

## Behind the Scenes: Production, Animation, and Postmodern Value

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Perhaps the most dramatic and arresting of all the moments in Marx's elaborately crafted nineteenth-century epic *Das Kapital* is the transition he effects between the superficial cacophonies of the marketplace and the 'hidden abode' of production:

Let us therefore, in company with the owner of money and the owner of labour-power, leave this noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone, and follow them into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there hangs the notice 'No admittance except on business'. Here we shall see, not only how capital produces, but how capital is itself produced. The secret of profit-making must at last be laid bare.<sup>1</sup>

The promised unmasking of what lies 'on the surface and in full view of everyone', this turn to a subterranean realm, where a cabal secretly orchestrates the patterns of everyday life in its own interests, is an immensely seductive narrative ploy. It resonates not only with the generic timbres of Homer's *Nekyia* and Dante's *Inferno*, but more contemporaneously with the urban '*mystères*' of metropolitan concealment and revelation (in Eugène Sue among others<sup>2</sup>), and with Goethe's Mephistopheles, who lures the scholar Faust from the superficial erudition of his study and drops him headlong into the true meaning of things:

*Ich gebe dir, was noch kein Mensch gesehen.*<sup>3</sup>

The chance to follow the 'owner of money and the owner of labour power' into a shadow-spectacle that 'lays bare' the truth of value is of course irresistible. And yet, once we are there, taken by the hand and admitted to the truth of 'how capital is itself produced', there can be little question: how

ugly and dull it all is! Not just the dreary expanse of labour in every direction, the grim waste of human powers expended in the name of alienated profits, the clang and crash of hideous machines which dwarf the human frame; but even more so the arid formulae in whose name the entire show is conducted—M-C-M',  $C = c + v$ ,  $C' = (c + v) + s \dots$ . What a cruel disappointment! Yet surely that is Marx's point: it is deflating that the secret truth of capitalist value should be this dismal and dejecting series of abstract laws, depleted bodies and hulking machines. As a spectacle, production is a colossal narrative let-down, filling up hundreds of pages with demographic data, economic formulae, parliamentary reports and industrial statistics. At least Dickens threw in a circus (in *Hard Times*); his contemporary Marx preferred to allow the tedious truth of production to build to a tension that would become a political time-bomb.

The basic promise of the Marxian narrative of production was a kind of explanatory depth, a guarantee of final decipherment. Whatever the giddy 'theological niceties', the capricious cavorting of commodity culture, beneath or behind it all lurked this abode of production, the hidden truth of capitalist society, where value was forged through a primitive but persistent deception carried on behind the back of a 'living wage':

the worker, during one part of the labour process, produces only the value of his labour power, i.e. the value of his means of subsistence ... a particular commodity, yarn for example, with a value equal to the value of his means of subsistence, or the money for it. ...

During the second period of the labour process, that is when his labour is no longer necessary labour, the worker does indeed expend labour-power, he does work, but his labour is no longer necessary labour, and he creates no value for himself. He creates surplus-value which, for the capitalist, has all the charms of something created out of nothing.<sup>4</sup>

At a given point in the evolution of the capitalist mode of production, however, two things happened to challenge the morphology of Marx's 'depth-model'. In the first place, the spectacular lures of Mephistopheles

were relocated from a realm out of sight to the sphere 'where everything takes place on the surface'. That is to say, spectacle, or the promise of a fulfilment at the level of image-consumption, was elevated to the surface domain of the marketplace itself. Far from being the event that would ultimately explain the mysteries of circulation and consumption, 'spectacle' was employed to defer and substitute for that moment of epistemological satisfaction. The most famous formulation of this epochal shift is that of Guy Debord, in whose memorable words, 'The spectacle is *capital* to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image'.<sup>5</sup> There is no longer a fluid dispersal of innumerable commodities, but a congealed spectacle 'where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which simultaneously impose themselves as the tangible *par excellence*'.<sup>6</sup> Humankind is held in thrall to the spectacle of its own productivity, an immense and captivating image, which takes the place of substantial freedoms. Work in this world is already and immediately the image of work, which workers consume as compensation for their efforts rendered. In Jean Baudrillard's intensification of this argument, when the whole world has been reconfigured as a 'simulacrum' which 'bears no relation to any reality whatever', the '*scenario* of work is there to conceal the fact that the work-real, the production-real, has disappeared'.<sup>7</sup> This supposed vanishing of the 'production-real' is the second event that marks postmodernism, as we are about to see; but Baudrillard's jeremiad bears further amplification in this context:

This isn't a science-fiction dream: everywhere it is a question of the doubling of the work process ... a wizardry of work, a *trompe l'oeil*, a scenodrama (not to say melodrama), of production, collective dramaturgy upon the empty stage of the social.<sup>8</sup>

Here Baudrillard flippantly disabuses the metropolitan Left of its nostalgia for the space of production as the underlying reality or truth of consumer society. Having been outflanked by a ruse of power that transformed the ugly monotony of Marx's vision of the 'hidden abode' into a seductive 'scenodrama' of the spectacle itself, any attachment to 'production' as the exclusive origin of value begins to look politically absurd. The 'spectacularization' of the workplace can be seen not only in the limitless production of

corporate short-films to introduce workers into their new places of employment, or in the ever increasing use of the mass media by unions and workplace activists, but above all in the cinematic imaginaries of films from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (Germany, 1927) to Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (Great Britain, 1985), where even the hellish aspects of modern working conditions are fully 'spectacularized' and converted into consumable and enjoyable images.

The perverse projection of labour into spectacle is further conditioned by the second dimension of postmodernization—namely, the leap-frogging displacement of primary industry itself under the banner of what used to be called 'post-industrialism'. Postmodernism 'happened' in part because that 'hidden abode' of production was successfully hidden all over again in a desperate line of flight away from the metropolitan centres of accumulation and consumption—in Jameson's lapidary paraphrase, 'first to Mexico, and then to China.'<sup>9</sup> When André Gorz penned his emblematic *Farewell to the Working Class* in the early 1980s, it was both to underscore the real decline in the effective power of organized labour in the political and economic landscape of late capitalism, and to point out the costs of a growing trend among industries employing low-skilled workforces, of relocating to countries where labour was relatively inexpensive and unregulated.<sup>10</sup> If we add to this complex the consequences of the fall of the Soviet Bloc, we can perhaps agree with Slavoj Žižek that the 'idea of labour (material, industrial production) as the privileged site of community and solidarity', once particularly strong in Eastern Europe and Russia, has been pushed off the imaginary map of contemporary global space altogether:

Therein perhaps resides the ultimate cause of *Ostalgie*, a continuing sentimental attachment to the defunct 'real Socialism' of the former GDR—the sense that, in spite of all its failures and horrors, something precious was lost with its collapse, that has now been repressed once again into a criminal underground. For in the ideological sensibility of the West today, is it not work itself—manual labour as opposed to 'symbolic' activity—rather than sex, that has become the site of obscene indecency to be concealed from the public eye? The tradition, which goes back to Wagner's *Reingold* and Lang's *Metropolis*, in which the working process takes place in dark caves underground, now culminates in

the millions of anonymous workers sweating in Third World factories, from Chinese gulags to Indonesian or Brazilian assembly lines. Due to the invisibility of all these, the West can afford to babble about the 'disappearance of the working class'.<sup>11</sup>

This seems directly to contradict Baudrillard's observations about the centrality of a certain 'scenario' of work to our present-day simulacrum, cut adrift from all contact with the 'work-real' that now thrives in China and the Third World. After all, Žižek's formulation returns us to the diagnosis of Marx, in which what is most in need of 'repression' from the surface of bourgeois society is that very spectacle of 'manual labour', which here is being driven all over again into 'dark caves' away from the sensitive eyes of postmodern subjects; whereas Baudrillard had assured us that we are all perfectly comfortable with, and indeed reliant upon, a certain spectacular image of production: 'What society seeks through production, and overproduction, is the restoration of the real which escapes it. That is why *contemporary 'material' production is itself hyperreal*. It retains all the features, the whole discourse of traditional production, but it is nothing more than its scaled-down refraction'.<sup>12</sup> If we reach mentally for an image of 'sweatshop conditions', we are overwhelmed with imaginary candidates, taken fresh from our television screens. How are we to square this circle?

My sense is that it is not enough simply to refer to the real political antagonism between these representative intellectual figures; for the irreconcilable positions they assume on 'labour', as an image to be either repressed from or paraded throughout postmodern culture, actually mediate obscure and difficult questions concerning the production of value itself in our society. In order to begin thinking these questions in their real complexity, I want to conduct a rapid tour through some recent attempts, in film and fiction, to map the emergence of value in a society driven by a 'spectacular' array of commodities from which all traces of production have been erased, and yet still necessarily tied, at however many removes, to the 'anonymous workers sweating in Third World factories' without whom, presumably, the entire system would collapse. The texts I want to survey are David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (Japan, 1998), Mark J. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), Olivier Assayas'

*demonlover* (France, 2002), and William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003). My task will be to analyse these attempts at the level of symbolic activity, clumsy and provisional as they may be, to reconnect the products of our 'simulacrum' with the realm of 'material, industrial production'. If any such symbolic attempt has indeed been successful, then it should direct some urgently needed light back on the seemingly imponderable question of value in our world today.

There is no *a priori* unity binding the cycle of works I want to examine here, whose Ur-text is doubtless David Cronenberg's exemplary *Video-drome* (Canada, 1983), with its fascinated attraction to a secret plot linking video pornography, snuff films, violent political takeover and media theory. Rather, what I want to discern is something like a symptomatic tropology manifesting itself in a collective international effort to use narrative form, in text and film, to specify the altered conditions for the production of value in our world. Like a structural tic, one particular device keeps asserting its functionality in this context, and has undergone significant evolution. It is the trope of a 'hidden scene' of an altogether different variety from Marx's, a scene that circulates restlessly on a black market of exchange and consumption, and takes on determinate medial forms: a film canister or video cartridge or, better yet, a website or digital download. Value in our culture is here understood as having to do with 'spectacularity', to be sure, but this is a spectacle nowhere to be found on the official channels of visual dissemination. Rather, this 'hidden scene' tends to appear at the ragged edges or in the interstices of our spectacle society, an illegitimate, excessive, compulsive, and often deadly visual 'hit' whose value inheres precisely in its not having been broadcast from the centre. It convokes, or exhorts, a shadowy confraternity of disciple-victims, whose thorough absorption by the 'hidden scene' is understood to be the major source of its value, the other source of which is an elusive space of manufacture. The place of 'labour' in this genesis of postmodern value is curiously triplicated: first, there is this primordial realm of manual-technical production as such (the film or video or digital download has been meticulously crafted, generally by some genius or visual auteur); second, there is the manic and diffuse symbolic labour of the consumers of this product, their collective effort to reconstruct its meaning, provenance and priority within the media-sphere; and third, there

is (generally) the exhaustive investigative labour of a character placed somewhere between these two poles, the journalist-critic-exegete put in our position of trying to connect the severed realms of production and consumption. What distinguishes the resultant visual product from its spectacular environment is just this dense layering of *work*; the general spell of social reification otherwise prohibiting any sign of labour from bubbling up to trouble the uninterrupted flow of simulation, these 'hidden scenes' accrue immediate value by virtue of the Real of production that is in them and which they in turn generate. What is initially uncertain, however, is whether this reintroduction of labour into the very space of consumption is a 'good' or a 'bad' thing.

Tellingly, the first in our sequence of texts, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), has not yet been able to divide this question into its constituent parts, but drives good and bad into one another in the form of what Michiko Kakutani called 'an object much sought after by terrorists: a movie reputed to be so entertaining, so lethally perfect, that it causes anyone who so much as looks at it to become comatose and, literally, to die of pleasure'.<sup>13</sup> Thus is inaugurated the archetypal form of the 'new' and valuable in this cycle of works: a cultural artefact of singular power, emerging from the fringes of the official media, galvanizing a certain fanatical sub-cultural following before either leading to catastrophic social effects, vanishing altogether, or becoming available to the co-optative attentions of the media system it begins by rejecting. Wallace's allegorical film 'Infinite Jest', the white whale of his narrative, is simultaneously what one most wishes to see, because of its rarity and the promise of happiness it raises and fulfils in a single short-circuiting act of consumption, and what one most needs to avoid, since its effect is so overwhelmingly pleasurable that it deactivates the drives of the organism exposed to it, which thus retreats into what Freud called 'the *old* state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has ... departed and to which it is striving to return', via the death-drive.<sup>14</sup>

Yet the conditions of possibility for the production of this film are anything but straightforward. Although Wallace's evident 'theme' in the novel is addiction, the various narcotics of the late-capitalist marketplace and their reduction of the human body to states of dependency, inertia, and mindless-

ness, and although clearly the video-cartridge of ‘Infinite Jest’ is the most perfect such narcotic ever produced, still its origin lies supposedly (nothing is very clear here) in the tail-end of some late modernist enterprise, of art-house aesthetics, high cultural theory, and avant-gardist collective action. The work’s putative *auteur*, the late James ‘Mad Stork’ Incandenza, is a legendary figure of America’s Left-bohemia, whose various artistic periods have developed in strict reaction against the fickle cycles of theoretical fashion and the market itself, along the uncomfortable ‘entertainment vs. non-entertainment’ axis of postmodern culture, of which this final masterpiece is meant to have been a sublation and perfect synthesis. In the words of the film’s veiled lead actress, Joelle Van Dyne:

He talked about making something quote too perfect. But as a *joke*. He had a thing about entertainment, being criticized about entertainment v. nonentertainment and stasis. ... When he talked about this thing as a quote perfect entertainment, terminally compelling—it was always ironic—he was having a sly little jab at me. I used to go around saying the veil was to disguise lethal perfection, that I was too lethally beautiful for people to stand.<sup>15</sup>

To achieve its ironically infantilising goals, the film is shot literally from ‘crib’s-eye view’, the camera mounted within an infant’s bassinet, into which the beautiful veiled woman utters ‘at least twenty minutes of permutations of “I’m sorry”’ (939). But the high-risk strategy of avant-gardist irony here, offering the punters exactly what they want without even knowing it, backfires when the ‘lethal perfection’ of the film falls into the hands of terrorists who use it (like the killer joke in the Monty Python gag) as a lethal weapon in their war against the society of over-consumption.

The point is that there is a stark division between the logic of the cartridge’s production (‘modernist’, intellectual, experimental, handicraft, collective) and its eventual deployment as a tool against what it both exemplifies and supposedly critiques (consumption, image-addiction, entropy, imperialism). In so far as the realm of production is a crucial part of the cartridge’s value for the novel, it is a *nostalgia-mode* of production, a Baudrillardian ‘simulacrum’ of unalienated labour, fully disconnected from its

value at the level of distribution (anonymous terroristic mail-drops) and consumption (infantile regression and death). Indeed, the narrative of the novel largely concerns the effects on Hal, the disturbed and addicted son of Incandenza, of growing up within the crippled emotional space generated by the late-modernist *auteur*-polymath. Hal thus experiences the legacy of the film in a completely different register from the rest of its victims—as a perpetuation of Oedipal dramas played out between the infantile Imaginary (what the cartridge ideally incarnates) and the mature Symbolic Order (what the Father ‘meant’ by the film, ‘a last desperate attempt to communicate with Hal and save him’<sup>16</sup>).

At any rate, the final lesson of Wallace’s extraordinary novel is minatory and somewhat unexpected—that, in the words of a contemporary, ‘beauty is regressive and vacuous’:

The image is the commodity today, and that is why it is vain to expect a negation of the logic of commodity production from it, that is why, finally, all beauty today is meretricious and the appeal to it by contemporary pseudo-aestheticism is an ideological manoeuvre and not a creative resource.<sup>17</sup>

Wallace has tracked this point directly home to the contemporary avant-garde, and rebuked it for returning the image to the arms of Beauty under the sign of ‘irony’. His ideological deflation of the value of beauty in post-modern culture, for being consanguineous with narcotics and soul-death, is timely, but cannot after all resist the general drift of things. The irony of his own novel’s compulsiveness, indeed its well-nigh addictive pleasures, is a lesson in point. Nevertheless, it is as though the specific form he gives to his critique—a visual text circulating secretly and virally throughout the social body—by opening up the paradoxes of the situation, has endowed future writers and artists with a figurative and narrative trope that has been propitious for further development.

The next time we find it working with comparable success is in a Japanese context—the remarkable horror film *Ringu [Ring]*, whose premise concerns the existence of a cursed videotape, again circulating virally in a

closed network of fascinated teens, which kills all who watch it within seven days. The ‘labour’ represented in the film is that of the journalist, Asakawa Reiko (Matsushima Nanako), who relentlessly tracks down both the veracity of the urban myth, and the origin of the cursed tape itself, leading us to a climactic revelation of its own ‘hidden abode’ at the bottom of a deep well. Essentially, the secret of the tape’s value inheres not in ‘manual labour’ of any description, but in a refraction of the very telescoped and hyper-accelerated development of Japanese society itself—wrenched out of a largely feudal economy by the Second World War, and plumped (via the influx of American capital during the Korean War) into a fully post-modernized economy predicated on high-tech production and financial speculation. At the very basis of the mystery is a moment of traumatic encounter, between the peasant-agricultural folk-life of 1950s Oshima and the new bureaucratic, Westernized administration of Tokyo, in which the psychic fisherwoman Yamamura Shizuko is exposed to a barrage of tests to determine the authenticity of her ‘talents’, which she has meanwhile passed on to her vengeful daughter, Yamamura Sadako. It is the inarticulate and murderous rage of this latter character which is then directed outward at the rational establishment, before she is forced down a well, whence her fury seeks its final outlet and form in the videotape itself: peasant affect reinscribing itself in a postmodern medium, bypassing the ‘modern’ altogether, and discovering a fatal afterlife in the vast sprawl of Tokyo. The value of the tape here begins as merely ‘journalistic’ value, but gradually discloses its full worth in the deeper resonance of affectivity itself, not unlike Wallace’s lethal pleasure, in a context of affectless drift. Moreover, it is mediated by a very specific historical trajectory, and consists largely in a successful transcoding of one whole, rapidly extinguished way of life into the privileged medium (video) of its cultural successor, where it persists as an existential and emotional blight upon the postmodernized present. Indeed, the first three in this cycle of works all invoke something of the same premise: that an older affect or mode of production can linger on spectrally in the postmodern media whose official purpose is to make everything new and without history. Value is specifically anchored in the uncanny experience of historical recrudescence itself.

Nothing like the Japanese palimpsest of productive modes can be expected to pertain, however, for the next text in our sequence, Mark

Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, which proceeds, in an abidingly suburban American situation, from a not unrelated premise: ‘whether or not, with the advent of digital technology, image has not forsaken its once unimpeachable hold on the truth’.<sup>18</sup> If Wallace had been concerned to decry the conciliatory drift of the artistic ‘image’ back to a Beauty from which it had once (with Modernism) been sundered, Danielewski wants to come at the image from the other, documentary, end of its spectrum of effects, and query its value as ‘truth’ in a postmodern society that has long since scuttled that concept. The so-called *Navidson Record*, a collection of 8 mm. and 16 mm. film footage shot by the documentary-photographer Will Navidson in his own house, and recording some truly *unheimlich* experiences, rapidly earns the respect and veneration of a legion of true believers, before the stock vanishes forever from the face of the earth. What remains behind is a conflicting set of textual commentaries, one of which (by a blind Mexican named after the lead male character in Fellini’s *La Strada* [1954]) falls into the hands of our narrator, Johnny Truant, a Los Angeles street urchin, whose impossible quest it is (again) to connect the dots and verify the propositions. The filmed image itself disappears in a hall of media-mirrors (‘film, video, photography’ are relayed by ‘tattoos, typewriters, telegraphy, handwriting, and digital computers’<sup>19</sup>), a fact which somehow increases in inverse proportion its immanent value and the test of truth for which it stands, despite a systematic plausible deniability:

After all, as I fast discovered, Zampanò’s entire project is about a film which doesn’t even exist. You can look as I have, but no matter how long you search you will never find *The Navidson Record* in theaters or video stores. Furthermore, most of what’s said by famous people has been made up. I tried contacting all of them. Those that took the time to respond told me they had never heard of Will Navidson let alone Zampanò. (xix-xx)

In this novel, a video-8 hand-held documentary shot by an embattled master of the form is most valuable precisely in its absence—as though the ‘scene of production’, the dedicated obsession of the householder to record and re-edit his domestic horror on the last medium that can directly retain its traces, needs to have vanished in order to be fully True. It is within the

network of Chinese whispers, cult rumours, and exchanged manuscripts that the full value of the absent artefact can finally be realised: truth as *spectacle withheld*. Danielewski nods at the infinite malleability of digital code as at once the death-knell for, and the site of a potential haunting by, the traditional ‘true image’ of film and video. All of which is in turn reinscribed on the much more archaic medium of the printed book, as if to arrest the pull of our entire culture into the vicious epistemological vortex of digital code:

although Danielewski has received several lucrative offers for movie options, he remains adamant that he will not allow the book to be made into a film. Unlike artists and writers who choose to work in digital media, Danielewski, in his mid-thirties, is young enough to take computers for granted. The daring move for him is not to adopt them but to return to the print book and reinvigorate it by extending its claims in relation to a plethora of competing media.<sup>20</sup>

What is more, the ‘space of production’ as it is given here is cloyingly sentimental at best, not even avant-gardist in Wallace’s sense, but ‘objective’, domestic-authoritarian, and familial. Navidson’s purportedly heroic grip on his Rolliflex in all situations, his quick decisions concerning lenses and framings while facing the purest of horrors, are evidence of a clear-eyed pragmatism in the midst of full postmodernism, and tilt the scales of value in this fiction toward a properly immemorial zone of patriarchal handicraft production, which ‘film’ henceforth designates against digital hyperreality. Between the print culture of tradition and the looming digital holocaust of truths, filmed evidence circulates spectrally to avow the defiant ‘truth’ of what is being lost. What *House of Leaves* performs against the coming liquidation is a happy coexistence of media, in which cultural value and human subjectivity are parlayed ‘in a dynamic, ongoing material relation with the richly diverse medial ecology in which we are all immersed, including computers, television, and film, as well as print books’.<sup>21</sup> And this ‘rich diversity’ is guaranteed in its equilibrium by the residual authority of a Nobodaddy (Navidson) ostensibly retired to suburbia, but who, at the moment of crisis, will emerge to reassert his right to regulate and confer value upon the mediated truths of his culture.

All of which is then succinctly reframed by our next feature, the French ‘art-house corporate espionage’ movie, *demonlover* (Oliver Assayas, 2002). For here, and immediately, the entire question of ‘production’ is banalized. Our introduction to the actual ‘product’ that a French finance company is being invited to back and distribute in Japan is on the ‘factory floor’ of the image itself, unproblematically integrated into the scene of the sales pitch. It is a small animation studio, divided along strict gender lines (like the old Disney studios), where the women along one long desk are painstakingly painting animation cells, while the men along another are typing code into computers. This division of labour corresponds precisely to an emerging disparity of value between the two species of image produced: the hand-animated manga-porn which has initially attracted the attention of the investors is ‘already out of date’, the director of the studio tells them, while the expensive state-of-the-art 3-D digital animation he unveils is ‘what consumers want’, and what the company will need to produce if it wants to stay in business. Assayas allows us to see samples of both varieties of this intriguing exploitation material. The first excerpt, a perfect pastiche of Japanese *anime*, at first seems to be the very thing itself, hypnotically addictive visual product, until the snippets of fully immersive 3-D digital animation suddenly reframe our attitudes to the hand-drawn material, effectively forcing us to dismiss it as crude, amateurish, and behind-the-times, just as the company director wants his audience to feel. My sense is that, with the transition to the digital-grade animation, the hand-drawn product is instantly repositioned on the scale of spectacular values, looking decidedly Symbolic (arbitrary, coded, ‘materialist’) in ways it did not just moments before, while the computer-generated images directly appeal to an established Imaginary realm already extended throughout the virtual worlds of gaming and cinematic Common Gateway Interface. Value here is born in the shift between media, and the market’s privileging of the newer over the old is unblinkingly adopted as the reality principle of a film which, like many another today, explores their boundaries with an eye to the future.

This fact alone should quickly lead to some summary conclusions about the first phase of this cycle of works, all the elements of which tried resourcefully to resist the pull of contemporary value into the binary codes of computer-generated spectacle. In one way or another, that resistance was

achieved through the figure of a film or video artefact, an ‘image’ that was immediate proof of its own unalienated production, and which duly ‘vanished’ from public view, circulating clandestinely as rumour among communities of would-be users with all the hallmarks of a cult. Indeed, these communities are themselves shown to be what finally confer value upon the artefacts they commemorate, and there can be little question that Dick Hebdige’s work on ‘subculture’ needs to be factored into the ways in which these texts construct their accounts of postmodern value.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, production is figured as ‘avant-gardist’, ‘patriarchal-handicraft’, or merely ‘affective’; but these values are residual and nostalgic in essence, more or less ‘images’ themselves. This is a fact which the three texts thus far considered seem to confirm in the haste with which they relocate the origin of contemporary value within the autonomous practices of secret societies, which themselves seem to be allegorical of nothing so much as the Internet itself.

It is worth asking here what this shift at the level of narrative representation might have to do with the determination of value at the most abstract level in our society, and whether or not this more ‘consumerist’ model of value is more in accord with the ‘truth’ of our current mode of production than Marx’s theory of value. Certainly, in the eyes of Antonio Negri, a most forceful ‘re-thinker’ of Marx, ‘immediately productive labour [has lost] its centrality in the process of society ... the distinctions between “productive labour” and “unproductive labour,” between “production” and “circulation,” between “simple labour” and “complex labour” are all toppled’.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the ‘*mode of production finds in circulation its own form*’ (p. 157, my emphasis). In this argument, value today is driven and sustained by the form of circulation, of which the various subcultural networks in these texts are microcosmic and prefigurative incarnations: they effectively pinpoint the raw emergence of value in the mutual founding of laws of discursive exchange among freely participating members. In general this value will be immediately appropriated by capital, which is interested only in the colonization and equalization of every value—snatched from the peripheries and past as much as from the interstices of the centre—on its own meta-market, whose members are *not* free to decide upon their participation. What these texts seek to accomplish is the driving of a wedge between the generation of value on the margins of ‘spectacle’, and its ultimate colonization by ‘spec-

tacle’. Two things interest me here. First, the evidently *political* nature of the collective social imaginary presented by ‘secret authentic communities’ thriving in the interstices of our mode of production, with fanatical levels of commitment to new and private values, and the desire to withhold those values from the open marketplace for as long as possible.<sup>24</sup> And second, the question of whether or not all this can really be dissociated from ‘manual labour’ in the Third World and elsewhere, or whether these two separated realms cannot be reconnected in some final gesture worthy of the name of a full ‘cognitive map’ of the present.

At any rate, what I have thus far neglected to say of Assayas’ film is that the ‘image-value’ and collective it is actually most interested in mapping has to do neither with the hand-painted *anime* of women’s labour in the film, nor with the masculine computerized rendering of 3-D digital animation, but with a third term which, as if to complete the circuitry already sketched above, is nothing other than the Real itself; or, the American *demonlover* company and the ‘Hell Fire Club’ website it secretly governs—‘send us your *fantasy* and we will make it *real*’. As the wheels-within-wheels of the corporate world slowly reveal themselves to our corporate-spy protagonist, behind it all emerges into view one master ‘value,’ of which all the rival corporations are in the most desperate pursuit, and in which their culture is already fully drenched: the Real of violent desire. All paths converge at an exclusive website in which the ‘user’ or consumer can elect various forms of torture and desecration for ‘real’ women masked as any number of copy-righted fictional characters, generally selected from cartoons and other animations. If ‘animation’ is in many ways the ultimate form of ‘spectacle’ society—having severed itself completely from all indexical relations with the ‘real world,’ and constituting a completely manufactured Imaginary plenum—it seems to bring with it a corollary dissatisfaction. In the moralistic words of Wheeler Winston Dixon,

the utterly synthetic images of such blockbusters as *Titanic* (1997) and *The Matrix* (1999) ... conjure up the mechanical perfection of Maxfield Parrish illustrations, while simultaneously banishing the real to a phantom zone of non-existence. And yet, as one eye-popping scene of spectacle and destruction after

another fills the screen, audiences are bored, unsatisfied. What have they truly seen? Just plotted points on a computer graph.<sup>25</sup>

In Assayas' vision, this dissatisfaction is answered by the Hell Fire Club, 'very difficult to access, very successful'—a knowing reference to the infamous gentleman's club of Augustan England. In the Hell Fire Club, all lingering doubts about the non-existence of this or that Imaginary creation are ruthlessly settled via the crudest documentary means available to the present media system: streaming web-cameras trained on suffering bodies. So it is that, in this film, the 'value' of an inaccessible and legendary illicit image has already been *pre-commodified*, and is under the corporate supervision of a tangled monopoly controlled by the Americans. Crucially, this displacement, while superficially rounding out the repertoire of the film's representational nodes, also shifts the question of production away from the Baudrillardian 'spectacularized' banality of the animation studio itself, and towards some properly archaic and indeed 'eighteenth-century' or Sadeian demesne of gothic mansions, dungeons, and implements of torture. 'Production' (of the Real) is utterly re-mythologized here through a pre-industrial imaginary of sexual slavery; and what results is the weakest attempt at moralism in this whole mini-canon, as our heroine is shipped off to one such dungeon and subjected to the puerile fantasies of a pubescent boy somewhere in the U.S.A., the Real of her destruction echoing in the void of an anonymous digisphere.

The discussion to date comes full circle in a narrative form which raises the level of debate to a new height of theoretical sophistication, potentially offering nothing less than a way forward for the political imagination of the present. William Gibson's already canonical work, *Pattern Recognition* (2003), is written out of the immanent frustrations of a late capitalist market whose logo-centred values are constantly sinking into a general equivalence of monotony, exhaustion, and inanity. In one of the most memorable prose passages of recent years, the heroine's acute sensitivity to trademark derogation is particularly concentrated in her exposure to a display of Tommy Hilfiger merchandise at Harvey Nicholls:

But down here, next to a display of Tommy Hilfiger, it's all started to go sideways on her, the trademark thing. Less warning

aura than usual. Some people ingest a single peanut and their head swells like a basketball. When it happens to Cayce, it's her psyche.

Tommy Hilfiger does it every time, though she'd thought she was safe now. They'd said he'd peaked, in New York. Like Benetton, the name would be around, but the real poison, for her, would have been drawn. It's something to do with context, here, with not expecting it in London. When it starts, it's pure reaction, like biting down hard on a piece of foil.

A glance to the right and the avalanche lets go. A mountain-side of Tommy coming down in her head.

My God, don't they know? This stuff is simulacra of simulacra of simulacra. A diluted tincture of Ralph Lauren, who had himself diluted the glory days of Brooks Brothers, who themselves had stepped on the product of Jermyn Street and Saville Row, flavoring their ready-to-wear with liberal lashings of polo kit and regimental stripes. But Tommy surely is the null point, the black hole. There must be some Tommy Hilfiger event horizon, beyond which it is impossible to be more derivative, more devoid of soul. Or so she hopes, and doesn't know, but suspects in her heart that this in fact is what accounts for his long ubiquity.<sup>26</sup>

And precisely to avoid this inevitable slide of image culture towards that black hole of derivation, Cayce is employed by canny market researchers to determine whether or not new logo designs might become emergent 'values' in those unassimilated sub-cultural communities that have tended, in previous texts in this cycle, to form around illicit images, 'hidden scenes'. Asked her opinion about one such corporate design, she hesitates:

She knows immediately that it does not, by the opaque standards of her internal radar, work. She has no way of knowing how she knows.

Briefly, though, she imagines the countless Asian workers who might, should she say yes, spend years of their lives applying versions of this symbol to an endless and unyielding flood of footwear. What would it mean to them, this bouncing sperm? Would it work its way into their dreams, eventually?

Would their children chalk it in doorways before they knew its meaning as a trademark?

'No,' she says. (pp. 12-13)

This is a bivalent 'no', as it denies the intrinsic cultural value of the symbol, while at the same time rising up, as an existential *cri de coeur*, against all the futile material labour (and its imaginary consequences) that an affirmation would bring in its train. Cayce's ability to factor in those 'countless Asian workers' is testimony as much to the 'simulacrum' of a Third-World workplace scenario circulating on Western TV screens, as it is to the reality principle itself; and it strikes me that Gibson has achieved a pretty well-poised articulation of Baudrillard's and Zizek's positions in this very economical passage, which he will then perfect at the end of his book.

Yet the narrative interest of this novel lies elsewhere, even if this is its effective representational base-line. For Cayce is herself part of a secret community whose proportions and type we are by now perfectly familiar with: in this case, a cult collective of 'footageheads', sustained in on-line chatrooms devoted to the partially emergent 'work' of some 'master' out there in cyberspace (itself, of course, a Gibson coinage). This cult object is apparently a filmed work, appearing in brief segments at apparently random parts of the World Wide Web, fanatically tracked down by aficionados and exhaustively discussed in countless postings on any number of sites. The sites are themselves arranged into two basic tribes—the Completists and the Progressives, who divide on the question of the work's teleology—and into a complex hierarchy of distinction, Cayce belonging, of course, to the most elite and expert of the sites. The footage itself is described, on and off, as follows:

They are dressed as they have always been dressed, in clothing Cayce has posted on extensively, fascinated by its timelessness, something she knows and understands. The difficulty of that. Hairstyles, too.

He might be a sailor, stepping into a submarine in 1914, or a jazz musician entering a club in 1957. There is a lack of evidence, an absence of stylistic cues, that Cayce understands to be utterly masterful. His black coat is usually read as leather, though it might be dull vinyl, or rubber. He has a way of wearing its collar up.

The girl is wearing a longer coat, equally dark but seemingly of fabric, its shoulder-padding the subject of hundreds of posts. The architecture of padding in a woman's coat should yield possible records, particular decades, but there has been no agreement, only controversy. (p. 23)

Assembled into one 'work', the fragments 'have yielded no period and no particular narrative direction' (p. 24). Which is, of course, the very occasion of their excessive value in an image-sphere saturated by heavily nominalized products, styles, logos, brands, niche-markets, and use-by-dates. This holds true especially for Cayce, who feels in the presence of such flat signs a kind of purification of her sense of sight, and an 'ontological relief ... an epoch of rest, an escape from the noisy commodities themselves, which turn out, as Marx always thought they would, to be living entities preying on the humans who have to coexist with them'.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, the absence of any consensus among the footageheads is another sign of the work's Utopian value, sustaining as it does an infinity of incompatible interpretations, which jostle one another virtually in the experience of any single piece of footage: 'Zapruder-ed into surreal dimensions of purest speculation', writes Gibson, 'ghost-narratives have emerged and taken shadowy but determined lives of their own' (p. 24), as though to prefigure the free community of a future world through the lens of the present one's structural antagonisms.

All of this comes to a classic spy-novelistic head in the climactic sequence, in post-Soviet Russia (epicentre of Zizek's *Ostalgie*), where Cayce, sent by one particularly perspicacious speculator on image-futures to find the 'work's' ultimate creative fount, has indeed tracked down the artist concerned. This is the very moment of corporate colonization, captured and narratively extended in a pregnant, dialectical moment of wonder and disenchantment; and yet *it has always already happened*—the 'footage' was never what it appeared to be in the first place, and nor were its fans. Infiltrated by corporate spies, the community of footageheads could never have resisted the enchantments of capital anyway, which is shown, in the revelations of the novel's finale, to have conditioned the footage's production from the start. For this is not a film at all, but the meticulous recreation of the effect of a film in the digital medium, and the kind of digital rendering

involved is immensely expensive and labour-intensive after all, hardly likely to have been the solitary labour of love of some reclusive maverick. The appeal is directly back to the epic transitions of Marx's inaugural text on the secret of capitalist value: 'Now you will see' (p. 303). And so we do.

A primordial division of labour has, it seems, already been instituted: between the 'symbolic' manipulations of the visionary artist of the piece, Nora Volkova, 'the headwaters of the digital Nile' (p. 305), an autistic savant with a piece of American ordnance lodged in her brain (from a bomb that killed her parents), working endless hours in a darkened apartment room clicking and dragging bits of digitalized video information across a host of screens; and, elsewhere, as we are about to see, a dungeon of classical manual labour after all. It is this unexpected second dimension of the 'work's' value that constitutes Cayce's, and our, final politico-economic lesson. As Cayce explains the basics of late-capitalist value to the savant-artist's protective sister, Stella:

'Your sister's art has become very valuable. You've succeeded, you see. It's a genuine mystery, Nora's art, something hidden at the heart of the world, and more and more people follow it, all over the world.'

'But what is the danger?'

'We have our own rich and powerful men. Any creation that attracts the attention of the world, on an ongoing basis, becomes valuable, if only in terms of potential.'

'To be commercial? My uncle would not allow this degree of attention.'

'It's already valuable. More valuable than you could imagine. The commercial part would simply be branding, franchising. And they're on to it, Stella.' (p. 307)

But history turns out to have a stern retort in store for this purely 'circulation' model of value. The post-Soviet Russian prison system has degenerated terribly, and that degeneration has thrown up new kinds of experiment in the direct extraction of value through old-fashioned labour. A new strand of prison privatization has led to a scheme in which prisoners voluntarily opt out of the 'regular prisons' in order to work off their sentences and earn a

minimum wage in high-tech work-farms—*rendering the footage*. The new Russian entrepreneurial *bourgeoisie* behind the entire operation are finally able to disabuse Cayce of any lingering attachment to the 'aesthetics' of the 'work' in a disinterested sense; since, all along, the mode of its production and distribution have been cynically manipulated to arouse just the attention it has in the West. If the massive security operation involved was about protecting the artist from unwanted 'foreign' attentions, 'the mechanism created to make the work public was not'.

'The work would not be viewed unless it were somehow able to attract the attention of an audience, and it was Stella Volkova's wish that that audience be global in scope. To that end, we devised the method you are familiar with, and we ourselves "found" the first few segments.'

'You did?' Cayce and Parkaboy exchanged glances.

'Yes. We sometimes, also, were able to point people in the right direction. But the result, almost from the beginning, far exceeded anything any of us had anticipated.'

'You watched a subculture being born,' says Bigend. 'Evolving exponentially.' (p. 337)

So, this is how Gibson tells us value is coined in the postmodern universe: jealously guarded 'genius' of talent at the level of production (Nora) and reception (Cayce herself, who certifies the former talent); massive capital investment in production facilities able to render digital 'footage' and distribute it globally at an instant's notice; cheap 'Third World' labour available in an infinite supply from the least developed parts of the technically-literate world; and the 'creation of subcultures' via something just as important, namely an unprecedented and alluring distribution system, an 'idea' about dissemination that is worth as much as any of the hard, primary capital investments enumerated above. There is thus no 'single' spectacular revelation, no straightforward turn to the site of manual production, but a complex nesting of institutional sites, stylistic negations, constituency-formations, and abstract ideations, each of which contributes its own, specific quotient of value—none ultimate, but none fully 'derealized' either—to the final 'work'. If we were to summarise the dynamic succinctly, it would be to say that value is forged in the dissociated collaboration between discrete sectors of symbolic and manual

labour, upon capital invested in both concrete and abstract forms, to fashion a product that must find its own community. Gibson's marvellous apotheosis of a rapidly evolving sub-form of literary and film narrative strikes me as having, at the very least, drawn up the coordinates of an effectively disenchanting, yet scintillating and intriguing map of the present economy's production of 'animated' value, the value of the spectacle in its most extreme and completed form, under whose unyielding yoke we would otherwise be languishing for some considerable time to come.

## NOTES

- 1 Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 279-80.
- 2 Renowned in his time for his treatment of criminal low-life in Paris, the colossal output of Eugène Sue (1804-57) dwarfed even that of Dickens. He is best known for his blockbuster, *Les mystères de Paris* (1842-43), a favourite of Walter Benjamin.
- 3 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, Part One, line 1674: 'I'll show you what no man before has seen'; or, in David Luke's translation: 'You will soon see what I can do. / No man has ever known a spectacle so rare' (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
- 4 Marx, *Capital*, pp. 324-25.
- 5 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983), ¶ 34.
- 6 Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 181.
- 7 *Selected Writings*, pp. 181-82.
- 8 Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 148.
- 9 André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class* (London: Pluto, 2001).
- 10 Slavoj Žižek, 'Why We All Love to Hate Haider', *New Left Review* 2 (Mar-Apr 2000), 40-41.
- 11 *Selected Writings*, p. 180.
- 12 *New York Times Book Review*, February 13, 1996.
- 13 Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in *On Metapsychology*, trans. James Strachey, Penguin Freud Library, Volume 11 (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 310.
- 14 David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1996), p. 940.
- 15 N. Katherine Hayles, 'The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*', *New Literary History* 30 (1999), 691.
- 16 Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), p. 135.
- 17 Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, by Zampanò (London: Anchor, 2000), p. 3.
- 18 N. Katherine Hayles, 'Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*', *American Literature* 74 (2002), 780.
- 19 Hayles, 'Saving the Subject', 794.
- 20 Hayles, 'Saving the Subject', 804.
- 21 Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1981).
- 22 Antonio Negri, 'Twenty Theses on Marx', in *Marxism Beyond Marxism*, ed. Saree Makdisi, Cesare Casarino, and Rebecca E. Karl (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 156, 157.
- 23 I refer here to Jameson's discussion of the society of philatelists in the final episode of Kieslowski's *Decalogue*, 'Decalogue as Decameron', and Slavoj Žižek's discussion of the same in 'Jameson as a Theorist of Revolutionary Philately', both in *Fredric Jameson: A Critical Reader*, ed. Douglas Kellner and Sean Homer (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 221-2, 122-3.
- 24 Wheeler Winston Dixon, 'Twenty-Five Reasons Why It's All Over', in Jon Lewis, ed., *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the Nineties* (London: Pluto, 2002), pp. 358-59.
- 25 William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition* (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 17-18.
- 26 Fredric Jameson, 'Fear and Loathing in Globalization', *New Left Review* 23 (Sep-Oct 2003), 114.

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