasperation at the conclusion of The Conversation, again, is an attempt at un-valuing, the offering of nothing (of value) but his thoroughly trashed apartment. The communicability of such a moment may very well be the punk Event. In Julien Temple’s Sex Pistols biopic The Filth and the Fury (2000), Johnny Rotten will assert that punk was, in fact, a subcultural labor to “deal with the trash” piled eye-level high but blindly ignored during Britain’s great garbage strike. But Rotten, of course, knew that the economic crisis of the moment was producing a generation as “trash,” a generation with no future. Letting the trash piles pile up, he asserted, was the dogmatic political option at the time: the stilted politics of Labour and, more incredulously, consensual blindness. It was then the perfect metaphor for both the failed delivery of the rhetoric of Empire and the failed delivery of a countercultural politic. As the “narrative line” of Empire is ironized by the unemployment doll, piles of trash, and the industrial urban decay of the British city—not unlike the urban decay that forms the ignored background of Coppola’s film—punk—rather than reinvest in the countercultural or leftist demands (they too having run their narrative lines)—insisted on doing nothing. The hyper-productivity of forms of cultural protest were underwritten by a decidedly non-participatory politic and an ironized affirmation; Rotten chose to wear the trash to bring attention
to the trash, to trash-making, but he, too, in part, concedes in spectacular fashion the interpellation of capitalism: “Hey, you punk.” His own interpretation of a structural metonymy already grounds punk as a cancellation of any faith in, for example, any kind of “productivity”: “No future,” as address, ambivalently placed between description and political imperative.

Can punk be evaluated through such slogans? Before judgment, can it even be interpreted through its slogans? Certainly, one runs the risk of reductionism, of betraying the collective complexity that produced punk. But, of course, even the signifier “punk” as a production both contains and expends a multiplicity of labors to give it its signifying force. In fact, while some continue to debate what is and what is not “punk”—although this smacks of a desperate insistence that there is still punk, since, to the best of my understanding now, punk is doing what makes you happy (Nichols, 2008)—I find it interesting to see how its signifying force works for those who would assume its signifying force were now obsolete. When punk is used without air-quotes, no longer suspended in its re-signifying air, it has—I will show later through Žižek and Jameson’s use of it—an interesting life. Punk itself, it is worth noting, is a slogan. Kristin Ross’s work on the Paris Commune is instructive here. She reminds that “Commune” was a “volatile” sign itself. It corresponded, on one hand, to the “form of social relations that had already been realized during the siege of Paris” and, on the other, to the hope for further “radical political transformation,” and, thus, the incompleteness of the form (150). Further, when sloganized (“Vive la Commune!”), she notes, the term becomes antagonistic. The slogan was to rally but also to provoke. Recalling the Commune of 1793, it was to embody a “swarm of bourgeois fears”: “Why did it cause such panic? Because, as one observer noted, ‘There’s blood on that word.’” So, even as the signifier is to organize a field of operations, it is to do more work, work that reinforces not only the labor organized under it but also the force of
that labor. It is at all points a testament to the social purchase, the incompleteness of that purchase, and the targeting of its obstacles. “Punk” had a life—a knotted tangle of meanings—before it was used to identify this underground. Adopted (willfully or not, but nonetheless), the term was to signify victimization or social castigation: the fucked. Of course, the term is not that innocent (more below), but as a slogan, as an identification with one’s abjection (what you throw off when you answer to the social imperative to need), a dis-identification as it were, it responds to the hail of capitalist interpellation all too truthfully.

The response to the hail of capital, punk would argue (and certainly, although without the signifier, Watkins is making this point) interpellates one as a punk. Punk, by casting off the social imperative to do good, “defaces,” as Michael Taussig would say, the public secret—that which we prefer not to know we know—of the work queue, the waiting in line to get fucked, by giving it a face, a surface, a testament, a “paralyzed look” (Hebdige, 69). “It was that or die” argues the proletariat in Lyotard’s famous rebuke of the alternative: “Death is not an alternative to it, it is a part of it.” There is a jouissance to “hanging on” to this; what jouissance is to be found in not hanging in there? Someone must risk that. Hebdige wrote in 1979: “The body becomes the base-line, the place where the buck stops. To wear a mohican or to have your face tattooed, is to burn most of your bridges. In the current economic climate, when employers can afford to pick and choose, such gestures are a public disavowal of the will to queue for work, throwing yourself away before they do it for you” (Hebdige, 1988, 32). In Sinker’s text, it is, as well, the “‘Fuck the Future’ face tattoo” that most poignantly marks the social rift between those committed to, invested in, social reproduction and those desiring “a new erotics” beyond the “proprieties of property” (131) and committed to “a certain asociality,” “an unsentimentality towards community itself” (133). “Hey, you punk” need not be the unveiled utterance in the
capitalist hailing. The defaced and defacing punk opens up the possibility to answering ambivalently. The punk slogan, then, carries with it and fortifies as it carries with it the punk project, and, perhaps, more so gave—continues to give—the loose conglomeration of acts and reactions a presence as project. No future: this is the most ambivalent of punk slogans. It is both permission and prohibition. Permission: “Where there’s no future there can be no sin.” Prohibition: “No future for you and no future for me!” He means it, man. No future. Both description (We’re fucked) and imperative (No future, if the future is this. “Fuck this.”). How is the future to be understood ambivalently?

Fuck this. In this concluding chapter on punk, perhaps it is best to put nicety aside. Perhaps, this is the unspoken articulation as Harry Caul relaxes into his situation. Johnny Rotten in “Bodies” shouts, “Fuck this and Fuck that. Fuck it all.” It is “Fuck this” though that seems most salient here, as I’ve outlined before how—aided and abetted by each emergence of an underground perceived as menace—the cleaving to this, the erosion of any otherwise to this, is carried out. I begin with this explicative, for as Watkins suggested (and as I think The Conversation illustrated) conspiracy theorizing is, in part, getting at the place where you know “you’re fucked” and short-circuiting the interpelation that compels one to determine how to be fucked all over again. A shifting of the vernacular register is important here—and certainly punk argued this—and I do think—at least if ultimately this exercise is to make its argument, an argument for something like an urgent cognitive mapping—a tone more dire, even more temperamental, is necessary. As we exit this exercise, one is compelled—and this compelling is subject to a punk critique I might suggest ultimately—to move beyond the descriptive that has characterized these readings. This is not to say I don’t believe them to have been useful; I have suggested a need to practice a certain “paranoia” (which, of course, is not paranoia but an
insistence to the interpretative labor indicted as such), and such paranoid reading, “fanciful reading” Meaghan Morris (1998) calls it, reveals that no matter what else is happening in television drama, literary novels, and postmodern film they are wrestling with and revealing the precarious position of the subject in globalization. The catastrophic imagination obscures the crisis of such precariousness, but too catastrophe is Real (Žižek, 2000; Davis, 2001), and so it should come as no surprise that those texts that figure the underground terrorist, the underground menace, the underground conspiracy, too, (as ways to figure that Real) figure how work—viewing, reading, listening—become implicated in this waiting, this waiting that reproduces the very conditions of the global crisis which makes this waiting precarious. And, thus, one is compelled to move beyond this description of this to imagine what possibility there may be for putting an end to this. As The Conversation closes, realizing he is fucked, Harry Caul can do nothing other than to say fuck this, and yet can we imagine his gesture—his coda to his screwing—as anything other than being fucked: surely, he can’t exhaustively give the surveillance operatives this nothing forever? He’ll be evicted soon enough. Then what? Can’t we only imagine a doing of nothing to the point of his incarceration? As Tavia Nyong’o exegesis on punk (as restless signifier) suggests, this is the point when the law and its disciplining forces obscure any conspiracy theorizing and force the safety of relative approximations (better than is better than worse), when one is privileged to be in capital yet outside the prison: one screwing is preferred to (the threat of) another screwing.

Punk City

As Nyong’o notes in his analysis of the vernacular of “punking,” the masculinist heteronormativity that in part girds the signifier’s rhetorical work as a “street” nomenclature underscores how a “bifurcated theorization”—between street and straight, black and white, at any “intersection”—requires the production of a “third space,” the state of exception, the
“supplemental provision of terror” (28). Punk becomes a privileged signifier for Nyong’o because it points—although certainly not in any way not conflicted—to this totalized scene. Nyong’o’s piece—“Punk’d Theory”—works to re-orient queer theory—following a critique by Cathy Cohen, who suggested queer theory needs be more relevant to the lives of “punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens”—toward “the punk experience with abjection” now that queer theory’s elevation to “the status of an academic discipline” has foreclosed its conversations to the “street taxonomy” Cohen enumerates. The use of punk, Nyong’o infers, is a rhetorical gesture meant to return radical political discourse to “the street.” Punk is—in its many inflections—“street work.” The punk—from which punk subculture borrows a name—was a street hustler, and the punks—as I’m suggesting—performed a symbolic labor, a “street” protest elaborated in a relationship to the streets of the United Kingdom, the King’s Road in particular. By animating a discussion of the multivalent inflections of “punk” and recognizing that Cohen’s charge set out to disrupt “the standard mode of intersectionality” (race and gender) by adding the dimension of economic oppression that such street taxonomies may point toward, Nyong’o wants to further disrupt Cohen’s “geometric effort…to picture the social whole.” Nyong’o critiques static nominations of such identities and rather proposes that such “identities” are a production, a space in which one discovers one’s self. Thus, Nyong’o main discursive device—intersectionality—thinks about subject position in such a way we may be able, ultimately, to extrapolate Lee Edelman’s theorization of the need for the queer to embody the death drive as a way to begin to theorize both the collective and the contingent possibility of assuming intersectional positions. Thus, we may be able to locate an admittedly terse moment when Watkins’ and Edelman’s and punk’s projects coincide not only discursively but politically in the labor of locating the “irreplaceable” subject position.
In his essay’s denouement, Nyong’o will stage a “street” scene in which it is important to imagine “the intersection” not merely as a pre-existing (and ambivalent) architecture, but “the intersection” as that which awaits you, is policed, and “occurs” in the drama of your arrival. Nyong’o obscures “the standard mode of intersectionality” by playing out how Cohen’s use of “punk”—to signify the black queer—can perhaps be more so useful if one reads, as well, Cohen’s “punk” to necessarily include by a shared signifier (but with a hardly elaborated coincidence) punk subculture. Nyong’o wants to know if something can be made of reading Cohen’s excluded taxonomy as a “nonce taxonomy to express creative discontent with settled categories”: “Might we theorize the intersection of punk and queer as an encounter between concepts both lacking in fixed identitarian referent, but which are nonetheless periodically caught up and frozen, as it were, within endemic modern crises of racialization?” Nyong’o is interested in punk’s inflection as “African American slang for gay man” and as a name for a member of an “anticapitalist subculture,” and so his theoretical labor becomes an “etymological retangling of these two supposedly distinct types of punk.” (21).

In part Nyong’o’s analysis accrues its force from the reminder that “the punk” is not an “identity,” for it follows a “punking,” an economy whereby “another’s pleasure comes at the cost of your pain.” He adds, “Street theorizing around the word punk marks a discursive space in which the possibility of desiring sodomy, desiring to be sodomized, is unthinkable but, nevertheless, unavoidable.” As such, Nyong’o is particularly interested in why Dick Hebdige’s analysis of punk avoids this queer affect. As my use of Edelman below may suggest, the answer may have to be framed in terms of why the prospect of the death driven, which Edelman argues the queer comes to figure for the symbolic order of political futurism, may need to be avoided? For Nyong’o, much is to be made of how the word “punk” has largely reappeared in popular
culture to signify the hapless victim but in such a way to accrue the currency of the hipness of black style. The word has been popularized in particular by MTV’s *Punk’d* prank show, which poaches the mainstream currency of the racialized term by tangentially invoking hip hop culture while obfuscating the sexual connotations. It is useful to note that on the show, the “punked” victim says, “I’ve been punked.” At no time, do they avow themselves a “punk.” Nyong’o further notes, that Hebdige’s volume—far from assuming that “punk” connotes blackness as Cohen is able to do two decades later—emerges as an elaboration of a cultural style “awaiting an overdue racial perspective.” While Cohen may be using “punk” to refer to a gay black man and Hebdige using the word to reference a particular subcultural phenomenon, Nyong’o, again, believes they are “discussing a single, complex phenomena…the reappearance of an experiential field that the word indexes” (24). For him, the term is—borrowing from Hebdige’s analysis—“frozen dialectically.” For Hebdige this “point” of analysis, this “point” of negotiating racial difference in Britain, marks punk’s endgame as a social critique. If punk were a translation of victimized ethnicity of blacks into a white context, then such a dialectic ultimately, argues Hebdige, “is incapable of renewal, trapped, as it is, within its own history” (70).

For Nyongo’o the point is that this dialectic is frozen to poignantly disavow a “queer affect.” To Richard Hell’s famous summation—“Punks are niggers”—Nyong’o wonders, why not “queers”? Nyongo’o then offers Hebdige’s “telling turn of phrase”—punk was “designed to puncture glam rock’s extravagantly ornate style”—to suggest how Hebdige’s description cannot escape a masculinist “distortion” of culture. Thus, in the Hebdige framing of punk, it is punk that does punking, that, in fashioning its “victimization,” cannot refuse a victimizing phallic discourse. Yet, as Nyong’o reminds, a “queer object”—Hebdige’s uncanny opening example of Genet’s use of tube of vaseline as the ideal subcultural object, “warn[ing] the ‘straight’ world in
advance of a sinister presence—the presence of difference” (3)—“appears in the absent center of an analysis devoted to explaining away the capacity of queer objects to revolt through style” (25). Of course, the whole erasure of how “straight” can be translated into dominant, into mainstream, into—keeping intact our language here—non-street without invoking this “original” difference is something that demands more attention. Of course, as I am suggesting, in building toward amplifying Rotten’s trash-pile “street scene,” the punk I am imaging turns on a rather literal “straight” culture—the rather fixed gaze of distraction, the pure un-distracted view of distraction—and punk becomes the labor of dis-tracting—of queering—that view. This is, of course, the punk labor beyond the forming, beyond the coming into form, Hebdige describes for us. As Nyong’o can help elaborate, punk indexes a field, not an identity. To bear the name, as it were, is to expand the field, to make visible the field, to dis-tract the view of another. So, my work below is an attempt to move beyond Hebdige’s descriptions—and in part the trappings of cultural studies—to suggest there is a way to imagine punk as something other than a particular re-organization—or retooling—of an opportunity to vivify an impotent population.

To step further outside of my reading of Nyong’o text for a moment, it is important to note that it is difficult to discern the extent to which there is a duplicity or disconnect between punk’s project and Hebdige’s on the level of description. For me, this puncturing, phallic punk seems to betray the forming of punk as what one does when one discovers themselves to be fucked, futureless. Rather, we get the history of punk proceeding in prodigousness without, again, the proclamation of “No Future.” No future is, after all, abortive not reproducing. Of course, we may have here a moment where we are reminded that language makes figuring—thinking about—an end to this impossible. A. Samuel Kimball (2002) reminds, “There is in the West a vast cultural heritage that determines thinking not only as the paradigmatic act of
conceiving, but as a masculine or paternal power transcendental in its presumptive self-generativity.” As such, it would seem impossible to think—to conceive—of no future.

Hebdige’s rhetorical figuring of the “punked” into the “punking,” occurs in part because it is difficult to imagine a labor and productivity—two words, as well, trapped in the semantics of begetting—that wants nothing politically, wants nothing other than the trash on the streets to be seen. Crudely said, cultural studies itself is a re-tooling formed in the very interstitial gap created in the belief “no future” could not possibly be read as serious. The very distance punk sought to collapse between life and death, between those who live and those who are sacrificed, becomes—as history and narrative advances—a workable space to theorize a new productivity—“making do”—since the demand for an otherwise must be impossible. In a sense, the semiotics of punk exists in part because the symbolic cannot imagine that someone would really believe themselves trash. Meaningful productivity is needed because waste cannot be thought. As Bataille teaches, squandering—acknowledged squandering—gets too close to revealing the sacrificial that underwrites the economy and gets too close to revealing the artifice of necessity. Thus, Nyongo’s reading of Hebdige is important because it illustrates the difficulty in reading punk as a thinking through of a newly emergent globalized victimization (its counter-intuitive response to the interpellation of capitalism) and the impossibility of registering—without recognizing supplementary acts of subtraction—the work of bringing into relief cancelled futures. Hebdige, I may add, finds himself reborn at his volume’s conclusion: “The cord has been cut” (138). He has discovered he is “condemned” (139) to “live an uneasy cerebral relation to the bric-a-brac of life” (138), his analysis having revealed—impregnated, we might say—all objects with meaning, condemned to be separated forever in reading. What is lost in the labor of resignification, in the potential given to bricolage, is the desire for things—in the
resignification—to not mean. Uncanny, then, that his abandonment (as it were) in this endlessly meaningful world occurs only after acknowledging, “we, the sociologists and interested straights, threaten to kill with kindness the forms which we seek to elucidate.” The burden of punk’s “dead white face” (65) cannot quite seem to be literalized.

It is when examining another one of his indices—the use of “punking” in the Scared Straight documentary series—that Nyong’o begins his most useful translation of what he calls the punk signifier’s “experiential field” (24). That series famously brought young street “punks” into a contrived confrontation between inmates, whose task is to “punk” them. The film, Nyong’o elaborates, maps a “bifurcated society traversed by two forces”: the “silent power of the penal apparatus” and the “loud, offensive sound of what the film calls ‘street talk’” (27). Nyong’o retells the drama whereby the young are threatened with the future punking that awaits them within the prison. For Nyong’o this drama complicates the overarching bifurcation the film reinforces between the prison and “the ostensibly ‘free’ space outside,” for male rape—projected in “straight” “street talk”—is required to “supplement the social order” (28). Here, Nyong’o—in invoking Giorgio Agamben—asks, “What would it mean to identify the authentic language of the street, its theorizing, not as some autonomous space that the law must at all costs come to dominate but rather as the active site of the law’s production, through the street’s supplemental provision of terror?” Nyong’o doesn’t directly answer this question, but I wonder if it is not possible to see punk’s staged street scene—the trash wearing the trash—as a dramatization of this question. For, as I’ve previously argued, this is secured in the elaborations that make it better than that and that any futures other than this must be avoided at all costs (as well as, the strange asymmetry whereby too we are promised that this will—and can only—get better), then the street drama that begins to cancel the distracted separations required to reproduce this seem
to no longer buy into the bifurcations—“this or die”—that organize the relative approximations of victimization. Punk, it would seem, is lousy as an “underground,” for in part what we have to recognize is its labor of suggesting the reduction to “bare life” (Agamben, 1998) is not provisional but real; it is our ground. Punk no longer believes in the exceptional.

In his reading of *Scared Straight*, Nyong’o’s focus is directed to the prison system’s contradiction of logic: what to do with the victims of a crime in prison, the very crime needed to supplement its far-reaching logic. Punk city, Nyong’o describes, “represents a kind of no-place or blind spot within bifurcated theorization of the social, a place of unthinkability.” For Nyong’o, any theoretical object that proposes “the simultaneity of race, class, gender, and sexuality” produces this blind spot, which, he suggests, the vernacular use of punk—poaching, as it does, from the interplay of each—does, ultimately, as well, even as it pointedly indexes the problem (30). The subject of critical investigation, he suggests, should be “the subject transformed by law that nevertheless exists nowhere within it, the figure of absolute abjection that is, paradoxically, part of our everyday experience.” Who is this subject? Nyong’o elaborates a concluding “street” scene, literalizing the term, to illustrate how pedestrians at intersections, against the forces of car culture, must often fend for their own mobility; to remain mobile, subject to the enforcement of jaywalking laws (“rarely enforced, but pregnant in [their] enforceability”), they must often demand “both their rights and more than their rights” (31).

Examples of such intersections “proliferate”: “workers become illegal immigrants; poor mothers become welfare queens; protestors become potential terrorists.” “All must attack the presumption of their criminality,” concludes Nyong’o’s argument, “merely to preserve their way of life from the ongoing incursions of disciplinary power…At the intersection, in the streets, we are all in punk city.” I won’t suggest that punk subculture was not guilty of calling forth “the
punk” to supplement its charge of the social order—it does participate in this economy of symbolic violence—but, in doing so, it too allays itself to the violence of economy that queer theory has been best at explicating. Nyong’o’s tactical extrapolation to conclude his work—and too reiterating the term whose trappings have produced his conclusion and insisting upon its use—has articulated what I do believe to be the communicable desire of punk subculture: “We are all punks.” Punk—as I believe the street scene of doing something with the trash illustrates—is the production of an intersection otherwise unattended. Punk identity (and policing punk identity) is quite different than punk production; punk production creates a space in which to demonstrate, not intransitively as an inherited political theater, but transitively, to demonstrate “punking,” a foundational precariousness that requires dis-identification.

For Nyong’o’s list, there is, too, the subject that watches this happen, that, in fact, too, performs this inter-sectional transcription of others into threats. This, after all, was the unfortunate epistemological work of conspiracy theories Watkins outlined. The symbolic law that sutures subjects to human capital exploitation does the work of translation. Laborers become paranoids obscuring how laborers in the informational economy become obsolete (trash) and, unable to attend to the operations of the economic necessity of this obsolescence, wanting rather to overcome their perceived antagonists, endlessly retool. Punk is the production of an exposure to this trash and, as such, the collapse of the space that allows distraction to gain ground. It is an insistence on, rather than the “pregnant” possibility of these intersections, their visible inscription into the field of social reproduction. To once again recall Lyotard’s regretted but perhaps worth repeating volume Libidinal Economy: “be inside and forget it, that’s the position of the death drive.” Fuck this.
Pynchon’s novel ends famously with its pregnant pause, unable to conceive of that which will deliver either the political organization that can possibly organize “so many undergrounds” or the cognitive map that can adequately dissolve so many paranoias into what Badiou calls an Event. Yet, the tension in language—whereby pregnancy precedes conception—I do believe is important, since whatever possibilities are “pregnant” in that moment, in the anticipation of that first cry, become effectively stillborn since the novel cannot figure—conceive of—the interpellation that will allow that pregnancy—the recognition of an alternative, the emergence of an underground history—to be the Benjaminian miracle it dreams of being. As Pynchon’s novel suggests in its underground backdrop, its depiction of what Balibar (2002) calls “the other scene” of political subject formation, the “new subjects of history” (insert Harry Caul here, too) discover themselves with unprecedented access to and insight into what Balibar calls “the topography of violence” and—in the precondition of the speed of obsolescence—to the very dynamic of human capital exploitation that makes a certain “security” within that topography a tenuous position. Of course, as Jameson argues, with this spatio-temporal adjustment, what he calls the “antinomies of the postmodern” make the prospects for change—a liquidated term in the postmodern—impossible. The novel’s abortive gesture performs its inability to think a future other than the continual reproduction (after reproduction) of subjects locked in the very interstices of an information economy that requires their re-tooling and as such reproduces itself as the only horizon for new beings, foreclosed to what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) would call new becomings. In part, this is the novel’s prescient indictment of “identity politics” which becomes a lock-step dynamic that reproduces the system. Identity politics is the work of assuring “cultural intelligibility” within the symbolic order of capital that is flexible enough to cede it (Yudice, 2004); the fact that we exist with an underground this or that cultural practice as a
marketing term amplifies the cultural “bend not break” of postmodern capital. Furthermore, the
very underground economies—drugs, prostitution, piracy—that service goods even suggest that
the presumed shadow logic—the outside—of capital is merely another terrain of a profiteering
and commodification logic (Schlosser, 2004). Even identities “outside the law” are perfectly
intelligible to capital.

As Hardt and Negri (2001) argue, the rise of communication networks and immaterial
labor production—the unprecedented scale of access to what they would call “the general
intellect”—is pregnant with possibility, but how can it be delivered? As such we get the abortive
gestures that “conclude” Pynchon’s novel and Coppola’s film, for they cannot figure something
new if their very thematic suggests that damage is inscribed in the very way sense is made in and
of the postmodern. To become intelligible merely secures a screwing in another context in the
very way an economy of survival—of victimization, of obsolescence, of retooling—reproduces
the ground of possibility: to step—or to be positioned—“outside” is to become the very threat
(commodity) that secures this. But in the fact that this pregnancy awaits conception itself tells us
something. And the answer requires a tour through the punk underground, the punk underground
as precisely an elaboration of the problem of conceiving of a future when the sacrificial is
inscribed in (the) economy. And, it must be said, the co-incidental (and far from being
coincidental, as Lakoff and Johnson can help us understand) languages of economics (i.e. how
victims are transcribed as “the fucked”) and sex (sexual reproduction as an accomplice to social
reproduction, which, of course, polices so much of sex, i.e. fucking) are used in so many
descriptive and rhetorical registers it would be impossible to chase them all. So, to a certain
extent, I have let them loose, to highlight a certain domination that must be undone, for the very
appropriation of “punk” to translate victimization into spectacle—a labor, I believe, that wants
truthfully to think about social justice—carries with it then a language founded in exclusionary strategies. The term “punk” has much to do with victimization, and with queerness, and with, finally one must admit, ambivalence, and, so, appropriation is part of the strategy, but it is also—one will learn of appropriation and rearticulation—finally unmerciful in believing in a point of articulation in which a certain “we” can be spoken that does not—for lack of a better word for now and later—hurt another. So what to make of Pynchon’s pregnant pause? Gramsci: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” Fuck this, but what else is to be born? Perhaps, it’s best to dream no future if the future continually reproduces only punk city.

A Real Trash Pile and the Trash Pile of the Real

The most morbid symptom for Rotten, the one that conferred futurelessness as a reality, and as such the one needing treatment if the persistent reanimation of precariousness were to be interrupted, was those trash piles that lined the street. For punk, trash demarcated the real. For Badiou (2007), the 20th century passion for the real is directly counterposed to “the extraordinary power of ignorance, of what Lacan calls ‘the passion of ignorance’.” What I am suggesting here is that in its most fundamental signification “underground” points to an attention directed at some other’s “ignorance.” It is an attention oriented toward some perceived deficit in cultural attention. I too believe it indexes some damage, some cost in the politics of attention, a mindfulness to cost no matter how partial or conflicted, a politics, I have argued, that refracts the capitalist attention span, its needs, its values (what it values). The passion for the real—no matter how conflicted or partial, reactionary or regressive—is a working between what is itself only ever perceived as ignorance and what is perceived or felt as Real, or perceived or felt as distance from the Real. The Real, of course, resists any symbolization, is never totalizable. Thus, ignorance itself must be, as well. It never knows what it ignores completely. For Rotten,
this ignorance can be figured only in the piles of trash, of waste, lining British streets and, yet, somehow ignored. Something must done, he imagined, not as much about this trash as about this ignorance. What other ignominies could be just as effectively avoided? The trash, after all, for Rotten was index to the failed countercultural movement which had left a return to old forms of political machination; what good was a garbage strike if the public that was to bear its burden ignored its overwhelming stamp? Punk decided to wear the trash, to make this waste an emblem for all that could not be ignored. There was no politics—and no need for politics—beyond the eye-opening spectacle. And so the Sex Pistols first single—“Anarchy in the UK” (1976)—can be read as if the trash pile speaks: “I want to destroy the passerby.” The passer-by holds a subject position; it is not irreducible to an identity. The passer-by is a relationship to the trash pile, to the punk, to punking. That Rotten’s declaration may either emanate from the trash pile itself—as emblematic of the whole of structural violence (whose designs for the passerby is precisely this imperative)—or from Rotten as punk, as “trash on trash,” as the canceling of the void of perception, is part of the necessary ambiguity here.

But Rotten’s translation of economic rubble into art was not singular. The 2007 documentary Joy Division opens with a narration from the band that recounts how their hometown of Liverpool was slowly turned into post-industrial rubble and slowly rebuilt into a “depressing” architecture of large tenement buildings. While there may be some romance about the older landscape, the coming and going of demolition struck the real chord with the band, recognizing demolition as an attempt by capital to rejuvenate and reanimate this “wasteland.” The demolition covers up the destruction to the dying industrial zone. Capital is ahead of itself, since the newer buildings betrayed the industrial decline of the city. The film presents the standard Joy Division music, its steely sound, its spaciousness and remove (most notably heard
in the famed reverberating drum sounds) and its claustrophobia (the pounding rhythms, the all
too present voice), as an attempt to index the destruction (the deathliness) covered over in the
march of progress (Joy Divison’s infamous fascist fascinations can be seen to ironize this march;
one of the earliest songs was “We Walked in Line”). What Rotten and Joy Division figure is
what Badiou describes as the subtractive gesture: go on without us. In an early archival work
*Punk: The Early Years* (1977), a young band bemoans the efforts of the law to stifle punk: “The
National Front can march down the streets; why can’t we stand on the corner?” Good question.
What does their eyesore—their subtraction from the narrative of a social health constantly
rejuvenated—bring into view?

Badiou’s own articulation of the twentieth century’s signifying feature recognizes that the
movement of the century has coincided, as well, with the increased collapse between experience
and fiction, between the real and semblance, and, thus, “art is everywhere,” and we arrive at
moment at the end of the century when the century “presents as art what used to be nothing but
waste matter” (50). Rotten’s trash on trash may be the artistic gesture that closes the century, for
not only does it enframe that waste matter but enframes that waste as the very waste material of
late capital: bodies. As Watkins showed, the enframing of one’s body as waste escapes no one
who labors since waste—or victim—status is the inescapable material of even the most
privileged exploitations. The production of the body as waste material has been a central concern
of theory in globalization. As globalization may best be understood as David Harvey (2000)
describes it as “uneven geographical development,” those zones of globalization most
“oppressed” by what can only be complicatedly called the luxuries of postmodern culture
includes the increasingly exponential knowledge that with globalization comes uneven
distributions of violence, yes, within postmodern culture but also most certainly outside it. The
critical attention paid to abjection in the formation (and deformation) of subjectivity, in the works of Kristeva (1982) and Butler (1993), for example, is a powerful rejoinder to remember how—to emphasize the figurative in the nomenclature from which Judith Butler derives so much power in its literalness—there are some bodies that matter more than others. Yet, this is not particularly news in a lived sense to those bodies but not even to those whom prosper in the configurations of normativity that work by exclusion. The recent work of Balibar on citizenship (2003)—whose “topographies” of violence map populations for elimination—or Agamben (1998)—whose theorizations illustrate how sovereignty requires precisely the authority to suspend the subjectivity of some of the population—are the critical articulations of the urgent cognitive mapping punk made visible. These are the accounts that in the political unconscious belong to an underground space populated by threats rather than a shared precariousness. Thus, the punk labor here is the collapse of this space, the erasure of a blank narrative availability for threat production, the production rather of an index to damage.

Žižek (2000) suggests that the elevation of excrement is in part a function of corruption in the process of sublimation in commercial culture, whereby “the gap that separates the sacred space of sublime beauty from the excremental space of trash (leftover) is gradually narrowing” (25–6). The former “shocking excesses,” the former “subversions” of an avant-garde, now produce precisely the “stronger and stronger shocking effects and products” needed to reproduce itself. Similarly, one could look to the security market, whereby the market feeds on the production of more and more fears without the production of more and more fears ever revealing the failure of the interventions, without ever revealing the absurdity of a state of security that needs to reproduce itself through insecurities. This “excremental art,” argues Žižek, is a desperate attempt to save the possibilities for creative sublimation, to insist that “the Sacred
Place is still there,” which is to ask, “Is the Real still there?” The passion for the real in the postmodern must contend with the leveling of everything, what Jameson in *Postmodernism* calls a “surrealism without the unconscious” (174). The Real is the *something more than this.* Sublimation in this Lacanian rendering gets closer to the real. Trash elevated as art might teach us one thing about the sacred place, but trash safety pinned to the cheek another. Such gestures certainly want to know more about the Real than the reality that makes them seem impossible. Reality as utility makes no sense here. But the utility of trash-making is the question never broached. Again why should such self-effacement kindle, more than moral panic, such contempt? The punks’ social affront as it were—their insistent neighboring in the Freudian valence, *dis-tracting* another’s ignorance—was famously met with a more physical reciprocal violence, as Rotten more than once found himself hospitalized by street attacks (as he discusses in *The Filth and The Fury*). The punk’s self-effacement truly disrupts the libidinal economy of ignorance, the libidinal economy as ignorance. Sublimation of this sort—in one’s dis-comfort, in another’s dis-comfort—creates the space of another sort of becoming.

Badiou’s exegesis on the “subtractive” passion takes Malevich’s modernist exercises as exemplary (55-57), but as Malevich’s work marks an important incision into the reflexiveness of art and the social, it lacks, I would argue, a social contract until punk, which, I am arguing, exceeds style at this point, and this excess, I believe, is inimical to the very excess of capital that postmodernism covers up in its drive to capitalize upon the everyday. For Badiou, Malevich’s *White on White* is “the epitome of purification” in the near cancellation of text and context, foreground and background, but Badiou is adamant that this is not simply destruction; this is, rather, a “subtractive protocol of thought.” The painting is “the erasure of every content, every upsurge,” and, I would argue in transcribing this labor to the staged street scene of punk, every
ignorance. What Malevich stages is the minimal difference between “place and taking-place.” Only this gap can register the Real, the gap is itself real and the gap is “fabricated.” Importantly for Badiou, “authenticity” as an impossible passion is eschewed. *White on White*, writes Badiou, “is a proposition in thought that opposes minimal difference to maximal destruction.” Punk’s trash on trash—counter to any politics that believes it can wake the slumber to violence through violence—insists on orchestrating the minimal difference between the trash and trash-making, filling the dis-tracted space with one’s own making into trash. The punk has not annihilated himself—this, again, is about making possible the subtraction that undoes distraction—but has struck against the self. This is why the legacy of punk “authenticity” loses sight of the defacements, defilements, and profanations that mark the punk Event. I think it’s important to elaborate this sacrificial content.

**Sacrificial Content**

The Sex Pistols’ “Bodies” is important here. The song’s origin is a fan’s letter telling of her State-enacted abortion (Savage, 415). The song begins by narrating those proceedings before devolving into a dialogical free-for-all where Rotten gives voice to the State and to the fetus. The victim here—the female, the punk as it would be—is not given voice. Though, of course, in Rotten the punk speaks, the admittedly complicated politic—and this in part the point of punk—whereby the “We are all punks” is an ambivalent insistence. Rotten lets the State rationalize: “She was a case of insanity.” She was just a “body.” Then, the State agent: “I’m not an animal.” Rotten with disgust narrates the operation: “Dragged on a table in a factory/Illegitimate place to be.” And his disgust can only be registered in its shock detail: “Screaming fucking bloody mess.” The narrator, seeking narrative absolution: “I’m not an animal.” Rotten then gives voice to the fetus: “Mummy, I’m not an abortion.” The fetus: “I’m not an animal.” The song then has a false ending. It returns more chaotically and aggressively
with the aforementioned “Fuck this/And fuck that/Fuck it all/And fuck her fucking brat.” It’s the condemnation of the labor of absolution that bound the lyrical voices together in a pact of humanity. I think we hear less charges of inhumanity than we do contempt for the discursive indices of the humane and inhumane that emerge from elsewhere, from some off-screen big Other under which humanity is interrogated, humanity as an ethical contest. The only one absolved is the punk, whose animality is conferred upon her by the State, the narrator, and the aborted fetus. Rotten concludes the song in a repetitious “I’m not an animal,” a declarative utterance now tainted with the force of disavowal, but, as such, now articulates ambivalently, signifying with both its tainted disavowal, and, in Rotten’s own performative abortion of the song’s opening narration, a more knowing force: Is there the cleared possibility of now truly saying “I’m not an animal”? And in the repetitive evocations of this lyrical mantra, Rotten is “an abortion.” The ambiguity here is crucial: both an abortion (the declarative “No future,” an end) and the abortive (the performative “No Future,” the interruption). What futures has he made available in thinking about the non-humane beyond a discursive humanity? What futures snuffed out? Punk’s ambivalence about the very status of humanity as an enterprise seems to be the burden of these questions.

The abortive gesture here, in a curious way, returns us to Coppola’s film. In The Conversation, the murdered infant is a ghostly figure that should compel compliance, should motivate the labor of redemption, but in Caul’s refusal of the economy of redemption, he both “aborts” the figure of the child (its potential second life as redeemable) and, yet, keeps the image of the dead child as dead intact. Isn’t Caul’s refusal to comply with the demands of redemption figured as a fuck this, as well? In “Bodies” the abortive gesture puts an end similarly to the economies of meaning that circulate to narrate and disown the state violence, that question
humanity, and, thus, intrudes upon the smooth functioning of the present. The repetition of “I’m not an animal” attempts to disavow the human’s existence as precisely founded on such snuffing outs of (others’) futures. In “God Save the Queen” the first proclamation of “no future” is descriptive: “There is no future in England’s dreaming…There’s no future for you,” but as the song progresses, Rotten proclaims, “We’re the poison in the human machine/We’re the future/Your future.” The punk as an aborted future, the future as an abortion. The abortive gestures drive toward revealing the virtuality in the future that otherwise presents itself as a “sterile repetition” or, as Watkins had said, “a blank sequence of ‘endless rebirths’.” The future—as mediated, as socially reproduced—is the future that proceeds in the unacknowledged cancelling of futures. The punks, again, emerging in the economic conditions of rampant unemployment and, thus, “dim prospects,” offer a certain testimony. The myth of state health—which “Bodies” poaches upon—is interrupted by the punks’ recognition of and affiliation with the migrant populations, whose exodus from worse speaks to the disavowed cost of the (former) health of the empire (Gilroy, 1991).

There is a reason, argues A. Samuel Kimball (2007), the anxiety over the future returns in these images of the unborn. Kimball argues that the image of the infanticide—an image throughout Western literature and culture, yet critically ignored—is the image through which Western culture—“no matter how indirect, halting, incomplete, or conflicted”—articulates the “sacrificial-cum-infanticidal implications of its economizing”: “existence costs.” The advent and advance of this fundamental, evolutionary knowledge has been the securing of distributions of survival. Kimball (2002) shows how the paternal order, for example, is secured in the Western metaphor of thought as conception, as insemination, and, therefore, “block[ing] another ‘species’ of thought—not a way of conceiving but of thinking otherwise” (73). Thus, it is only the image
of the infanticide itself that can return to us what is otherwise barred from thinking. Thus, this apprehension—however it manifested itself—of the future moving at the punks’ expense is framed in the further apprehension of punks as an aborted future generation; they become walking infanticides. Their “poison” is directed at the family, the capitalist economy, and the nation, certainly forms complicit in the distributions of survival that must disavow their infanticidal logic. That disavowal, of course, needs to be less conflicted these days; the current shape of capital announces itself precisely as speculating on futures (Martin, 2007). The nation’s (and the Other nation’s) border fluidity and security is rather amendable to capital’s flow as long as it does not disrupt the uneven geographical development, which we recognize, too, as the uneven distribution of survival (Harvey, 2000; Balibar, 2002). With globalization—and this returns us to the punk emergence in a burgeoning globalization—comes, I would suggest, a more even distribution—with the dissemination of the media and, thus, the dissemination of the discontinuous realities of globalization in images—of the knowledge of “the infanticidal,” the costs of this economy of survival. Capitalism is quite literally an operation of securing how the infanticidal operates geopolitically; healthy babies are more important in some indices than others. In some spaces, some need to live well and, in other spaces, some not; not all can live. Balibar (2002) describes globalization’s virtual supplement to its liberating discourses as “ultraobjective violence”—the production of trash populations, surplus surpluses of labor, the production of slums—the unambiguous production of no future (25). And where labor markets—as consumption markets—need to live, they need to live in ways that do not demand too much: the bribe—the synchronic blackmail—of no (better) future. And certainly the emergence of the punk “underground” forms under this ground, positioned in the precariousness of thought, whereby both one’s own existence seems threatened and, yet, this very affect of
dissatisfaction emerges from its own cost making. The register in which one frames
“satisfaction,” measures this life against another, is formed in its own costliness; to measure this
existence against the riches of the past must recognize how the past was sanctified in its own
costliness. To demand the future promised by the past is to damn others to the sacrificial
burdens that provided this future imaginary. There is at this point both a need to and
impossibility in saying “I’m not an animal.” There’s something in-humane about the human and
certainly an in-humaneness to the future. This is the punk ambivalence.

For punk the “no future” was to be rhetorical, a symbolic violence to render the
ambivalence of the future as a horizon, so as to expose its burdening literalness in expense, but,
in the postmodern of its reception, no future is “literal”—the “sterile repetition” of the present,
the antinomy of change, the loss of history—in such a way this infanticidal suturing is performed
(and disowned) in what Lee Edelman (2004) has described as the sanctification of the image of
the child. No doubt punk’s figuration of themselves as abortions—“between two deaths” as it
were (Žižek, 1998, 131-145)—both participates in and intercedes into this politic that enshrines
the image of the child while reducing so many of them to their status as “bare life” (Agamben,
1998). Edelman—although making no explicit reference to punk, although certainly sharing its
polemical fervor—entitled his book No Future, “no future” as a description of the reproduction
of the same that constitutes the limits of imagining the future—a “reproductive futurism” that
“gives us history as the continuous staging of our dream of eventual self-realization by endlessly
reconstructing, in the mirror of desire, what we take to be reality itself” (10)—and as a
description of the queer’s place in the political order. The Child as the “fantasmatic beneficiary
of every political intervention” secures the discourse of “reproductive futurism,” a symbolic
calculus in which the figure of the queer emerges as the necessary threat required to secure the
reproduction of a symbolic order. In the elevation of the image of the Child, queerness in its exclusion from this discourse figures as that discourse’s death drive, the “negativity opposed to every form of social viability,” “the destabilizing force of what insists outside or beyond, because foreclosed by, signification” (9). That abjection to signification Kimball would call the infanticidal, the expense of existence, the evolutionary horizon of extinction. The paternal-heteronormative interpellation is consolidated in “a root metaphor, thinking understood as conceiving…seminal or inseminating…thereby as a force of life as opposed to death” (73). For Kimball, this grounding metaphorics—and a history of Western literature and philosophy that follows—have made it “difficult to conceive of the future otherwise than as a continuation of life.” Furthermore, it would seem impossible—inconceivable—to think of the future as costly and social institutions as manifestly sacrificial. Such thought would be contraceptive, or, as I have suggested, abortive. The queer, then, according to Edelman, bears the social burden of this disavowing operation and, as such, is the only index to the Real of extant costs.

Edelman, I imagine, would resist my own signification of the Real as “the infanticidal,” for it may reinforce the very sacralization that he resists, but it is important to note that rhetorically the petition to acknowledge the infanticidal as a political provocation has failed throughout Western culture (as Kimball’s project reveals and postmodern, global capital firmly attests). But, there is an important passage where Edelman’s argument coheres with what I am advancing; he writes, “the sacralization of the Child thus necessitates the sacrifice of the queer” (28). Sacrifice here is pointedly devoid of its sacred function; it runs closer to Giorgio Agamben theorization of “bare life,” “abandoned by [the law], that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable” (28). Edelman notes how the Church’s aggrandizement of the family to protect the children then need take aim
at dismantling same-sex relationships and, thus, being “blindly committed to the figure of the Child that it will justify refusing health care benefits to the adults that some children become” (29). Here, the cultural logic emerges in brute economic detail.

Edelman’s essay is particularly important here because it recognizes in the informational (symbolic) politics of reproductive futurism how the queer subject figures in that discourse and how from within that position it may be most advantageous to move strategically, for it is in that position that the queer becomes, in fact, *irreplaceable*. This “irreplaceability,” as discussed in the two previous chapters, is the position Watkins argues short-circuits human capital exploitation; Watkins’ advocating of a “pedagogy of conspiracy”—“pedagogy” itself perhaps partially emblematic of the very *conspiratorial* operation I believe Edelman describes—finds viability in the possibility of discovering “a narrative in which you are irreplaceable.” Of course, Edelman’s queer politic requires in part the ironizing of *narrative*. In the cohesion of subject to figure is a certain viability, for resisting the figure is either to be vulnerable to the policing of the fugitive (vulnerable to legislation, state-action, being named “threat) or to occasion the persistence of the power of the figure, for it needs no actual bodies; bodies are replaceable since the narrative damage is done. Edelman’s proposed intervention is to “accept” how queerness embodies the death drive. For Watkins, bodies are replaceable within the subject positions designated by capital; Edelman’s insight is in locating within a subject position the force of the irreplaceability of that subject position, the force of accepting the force of its narrative, thus, ironizing it. The figural burden, it should be noted, is taken somewhat ambivalently; for queers to deny their “disidentification from the promise of the futurity,” argues Edelman, would only shift “the figural burden of queerness to someone else,” for the “*structural position* of queerness” and the need to fill it would still remain. Yet, Edelman says—in petitioning his queer
audience—“by assuming the ‘truth’…we might undertake the impossible project of imaging an oppositional political stance exempt from the imperative to reproduce the politics of signification” (27).

If the queer is the symbolic order’s death drive, then the queer need become this death drive (the possibility for non-identity) and must refuse any identity and signification. In his text, the strongest sense, for me, of how this may take shape politically (that is, how to occupy what it is you are told to occupy) occurs performatively in a rhetorical shift in his text as it tends toward the polemical near its conclusion. How is one not beholden to the future imaginary? How does one resist the command to plan for, prepare for, save for, place hope in, work toward improving the future? Well, Edelman says, and, therefore, argues for saying, “Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie...fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop” (29) Edelman’s dis-missives aim, too, at the “political interventions of identitarian minorities,” which “properly take shape as oppositional, affording the dominant order a reassuringly symmetrical, if inverted, depiction of its own ostensibly coherent identity.” Rather, Edelman’s im-politic opposes “any such logic of opposition, its proper task the ceaseless disappropriation of every propriety.” Thus, an impolitic (a word I offer and a word, I might offer, too shaped by the reification of politics as and in propriety and, thus, a word, I would suggest, able to wield some new force as a semantic index to all that polite politics needs bar for its survival) is a social affront, one mindful, I would suggest, if even Edelman may insist otherwise, of the destruction otherwise done socially without such affront. The endless postponement of the future, “the fantasy that generates endless narratives of generation” (82) by “denying the pressure of the Real” (96), the enabling postponement that secures some “futures” (that is, some viabilities) at the expense of others not
only denies healthcare to some but also requires—as described by Watkins and Jameson in the previous chapter—postmodern unemployment for many, requires precariousness as a reality to foreclose the very burden of the social for all.

Here, I think we can insert (violently, perhaps) the possibility for an outreach of the Bartlebian gesture, the impolitic Žižek petitions for in The Parallax View (2006). It is the call for a violence capable of “actually changing the basic coordinates of a constellation” (381). This is, of course, the labor in Edelman’s and punk’s profanity. Žižek’s elevation of Bartleby’s “I would prefer not,” I think, can begin to register, in much the same way as Edelman’s dis-missives, as the passage to a im-politics, which, rather than playing the parasitic game of opposition, “opens a new space outside the hegemonic position and its negation”: “‘There are great chances of a new career here! Join us!’—‘I would prefer not to’; but also ‘Discover the depths of your true self, find inner peace!’—‘I would prefer not to’” (387). Žižek adds, such gestures need to “subtract” from “the forms of resisting which help the system to reproduce itself by ensuring our participation in it”: “‘I would prefer not to support a Black Orphan in Africa’” (383). Badiou’s discussion of the subtractive protocol ends with a rejoinder to rethink “the new.” He suggests it must “interrupt repetition.” There must be, he adds, quoting Malevich, “a ‘new birth’” (57). The century may very well close with punk’s, Edelman’s, and Žižek’s impolitical refusal of what Edelman names “compassion’s compulsion.” Edelman argues for a queer theory that can insist “We are the advocates of abortion” and “insist the future stops here” (31). A new birth may be otherwise. Edelman suggests—and I do think this too is what drives punk’s street affront—the best (worst) we can do for each other is to be each other’s Real Neighbor, breaking the spell of postponement. The embrace of futurity—and by proxy any answer to any such call to “do good”—argues Edelman, “denies the pressure of the Real” (96). Punk’s “No future”—embodied
by accepting the status as trash—sought to pressurize this Real, sought to occupy the space available for distraction.

**The Force in Bearing No Future**

In conclusion, I want to pass through the use of punk in a couple of the canonical figures that inform my thinking: Žižek and Jameson. I wish to conclude by suggesting that the labor of punk, and, therefore, the labor of figuring a subtractive, abortive, irreplaceable subject positionality, is not a “withdrawal.” It is not to be confused with any sort of bohemian “dropping out.” It was rather a social affront that exceeded its commodification in albums, fashions, and other products. The past tense in the preceding sentence is crucial here. I am interested in the use of punk as an un-elaborated signification that would seem—from the rhetoric of the moments I highlight—to be effectively referential. Žižek and Jameson are uninterested in punk’s continuing dynamic of policing itself. Of course, however, the “punk underground,” if it means anything to its newly interpellated subjects, as Craig O’hara’s *The Philosophy of Punk* makes clear, is the labor of keeping the referent policed and, thus, open. The “punk” Žižek and Jameson discuss is interesting because the “what ‘punk’ was—what ‘punk’ is” suspense is forgone for a *what punk did* and *what punk does* discursive force in the referent’s lack of open-endedness and, presumably, in punk subculture’s failure. The punk intervention, I think it will be safe to say, transmits a great deal of force for Žižek and Jameson, even as they suggest it was not—could not have been—a transforming force. In their rhetoric, punks, those whose culture work could be generalized under the rubric of “punk,” become rather curious specters haunting the real in *productive* ways without producing any new contaminated products, with only those original contaminated products still—and this is the point—contaminating. It is as if those products of social protest—condemned from the start as commodities—spit out forces which antagonize the serene superficiality of globalization that, of course, Jameson and Žižek know covers up—
buries—its destruction as mere ugliness. It is, as well, as if those products of social protest antagonize Jameson and Žižek’s descriptions of this superficiality as superficiality. The presence of punk in their texts suggest there is still the possibility for defacements. The punk intervention seems to provide a certain fraying in a postmodern that otherwise presents itself (and is presented) as complete. Of course, it is this very stain to which I want to give weight, enough weight to break the imaginary membrane between survival and destruction I have been elaborating.

Again, Žižek’s and Jameson’s punk is an unelaborated, one might even say un-nuanced, punk, and, in this fine focus (or lack of focus, as the case may be), punk accrues a certain ghostly presence in the social and in their characterizations of that social. Something about punk signification—the product of many people’s labor—will complicate postmodernism’s defining feature: the erasure of (subjects of) history. Both Žižek’s and Jameson’s references to punk arise, ultimately, in a consideration of the possibility for or impossibility of—to use Jameson’s phrase—“new subjects of history.” Punk emerges well before what we might call the current constellation of new social movements. To move from the solipsistic desperation captured in Pynchon’s and Coppola’s figurations of an underground to punk’s more menacing desperation may seem, of course, a curious precursor to the rise of the new social movements, the rise of an active counter-globalization movement, but the problematic at the heart of these texts bears a certain witness to an inefficacy at the heart of these movements, at the heart of collectivization as such in the postmodern.

Žižek (2002) observes that this new global movement is, in fact, more global than the global capitalism it protests since it accounts “both for the totality of global capitalism and for its excluded dark side,” organized by or organized to include global capital’s excluded and
victimized populations and mindful of—making a point to keep in mind—global capital’s waste-making, the occluded content of an un-cognitively mapped ease. Yet, the New Social Movements—given a proper name by Žižek to suggest the impossibly global character of its hegemonic negotiating manifestation, that is, when “it” inevitably tends toward negotiation—are confronted by an establishment “always ready to ‘listen to their demands,’ depriving them of their proper political sting (300). The system is by definition ecumenical, open, tolerant, ready to ‘listen’ to all—even if you insist on your demands, they are deprived of their universal political sting by the very form of negotiation.” Thus, there seems some poverty in the state of demand, demand as a declarative exercise dispelled of its performative force. The formulation of demands in some way cuts through the force of collectivization itself as the making of a demand. Demands—much like threats in the preceding chapter—are welcomed by the regime of production that wants to give—and that ultimately wants to placate—the superego injunction to “Enjoy.” The articulating of demand manages to, or, perhaps more precisely, it manages, the inherent violence of demand, a violence—as both Pynchon and Coppola show in mining the underground—that tends toward the destructive, if not the suicidal.

For Žižek the poverty of making demands reveals the deadlocked possibilities of a centrist, reforming “Third Way” of politics that listens to demands as a means toward reproducing precisely the deadlock, the sediment of a liberal-democratic consensus with global capital “going on indefinitely, without change” (302). Advocates of radical change are tempered by liberalism’s effectively (synchronically) blackmailed proposition of the need to neutralize the Right, fearful of the fascist possibility always bound to the possible disruption of the system “working” as is. Žižek then concludes we should return to the Situationist slogan whereby—when reality is constructed as a bartered conciliation to ward off catastrophe—to be a “true
realist” requires “demanding the impossible,” “breaking out of the constraints of what appears ‘possible’.” Thus, for Žižek, the revolutionary project should become one of “repeating Lenin,” in whose figure exists the passion to demand the disruption of such deadlocks, the opening up of “the field of possibility,” locating “the utopian spark in it worth saving” (310). Žižek reminds us that, as the demands which conclude *The Communist Manifesto* are now part of today’s consensus, today’s bourgeois democracy is the result of proletarian class struggle, and, having failed to deliver completely, the emancipation projects at the turn of the century remain an unfinished project. This is in keeping with Hardt and Negri (2000), who argue much of the communicative possibility making the new social movements possible (the immaterial labor regime that offers both the possibility for hope and exploitation) results from the proletarian struggle to re-imagine labor (290–294). In short, in the very composition of the new social movements we find the very labor of demand that must push through the current poverty in demand.

“To repeat Lenin,” writes Žižek, “is to repeat not what Lenin did but what he failed to do, his missed opportunities” (310). Of course, in Žižek’s polemic it is curious to note how the strategy of repeating—as a fidelity to the force of demand Lenin embodies—is characterized in Situationist discourse, which must then model a particular form of repeating. What I am interested in accessing, then, is punk subculture as a particular intervention into demand making. The punk Event captured in the late 1970s—which, as Greil Marcus (1989) has outlined, offers its own variant of repeating the Situationist demand—serves as an intervention running a similar course (as presented in the previous chapter) with Žižek’s own thought on the “unbearable presence”—or the demand—of subtraction, of impassive refusal, the protest that makes no specific demand, but rather insists on being heard, insists on *demanding*. 
Punk has a curious life in Žižek’s work. In an early volume, 1993’s *Tarrying with the Negative*, one of Žižek’s early exercises with the problems of nationalism, he concludes with a scene from post-fall Eastern Europe to illustrate how the transition from socialism to capitalism (and democratization) ultimately engenders nationalism. In part, nationalism is a form of organization that closes the “open, undecided process” that carries the freight of “its traumatic origins” (228-229) and, thus, the need to “obliterate” them. The “open situation” of the post-Communist moment drives toward a “synchronous totality…render[ing] invisible its ‘possibility’”: “Once the process of democratization had reached its peak, it buried its detonators.” Among the detonators: the “new social movements” (non-proper) and punk. This is, of course, an interesting pairing for my purposes here. Both are “undergrounds” of different guises, but the difference between any particular new social movement and punk would seem to have to be drawn specifically at the line of demand. Each social movement has its particular demand. However, punk, which has no list of specific demands, no particular grievance amidst all its grievance, persists only as demand, characterized most prominently by its ambiguous description of—or demand for—“No future” and the command to “Destroy,” notably delivered intransitively (the snarled coda to The Sex Pistols’ first single “Anarchy in the UK”). One of the “negative” critiques of punk that I’ll outline below is the case for punk existing as some sort of ontological purity, as an “authentic” mode of being, losing sight of its relationship to its initial demand, the deliverance of “No future.” Žižek is not compelled to draw any distinction. These impulses, Žižek observes, “suddenly and enigmatically lost ground and more or less disappeared from the scene.” “A chaotic array of punkers, students with their sit-ins, committees for human rights, etc.,” notes Žižek, “…literally became invisible the moment the new system established itself and therewith its own myth of origins.” In the movement from punk to “national poems and
quasi-folkloric commercial music,” I’m not sure just how literally we are to take Žižek’s “literal” invisibility here, but the suggested purge of the punk from the scene of closure, from the settled regime of the social pact, says much about the punk figure, the punk figured visibly in the moment of rupture but eradicated—driven underground, perhaps—in the need to obliterate the traces of trauma, detonation, and indeterminacy. Once the future is settled so to speak in the settling on a future, the mediation offered by punk’s affirmation of “No future” vanishes; the punk is no longer needed. The specificity of the punk emergence and eradication is unexplored by Žižek and, thus, a thought I want to advance further.

In a later volume, 1999’s *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek reaffirms a certain cynicism about new social movements—presumably in the geopolitical spaces where nationalism need not cover up the labor and product of their demands—and suggests that such bristling, particular micro-politics is precisely the subjective content needed for a de-centered, de-stabilized, self-generating capital, where demands can be quickly commodified and, thus, seemingly met. Nothing, however, ultimately changes: “all this incessant activity of fluid, shifting identities…ultimately resembles the obsessional neurotic…frantically active precisely in order to ensure that something—what *really matters*—will *not* be disturbed, that it will remain immobilized” (354). Žižek repeats his reading of the passage from communist statism to democracy qua capitalism to reiterate such a point, as Communists cum ex-Communists—that is, the same class—ultimately retained power, and, Žižek reminds, dissidents—not named here as punks or as new social movements—“played the role of ‘vanishing mediators’ on the way from socialism to capitalism,” the purging of the demand for (real) democracy from its finally incompatible economic partner. Nationalism is the answer when the de-politicization of the economy delivers the very need to reassert competitive, economically sustaining “communities” like “the nation.”
Žižek then suggests that the de-politicized economy is the “the disavowed ‘fundamental fantasy’ of postmodern politics” since intelligibility—and the labor of intelligibility—is an enterprise of inscribing subjectivity into the competing terrain of that economy (354). But, Žižek is careful not to disavow “the tremendous liberating impact of the postmodern politicization of domains which were hitherto considered apolitical” and is careful to resist any “return to some new version of so-called economic essentialism” (356). He insists, though, on being mindful of how a de-politicized economy generates not only progressive communities but New Rights, Moral Majorities, and Nationalist Parties, the very obstacles to the realization of the very demands of postmodern politics. He writes, “I am pleading for a ‘return to the primacy of the economy’ not to the detriment of the issues raised by postmodern forms of politicization, but precisely in order to create the conditions for the more effective realization of feminist, ecological, and so on, demands.” While the “and so on” in Žižek’s rhetoric may be dismissive, it does grammatically reinforce the intertwined dynamic of excessive demands and a continuously re-motivated and re-animated capitalism, the structural coincidence of demand (or more so demand-making) and the very signification of the future, upon which so much of what Paul Smith (1997) describes as capitalist fundamentalism is currently inscribed: a promissory egalitarianism (neoliberal globalization) and an end-of-history sedimentation of the hegemonic economies of survival (uneven geographical development as globalization).

Before further reflecting on this point, note that Žižek’s conversation about the necessity of re-thinking, recommitting to, that is, repeating, a project for the re-politization of the economy, is, then, reinforced by several paragraphs detailing the possible “global implosion” of a de-politicized economy, including a reference to punk, a reference encrusted in the obvious contradiction of punk:
Paradoxically—and not without irony—the first musical trend which was in a way ‘fabricated’, exploited for a short time and very soon forgotten since it laced the musical substance to survive and attain the status of ‘classics’ like the early rock of the Beatles and Rolling Stones, was none other than punk, which simultaneously marked the strongest intrusion of violent working-class protest into mainstream pop culture—in a kind of mocking version of the Hegelian infinite judgment, in which opposites directly coincide, the raw energy of social protest coincided with the new level of commercial prefabrication which, as it were, creates the object it sells out of itself, with no need for some ‘natural talent’ to emerge and be subsequently exploited… (358)

Of course, the “coincidence” Žižek describes is not perfect, for it intersects first with not only the “new level” of economy but, as well, as Giovanni Arrighi’s history articulates (1994), the passing away of a former level—or stage—centered (so to speak) in England. Thus, the coincidence of social protest and commercialization is not as self-engendering as Žižek may suggest. While Žižek uses this theoretical space to advocate a re-politicization of the economy, might it also be possible to see the punk intervention as having something of the same desire? Of course, their politicization of the economy, as Žižek himself notes, is driven toward the very implosion proper re-politization curtails; when Žižek references Marx’s metaphorical association of capital to the vampire, requiring the content “outside itself” upon which to feed, the reflexive economy of punk in some way becomes capital’s death drive, the vampire as its own parasite; punk can be read as a parody of this vampirism, but in Žižek’s sense it is very real. For the advocate of subjective destitution, of “the ultimate revolutionary ethical stance,” of “willingly accepting the role of ‘vanishing mediator’” (379), it is curious to know why Žižek’s “punk” isn’t offered as a new social movement of properly impossible demands?

What might be useful to read into Žižek’s text is his emphasis on the word punk, which, presumably at that conceptual point in the text was supposed to catch the reader off guard—as if it were possible to believe punk was not “fabricated.” That Žižek himself suspends fabrication in quotes suggests some trepidation on his part to suggest that punk was, in fact, a fabrication.
There then emerges a rift in the ability to know how sincerely Žižek offers “raw energy” later in his text. Raw energy, it seems, should be suspended in quotes, as, according to Žižek’s logic, it is a commercial by-product, a by-product of commercialism, a repackaged excretion, far from raw material. But, again, this seems to have been precisely Žižek’s point: punk is emblematic not of political gesture but of a reflexive capitalism. But as an emblem of a capitalism veering toward an implosion, unable to “feed” on a truly “raw” productivity as it were—capitalism in its postmodern extreme—turning its colonization, as Jameson has described, toward the subconscious, punk subculture is then figured precisely as punk subculture desired to be figured: as the very expedient detonation of this, when and where the reflexive pronoun needs no exact referent beyond its totalization. The Weirdos sang, “We’ve got the neutron bomb.” It would seem to me the economy then has been re-politicized, certainly not in any egalitarian or pragmatic way, but in a way precisely unlike the post-political demands Žižek characterized as impotent (a word I strategically use for its connections throughout my elaborations) and in a way that casts Žižek in a much more pragmatic way. Perhaps, and here Žižek could stand-in for any number of cultural commentators on punk or postmodernism for that matter, there is some mourning for the decision to “fabricate.” So much of the continued discourse on punk submerges itself into discussions of “selling out” against the humanist grasp of the “authenticity” in not selling out; punk’s relationship with commodification forever stains some “raw energy,” forever betraying the “what could have been” of that “raw energy” being directed elsewhere (into protest of some other order), as if—and this is the point the following outlines—the very project of this form of protest was not in fact an insinuation into commodification, was not in fact the labor of providing the sacrificial content that secures the death drive of capital (as Žižek precisely reads its potential).
What then becomes particularly curious in Žižek’s text is his choice of “forgotten,” which would seem more appropriately exchanged for abandoned, as the very “forgetting” or “abandoning” is precisely the economic move proper of a capitalism less unwieldy than one would want to imagine (Consider how both Žižek and Jameson, discussed in the previous chapter, advocate—not without reservation—a language of conspiracy in describing capitalism).

Žižek knows well punk is not forgotten, hence its presence in the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe a decade and more later. What I think Žižek’s own text betrays is a need to engage punk further than the negative appraisal to which its intervention seems the arch-testimony. Also, one must engage punk further than the affirmative appraisals of punk subculture found in a cultural studies that too often enshrines punk as that authentic mode of being. Take, for example, David Muggleton’s account of punk subculture (2000), one that dispels the notions of Hebdige and Willis (1993)—both of whom insist on punk’s relationship to economic structures—and seemingly labors to extract punk’s Event from any sort of economic determinism, shifts the discourse to “freedom,” punk as “freedom from rules, structures, controls and from the predictability of conventional lifestyles” (167). Muggleton concludes, “subcultures are manifestations of self-expression, individual autonomy and cultural diversity, and that these traits have an elective affinity with bohemian values.” Thus, Muggleton’s affirmation of punk brings into relief with it both punk as some inconsequential fashion choice that asserts the “subject of value” of capitalism and a historical continuum that merely provides some supplementary space where punk is a reiteration of a history of withdrawals, is purely subterranean, another identity politic, locked into the symbolic structure of what one really needs to survive. What of wanting not to need? Of fuck this? What of the imperative to destroy?
What of the desire for no future? There appears to be the aggrandizement of punk subculture to assuage the failure of punk subculture if we are—or were—to take its initial demands to heart.

Consider, for example, how punk exists in Jameson’s *Postmodernism*. Early he writes, we arrive at time when “even overtly political interventions like those of *The Clash* are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it” (49). What interests me most is Jameson’s use of the commodity—the Clash’s eponymously titled first album—as his example. Does something happen—is there something different to say—if the band’s name itself is placed in the sentence? The Clash exists as something else of which that lone text is only a fraction. Their touring, their “invasion” of Broadway, their existence as *band* (in all its Deleuzian richness) all figure differently into “the system.” The Clash exists in something else, in an underground, a series of networks and proliferations that potentially escape the system, if not only because they are forgotten. Most importantly lost in the choice is the decision-making, the decision to enter “the system” as a text mindful of the very cost in doing so: its potential cancellation, the expense of the other choice, another future (a cost that, in fact, Jameson’s own choice both fails to account for and repeats). But—and this is Jameson’s point—do they ever threaten to destroy the system as Žižek may have insinuated such a postmodern feeding may be able to do? If the dilemma, again, of postmodernism is “the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational networks in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (44), I believe punk, an underground (the signifier in all its generality), can be a privileged site of investigation for, it seems to me, it is already produced in some shared response to some seemingly inadequate mapping made (perhaps, forced by) the prevalent communicational networks. As counter-space, the
underground—while even if susceptible at all turns to being reabsorbed—exists as the recognition of some failure already in the system, to some weighing of the costs of going on as if nothing can change. I imagine a text produced by an underground could remain condemned to meta-commentary—such as how the Gang of Four’s song “Damaged Goods” recognizes itself as damaged goods—if it were not that the song demands attention to its own moment of recognition: Punk refuses to be, as Jameson famously reads Andy Warhol’s paintings, silent.

Later in Jameson’s text, the punk signifier—not any particular punk “product” or any particular punk collective—emerges as just that kind of force in a line of flight by which the punk Event is now an aesthetic assemblage, one to be contained in postmodernism, by the postmodern cultural logic. In his readings of the then new nostalgia films of the eighties—Something Wild and Blue Velvet—the labor of nostalgia is a dialectical play of the elegance of the inherited nostalgia film form and “the grade-B simulations of iconoclastic punk film.” These films figure—arrive at, even in their attempt to identify the present—the failure of a history reduced to stereotypes. In both films, Jameson seems to suggest, in the drive toward some nostalgic perfection, some crystalline suburban past, this elegance must depend on “a negation which seems in our time to have shed its class content…and to have gradually migrated into that new complex of meanings that bears the name punk.” Elsewhere, Jameson refers to punk as the “trash aesthetic,” and it is at that point I would wonder if in remembering that punk was something one did to the body—the trash aesthetic of the body, the trashed body—if a “class content”—thinking of how Balibar recognizes a production of a true trash class in globalization—could ever be shed in such a signification. But for now, in Jameson’s reading, this punk signification is a constellation of associations: “menace,” “S&M,” “evil,” “guilt,” “unpredictability,” “the gothic.” These significations disrupt “elegance” as the smooth space
cultural memory desires. But punk, too, is fashion, and its reference here marks, is supposed to mark, as well, that dis-embodied “politics of style”: through the punk signifier—as some cosmetic rebellion against normativity—the 50s and the 60s can be dis-remembered as the introduction of lifestyle politics (that historical continuum of the subterranean, the bohemian), but in such a way that lifestyling is a politics, that the content of “alternative lifestyles” was in opposition to real political menace. But this signification of punk is precisely one subject to the operations Jameson describes whereby image culture puts a sheen on the antagonism that generated the fashioning of a new body, of a new life.

And so something of “punk”—what is the constellation produced by the cultural labors of punks—seems to exist in all the perverse machinations a film must go through to absolve the past of its antagonistic becoming. What these films want is a cleansed punk too, a purged punk, where punk seems to stand in for precisely that which must be purged to offer the ahistorical dreamland they desire. Part of the dynamic of these films is to expose and then purge an underclass—criminal, deviant, punk—seething with violence; how can a marriage of respectability (normativity) and unpredictability (the space where normativity offers fashion) be had when the everyday teems with this menace. Of course, the answer has much to do with fashion, with imagining some non-historical historical past, some nostalgic utopia purged of the punk, purged of revolt and ressentiment, purged of all that which reminds that the present is the postmodern deliverance promised, a particular image of “no future” since the future still anticipates antagonism.

Of course, these, too, are the films where Jameson expounds on the contemporary gothic, and it is the punk signifier which too holds the place of menace. Jameson remarks on how the new figures of evil are not particularly frightening and that their playing at evil is not only a
simulated “gothiness” but a simulated rebellion, the sorts of bad guys who threatened homes and neighborhoods, not systems. Think, for instance, of how punk’s antagonism has become a part of gentrification efforts, making cultural zones of decaying urban areas, giving old neighborhoods character if not fashionable menace before the Starbucks “really”—from a marketing standpoint—rejuvenates the area. The punk today is lost in any real revolutionary project and emblematic of the way capital regenerates. And I wonder if it is, then, not the cultural-aesthetic evocation of menace (the ambivalent figure of demand—what do you really want?) that becomes the rub of smooth global capital, since the “real” demands of a proletariat have no potency and offer investment opportunities in their own right. Here, then it is important to recognize something in the punk body—both really beaten, trashed, punctured, bruised, and playing at being trashed, simulating a “gothiness,” fashioning a ghostliness—that rubs ever so closely to being the figuration that as lived returns to the contemporary and contemporaneous scene of its execution a contestatory spectacle that disrupts the scene of distracting spectacles.

Susan Willis, critiquing the American expropriation of both Hebdige and de Certeau by way of the American punk variant hardcore, reminds that punk—for whatever else it meant (or means)—was, in fact, an economic marker, a positioning in relation to consumer society—even for American suburban youth. Of course, this drift to the demarcation of that which is not a redneck (as Willis describes it for her subject) from that which is trash is precisely the gap which marks a consumerist society’s filling of the void with precisely the image that should haunt it—if only it were a ghost. But, “menace” is a hardy ideological construct that itself cannot be purged; what are purged rather are those signifiers that—no matter how refracted or conflicted—signify punk. The gestures, the tactics, the re-articulatory practices of punk—of punk subjects—manifest in such a way that aesthetic signifiers must labor to purge them.
Late capitalism, Jameson notes in his contribution to *Ghostly Demarcations* (1999), in whose becoming the punk too emerges, offers “a present that has already triumphantly exorcized all of its ghosts and believes itself to be without a past and without a spectrality, late capitalism itself as ontology, the pure presence of the world-market system freed from all the errors of human history and of previous social formations” (58). This is, of course, a “sterile repetition” that still reproduces itself again and again. Punk, at least for as long as trash could be stylized in the context of actual trash piles, forced the collapse of the semantic space needed to underwrite the gothic fantasies that exorcize the ghosts—that is, the victims—of the world market. Now the citizens had to learn to hate their own children. A poignant difference here must be made between violences. Unlike a generation moved toward political violence, although inspired by such violence, punk now produced a more inscrutable violence. It must be noted that repeatedly—but never critically—references in punk are made to the turn to terroristic violence. In Savage’s history of *The Sex Pistols* he describes “a diaspora of the underground community” formed in the wake of the Angry Brigade’s turn to terrorism; a rift that created the very nihilistic space (the sense of an end to solutions) punk poaches. The Stiff Little Fingers packaged their demo tape—featuring a song entitled “Suspect Device”—as a suspect device. Punk flyers and others sorts of punk art often took the communiqués and ransom letters of underground militants as a template. Thus, this more inscrutable violence is self-mutilating, thuggish, ambivalently political, and, most evocatively, semiotic, that is, knowingly spectacular. Thus, the point at which, as Jameson describes in “Periodizing the 60s,” when the postmodern forecloses the potentialities of the decade—that is, when politics turns to dramatizing state power, turning thus to violence, and, then, ultimately, inscribed into the spectacle—punk takes this fate as a starting point for intervention. Its violence—mostly operating on the terrain of the symbolic, although
not without its wounds and beatings—was not the material for an easily conscripted gothic fantasy simply because the desire in such violence could not be written into a paranoid political fantasy since the violence demanded nothing, nothing in particular, demanded the im-particular, no future. In fact, it produced—or perhaps, more properly, revealed—a detest that was nakedly brutal; in *The Filth and The Fury*, archival footage shows British politician Bernard Brook-Partridge suggesting, “Most of these groups would be vastly improved by sudden death. [They are] the antithesis of humankind; the whole world would be vastly improved by their total and utter non-existence.” A spectacular exercise in subtracting the difference between trash—an unemployed population as economic crisis shifts dynamics—and trash—the street piles of refuse as labor power plays an old gambit—ultimately reveals a rather candid summation of an economic violence that believes it can wish away its ghosts, that dreams of a “total and utter non-existence” of friction.

Finally, Bataille writes, “We can ignore or forget the fact that the ground we live on is little other than a field of multiple destructions.” I have used the metaphor of the underground as a way to index both these destructions and the way its production in part produces this ignorance. I, of course, believe by teasing out the metaphor of underground we can sharpen our attention. The underground—the emergence of an underground—can be a serviceable index to this field of destructions, not because it points to a destruction (or even necessarily a hope for undoing these destructions) but because the very production of the language of ideologically distributing bodies, of the active labor of the passion for real (closed to language and perception), points to a political unconscious wrestling with this knowledge.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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