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## Paths of most resistance: navigating the culture industry in William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Delmore Schwartz, and Eudora Welty

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PATHS OF MOST RESISTANCE: NAVIGATING THE CULTURE INDUSTRY  
IN WILLIAM FAULKNER, RICHARD WRIGHT,  
DELMORE SCHWARTZ, AND EUDORA WELTY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
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In

The Department of English

by  
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For Melinda.

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## Abstract

This dissertation explores how four modernist writers of the 1930s and 1940s—William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Delmore Schwartz, and Eudora Welty—used their works to present ways to resist and navigate what they present as the frequently reductive worldview offered by the culture industry. Faulkner tends to show the culture industry as selling easy answers that focus on the end result, which allows his characters to approach the culture industry with a sense of fatalism. To resist this, Faulkner stresses a step-by-step, complex dialectical understanding of the culture industry, one that shows the fissures in its seemingly straightforward narratives and allows the reader to see how the narratives of the culture industry are not totalizing and can be resisted. Richard Wright, with his *Native Son* (1940), has written a better piece of mass culture, one that both gives the reader what he wants and helps show how the pleasures of mass culture are tied to a racist system. More than any of the other writers I'm discussing, Wright courts a wide audience by expertly using the tropes of various popular forms of the late 1930s—movies, crime novels, gothic fiction, newspapers, protest novels—and then adds an extra layer of analysis that explores how these pieces of mass culture are not ideologically neutral. One of the protagonists in a Delmore Schwartz story compares a movie to the Oracle at Delphi, which gave prophecies enigmatic enough to allow differing interpretations. The masses in Schwartz's stories approach mass culture looking for simple entertainment, and that's what they get. The conflicted artist figures who are the protagonists of Schwartz's stories approach mass culture more complexly, and Schwartz shows how an artistically inclined mind can find much of value in mass culture if he knows what to look for. Eudora Welty, finally, shows mass culture as something that can help compound a sense of (frequently female) alienation. For Welty, it is small moments of emotional connection that allow people to find a way out of the totalizing system of mass culture.

## Chapter One:

### The Culture Industry in Context

The short story “Golden Land” (1935), the only of William Faulkner’s works to take place in Hollywood, takes a particularly dim view of the culture industry. Its protagonist, Ira Ewing, is a prominent California realtor with a serious drinking problem and a disastrous family life that includes a wife with whom he barely speaks, a cross-dressing son, and a daughter who is in the tabloids for her part in a sex scandal. The morning we first meet Ira, he wakes up hung-over to find a newspaper headline that reads, “APRIL LALEAR BARES ORGY SECRETS” (705). His daughter, known publicly by her stage name, has tried to stage a sex scandal with a prominent Hollywood producer in the hopes of becoming a movie star, though it backfires. Ira was born in Nebraska, and he brought his mother west with him, and the story makes a stark distinction between the honesty of the farm life in Nebraska and the corruption of life in California. As Ira’s mother tells him, “You make money too easy. This whole country is too easy for us Ewings. It may be all right for them that have been born here for generations; I don’t know about that. But not for us” (724).<sup>1</sup> As the story sees it, moving to California and its culture industry brings about sexual perversion in the forms of Ira’s son’s cross-dressing and his daughter’s Hollywood sex life, which gives the story the distinct whiff of homophobia and sexism.<sup>2</sup> Life in Nebraska, to which his mother wants to return to live out her days, might have been more difficult, but it was also free of such corruption. In relation to much of Faulkner’s body of work, this story is fairly simplistic. It’s the view of mass culture put forth by the Agrarians, who saw farming as a sort of social panacea to the ills brought about by industrialized society. And although Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, developers of the theory of the culture industry, would never present the issue in such a relatively uncomplicated way, they would likely agree with the distrust of Hollywood that informs the story. Indeed, much of our conception of modernism—though it’s a conception that has been

deeply challenged and complicated in recent years—is that it stands in opposition to the simplistic repetition of the culture industry. Of course, such a view of modernism would suggest that William Faulkner, the premiere American modernist novelist, would want to show us how vapid and destructive the culture industry could be. It goes without saying that things aren't nearly that simple. Faulkner might have hated Hollywood—and he especially might have hated his time working there—but he, like most American modernists, understood that the culture industry must be dealt with in a more complex way by anyone who wanted to practice serious art, which makes “Golden Land” a bit of an anomaly in his body of work.

The 1930s didn't see the invention of what we call mass culture or the mass media—movies, newspapers, pulp magazines, radios—but the Depression years saw a multiplication of that mass culture with which many of the significant pre-war American authors were forced to grapple. Many people turned to mass culture as an escape from the crushing realities of Depression-era life. Gary Dean Best calls the thirties the Nickel and Dime Decade and writes, “Technological advances influenced American popular culture during the 1930s to a degree unprecedented even in the previous decade,” and, he continues, “Much of the popular culture of the 1930s was clearly attractive for the means it offered to escape from the guilt, anxieties, stresses, and insecurities of the depression years” (xii). The Great Depression remains, to this date, the greatest period of financial instability in this nation's history. The decade also saw the rise of fascist governments in Western Europe that threatened, certainly, the world, and, specifically, American-style liberal democracy. Against this backdrop, popular culture might seem an afterthought. But it wasn't. There was more of it than ever before, and it became increasingly technologically complex. The most significant of these changes was probably the emergence of synchronized sound in film in the late 1920s. Though film had been around since the Lumiere brothers showed their first movie in 1895, the release of *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson, in 1927 changed everything, helping films transition from a mostly visual medium to

one that was more equally dependent on both vision and sound. Color film followed soon after, giving the still burgeoning medium more ability to represent reality in a way that it had never before been able to do. Additionally, print media began blossoming substantially in this period. Pulp magazines, the spiritual successor to the dime novel, were hugely popular in the 1930s, and their cheapness made reading material widely available to a working-class readership. As Best writes, “Cheap magazines were, of course, ideal for a depressed America in which people had the time for recreation and a desire to seal themselves off at least temporarily from reality, but little money to spend” (43).

None of this happened in an ideological vacuum. The vast poverty of the Depression years saw the culture industry react frequently with images that reinforced a comfortable view of traditional American values. As David Welky writes, “Partly consciously and partly unconsciously, mainstream newspapers, magazines, and books offered interpretations of contemporary difficulties that urged readers to adhere to ideological roots that drew from deep traditions rather than drift into the perilous seas of reform and perhaps revolution” (4). Though Welky’s analysis is confined to print culture, it is nonetheless a very useful entry point to discussing mass culture in the 1930s. As he sees it, “The mainstream media lauded the continuing relevance of the rags-to-riches, hard-work ethos even as the real world restricted opportunities for hard-working individualists,” and “It depicted an ethnically and racially homogenous nation, defining true Americanism in a way that denied America’s diversity” (4-5). To Welky, the American culture industry’s reaction to the specter of fascism was an inherently conservative one. Though the 1930s was a time of great social unrest—social unrest that included the growth of an American Socialist party—according to Welky, you wouldn’t know it from much of the American popular media. Instead, they sold stories of can-do bootstraps mythology, stories that were largely derived from dime novelist Horatio Alger. The world was falling apart in a way that could only be addressed by complex social change, but

American mass culture continued to sell an image of American individualism that, paradoxically, reinforced ideas of social conformity.

Significantly, Welky—though he spends ample time on newspapers, comic books, and “women’s” magazines—doesn’t give much attention to the pulp crime magazines of the period. The popularity of the hard-boiled detective, both in pulp magazines and on the movie screen, was a reflection of the frequently dire situation of many Americans during the Depression. *Ladies’ Home Journal*, for example, presented a significantly different worldview than did the crime and detective stories in *Black Mask*, since the former wanted to show, in part, that everything was fine during the Depression, while the latter, with its graphic violence and moral ambiguity, suggested that everything was not, in fact, fine. Still, magazines such as *Black Mask* helped—though through different means—to reinforce gender and racial stereotypes in a way not wholly different from how magazines such as *Ladies’ Home Journal* did. Additionally, the growing popularity of gangsters in mass culture, both in pulp magazines and in films such as *Little Caesar* (1931), *The Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932), helped reinforce the idea of the gangster as a type of super capitalist (and the super capitalist as a type of gangster), one who not only succeeded, but thrived, financially while the rest of the country was struggling to make ends meet.<sup>3</sup> So while Welky might be largely right in his assessment of 1930s mass culture, I don’t want to present mass culture as completely monolithic. It was complex enough to allow for differing points of view, including a significant leftist presence. According to Michael Denning, it was

the peculiar combination of the corporate liberalism of the media corporations, the internal labor relations of the culture industries, and the working class audience of the film, broadcasting, and music industries that resulted in a remarkable and contradictory politics of mass culture, producing the phenomena of left-wing “stars” and “socially conscious” nightclubs, radio broadcasts, and picture magazines. (*Cultural Front*, 83)

Denning’s assessment doesn’t mean that writers such as Welky and Best are wrong about the largely conservative nature of mass culture in the 1930s. Rather, it shows that mass culture

was—and continues to be—a contested field, one that is capable both of reinforcing the most politically regressive worldviews of the dominant culture and of allowing for aesthetically and politically complex responses to dominant culture.<sup>4</sup> Since the culture industry was not monolithic, artists were able to appropriate elements of the culture industry to critique American society.

The writers I'll be discussing—William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Delmore Schwartz, and Eudora Welty—all saw themselves, to varying degrees, as working in opposition to this mass culture. As modernist artists, these writers aimed to present works of more complexity than would be found in what they present as a largely conservative and regressive mass culture, which frequently exists for profit and is inextricably linked to the demands of the culture industry and capitalism as a whole. Modernist art, supposedly, isn't concerned with such issues. It exists for its own sake. Or so the most clichéd understanding of modernism goes. Though I use high/low as a shorthand here, I realize that it's a mistake to reduce the issue to a simple binary. While none of these writers believed in what we today might call the postmodern view of mass culture, one in which the wall between high and low is less clear cut, they also didn't see an impenetrable boundary separating high from low or feel that they should always privilege high modernist art over low mass culture. These writers knew that mass culture was here to stay and that it must be dealt with complexly, not scornfully rejected as simplistic garbage. Additionally, all of these writers were artists writing *about* the ways that their characters were engaged with mass culture. Faulkner, Wright, Schwartz, and Welty were artists trying find a place for their art in a world of mass culture, and their stories stand, in part, as case studies of *how* an artist could hope to make his or her art understood and worthwhile. While there are frequent moments of ambivalence, and even times when the writers show levels of appreciation for what the culture industry is selling, these four writers are still trying to show what they write as being fundamentally different from the culture industry, which they

see as largely interested in selling regressive worldviews. In the stories and novels by these four writers I'll be discussing, I'll be exploring how these writers show their characters interacting with mass culture in a way to encourage the reader to examine different routes of possible resistance against the regressive nature of the culture industry.

Erin A. Smith, in her book *Hard-Boiled: Working Class Readers and Pulp Magazines*, makes a useful distinction between modernist artists and members of the culture industry, a distinction that might serve as a starting point: "Modernist writers of the time operated on the lone artist/creator model, preoccupied with the place of the individual talent in literary tradition. Pulp writers, however, were less artists than manufacturers, paid for making a product much as factory workers were" (21). As Smith says, modernist writers got paid for writing a book, while the pulp writers got paid by the word. Though this distinction oversimplifies things, it does address the central issue that is dealt with in more detail by Marxist critics such as Adorno. On one hand, mass culture is a commodity, and its creators are producers who get paid for meeting quotas. On the other hand, modernist art aims to exist for its own good. But, both modernist artists and pulp writers live in a capitalist system and must make money to survive. The demands of the market affect everyone, even the allegedly autonomous artists. While there is no hard-and-fast definition of what modernism is, Astradur Eysteinnsson sums up how many have seen the literary movement when he says that "Modernism is viewed as a kind of aesthetic heroism, which in the face of chaos of the modern world (very much a 'fallen' world) sees art as the only dependable reality and as an ordering principle of a quasi-religious kind" (9).<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most significant year in the development of modernism is 1922, which saw the publication of two of the landmark modernist works, T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. These works—and those that they inspired—were marked by great formal experimentation and a sense of alienation, one frequently manifested by stream of consciousness writing and a fragmentary use of language. Later critics such as Adorno and

Fredric Jameson helped call attention to how modernism and mass culture are inextricably linked. They form two incomplete halves of a whole, and each is a reaction to the other. As Raymond Williams writes, “Photography, cinema, radio, television, reproduction and recording all make their decisive advances during the period identified as Modernist, and it is in response to these that there arise what in the first instance were formed as defensive cultural groupings, rapidly if partially becoming competitively self-promoting” (33). As modernist artists, the four writers I’m discussing saw themselves as part of the same tradition as Eliot and Joyce, and they saw—just as Eliot and Joyce did—that the modernist art they made was constantly engaged in a complex relationship with mass culture.

Up until now, I’ve been defining mass culture largely in terms of the technology of that culture’s production. Magazines printed on cheap paper, movies, and radio broadcasts are available only because industries had developed the technological means to produce them. However, defining mass culture and popular culture (which are sometimes seen as two different, though related, cultural products) has never been an easy task. M. Thomas Inge says that

popular culture is what we do by choice to engage our minds and our bodies when we are not working or sleeping. This can be active—playing baseball, driving an automobile, dancing—or passive—watching television, sunbathing, or reading a book. It can be creative—painting a portrait, writing a poem, cooking a meal—or simply responsive—playing a game, watching a circus, or listening to music. (xxvi)

This conception of popular culture, however it might accurately represent the ways that many people casually think of what constitutes popular culture, is quite broad, and it’s useful to try to come up with a more specific definition. Trying to come up with a more focused schematic, James Naremore and Patricia Brantlinger write, “Far from congealing into a mass, Western society in the early decades of the twentieth century seems to have spilt into an unsettled mixture of at least six artistic cultures, each producing different kinds of images, stories, music, and what Carl Schorske calls ‘intellectual objects’ ” (8). The six categories that Naremore and

Brantlinger lay out are high art, modernist art, avant-garde art, folk art, popular art, and mass art. As these writers point out, this list could be broken into the traditional high/low dichotomy, with the first three cultures constituting the “high” and the last three the “low.” As they also point out, the differences between modernist art and the avant-garde are still highly contested.<sup>6</sup> Concerning the low, “folk art is agrarian or pre-industrial, belonging chiefly to peasants” (11). Popular art, according to Naremore and Brantlinger, is a “highly politicized” category that is “sometimes associated with a more or less proletarian audience” and “connotes the world of sports, circus, fairgrounds, nickelodeons or penny arcades, early jazz, early rock ‘n’ roll, comic strips, and certain kinds of down-market theater or film—a hazy terrain that resists most attempts at definition, although it’s usually described as earthy or excessive” (12). Mass art—what Adorno and Horkheimer would call “the culture industry”—is an industrial mass-produced art associated with the “rise of Hollywood talking pictures, American network radio, and Henry Luce’s empire of slick-paper magazines” (13). However:

Despite its industrial basis... twentieth-century mass art has allowed and selectively encouraged certain kinds of experiment. In its relatively brief history, it has absorbed material from all five of the cultural categories listed above, and has employed the finest artists from every sphere. It has even appropriated the ideology of romantic individualism, which it uses to promote a star system. During the 1970s and ‘80s, it was reorganized by multinational, conglomerate capitalism, and in the age of electronics it has become so pervasive that the other cultures now tend to represent themselves through its technology. (13)

Indeed, to use the example from the beginning of this chapter, Faulkner’s “Golden Land” is both a modernist short story that criticizes the culture industry *and*, as something originally published in a cheap magazine, is itself a product of that culture industry. In the works on which I’m focusing this dissertation, the writers I’m discussing largely see low culture in terms of a mass-produced culture industry, but, as the complications of Naremore and Brantlinger’s analysis points out, these different fields are always overlapping. My focus is on how Faulkner, Welty, Wright, and Schwartz approach the culture industry in relations to their art, but there are

times when their presentations of low culture bleed into the area of folk art, such as the schoolbook that so influences Thomas Sutpen, and popular art, such as the track meet in Schwartz's "The Track Meet." As I discussed earlier the era in which these writers were working—the 1930s and 1940s—saw the culture industry producing a vast amount of product, in part because of the Great Depression. While what we would call the culture industry is, I think, one of their central concerns, they were not thinking in the theoretical terms that hindsight has afforded us, meaning that the divisional lines are frequently blurred.

As I mentioned, the "mass art" approach sees mass culture in terms of what Adorno and Horkheimer dubbed "the culture industry" in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). As they say, "Culture today is infecting everything with sameness. Film, radio, and magazines form a system. Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together" (94). They go on: "The conspicuous unity of macrocosm and microcosm confront human beings with a model of their culture: the false identity of universal and particular. All mass culture under monopoly is identical, and the contours of its skeleton, the conceptual armature fabricated by monopoly, are beginning to stand out" (95). For Adorno and Horkheimer, part of the way to work against the culture industry is through art: "The more seriously art takes its opposition to existence, the more it resembles the seriousness of existence, its antithesis: the more it labors to develop strictly according to its own formal laws, the more labor it requires to be understood, whereas its goal had been precisely to negate the burden of labor" (113-114). For Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry repeats the same thing over and over again, and its simplicity leads consumers to expect what they're going to get, and they always get what they expect. Real modernist art, in the way that it strives to defy conventions, helps struggle against the omnipresence of the culture industry. Adorno and Horkheimer value in art its ability to attempt to move beyond the confines of reality. The intellectual work involved in appreciating art is part of what gives it a value lacking in the culture industry. This is not to say

that, however much they value art, Adorno and Horkheimer see it as unequivocally triumphant against mass culture. As Adorno said in a letter to Walter Benjamin: “Both [modernist art and mass culture] bear the scars of capitalism, both contain elements of change. Both are torn halves of freedom to which, however, they do not add up” (qtd. in Huyssen, 58).<sup>7</sup> It isn’t that art trumps the culture industry every time. Adorno and Horkheimer are well aware of how pervasive the culture industry is and how it can appropriate art for its own uses. Part of the value of art comes in the struggle, not the triumph. Still, Adorno and Horkheimer value the resistant possibilities of art in ways not dissimilar to how the authors I’ll be writing about do.

In his later essay “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” Adorno discusses how he and Horkheimer, when writing *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, replaced the term “mass culture” with the term “culture industry” so they could “exclude from the outset the interpretation agreeable to its advocates: that it is a matter of something like a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular art” (98). For Adorno, a legitimate type of mass culture—folk songs, for example—would have genuine worth in reflecting the lives and values of the masses. However, for the culture industry, “the masses are not primary, but secondary, they are an object of calculation; an appendage of the machinery” (99). The culture industry, as Adorno sees it, is far less interested in addressing the lives of regular people than it is on profiting off of the lives of those people. As he says, “Cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer *also* commodities, they are commodities through and through” (100). The usefulness of mass culture is irrelevant. All that matters is that it can be sold to people. Adorno and Horkheimer’s dismissals of film and jazz might seem intellectually dubious to anyone familiar with, for example, *Citizen Kane* (1941)<sup>8</sup> or the music of Charlie Parker, both of which were around when *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was published. As Andreas Huyssen writes in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, “Politically, adherence today to the classical culture industry thesis can only lead to resignation

or moralizing about universal manipulation and domination” (19). However, according to Huyssen, part of what makes Adorno a necessary starting point for any discussions of mass culture is how “Adorno is one of a very few critics guided by the conviction that a theory of modern culture must address both mass culture and high art” (19). To Huyssen, one of the major faults with Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory is how it sees exchange value completely supplanting use value in mass culture: “If cultural products were commodities through and through and had only exchange value, they would no longer even be able to fulfill their function in the processes of ideological reproduction. Since they do preserve this use value for capital, however, they also provide a locus for struggle and subversion” (22). In other words, cultural products must have some kind of use value in how they reinforce the dominant ideology, but that same use value can be used against the dominant culture. While it’s certainly true that mass culture isn’t as absolutely monolithic as Adorno and Horkheimer would have us believe, it is still quite overwhelming, at least as far as the writers I’m discussing present it. Though it’s virtually impossible that any of these American writers who are the focus of this project would have read any of Adorno or Horkheimer’s work—their writings weren’t translated into English until much later—the writers I’m focusing on wrote stories and novels that show a concern with many of the same issues Adorno and Horkheimer were exploring in Europe—including a deep attention, to some degree, with an idea of “pure” modernist art and the culture industry as a giant, frequently overwhelming negative force.

Fredric Jameson, in his essay “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture”—though he says that the Adorno/Horkheimer approach is incredibly useful in understanding mass culture—brings up what he sees as one of that critical approach’s main shortcomings. As he says, “What is unsatisfactory about the Frankfurt School position is not its negative and critical apparatus, but rather the positive value on which the latter depends, namely the valorization of traditional modernist high art as the locus of some genuinely critical and subversive, ‘autonomous’

aesthetic production” (133). Instead, Jameson thinks that

we must rethink the opposition high culture/mass culture in such a way that the emphasis on evaluation to which it has traditionally given rise, and which—however the binary system of value operates (mass culture is popular and thus more authentic than high culture, high culture is autonomous and therefore utterly incomparable to a degraded mass culture)—tends to function in some timeless realm of absolute aesthetic judgment, is replaced by a genuinely historical and dialectical approach to these phenomena. Such an approach demands that we read high and mass culture as objectively related and dialectically interdependent phenomena, as twin and inseparable forms of the fission of aesthetic production under late capitalism. (133-34)

For Jameson, it makes little sense to discuss someone such as William Shakespeare in terms of the high/low divide, since Shakespeare was writing before the advent of industrial capitalism and the huge market that came with it, though he was both very “popular” and is now the embodiment of what we see as high art. The high/low divide exists as a result of the market brought on by industrial capitalism, so to discuss it outside of capitalism and market concerns isn’t particularly useful. What is additionally insightful about Jameson’s approach, especially in terms of this project, is how he sees mass culture in terms of repetition. The way that mass culture is easily broken into genres—romance novels, disaster films, and pornography—means that consumers of mass culture come to each text with certain expectations. The piece of mass culture is a repetition of something that the consumer has already read, watched or listened to. That “something,” however, isn’t there; there is no original disaster movie to which all subsequent disaster movies are referring. As Jameson says, this gives us another parallel between modernism and mass culture, since complex modernist works, such as *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939), must be reread in order to be appreciated fully. However, these modernist works are themselves stable texts to which we can return. But, according to Jameson, “In mass culture, repetition effectively volatilizes the original object—the ‘text,’ the ‘work of art’—so that the student of mass culture has no primary object of study” (137). This understanding of mass culture certainly jibes with how the American writers I’m discussing frequently see it. Though Faulkner makes occasional references to specifics—*Ben*

*Hur*, for example—he frequently deals in abstract ideas of mass culture. The detective magazine that *Light in August*'s (1932) Joe Christmas reads is exactly the type of repetition about which Jameson is speaking. It refers not to a specific story or even a specific magazine, but an idea of those types of magazines. Certainly there are occasional references to specific pieces of mass culture in the pieces I'm analyzing, but even then they point to some larger idea of mass culture and how it functions in society.

Writing much more recently, Perry Meisel says, with no little vitriol, "Friend of the worker, Adorno is nonetheless a brickheaded snob on the question of the 'popular' in art and in culture" (44). As Meisel summarizes Adorno's assessment of jazz in relation to classical music, the tension

that "serious" music produces between what is already known and what is newly presented to the listener is the source of its value. The difference it requires the listener to become conscious of, whether within the piece or between a given piece and other "serious" music, is precisely what popular music simulates but does not really secure. (45)

For Adorno, as Meisel sees it, great art—in this case, classical music—is dialectical, while popular art—here, jazz—isn't. In Meisel's estimation, this isn't true: "Pop's deviation from its backgrounds is more microscopic than is Beethoven's. Like modern art and sculpture, it is minimalist. It saves more of the past in less time and space than does 'serious' music, different from it not in kind but in degree" (46). For Meisel, popular culture *is* dialectical. One simple example he gives is that of the relationship between *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and *Mary Tyler Moore*. As he says, "The secret finally comes out. Everyone does indeed know better. Properly speaking, there is no difference between the 'popular' and the 'higher' for a simple reason: All traditions are dialectical" (53). This rereading of Adorno is useful because it helps us see the pieces of popular culture examined in the more "serious" modernist works I'm discussing as themselves engaged in a dialectical relationship with the culture around them. What isn't a focus of Meisel's analysis, which is central to Adorno's and Horkheimer's, is the idea that

popular culture is produced by an industry that is concerned almost exclusively with profits. Even if Meisel is correct that there is no absolute difference between popular and high art, it's important to realize that the writers I'm examining continuously stress that their modernist works are in direct opposition to what the culture industry is selling. Certainly, there are many moments of ambivalence, and moments when the writers appropriate elements of the culture industry for their own good, but these writers ultimately see the culture industry as selling regressive ideologies that these modernist works can help us begin to resist.

Walter Benjamin, who, like Adorno and Horkheimer, is part of the German Frankfurt School of critical theory, is more open to the democratic possibilities offered by the emerging mass culture. In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin makes an argument that is almost the polar opposite of Adorno and Horkheimer's. While a work of art such as *The Mona Lisa*, of which there is only one original copy, can only be viewed by those with the money and means to travel to see it, a film, on the other hand, is available to many more people, so it has none of the "aura" of the *Mona Lisa*. You could make as many copies of a film print as you like, and none is more original than any other. People around the world who never had the means to view a work like the *Mona Lisa* now can view a movie with relative ease. As he says, "But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic reproduction, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics" (224). Benjamin is talking mostly about film in this essay, but his points are applicable to all forms of the mass media. While it's important to keep in mind Adorno and Horkheimer's emphasis on aesthetic value—an emphasis on aesthetic value that all four of these writers shared—Benjamin's argument helps refocus on one of the most fundamental aspects of mass culture in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: Its omnipresence allows far more people to have access to it, allowing for far more points of view. This omnipresence, additionally, comes from the technological aspects involved in producing

mass media. If we agree with Meisel's assertion that the difference between the high and the low is largely non-existent, we can still use Adorno, Horkheimer, Jameson, and Benjamin to help us situate mass culture as a product of industrial capitalism, both for good and bad.<sup>9</sup>

Taking this cue, I think it's worthwhile to discuss mass culture in terms of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci doesn't see things in terms of direct domination the way that Adorno and Horkheimer do. Instead, Gramsci's idea of "hegemony" allows us to focus on the back-and-forth mediation that happens with mass culture. As Gramsci writes, "Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of the essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields" (5). He goes on to say that "The relationship between the intellectuals and the world of production is not as direct as it is with the fundamental social groups but is, in varying degrees, 'mediated' by the whole fabric of society and by the complex of superstructures, of which the intellectuals are, precisely, the 'functionaries'" (12). For Gramsci, these intellectuals are able to organize others and lead by example, but their leadership is not absolute. John Storey, in his *Inventing Popular Culture*, gives a useful summary of this Gramscian approach to mass culture:

Gramscian cultural studies is informed by the proposition that people make popular culture from the repertoire of commodities supplied by the culture industry. Making popular culture ("production in use") can be empowering to subordinate and resistant to dominant understandings of the world. But this is not to say that popular culture is always empowering and resistant. To deny the passivity of consumption is not to deny that sometimes consumption is passive; to deny that consumers of popular culture are cultural dupes is not to deny that the culture industries seek to manipulate. But it is to deny that popular culture is little more than a degraded landscape of commercial and ideological manipulation, imposed from above in order to make profit and secure social control. (53)

And, as Michael Denning writes in "The End of Mass Culture":

No popular cultural practice is necessarily subversive or incorporated; it takes place in a situation, becomes articulated with a "party" in Gramsci's sense: an organized way of

life, an alliance of class fractions, a conception of the universe, a historical bloc which creates the conditions for a political use or reading, the conditions for symbolizing class conflict. (14)

As Denning also discusses, Gramsci's writings weren't about anything we might consider to be mass culture, while Adorno's writings clearly are. As Denning says, "Adorno's screech against radio music may not be appealing but it is recognizable" (14). For Gramsci, according to Denning, popular culture is the Catholic Church, so Gramscian approaches to mass culture should help us to see that "Popular culture is more the product of a long-term cultural organization and a symbolic community than a quick sale" (14). Gramsci never wrote substantial analysis of movies, radio, or magazines. His analysis of institutions such as the Catholic Church helps us situate mass culture as a part of the culture at large. The Gramscian approach is useful in this project because it sheds light on how these writers are approximating elements of the dominant culture, elements such as film and detective magazines, for their own ends. For example, the detective magazines that Bigger reads in *Native Son*, and their accompanying tropes, are instruments through which Richard Wright can examine the racist and classist ideologies that underline the content of those magazines.

The Gramscian analysis I've brought forward isn't as concerned with whether a piece of writing is artful; it's more concerned with how it functions in certain situations. Because of this, Adorno's and Horkheimer's attention to the complex dialectical relationship between modernism and mass culture is central to my project, just as the role of art and the artist is central to what these American writers were writing about. All of the writers I'm discussing wrote to make money. Only Schwartz, who worked intermittently as a university professor, had any type of substantial income that didn't come from his writing. They certainly wrote for other reasons, as well, of course. Whatever concessions any of the stories and novels I'm discussing make to the culture industry—and some make more concessions than others—they all hew close to Adorno's and Horkheimer's conceptions of modernism. These stories and novels are

consciously crafted to be works of art, but they are works of art that are very much engaged with how the artist who makes that art can function alongside the culture industry. What frequently emerges is a sense that the culture industry cannot be overcome; rather, art must work constantly to appropriate elements of the culture industry to show how they function in society.

While these European Marxist critics were addressing many of the same issues in their theoretical writings as the American writers on which I'm focusing were addressing in their fiction, there was a profound change happening in America: the Great Depression. As I mentioned earlier, the financial and social changes brought on by the Depression changed not only what people expected from mass culture but also what they expected from serious literature. As Ted Atkinson writes, the economic collapse of 1929 made several writers and critics renounce the formal experimentation of 1920s modernism as hedonistic and decadent. As Atkinson says, "With a sort of Lenten devotion, artists and intellectuals repented of their past excesses, publicly renouncing past attitudes and practices driven by bohemian and often hedonistic attitudes" (55). In this climate, according to Atkinson, critics influenced by Marxist theory saw modernism as out of date, making some see William Faulkner, now regarded as the premier American modernist, as a relic of a fading literary movement. On the other side of the spectrum, came the conservative response, which was largely derived from the critical writings of T.S. Eliot, whose seminal "Tradition and the Individual Talent" outlined the beginning of what would lead to a school of criticism, dubbed New Criticism, that would be concerned largely with formal artistry over social or political content. Eliot takes a shot at popular literature in his essay "Religion and Literature," where he says,

For the reader of contemporary literature is not, like the reader of the established great literature of all time, exposing himself to diverse and contradictory personalities; he is exposing himself to a mass of movement of writers who, each of them, think that they have something individual to offer, but are really all working together in the same direction. (351-352)

One of the representative Depression-era texts to stem from this school of thought was 1930's *I'll Take My Stand*—a book by “Twelve Southerners” that owed a great debt to Eliot and espoused an “Agrarianism” which called for a return to a more southern way of life—which wanted a return to the autonomy of art amid the emerging industrialized culture.<sup>10</sup> While *I'll Take My Stand* doesn't present a wholly monolithic point of view, most of the essays represent both a pseudo-intellectual white supremacy and a disgust with industrialization, which the Agrarians, as their name might imply, find inferior in every way to farming. In Donald Davidson's “A Mirror For Artists,” the essay in the book that is most concerned with the Agrarian idea of art, Davidson argues that

Industrialization cannot play the role of Maecenas, because its complete ascendancy will mean that there will be no arts left to foster; or, if they exist at all, they will flourish only in a diseased and disordered condition, and the industrial Maecenas will find himself in the embarrassing position of having to patronize an art that secretly hates him and calls him bad names. (29)

Clearly, mass culture, which is dependent on industrialization, has no place in the world of the Agrarians—As Andrew Nelson Lytle says in his essay, “The Hind Tit,” “Throw out the radio and take down the fiddle from the wall” (244).<sup>11</sup> The Agrarians and Adorno feared different aspects of industrialization for different reasons, but they all believed that art must strive to be separate from it, which, of course, is impossible for the culture industry. As Christopher Brookeman writes, both the conservative Eliotic approach to mass culture and the Marxist Frankfurt School approach to mass culture were similar in that they saw “mass culture as transmitting distorted consciousness through the use of repetitive stereotypes and mechanical narrative formulae. The effects of mass culture are to induce passive alienation and anomie in the mass audience, and to exclude the majority of people from active participation by manipulating an artificial consensus of beliefs” (42). Of the four writers I'm discussing, only Wright was ever explicitly Marxist, though Schwartz did consider Marx to be among his

intellectual heroes. Faulkner and Welty were, in their own ways, much more conservative. However—the Agrarians’ love of Faulkner notwithstanding—all four of these writers are engaged in a level of social analysis that, while not always exactly Marxist, is still far more complex than the worldview the Agrarians espoused.

In addition to the more overtly political framework that informed 1930s culture, the emergence of sound film was helping to make the already-huge Hollywood an even bigger cultural force. Film figures prominently in many of the stories I’ll be discussing, and movies especially draw the ire of Adorno and the Agrarians. While mass culture isn’t synonymous with film, the two frequently go hand in hand. Larry May, who sees film as part of the beginning of American mass culture, argues that “the motion picture industry provides an ideal focal point for fathoming the birth of a new urban culture” and that by 1914 movies were “the first true mass amusement in American life” (xii). In much criticism, there’s a tendency to label some literature as “cinematic,” discussing how prose calls attention to or tries to recreate elements of film. Writing in 1948—though not published in English until 1972—French critic Claude-Edmonde Magny traces the relationship between film and American literature between the First and Second World Wars, the time period we now associate with high modernism, and he sees film as having a profound effect on the relationship between the literatures of America and France:

But there is no doubt another, more basic reason for such a vogue, [of film’s affecting literature] and I suggest that it is to be found in the cinema’s profound modification of our collective sensibility, a modification that has taken place without our even being aware of it. We no longer perceive in the same way as we did fifty years ago; specifically, we have gotten into the habit of having stories shown to us instead of hearing them narrated. This must naturally turn storytelling technique upside down. (37)

According to Magny, American writers—he gives John Dos Passos and his use of the “Camera Eye” in *U.S.A.* as an example—had been far more willing to adopt these new changes, as opposed to the more conservative French writers, who were less open to change. Writing in

1976, Alan Spiegel sees *Madame Bovary* as an epochal event in literature, since it was the novel that brought us the “narrative as a totally concretized form.” He goes on to say that “Concretized form, then, is a way of transcribing the narrative, not as a story that is told, but as an action that is portrayed and presented, that seems to reveal itself to the reader apart from the overt mediations of the author” (6). Of course, since the movie camera did not debut publicly until 1895, Flaubert could not have been influenced by movies, since they didn’t yet exist. What Spiegel is arguing, though, is that the modern novel is interested both in objective presentation of events and images and in meditating on how those “objective” presentations are themselves always limited and mediated in ways similar to how film works. Writing much more recently, David Trotter says, “My hypothesis is that some modernist writers found in film’s neutrality as a medium a stimulus to the reintroduction or re-enactment of the neutrality of literature, or in some cases of writing itself, as a medium. It was not cinema which made literary modernism, but cinema’s example” (9). I don’t agree with Trotter’s claim of the “neutrality” of film—considering all of the subjective decisions that go into creating a movie; the camera might be neutral, but the people using it aren’t. In fact, the modernist stories I’m discussing ultimately present critical views of film, which is seen as presenting a reductive worldview that isn’t able to deal fully with the complexities of the characters’ lives. But, at the same time, film and literature are so deeply imbricated that it’s very difficult to parse out the differences. These texts produce a deep ambivalence about film. For example, in Welty’s “June Recital,” silent film is the shorthand through which the people of Morgana create a reductive version of Virgie Rainey. However, readers gain a deep insight into how the sexist norms of Morgana constrict Virgie through the ways that the story frames Loch’s voyeurism in specifically cinematic terms. The story would not function in the same way without the tropes of the films that it critiques. So while the relationship between cinema and modernism is rich and complex, what I want to focus on in my analyses is moments in the stories when the writers

call specific attention to film, which usually involves characters watching movies. Many critics of Faulkner, as I will discuss in my chapter dedicated to him, have explored the ways that film plays a role in his writing, and this criticism certainly echoes much of the criticism I just discussed. However, because none of Faulkner's novels deals with film substantially or overtly, I won't focus on film in my reading of Faulkner and will instead discuss the print media that figure prominently in his novels.

Much of my analysis so far has focused on the nature of the high/low divide, so it's worth mentioning more recent scholarship that has laid out ways in which the high/low divide was always blurred. Rita Barnard lays out three areas in which she sees this happening in the 1930s. The first is the emergence of proletariat literature. The second is how in the 1930s, high culture in a sense became mass culture, such as when symphonies would play regularly on the radio. The third is how "the dichotomy between literature and mass culture is also undermined by a few writers who incorporated the language of mass culture into the body of their 'literary' work" (7). Barnard's *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance*, focuses on Kenneth Fearing and Nathanael West, whom she argues are particularly indebted to the methods of mass culture and "foreshadow the work of postmodern artists, [and] who understood quite clearly the challenge that the commercialization of culture, high and low, presented to the notion of art as a social panacea" (8). On an even larger scale, John Xiros Cooper argues that the

modernist bohemiae were the social places where an unrestrained market society first began to reveal itself in its most concrete social forms, including offering a social space in which the gender and sexual emancipation that characterizes fully developed market societies could begin. By the end of the twentieth century, the culture intrinsic to market society had spread from the avant-garde enclave to society at large, transforming, in its course, the everyday lives of the very philistine masses the early modernists haughtily kept at arm's length. (4)

What is frequently explicit, such as in Huyssen and Meisel, and almost always implicit in the post-Adorno critics I've been discussing, is a critique of the Adornian conception of the culture industry. Virtually everyone agrees that pieces of mass culture are capable of more nuance and

complexity than Adorno and Horkheimer claim. Still, there *is* a culture industry, and it is largely driven by profit. To argue for a more complex approach to the culture industry of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—that it had a significant leftist presence, or that some modernist writers were themselves unadorned fans of popular culture and were willing to allow its influence to show in their work—is not to say that elements of the culture industry were not frequently regressive in their presentation of social issues, and it is not to say that modernist artists were themselves not trying to produce art that, through its complexity, could shed light on how to resist the frequently destructive ideologies of the culture industry.

Though Meisel’s assessment of Adorno as a “brickheaded snob” is needlessly cruel, I will admit that reading Adorno can be a frequently frustrating experience. There are more worthwhile movies to see and more good jazz to hear than any single person could hope to experience in a lifetime, and Adorno’s wholesale rejection of everything the culture industry has to sell can put me in an adversarial mood while reading him—and based on quotes from Denning and Meisel that I’ve just presented, I’m clearly not alone. However, while Adorno’s assessment of the culture industry is unsatisfactory when we are talking about specific movies or pieces of music, what Adorno is really discussing is a system made up of (increasingly few) corporations that makes products with profit in mind. As Jameson says, “Thus, the ‘Culture Industry’ is not a theory of culture but the theory of an industry, of a branch of the interlocking monopolies of late capitalism that makes money out of what used to be called culture” (*Late Marxism*, 144). The existence of visionary artists like John Ford and Louis Armstrong doesn’t mean that the movie studios and record companies that paid their bills weren’t intent on churning out whatever sold. While I can acknowledge that the pulp magazines produced genuinely good writers such as Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, that doesn’t mean that the vast majority of stories in pulp magazines weren’t the type of simplistic garbage that so enamored Joe Christmas and Bigger Thomas. The four writers I’m discussing all write novels

and stories that display a keen desire to resist what the culture industry is selling. Sometimes, as with Faulkner, this involves striving for an almost categorical rejection of everything associated with the culture industry. For the others, this resistance involves different degrees of appreciating the value of some aspects of the culture industry while also finding ways to reject what is largely dangerous and regressive about it. All of these writers, however, appropriate some elements of the culture industry in their writings, if only to critique them, displaying the degree to which their modernism is inextricably tied to the culture that helped produce it. As Thomas Strychacz writes, “Though modernist writing in the period 1880-1940 is characteristically distinct from the forms of expression emerging from mass culture... writers in search of a realm of authentic experience had to write within that context and... the marks of that cultural refashioning are inscribed within their texts” (7).

I originally intended this project to be devoted entirely to the works of William Faulkner, and the extra attention I give to his work reflects that. The premiere American modernist novelist, he is also in many ways the most conservative of the four writers I’m discussing, at least in terms of how he views the culture industry. While, as I’ll discuss later, many critics have explored how Faulkner was more engaged with the culture industry than he let on, I think it’s significant that he personally dismissed movies and magazines as “trash” while the other three writers I’m discussing all expressed a level of enthusiasm for products of the culture industry, especially the movies. While Faulkner’s public comments were frequently contradictory, his presentation of the culture industry in his stories reflects the negative opinions he claimed to have for it. For Faulkner, the culture industry represents a type of fatalism in which characters encounter elements of the mass culture that give simplistic, regressive worldviews where the future is already written, and there’s little anyone can do to change it. Faulkner presents the reading and writing of pieces of the culture industry as fatalistic races to the finish in which the end result is far more important than the nuances along

the way. To counter this, Faulkner espouses a type of personal reflection that involves as total a rejection of the culture industry as possible. Unfortunately, in the four of Faulkner's novels that I'll be discussing—*Light in August*, *Pylon* (1935), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and *The Wild Palms* (1939)—characters ultimately choose the easy (but fatalistic) answers provided by the culture industry. It is in the quiet moments of intellectual contemplation—such as when Thomas Sutpen retreats to his cave of trees in the forest—that we see moments of resistance, moments in which we, as readers, can see the world as far more nuanced and complex than how the culture industry presents it. We, as readers, do Faulkner a disservice if we read the tragic endings of these novels as the final word. Instead, we should see the moments of resistance as starting points for ways in which we can begin to approach the world more complexly.

For Richard Wright, the culture industry is a direct product of the dominant white racist power structure. *Lawd Today!*'s (1963) Jake and *Native Son*'s (1940) Bigger might have moments when they show a level of understanding or resistance, but Wright stresses that these moments are not enough to overcome the overwhelming brutality of the system. Jake and Bigger—and, by extension, all black men caught in the system—will lose. *Lawd Today!* takes a more critically scornful approach to mass culture, but part of *Native Son*'s modernist critique is in how it embodies the tropes and forms of different elements of the culture industry—gothic horror, detective stories, movies, newspapers—and then steps back and reflects on how each of these pieces of the culture industry is built on a foundation of white racism. In essence, Wright is trying to write a better detective novel (and gothic horror novel, and newspaper story). Bigger might have moments when he can articulate how white racism affects him—perhaps best embodied in his proclamation to Max that “What I killed for must've been good” (429), maybe the most grotesque manifestation of Bigger's asserting his humanity through violence—but Bigger has significantly more trouble realizing how the culture industry in which he finds

solace is part of that same oppressive system. *Native Son* shows the reader how the culture industry is not just simplistic and regressive but is also fundamentally racist. More than any of the other texts I'm discussing, *Native Son* is interested in giving readers the type of experience they would get from reading a product of the culture industry. The novel gives readers the pleasures of, for example, crime and horror novels, but Wright's modernist critique forces the reader to examine how the tropes that give black and white readers pleasure are predicated on fundamentally racist assumptions and ideologies.

Critics of Delmore Schwartz's poetry have discussed whether his verse is personal and confessional or more in the Eliotic tradition of favoring formal innovation and universal truths. Much of Schwartz's fiction embodies this tension. In the short story "Screeno" the protagonist Cornelius compares movies to the Oracle at Delphi, which gives us a useful way to begin understanding Schwartz's take on the culture industry. In Greek myth, the Oracle at Delphi gave enigmatic prophecies that the listeners interpreted as they wished. In the three of Schwartz's stories that I'll be discussing—the aforementioned "Screeno," "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," and "The Track Meet"—the masses are shown as wanting simple entertainment from the culture industry, so that's what they get; they applaud at whatever is presented for their enjoyment, regardless of whether it's more complex or tragic than they are willing to admit. The protagonists of these stories, on the other hand, believe in a type of Eliotic artistic purity, which allows for a level of critique of the idea of art for art's sake. However, though pure art isn't the answer to what the culture industry is selling, the artistically inclined mind, which these stories associate with an ability to approach situations with more nuance and complexity, allows the reader to have a more fruitful engagement with the culture industry. As with the Oracle at Delphi, the protagonists can find what they are looking for, and we as readers gain an appreciation for mass culture's ability to explore significant social issues,

ranging from the small-scale drama of fractured personal relationships to the large-scale tragedy of social suffering.

For Eudora Welty's short story cycle *The Golden Apples* (1949), the culture industry—specifically movies—is associated with a sense of (frequently female) alienation. The inability of characters (and the narration) to get a firm sense of Virgie Rainey in the stories “June Recital” and “The Wanderers” is explicitly tied in with the idea of Virgie as a fading silent film star. The salve to this is not just art, but art as a means to personal understanding. In “Music From Spain,” Eugene MacLain projects his own idea of artistic purity onto the Spanish guitarist, but the language barrier between the two men is symbolic of their inability to find a true breakthrough. The spontaneity and creativity of art, coupled with a legitimate attempt of understanding—as in the relationships between Virgie and Miss Eckhart, and Virgie and the old woman who comes to visit her—are the true ways to fight the alienation represented by the culture industry. When Virgie breaks free of convention and plays more complex pieces while working as the piano player at the movie theater, the story presents moments in which we can see a type of Gramscian appropriation of the culture industry. It is, after all, this playing in the movie theater that the old woman remembers all the years later. Faulkner wouldn't see this type of breakthrough as possible, and Wright and Schwartz, though they see the culture industry as offering more of value than Faulkner does, present worlds of isolation and loneliness that don't see this type of person-to-person breakthrough as possible. Of course, the culture industry that allows Virgie moments of individual artistic expression also is partly responsible for keeping her in her place in Morgana, and the book ultimately espouses a type of personal bond that rises above the constraints of the culture industry.

Each of the four chapters that follow involves close readings of short stories and novels by these four writers. These readings explore the ways that these modernist writers aim to present their works as an ideological and aesthetic alternative to the frequently regressive

content of the culture industry. As I've stressed, this doesn't mean that these writers don't occasionally view the culture industry ambivalently and sometimes even favorably. However, we frequently see, in these texts, the culture industry, regardless of its nuances, as also representative of a totalizing system that is capable of compromising a character's individuality. All four of these writers have put clear signposts within their texts that make the reader draw a clear distinction between the story she is reading and the pieces of the culture industry that the story is examining. While the insights of the theorists and critics I've discussed, especially Adorno and Gramsci, have been invaluable in helping me frame my argument, these chapters are not overtly theoretical. Broadly speaking, all four of these writers are interested in the high/low approach to the culture industry that Adorno's theories give us, as well as presenting situations that lend themselves to a more Gramscian idea of struggle and resistance. My point is not to declare one of these schools of thought right and the other wrong but to show how they can work in tandem to give a framework that allows us to see the complex dialectic between modernism and mass culture.

To return to Michael Denning, writing nearly 20 years ago, his assessment of mass culture is still true today: "But the fact is that mass culture has won; there is nothing else" (8). I am hard pressed to imagine any facet of human life that is untouched by mass culture today. Harry in "The Wild Palms" says that we have replaced God's voice with the radio, and Faulkner wrote that line at a time when such an observation didn't seem to be a foregone conclusion. These writers all have a clear understanding of how mass culture, in the 1930s and 1940s, is beginning to infiltrate every aspect of society. They are foretelling the world we live in today, but they are still trying to hold on to an idea of artistic representation that belonged to a less media-saturated time. Jameson, Adorno, and Horkheimer are all concerned with some idea of "popular" culture—though, when they use that term, they don't mean it in the way that most laypeople would use it today, a way that makes it synonymous with what I've been

calling “mass” culture. Instead, they see popular culture as a genuine folk culture, one that springs up genuinely from regular people and is not imposed from above. Yet as Denning and Jameson acknowledge, such a thing is virtually impossible. Mass culture won. It’s everywhere. The writers about whom I’m writing seem to see this coming. In *Lawd Today!*, when we see the parade, here a sign of black folk culture, it is also mediated through a radio. Faulkner and Welty, through their focus on a more rural South, give glimpses of ways of life that have not yet been completely overrun by mass culture, but mass culture has still made such inroads that complete saturation seems inevitable. For Schwartz, mass culture is already everywhere. It’s difficult to make sense of the world without it. The omnipresence of the culture industry is not a wholly destructive thing. As Benjamin would say, the industrialization of culture allows that culture to be available to far more people than it was in centuries past. Books and paintings are no longer just for the rich. But, as I said, while it’s important to focus on the possibilities and nuances of the culture industry that recent critics have been exploring, it’s also important to realize that much of what Adorno wrote still stands. Much of what the culture industry is selling is regressive, and even in the best cases, consumers must know how to approach those cultural products critically. These modernist writers explored frameworks of resistance that are still useful today.

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#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Page numbers from all of William Faulkner’s short stories are from *The Collected Stories*.

<sup>2</sup> In his “ ‘All That Glitters’: Reappraising ‘Golden Land,’ ” D. Matthew Ramsey argues that “to oversimplify Faulkner’s Hollywood and magazine-writing experiences results in a lost opportunity to consider more carefully what Faulkner might have gained from the popular culture aspects of his career, rather than assuming he only lost from such experience” (54). While I agree that we should not use “Golden Land” as a basis for seeing Faulkner treating popular culture as universally worthless, I think that the story, taken in isolation, is far less complexly engaged with the culture industry than the other Faulkner texts I’ll be discussing.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of the gangster as a capitalist hero, see *Ted Atkinson's Faulkner and the Great Depression*.

<sup>4</sup> See also Morris Dickstein's recent *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* for an interesting, charitable reading of Depression-era culture. As he says, "The cultural changes of the 1930s... parallel the effects of the New Deal. The initial sense of crisis and personal isolation gave way to a dream of community, a vision of interdependence, just as it did in the political world" (523).

<sup>5</sup> Eysteinnsson here is summarizing what he sees as a traditional understanding of modernism. His *The Concept of Modernism* deals with the subject much more complexly.

<sup>6</sup> See Eysteinnsson's *The Concept of Modernism* for more in-depth discussions on this issue.

<sup>7</sup> See Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* for a thorough discussion of his aesthetics.

<sup>8</sup> Of Orson Welles, Adorno and Horkheimer write, "Orson Welles is forgiven all the offenses against the usages of the craft because, as calculated rudeness, they confirm the validity of the system all the more zealously" (102).

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Williams is similarly sympathetic to the socialist possibilities of film. As he says, "One way that became common on the Left saw film, from an early stage, as an inherently popular and in that sense democratic art. It bypassed, leaped over, the class-based establishment theatre and all the cultural barriers which selective education had erected around high literacy" (107).

<sup>10</sup> For a thorough analysis of the Agrarians, see Michael Kreyling's *Inventing Southern Literature*.

<sup>11</sup> As Atkinson points out, we shouldn't see this issue simply as the left's being interested only in social realism and the right's only being interested in formal style. The Agrarians, after all, were deeply political, and part of the reason they were early to embrace Faulkner was because, in addition to his formal abilities, he—at least as far as they were concerned—presented in his writing a critique of industrialism with which they agreed. At the same time, some leftist critics embraced novels such as Faulkner's *Light in August* as a prime piece of social realism.

## Chapter Two:

### “Suppose I Went There and Found Out It Was Not So?”: Faulkner’s Mourning and the Easy Answers of the Culture Industry

A discussion of Ab Snopes, one of the central characters in the short story “Barn Burning” (1938), might not seem like the most obvious way to begin exploring how William Faulkner sees the culture industry in his texts. The patriarch of the Snopes clan—whose son Flem is the focus of *The Snopes Trilogy* (1940-59), Faulkner’s longest work—is someone who, along with his family, exists on the margins of society, working as sharecroppers until Ab feels that the family has been sufficiently wronged by a landowner and burns the property owner’s barn down; the family then moves to the next town to repeat the process. “Barn Burning” is told from the point of view of Ab’s son Sarty (Flem’s younger brother), who is horrified by the cycle of violence that he sees his father engaged in. The story takes place in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the rural South and is wholly unconcerned with any elements of the culture industry. What is significant, however, is how the story, told from Sarty’s point of view, presents Ab’s use of fire as a way to assert his “integrity.” To give some context, the Snopes family finds itself working on the property of wealthy landowner Major de Spain after being driven out of another town when Ab was accused of burning down his overseer’s barn. When the Snopeses arrive at the de Spain house, the black slave at the door tells them not to come in, but Ab pushes through, smearing cow feces over the family’s expensive French rug.<sup>1</sup> De Spain demands that Ab clean the rug, but Ab’s indignant attempts at cleaning only serve to ruin the rug forever. In response to Ab’s actions, Major de Spain gets the local justice of the peace to levy a harsh fine on Ab’s harvest.

Within this situation, Sarty realizes that his father is going to burn down Major de Spain’s barn and that “the element of fire spoke to some deep mainspring of his father’s being, as the element of steel or of powder spoke to other men, as the one weapon for the preservation

of integrity, else breath were not worth the breathing, and hence to be regarded with respect and used with discretion” (7-8). The assessment of Ab in this situation is similar to Bigger Thomas’s declaration to Max that “What I killed for must’ve been good” (429). Bigger has used what he’s learned from elements of the culture industry—detective novels and newspapers—to strike back against the white power structure of which that culture industry is a part.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Ab has taken what little tools he has at his disposal to help in the “preservation of [his] integrity,” to strike back the only way he can against the dominant upper class that helps keep him in a state of perpetual poverty as a sharecropper. In both of these cases, the outcomes are violent and tragic and help perpetuate the systems in which these men are caught. Still, we shouldn’t underestimate the power of the moments in which these men who have been acted upon for much of their lives find a way to act back.

Many of the characters in Faulkner’s novels approach the culture industry in ways similar to how Ab Snopes approaches the fire, as something that might give them the means to resist what the dominant culture is forcing upon them.<sup>3</sup> These attempts at resistance work to varying degrees in the different novels, but they all end in tragedy, in part because of how Faulkner views the culture industry. To Faulkner, products of the culture industry largely represent the regressive, simplistic, and frequently racist, sexist, and dangerous worldview of the culture at large. To try to use the culture industry as a way to resist the dominant culture is to accept the rules of that culture. For Faulkner, the best response to the culture industry is to break free of what it presents as a fatalistic, mad dash to the end in favor of a complex understanding of the process that gets you there. The reader, or consumer, of the culture industry, must stop and think, giving time to accept the nuances of life that the culture industry is intent on simplifying, frequently in racist or sexist ways. Of William Faulkner’s novels of the 1930s, four of them—*Light in August*, *Pylon*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *The Wild Palms*—pay particular attention to how characters navigate within the culture industry. *Pylon* and *The Wild*

*Palms*, Faulkner's city novels, give a more sustained presentation of the culture industry, a world where we have replaced God's voice with the radio, as Harry in *The Wild Palms* says. *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, on the other hand, are rural novels that make only fleeting, though significant, mentions of elements of the culture industry. Part of what unites these novels is their presentation of the culture industry's tendency to represent the regressive, simplistic worldviews associated with the community at large. Additionally, the characters in these novels, in their attempts to struggle for some kind of dignity or integrity—much as Ab Snopes does in “Barn Burning”—find ways to use elements of the culture industry to their advantage, however briefly. In this regard, a Gramscian approach to mass culture in Faulkner's works is useful, but only to an extent. While it's significant how characters use elements of the culture industry to help in resisting the dominant culture—for example, the poor, illiterate Thomas Sutpen uses what he hears from a schoolbook about gaining riches in the West Indies as part of the impetus for his grand design—Faulkner frequently presents the culture industry as leading characters to focus on the end result of what the culture industry is presenting, something that doesn't allow for the thoughtful nuances the reader will find in Faulkner's books. Again, Thomas Sutpen is a useful example. Though a poor boy with seemingly few options in life can find in the culture industry a language that allows him to find a way out of his crushing poverty, that same culture industry promotes an ideology that is focused so much on the end results—colonialism can make you rich—that it ignores the complexities—that type of colonialism involves the messy, moral black hole of slavery—on which *Absalom, Absalom!* focuses.<sup>4</sup>

I am indebted here to Seth Moglen, who in his *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernism and the Injuries of American Capitalism*, argues that there are really two modernisms in American literature. There is what he calls the modernity of melancholy, which he sees as the traditionally canonized strand of modernism that is “structured by the

presumption that collective resistance to the damaging forces of modernization was impossible, even unthinkable” (7). Moglen counts Faulkner as part of this tradition, along with T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Alternately, there is the modernism of mourning, the second strand whose

poetics and forms of storytelling are predicated on the view that the processes of modernization were historically contingent, that the most corrosive forces at work in American life might be altered or ameliorated, and that the human capacities that seemed most constrained might somehow be enabled to flourish in the future. (8)

In this tradition, Moglen sees Zora Neale Hurston, H.D., Tillie Olsen, Langston Hughes, and William Carlos Williams as representative authors.<sup>5</sup> Though I disagree with Moglen as to which camp Faulkner should be placed in, I still find his framework useful for this project. In Faulkner’s world, the endings in mass culture are already written, and readers can find themselves pulled toward fatalistic conclusions that affirm simplistic, regressive assumptions toward ideas about race, class, and gender. These worldviews, in Moglen’s words, can keep readers from realizing their “personal capacities” to act against the fatalism of mass culture. To counteract that, Faulkner’s novels embrace a type of mourning as a useful response to mass culture. Things might end terribly, as they frequently do in Faulkner’s novels, but the reader’s job is to step outside of the fatalistic narratives of mass culture and engage in the type of personal reflection necessary to explore the nuances and complications that mass culture steamrolls over.

The novel most frequently associated with Faulkner’s relationship with mass culture is the lurid best-seller *Sanctuary* (1931). As Ted Atkinson says, when discussing how Hollywood producers were quick to jump on *Sanctuary*, “Presumably, Hollywood executives at the time recognized what influential critics would later seek to downplay: Faulkner’s keen awareness of the ‘current trends’ and his ability to exploit them, as his sensational gangster tale demonstrates” (121). There has been criticism discussing how *Sanctuary* works as a detective

novel<sup>6</sup>, and Leslie Fiedler expands this to say that the novel “includes a potpourri of almost *all* the popular genres of the late 1920s” (88, italics in original). Peter Lurie posits the novel’s opening chapter encounter between Horace Benbow and Popeye as a meeting between the high and low, with Horace being the former, and Popeye the latter: “Popeye’s position opposite Horace thus figures the cultural circumstances that surrounded Faulkner and the writing of his novel—his position as an author of European-influenced literary modernism, as well as a writer aware of the market for ‘hack’ fiction” (26). So while *Sanctuary* can certainly be read as a meditation on the high-low divide, and its protagonist, Horace Benbow, is a kind of detective—though not a very good one—what the novel lacks is moments in which characters specifically interact with a product of the culture industry, which in turn exerts some kind of influence over them. *Sanctuary* is a type of detective novel, but unlike, for example, *Light in August*, it doesn’t have a parallel to the scene where Joe Christmas reads the crime magazine and sees his fate so intertwined with what mass culture has to offer. What much of the criticism on *Sanctuary* helps us contextualize is not just how Faulkner dealt with mass culture in his works but how the culture industry in which Faulkner worked left its traces on his works. A sustained discussion of this idea can be found in John Matthews’s essay “Faulkner and the Culture Industry,” which discusses Adorno and Horkheimer’s ideas of the culture industry in relation to the movie *Barton Fink* (1991), which features a kind of Faulkner surrogate in the character of Bill Mayhew, and then discusses Faulkner’s short story “Turnabout” and the screenplay drafts he wrote based on that story. According to Matthews, the story, which involves an American and an Englishman bonding during battle in the First World War, is, with its exciting war-time story, both a concession to the culture industry and a modernist reflection on the capitalist demands that drive that culture industry. According to Matthews, “If we valorize only the elite works (or portions of works) that suppress mass culture, we fail to maintain sufficient analytical purchase upon the ideology of modernist autonomy” (70). As he goes on to say:

Capitalist interests come to saturate mass culture. For its part, elitist modernism retreats in the cultural sphere from the specter of social formation inherent in the emancipatory advances of modernization. At the same time, the uncompromising modernist work does attempt a salutary negation of modernization's ills: rampant and brutal authoritarianism, the commodification and debasement endemic to the culture industry. (71)

For Matthews, Faulkner's modernism is engaged in a process of resistance against the commodification of the culture industry. Where I differ from Matthews is in the ways I see Faulkner showing that resistance: I focus on the ways that Faulkner presents reading pieces of the culture industry.

Matthews's essay is part of larger body of work to discuss Faulkner in relation to film. There has been a considerable amount of criticism on how film—specifically Faulkner's time as a Hollywood scriptwriter—affected his literature. Bruce F. Kawin's *Faulkner and Film* is a study of how filmic techniques such as montage might have affected Faulkner's writing. As Kawin says of the substantial aesthetic improvement between Faulkner's first two novels and his third, *Sartoris* (1929):

It seems possible to argue that what he discovered was montage—that it fits his sensibility, and made possible the expression of his most complex and troubling conviction. For what is most essential in Faulkner's experimental fiction is the way characters and events repeat and collide with no regard for the conventions of chronology. All time is equal, all mental space accessible, right up to the edge of a cosmic, ineffable silence. (10-11)

Gene D. Phillips' *Fiction, Film, and Faulkner*, on the other hand, is an examination of how Faulkner's novels were adapted into movies by other screenwriters. Lurie, writing more recently in his book *Vision's Immanence: Faulkner, Film, and the Popular Imagination*, views Faulkner's work largely through the lens of film, argues that Faulkner was in fact finely attuned to how popular media, especially the movies, worked, and explored those media in a highly dialectical fashion wherein the “visual and the filmic as they appear in Faulkner's fiction... do so as part of his cultural and historical critique as well as in dialectical relation to his modernism” (19). Written more recently, Atkinson's *Faulkner and the Great Depression:*

*Aesthetics, Ideology, and Culture*, is only partially concerned with issues of mass culture. What interests Atkins is how Faulkner's work responded to the "specter of fascism," which he sees as being largely represented in popular films of the time.<sup>7</sup> While these discussions of Faulkner's relationship with film are useful and insightful, this chapter doesn't focus much on film because, with the exception of the short story "Dry September" (1931) and the story "Pantaloons in Black" from *Go Down, Moses* (1941), Faulkner's characters spend no appreciable amount of time watching movies. The other authors I've been discussing show film as having a profound impact on the lives of their characters; Faulkner doesn't. Faulkner claimed to dislike film,<sup>8</sup> but he was also a prodigiously well-read man who, at times, claimed not to read very much. And the analyses that these critics have put forward suggest that Faulkner's relationship with film was far more complex than he ever let on. Regardless, the overwhelming concern Faulkner seems to have with the culture industry is *how* we read what the culture industry is selling us, and the implicit contrast is between how Faulkner's characters read elements of the culture industry and how the reader reads Faulkner's novels, which lead the reader to a more complex analysis of situations than the culture industry can provide. Since print was the medium Faulkner worked in, it makes sense that print mass culture would come into special focus in his works. Additionally, while it's important that these critics have examined the ways that the culture industry affected and influenced Faulkner's fiction, it's also important to realize that within his fiction, the culture industry is met with almost categorical scorn. While all of the writers I'm discussing in this project are exploring how to resist the frequently regressive ideologies of the culture industry, Richard Wright, Delmore Schwartz, and Eudora Welty each present instances where the culture industry allows for moments of genuine insight and perhaps even resistance to the dominant culture. For Faulkner, these moments are fleeting. Unlike the other three writers, Faulkner stresses as near-total a rejection of the culture industry as possible. It is in the brief moments when Faulkner's characters realize ways in which the messages of the

culture industry aren't the Gospel truth that we as readers gain insight into how to resist what it's selling.

That William Faulkner claimed to hate his time in Hollywood churning out screenplays and writing "trash" for magazines (*Selected Letters*, 84) is well documented. As he sometimes said, he was an artist, and he should have been spending time on his novels, not writing movies. He also claimed not to like writing short stories to be published in magazines; he said he only wrote them for the money. It's not surprising that Faulkner's novels would, for the most part, reflect this level of frustration with and condescension toward mass culture. From an Adornian perspective, modernist writers, such as Faulkner, scorn mass culture. And, as other critics have discussed, both *Pylon* and *The Wild Palms* feature a bit of autobiography in the sense that they present artist figures who are trying to navigate through the demands of the culture industry, just as Faulkner felt while writing screenplays and short stories.<sup>9</sup> *The Wild Palms* reflects a deep frustration with the culture industry and the financial demands that go along with it, a frustration manifested in Charlotte's at-times uncritical interpretations of what she reads, which are paralleled with The Tall Convict's similarly uncritical reading of dime novels in "Old Man." Though the characters in *The Wild Palms* sometimes approach elements of mass culture in a simpleminded way, the novel, along with *Pylon*, presents a complex examination of the continuously dialectical relationship between allegedly "pure" high art and financially dependent low art. They are the only two of Faulkner's novels that take place mostly in industrialized cities,<sup>10</sup> and, more importantly, they are the only two of Faulkner's novels to focus primarily on characters who themselves are part of the culture industry. What they share with the more rural *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, is that all four novels feature protagonists who both are influenced by some aspect of the culture industry and are themselves trying to maneuver within a larger, oppressive culture. While the culture industry is far more prevalent in *Pylon* and *The Wild Palms*, Faulkner is less concerned with the technological

aspects of the culture industry—the simpleminded racism that greets Joe Christmas in rural Jefferson is not substantially different from the stultifying nature of city life that greets Harry and Charlotte in *The Wild Palms*—and more interested in how characters might, in attempts that ultimately fail, place unjust faith in specific elements of the culture industry to try to make their way through that oppressive world, in an attempt to preserve their integrity.

As with all of Faulkner’s mature novels, *The Wild Palms* deals with narrative form, in this case by alternating between two seemingly unrelated stories: “The Wild Palms,” a tale set in 1939 of Harry and Charlotte, two doomed lovers who traverse the country trying to escape from the financial demands of modernity; and “Old Man,” a story set ten years earlier about a prison inmate, known only as the Tall Convict, who is ordered to rescue a pregnant woman after the Mississippi River floods during a hurricane. It is after Harry and Charlotte have begun their illicit affair that she tells him, “the second time I ever saw you I learned what I had read in books but I never had actually believed: that love and suffering are the same thing and that the value of love is the sum of what you have to pay for it and anytime you get it cheap you have cheated yourself” (41). Charlotte—whose closest literary analogue is certainly Madame Bovary from Gustave Flaubert’s novel of the same name—is influenced by what she reads and uses it as a type of blueprint for life, the type of blueprint that gives her the idea that her comfortable life with her two kids and her relatively supportive husband, “Rat”—a life that allows her to practice her sculpting with little interference—is too dull for her. Instead, she must live a life of adventure, something that is, in her words, “all honeymoon, always” (71). As Pamela Rhodes and Richard Godden write, “In *The Wild Palms* Faulkner shows man as having lost touch with ‘matter.’ He has lost sight of his relations with his own objects and his own kind, and is reduced to yet another item of merchandise in the market which appears to control him” (6). They go on to say that the “story is cluttered with the chewed-over bits of the cultural objects which the characters need in order to define themselves, but which simultaneously get in their

way, preventing any achievement of ‘real’ feeling” (7). The reading that Rhodes and Godden offer is useful—it was the first to give an in-depth reading of the novel in relation to the culture industry—but it ultimately reads the novel too fatalistically. As they say, “Faulkner’s analysis of the structures and the strategies of the market provides no way of disrupting the commercial spectacle, since he can imagine nothing beyond it” (41). While *The Wild Palms* doesn’t dramatize revolutionary resistance, it is not the fatal march to the end that Rhodes and Godden present it as. The countless moments of reflection in the novel allow for analysis and mourning that might point the way to something better.

It is, of course, worth addressing what Charlotte has read to give her such ideas. As Vincent King says:

While the Tall Convict has been seduced by dime-store Westerns, Charlotte has fallen prey to the nonsense of equally cheap romances—romances that value ‘true love’ over family responsibility and that suggest that we would all be happy if we had enough money to do what we wanted—i.e. run away from the quotidian world of domestic responsibility.

Similarly, in “The Kotex Age: Women, Popular Culture, and *The Wild Palms*,” Ann Goodwin Jones discusses how *The Wild Palms* does and doesn’t function as a romance, though she does not mention the passage in which Charlotte talks about being influenced by what she read. What King doesn’t mention, however, is that the novel never specifically says what Charlotte reads. She could have gotten these ideas from The Bible or Shakespeare. She doesn’t say, so we can’t know for sure. There is some circumstantial evidence to show that perhaps we can infer that she is reading cheap romances. For starters, as King argues in his essay, the two stories are clearly there to shed light on each other, and the Tall Convict’s explicit debt to mass culture, in his reading of dime novels, could be there to suggest what is unsaid about Charlotte: namely, that she too is influenced by mass culture. Secondly, there is so much mass culture in “The Wild Palms”—enough to make Harry say that we have replaced God’s voice with that of

the radio—that it is perhaps not unreasonable to think that Charlotte too is hearing “God’s voice” through mass culture.

But, as other critics have discussed, and as I’ll discuss later, Charlotte is also a type of emblematic modernist.<sup>11</sup> She starts out as someone who makes art for the sake of making art, and she strives to escape the financial constraints on art that modernism similarly railed against. And even though her belief in a Platonic love that mirrors books comes across as simple-minded, it is only part of her character. She also exhibits a level of sexual freedom that is progressive for the time, especially for a female character. As Laurie Bernhardt writes, “Only Charlotte’s power and determined vision can draw Harry from his shell” (351). Unlike the Tall Convict, Charlotte doesn’t passively accept everything she has read. Her worldview allows for far more nuance than his does. The point is, we can’t know what she’s reading, and the novel gives us a highly ambivalent view of Charlotte’s relationship with mass culture. She makes both artistically “pure” art and financially dependent “low” art when making sculpture for the department store. Her views on love are alternately simplistic and complexly fluid. What is tragic about Charlotte is her inability to reconcile the two competing impulses between high and low that battle within her, the two competing impulses that play out in the world of the novel. In many ways, because of this ambivalence, Charlotte’s attitudes become a caricature of artistic purity. Much serious art, the type of art that Harry and Charlotte can’t quite appreciate, understands that life isn’t all honeymoon; it’s far more complex. To survive in a culture industry, the artist must find a way to balance herself with the commercial elements that make the day-to-day financial demands of living possible.

Harry, the beleaguered doctor whose relationship with Charlotte is both his means of escaping the doldrums of his go-nowhere life and the eventual cause of his downfall, spends most of the book worrying about money: how much he has, how much he has left, where the next paycheck is coming from. The potential life he gives up, that of practicing medicine as a

small-town doctor, is not particularly glamorous—we see at the beginning of the novel the middle-aged doctor from whom Harry and Charlotte rent a room as the embodiment of the unhappy mediocrity that Harry felt destined for. What that life is, however, is financially stable, something that can't be said for any of Harry's other endeavors. At one point, significantly, Harry ends up as a part of the culture industry, writing cheap sex stories that begin, “ ‘I had the body and desires of a woman yet in knowledge and experience of the world I was but a child’ or ‘If I only had a mother’s love to guard me on that fatal day’ ...” (103). The narrator says that Harry “wrote complete from the first capital to the last period in one sustained frenzied agonizing rush...” (103) and compares the writing to the running of a halfback until the play is completed, whether he scores the touchdown or is tackled. This “sustained frenzied agonizing rush” is a succinct summation of how Faulkner frequently treats the culture industry. Harry is trying to get to the end at all costs, similar to how Joe Christmas is led to read the detective magazine and Shreve is determined to rush to the end of the Sutpen story. Harry was a virgin before meeting Charlotte, and he couldn't have known enough about sex to write these stories without having met her. But the type of pornographic stories Harry is writing—pornography is frequently concerned solely with the end results of the orgasm—are in many ways the direct opposite of his relationship with Charlotte—which, though it ends tragically, must be seen as a complex exploration of human sexuality instead of a “sustained frenzied agonizing rush.”

Hurry's tenure as a sex-story writer comes about midway through the novel, but it's important to examine both how he got there and where he goes afterward in order to understand the book's complex engagement with mass culture. When Harry first meets Charlotte, it's at a party in New Orleans. He is nearing the end of his medical residency and lives on a tightly fixed budget, his sole luxury being a pack of cigarettes on the weekends. Entering the more casual world of bohemia, he stares at a painting in the apartment the way a “yokel might look at a drawing of a dinosaur.” The narration goes on:

But now the yokel was looking at the monster itself and Wilbourne stood before the paintings in complete absorption. It was not what they portrayed, the method or the coloring; they meant nothing to him. It was in a bemusement without heat or envy at a condition which could supply a man with the obvious leisure and means to supply his days painting such as this and his evenings playing the piano and feeding liquor to people whom he ignored and (in one case, at least) whose names he did not even bother to catch. (33)

The painting might or might not be great art. But Harry isn't really able to tell. He doesn't have the background necessary to make any type of aesthetic judgment. "Good" art isn't really his concern. Art, to Harry, is something that is autonomous from the concerns of the day-to-day world. The artist doesn't have to worry about where the money comes from; he can just be concerned with painting. And this way of life is so foreign to him that he isn't yet even able to be jealous of it, just bemused. As with dinosaurs, it's hard to believe that such a thing exists. While this scene might reflect some of Faulkner's frustration at having to write movie scripts and short stories in order to stay financially solvent, the painting is not, at least in Faulkner's universe, the type of art that is most valuable. Art-for-art's sake—here embodied by the painting—is not what reader's of Faulkner will encounter. *The Wild Palms*, the novel in which we read this incident, is nothing like the painting that Harry compares to a mysterious dinosaur. Instead, in its plot and in its formal and structural elements, the novel asks the readers to become engaged in a constant, complex dialectical examination of the social forces that lead both to the demands of the culture industry and a world in which someone might become so enamored with a less-complex idea of art.

This freedom from financial constraints—this desire to be able to do things just for the sake of doing them—is part of what Harry and Charlotte are seeking throughout their portion of the novel. Yet the specter of mass culture hangs over everything, and its dialectical relationship with "pure" art is embodied in Charlotte. When Harry meets her, Charlotte is living the type of life that he finds so incredible. She is a sculptor, whose rich husband affords her the lifestyle that Harry can't fathom. However, as I've discussed, Charlotte's approach to life is reinforced

by the elements of mass commercial culture that she and Harry spend so much of the book trying to escape. It is her at-times simplistic approach to reading that gives her the untenable idea of love that drives her away from her comfortable life with Rat, a life that made her sculpting possible. As Harry tells her, “So it’s not me you believe in, put trust in; it’s love. ...Not just me; any man” (71). Here, Harry is perhaps overstating things. Certainly Charlotte has some level of affection for him. While Rat is a relatively supportive husband, the problem Charlotte runs from is more complex. The patriarchal social structure—Charlotte says she married Rat because she couldn’t marry her brother—that Charlotte must live in is constricting and stultifying. After becoming pregnant, she asks Harry to perform an abortion because children “hurt too much” (182). There are serious problems with being a bored housewife that can’t be combated simply by having free time to sculpt. It is from this life that Charlotte wants to escape, and her reading habits give her a way to begin resisting the life that has been forced upon her. Harry’s pornographic stories, through the income they generate, are another way in which the culture industry allows these characters to resist the dominant culture, however briefly, by using elements of the culture to their advantage. But what Harry’s pornographic stories and Charlotte’s idea of eternal honeymoon have in common is their focus on the end results instead of the complex mourning process that would allow for the nuances of their relationship. *The Wild Palms* itself is not an eternal honeymoon. And though its sexual content helped it become Faulkner’s first truly successful book since *Sanctuary*, it isn’t pornographic either. The complexity of the novel, which includes the two stories constantly interrupting each other, compels the reader to analyze how the relationship between Harry and Charlotte is functioning within a culture industry.

Charlotte soon gets a job as part of that culture industry: “She was to make puppets, marionettes... [to be photographed] for magazine covers and advertisements; perhaps later they would use the actual puppets in charades, tableaux—a hired hall, a rented stable, something,

anything” (77). This first assignment leads to what appears to be a stable job making mannequins for a department store, which gives them a level of financial security that they haven’t had since they left New Orleans for Chicago. Once the department store tells Charlotte that they will take her on until the summer, hinting at some level of permanence, Harry insists that she quit, telling her that “You’re not going to work any more just for money” (107), and they leave Chicago. Harry was bemused by the art earlier in the novel because it could exist free of any financial constraints. Once Harry feels those financial constraints could begin to affect Charlotte’s art, he insists that they leave the city. As he tells Charlotte:

“Damn money. I can make all the money we will need; certainly there seems to be no limit to what I can invent on the themes of female sex troubles. I dont mean that, nor Utah either. I mean us. Love, if you will. Because it cant last. There is no place for it in the world today, not even in Utah. We have eliminated it. It took us a long time, but man is resourceful and limitless in inventing too, and so we have got rid of love at last just as we have got rid of Christ. We have the radio in the place of God’s voice and instead of having to save emotional currency for months and years to deserve one chance to spend it all for love we can now spread it thin into coppers? and titillate ourselves at any newsstand, two to the block like sticks of chewing gum or chocolate from the automatic machines.” (115)

Harry wants a love free from the demands of money and the effects of the culture industry, which in this instance is radio and newspapers. These media create a titillating din that gives people the type of instant satisfaction that candy does but no actual nourishment. He could have kept writing his stories, but he wants real love, something that mass culture can’t give him. The great irony here is that the idea of perfect love that Harry wants that can’t exist between the two of them is directly a product of the mass culture that Harry is trying to avoid. It isn’t important whether Harry and Charlotte are really “in love.” What is important is that they continue to believe in their idea of love even when every one of their experiences shows that it can’t work that way. Their idea of love is based not on any complex understanding of human relationships but on Charlotte’s reading material, as well as the modernist idea that art can be an

autonomous, perfect thing. Both extremes of the binary are equally untenable. Her attitude changes slightly after she stops douching and gets pregnant, when she tells Harry:

I should have known better. . . . I remember somebody telling me once, I was young then, that when people loved, hard, really loved each other, they didn't have children, the seed got burned up in the love, the passion. Maybe I believed it. Wanted to believe it because I didn't have a douche bag anymore. Or maybe I just hoped. (172)

The line “maybe I just hoped” echoes the ambivalence that Joe Christmas and Thomas Sutpen feel when confronted by their own elements of mass culture: Perhaps we believe these stories not because we know that they're true or even because we expect them to be true, but because we hope them to be true. We hope that they preemptively justify what we want to do, even when we often suspect that they don't. It is this unrealistic idea of love, one that is all honeymoon, that Harry has bought into and has, in part, led to his production of sex stories. But, as I've mentioned, there is also value, however fleeting, in how these elements of the culture industry allowed the characters to find ways to resist what the dominant culture was forcing upon them. Charlotte didn't end up a bored housewife, and Harry didn't end up a bored doctor. Though mass culture isn't the answer, the ways that the characters use mass culture opens up Faulkner's novels for serious reflection by the reader on how we can appreciate the mourning process (not unlike how Harry mourns Charlotte in his prison cell) that is the complex antidote to what the culture industry is selling.

In “Old Man,” whose story is a counterpart to “The Wild Palms,” the main character, known only as the Tall Convict, is influenced by mass culture in a way similar to Charlotte. After being arrested for attempting (poorly) to rob a train, he blames not the police who caught him or the court that sentenced him but

the writers, the incorporeal names attached to the stories, the paper novels—the Diamond Dicks and Jesse Jameses and such—whom he believed had led him into his present predicament through their own ignorance and gullibility regarding the medium in which they dealt and took money for, in accepting information on which they placed the stamp of verisimilitude and authenticity... (20)

The Tall Convict is portrayed as profoundly naïve. He “had followed his printed (and false) authority to the letter; he had saved the paper-backs for two years, reading and rereading them, memorising them, comparing and weighing story and method against story and method...” (21).<sup>12</sup> What is tragic for Harry and Charlotte is portrayed as grotesque comedy for the Tall Convict. He never has the ambivalence that Joe Christmas, Thomas Sutpen, and Charlotte have. They each have slight moments of resistance when they acknowledge that perhaps things are more in their control than they would care to admit, that they don’t have to accept passively the information they are given.

But to reduce *The Wild Palms* to merely a bit of simple moralizing—to think that the novel is just there to tell us not to be so dumb when it comes to the books we read—is to ignore much of its complexity, especially in the ways in which it deals with mass culture. Aside from the Tall Convict’s obvious debt to dime novels, “Old Man” isn’t nearly as concerned with mass culture as “The Wild Palms” is. While Harry feels that we have replaced God with a radio’s voice, “Old Man” gives us “God” in a much more natural, physical sense, in the brutal indifference of nature. The “Old Man” of the title, the Mississippi River, is as overwhelming and ever-present as the radios and newspapers that Harry complains about, but, unlike those elements of mass culture, the river is something that is literally beyond human control. Many events in the story, of course, are the product of human engineering—the faulty dams, the guards firing on the Tall Convict when he is trying to return the woman he has been sent to save, the bureaucratic defensiveness and indifference that results in the Tall Convict’s prison sentence being extended through no fault of his own. But the river itself is the primary thing against which the Tall Convict and the woman must contend. That they manage to survive shows how human actions are not completely meaningless amid such overwhelming situations, but at no point can the characters take control of the river; they simply must make do with the situations the river gives them.

In both stories, couples fight to find a type of safety against seemingly impossible conditions, but only in “Old Man” are those conditions actually an element of nature that is beyond human control. The river does what it does. Harry bemoans how we have replaced God’s voice with a radio, which is true to a degree, but he fails to understand the full extent of how the capitalist culture industry that the radio represents is not monolithic. “We” did it, not some unimaginable force that escapes human comprehension. Everything about mass culture and capitalism that Harry and Charlotte hate and try to escape from throughout the novel is in fact revealed to be a product of humanity. What is implicit in the novel is that every newspaper, every voice on the radio, is the product of someone’s labor just like what Harry and Charlotte do. It’s not magic. It’s made by people like themselves, and understanding that fact is the first step toward figuring out how to deal with it.

As with *The Wild Palms*, *Pylon* takes place predominantly in a city where modernity has taken full hold. Taylor Hagood, who has written the most thorough examination of the novel in relation to mass culture, sums up neatly the problems that arise from dealing with this book: “Pylon remains strangely unclassifiable, bizarre, mysterious, different. It broods in the very heart of [Faulkner’s] canon and seems as aloof, unapproachable, and recalcitrant as its author in his most introverted moods” (107). As Joshua Gaylord writes, “*Pylon* has long been claimed as Faulkner’s most overtly modernist text, the spiral of spiritual and physical degradation that determines the course of the novel’s action interpreted in light of the traditional alienation and dispossession characterizing the modern zeitgeist...” (177). Christopher Breu puts the novel among Faulkner’s lesser works, and Lurie specifically chooses not to include *Pylon* in his book-length study, in part because though the novel is “certainly about the ‘modern’ phenomena of technology, newspapers, aviation, and spectacle, as well as about the role in each of a vicious economic imperative, *Pylon* is not as recognizably modernist as the other novels of this period” (16).<sup>13</sup> Part of the novel’s mixed reputation is due, I think in

part, to its chronological placement in Faulkner's body of work. Written during the composition of *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Pylon* was published before that book and after *Light in August*, the two novels that, along with *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Go Down, Moses*, are the most complex examinations of race and southern historiography in Faulkner's canon. *Pylon* is an odd duck among Faulkner's novels no matter how you approach it, but it seems especially odd coming between two novels with such similar thematic concerns. However, I think that for all its seeming aberrations, *Pylon* is very much a piece with Faulkner's body of work, and it is just as "modernist" as any of his other novels, if not more so.<sup>14</sup> The protagonist, a nameless reporter, is convinced that there is a story worth writing about a trio of stunt pilots, two men and a woman whose relationship is a strange ménage à trois in which no one knows for sure who the biological father of the woman's child is. The reporter finds this relationship fascinating, and he tries to sell his editor, Hagood, on the story. Hagood has already told the reporter that he has an "instinct for events" but that "you never seem to bring back anything but information. . . . But it's not the living breath of news. It's just information. It's dead before you even get back here with it" (39). Hagood goes on:

It's like trying to read something in a foreign language. You know it ought to be there; maybe you know by God it is there. But that's all. Can it be by some horrible mischance that without knowing it you listen and see in one language and then do what you call writing in another? How does it sound when you read it yourself? (40)

To this, the reporter replies, "Why didn't you tell me before that this is what you want? Here I have been running my ass ragged eight days a week trying to find something worth telling and then telling it so it won't make eight thousand different advertisers and subscribers..." (40) and then he stops. The reporter understands that whatever he writes must please the market to a great degree. He mentions his responsibility to the "advertisers" before his responsibility to "subscribers." And, significantly, he talks about "subscribers" instead of "readers," since a reader to the newspaper is more important if he is paying for it—and since there are so many

thousands of them, it's difficult to write something that would please everyone. But Hagood wants more than news from the reporter. When the reporter tells Hagood about the three pilots and their son of indeterminate paternity, Hagood says:

Listen... The people who own this paper or who direct its policies or anyway who pay the salaries, fortunately or unfortunately I shant attempt to say, have no Lewises or Hemingways or even Tchekovs on the staff: one very reason doubtless being that they do not want them, since what they want is not fiction, not even Nobel Prize fiction, but news. (48)

The question, of course, is, what is news? The reporter says, "I thought a woman's bedhabits were always news," acknowledging that there is an obvious market for the details of a woman's sex life. Hagood responds: "If one of them takes his airplane or his parachute and murders her and the child in front of the grandstand, then it will be news" (48). What Hagood wants is a single, spectacular event, something that is easy to pin down and can be reported on quickly for the next day's issue. The fiction writers Hagood speaks of with such derision wrote stories of ambiguity and complexity that he sees as having no place in the newsroom. Similar to the other characters I've been discussing, the reporter has only one tool—the newspaper story—with which he can fight against an oppressive culture that values profits over exploring the complexities of a relationship that disregards all the sexual norms of that oppressive culture. Though, as far as *Pylon* is concerned, newspaper articles ultimately aren't up to the task of exploring these nuances, readers who follow the reporter are allowed to mourn the death of the pilot Roger Shumann and the way of life that dies with him.<sup>15</sup>

Hagood wants something exciting and sensationalistic but easily containable, anything that "occurs out there tomorrow that creates any reaction excitement or irritation on any human retina" (48), be it something as simple as who won or lost a race or something more extreme, such as who killed who where. The love triangle that fascinates the reporter doesn't have the spectacular quality that Hagood is looking for. The motivations are blurry—why would people live this way?—and the paternity of the child is something that can never be proven

definitively, at least in a time before DNA testing. Everything about the relationship is open to interpretation, and while that might make for an area of fecund artistic inquiry in a novel such as *Pylon*, it doesn't have any single spectacular element that creates reaction, excitement or irritation. It is the type of thing written by the fiction writers Hagood disparages. The conversation that Hagood and the reporter have embodies the tensions and contradictions that face any writer forced to write for money and a large audience. The paper must please the subscribers and the advertisers, for without them the paper can't publish. The newspaper must sell copies (and advertising space) every day, which involves constant spectacular events, which bring back readers every day. Just as Faulkner was forced to write at a breakneck pace just to stay financially solvent, the reporter of *Pylon* must keep finding "news," which keeps him from focusing on more sustained artistic ventures. Of course, Hagood's demand for something with the "living breath of news" slightly complicates the reporter's situation. News, in Hagood's estimation, isn't simply a collection of facts; those facts must be presented in a way to create excitement in the reader, which hints at the complexity of art but doesn't go far enough in that direction to allow for the type of story the reporter wants to write.

At the end of *Pylon*, a copyboy whom the narrator describes as a bright boy who has "not only ambitions but dreams too" (323) finds pages of copy strewn about the floor near the desk of the novel's nameless reporter protagonist. The copyboy then

gathered up all the sheets, whole and in fragments, from the floor and emptied the wastebasket and, sitting at the reporter's desk he began to sort them, discarding and fitting and resorting at the last to paste; and then, his eyes big with excitement and exultation and then downright triumph, he regarded what he had salvaged and restored to order and coherence—the sentences and paragraphs which he believed to be not only news but the beginning of literature... (323)

What the copyboy has constructed is a poetic elegy for Roger Shumann, the stunt pilot who died in a plane crash. On Thursday, "Roger Shumann flew a race against four competitors and won." But, "On Saturday he flew against but one competitor. But that competitor was Death,

and Roger Shumann lost. The copyboy then thinks, “O Jesus... Maybe Hagood will let me finish it!” (323). The copy itself is part of a collaborative effort between the reporter and the copyboy. The reporter wrote the words, but the copyboy arranged them in a way so that they approach literature. But the copy is still “news,” in that it focuses on the saleable spectacle of someone’s death. And news, not literature, is what the editor Hagood and the culture industry as a whole want. But it is also the “beginning of literature,” and what is significant is that the reporter and the copyboy have found a way for something approaching art to exist within the confines of the culture industry. But that is not how the novel ends. When the copyboy goes to Hagood to talk about the story he has reconstructed, they both find on Hagood’s desk a complete piece of copy weighed down by an empty whiskey bottle. Also written by the reporter, this story seems to give Hagood what he wanted from the beginning: details of a big, spectacular plane crash:

At midnight last night the search for the body of Roger Shumann, racing pilot who plunged into the lake Saturday p.m. was finally abandoned by a threeplace biplane of about eighty horsepower which managed to fly out over the water and return without falling to pieces and dropping a wreath of flowers into the water approximately three quarters of a mile away from where Shumann’s body is generally supposed to be since they were precision pilots and so did miss the entire lake. (324)

Yet compare this with the final sentence of the story that the copy boy reconstructed: “Thus two friends told him farewell. Two friends, yet two competitors too, whom he had met in fair contest and conquered in the lonely sky from which he fell, dropping a simple wreath to mark his Last Pylon” (323). In the story that the copyboy has helped create, the gesture of dropping the wreath signifies the emotional complexity of the competitive/romantic relationship among the three pilots, something that is never—and can never—be resolved completely. This might be the type of literary touch found in Hemingway or Chekhov (or Faulkner), but it is not, according to Hagood, what belongs in a newspaper, or at least the reporter didn’t think so. What the second story lacks is any mention of the love triangle that led the reporter to write

about the pilots in the first place. But there are still several ambiguous complexities to this piece. Why did they miss by three-fourths of a mile? Why is it remarkable that the plane didn't fall to pieces? Even something that aims to meet Hagood's idea of what the newspaper industry wants is full of unresolved tensions. And underneath this story, written "savagely" in pencil:

*I guess this is what you want you bastard and now I am going down to Amboise st. and get drunk a while and if you dont know where Amboise st. is ask your son to tell you and if you dont know what drunk is come down there and look at me and when you come bring some jack because I am on a credit (324, italics in original)*

The reporter has, he feels, given Hagood what he wants. Yet the long, winding sentences of that second story owe more to Faulkner's brand of modernism than they do to the short, declarative sentences favored in newspaper reporting. And the story that the copyboy has helped create is itself, according to the narrator, news, which is what Hagood wanted.

In short, there are as many similarities as differences between the two stories. The type of split between news and literature that Hagood insists upon isn't nearly as cut and dried as he wants to believe. At the same time, this tension is exhibited in the novel itself, which attempts to be a piece of "news," in terms of how it presents spectacle but also tries to explore the modern alienation of its protagonists in the nuanced, complex way that initially interests the newspaper reporter. While the reader doesn't know which story will run in the next day's paper, the reporter was clearly frustrated with his more artistic attempts to write the story, and the novel ends with the reporter drunk and frustrated. Part of the problem here is the medium. The only tool that the reporter has to help mourn the death of Roger Shumann and to celebrate the complexities of the trio's life is the newspaper story, and the ultimate inadequacies of what the newspaper story must entail are part of what leaves the reporter so frustrated. While we don't know which of the stories will run the next day, only *one* of them will run, and it is by reading both of them—in the context of reading *Pylon* as a whole—that the reader gains insight into the tensions inherent in trying to represent the nuances of someone's life and death.

The female pilot, Laverne's, first attempt at a parachute jump, though not documented by any newspaper, fits comfortably into Hagood's definition of news. She was frightened, though she didn't tell Shumann until they were up in the air. According to the narrator she "wore skirts; they had decided that her exposed legs would not only be a drawing card but that in the skirt no one would doubt that she was a woman..." (198). Clearly, her sexuality here is part of what the pilots hope will bring paying customers to the show, but things soon go terribly wrong. Instead of climbing out onto the wing to do her stunt, she climbs into Shumann's lap, and starts clawing at the zipper on his pants. She is wearing no underwear—she later tells him because she was so nervous that she didn't want to soil one of the few pair of underwear she owned—and Shumann soon finds that "he had two opponents," both the woman and his penis, the "perennially undefeated, the victorious" (199). Before he knows it, she has fallen out of the plane and parachuted to the ground. The group of men watching on the ground turn into a gang of near-rapists, and the police break it up, arresting her. By the time Shumann gets to her the next day, she is wearing a raincoat and she shows him "the dress now in shreds and the scratches and bruises on the insides of her legs and on her jaw and face and the cut in her lip" (202). The police, realizing that Laverne's presence has deeply upset the men in the town, try to get her to the airplane so she and Shumann can leave, but they have to fend off the town's men, including one who says, "I'll pay you!... I'll pay her! I'll pay either of you! Name it! Let me fuck her once and you can cut me if you want!" (204). The man then begins to "struggle and scream again, cursing now, screaming at Laverne, calling her whore and bitch and pervert in a tone wild with despair until the engine blotted it" (204). I think it's safe to say that this event fits Hagood's definition of news. It is something that "creates any reaction excitement or irritation on any human retina." But this event didn't appear in any newspaper. It appeared in a modernist novel, and amid all the excitement and violence is an examination of the sexual relationship that the reporter wanted to write about but that Hagood said wasn't fit for a

newspaper. Additionally, this scene shows the violent sexual fervor of the masses, a dangerous worldview that Faulkner frequently associates with the culture industry.

It is, I think, a legitimate critique of Faulkner that he uses regressive portraits of unhinged female sexuality to expose how monstrous male sexism can be. Just as the undeniably horrific situation of Temple Drake's rape in *Sanctuary* leads to Temple's becoming sexually promiscuous, the terror Laverne feels from having to perform a stunt for the first time drives her to try to find solace in having sex with Shumann, even though it's obviously incredibly dangerous. Shumann and Laverne have already begun their unusual relationship at this point, and we see here how difficult it is to separate their intimate, private life from the spectacle of public life. Her sexuality is always for sale, whether in the more accepted form of having her wear a skirt while performing a stunt or in the much more extreme form of a potential rapist saying that he'll give anything, even allowing himself to be cut, if he can "fuck" her. Significantly, this episode *doesn't* happen in a way that is mediated through the mass media. It is just the type of news story Hagood would want, but we only know about it through reading *Pylon*. The reader of the novel, like the men on the field, gets the spectacle of the "newsworthy" event of Laverne almost getting raped and killed. But the reader of the novel also understands how this event is part of a much more complex sexual relationship between Shumann and Laverne.

So, to read this portion of *Pylon* is partly to get the type of "newsworthy" experience that Hagood wants for his newspaper, the type that he thinks will help make a profit for the paper's owners. This makes *Pylon*, or at least this section of *Pylon*, a piece of "news," in Hagood's terms. That this scene is in the novel and not in one of the reporter's stories shows how newspaper stories frequently don't cover newsworthy events, for whatever reason. To read the newspaper is to get an incomplete understanding of what has happened. In order to mourn

what was lost in the death of Roger Shumann, a reader should be familiar with this episode. It contextualizes and explores the complex sexual dynamics at work in his life with Laverne.

In an oft-cited passage in *Light in August*, on the day Joanna Burden dies, Joe Christmas reads a magazine of the “type whose covers bear either pictures of young women in underclothes or pictures of men in the act of shooting one another with pistols” (110). Joe reads the magazine while he eats: “He had previously read but one story; he began now upon the second one, reading the magazine straight through as though it were a novel. ... ‘Maybe I have already done it,’ he thought. ‘Maybe it is no longer now waiting to be done’ “ (111). Aside from the novel’s fleeting references to cartoons, movie theaters, and billboards, this is the one focused, in-depth mention of mass culture in *Light in August*, and it is representative of the way that many of Faulkner’s novels deal with mass culture: complexly, but ultimately critically and scornfully. *Light in August* is probably Faulkner’s most complex examination of the rural, pastoral community that is at times ambivalent toward—and at other times vigorously fighting against—the onset of modernity. The novel is largely unconcerned with mass culture, because, in part, the people of Jefferson are largely unconcerned with mass culture. They are instead concerned with maintaining the social order of their segregated community. The magazine is an anomaly here. We don’t know where it came from, where it was printed, even where Joe bought it. Jefferson has little culture industry to produce such things.<sup>16</sup> It has farmers and small businesspeople.

When Joe reads the magazine we get a clear sense of his fatalism. He “digests” the magazine as he does his food, uncritically, all the while thinking as if he has no choice in Joanna’s impending death. The sex and murder stories of the magazine offer a sort of contrast to the more complex story of *Light in August*, which itself is full of sex and murder, but offers a level of historical inquiry that allows the reader to examine all of the racist tropes and savage violence that so many people in Jefferson take for granted and to see that they are not inevitable

but are man-made and can be undone. Joe, however, has trouble grasping these larger issues. Instead, like Bigger Thomas, he reads the type of magazine with strictly reinforced racial and gender codes, the type of magazine in which a “nigger” like Joe would certainly kill a white woman like Joanna Burden. As I’ll discuss in regard to *Native Son*, these pulp crime magazines were frequently savagely racist, which makes it notable that in a novel intensely concerned with race, when Joe Christmas reads the magazine, there is no mention of any racist content—or any content for that matter. Instead, the focus is on *how* Joe reads: straight through, as if he is finishing a novel or a meal. This type of reading—to get to the end—is the type of reading one would do for crime and detective stories, to find out who did it.<sup>17</sup> As Faulkner suggests, readers read crime and detective stories looking for the resolution, and he contrasts Joe’s reading through to the end with the way that readers must read *Light in August*, which is itself a type of crime and detective story.<sup>18</sup> To read *Light in August* as a novel in which a mystery can be solved—and parts of the novel lend itself to that reading—is to miss the point, just as Joe does. The initial mystery—who killed Joanna Burden?—is never definitively solved, though Joe is the likeliest culprit, and the community has no problem declaring him guilty and killing him. The larger mystery—who is Joe Christmas? Is he black or white?—is revealed to be largely irrelevant, since the novel goes to great lengths to explore how Joe’s race is not something that can definitively be pinned down biologically but is instead part of a complex social process. So, if *Light in August* is a mystery novel, it is one that is largely unconcerned with solving any mystery—no matter how characters such as Doc Hines and Gavin Stevens strive to give a definitive explanation for what happens.

The most extensive reading of the magazine scene and its relationship with mass culture is in Christopher Breu’s *Hard-Boiled Masculinities*. According to Breu,

*Light in August*, perhaps uniquely among Faulkner’s output, can be read as advancing an implicit theory of the relationship between modernism and mass culture. Stylistically and thematically heterogeneous, the novel constructs a dynamic relationship between

popular cultural forms such as the hard-boiled and noir narrative and the met narrative techniques of the modernist novel. (117)

I don't agree with Breu that *Light in August* is unique in this regard, since I think that this relationship between high and low is touched on in many of Faulkner's novels. However, Breu's insight into the novel is invaluable, especially how he argues that the *Lights in August* presents mass culture and high modernism as two spheres that don't completely collapse into each other and instead "presents them as distinct yet deeply imbricated and overlapping spheres of cultural production that can positively, as well as negatively, interact with one another" (118).<sup>19</sup> Breu is correct, but I think his argument needs to be taken further: Namely, this tension is there in many of Faulkner's works. Faulkner might have personally seen mass culture as "bad," but that's not as important as how it functions. *Light in August* is a different book because of the detective magazine. Joe understands things differently, and the reader of *Light in August* understands things differently because of its presence. In Faulkner's world, mass culture isn't simply a reductive distraction, though it frequently is that; it is also a powerful presence, almost like a new language, that has fundamentally altered how his characters see the world. Mass culture's power means that Faulkner's works have to stress constant attempts at resistance, or else modernist art runs the risk of being overrun completely.

Other critics have noted that the actual act of reading is treated more complexly here than it is in *The Wild Palms*, where characters tend to read less critically.<sup>20</sup> Joe, on the other hand

turned the pages in steady progression, though now and then he would seem to linger upon one page, one line, perhaps one word. He would not look up then. He would not move, apparently arrested and held immobile by a single word which had perhaps not yet impacted, his whole being suspended by the single trivial combination of letters in quiet and sunny space, so that hanging motionless and without physical weight he seemed to watch the slow flowing of time beneath him, thinking *All I wanted was peace* thinking, 'She ought not to started praying over me.' (112)

The narration makes clear that what is written is just a “trivial combination of letters.” If, as the novel invites us to think, Joe’s reading the magazine is foreshadowing of Joanna’s murder, then the narration also shows that this trivial combination of letters is just that. They’re just words, and the words are not forcing Joe to kill Joanna. They can’t force him to do anything. The magazine, with its repetitive stories, offers a kind of comfort to Joe. In it, the story is already told; the woman has already been killed. But he can’t focus. He continues to daydream, and the random collection of letters float in his mind, unable to get a firm grasp on him. So, maybe it’s done, but maybe it isn’t. The magazine might have been written for any number of reasons—to make money, to entertain, to reinforce racist, sexist stereotypes—but the problem here is not primarily with the text itself—which, whatever its many faults and limitations, is not forcing Joe to do anything. The magazine might very well contain a reductive worldview, but the major problem here is Joe’s desire to find that reductive worldview in the magazine, to use it as an escape from the complexities of real life and the moral responsibilities that go along with them.

What *Light in August* doesn’t give the readers—something that a pulp crime story would—is a description of Joanna Burden’s death, which allows for the possibility that Joe killed Joanna in self-defense, or even the slight possibility that Joe Brown killed Joanna.<sup>21</sup> As Daniel J. Singal writes of Joe Christmas’s killing of Joanna: “At the same time it cements on him in the eyes of the community the identity of ‘nigger rapist-murderer’—an identity that will ironically lead to his own castration and death. In this way the deed, like so much else in Joe’s life, simultaneously enhances his freedom and spells his doom” (180). Throughout the novel, Joe has moved back and forth between white and black society, and part of his agonies lie in how he is someone who, like Bigger, is frequently acted upon; before Joanna dies he reflects on how she shouldn’t have started praying over him—a harsh reminder of his abusive, religious upbringing. In this sense, the magazine is briefly useful to Joe. It helps him cement the fatalistic worldview that will turn him into the “nigger rapist-murder.” As Richard Godden writes, “*Light*

*in August* can be read as a thriller whose villain is the word ‘nigger’ “ (238). For a brief moment, Joe knows who he is. Though Godden is not concerned with the mass cultural aspects of the novel, his analysis is useful for examining how Joe uses the worldview of the magazine. As Godden says, “Racial demarcation supports and is supported by all manner of social categories so that ‘nigger’ is one part of a network of oppositions—black/white, male/female, profane/sacred—through which the system identifies itself” (239). He goes on to say that “the presence of [Joe’s] black blood depends upon conspicuously absent information: the word of a decamped circus owner and the ravings of a crazy grandfather show the extent to which this term’s ‘truth’ is a theoretical fiction persuasively stated” (239). Faulkner might have wanted the racism of crime magazines to be read implicitly, but regardless of the magazine’s content, we read it as positioned within the type of binaries Godden explains. To read the magazine straight through to the end is to be pulled to the simplistic, fatalistic worldview of mass culture, a world that is part of the larger racism of Jefferson and a world where “nigger” explains everything. Joe can convince himself that the “nigger” will do it. In Godden’s terms, the “nigger” is the villain. Of course, Godden is also correct when he says that “Joe is neither black nor white. He can be both. The choice is his, and by manipulating a white skin and a black word he debilitates Jefferson’s confidence about its distribution of meaning” (240).<sup>22</sup> This ambivalence about race is embodied in Joe’s use of the word “maybe” when discussing the impending death of Joanna. The story’s inability to hold Joe’s attention points the reader toward an understanding that the fatalism of mass culture, which points toward a larger fatalism regarding race and violence, is not the only way the narrative has to end. To explore the ambivalence about race fully is to engage in the type of complex mourning that characterizes Joe’s story in Faulkner’s novels rather than the fatalistic drive to the end that characterizes the crime magazine.

At the very end of *Light in August*, the furniture salesman who gives Byron and Lena a ride out of Jefferson is telling his wife about his passengers and refers to Jefferson as “Where

they lynched that nigger” (497). The news that has traveled outside of Jefferson has reduced the complex story of Joe Christmas’s racially ambiguous life to that of a “nigger” getting lynched. This simplistic summary of the events of *Light in August* could also be fitting as a summary of a story from the crime magazine *Black Mask*. Just as cultural forces tried to coerce Joe into a simplistic notion of black and white, those same cultural forces that are reflected in the culture industry try to make his story into a simple tale that panders to the needs of that culture industry. Of course, the furniture salesman wasn’t there, and after Percy Grimm kills and castrates Joe, the men who are there have the image of Joe’s bloody body “rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. They are not to lose it, in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes” (465). The racial violence of Jefferson is etched in their memories, and its gravity ensures that the story of Joe Christmas will resonate with them; they might even mourn him, and themselves.

Although Lurie has made a thorough argument for how *Absalom, Absalom!* contains many cinematic elements in the way that the story is told,<sup>23</sup> and Joseph R. Urge has argued that the novel, with its focus on collaborative narration is about the similarly collaborative act of filmmaking, the book doesn’t have much of a mass cultural presence in the story itself. Part of this is because of when the story takes place. Since Thomas Sutpen’s tale is set in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, before the advent of industrial capitalism and the culture industry—and because of the overwhelmingly rural setting of that part of the novel—there really isn’t much mass culture to speak of in the book. However, what links the novel to Faulkner’s other approaches to reading mass culture that I’ve previously discussed is when Thomas Sutpen recounts to Quentin’s grandfather how he learned about how one can get rich by going to the West Indies. As Sutpen says of what he learned in school:

I learned little save that most of the deeds, good and bad both [...] had already been performed and were to be learned about only from books.... What I learned was that there was a place called the West Indies to which poor men went in ships and became rich, it didn't matter how, so long as the man was clever and courageous. (195)

This is from a schoolbook that Sutpen's teacher reads to him in class. Here, Sutpen's interpretation of the book will be echoed by characters such as Charlotte, The Tall Convict, and Joe Christmas, all of whom are reading texts that are more obviously products of the Adornian conception of the culture industry. Additionally, this portrayal of the education system has strong parallels to the portrayal put forward by Louis Althusser in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." Althusser says that "the ideological State apparatus which has been installed in the *dominant* position in mature capitalist social formations as a result of a violent political and ideological class struggle against the old dominant ideological State apparatus, is the *education ideological apparatus*" (103). Althusser treats what Adorno would consider to be the culture industry as part of a larger system, what he calls the Ideological State Apparatus. Of this apparatus, he says:

Of course, many of these contrasting Virtues (modesty, resignation, submissiveness on the one hand, cynicism, contempt, arrogance, confidence, self-importance, even smooth talk and cunning on the other) are also taught in the Family, in the Church, in the Army, in Good Books, in films and even in the football stadium. But no other ideological State apparatus has the obligatory (and not least, free) audience of the totality of the children in the capitalist social formation, eight hours a day for five or six days out of seven. (105)

Though Althusser doesn't mention pulp magazines or dime novels, they could easily fit alongside film in his list, and the type of message that Sutpen gets—an oversimplification of how one becomes successful—is similar to the types of messages that Joe, Harry, Charlotte, and the Tall Convict get.

And, like those characters, Sutpen has his reflective moment. Since he is illiterate at this point, Sutpen knows he is at the mercy of his teacher when it comes to finding out the contents of the schoolbook. And, according to Sutpen, the teacher "resorted to reading aloud only when

he saw that the moment had come when his entire school was on the point of rising and leaving the room” (195), implying that the teacher is as focused on saying something to maintain an audience as he is on imparting anything of educational value. Sutpen, however, isn’t yet completely sold on what the teacher has said. As he tells General Compson:

I asked [the teacher] if it were true, if what he had read us about the men who got rich in the West Indies were true. “Why not?” he answered, starting back. “Didn’t you hear me read it from the book?”—“How do I know that what you read was in the book?” I said. I was that green, that countrified, you see. I had not then learned to read my own name; although I had been attending the school for almost three months, I daresay I knew no more than I did when I entered the schoolroom for the first time.

As with Joe Christmas and Charlotte, Sutpen has that moment of ambivalence, but he cannot fully articulate those doubts. Significantly, he doesn’t question whether the book is correct. Rather, he questions whether what the teacher read is really what’s in the book. To Sutpen, the book itself can be a source of authority, but that authority can be undermined by a teacher trying to maintain the interest of his largely illiterate students. In all likelihood, the teacher himself, as someone who works in a rural school, has little experience in the outside world, and knows not much more about the West Indies than he himself has learned in the book, which is shown in how he falls back on it as a source of authority. How can this boy question him? the teacher thinks. After all, doesn’t the book say so?

Sutpen confirms, in his view, the relative ignorance of the teacher when he continues to describe to General Compson how he pressed the man for confirmation:

Perhaps it was that instinct and not I who grasped one of his arms as he drew back (I did not actually doubt him. I think that even then, even at my age, I realised that he could not have invented it, that he lacked that something which is necessary in a man to enable him to fool even a child by lying. But, you see, I had to be sure, had to take whatever method that came to my hand to make sure. And there was nothing else to hand except him) glaring at me and beginning to struggle, and I holding him and saying—I was quite calm, quite calm; I just had to know—saying, “Suppose I went there and found out it was not so?” and he shrieking now, shouting “Help Help!” so that I let him go. (196)

Sutpen here says he wants to make sure that what the book says about the West Indies is accurate, and the small-scale violence against the teacher hints at the much larger violence Sutpen will later use to get what he wants. As he says, Sutpen even then understood that the teacher isn't the type of person capable of making up such a story. The teacher is not possessed of the creativity Sutpen will later display when he begins to create his grand design. The teacher has not thought through the effect that such information might have. He hasn't thought that a pupil who hears about such things might actually try to go out and do them. But just as with Joe and Charlotte, Sutpen isn't a blank slate. Already feeling shamed by being turned away by a slave, Sutpen has been looking for a way to increase his station in life, which makes him latch onto the idea of going to the West Indies to become rich. But even at this young age, he is nagged by the idea that all of this is too good to be true, that he might go to Haiti and find out that none of what he's heard about is really there, or that the situation isn't as simple as it seems.

What the teacher never mentions, though, is *how* someone would get rich by going to the West Indies. The implicit argument is that slavery is the path to riches—and for Sutpen it certainly was—but Haiti had already been the site of a successful slave revolt and had abolished slavery when Sutpen was a schoolboy in the 1820s. Though many scholars have acknowledged the possibility of Faulkner's getting his dates wrong, John T. Matthews, in "Recalling the West Indies: From Yoknapatawpha to Haiti and Back" argues that the novel's references to the Haitians working on Sutpen's plantation as the "niggers" and not the "slaves" is an acknowledgment that Sutpen didn't own any slaves in Haiti. Instead, as Matthews argues, Sutpen could have gotten his slaves during a trip to Africa (251). Another possibility, and one that doesn't explicitly contradict anything in Matthews's reading, is that Faulkner could have been playing off of a real historical situation that took place after Sutpen's voyage to Haiti.

According to Robert E. May, describing the American attitude toward the Caribbean in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century:

Heaven could be found almost anywhere in the tropics of the Western Hemisphere, and many southern expansionists argued that the United States would be foolish to rest content with anything less than the annexation of all of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean Islands; some southern imperialists even extended their hopes to South America. (8)

May goes on to say, “Vital to this dream of empire was the expectation that slavery would be intrinsic to its realization” (9). Though Sutpen’s schooling takes place more than 30 years before the idea of the annexation of Mexico and the Caribbean became popular, Faulkner likely would have known about these imperial designs, and he could have been retroactively commenting on the folly of such ideas.

As with Joe reading the magazine straight through; Harry charging through his pornographic story like a football player; and Hagood looking for news that focuses on a single, spectacular event, the conception of the schoolbook is one that focuses on the end result—getting rich in the West Indies—at the expense of the process through which one gets to that end result. Sutpen has been looking for an answer for his problems, and the culture industry has provided one for him. As I mentioned earlier, it’s important to realize that this instance, just as in the other novels, provides a moment when the culture industry is a useful tool for Sutpen. By the time Sutpen has this schoolroom experience, he has already faced the seminal moment in his young life: When his father sent him to bring a note to a neighbor, the slave who answered the door told the young Sutpen to go around through the back. This shakes Sutpen to the core—he loses his innocence, as Quentin says—and he needs time to figure out how to deal with it.

As Quentin says,

He just had to think, so he was going to where he could be quiet and think, and he knew where that place was. He went into the wood. He says he did not tell himself where to go: that his body, his feet, just went there—a place where a game trail entered a cane brake and an oak tree had fallen across it and made a kind of cave where he kept an iron griddle that he would cook small game on sometimes. He said he crawled back there

into the cave and sat with his back against the upturned roots, and thought. Because he couldn't get it straight yet. He couldn't even realise yet that his trouble, his impediment, was innocence because he would not be able to realise that until he got it straight. (188)

This decision to think through and mull over what just happened is a sharp contrast to what Sutpen will later experience in the school, when he latches onto idea of the West Indies as a panacea for his situation. While in his cave, Sutpen engages in a dialectical dialogue with himself in which he tries to discern what, exactly, is the problem: "*But I can kill him.—No. That wouldn't do no good—Then what shall we do about it?—I don't know*" (191, italics in original). The slave who answered the door isn't the problem, and killing him wouldn't fix anything (it would, in fact, make it worse), as the young Sutpen realizes. The realization that Sutpen reaches is that "to combat them you have got to have what they have that made them do what he did. You go to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with" (192). The young Sutpen decides that in order to fight this system, he must become a part of it, and within that context his use of the information in the schoolbook, which is another piece of that system, makes sense. Since the reader, and Quentin, first learn of Sutpen from Rosa Coldfield, who refers to Sutpen as a "demon" (6), and since Sutpen's story ends up being one of slavery and violence, it's easy to overlook that that there is a humanitarian impulse (however paternalistic) behind his desire to become part of this system. Later, Sutpen tells Quentin's grandfather that

The boy-symbol at the door wasn't it because the boy-symbol was just the figment of the amazed and desperate child; that now he would take the boy in where he would never again need to stand on the outside of a white door and knock at it: and not at all for mere shelter but so that that boy, that whatever nameless stranger, could shut that door himself forever behind him on all that he had ever known, and look ahead along the still undivulged light rays in which his descendants who might not even ever hear his (the boy's) name, waited to be born without even having to know that they had once been riven forever free from bruteness just as his own (Sutpen's) children were— (210)

Not only does Sutpen want to allow the boy in his old position to enter through the front door, he wants to give the boy the power to close the door himself, thus eliminating forever the class differences that had made the young Sutpen feel so alienated.

It was a complex, thoughtful process that brought the young Sutpen to this admirable conclusion, the type of thoughtful process that Faulkner's novels stress as the way to combat the simplistic worldviews peddled by the culture industry. This makes it more tragic when a piece of the culture industry rears its head, in the form of the schoolbook, and Sutpen accepts its ideologies. The schoolbook isn't *wrong*, exactly. Many men did gain riches going to the West Indies, and Sutpen himself builds his riches on an empire of slaves that begins in Haiti. The path to riches found in the schoolbook does work, but it lacks the thoughtfulness that the young Sutpen displayed when he realized that the slave who turned him away was not the problem. In fact, the teacher's reading from the schoolbook doesn't mention *how* at all, in part, no doubt, because to do so would be to begin to address how, in the words of Quentin's father, "the South would realise that it was now paying the price for having erected its economic edifice not on the rock of stern morality but on the shifting sands of opportunism and moral brigandage" (209). The culture industry, with its focus on the end result, evidenced in the previous novels I've discussed, isn't capable of addressing the nuances necessary to make sense of how though the slave trade might work temporarily, it is such a moral abomination that it is bound to crumble, with far-reaching reverberations. This is, of course, a topic that *Absalom, Absalom!* is well equipped to explore.

In one modern portion of the novel, Quentin and Shreve trying to reconstruct Sutpen's story in their Harvard dorm room, makes a single significant mention of mass culture that helps explain a good deal of Shreve's approach to the story. Shreve says at one point, "Jesus, the South is fine, isn't it. It's better than the theater, isn't it. It's better than Ben Hur, isn't it" (176).<sup>24</sup> To Shreve—who asks Quentin if he can "play" by helping to create the story of Sutpen by mixing the testimony he's gotten from Quentin with some outright conjecture—the complex process of historiography is little more than a game or a piece of epic entertainment. Like the characters in *The Wild Palms*, he has trouble, at least in this moment, distinguishing reality

from superficial mass culture. While *Absalom, Absalom!* displays a level of formal sophistication that clearly separates it from elements of the culture industry, that formal sophistication also helps the novel reflect on the ways that Joe Christmas reads his detective magazine or Harry writes his pornographic stories. Both of those previous instances are presented as straight charges to the end, and the length of the sentences in *Absalom, Absalom!*—the novel once held the world record for longest printed sentence in the English language—pulls the reader through the novel much as Joe and Harry are pulled to the end of their stories. This is compounded by Shreve’s hijacking of the narrative, which he pulls toward a simplistic racist conclusion:

I think that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it wont be quite in our time and of course as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do, so they wont show up shar against the snow. But it will still be Jim Bond; and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings. (302)

Shreve’s forward momentum is momentarily broken up by the despondent Quentin’s occasional “wait,” which serves as a reminder that the story of Thomas Sutpen and his legacy is not a mad dash to the end. Echoing the young Sutpen in his cave, Quentin’s interruptions make the reader consider the complexity of the situation instead of accepting Shreve’s steamrolling narrative with its racist conclusion.

Shreve himself is able to see Sutpen’s story in terms of the culture industry in part because, as the novel has already displayed, he is the type of person who is inclined to see the world in terms similar to how Faulkner has portrayed mass culture. As Marta Puxon writes, “Among the narrators only Shreve reads Sutpen’s decadence in racial terms and pronounces a moral conclusion about it” (549). As Shreve tells Quentin:

“I just want to understand it if I can and I dont know how to say it better. Because it’s something my people haven’t got. Or if we have got it, it happened long ago across the water and so now there aint anything to look at every day to remind us of it. We dont live among defeated grandfathers or freed slaves (or have I got it backwards and was it

your folks that are free and the niggers that lost?) and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget.” (289)

While it’s true that Canada has no historical event that could be argued as a direct analogue to the American Civil War, Shreve is woefully myopic when he implies that any racial strife in Canadian history is confined to “long ago” in Western Europe. Canada, like the United States, was home to its own indigenous peoples who were killed or driven off their land by white expansion.<sup>25</sup> Much like the schoolbook that doesn’t mention *how* one goes about getting rich in the West Indies, Shreve is willing to see racial strife as unique to the American South while ignoring (or being unaware of) how the type of comfortable middle-class Canadian life that would allow for a family to send its son to Harvard is predicated on a type of racist violence not completely alien from that of the South.<sup>26</sup> Barbara Ladd is discussing Quentin and the South when she says, “when a nation envisions itself in ahistorical and millennialist terms, as new and as redemptive, it denies its relationship to the past, even to the history of its making” (*Nationalism and the Color Line*, 153). However, she could just as easily be discussing Shreve and his conception of Canada. Faulkner aligns Shreve with the attitudes he sees promoted in the culture industry: a refusal to deal fully with the overwhelming complexities of history.

Readers of *The Sound and the Fury* finish *Absalom, Absalom!* knowing that Quentin will be dead at his own hands in a matter of months. Shreve, whom Faulkner describes in the novel’s genealogy as still being a practicing physician, is the only person still alive—except the mentally handicapped Jim Bond—with knowledge of the Sutpen story. Shreve’s attitudes about race and the nature of the South are regressive, but they’re all that’s left standing at the end of the novel. *The Wild Palms* ends with both Harry and the Tall Convict in prison; *Pylon* ends with the reporter drunk (again); and *Light in August* ends with Joe Christmas as the “nigger that got lynched.” These are, on the whole, not the most uplifting collection of endings. All of these characters tried to use the culture industry to their advantage, but any advantage was fleeting.

To read these novels as if the endings are all that matter is to give in to despair, similar to the type of despair Joe is led toward while reading the magazine. Similarly, to focus too much on Quentin's impending death is to ignore what he does in his life. We, too, must wait.

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#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Richard Moreland, in his *Faulkner and Modernism: Rereading and Rewriting*, sees this scene as a revision of the similar scene from *Absalom, Absalom!* that I discuss near the end of this chapter. Ab, unlike Sutpen, "repeatedly provokes, frustrates, and escapes all such attempts by his society to account for him in terms of its usual mediations and resolutions: Ab provokes those resolutions to the point of exposing the violence of those oppositions they usually disguise in order to preserve and repeat them compulsively" (12-13).

<sup>2</sup> My chapter on Richard Wright has a full discussion on this scene.

<sup>3</sup> Though I don't quote them specifically in this chapter, the following texts were helpful in forming my thoughts on Faulkner: Cleanth Brooks' *The Yoknapatawpha County*, Lawrence Schwartz's *Creating Faulkner's Reputation*, Joseph Blotner's one-volume biography of Faulkner, and Richard Moreland's *A Companion to William Faulkner*.

<sup>4</sup> Owen Robinson's *Creating Yoknapatawpha: Readers and Writers in Faulkner's Fiction* explores both how characters in Faulkner's fiction are themselves types of writers who engage in their own self-creation and how the act of reading is crucial for us to understand these creations. What Robinson doesn't explore, however, is how Faulkner's characters read and react to specific products of mass culture.

<sup>5</sup> Mogen spends most of his book discussing *U.S.A. (1930-1936)* by John Dos Passos, a book that he sees as a transitional piece between the two forms of modernisms. Although I think that Moglen's book is an invaluable study, and that it is mostly right, I do take some issue with his placing of Faulkner in his melancholic strand of modernism. Of course, by trying to deal with so many writers in such a short amount of space, Moglen's readings of individual texts must by nature be truncated, and he also admits that these melancholic and mourning strands are always both present in any modernist text. Furthermore, Faulkner's novels are unquestionably full of the apocalyptic imagery that would lead the reader to feel that human suffering is an eternal force that cannot be stopped or reversed. However, it is slightly ironic that Moglen would say, as I just quoted, that "poetics and forms of storytelling are predicated on the view that the processes of modernization were historically contingent" and then focus his reading of Faulkner on *Absalom, Absalom!*, perhaps the Faulkner novel that is the most interested in historical inquiry. The novel clearly understands that the evils absorbed and then perpetuated by Thomas Sutpen are not the mystical demonic forces that Rosa Coldfield sees but rather are part of a continuous historical process based on human-created ideas of race, class, and gender.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, A.J. Wilson's "The Corruption in Looking: William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* as a Detective Novel," and, more recently, Walter Wenska's "'There's a Man With a Gun Over There': Faulkner's Hijackings of Masculine Popular Culture."

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<sup>7</sup> Conversely, for a discussion about Faulkner's influence on popular culture, see "Pulp Fictions: Reading Faulkner in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" by Catherine Gunther Kodat, who argues that Faulkner's manipulation of time in his novels is a possible influence on similar techniques in movies such as Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994).

<sup>8</sup> Maybe the most savage attack on film in Faulkner's works comes in *The Compson Appendix*, when we learn that Caddy Compson goes on to marry a Hollywood magnate and then a Nazi officer, which we are encouraged to read as a lateral move.

<sup>9</sup> Karl F. Zender gives an examination of these two novels and how their focus on money allows Faulkner to mediate "intensely on the implications for his fiction and for his life as an artist of the world of wage labor and commercial art" (17). As Zender sees it, Harry's abandoning of his job as a pulp writer helps resolve the open-ended conclusion of *Pylon*.

<sup>10</sup> *Pylon* is set almost entirely in New Valois, a thinly veiled stand-in for New Orleans. Though the "Old Man" half of *The Wild Palms* is set mostly in a rural flooded area, "The Wild Palms," spends more time in major industrialized cities—New Orleans and Chicago—than any Faulkner novel except *Pylon*.

<sup>11</sup> See Daniel J. Singal's *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist*.

<sup>12</sup> It's worth noting that according to Michael Denning in *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America*, the type of dime novels that the Tall Convict reads had lost most of their popularity by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, making his reading of them something of an anomaly in the 1920s. The novel does give us the idea that the Tall Convict is a man out of time, especially when he meets a doctor toward the end of the novel and tells him that he is in prison for robbing a train. To this, the doctor replies, "'Say that again.' The convict said it again. 'Well? Go on. You don't say that in the year 1927 and just stop, man'" (208).

<sup>13</sup> Lurie's book is interested in film and, by extension, the nature of looking. In his estimation, *Pylon* "does not quite implicate readers along with characters in its critical treatment of vision as do Faulkner's other thirties novels" (16). This is something with which I disagree, as my discussion of the scene in which Laverne is attacked by the mob of onlookers shows. To be fair, Lurie has read the same criticism I have that argues for *Pylon*'s status as a modernist novel, and he chooses to exclude the book in part because its references to high modernism, such as Eliot's "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock" border on parody and because the novel has a relatively straightforward plot. Modernism isn't the focus of this chapter, but I think this is important because many critics seem to use "modernism" as a shorthand for literature that is worthwhile, and *Pylon*'s deep engagement with 1930s mass culture makes it in this way as worthwhile for study as any of Faulkner's other 1930s novels.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Michael Zeitlin's "Faulkner's *Pylon*: The City in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" for a further discussion of these issues.

<sup>15</sup> Not everyone is as generous with the reporter as I am. Susie Paul Johnson argues that the reporter, in his sexual desire for Laverne, actively works to create situations in which Roger's plane will crash. As Johnson writes, "After Shumann's death, the reporter is numb with grief; he clearly is a saddened man. But there is little evidence that he grieves for the dead flyer"

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(411). Though the reporter is far from innocent, I think the ways the novel asks the reader to examine the different stories at the end suggests a strong level of grief on the reporter's part.

<sup>16</sup> The lumber mill where we first meet Joe and where several of the novel's characters, Joe included, work is a notable exception in that it shows how industrial capitalism is beginning to make its presence felt in Jefferson.

<sup>17</sup> For an overview of Faulkner's relationship with detective fiction, see Noel Polk's "Faulkner and Crime Fiction."

<sup>18</sup> I call the novel a "detective" story, though there isn't really a detective character, at least not in the way that Gavin Stevens is in *Knight's Gambit* (1949). The reader, however, acts as the detective, trying to find the proof of Joe's black blood, only to discover that no such proof can exist. Scott Romine's *The Narrative Forms of Southern Community* discusses the novel in terms of a detective story; however, he sees Gavin Stevens here as the detective.

<sup>19</sup> Something I disagree with is Breu's treating Faulkner's body of work as belonging to two different strands: "On one hand, there are the stream of consciousness modernist masterworks such as *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*... On the other hand, there are Faulkner's forays into mass or popular culture such as *Sanctuary*, *The Wild Palms*, *Pylon*, and his screenplay work. As these two categories are considered mutually exclusive in most Faulkner criticism, *Light in August* is usually classified as one of Faulkner's great modernist achievements... and any relationship it may bear to mass culture has generally been repressed" (116). More critics, such as Lurie, have begun to discuss *Light in August's* relationship with mass culture, and I think Breu is overstating things when he breaks Faulkner's body of work neatly into two categories. The extensive body of criticism on *Sanctuary* and *The Wild Palms* support the idea that those novels are of a piece with Faulkner's body of "modernist masterworks." If *Pylon* hasn't reached quite that level, it's in part due to its aesthetic shortcomings in relation to the other novels, but critics have also argued that it is among Faulkner's most modernist works.

<sup>20</sup> See "With Judgment Reserve: Reading both Predictability and Unpredictability in William Faulkner's *Light in August* and *The Wild Palms*" by Michael Fenrick for a more thorough discussion of the different ways reading is treated in these two novels.

<sup>21</sup> As Stephen E. Meats wrote in 1971, "One assumption about *Light in August* which has gone unchallenged is that Joe Christmas is guilty of murdering Joanna Burden. I call it an assumption because there is no positive evidence in the novel to indicate who actually commits the murder. We only have the fact of the murder itself, a number of circumstantial clues, and a baffling collection of incidental details" (271).

<sup>22</sup> See "This Race Which is Not One: The 'More Inextricable Compositeness' of William Faulkner's South" by John T. Matthews for a further discussion of how Joe navigates between the black and white worlds.

<sup>23</sup> See his chapter, "Some Trashy Myth of Reality's Escape," in which he argues, for example, that a scene where Charles Bon's life is compared to "a broken cinema film" (AA 170) works as a metaphor that "suggests a relationship between [Faulkner's] self-consciousness about his

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literary experiment—his fractured, disjointed narrative structures—and his understanding of the apparatus of film” (Lurie 106).

<sup>24</sup> It is worth discussing what exactly Shreve means when he says “Ben Hur,” which is probably an unintentional anachronism on Faulkner’s part. The modern reader probably first thinks of the 1959 film starring Charlton Heston, which, of course, didn’t exist when Faulkner was writing the novel. There was, however, a 1925 silent version that runs about 143 minutes and that is suitably “epic,” at least in the terms Shreve seems to be discussing. Lurie seems to see this as what Shreve is discussing, but since Shreve is talking in 1910, the movie doesn’t yet exist in the timeline of the novel, even if that’s what Faulkner was thinking about. There was, however, a 1907 version of the story that ran about 15 minutes, which would fit in chronologically, even if a 15-minute movie does not capture the grandeur Shreve is aiming for. The story of Ben Hur is based on an 1880 novel by Lew Wallace, which was adapted into an 1899 Broadway production. Since Shreve mentions it in the same breath as the theater, it’s possible this is what he’s talking about.

<sup>25</sup> I am indebted to my friend Claire Dixon, who grew up in Canada, and told me that Shreve’s projecting of all racial problems onto the United States is the type of attitude she has frequently encountered.

<sup>26</sup> See Sara Gerund’s “‘My Son, My Son!’: Paternalism, Haiti, and Early Twentieth-Century American Imperialism in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*” for a thorough discussion of how Quentin and Shreve’s paternalistic attitudes mirror those of the United States to Haiti in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### Chapter Three:

#### “That Sense of Fullness He Had So Often But Inadequately Felt in Magazines and Movies”: Richard Wright’s Appropriation of Mass Culture

Though it would seem to defeat the very point of *Native Son*, Warner Brothers, in the early 1940s, briefly considered adapting the novel into a film—with an all-white cast.<sup>1</sup> That the studio would have been unwilling to confront the complex racial issues that the novel addresses is unsurprising. But as ill advised as this Hollywood idea seems, it isn’t completely without merit. The basic plot points of *Native Son*—in which a man commits a horrific crime, becomes a fugitive, is chased by the police, and is put on trial—could make for an exciting movie that easily could appeal to a wide audience. The commercial viability of *Native Son* is especially interesting considering that Richard Wright’s previous and first novel, the posthumously published *Lawd Today!*, makes no such concessions to the market. It’s hard to imagine a story in which postal workers hang out, play cards, and get drunk as being any studio executive’s idea of a sure-fire hit, regardless of the skin color of the characters. That producers might think that *Native Son*’s story could “work” as a movie while still ignoring the central role that race-related social protest plays in the novel is perhaps as good a sign as any that Wright was keenly aware of the way mass culture worked and the ways it could be used and abused by American society. As Jacqueline Stewart says, the novel attempts to “replicate the visual and temporal immersion of classical cinema” (655).<sup>2</sup> Reading these two novels in tandem gives us insight into not only how Wright works through mass culture’s place in society but also how a black writer must work within a framework of mass culture that rests on many racist notions. Virtually all of the mass culture we encounter in these novels is made from a white perspective for a white audience, yet the black characters still feel as if it’s made for them, and they occasionally have reactions that the racist white power structure probably wouldn’t have foreseen. Neither Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of *Native Son*, nor Jake Jackson, the

protagonist of *Lawd Today!*, makes a substantial breakthrough when it comes to understanding exactly what the mass culture is selling them. The reader, however, might, and *Native Son*'s more ambivalent, complex appropriations of mass culture give the reader a deeper understanding of how racist American mass culture works. With *Native Son*, Richard Wright essentially wrote a better detective novel (and gothic horror novel, and protest novel) than the culture industry usually offered. The book offers a tour of many of the popular genres and forms of the late-1930s, and it gives readers many of the same pleasures to be found in those genres. What *Native Son* does additionally is that it examines how the tropes of mass culture are not ideologically neutral but are in fact built on a foundation of white racism. While the reader might enjoy the exciting detective-novel aspects when Bigger is on the run or the grisly horror-novel aspects when he decapitates Mary Dalton, the reader is also forced to examine the underlying racist nature of these tropes in ways that he wouldn't while consuming other products of the culture industry.

*Lawd Today!* is a novel that places itself firmly in the tradition of high modernism. *Native Son*, though critics have established its modernist bona fides, has a much more ambivalent relationship to that literary movement. This ambivalence, I believe, stems directly from the book's critical engagement with mass culture. *Lawd Today!* takes a more traditionally modernist approach to mass culture, in that it presents a more Adornian high-low divide between serious modernist art and less-worthy mass culture. *Native Son* deals with that divide much more complexly and ambivalently. Like *Lawd Today!*, *Native Son* is very critical of the American mass culture that it presents as a direct product of white hegemony. Unlike the other novel, however, *Native Son* has so narrowed the gap between high and low that it features many of the same traits and tropes that readers would expect from elements of mass culture. At times, *Native Son* gives readers what they would expect from a gothic horror story, or a movie, or a crime story, or a newspaper report. What emerges from this is a sense of ambivalence

toward modernist conceptions of art, and how it functions in American society. While most people probably haven't read *Ulysses*, one of the most obvious influences on *Lawd Today!* and a lesser influence on *Native Son*, they are more familiar with the tropes of gothic horror, detective fiction, newspapers, and movies. To understand how these mass cultural texts work is to understand a great deal about American culture, which is part of *Native Son*'s argument. Whether any of these pieces of media are worthwhile in an aesthetic sense is not the concern of the novel. Instead, *Native Son* is interested in exploring how all of these pieces of popular culture are made from the point of view of a white racist culture and how instead of being simply mere junk or entertainment, they all reinforce their racist points of view, often in ways that their consumers don't even notice.

*Lawd Today!*, a novel whose plot explicitly parallels that of James Joyce's high modernist milestone *Ulysses*, is, at least on its surface, relatively unconcerned with the more pressing social issues that fill *Native Son*. When the book first saw publication after Wright's death, critics were not enthralled with it, though recent scholarship has been more willing to embrace the novel. Brannon Costello makes a compelling argument for how a book that seems more concerned with the fragmentation and alienation associated with modernist literature is, in fact, engaged with social issues. According to Costello, though the novel isn't a traditional proletarian novel, it "does serve a political purpose: It shows how the popular myths of consumerist, capitalist American culture have disrupted [the traditional forms of African-American] community and stresses the need for new forms or for the revival of the old" (41). Because of these issues, I think it's worth discussing the earlier novel, especially in terms of its approach to mass culture, before moving on to *Native Son*, since both the similarities and differences between the two works give us an essential insight into Wright's developing understanding of how white mass culture works. Jake Jackson, *Lawd Today!*'s main character and ostensible hero, is only slightly less unpleasant than Bigger Thomas. Jake is a drunken

layabout who routinely beats his wife and is indifferent to the tumor brought about by an abortion he coerced her into. And, unlike Bigger, Jake has a job, which is representative of some of the larger differences between the two novels. In *Native Son*, black life is presented as a state of constant desperation. None of the black characters in that novel has a chance of moving beyond abject poverty. *Lawd Today!*, on the other hand, with its portrayal of lower-class black life, shows a group of people who have steady income, which allows for a more diverse, vibrant black community, one that is almost completely absent from *Native Son*. Also, Jake is portrayed as someone who—though he is not an intellectual by any stretch of the imagination—is frequently more eloquent than Bigger Thomas could ever hope to be. That’s a small consolation, since what he says is almost exclusively regressive and reactionary, showing a sense of near hero-worship for white leaders of industry—such as Rockefeller and Ford—while displaying contempt for the suffering of poor blacks in the South.<sup>3</sup>

Even the ways the two men approach movie watching are fundamentally opposed. As I’ll discuss, when Bigger watches *Trader Horn* (1931), he is not completely in its thrall, and he daydreams while watching the movie, indulging himself in his own racist fantasies about white women. But he doesn’t think or reflect much on the actual content of *Trader Horn*. When the movie is over and Gus asks him if he liked it, Bigger replies, “Yeah; it was a killer” (34). While Bigger certainly has his moments of eloquence, such as when he tells Gus that white people live inside of him as his way to describe the internalized oppression he feels, Bigger frequently doesn’t reflect on how the mass media is selling racism to him. On the other hand, the narration of *Lawd Today!* says about Jake:

When he went to the movies he always wanted to see Negroes, if there were any in the play, shown against the background of urban conditions, not rural ones. Anything which smacked of farms, chaingangs, lynching, hunger, or the South in general was repugnant to him. These things had so hurt him once that he wanted to forget them forever; to see them again merely served to bring back the deep pain for which he knew no salve. (138)

Jake's frustration with rural blacks is shown here to be more of a frustration with the South itself. All of the mass culture that enamors and influences Bigger so is directed toward a white audience, something that gives Bigger little pause. It is explicitly fantasy, a way for him to escape, however briefly, his miserable life. For Jake, on the other hand, the movies—though they can pander to fantasy—frequently are not so much an escape as a terrible reminder of reality. Whether pandering to the worst Uncle Tom stereotypes or showing the violent affirmation of white supremacy, popular movies that were full of lies such as the landmark *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), still held far more truth than someone like Jake could handle. In the case of *The Birth of a Nation*, the lies are the regressive, racist portrayals of the black characters, which have little basis in truth and are instead white racist fantasies. The truth, on the other hand, is the racism itself, which is as real in a movie like *The Birth of a Nation* as it is in daily life, especially to black Americans. That racism is inescapable even in the world of mass culture, which, at least to white audiences, was frequently expected to be an idle distraction from day-to-day life. Of course, Jake is fine watching movies without any black people at all in them, showing that he is as inclined to watch movies for escape as Bigger is. Yet his repulsion at seeing the horrors of black life in the South shows a dawning—if not articulated—understanding of mass culture's status as historically contingent, as something that is very much tied into the real world. You cannot completely escape what has happened, even through "entertainment." Though Bigger is from the South—his father was murdered there—he doesn't give much explicit thought to black life in the South, which Jake does, allowing Jake to have an unrealistically romantic view of black life in the North.

*Lawd Today!* is a novel immersed in mass culture. Taking place over the course of one day—Feb. 12, Abraham Lincoln's birthday—the book begins with Jake being woken from a dream by a radio announcer who says, "MY DEAR FRIENDS, OUR FLAG IS FLYING HIGH TODAY IN HONOR OF ONE OF OUR GREATEST AMERICANS, A MAN WHO SAVED

HIS COUNTRY AND BESTOWED THE BLESSINGS OF LIBERTY AND FREEDOM UPON MILLIONS OF HIS FELLOWMEN!" (4). Throughout the day, the radio's celebration of Lincoln's life weaves in and out of the text, offering a kind of commentary on what is happening. There are several ironies here, the foremost among them that Jake's own liberty and freedom don't amount to much. His sense of alienation is not quite as intense as Bigger's, but he still has very little control over his life and seems to garner what little joy he does out of life by drinking, gambling, and visiting a brothel. Jake's frequently monstrous actions toward his wife, which include beatings, make him hard to sympathize with and make it even more apparent that the lives of people like Jake are vastly removed from the rah-rah American exceptionalism that the radio keeps trumpeting.

As with the movies that portray black life in the South that Jake is unwilling to see—movies that tell a kind of truth in spite of themselves—the radio is blaring its own kind of truth. While it's grossly reductive to say, "Lincoln freed the slaves," it isn't exactly untrue either. The urban North that Jake lives in, whatever its myriad of problems, is not the antebellum South. The relative freedom that Jake enjoys—the freedom to drink and gamble and frequent brothels—is unimaginable for a black man in an earlier time; it is, in fact, unimaginable for Bigger Thomas. Jake doesn't think too deeply about any political ideas. He looks down on communists and thinks that blacks living in the South get what they deserve. He worships successful whites and buys into the myth that anyone in America can be rich, a myth that is in part propagated by mass culture. He looks down on his wife's religion—a religion that is filtered through mass culture in the form of magazines—yet he is all too eager to buy whatever advertisers are selling him. After opening his mailbox to find several circulars selling impotency drugs and other cure-alls, he accepts them all unquestioningly. After reading an advertisement that claims to offer help from the spirit world in finding lottery numbers, Jake says, "I ain't never heard of nothing like this before; maybe there's something in it if it comes

straight from the spirit world” (39). After reading an ad for a cure-all herb, he says, “I’m sure going to show this to Lil. This thing might save me some money” (41). Like many of the characters in Faulkner’s world, Jake tries to find what he wants to find in mass culture. But unlike Faulkner’s mostly-white characters, Jake, who is black, is not the intended audience for the white-produced mass culture. And because of this, the racism that might have made no effect on a white reader, frequently has the ability to remind Jake that he is different and has a more painful history than many white readers.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, unlike Bigger, Jake is able to articulate (however poorly) his disgust with elements of mass culture, at least when he feels that it’s wrong. Probably the earliest instance of this—in one of the novel’s direct parallel to *Ulysses*— is when Jake reads the newspaper, and the reader gets a series of headlines followed by Jake’s interpretations of the stories. For example, one headline reads, “HITLER CALLS ON WORLD TO SMASH JEWS,” and to this Jake has to say:

“Now, that’s something for everybody to think about. It shows that people’s waking up. That’s what’s wrong with this country, too many Jews, Dagos, Hunkies, and Mexicans. We colored people had been much better off if they had kept them rascals out. Naw, the American white man went to sleep; he had to let them Jews and all in. Now they got the country sewed up; every store you see is run by a Jew, and the foreigners. And they don’t think about nobody but themselves. They ought to send ‘em all back where they come from. That’s what I say.” (32)

Jake isn’t versed enough in Nazi ideology to understand that Hitler would have had little problem smashing Jake as well. And Jake’s racism against non-blacks is virtually indistinguishable from the racism spouted by the likes of Hitler and other toxic racists in America. Sympathizing with Hitler is merely the most extreme version of Jake’s attempts to identify with the white power structure. He denounces Roosevelt and Communists in other stories, and firmly believes that Americans who are rich deserve it, and those who are poor are lazy. Yet when commenting on a story discussing the possibility of war with Germany, he says, “I always did say they should’ve wiped them monkeys off the map while they was at it. Them

sonsofbitches is sure one slick and trickery lot—I'm here to tell you" (30). His sympathizing with the German dictator who is largely responsible for bringing those "monkeys" to war while looking down on the "monkeys" themselves can charitably be called inconsistent. After his wife tunes him out at one point, he tells her that "You could learn something if you didn't keep that empty head of yours filled with those Gawddamn *Unity* books all the time" (31). What she can learn, of course, is not anything of historical consequence, since Jake isn't reading her the stories. All she can "learn" is what Jake thinks about the news stories, which only have value to Jake as a way for him to reinforce what he already believes. When the news contradicts what he thinks, he has no use for it. When a story about communists in America makes Jake talk about the starving and brutality in Russia—which, as with the myth of Lincoln on the radio, isn't untrue—his wife responds that people are starving in America too, which leads to the following exchange:

"Aw, you talk like a fool!"  
"The papers said so."  
"Nobody but lazy folks can starve in this country!"  
"But they can't get no work."  
"They don't want no work!"  
"And they burned a colored man alive the other day."  
"Who?"  
"The white people in this country."  
"Shut up! You don't know what you're talking about!"  
"Well, they did!"  
"How you know?"  
"It was in the papers."  
"Aw, that was down South, anyhow"  
"But the South's a part of this country." (33)

While Jake previously said that Lil could "learn" something from the paper, when she actually has learned something from the paper—that life in the Jim Crow South is often unbearably violent for blacks—he dismisses it as inconsequential, since it happened in the South, implying that southern blacks got what they deserved, or perhaps their fates are of little consequence to someone such as Jake, who identifies himself far more with the urban, industrialized North.

When she states the obvious truth, that the South is part of America, he asks her if she's a Red.<sup>5</sup> Yet in spite of his own form of engagement with the newspapers, Jake also thinks that "*Too much reading's bad*. It was all right to read the newspapers, and things like that; but reading a lot of books with fine print in them and no pictures would drive you crazy" (69). He makes this observation while noticing that the library is closed for Lincoln's birthday, and he's so unfamiliar with what a library is that he wonders if it charges for admission. As much as Jake likes mass culture, since he frequently turns to it as a way to reinforce what he thinks or wants, he is aware that much of the information available to him will drive him "crazy." That Jake limits himself to pieces of mass culture fits comfortably with Adornian critiques of the culture industry. If Jake were to go to the library, he might read more substantial pieces of history and literature, which could destroy the worldview reaffirmed by his consumption of mass culture. But the novel is not so simple as to fit into a perfect high-low binary. Not all mass culture in the novel has the same effect on Jake. Sometimes he is enamored with its racism, such as when he praises Hitler, and other times he is repulsed by it, such as when he thinks that he can't handle watching southern black life on film. Yet on the whole, mass culture in *Lawd Today!* represents an overwhelming system against which Jake has few real options.

Astradur Eysteinnsson, using *Ulysses* as his example—though he is discussing modernism in relation to post-modernism—sets up a useful paradigm for how we might approach mass culture in modernist novels:

Modernist works, through the "thickness" of their referential texture, establish a radical distance between themselves and such products of popular culture that we perceive in the background. Postmodernism, on the other hand, self-consciously working with the desires involved in the production and consumption of such products, seeks to seduce its audience into compliance with the work before setting about to reveal the sources of its illusion. (121)

*Lawd Today!*, through its formal complexity, makes the reader constantly aware of the distance that exists between Wright's text and the pieces of mass culture that Jake consumes. Wright is

canny enough to know that the complexities of the white power structure would allow for Jake's various interpretations, which give Jake the illusion that he is in total control of what he thinks and does. Though Jake thinks that if he works hard enough he will get rich, the novel understands that this isn't true. The problem is that by keeping mass culture at arm's length, the novel denies the reader the insights afforded by *Native Son*: namely, that mass culture is so deeply entwined with the white power structure that it's almost impossible to separate them. While it's probably a stretch to call *Native Son* a postmodern novel, it does work in the way Eysteinnsson describes postmodernism as asking readers to become at least temporarily compliant with the tropes of mass culture.<sup>6</sup> While it's important to understand Jake's—and later, Bigger's—differing reactions to different elements of mass culture, the novels also show us how these occasionally nuanced interpretations don't do the protagonists much good. Jake's life isn't going anywhere, and Bigger is going to die. Even if the white power structure isn't completely monolithic, it's monolithic enough that the wiggle room Jake and Bigger have isn't enough to allow them to break out of their terrible lives.

*Lawd Today!*, at least in its treatments of mass culture, fits pretty squarely into the Adornian idea of modernist literature. However, as I've discussed, the critical distance that the novel keeps from American mass culture helps create a sense of that mass culture as a largely malevolent force that can't be properly resisted. *Native Son*, on the other hand, uses a two-tiered approach to critiquing American mass culture that allows for a deeper analysis than *Lawd Today!* does. Like *Lawd Today!*, *Native Son* uses the more conventional Adornian modernist critique of mass culture: As with Jake, Bigger is overwhelmingly influenced negatively by mass culture—though, again as with Jake, his reactions sometimes reveal a level of ambivalence that shows he isn't completely under mass culture's sway. But *Native Son* goes deeper than the previous novel in how it lays bare the tropes and forms of the pieces of mass culture that it is critiquing. As Leonard Cassuto writes, “Modern African American crime

fiction begins with *Native Son*” (213). The novel is a critique of mass culture, including crime fiction, and is itself a piece of crime fiction. *Native Son* shows how—at least as Wright sees things—these pieces of mass culture that so enamor Jake and Bigger are built on a foundation of racism so deeply entrenched in society that any type of Gramscian resistance is virtually impossible. No matter what type of interpretation Bigger has to any element of mass culture—even when he momentarily seems to be using the tropes of mass culture to his advantage—*Native Son* assures us that there is nothing Bigger can do. We, as readers, know from the beginning that Bigger will die. This doesn’t, however, mean that the book is overly nihilistic. Possibly the most substantial criticism of *Native Son*, one probably best articulated by James Baldwin, is that the racist world Wright envisions in the novel is so brutally overwhelming that it presents black life as doomed to nothing but persecution and suffering. There is no way out for any black Americans. As Baldwin writes, “The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended” (18). The racism that Wright details is very much real, and there are countless stories of black Americans living—and dying—in situations similar to Bigger’s. But, an artist such as Richard Wright also emerged from this racist system, and he was neither the first nor the last black intellectual or artist to overcome racism in America. This doesn’t negate the worth of the book, but it means that we should read the novel with extra attention toward how Wright the author is presenting elements of racism in America. Though there is nothing lasting that Bigger can do with mass culture within the novel—he is doomed—*Native Son* aims to show the reader specific elements of mass culture—movie scenes, newspaper stories, elements of gothic and detective fiction—and then situate those elements as direct products of a racist system. Additionally, Wright, takes aim at the popular genre of proletariat fiction, by showing the aftermath of Max’s famous courtroom speech, in which Bigger and Max still remain achingly distant from each other. It is

only through understanding how this racist mass culture works, as *Native Son* shows us, that readers could understand how to begin dismantling it.

For Wright, mass culture is the product of racist ideology, and even seemingly progressive proletariat fiction is compromised by its inability to address fully the realities of black life in America. It helps, of course, that Wright was a fan of much of mass culture and understood its tropes fairly well. As Michel Fabre writes, “Among the books and magazines he read in his youth, Wright lists not only Zayne Grey’s *Riders of the Purple Sage*, but also *Flynn’s Detective Weekly* and *Argosy All-Story Magazine*” (27). Wright’s reading of popular pulp magazines is reflected in *Native Son*’s narrative structure, one that pulls from various forms of popular media of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Aside from the aforementioned fugitive criminal element—the element that attracted a movie studio, however briefly—the novel also draws heavily from film, gothic horror stories and newspaper articles. It is also, of course, a social protest novel, in addition to its echoes of high modernist sources, such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.<sup>7</sup> Bigger, as critics have also noted, is himself intensely shaped by the elements of mass culture in his life: movies, newspapers, detective magazines. In short, *Native Son* uses many different genres, and part of the novel’s tension comes from how it embodies in its formal narrative elements so many of the parts of mass culture that it also portrays as ultimately destructive to Bigger. As James Smethurst writes, “For the Marxist Wright, the gothic represents the old consciousness of capitalism, particularly of capitalism in the crisis of the Great Depression, which is retailed to the masses through mass culture” (31). According to Smethurst, though Wright is pulling from many “high” cultural sources—James, Poe, Dostoevsky—it is through elements of mass culture that readers would know the gothic elements that Wright uses in the novel, especially in its first book. Once Bigger is on the run after killing Mary, the mass cultural influence on the novel shifts from the gothic to the hard-boiled detective story, and then to the newspaper article. By switching among different types of

mass culture, Wright helps show how each element reinforces racist stereotypes in a unique way.

The first significant scene in *Native Son* that deals complexly with the ambivalent relationship between Bigger and his reactions to mass culture is when he and his friend Jack go see the movie *Trader Horn* at a local theater. The scene, which was originally altered for the book's publication but has since been restored, involves the two teenagers sitting in the theater before the movie starts and masturbating in a race to see who can climax first. The competition is full of bravado, with each character talking about how he wishes his girlfriend were there and one saying that he thinks a woman saw them and that "If she comes back I'll throw it in her" (30). When they are finished, they move to the seats in front of them to avoid the mess that they've made and begin discussing the robbery that they have planned. It is only then, after they are done masturbating and discussing their plot, that the movie begins. Near the very end of the novel, when Bigger is on trial for raping and murdering Mary Dalton, the district attorney unveils what he—and presumably, the jury—sees as the proof of Bigger's motive to commit the crimes:

On the very day that Bigger Thomas was to report to the Dalton home for work, he saw a newsreel in a movie. This newsreel showed Mary Dalton in a bathing suit upon a Florida beach. Jack Harding, a friend of Bigger Thomas, under persistent questioning, admitted that Bigger Thomas was enthralled by the idea of driving such a girl around the city. Let us be frank and not gloss over words. This Court has already heard of the obnoxious sexual perversions practiced by these boys in darkened theatres. Though Jack Harding would not admit it outright, we got enough information out of him to know that when the shadow of Mary Dalton was moving upon that screen those boys indulged in such an act! It was *then* that the idea of rape, murder, and ransom entered the idea of this moron! There is your motive and the vile circumstances under which it was conceived! (410)

As the D.A. sees it, the newsreel, and the sexual excitement it brought about, were a motivating influence on Bigger's killing of Mary Dalton. Of course, as the reader knows, Jack did not "admit it outright" because it isn't true. Bigger and Jack were done masturbating by the time the movie started. While the D.A. is playing both to racist stereotypes of a black man's violent

lust for a white woman and the mass media's—in this case a movie's—seeming ability to plant ideas in people's minds, the novel reflects a much more complex and at times ambivalent approach to mass culture, one that avoids the D.A.'s simple-minded approach but also sees how mass culture is part of an oppressive racist system.

We, as readers, are privy to several facts that are either unknown or of little interest to the prosecutors. Besides, as I've mentioned, the fact that the D.A.'s description of the masturbating in the theater is incorrect, we also know that Bigger did not rape Mary and that his killing of her was not sexually motivated, but instead happened because he had to bring the drunken Mary to her bedroom and accidentally smothered her while trying to keep her quiet, knowing that had he—a black man—been found with a drunken white woman in her bedroom late at night, he likely would have been accused of attempted rape. So, the prosecution's argument is mired in racist conjecture and outright untruths, but that doesn't mean that Bigger's attitudes toward Mary Dalton are completely unshaped by mass culture. He does see her in a newsreel, where she is made larger than life. The newsreel goes out of its way to present Mary in a sexual way, the novel's narration describing how “the girl's legs strained upward until only the tips of her toes touched the sand.” As commentary to this, the newsreel announcer says, “*Ah, the naughty rich!*” (32).

Bigger thinks, while watching the movie, that “rich white people were not so hard on Negroes; it was the poor whites who hated Negroes. They hated Negroes because they didn't have their share of the money. His mother always told him that rich white people liked Negroes better than they did poor whites” (34). Bigger then goes on to think that their previous plan to rob the store was foolish, since the opulence and sexual freedom of white society were now almost his. As Vincent Perez writes, commentary on *Native Son* “oversimplifies the author's engagement with media culture by framing Bigger Thomas too narrowly with the discourses of Marxism and naturalism. In doing so, it fails to consider the complex ways in which Bigger

interacts with his cultural environment even as he rebels against it” (153-54).<sup>8</sup> Perez sees much of this commentary as far too dependent on the approach to mass culture associated with Adorno. What Perez wants is a reading of Wright that is more indebted to a Gramscian approach, one that shows how Bigger’s “relation to media culture is marked by resistance and contestation as well as by forms of negotiation and manipulation” (155). Bigger here is not entirely in thrall to what the culture industry is trying to sell him. However, it’s also important to understand that any sense of control that Bigger has over his situation is fleeting and often illusory. Perez is correct that Bigger resists and manipulates white mass culture, such as in this scene, and later, when he tries to exploit the racism of the white world by playing dumb and trying to get ransom money from the Daltons, which itself is a scheme he lifts from detective magazines. But *Native Son* continues to stress that Bigger’s conviction and execution are all-but-foregone conclusions. Wright stresses that these subtle moments of resistance from Bigger are doomed to fail, in part because everything is always framed through the white cultural system. When Bigger turns a scene from *Trader Horn* into his own fantasy, it’s significant that the scene he’s watching is one in which white people observe staged African rituals. Part of what film does, of course, is frame things, and here we see that just as the Africans in the movie are literally framed by the camera and figuratively framed by Trader Horn watching through the window, Bigger will always be framed by white society. He will always feel the gaze of the white characters, and in that sense Bigger is “starring” in a movie in the way that the African dancers are. They are all there for white people to watch.

It’s while watching this that Bigger tells Jack that Mary is part of the family for whom he is supposed to begin working that afternoon. To this, Jack tells him that “them rich white women’ll go to bed with anybody, from a poodle on up. They even have their chauffeurs. Say... if you run across anything too much to handle at that place, let me know” (33). The two

men laugh at this, and then “Bigger turned his eyes to the screen, but he did not look” (33). It is thoughts of his new job, and not the movie, that has grabbed his attention. Then:

He looked at *Trader Horn* unfold and saw pictures of naked black men whirling in wild dances and heard drums beating and then gradually the African scene changed and was replaced by images in his own mind of white men and women dressed in black and white clothes, laughing, talking, drinking and dancing. Those were smart people; they knew how to get hold of money, millions of it. (33)

The screen is full of racist images, images similar to those that the newspapers will help spread later in the novel. But those racist images can't hold his attention. Bigger's imagination shifts from the projection on the screen of African men dancing to his own fantasy of rich, cultured white people dancing. What Bigger imagines isn't significantly different from the brief movie of Mary Dalton frolicking on the beach. What is being projected on the screen is a racist fantasy, but one that, according to Bigger's thoughts, has the “screams of black men and women dancing free and wild, men and women who were adjusted to their soil and at home in their world, free from fear and hysteria” (34). Bigger can take some comfort in this image, since it shows Africans seemingly adjusted and at home, free from white oppression. But, since this scene can't hold Bigger's attention—he thinks of white people dancing—we can see that even brief moments of escape for Bigger are always tainted by images from white popular culture. Additionally, viewing the film *Trader Horn* shows that even what Bigger momentarily sees as Africans free from fear is a narrative framed in terms of white racism.

It's worth spending a moment on the movie *Trader Horn*. Based on the memoirs of real-life trader Alfred Aloysius “Trader” Horn, the film stars Harry Carey in the title role, a man who claims that “no white man knows more of Africa than I.” As one of the earliest Hollywood films to be shot in Africa, *Trader Horn* seems to exist primarily as a way to show American audiences the people, animals, and locales of Sub-Saharan Africa, an area of which most Americans in the 1930s likely had little knowledge. An early exchange between Trader Horn and Peru (Duncan Renaldo), Horn's assistant, does a good job of essentially spelling out

the racial politics of the film. Peru says to Trader Horn, “You’re mistaken about these people. They’re just happy, ignorant children.” To this, Trader Horn later says, after both hear drums beating, that “Every black man in the bush will be a homicidal maniac.” What is surprising about *Trader Horn* is that black audiences of the 1930s embraced it as a relatively progressive representation of black characters. Though modern audiences would likely find the movie almost overwhelmingly offensive, *Trader Horn* breaks from the racist traditions of early film, however slightly, in the way that it portrays Trader Horn’s African guide, Rencharo (Mutia Omoolo). Just sixteen years after *The Birth of a Nation*, in which white actors played to the basest of racist stereotypes while performing in blackface, *Trader Horn*’s decision to have Rencharo played by a native African as a competent, brave hunter who shows loyalty to Trader Horn when all of the other African guides are reduced to cowards, could have been seen as relatively progressive. As Thomas Cripps writes, “*Trader Horn*, despite its flaws, effectively used Mutia Omoolo, a sensitive African; authentic location shots; and a plausible tension between colonized and *colons*” (275).<sup>9</sup> Of course, by more challenging standards Rencharo, who sacrifices his life to save Trader Horn’s, fits nicely into the idea of “the magical negro,” the black character who exists in fiction and film only to help the white characters. The movie ends with Rencharo’s image hanging over the clouds, giving him a magical air, the type of image that has been used in many movies since.

*Trader Horn*’s few progressive elements are mostly overwhelmed by the film’s more traditionally racist content, and Bigger’s enjoyment of it fits in with his general tastes in American mass culture. But the scene that Wright mentions, the one that shows “pictures of naked black men whirling in wild dances,” gives us a deep insight into how Wright is approaching that American mass culture. In the movie, Trader Horn, Peru, and their entourage are taken prisoner by a tribe and are being held in a hut, presumably while waiting to be executed. This allows the filmmakers to stage a variety of performances by the Africans,

ranging from the aforementioned dancing to far more unpleasant fare, such as upside-down crucifixions. We, as the audience, frequently see this scene from the point of view of Trader Horn and Peru, who watch everything through the window. All of these allegedly genuine African rituals are seen through the eyes of the white characters, just as, on a larger scale, these Africans are being presented to the (mostly) white audiences through the eyes of white filmmakers. Bigger is seeing what Trader Horn sees. But the novel *Native Son* shows that all American mass culture is filtered through a white perspective, such as Trader Horn's.

As critics have noted, there are moments in the novel that—while not outright supernatural—use the tropes of gothic horror in a way that give a general feeling of haunted unease that hangs over the story. Probably the earliest example is when, after Bigger uses the rat that he killed to scare his sister, his mother tells him, “And mark my word, some of these days you going to set down and *cry*. Some of these days you going to wish you had made something of yourself, instead of a tramp. But it'll be too late then” (9). Bigger, of course, does end up crying, in his cell with his lawyer Max, and by then it is too late. Bigger's fate is sealed, and he will die in the electric chair. Such premonitions have a long literary tradition—think Macbeth and Oedipus—but in this case his mother's warning carries both a supernatural air and is grounded in the harsh reality of the family's daily life. Bigger does live recklessly and without caring for others, and it doesn't take a crystal ball to realize that sooner or later—probably sooner—Bigger's lifestyle will catch up with him. As critics have discussed, gothic horror frequently presents evil as a blackness that is aligned with images of Africans or African Americans. What *Native Son* does, at least near the end of its first book when Bigger kills Mary and disposes of her body, is tell the gothic story from the “monster's” point of view. Instead of appearing from nowhere, the monstrous elements of Bigger's personality are contextualized and humanized in a way that an average gothic horror story wouldn't allow.

The novel explicitly places this scene within the context of gothic horror—Bigger wants to “lie down upon the floor and sleep off the horror of this thing” (92)—and the Daltons’ white cat—a clear reference to Poe’s black cat<sup>10</sup>—appears in the basement just before Bigger cuts off Mary’s head. The cat

stood up; its white fur bristled; its back arched. [Bigger] tried to grab it and it bounded past him with a long wail of fear and scampered up the steps and through the door and out of sight. Oh! He had left the kitchen door open. That was it. He closed the door and stood again before the furnace, thinking, Cats can’t talk... (91)

Cats, of course, can’t talk, but as Wright well knew, in the context of Poe’s story, the black cat—which might or might not have been an apparition—caused the narrator to confess to the murder of his wife, a murder that he might have been able to get away with otherwise. So, no, cats can’t talk, but they can prod at a guilty conscience, and the white cat makes a significant reappearance later in the novel, when Bigger has returned to the Dalton’s house after sending them the ransom note he has written. This reference to Poe is significant. Toni Morrison, when discussing her idea of the Africanist presence in American literature, says, “No early American writer is more important to the concept of African Americanism than Poe” (32). To Morrison, images of whiteness in American literature, which are associated with freedom and goodness, need

contextualizing to explain their extraordinary power, pattern, and consistency. Because they appear almost always in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control, these images of blinding whiteness seem to function as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness—a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing. (33)

Bigger is impotent and under white control—as I’ve said, any feeling of power on his part is transitory. This use of Poe’s racist imagery helps reinforce how the racist tropes of Poe and the later gothic traditions will continue to control Bigger. The whiteness is always there to remind him of his darkness.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, we cannot overlook the deep influence that Poe has had on American mass culture. As Teresa A. Goddu writes, “For instance, through Poe, popular

literature can enter the canon without threatening the hard-won, highbrow status of our ‘classic’ American literature” (78). Again, to return to Smethurst, I think that Wright clearly knew, from his wide range of reading, how these elements of Poe’s writings had found their way into the mass-produced stories that people like Bigger loved.<sup>12</sup> But these popular stories are always told from a white perspective, and the explanations for the darkness are either mysterious or reductive. Though the novel doesn’t lead us to excuse the monstrous nature of Bigger’s actions, it does show us that the tropes of popular gothic fiction are ill prepared to deal with the complex realities of race in America. We, as readers, are forced to understand the nature and actions of a “monster” in ways that are foreign to the average piece of mass culture. Just as we see how *Trader Horn* is always framing blackness from a white perspective, the gothic aspects of *Native Son* force the reader to see the “darkness” not as some mysterious force but as a terrified human being who feels trapped and controlled by his social conditions. The grisly decapitation of Mary Dalton might give the reader the type of thrills that a gothic horror story would, but the reader is also led to question where the darkness comes from.

The next significant genre that the novel explores is crime fiction, and it leads the reader to question one of the implicit arguments of pulp crime stories: that black men can cross the racial divide and “become” white through their adherence to the hardboiled ethos. Earlier, on the day that Bigger and his friends are supposed to rob a local store, he reflects on some of the pieces of mass culture he enjoys:

Bigger felt an urgent need to hide his growing and deepening sense of hysteria; he had to get rid of it or else he would succumb to it. He longed for a stimulus powerful enough to focus his attention and drain off his energies. He wanted to run. Or listen to some swing music. Or laugh at a joke. Or read a Real Detective Story Magazine. Or go to a movie. Or visit Bessie. (28)

The only reason Bigger would visit Bessie, his nominal girlfriend, is apparently to have sex, and placing her at the end of a list that begins by wishing to run away and continues with examples of different elements of mass culture—movies, swing music, jokes, magazines—

shows that to Bigger sex and mass culture are often just distractions, things that help him “run away” from the oppressive white society that makes Bigger feel as if a life of crime is his only long-term option. Yet the detective magazine can be more than just an idle distraction, as we will later see, when Bigger acknowledges that, to him, it can be a source of instruction and inspiration. What *Native Son* leaves unsaid is that the detective magazine stories Bigger reads were frequently savagely racist and almost always featured white heroes. How Bigger is “different” from the white society that surrounds him is, of course, one of the central ideas of *Native Son*. However, the heroes of these hard-boiled detective stories that were so popular in the 1930s appeared to be outsiders, and Bigger certainly is an outsider. Though they were detectives, these heroes stood apart from ordered society, which was often shown by having these characters work as private eyes and not part of the established police force. So, they got to have it both ways. By making these characters private eyes with frequently antagonistic relationships with the police department, pulp writers got to portray these heroes as being against the system, but at the same time the racist attitudes of these detectives showed that they were part of the same white power structure as the police departments.

As Maureen T. Reddy argues, “In most hard-boiled detective fiction, only the detective himself fully meets the criteria for whiteness, heterosexuality, and masculinity encoded in the text, hence his heroic stature” (10).<sup>13</sup> So while the detective might stand apart from straight, white, ordered society, he is also the embodiment of what that society should be. Reddy goes on to argue that such stories will have characters who help the hard-boiled detective hero who, though they are not quite at the level of straight white manhood embodied by the detective, they approach it and engage in white bonding—racist jokes, shared assumptions about non-whites, etc.—that “strengthen the shared understanding among white people that the United States is ideologically a white society” (11). She goes on:

However, the texts also seek to interpellate readers not already white, heterosexual, and male *as* some version, even some imitation of all of those. While much has been made of the hard-boiled detective's solitariness, that solitariness is necessarily mitigated by the presence of a possible sharer. (11)

It is one of the contradictions of Bigger Thomas that he has moments when he is relatively articulate in describing the pain of living in a racist society, yet he also unquestioningly embraces the racist ideology of the detective magazines he reads. Though he is of course not a detective, Bigger tries to make himself into the hard-boiled character of detective novels. He tries to become the embodiment of violent manhood. He uses savage violence to get what he wants and treats women as disposable sex objects. He sees those hardboiled detective stories not just as escape valves but also as instruction manuals for living. Without realizing it, he embraces the whiteness that he also hates.

As I mentioned *Native Son* itself is also a kind of pulp detective story that is a reflection on pulp detective stories. The central mystery, of course, is "Who killed Mary Dalton?" Though the reader knows that Bigger is guilty, no other character in the novel is privy to that information. Attempting to find Mary—whom the Daltons still suspect is missing and not dead—the family hires Britten, a private investigator, to find Mary's whereabouts. Like the standard hard-boiled detective, Britten is not a member of the police force, but is an embodiment of the cliché pulp detective hero. He is racist and fiercely anti-communist. While questioning Bigger he yells, "You *are* a Communist, *you goddamn* black sonofabitch! And you're going to tell me about Miss Dalton and that Jan bastard!" (161), and he later tells Mr. Dalton, "Well, you see 'em one way and I see 'em another. To me, a nigger's a nigger" (163). While his tough-guy posturing might be straight out of the pulps—and synchs up perfectly with Reddy's analysis—there is one character trait that differentiates him from the detectives you would find in a Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler story—he is thoroughly incompetent. As Wright himself wrote, if anyone had acknowledged Bigger's humanity, the crime would

have been solved in half an hour. Instead, Britten's racism causes him to see Bigger as so mentally inferior that he would be incapable of pulling off even the simplest ransom plot. This probably emerges as Wright's most potent attack on the tropes of the hard-boiled detective type and the culture that sustains him. In the standard pulp magazine, the hard-boiled detective's competency as a detective is directly related to his racism. For Britten, his racism *is* his incompetency.

Wright is adapting elements of the detective genre to lay bare many of the racist assumptions that were prevalent in American popular culture. Chester Himes, one of the first significant black writers of detective fiction, once said of his first novel, "I had started out to write a detective story when I wrote that novel, but I couldn't name the white man who was guilty because all white men were guilty." While Himes' comment isn't exactly applicable to *Native Son*—it ignores the class angle that was so central to Wright's then-Marxism—it shows how both writers in general see the complications of the detective genre. The reader of *Native Son* is there when Bigger kills Mary and disposes of her body. We know he did it and why. The killing is only a mystery to the white characters of the novel. Once Bigger's guilt is determined, the question for them then becomes, why? The answer, of course, is not in the racist trope of the black rapist that the district attorney preys on but rather, as Bigger's attorney Max argues, that Bigger's life is a direct product of the racist society in which he lives. A detective like Britten—and the hard-boiled detective in general—is incapable of coming to such a conclusion, since he works under the assumption that murders can be "solved." As Wright said, the murder could have been solved, at least in terms of the factual nature of Bigger's guilt, if someone had been able to acknowledge that Bigger is human, but the racism of the pulp detective ensures that Britten won't see Bigger's humanity. In order to truly "solve" the murder, Britten would not only have to see Bigger's humanity but also understand how white society had so damaged the humanity of someone like Bigger. Perhaps not every white man is guilty. But many of them

are, to varying degrees, which the hard-boiled detective isn't able to confront. The complications of a racist system, in which many of its inhabitants carry around varying levels of guilt, reveal as completely untenable the hard-boiled idea that one person can be found guilty of any crime.

While the character Britten is heavily indebted to pulp detective stories, Bigger tries to make himself out to be a similar type of tough guy. In fact, Britten is a personification of the type of racist thug character to whom Bigger looks for inspiration. When Bigger begins to think that he might be able to get away with killing Mary, he feels “more alive than he could ever remember having been... he was moving toward that sense of fullness he had so often but inadequately felt in magazines and movies” (149-50). The (relatively) private sexual satisfaction that Bigger felt earlier in the movie theater was fleeting. The unreality of mass culture, of the movies and magazines that he uses as a temporary escape from the misery of his life, cannot give him any lasting sense of fullness. When he writes the ransom note he thinks to say, because he “had read that somewhere,” that the Daltons should put five dollar and ten dollar bills in a shoebox (177). Bigger is trying to make permanent the sense of fullness that movies and magazines had hinted at, but he still falls back on the tropes that he read from magazines. What the magazines promise is a world where black and white are clearly separated but where a black reader can feel that he can cross the line and “become” white (just as Joe Christmas does). Virtually no pulp heroes in the 1930s were black, and Wright is showing how the detective story works when the rugged outsider is not a white hardboiled detective but instead is a hunted black man. The magazines are not a realistic representation either of criminal activity or the detective work used to foil it, yet the magazines reflect something that is very real, the racism of Bigger's world. Asking for the money in a shoebox—he could have also asked for unmarked bills—is part of a larger narrative that Bigger is convinced works, yet for all of his alienation he doesn't see how the white-dominated mass culture is produced in a

way to compound his alienation. It is men like Britten, not men like Bigger, who come out as the victors in these stories. That, as I've said, Britten isn't a good detective and his side still "wins" helps show part of the novel's larger point about mass culture. The real-life Brittens aren't as smart as their pulp counterparts, but they don't need to be. What is embodied in one man in the pulps is in the version of real life that Wright is showing to us as a systemic problem—that they will catch Bigger, and reduce the complicated questions of responsibility to his individual guilt, no matter what.

But perhaps the most substantial critique of mass culture in *Native Son* comes in the ways that it presents the production and dissemination of newspapers. Unlike film and gothic and detective fiction, newspapers are read and published under the pretense that they contain a factual record of what happened. Additionally, the daily publication of newspapers allows for a much faster turnaround than the other types of mass culture with which the novel is concerned. In writing *Native Son*, Richard Wright drew from newspaper accounts of two sensationalistic murder cases, elements of which Wright placed in the narrative of the novel.<sup>14</sup> One case was that of Robert Nixon, a black man who broke into a white woman's house and killed her with a brick in a fit of panic. The other was the Loeb and Leopold case. Loeb and Leopold were two young men, the sons of Jewish millionaires, who, according to Hazel Rowley, Wright's biographer, "kidnapped a fourteen-year-old boy, bludgeoned his face with a chisel, shoved his naked body into a culvert, burned his clothing in the furnace at Loeb's house, then written his father a ransom letter asking for ten thousand dollars"<sup>15</sup> Additionally, because the two men were gay, people assumed that they had raped their victim. Nixon was convicted and executed. Loeb's and Leopold's lawyer, who took on their case because he was passionately opposed to the death penalty, managed to get the two men's death sentences turned into life in prison.<sup>16</sup> While the basics of the killing of Mary Dalton are more strongly influenced by the facts of the Loeb and Leopold case, it was the Nixon case, with its racial angle, that makes for

the more significant influence. Nixon, who was black, was executed. Loeb and Leopold, who were white, were not. Bigger's being black is intrinsically linked to every event in the novel, and Wright rewrote many of the news stories of the Nixon case—often changing very little—when integrating news stories into the novel. While there is racism everywhere in the novel, the news media play a privileged role, because it is through the newspapers that the story reaches the point where Bigger has been accused of a rape he didn't commit. After the Daltons have received the ransom note and held a press conference, the reporters begin discussing how they are going to “slant” the story. One of the reporters says, “Good God! ... What a story! Don't you see it? These Negroes want to be left alone and these Reds are forcing 'em to live with 'em, see? Every wire in the country'll carry it!” (214).<sup>17</sup> Another reporter says the story is better than Loeb and Leopold, and another says, “Say, I'm slanting this to the primitive Negro who doesn't want to be disturbed by white civilization” (214). The alleged idea of a newspaper is to tell what “happened,” but as this scene shows, what happened is always open to interpretation, and the media have no problem slanting it to their own agenda. The reporter's claim that “every wire” will carry the story shows that he is thinking in terms of a mass readership, readers who live far outside of Chicago—perhaps in the American South, where blacks aren't “disturbed by white civilization.” The story of Bigger Thomas is perfect for the American mass media. As Wright continues to demonstrate in his book, he sees American mass culture as being underpinned by both racist and economic demands. Every piece of mass culture in the novel—from the newspapers to the movies and detective magazines Bigger likes—is something that makes money, and this scene shows how disseminators of mass culture will explicitly play up a racist angle to increase profits.<sup>18</sup> When reporters ask if Mary had been raped, the authorities say they don't know—and, indeed, they can't, since her body had been burned. Yet after police find Mary's charred remains and Bigger becomes the lead

suspect, the papers carry a headline that reads, “AUTHORITIES HINT SEX CRIME.”

Reflecting on this, Bigger thinks:

Those words excluded him utterly from the world. To hint that he had committed a sex crime was to pronounce the death sentence; it meant a wiping out of his life even before he was captured; it meant death before death came, for the white men who read those words would at once kill him in their hearts. (243)

The story goes on to say that police suspect Bigger killed Mary “perhaps in a sex crime” (242), when the police have said no such thing, and a few paragraphs later, in that very same story, Bigger has gone from a suspected rapist to an actual rapist, since the story says, “Indignation rose to white heat last night as the news of the Negro’s rape and murder of the missing heiress spread through the city” (243). The media’s attempts to prey on public fears to create a sensationalistic story have convicted Bigger of rape when the police specifically say that there is no evidence to support such a claim. And, more significantly, it is only after the media have declared Bigger to be a rapist and murderer that he actually becomes a rapist and murderer. He didn’t rape Mary, and, legally, her death was probably manslaughter, but Bigger does rape and murder his girlfriend Bessie, finally becoming the rapist the newspapers make him out to be. Unlike the instances with the detective magazines or the movie, the link between the newspapers and their effect on Bigger isn’t made explicit here. We don’t see a direct connection between the newspaper reports and Bigger’s rape of Bessie. But by chronologically placing the assault after the news reports of the rape, Wright shows how media influence can work in ways more subtle and complex than the simplistic approach put forth by the district attorney. Bigger has so internalized the idea of his being a rapist that he can become one without making the connection to the news reports explicit. And, more significantly, the reader can understand where the newspapers came from, how reporters consciously crafted the stories that engulf Bigger and make him feel as if he truly is a rapist monster.

But, more substantially for the reader, the novel presents lengthy excerpts from the newspaper stories, such as the following:

In relation to the Negro's mental condition, Dr. Calvin H. Robinson, a psychiatric attaché of the police department, declared: "There is no question but that Thomas is more alert mentally and more cagy than we suspect. His attempt to blame the Communists for the murder and kidnapping note and his staunch denial of having raped the white girl indicate that he may be hiding other crimes."

Professional psychologists at University of Chicago pointed out this morning that white women have an unusual fascination for Negro men. "They think," said one of the professors who requested that his name not be mentioned in connection with the case, "that white women are more attractive than the women of their own race. They just can't help themselves."

Wright uses these and other excerpts from newspapers to present not only what the characters in the novel would read but to represent what the average newspaper reader would come across in a similar situation. These pieces are, as I mentioned, close rewrites of actual news stories from the Robert Nixon case, and the average citizen at the time would know about Nixon only what the media present. Similarly, the characters in *Native Son* only know about Bigger what the newspapers report, but the readers of *Native Son* are given the context that the average newspaper reader lacks. We, as readers, see the reporters consciously slanting the stories to prey off of racist fears, and then we read the stories that are the direct product of that slanting. While *Lawd Today!* is a more Adornian condemnation of mass culture, *Native Son*'s triumph lies in how it continuously contextualizes mass culture. Ideally, the reader of *Native Son* would no longer be able to read a newspaper account of a "black rapist" without realizing that such stories aren't created in a vacuum and are instead the products of complex differing motives—motives often driven by racist and financial agendas.

It's important to realize that in *Native Son*, Bigger briefly has the upper hand. He has the newspapers seeing him as a simpleton who is incapable of being responsible for something as complex as the kidnapping of Mary Dalton, and he is using those newspapers to help disseminate his plot to blame Jan and his communist friends for Mary's disappearance. Since

the press is so fundamentally racist (and anti-communist), it is all too eager to buy into the story that Bigger has set up. It is important to see these pockets of resistance, the moments in the novel that show how this white-dominated mass culture isn't monolithic. But, at the same time, we should understand these moments within the context of the novel. Bigger's plan doesn't work. He still gets caught, and the press's racism, which he had previously exploited, now helps convict him of rape and murder. White mass culture might not be completely monolithic, but it's monolithic enough. To give too much credit to Bigger's manipulation of mass culture is to ignore how that mass culture eventually plays such a pivotal role in crushing Bigger. Instead, the reader should focus on how the novel presents mass culture not as ideologically neutral but as a direct product of a racist power structure. It is, as I mentioned, a legitimate complaint against the novel that it presents a world in which a black man has no chance of survival when Richard Wright, among many other black intellectuals, emerged from the same world that Wright is allegedly portraying. But the racism in mass culture that Wright is documenting is very real. And whatever limitations there are in the Adornian critique of the culture industry—namely, that it gives little thought to nuances within the content of individual elements of mass culture—I think Wright would agree with Adorno that much of mass culture is full of relatively simplistic repetitions that don't encourage more complex thought. *Native Son*, by placing its complex social analysis alongside elements of mass culture with which its readers would be familiar, forces the reader to recontextualize mass culture and see it as the product of a racist society.

*Native Son* has been traditionally read as a realist novel, but this pastiche of several genres—the way that Bigger moves through a movie, a crime novel, a horror story, and newspaper reports—isn't terribly realistic. Of course, the question of how much a scene conforms to our understanding of physical reality would be similarly out of place when discussing a piece of high modernism. We don't, for example, care whether Leopold Bloom

“really” sees his dead son Rudy at the end of the “Circe” chapter of *Ulysses*. And we don’t give up on *As I Lay Dying* because a chapter is narrated by Addie Bundren well after the book has firmly established that she is dead. Craig Hansen Werner sees examples like this—he cites the highly unrealistic scene when so many people are crammed into Bigger’s small jail cell—as part of the novel’s larger modernist structure. Werner sees much of black literature as sharing similar concerns with literary modernism: “At least since [W.E.B.] Du Bois produced *The Souls of Black Folk*, Afro-American culture has explicitly addressed the central concerns of modernism: fragmentation, alienation, sense-making” (186). Regarding Bigger’s situation in relation to mass culture, Werner says, “Wright’s presentation of a variety of these discourses—advertising, journalistic, legal, aesthetic, Marxist—continually emphasize Bigger’s exclusion” (188). While the mass culture in the novel is all produced from a white perspective for a white audience, Werner ignores how Bigger himself enjoys the movies and magazines he watches and reads. While the racist rants of the newspapers, which help convict Bigger of rape when there is no actual evidence to back such a claim, certainly help to foster Bigger’s sense of exclusion, not all of the mass culture in the novel is created equal. Certainly Bigger is alienated from almost everything, and I agree that his alienation stems in part from the way that mass culture—especially the newspapers—frames the issue of race. But if we fall back on the Adornian idea of modernism—one that views mass culture largely with scorn as something that is little more than worthless, often oppressive clutter, then we miss the nuances of how Bigger reacts to mass culture in different ways at different points in the novel. As I’ve discussed, the complexity of how mass culture functions is important to both of these novels. Yet, I also believe that Perez’s Gramscian analysis, though it is correct to stress how Bigger’s relation to mass media “is marked by resistance and contestation as well as by forms of negotiation and manipulation,” overstates the amount of resistance that is possible for Bigger. We must understand that these moments of resistance, just as with Jake, don’t amount to much. Bigger is

going to die, and his and Max's conversation at the end of the novel stresses how the two men, in spite of their progress, still don't really understand each other. The sad fact of *Native Son* is that Bigger is doomed from page one. What is more important is that the reader understands the ways that mass culture works to help ensure that Bigger cannot escape his situation.

As I—and many other critics—have said, *Lawd Today!* is overtly modernist in its formal complexity, and *Native Son* isn't. And part of the reason that *Native Son* wasn't read as a modernist novel for much of its existence is because Wright wrote it more in the tradition of social realism. As Werner writes, "To employ a modernist form would have been to relinquish the possibility of an audience, of the contact that Wright consistently images as crucial to full articulation" (203). Simply put, the easier a book is to read, the better a chance there is that more people will read it. *Native Son* largely works as a thriller. It isn't hard to see why movie executives would have been eager to make a film version of the novel with the racial angle erased. However, the final major scene in the book—Max's passionate speech and its aftermath—works both as a culmination of the ideas of social realism and as a critique of social realism. As Chris Vials writes, realism's prominence both in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the 1930s, when Wright was writing, had a complex relationship with the culture industry. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, "despite the profound ambivalence of realists toward the culture industries, they nonetheless wanted a viable place for their 'serious' writing within the emergent and largely entertainment-driven markets" (xxxix).<sup>19</sup> However, as Vials also discusses, these 19<sup>th</sup>-century and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century writers were not overtly concerned with linking racism to societal problems, either downplaying it or ignoring it: "London, Dreiser, Norris, Howells, and Sinclair turned out novels, in some instances explicitly socialist in their politics, that were highly critical of the abuses of American capitalism. But the racial and ethnic politics of these authors fell short in a number of ways" (xxxvi). Max's lengthy speech is exactly the type of socialist ideology that might be found in a novel by Upton Sinclair, and it has encountered

much criticism since the book was published, perhaps most notably from Baldwin. In a relatively sympathetic reading of the speech, Barbara Foley says, “the speech provides both information and analysis not inferable from the story of Bigger’s crime and punishment” (210). She goes on to say that the elements of this speech “point to the political analysis necessary for fully comprehending the dimensions of Bigger’s fate” (210). I think the key word of Foley’s is “point,” since, though Max’s analysis certainly has value in pointing out the damages of capitalist America, it is fundamentally incomplete. Though *Native Son* shows more faith in the potentials of social realism than it does in the other products of the culture industry, the novel again contextualizes realist fiction to show its limits—namely that it is unable to deal with race thoroughly.

It is during the very end of the book, when Max and Bigger are alone in Bigger’s cell, that we see how Wright posits the limits of the social realist novel. Max says to Bigger:

“Bigger, the people who hate you feel just as you feel, only they’re on the other side of the fence. You’re black, but that’s only a part of it. Your being black, as I told you before, makes it easy for them to single you out. Why do they do that? They want the things of life, just as you did, and they’re not particular about how they get them. They hire people and they don’t pay them enough; they take what people own and build up power. They rule and regulate life. They have things arranged so that they can do those things and the people can’t fight back. They do that to black people more than other because they say that black people are inferior. But, Bigger, they say that *all* people are inferior. . . .” (428, emphasis in original)

Max’s stressing of the word “all” shows his willingness to reduce all social issues to matters of class. But the novel has continuously stressed that—though class is important—race is what determines Bigger’s situation. Bigger’s response to what Max says shows the incompleteness of Max’s worldview:

“What I killed for must’ve been good!” Bigger’s voice was full of frenzied anguish. “It must have been good! When a man kills, it’s for something. . . . I didn’t know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for ‘em. . . . It’s the truth, Mr. Max. I can say it now, ‘cause I’m going to die. I know what I’m saying real good and I know how it sounds. But I’m all right. I feel all right when I look at it that way. . . .” (429)

Max is horrified by this admission from Bigger; his “eyes were full of terror” (429) after Bigger says it. Max, holding back tears, doesn’t know what to say and tells Bigger goodbye. After he leaves, Bigger “still held on to the bars. They he smiled a faint, wry, bitter smile. He heard the ring of steel against steel as a far door clanged shut” (430). Bigger’s admission is horrifying, but it gives a level of insight into the despair of black life in America that Max, with his largely class-based view of American life, is unable to deal with. His worldview has difficulty comprehending the lives of people like Bigger Thomas. A novel by Sinclair likely would have let Max’s speech remain the final word on the evils of capitalism, but *Native Son* again forces the reader to recontextualize the realist novel within a racist system. Certainly, *Native Son* privileges the realist novel over the other forms of mass culture. Realism can question capitalism, while all the other pieces of mass culture in the novel reinforce it. It isn’t that Max’s lengthy analysis is wrong, just that it’s incomplete. The final scene in the novel allows the reader to see how social realism must expand its scope to allow for the complexities of race.

As I mentioned earlier, the idea of an all-white film version of *Native Son* has its own logic, since the basic plot mechanics are sturdy enough to support such a film, even without the social protest angle. If Richard Wright leaned more toward the Adornian modernist distrust of mass culture in *Lawd Today!*, he surely complicated his stance by the time he wrote *Native Son*. It isn’t just that social realism is more palatable than high modernism; it’s that Wright is using the form of those pieces of mass culture to show that what makes them entertaining—and Wright’s reading habits suggest that he himself found them very entertaining—is inextricably linked to what makes them racist. The barely articulated attempts by Jake and Bigger to manipulate elements of mass culture for their own gain only hint at what Wright attempted to accomplish with the novel. Just as Bigger can use the movie screen to project his own view of the world, Wright is using *Native Son* to show how mass culture works.

For Wright, at least in these two novels, mass culture is white power. Though there is a black folk culture—religion, blues songs, etc.—it is the white-dominated mass culture that has the most effect on Jake’s and Bigger’s lives. It is through this mass culture that the two men try to find some kind of refuge from the racism that is implicit in *Lawd Today!* and explicit in *Native Son*. Jake doesn’t have much control over his go-nowhere life, but he can control how he interprets the newspaper, and he can decide not to watch a movie that might remind him of the terrible reality of life for blacks in the South. Such minor accomplishments might seem like small victories, but they point toward the most significant accomplishment of *Native Son*, in which Wright narrows the high-low gap of the previous novel. In *Native Son*, Bigger, like Jake, is not completely under the control of mass culture. He is able to use the tropes of detective fiction for his own ends, however briefly and unsuccessfully, and he is able to project a different fantasy than the one he is shown in the movie theater. As with Jake, these attempts to resist mass culture are relatively unsuccessful, but the contextualization in *Native Son* allows the reader to focus on how the racist society produces racist mass culture. *Native Son* turns 1930s mass culture on its head, showing the reader how it works and how seemingly innocent assumptions of how gothic horror, pulp detective stories, and tabloid journalism work are rooted in systemic racism. *Native Son* is a piece of mass culture—it could have made a good movie—but one of its primary goals is to have the reader be unable to read a detective novel without thinking of Britten or read a horror story without thinking of what the darkness really symbolizes or read a newspaper without thinking of how reporters might have tried to “slant” the story. The high modernism of *Lawd Today!* is unprepared for this, since it maintains a level of critical distance from mass culture that doesn’t allow for the substantial analysis that *Native Son* does. If the reader leaves *Native Son* with a deeper understanding of how mass culture reinforces the white power structure, then she might be able to go past Jake and Bigger, to

reach a level of interpretation that might lead readers to begin questioning other pieces of popular culture that present themselves as ideologically neutral.

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#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a thorough account, see “Burbanking Bigger and Bette the Bitch” by Elizabeth Binggeli, which argues that *Native Son* was not suitable for the Hollywood treatment because it didn’t blame the story’s problems on one evil individual who could be defeated. Its depiction of systemic racism that found everyone guilty wouldn’t have worked for a Hollywood feature.

<sup>2</sup> Stewart’s discussion of movie-watching in *Native Son* is worthwhile and echoes a good deal of the Vincent Perez article I discuss later in this chapter, at least in terms of how black characters in the novel can find a place to maneuver within the racist media. However, her reading of *Native Son* is based on the original 1940 version in which Wright was forced to make several major editorial changes. Among the most significant of these is the scene in the movie theater. Among the differences is that in the original version of the novel, the two young men don’t masturbate, and they go to see a double feature, which includes *The Gay Divorcee* (1934) along with *Trader Horn*. Because of how these changes affect the reading of the scene in the movie theater, I feel a lot of what she says isn’t directly applicable here.

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough discussion of Jake’s nationalism, see “From No Man’s Land to Mother-Land: Emasculation and Nationalism in Richard Wright’s Depression Era Urban Novels” by Anthony Dawahare.

<sup>4</sup> Joe Christmas, of course, is the exception when I refer to Faulkner’s mostly-white characters. Since whether Joe is “black” or “white” is one of the central questions of a novel that is concerned with the social construction of race, I can’t put him definitively in either group. But, as I argue in my Faulkner chapter, Joe’s reading of the crime magazines shows how he is trying to become a part of white mass culture.

<sup>5</sup> Leigh Anne Duck, in her *The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism*, discusses the type of attitude that Jake displays: “Much as perceptions of southern cultural fixation protected racial segregation from legal challenge, the representation of African American oppression as a specifically southern problem cast the conflict between egalitarian democracy and white supremacy as a dichotomy between national and regional practice” (23).

<sup>6</sup> See Michael Holquist’s “Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction.” for a discussion of how he sees detective fiction—a genre that *Native Son* borrows from and critiques heavily—as being postmodern.

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the most elaborate allusion to high modernism in *Native Son* is when Max, Bigger’s lawyer, asks Bigger a series of questions about his life that make him feel that “for the first time in his life, he felt ground beneath his feet, and he wanted it to stay there” (361). The series of questions and answers echo the second-to-last chapter in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which is presented as a series of questions and answers as Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, the novel’s two main characters, try to sober up in Bloom’s kitchen. The entire chapter is a series

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of questions and answers that deny the reader what he has been expecting for the entire novel: for the two characters to make an emotional connection and for Bloom, who, like Max, is Jewish, to become the true father figure to Dedalus, the Odysseus to his Telemachus. It doesn't happen, and even though Max's and Bigger's conversation seems more fruitful, the final scene in the book, in which Max's theoretical approach to Marxism can't truly comprehend the physical reality of Bigger's life, *Native Son* shows these two figures alienated from each other in much the same way as *Ulysses* does shows the alienation between Stephen and Leopold.

<sup>8</sup> Probably the earliest significant piece of criticism to discuss the mass media in *Native Son* is "Celebrity as Identity: *Native Son* and Mass Culture" by Ross Pudaloff, which is largely representative of the type of criticism to which Perez is referring.

<sup>9</sup> While most criticism has worked from the assumption that American presentations of Africa on film are racist, Kenneth M. Cameron's *Africa On Film: Beyond Black and White* explores the nuances of this issue in great detail. Cameron's analysis views *Trader Horn* as largely racist.

<sup>10</sup> For thorough discussions of Wright's relationship to Poe and gothic literature see Joseph Bodzioc's "Richard Wright and Afro-American Gothic" in *Richard Wright: Myths and Realities*, edited by C. James Trotman, and the chapter "Black Cat and White Cat: Wright's Gothic and the Influence of Poe" by Michael Fabre in his *The World of Richard Wright*.

<sup>11</sup> There is a significant body of work discussing the relationships between race and gothic literature. See, for example, *The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination*, edited by Ruth Bienstock Anolik and Douglas L. Howard.

<sup>12</sup> Many critics have pointed out how such gothic elements in the novel show influences from the aforementioned Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. It is far more likely, however, as James Smethurst argues, that "most Americans were familiar with gothic conventions and sensibilities through mass culture at the time Wright wrote *Native Son*" (32). I think Smethurst might be stretching his point a little when he says that "while *Native Son* is most often connected with melodrama, the first two sections of the book resemble a typical horror movie of the 1930s" (32), but I do generally agree that those two sections are deeply indebted to the tropes of mass culture in addition to the more canonical versions of the gothic, such as Poe and Hawthorne.

<sup>13</sup> Erin A. Smith's *Hard Boiled: Working Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* also has some useful insights into how working-class readers read pulp magazine stories, though she doesn't discuss the issue in terms of race.

<sup>14</sup> This has been well established in Wright criticism. For a succinct summary, see *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* by Hazel Rowley.

<sup>15</sup> The Loeb and Leopold case was also reportedly the inspiration for the 1929 play *Rope* and its more famous film version, the 1948 Alfred Hitchcock film of the same name.

<sup>16</sup> In "The Loeb and Leopold Case: A Neglected Source for Richard Wright's *Native Son*," Robert Butler argues that, "By thus connecting Bigger with two other men from vastly different social and economic circumstances, Wright makes an important point about capitalism in

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America, namely that it corrupted all levels of society, regardless of race and class” (561). Butler’s essay contains a very thorough examination of the many parallels between the Loeb and Leopold case and Bigger’s situation, which also includes Loeb’s “nearly compulsive reading of crime magazine city gangsters and dime western desperadoes” (560).

<sup>17</sup> The most astute examination of the American news media I’ve come across, one that jibes with my brief tenure as a professional journalist, is *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky. In their analysis, though the American media are free from the type of formal censorship found in, say, Soviet Russia, the corporate media still operate with layers of subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) influences that help shape what we read and watch. As they say, “The elite domination of the media and marginalization of dissidents that results from the operation of these filters occurs so naturally that media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news ‘objectively’ and on the basis of professional news values” (2). While I would not vouch for the integrity of the reporters in this scene, it’s clear that no one is telling them to play up racist angles. They are doing it because it’s part of the system they operate within.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of how popular culture has either portrayed reporters as either noble truth-tellers or “reveled in the press’s seediness, its infatuation with juicy scoops, and its wanderings on the dark side” (6), see *Journalism in the Movies* by Matthew C. Ehrlich.

<sup>19</sup> Examples Vials gives include Theodore Dreiser’s debt to sentimental fiction in *Sister Carrie* and Stephen Crane’s unconscious use of minstrel and freak show imagery in “The Monster.”

## Chapter Four:

### The Oracle at Delphi: Delmore Schwartz and the Artist's Approach to the Culture Industry

Though Delmore Schwartz has his place in the canon of American poets, he is someone—unlike the other three authors I'm discussing—about whom relatively little has been written, especially regarding his short fiction.<sup>1</sup> What has received virtually no sustained attention is how Schwartz deals with elements of the mass media in his short stories, three of which—"Screeno,"<sup>2</sup> "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" (1937) and "The Track Meet" (1957)—I will deal with here. "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" is Schwartz's most famous story—Vladimir Nabokov said it was one of the greatest of American short stories—and most of his fiction deals with how the individual, usually presented as an artist figure, can navigate in a mass-mediated society. For Schwartz mass culture is literally the culture of the masses. We frequently see it, especially in these three stories, as something that can draw together large groups of people who are looking for idle entertainment. A woman in the theater tells the narrator of "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" that the film of his parents' courtship that everyone is watching is "only a movie," even though the narrator is so horrified by what he sees that he jumps up to yell at the screen several times during the showing. In Schwartz's oeuvre, in these three stories especially, we see lone artist figures who feel a deep sense of alienation and isolation from the rest of the masses, who can accept what mass culture is selling without question. While Schwartz's work certainly display a sense of the Adornian dichotomy between art and mass culture, the stories themselves show a keen attention to the nuances of mass culture, and the artist figures are always themselves fans of mass culture. Conversely, these stories suggest that the Eliotic idea of pure art is woefully inadequate to deal with the complexities of a mass-mediated society. In "Screeno," Cornelius, the main character, compares movies to the Oracle at Delphi, which, in Greek myth, gives prophecies that are

enigmatic enough to allow the listener to interpret them to his or her own desires. All three of these stories present the masses as passive consumers who applaud at the right time and generally give the prescribed response to mass culture. As with the Oracle at Delphi, they get what they're looking for. The point of view of the artist figures, however, allow the reader to see much more complexity and nuance in what mass culture is presenting. The movies and advertisements that are products of the culture industry are the same for all viewers, but a more artistically inclined mind can see how mass culture can give viewers a deeper understanding about situations ranging from intimate family dramas to large-scale social disasters. This is not to say that these stories unquestioningly valorize the artist. These artist figures are frequently pathetic and ill-equipped to deal with the real world. Schwartz's auto-critique of the artist, however, does not negate how the artistically inclined mind can find much of value in the culture industry, so long as he knows how to analyze what the culture industry is presenting.

In his lifetime, Schwartz was frequently seen as the artist he *could* have been instead of the artist he became. *Genesis* (1943), Schwartz's epic-length autobiographical poem, was never finished, and only the first portion, which covered the first seven years of his life, was published. As he got older, he bounced around different university teaching positions as he descended further into alcoholism and mental illness. His most famous student was rock musician Lou Reed, whom Schwartz taught while he was a professor at Syracuse University. *Humboldt's Gift*, the 1975 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Schwartz's friend Saul Bellow, is a roman a clef about Schwartz whose main character, the Schwartz stand-in Von Humboldt Fleisher, is a writer who tries to change the world through art and dies a failure.<sup>3</sup> By the end of his life, Schwartz was espousing bizarre conspiracy theories about an alleged CIA plot on his life; he died virtually penniless in a New York hotel. Though his poems are still regularly anthologized, the tragic nature of his slow decline coupled with both the relatively low quantity of his output and his perceived inability to match the heights of his first published piece of

work, the prose and poetry collection also called *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities* (1938) has helped keep Schwartz at the margins of the canon. This is especially true with his short fiction, which, unlike his poetry, has almost completely vanished from literary discussion.<sup>4</sup>

When *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities* was published in 1938, Agrarian critics such as Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom—who also contributed to *I'll Take My Stand*—lavished praise upon it. This was in part, according to Bruce Bawer, because Schwartz's poetry was in the same vein as T.S. Eliot's and was perfect for what Cleanth Brooks would soon dub the New Criticism. According to Bawer:

The New Critics were waiting for a member of Schwartz's generation to produce a good volume of Eliotic poetry. For if the literary community could be convinced that the generation's first innovation in poetry had been brought about by a disciple of Eliot, and that the poems constituting that innovation could only be appreciated by applying the New Criticism to them, it would be a great leap forward for Tate and Ransom's cause. Conversely, for Tate and Ransom to give Schwartz's first book bad reviews would have done them no good. If they panned *In Dreams*, they would be fueling the fires for those critics who disparaged *In Dreams* for exactly those qualities that its admirers commended—its allusiveness, ambiguity, indirection, intelligence, impersonality, and audacious taking on of imposing themes. (69)

It is, however, debatable whether Schwartz's poetry is as impersonal and Eliotic as Bawer says. Writing more recently, Adam Kirsch says that Schwartz's "candor violated the principle, laid down by T.S. Eliot in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' that poetry is 'not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality'; that 'it is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting' " (203).<sup>5</sup> That Schwartz's poetry could bring about such diametrically opposed views is a testament to the complexity of both the writing and the author—a man who both loved Eliot as the premiere poet and critic of his generation and hated him for his anti-Semitism. Among the many contradictions of Delmore Schwartz is his desire to become the type of modernist artist espoused by Eliot (and, in many ways, Adorno), an artist who strived

for the autonomy of his art, while at the same time having his art reflect his own personal neuroses.

This tension is more pronounced when you read Schwartz's fiction alongside his poetry. Cynthia Ozick associates the more formally complex, Eliotic aspect of Schwartz's poetry with his inscrutable first name and the more straight-ahead aspects of his prose with his more conventional last name: "Put it that the poetry is Delmore; its themes are chiefly (and in his own fearsome words) awe and abyss. But the prose? The prose is Schwartz. The language of the stories is plain, simple, never convoluted or mandarin; practical and ordinary" (98). This "ordinary" writing is frequently placed in—and associated with—a world saturated with the mass media: movies, magazines, records, radio. Much more than his poetry, Schwartz's prose is concerned with the concrete realities of day-to-day life. However, while this dichotomy is certainly present between his prose and poetry, I don't want to take it too far. In "Screeno," for example, Schwartz quotes extensively from poetry both modern and classical. While his short stories might remain approachable on a sentence-by-sentence level, Schwartz is not writing for the type of mass audience Richard Wright is when he approximates different elements of mass culture for *Native Son*. The part of Schwartz who writes his formally complex poems is frequently a character in these stories, and the enigmatic nature of the stories is at odds with much of the nature of the culture industry. While the "ordinary" nature of the language of his stories is of a piece with the mass culture he describes, the complexity of the stories themselves forces the reader to approach them in the more nuanced way that the artist figures in those stories approach the products of the culture industry.

While Schwartz's verse is at least ambiguous enough that we can debate its relationship to his personal life, his prose is far more obviously autobiographical. As James Atlas, Schwartz's biographer, explains, virtually all of Schwartz's prose writings were autobiographical, even to the point where the margins of his drafts would have the initials of

the real-life corollaries written next to names of the characters. Because of the frequently autobiographical nature of his published short fiction, Schwartz's stories tend to focus on a frustrated male hero, who is either explicitly or implicitly a struggling artist as he tries to make his mark as an individual in a world that is often cruelly antagonistic to such attempts.

Schwartz's passionate love for James Joyce—he named his cat Riverrun, after the first line from *Finnegans Wake*, and, during his more wayward years, he would eat up time by reading passages from that novel out loud to his college classes—suggests that he saw his characters—if not also himself—as deeply indebted to Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, another struggling artist who wants to move beyond the confines of family and society. Of course, the nominal father figure to Stephen in *Ulysses* is Leopold Bloom, who works for an ad agency, and Schwartz is working along similar lines, showing how the high/low divide is beginning to break down on a fundamental level as mass culture becomes more prevalent.

In "Screeno," Schwartz lays out much of how he sees the frustration of the aspiring artist in the world of mass culture. Cornelius Schmidt, the protagonist, begins the story by trying in vain to lift himself out of the doldrums. He reads the newspaper. He listens to records, both a string quartet by Haydn and then, when that doesn't please him, recordings of a movie actress singing. Then, he lifts a book of poetry off the shelf and tries to read it. But "A poem of his own slipped from the book. He read the first few verses and shuddered, thoroughly disheartened. Drenched by such a tasteless, colorless mood, there was only one refuge: the movies" (187). His inability to be satisfied either by the high art of the Haydn piece or the mass culture of a movie soundtrack reflects a sense of ambivalence about the split between high and low, and his feeling of being disheartened by reading his own verse suggests that he is as much a failed artist as he is an actual artist. But the prospect of seeing a movie makes him happy, and as he walks to the theater, "anticipation of the movie to be seen already began to rise in his breast" (187). When he arrives at the theater, the marquee says that the movies playing are *One*

*Heavenly Night* (1931) with John Boles and Evelyn Laye and *Freedom* with Spencer Tracy.<sup>6</sup>

According to the marquee, there will also be a game of screeno, which is essentially the same as bingo, between the two features. The inclusion of screeno “annoyed him, for it meant an interruption in the flow of movies while the stage was lit and everyone looked about dazedly. At such times, Cornelius slouched far down in his seat, ashamed for some reason to be at the theatre alone, as if it were a confession of a lack of friends and engaging activities” (188). He then decides, in part because he is a fan of Tracy’s, that he will go, but his initial excitement is deflated by his feeling that going to a movie—where he is, of course, surrounded by people—is an admission of his isolation and loneliness. As with the other two of Schwartz’s stories I’ll be discussing—and, indeed, with a great deal of his short fiction—“Screeno” stresses the isolation and loneliness of its protagonist.<sup>7</sup> To be an artist in Schwartz’s world is to face a life of isolation, in part because Schwartz presents the artist as approaching the world in a fundamentally different way from the ways that the masses approach the world. The masses idly accept what is presented to them, while the artist always sees things more complexly.

In the theater, during the opening newsreels before the screeno drawing brings him up on the stage, Cornelius reflects on the voice of the newsreel’s narrator: “The unseen voice, the commentator who always made Cornelius remember the Oracle at Delphi, was saying: ‘Uncle Sam does not intend to be unprepared’ ” (189). The scenes that the narrator is describing are cavalrymen doing drills on horseback. The narrator, however, is assuring the audience that America will be prepared in case of required military action. The story then begins to explore montage by positioning the footage of the triumphant cavalrymen alongside of an image of utter despair: “The scene shifted suddenly, to the accompaniment of sad and heavy music. Flood pictures were shown; a family departed from its almost submerged frame house in a rowboat, the young son of the family dog clutching his dog in his arms” (189). This scene has the appropriate musical cues—sad and heavy music—to let the audience know that they should

be sufficiently moved by such suffering. However, “The bleak and baffled look of the dog charmed the audience,” suggesting that the audience finds lighthearted distractions in a movie theater even when confronted with intense human suffering. The film then goes on: “And then with a montage of archetypal newsreel scenes (West Point; a batter swinging; Roosevelt at the microphone; an actress descending from a train) and a martial music which came to a ringing close, the newsreel was ended” (189). That these images can be called “archetypal” shows how much the language of cinema has already ingratiated itself with the audience—and the narrator.<sup>8</sup> The newsreel begins with footage of cavalymen going through their drills as a sign of America’s preparedness, and it ends with “martial” music, giving it bookends with clearly militaristic overtones. In between we get another militaristic image, footage from West Point, along with images that can clearly be seen as distractions from the crushing poverty of the Depression—someone playing baseball, and a Hollywood actress doing something thoroughly banal. Additionally, there is the footage of President Roosevelt saying something—though the story’s lack of any concrete details, and its referring to such an image as “archetypal,” suggests that the president is giving one of his many speeches about how America will survive the Depression, a speech that has been repeated so many times that the audience already knows everything he’s going to say.

All of these images—the ready military, the president’s speech, the mass entertainment of the actress and the baseball player—collectively create a feeling of American prosperity and success. Cornelius’s comparison of the newsreel with the Oracle at Delphi is quite apt. Since the enigmatic prophecies of the Oracle allow the listeners to hear what they want, these viewers who simply want to be entertained can see the triumphant nature of American life while ignoring the more unpleasant aspects of the newsreel. The one image that comes closer to representing the lives of the average poor person hoping to win a few hundred dollars in the movie theater—that of the family’s lives being destroyed in the flood—is subsumed within the

larger framework of the montage.<sup>9</sup> Instead of feeling empathy for those suffering, the audience takes delight in the footage of the dog's face. Even though the music of the film is heavy enough to let the audience know they should feel sad, they don't, since the montage places the suffering of the flood within a larger context of American exceptionalism and military might—a context in which the suffering of the flood victims doesn't register as tragedy. The Great Depression hangs over many of Schwartz's short stories—often explicitly, and even more often implicitly. That there are hundreds of people in the theater hoping to win a few hundred dollars is a reflection of the awful financial conditions that so many are facing. Yet when suffering beyond theirs is put on the screen, the audience finds it amusing, in part because the film had conditioned them to do so. Cornelius, as the beginning of the story lets the reader know, is not a terribly successful artist, but his artistic inclinations—and the fact that the story, though not in first person, is told from his point of view—allow the reader to read the Oracle differently. We can see that there is truth about daily life in America found in the newsreel. The viewer just needs to be able to read it more critically so he can see how the newsreel is in fact carefully constructed to bury that truth amid pro-American propaganda.

And then Cornelius ends up winning the game of screeno. Initially ecstatic—as an unemployed writer who lives with his mother, he can especially use the \$475 jackpot—he is soon embarrassed when the master of ceremonies, whom the story refers to as the “young man” brings him up on stage and begins to attempt small talk, including asking Cornelius what he does for a living. After Cornelius says that he's a poet, he thinks that “this would be equivalent to sissy or bohemian for some of the audience.” Things are made worse when the master of ceremonies, hoping to be clever, says, “Mr. Schmidt is a poet,” and then recites this verse: “He's a poet, / His feet show it, / They're Longfellows!” (193). The crowd then pressures Cornelius to recite a poem of his but instead he recites a portion of “Gerontion” by T.S. Eliot. The narration lets us know that Cornelius “ended appalled at himself, as if he had made a

shocking confession. But he saw that his effort was a failure for his tone had been false, too serious. The audience had been silenced and puzzled by the verses, but the young man, curiously enough, had been impressed” (194). After the young man asks Cornelius if he wrote the verse, Cornelius says no and that “Those verses were written by the best of modern poets. ... a man named T.S. Eliot, whom all of you ought to read.” But, then, “Even in saying this, Cornelius knew that this advertisement was a foolish thing” (194).

Cornelius only recites a portion of “Gerontion,” and it’s significant that he doesn’t mention what is probably the most famous (and controversial) part of the poem: “And the jew (sic) squats on the window sill, the owner, / Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp, / Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London” (lines 8-10). Anthony Julius, in his *T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form*, discusses the significance of this line in relation to Eliot’s bigotry: “Gerontion’s ‘jew’ is ugly in full measure. Spawned, blistered, patched and peeled, he emerges as if from the swamp, diseased and disfigured. Jews are swamp-life, breeding in uncontrollable numbers, the alarm of generations of anti-Semites” (45). Julius goes on to say, “The ‘jew’ is an intruder. He hovers outside the house, making unwelcome proprietary claims over it. Such a Jew was a familiar type in anti-Semitism’s gallery” (47). While Cornelius’s ethnicity is never mentioned, the autobiographical nature of all of Schwartz’s stories suggests that Schwartz chose this poem in which a Jewish character is isolated from the rest of the world in part to parallel Cornelius’s feelings of isolation. Atlas’s biography of Schwartz gives clear evidence that Schwartz was deeply troubled by Eliot’s anti-Semitism,<sup>10</sup> but Schwartz continued to view Eliot as the premiere American poet and critic. In his essay “T.S. Eliot as the International Hero,” one of several highly complimentary essays about Eliot that he wrote, Schwartz writes that Eliot is a “culture hero” because he brought “new arts and skills to mankind” (120). In the same essay, Schwartz discusses the hero of “Gerontion” in the following terms: “He lives in a rented house, he is unable to make love, and he knows that

history has many cunning, deceptive and empty corridors. The nature of the house, of love and of history are interdependent aspects of modern life” (126). Schwartz clearly sees “Gerontion” as a poem about the type of modern alienation that Cornelius is feeling in the movie theater. Yet this same poem posits its Jewish character as a disgusting, sub-human outsider. Schwartz had trouble reconciling the intellectual and aesthetic value in Eliot’s work with his deeply unpleasant racism, and that ambivalence carries over into the scene of Cornelius’s poetry reading. Cornelius is reading a poem that both gives voice to his deep alienation and, through its racism, helps to ensure that his alienation will continue.

However, this dilemma only matters to the reader, since the audience doesn’t seem to understand what Cornelius has recited, and, since he left out the explicitly anti-Semitic portion, the audience wouldn’t even know that that part existed. The audience members want the simpler entertainment they can find in the newsreel, and “Gerontion” certainly isn’t providing that. However, Cornelius’s presence in the story urges the reader to approach everything, not just the newsreel, in a more artistically inclined way. Art is not a panacea. It’s debatable how much good it does Cornelius, whose isolation is never overcome. The portion of the story that discusses the newsreel shows the reader the value in the ways that the artist figure can approach the mass media in a way that reveals more truth and nuance, but there is a strong sense of ambivalence that emerges in the portion in which Cornelius is up on stage. Since the people in the audience are looking for simple pleasures in the movie, that’s what they find. But they don’t know what to do with Eliot. The story is positioning its readership as the type of people who are somehow more able to parse out the complexities of what Cornelius is doing than the audience members are. It isn’t so much that the audience members are simply dumb—though there is an element of condescension in the story—but that the audience members are only watching what happens on the stage, while the reader is reading “Screeno,” which couches the situation in more complex, artistic terms. The artist figure is able to show the reader—through

“Screeno”—both ways in which the artist can help deepen our understanding of what mass culture is and how it works but also how the artist remains fundamentally at odds with mass culture, and himself. The demands of the mass audience show the limits of what Eliot’s art can do. The two spheres of high and low overlap, and they can illuminate each other, but they are also still deeply at odds.

The story never gets to the film proper because another man in the audience claims to have won screeno also. After much confusion—in which the master of ceremonies accuses the man first of misreading the card, then of being a communist, all so that he doesn’t have to deal with paying another jackpot—Cornelius thinks to himself, “Easy come, easy go” (200), and gives his winnings to the man. Then: “The audience saw what was happening and applauded vigorously, not because it was genuinely moved, but because it felt that it ought to applaud. Such applause is heard at public gatherings when an abstraction too vacuous is mentioned or tribute is paid to a man long dead” (200). Just as the crowd had the prescribed responses to the newsreels, it applauds Cornelius’s seeming altruism because it’s the thing to do, not because that altruism resonates with the crowd members in any genuine way. Cornelius’s reading of Eliot didn’t give the crowd members what they wanted, but his gift to the man did; it’s what they had been expecting all along. Throughout “Screeno” the crowd members respond to whatever is on stage in an expected way when they are given what they expect—the newsreels or the trite sacrifice of Cornelius. But when confronted by something more complex—Eliot’s poetry, for example—the crowd members don’t know how to respond, since they haven’t been conditioned to deal with something of such nuance, especially when it isn’t presented in a lively, engaging way.

Of course, Eliot’s poetry cannot exist in a vacuum, and Cornelius significantly blames his poor reading of the poem on the audience’s indifference. In a culture in which the masses have been conditioned to expect entertainment to work in a specific way, can Eliot matter at all,

much less when he's presented on a stage in a movie theater? "Screeno" seems to be ambivalent about this question, and Cornelius leaves the theater after giving away the money. Feeling pleased with himself, Cornelius recites a poem by fourteenth-century Scottish poet William Dunbar that begins as follows: "Be merry, man! and tak not sair in mind / The wavering of this wretched world of sorrow! / To God be humble and to they neighbors be kind, / And with thy neighbors gladly lend and borrow" (201). These sentiments of kindness are, of course, not unique to Dunbar, but Cornelius is clearly making a link between his moment of giving and Dunbar's verse. Dunbar was writing long before the advent of industrial capitalism, and unlike Cornelius (and Eliot) he was in no way affected by the demands of the culture industry. It didn't exist when Dunbar was writing. Of course, Cornelius recites the poem to himself alone after he has left the theater. Everyone else is watching the movies together, and Cornelius is alone with Dunbar and his own sense of pride. It's certainly arguable that Dunbar's verse, whatever aesthetic merits it might have, is in its own way as trite as the type of image the audience would have applauded, and Dunbar's poem is linked with Cornelius's isolation. It comforts him, even though he ends the story alone. While the isolation of Cornelius isn't as violent or profound as that of the characters at the end of the novels by Faulkner and Wright I've been discussing, it's hard to read this ending as in any way triumphant, regardless of Cornelius's attempts to link it with a classical poet. The story presents a thoroughly ambivalent take on Cornelius's view of art, but what it stresses is that his artistic mind, whatever its shortcomings, allows the reader to perceive the Delphic Oracle of the movie in a way that the crowd doesn't. Because of Cornelius's presence, we can see more nuances in the movie and find the truth of human suffering buried amid the propaganda.

"In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," aside from being Schwartz's most famous story, is also the one that deals the most complexly with the relationships we have with the movies that Schwartz loved so much. The story, told in first person, is about a young man who watches a

silent film about his parents' courtship and begins to yell at the screen several times, saying alternately that his parents' union shouldn't happen and that it should happen. He is admonished and evicted by the usher and wakes up to confirm what the title had suggested, that it is all a dream. Within the story, the movie that the narrator is watching is, at least to the rest of the people in the crowd, just a movie, a romance made for idle entertainment. The story stresses that the masses in the audience are getting what they expect, which lends the story a type of Adornian critique of this facet of the culture industry. However, as with "Screeno," the artistic approach to the movie that the narrator brings allows the readers to see more complexity and nuance in the movie. The culture industry isn't simply selling a collection of simplistic, regressive lies—though it's possible that that's all the rest of the audience is getting from it. There is also a kind of valuable truth contained in the movie—the type of truth that allows the reader to see how an artistically inclined imagination can help us find in products of the culture industry deeper insights into the complexities of human relationships. Schwartz understands that the artist must find a place in the world of mass culture, and what we as readers learn is *how* the artist's approach to mass culture can help readers find more complexity and value in it.

Unlike some of the other authors I've discussed—such as Richard Wright with *Trader Horn* or Eudora Welty with *The Sheik* (1921)—Schwartz isn't presenting us with a real movie, one that we can seek out and watch independently of the book, searching for elements that might provide further insight into the author's reasons for choosing such a film. The unnamed film of Schwartz's story exists only in the words on the page. The scenes he doesn't mention don't exist. Additionally, an author who chooses to incorporate a real film into her text is certainly able to choose which film to present, but her story will likely be deepened or complicated by elements of the film that the author might or might not have realized. Regardless of the author's intention, the film she chooses isn't hers. It already exists outside of the story, and the creative decisions of filmmaking have already been made. I bring this up

because I think it's important to realize that Delmore Schwartz is not only the author of "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," he is also the author of the movie in the story. Everything that happens in the movie is part of the story and ultimately exists for the sake of the story. While Wright might be critiquing the racism of a movie like *Trader Horn* specifically in a way to shed light on the larger racist issues at work in many American films, Schwartz is creating a sort of "perfect" movie, one that allows him to explore his Freudian concerns in the most specific way possible. As Freud writes in "Writers and Day-Dreaming," "The creative writer does the same thing as a child at play. He creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously—that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion—while separating it sharply from reality" (144). The story presents something that is both a dream and a movie, and the narrator certainly takes it very seriously. The type of artistic interpretations that the narrator gives to the movie gives us a deeper insight than the anonymous crowd members have, but it's up to the reader to see how the movie is just a movie, in that it is not something that determines the nature of the narrator's existence.

According to Atlas's biography of Schwartz, Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx were Schwartz's two primary intellectual heroes, and "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" makes Schwartz's Freudian concerns explicit. There is, of course, a long tradition of psychoanalytic approaches to film, in a Freudian sense and more recently complicated by Lacanian, Jungian, and feminist readings. Writing in 1923, Melanie Klein said:

In a number of cases it became clear that theatres and concerts, in fact any performance where there is something to be seen or heard, always stand for parental coitus—listening and watching standing in for observation in fact or phantasy—while the falling curtain stands for objects which hinder observations, such as bedclothes, the side of a bed, etc. (112-13)

Writing in 1985, Daniel Dervin expands on this, discussing how he sees cinema as related to Freud's "primal scene," which is "the child's witnessing or his fantasies of parental intercourse" (10). The connection between the primal scene and film essentially boils down to

voyeurism, and Dervin says that “if movies do not always include voyeurism per se, their effect is to turn audiences into voyeurs; and most of us at some deep perceptual level associate sex with violence, repugnance with beauty, and birth as the answer to the riddle of sexuality” (17).<sup>11</sup> Additionally, Paul Lippmann sees a clear parallel between Freud’s development of psychoanalysis and the Lumiere brothers’ creation of the movie camera: Shown in a darkened room in order to parallel sleep and charging admission, the Lumieres were expanding the private dream into a shared and social experience” (231).<sup>12</sup> These Freudian elements give the reader insight into the artistic mind that interprets the movie in “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities.” Though the narrator doesn’t literally watch his parents have sex, sex figures prominently, since it is the eventual consummation of their courtship that will lead to the creation of the narrator and his brother, two people whose characters the narrator describes as “monstrous.” Yet he also watches the movie in a packed theater, full of people who, having no personal investment in the story, see it as “only a movie,” a romance there for their entertainment. Here, the comparison to the Oracle at Delphi from “Screeno” is again appropriate. The mass audience that wants to see something that is only a movie gets exactly that. The narrator, however, is looking for something more complex, a way to understand the unhappiness of his life—and the misery that he sees as having led to it.

The story begins as if the author is trying to remember a dream. “I think it is the year 1909,” he says, hinting that we can’t know exactly what year it is. The second sentence makes things harder to pin down: “I feel as if I were in a motion picture theatre, the long arm of light crossing the darkness and spinning, my eyes fixed on the screen” (1). While the narrator establishes that he is watching actors in a movie, he refers to the people on screen only as his father and mother (as opposed to “the actors playing my father and mother”). And while he initially “thinks” that it is 1909, by the second paragraph, he states that it is “Sunday afternoon, June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1909” that he is watching on the screen. The theater is itself presented as a place in

which consciousness is altered. He says, “I feel as if I had by now relaxed entirely in the soft darkness of the theatre; the organist peals out the obvious and approximate emotions on which the audience rocks unknowingly” (1). Unlike Virgie Rainey from *The Golden Apples*, whose piano playing gives her some limited control over how the movie is perceived, this organist is playing only the “obvious” emotions, but those emotions are still only “approximate.” What’s more, the audience is unknowingly held under the sway of the organist. They are rocking back and forth, accepting the emotions given to them, without realizing it. As I mentioned, they are looking for something that is only a movie, and that’s what they’re getting. The narrator goes on to say, “I am anonymous, and I have forgotten myself. It is always so when one goes to the movies, it is, as they say, a drug” (1). The narrator has forgotten himself in the movie, both in the sense that he wants to get wrapped up in the story playing on screen, but also in how he wants to become a faceless member of the audience, someone whose identity is subsumed by the anonymous crowd.

The narrator is watching a movie in 1909, and when the narrator compares what he is watching to the Biograph films directed by D.W. Griffith in the early years of the century, he is giving us a historical marker to show that the movie is in fact rooted in reality. According to Miriam Hansen:

[D.W.] Griffith’s work for the Biograph Company (1908-1913) has been seen as an attempt to translate the heritage of the bourgeois novel into cinematic forms—in its development of complex forms of narration, especially parallel editing, and in its transformation of the “histrionic” acting style descended from stage melodrama toward a more psychological delineation of character, using closer camera ranges for connotations of intimacy, interiority, and individuality. (64)

Additionally, Hansen writes that some of the Biograph films are specifically concerned with ideas of Jewish assimilation: “Because Jews were involved in film production early on, they had a certain input in the shaping of their public image from which other minorities, especially blacks, were barred” (71).<sup>13</sup> While the Jewish Schwartz could have been thinking about the

Biograph films' occasional attention to Jewish characters, the story is certainly attempting to merge the novelistic and cinematic in ways similar to the ways Hansen describes. Literally, Schwartz isn't writing a movie; he's writing a short story. As I outlined in my introduction, film and literature are two deeply imbricated spheres, and Schwartz is using novelistic techniques that were near-impossible for silent film—such as descriptions of a character's internal thoughts—to show that the artistic tendencies of a novelist (or, in this case, a short story writer and poet) are, in this instance, necessary for helping to add aesthetic complexity to film.

Part of my point is that the story, published in 1938, uses a very specific type of movie from a specific point in time when, conceivably, it could have used any type of movie up through 1938, including, obviously, color pictures with synchronized sound. The movie he watches, in addition to being black and white, is dark, as if it were filmed during rain and with poor lighting. The people walk too fast, both a reflection of the frame rate of silent films and the unreality of a dream. Yet there are ways in which the film doesn't reflect a silent movie. The narrator tells us, "My father has chosen to take this long walk because he likes to walk and think. He thinks about himself in the future and so arrives at the place he is to visit in a state of mild exaltation" (2). The narrator leaves it vague as to how the viewer would know such things about his father. There is no sound, so his father cannot say something to the effect of "I enjoy long walks and am thinking about my future." The film could say as much through title cards, or strongly suggest it through a series of montages. But the narration, which has clearly shown us, through its opening, that it is familiar with the conventions and rhythms of silent film, doesn't tell us any of this. The more likely scenario is that the narrator is projecting these thoughts onto the actor playing his father. To again bring up the Oracle at Delphi comparison, the narrator is watching a silent film of the courtship between two young people—people we only know as his father and mother because he says so—and finding in it a harrowing

presentation of his parents' courtship. It is his artistic tendencies, the tendency to force novelistic elements onto a silent film, that give the reader the type of insight into the story that might give us an understanding of the human relationships on screen.

Several times, the story allows for a level of self-reflexivity, which leads the reader to question how the narrator is watching the movie. While his parents are on their date, the narrator says, "My mother is holding my father's arm and telling him of the novel which she has been reading; and my father utters judgments of the characters as the plot is made clear to him" (3). His father, of course, hasn't read the book. His judgments are based on incomplete knowledge of what happens in the novel. However, the narrator tells us, "This is a habit which he very much enjoys, for he feels the utmost superiority and confidence when he approves and condemns the behavior of other people" (3). We read this as a condemnation of his father's shortsightedness. To his father, the story matters only in how it allows him to show his purported moral superiority. His mother, on the other hand, "feels satisfied by the interest which she has awakened; she is showing my father how intelligent she is, and how interesting" (3). Here, the novel functions as something through which the narrators' parents can air their neuroses and insecurities. His father wants to feel morally superior, so he talks condescendingly about characters in a book he hasn't read. Instead of challenging the father, his mother sees her reading of the book merely as a way to show him how intelligent she is. The mere act of having read a novel that the father can talk about satisfies her. The father's secondhand judgment of the novel parallels the narrator's secondhand judgment of his parents' courtship. After the first paragraph, the narrator no longer refers to the people on screen as actors, though he has established that they are. They are his "father" and his "mother," and we as readers are lulled into accepting this as the truth. And, the narrator blurs the line between film and reality by providing psychological insights into his "parents" that silent film is ill-equipped to display. Additionally, the narrator, of course, wasn't really present for his parents'

courtship. So, the narrator is in effect in a similar position to his father. His father is passing judgment on a story that he only knows secondhand, and the narrator is doing the same. The feeling of “utmost superiority and confidence” that the narrator disapproves of in his father is reflected in himself, though he is unable to recognize it. As in “Screeno,” the protagonist is someone who we can’t see as unambiguously noble. Like Cornelius, the narrator thinks that his smug distance can keep him insulated from what he’s watching. But this distance ends up reinforcing his sense of isolation.

As with many discussion of mass culture, “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities” is concerned with the role of art, and we come away with a highly ambivalent feeling of the artist’s place in the story, and in the movie. Again, while out on a date, the narrator’s parents go to have their picture taken, and the photographer struggles to get the picture right. The narrator’s father is frustrated by the constant reshoots, but the “photographer explains that he has pride, he is not interested in all of this for the money, he wants to make beautiful pictures” (7). The narrator goes on to say that the “photographer charms me. I approve of him with all my heart, for I know just how he feels, and as he criticizes each revised pose according to some unknown idea of rightness, I become quite hopeful” (7). But what, exactly, is the narrator hopeful for? By the time the photographer shoots the picture, the narrator’s father’s “smile turned to a grimace and my mother’s bright and false” (7). And, while the picture develops, his parents “sit in the curious light [and] they become quite depressed” (8). The narrator identifies with the photographer and his desire to make an aesthetically pleasing picture, but this desire is directly at odds with what his parents want. His father just wants a photograph of the two of them together. The more the photographer tries to capture this elusive perfect artistic picture, the more frustrated the narrator’s father becomes. Not only is art useless in this context—no picture, no matter how beautiful, could overcome the fissures in his parents’ relationship—its pursuit is actively destructive. Though we never learn the narrator’s actual vocation, we know

that he identifies with the photographer's pursuit of art, and the story forces us to question what good art can do in alleviating the problems of the real world. Part of the narrator's problem, therefore, is in how he puts faith in "some unknown idea of rightness." Just as the complex poetry of Eliot did nothing for the crowd in "Screeno," the photographer's pursuit of the perfect picture does nothing to address the misery of the couple's relationship. However, though the photographer's art-for-art's-sake approach to art doesn't begin to address the problems in the couple's relationship, it is only through the perspective that the narrator has—a perspective fully informed by a complex, artistic worldview—that the reader can gain any type of insight into the relationship. The rest of the audience is only watching a movie.

Several times the story makes the movie-dream parallel explicit, such as when the film breaks down at a certain point. During a scene in the film when the narrator's father is meeting the narrator's mother's family, the film stops: "At this point something happens to the film, just as my father is saying something funny to my mother; I am awakened to myself and my unhappiness just as my interest was rising" (3).<sup>14</sup> Here, the narrator's unhappiness is tied directly to his awareness of himself, and the breaking down of the film awakens him from the dream- and drug-like stupor into which the movie has lulled him. However, even though the narrator wakes up to his unhappiness, the more he gets lost in the film, the more he becomes engaged in a story that is directly a product of his personal neuroses. But by framing this situation within the context of a movie, Schwartz is calling attention to how such a scenario as the parents' courtship, or at least the narrator's conception of his parents' courtship, is in fact a construction that he is imagining to help explain his own sense of loneliness and misery. His parents' courtship might well have happened quite differently from how the movie presents things. And by presenting the courtship to us as a film, the story sheds light on its status as the product of the narrator's imagination. We know that we are not seeing the "real" story of the

courtship so much as a version of the courtship that allows the narrator to dwell on his own insecurities.

During the movie the narrator breaks down crying several times and is comforted by an old woman next to him who, thinking he is only touched by the tenderness of the scene, tells him, “There, there, all of this is only a movie, young man, only a movie” (5). Again, the woman echoes the type of person who approaches the movie in “Screeno” as the Delphic Oracle. To her, the film is just an escapist love story. At the point in the film when his father offers a half-hearted proposal to his mother and his mother replies, “It’s all I’ve wanted from the moment I saw you,” the narrator gets up in the theater and screams, “Don’t do it. It’s not too late to change your minds, both of you. Nothing good will come of it, only remorse, hatred, scandal, and two children whose characters are monstrous” (6). Of course, the narrator is yelling at a movie, which has already been filmed. Trying to change a movie is just as fruitless as trying to change the past. Christian Metz, in his *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, addresses this very issue:

Rather, we have here one of those intrinsically ambivalent behaviors in which a single action, with double roots, expresses simultaneously virtually opposite tendencies. The subject actively invading the diegesis through a motor outburst was initially aroused by a first step, however modest—however prescribed, if necessary, by the indigenous rituals of the film audience—a first step towards confusing film and reality. But the outburst itself, once it has been set in motion (an outburst, moreover, which is most often collective), works to dissipate the budding confusion by returning the subjects to their rightful activity, which is not that of the protagonists as it is evolving on the screen: the latter do not assent to the spectacle. (102)

In short, yelling at the screen shows that the viewer is lost in what is going on, to the point where he accepts it as reality, but the action of getting up and yelling snaps him out of it and makes him realize that it is in fact a movie he is watching. The narrator tells us he wants to get lost in the movie, and he likens movie-going to a drug, and it is only through getting lost in the movie that he convinces himself that the people on screen are his parents and not actors. So, as I said, the movie itself cannot be changed, but to snap out of the dream state and realize that it

is in fact “only a movie”—in that sense the old woman is correct—is to come to some awareness of how the movie isn’t real and therefore doesn’t determine people’s existence. The narrator’s artistic tendencies are a double-edged sword in this instance. They allow him to see the movie in a complex way that can give him—and the readers—a more complex understanding of his parents’ relationship, but those tendencies also allow the narrator to sink into a sense of fatalism.

So, what he is yelling at is his idea of his parent’s courtship, one that he clearly sees as the direct cause of his unhappy situation in life, since he thinks of his own character as “monstrous.” Yet he is clearly torn, because after he makes his first outburst, the movie becomes what he thought he wanted it to be. His parents go see a fortuneteller, which his father only agrees to after some cajoling and soon finds “intolerable” and leaves. His mother tries to follow his father, but the fortuneteller stops her, at which point the narrator launches into a long passage that encapsulates much of the tension in the story:

She moves to go after my father, but the fortune-teller holds her arm tightly and begs her not to do so, and I in my seat am shocked more than can ever be said, for I feel as if I were walking a tight-rope a hundred feet over a circus-audience and suddenly the rope is showing signs of breaking, and I get up from my seat and begin to shout once more the first words I can think of to communicate my terrible fear and once more the usher comes hurrying down the aisle flashing his search-light, and the old lady pleads with me, and the shocked audience has turned to stare at me, and I keep shouting: “What are they doing? Don’t they know what they are doing? Why doesn’t my mother go after my father? If she does not do that, what will she do? Doesn’t my father know what he is doing?”

When the narrator seems to get what he wants—the end to his parents’ relationship—he finds it overwhelming, as if he’s walking on a tight rope in a circus. The rules of real life do not apply in the world of dreams, so the story leaves itself open to the possibility that his initial outburst could have altered the course of the movie, but the story also specifically places the courtship in terms of being a movie, and we cannot change movies. They are already made. The more likely scenario is that the fortune-teller incident is yet another stumbling block in his parents’

miserable relationship. The narrator, faced with what he sees as the potential enormity of his actions, is overwhelmed by how he might have the power to nullify his own existence. Ozick calls it the “willed abortion of the self” (99). Of course, this reaction fits in with what we know of the narrator’s character. He is concerned with himself, and he is lost enough in the movie to feel that he can control it. To understand that a film is a consciously constructed, physical thing is not, of course, to think that we can change it as it is playing. We can’t. Rather, the realization should be that we could conceive of a competing narrative, one that would allow the narrator to find his way out of his unpleasant existence.

The story seems kind enough to give us a moral at the end, when the usher drags the narrator out of the theater and says:

“What are *you* doing? Don’t you know that you can’t do whatever you want to do? Why should a young man like you, with your whole life before you, get hysterical like this? Why don’t you *think* of what you’re doing? You can’t act like this even if other people aren’t around! You will be sorry if you do not do what you should do, you can’t carry on like this, it is not right, you will find out that soon enough, everything you do matters too much...” (9)

According to Murray Smith, “spectators—perceivers of fiction in general—do not *lose* consciousness, as the various metaphors of delusion suggest, but rather *imaginatively entertain* the propositions and imagery of the fictional texts” (118). Smith concludes his essay by saying that “imagination is a precondition for progressive social change. It is only through imagination that we can fully grasp the experiences and predicaments of groups other than those to which we belong, and so it is central to our rising above self-interest, be it individual or tribal” (123). While the story spends much of its time seemingly siding with the idea of films helping people lose consciousness with which Smith takes issue, “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities” ultimately uses the idea of the parents’ courtship to show that while the past might be eternal—both in the literal sense that what has happened cannot be undone and in the more poetic sense that what happens continues to reverberate in the present—we are not enslaved to that past. The

narrator's parents' courtship happened.<sup>15</sup> He and his brother were born. Yelling at the screen isn't going to change that. While the narrator focuses almost exclusively on the screen—as if what his parents do is the key to understanding his own unhappiness, the usher focuses on what the narrator does. The responsibility is not in learning how to change his parents' lives, since such things are impossible. The responsibility is, rather, in coming to the understanding that the things that he *does* do matter. All of the narrator's actions do “matter too much.” Though the narrator doesn't understand it during the course of the story, the usher is right in that the narrator, while no doubt influenced by the actions of his parents, must turn the focus onto his own life. That is his responsibility. What the film does is show the constructedness of his ideas of his parents' courtship and place them in a mass-mediated situation where we readers can see that his actions reverberate in a larger context, even if he doesn't see that. While there are certainly many parallels between the narrator and Schwartz the writer, Schwartz clearly has a level of insight that the narrator doesn't. His artistically inclined imagination helped him (and the reader) gain some kind of understanding into the nature of his parents' unhappy relationship. The movie might have been simple mass culture for the other audience members, but the artist is able to find significant value in mass culture that the rest of the audience doesn't.

The narrator then wakes up “into the bleak winter morning of [his] 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, the windowsill shining with its lip of snow, and the morning already begun” (9). The title has, from the beginning, made us read the story expecting it to be a dream, which the last few sentences confirm, but what are the responsibilities that are beginning? Does the usher really provide the final word on the situation, and are his words compatible with the title? The reading that the title suggests is that dreams allow us to imagine an alternate way of living—one, for example, in which the narrator can use the complex understanding of his parents' courtship that his artistic abilities helped construct to understand his own adult responsibilities. By placing the

courtship within the context of both a movie and literature, the story shows both how artistic tendencies can help us understand something that is “only a movie” but also how the view of the courtship is not what “really” happened. The narrator is horrified at the idea that he can change the past; and while movies and stories are malleable, the past isn’t. What he does have control over, in a way similar to how a movie or story can be controlled, is what he does with his adult life—he is now 21. As the title suggests, he must use the complexities of the dream to help him accept his adult responsibilities.

Published 20 year after “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities,” “The Track Meet” takes the hallucinogenic, Kafkaesque elements of “In Dreams” to a far more grotesque extreme. Near the beginning of the story, Frank Lawrence, is visited by a man named Reginald Law who claims to share a mutual friend who told Law to look up Lawrence if Law should ever find himself in New York.<sup>16</sup> Law says that he has two tickets to a track meet—itsself a questionable claim, as Lawrence notes, since it’s so early in the morning—and after some hesitation Lawrence agrees to go. As in the earlier story, Lawrence says that it “all seemed so strange to me; it was as if I were dreaming” (129), an idea that recurs through until the end. During the track meet, Lawrence sees that all five of his brothers are runners, and, during the final race, his brothers get into a brawl and are all shot to death by women dressed as drum majors. Trying to get out of this nightmare, Lawrence screams that it must be a dream, when he is lectured by Law in a way not dissimilar to the lecture the narrator receives at the end of “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities.”

As I’ve discussed, “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities” and “Screeno” are overwhelmingly concerned with film. On the other hand, “The Track Meet” deals explicitly with newspapers and advertising. During one of the races, “one of the runners had jogged up to the last billboard and was kissing the handsome girl who had just been given a radio. He was kissing with the intensity of one who drinks water after five sets of tennis in July...” (134).

Lawrence comments that such actions are foolish, since the woman in the picture isn't real, and New York is full of real women. To this, Law replies, "Perhaps he prefers the poster image to the difficult actuality... He cannot be rejected, and he does not have to take much trouble to win her favors" (134). Lawrence's response is that though such things seem ridiculous, "since everything was utterly ridiculous, it was pointless to harp on any one thing" (134). Again, the image of the Oracle at Delphi from "Screeno" is important. Advertising sells the idea of sexual gratification, and the runner, finding in the ad what he is already looking for, takes the idea of the media selling sexual gratification to its absurd conclusion. Lawrence sees things more complexly, and what this story offers is the insight afforded by the dialectical conversation between Law and Lawrence, whose nearly identical last names suggest that they can be read as two halves of the same consciousness. Lawrence is, of course, correct that it is foolish to court a picture of a woman, but Law's response suggests what Lawrence doesn't acknowledge: that many people look to the mass media not just for products but to address deeper longings, such as the longing for love. As Jackson Lears writes, "By surrounding modern products with a pseudotrationalist aura, advertisers scrambled past and present, stripped material goods of their actual historical associations, and allowed them to enter a sphere where the object itself was less important than the desires that couple be projected onto it" (385). Though Lawrence is correct that a picture of a woman can't offer the type of relationship that a real woman can, Law is correct that a billboard can't reject advances in the way that a real woman can. This is not to say that Law is right; by placing the ads within the larger violent context of the track meet, the story shows its dim view of the mass media. But Lawrence's elitist dismissal doesn't do enough. The conversation between the two men compels the reader to analyze the ways that people look for more in the mass media than simple products.

Soon Law buys a newspaper from a "vendor of pop, peanuts, score cards, and other forms of reading matter," suggesting that the newspapers themselves are just another

commodity aimed at providing simple pleasures. That the newspapers are full of horrible details contrast sharply with the other form of mass media in the story: advertising. Most of the billboards on the track field have contents with which most readers would be familiar, including the following:

By the right field foul line was a big garish billboard that showed a young man standing in back of a beautiful young lady to whom he had just given a radio. She is smiling sweetly, her blond hair is set in an upswept hairdo, and she is wearing a low-cut gown. His right hand, as he stands beside her (his smile is an innuendo), is resting on her shoulder, and his fingers point down, as if he wanted to touch her breasts—as if he would soon touch them. In flowing letters the poster broadcasts the big phrase “My Own *Personal* Radio,” and she holds her small set as if she were holding a child. (133)

What this billboard is selling is the idea of domestic, family bliss through radio ownership. Just as the sex that the man is perhaps about to initiate by touching the woman’s breasts could result in a child, that same sex act is now associated with the radio that the woman treats as a child. Additionally, a radio is a gift that keeps on giving, since it gives listeners access to a steady stream of radio programs, including, not coincidentally, the news. The mass media are a product. You can buy that product just as you would candy. The mass media are also advertisements for more products that can help disseminate more mass media, including more advertisements for more products. The only things in the dream world of “The Track Meet” that are reasonable representations of reality are the pieces of mass media: the ads and the newspapers. And, though Lawrence makes disparaging remarks about all of the billboards, he admits to himself that many of his comments “were expressions of personal disappointments” (133), as if he himself wished that he could accept the world of the mass media so unquestioningly, just as the runner who makes sexual advances on the billboard. Lawrence can, for example, look at a billboard using a swordfish leaping in the air to help sell alcohol and say that “fish don’t drink beer” (132), but a part of him still longs for the seemingly perfect world where problems can be fixed by the purchasing of new products.

Regarding the newspaper, Lawrence tells us that Law “read the news to me in a soft, indifferent voice. A housewife had killed her husband after finding two letters from another woman in his pocket” (135). Law goes on to describe a litany of small tragedies: a husband kills his wife because she gets home 15 minutes late; a bus crash kills 16 children; a woman commits suicide because she doesn’t have a date; etc. Lawrence’s response is to say that “You’re making a selection... and it’s extremely one-sided.” To this, Law responds, “Perhaps it is one-sided... but these things did in fact occur. You would not be able to console any of the victims by telling them that what had occurred was not by any means representative” (136).<sup>17</sup> There is, of course, a tragic absurdity to a woman killing herself because of her inability to get a date, or a man murdering his wife because she is late in getting home. But through the newspaper, these tragedies are reduced to a banal din. After hearing about them, Lawrence is not overwhelmed by the depth of human suffering but instead insists that Law is cherry-picking the news, as if a reading of “human interest stories” or similar fluff would negate the awfulness of what Law is describing. Lawrence is like the average reader of the story in that he has read newspapers without making much of the stories they contain. These average newspaper stories are both paralleled and contrasted with the goings-on at the track meet. Both chronicle human suffering, but the killings at the track meet are so out of the ordinary that they come across as insane, while the deaths in the paper are so run of the mill that they barely register. Again, the Oracle at Delphi is an apt comparison. Someone approaching a newspaper as a chronicle of human suffering can certainly find plenty of human suffering, but the newspaper is also presented as a piece of entertainment that people such as Lawrence can write off as largely unrepresentative of the human experience.

After Law reads the newspapers, the mile run—the main event—begins, and it quickly descends into chaos. A woman in a bathing suit climbs over a fence and hits the pace setter over the head with a bottle, knocking him unconscious, which leads to a polite applause from

the audience—a response not dissimilar from the applauding crowd in “Screeno”; in both cases, the crowds find the simple entertainment they’re looking for, regardless of the complexity (or absurdity) of what’s really happening. The connection between violence and crowd approval is made more explicit when “A spectator threw a pop bottle and hit one of the leading contestants on the head, and this time the applause was unanimous, full-throated and full of conviction” (137). Lawrence objects to the actions of the woman in the bathing suit, saying it is the type of thing “which is not done,” because it spoils the game and makes the winner feel not pride but guilt (137). To this Law replies, “You are interested in platitudes... but I am interested in reality” (137). Though Lawrence isn’t as explicitly aligned with artistry as the protagonists of the other two stories—he is the editor of an encyclopedia—Law’s comment here helps place Lawrence in the company of Schwartz’s other artists. Just as Cornelius worked on his poetry for no pay while living in his mother’s house and the narrator of “In Dreams” aligned himself with the photographer who wanted the perfect picture in spite of the couple’s bickering, Lawrence yearns for a type of universal ideal, even though reality never allows for the type of perfection that these artists might strive for. Soon, all of Lawrence’s brothers are killed by gunfire, which causes Lawrence to try to run away, “to awake into the ordinary day, and the little things and small action of early morning, since this was just a dream, as [Lawrence] knew very well” (137).

Law’s lengthy response, as I said earlier, has him playing a similar role to that of the usher in “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities.” “What difference does it make if it is a dream or it is not a dream?” Law asks Lawrence. “It is worse for you—it is far worse for you if it *is* a dream. I should think that by this time you would know that” (139). Saying he doesn’t understand, Lawrence asks for an explanation, yet he is afraid that he would “soon awaken, and that the moment of awakening would occur just as he began to explain, to tell me what I wanted to know so much.” To this, Law responds:

“The things that I read you out of the newspaper were, if anything, more shocking than what has just occurred down there on the field. You don’t escape from the nightmare by waking up, you know. And if what occurred on the field were merely imaginary and unreal and merely your own private hallucination, then the evil that has terrified you is rooted in your own mind and heart. Like the rest of us... you not only know more than you think you know but more than you are willing to admit. Look at yourself. *Just look at yourself!*” (139)

Law’s lecture—though it certainly echoes much of the usher’s admonitions in “In Dreams”—widens the focus of what the usher says. The narrator of the earlier story was focused on the small-scale tragedy of his parents’ unhappy courtship. Lawrence doesn’t have that luxury. As with the narrator of “In Dreams,” Lawrence is watching a family tragedy staged for public entertainment. And while events of the track meet are far more insane, for lack of a better word, they are but a drop in the bucket compared to the unimaginable suffering going on in the world, only a fraction of which is represented in the daily newspaper.

Of course, the story takes place within the framework of a dream, and these ads represent dreamlike fantasies that companies sell to consumers. On one level, Lawrence knows that they aren’t real, but he remains disappointed that he can’t have the life they’re selling. But the mass media aren’t only selling sex and good times. It is the violence in the newspaper—and not the gleeful happiness of the billboard advertisements—that most clearly parallels the insanity on the track field. As I mentioned, the similar names of the two men suggest that we can read them as two halves of the same consciousness. Most of Law’s critiques of the media are correct, but the dialectical exchanges he has with Lawrence—one that is implicitly (and cynically) aligned with a more artistic worldview—force Law (or, at least, the reader) to confront how the violence of the mass media is not an abstraction. Just as Law’s family is killed on the field, the deaths of other people’s family members are reported in the news every day, though Law isn’t terribly willing to make the connection between the two. Instead of being only idle entertainment, something like candy, the mass media are also in fact selling terrible truths about human suffering; but because those truths can be buried amid, among other things,

advertisements selling false ideas of happiness, consumers of the media are less likely to make the connection between what they read in the paper and the depth of human suffering it's reporting. The people at the track meet delight in the violence they're watching, but Law and Lawrence's conversations help move the reader to a broadening awareness of what the media are really selling.

Schwartz was an unabashed fan of movies, and the type of resistance he explores is not necessarily a resistance of a wholly regressive nature in mass culture. Certainly that regressiveness is there, but, more than any of the other writers I'm discussing, Schwartz sees true possibilities in mass culture. The masses in Schwartz's stories find simple answers in mass culture, just as the characters in Faulkner's works do. But in Faulkner's world, simplicity is all mass culture has to offer. For Schwartz, the complexity is there, as long as someone who has artistic inclinations knows how to approach the mass media looking for more than simple entertainment. In Schwartz's world there is a sense in which the mass media can be even more complex than high art. A poem such as "Gerontion" is of little use unless someone is willing to put in the intellectual work necessary to understand it. Movies, on the other hand, require no intellectual work to enjoy as simplistic entertainment, which means that many people approach them as such. If someone puts the same level of intellectual work into watching a movie as he does into reading "Gerontion," more possibilities open up, even if not everyone knows how to look for it.

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#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> In one of the few pieces of recent criticism on Schwartz, Benjamin Schreier argues that "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," Schwartz's most famous story and one that I will spend some time with here, is a story that "offers a defiant illustration of how Schwartz is often misread via the unwarranted expectation that the Jewish American literary canon represents a determinate literary Jewishness" (501). Schreier's assertion is basically that, contrary to what earlier critics had said, Schwartz's work resists being stereotypically "Jewish," a claim with which I have no argument. While Schwartz's Jewish ancestry was no doubt important—the highly conflicted

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feelings he had toward T.S. Eliot in light of that writer's anti-Semitism attest to that—approaching Schwartz with a focus entirely on his Jewishness is too narrow an approach.

<sup>2</sup> Though he wrote “Screeno” in the early 1940s, Schwartz never published it or even typed it up during his lifetime.

<sup>3</sup> It's interesting to note that the novel is about Charlie Citrine, a Bellow stand-in, who makes money off of a movie about his relationship with Von Humboldt Fleisher, the Schwartz stand-in. Humboldt dies penniless while trying to maintain the purity of his art, and Charlie sells out and becomes part of the culture industry. The gift of the title is a screenplay that Humboldt has left for Charlie in his will. The success of the movie allows Charlie to revive his flagging career, which lets the novel end with an ambivalent attitude toward the culture industry.

<sup>4</sup> Written a little more than ten years after Schwartz's death, Bonnie Lyons's “Elmore Schwartz and the Whole Truth” addresses this issue, saying that there is “a tendency to consider his fiction a ‘sideline,’ a literary curiosity worth reading for one's interest in the man or his poetry but not itself meriting close attention” (259). There is certainly an element of truth to this, but it's also worth noting that Schwartz's poetry is even less read today than it was when Lyons was writing in the late 1970s.

<sup>5</sup> For more on Schwartz's at-times antagonistic attitudes toward the New Critics, see Paul Bauer's “The Politics of Reality, 1948: Wallace Stevens, Delmore Schwartz, and the New Criticism.”

<sup>6</sup> Spencer Tracy never starred in a movie called *Freedom*. It is possible that Schwartz misremembered the name of Fritz Lang's 1936 film *The Fury*, which starred Tracy, or perhaps he just made the movie up.

<sup>7</sup> For a brief discussion of Schwartz's depiction of isolation, see Stephen Hahn's “Isolation of Delmore Schwartz,” which argues that Schwartz differs from the high modernists such as Eliot in his “lack of presumption about the benefits to be conferred upon society by reversion to any previous models of society, behavior, or literary performance” (29).

<sup>8</sup> Schwartz's description of the newsreel is an accurate description of how they were in the 1930s. See Raymond Fielding's *The American Newsreel* for a complete history.

<sup>9</sup> Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, one of the earliest theorists of montage, offers a thoroughly lucid examination of how it works. As he writes, “The basic fact was true, and remains true to this day, that the juxtaposition of two separate shots by splicing them together resembles not so much a simple sum of one shot plus another shot—as it does a *creation*” (7, italics in original).

<sup>10</sup> For example, Atlas writes, “The overt anti-Semitism of [Ezra] Pound and Eliot disturbed [Schwartz] even more than the oblique disdain of [Henry] James and [Edith] Wharton. In his journal, he copied out Eliot's observation in *After Strange Gods*: ‘In the good society reason and religion combine to say that free-thinking Jews in large numbers would be an anomalous and undesirable element’ and substituted ‘Anglo-Catholics’ for ‘Jews’ ”(163). Atlas goes on to say that “Delmore felt personally slighted whenever his literary heroes expressed distaste for

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Jews, for it fed his self-hatred and cast doubt on his self-chosen identity as their cultural heir” (163).

<sup>11</sup> I don’t want to give the impression that Dervin, writing more than 20 years ago, is in any way the final word on psychoanalytic approaches to film. Writing much more recently, John Izod has a cogent attack on Dervin’s analysis: “As revamped by screen analysts, Freudian and Lacanian theories proved for several reasons to be at best rather limited, and at worst cack-handed implements. In the first place, in common with most late twentieth-century interpreters of Freudian theory, film theories insisted on referring every disturbance manifested in adulthood back to the traumatic shocks suffered by the infant as it begins to acquire a separate, gendered identity. At its most naïve, this tendency is illustrated by Daniel Dervin’s use of the orthodox Freudian assertion that the impact of the primal scene (whether witnessed or fantasised) comes at a time when the child is so emotionally and mentally ill-equipped to deal with it that it gets repressed” (3). My point here is not that I think Dervin is “right”—and I can’t say I’m convinced that he is—but rather that his Freudian approach most closely mirrors how Schwartz is presenting film to the reader.

<sup>12</sup> Lippmann’s basic argument is that dreams are the “canary in the mind” of the modern world, in that they are representative of what is going on inside of us. He thinks that dreams are being devalued, even though technological innovations—movies and now “virtual reality”—are in fact reflections of dreams. To ignore the rich inner life of people is dangerous, according to Lippmann.

<sup>13</sup> Hansen stresses, however, that these stories were not typical of Biograph; most of the films did not deal with Jewish experiences.

<sup>14</sup> See Sigfried Kracauer’s *Theory of Film* for a discussion of the movie-dream connection that is especially pertinent to this story. As Kracauer says, “To the extent that films are mass entertainment they are bound to cater to the alleged desires and daydreams of the public at large. . . . Because of their vagueness mass dispositions usually admit of diverse interpretations. People are quick to reject things that they do not agree with, while they feel much less sure about the true objects of their leanings and longings” (163).

<sup>16</sup> Though it’s not directly related to my discussion, the beginning of “The Track Meet” involves Lawrence trying to explain a game of baseball to a British friend who is unfamiliar with the rules. Certainly baseball can be counted as part of popular or folk culture, but it’s not among the mass media that I discuss in this chapter. For an overview of how Schwartz deals with baseball in his writings, see Eric Solomon’s “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Baseball Fan: Delmore Schwartz.”

<sup>17</sup> This scene displays the types of attitudes that Roland Barthes discusses in his essay “Operation Margarine.” As Barthes writes, “A little ‘confessed’ evil saves one from acknowledging a lot of hidden evil” (42).

## Chapter Five:

### “Her Beethoven”: Eudora Welty and the Power of Human Understanding

In his essay “Free Eudora!,” Michael Kreyling discusses the battle between “those who wanted a Eudora Welty embroiled in the gender issues and politics of her time and those who preferred to see her serenely above local circumstances, protected by trump cards such as ‘love’ and ‘knowledge,’ ...” (759). Welty’s public persona as a sweet old lady has led some to see her as only that, and how could someone who is just a sweet old lady write works of such formal complexity? Some of this tension, as Kreyling points out, is due to Welty’s last major publication, *One Writer’s Beginning* (1983), a brief autobiography originally presented as a series of lectures at Harvard University. The book is far heavier on personal anecdotes than on deep insight into her formal accomplishments. More recently, texts such as Harriet Pollack and Suzanne Marrs’s *Eudora Welty & Politics: Did the Writer Crusade?*, Suzanne Marrs’s *One Writer’s Imagination: The Fiction of Eudora Welty*, and Barbara Ladd’s *Resisting History* have done much to show how Welty was in fact engaged with history and current political issues. What has received considerably less attention is Welty’s engagement with mass culture, which is all the more surprising considering how much of it there is in her works. Mass media play a significant role in the short stories “A Piece of News” and “Petrified Man” and the novel *The Ponder Heart*, just to give three examples.<sup>1</sup> There is some criticism that discusses film in relationship to *The Golden Apples*, but most of it is concerned with how film influences the book, not with what I find most interesting for this project: how the book frames Virgie Rainey in terms of silent film as a way to explore the high/low divide.

Early in *Delta Wedding* (1946), Eudora Welty’s first novel, we learn that

In bed Laura and India would slap mosquitoes and tell each other things. Last summer India had told Laura the showboats that came on the high water and the same old Rabbit’s Foot Minstrel as always, and Laura told India “Babes in the Wood,” Thurston

the Magician, Annette Kellerman in “Daughter of the Gods,” and Clara Kimball Young in “Drums of Jeopardy,” and if Laura went to sleep, India would choke her. (9-10)

For a novel that is set entirely within the confines of rural Mississippi life, it’s interesting that the two cousins would spend their time telling each other of the popular culture that they have been exposed to. Laura’s mother has just died, and her father has put her on a train—officially named the Yazoo-Delta, but nicknamed the Yellow Dog—that will take her from the (relatively) big city of Jackson to her family’s plantation Shellmound, which is in the small Delta town of Fairchilds. Laura is at Shellmound to attend the wedding of the book’s title, that of her cousin Dabney. The Yellow Dog, as with many trains, serves as a potent symbol of the encroaching modernity that threatens to erase the Fairchild family way of life—in fact, an oft-told story in the novel is about how some family members once got caught on the track and were almost killed. It is perhaps not unexpected that Laura would come on a train from the city and tell India the things she does.<sup>2</sup> Laura is telling of the mass media culture that was still in its relative infancy when the novel takes place, and India in turn tells Laura about her own local popular culture, showboats and minstrel shows, that themselves are being changed by the onset of modernity. Steamboats, after all, allow the shows to cover more ground in less time and therefore perform for more people. That the girls talk about popular and mass culture suggests that these types of cultures are beginning to have a profound impact on small-town southerners, no matter how far they are from the more thoroughly “modern” Manhattan or Los Angeles. *Delta Wedding* is mostly concerned with the minutia of small-town life, as almost all of Welty’s work is, but this scene early in the novel lets us know that the mass media are always there. This brief discussion of movies and mass culture suggests that Laura and India are beginning to define their lives, in part, by the culture they consume. By presenting this scene early in the novel, Welty asks the reader to imagine how the novel that follows is different from the packaged stories of the culture industry. In this brief moment, *Delta Wedding* is addressing

the high/low dichotomy: The novel is nuanced and complex, but the characters are still trying to frame their lives, in part, in terms of the culture they know. The tendency of characters to use popular movies as a way to frame reality is dealt with in more detail in *The Golden Apples*.

In an oft-cited passage from *One Writer's Beginning*, Welty reminisces about movie watching in her youth: "All children in those small-town, unhurried days had a vast inner life going on in the movies. Whole families attended together in the evenings, at least once a week, and children were allowed to go without chaperone in the long summer afternoons" (36). I am also reminded of a quote from novelist Don DeLillo, who said, "The twentieth century is *on film*. It's the filmed century" (200). I bring up DeLillo because I think he eloquently sums up something so obvious that it's easy to ignore: namely, that film in the twentieth century (and, of course, the twenty-first century) has been so pervasive that we run the risk both of ignoring its presence and of underplaying it, to the point where we search out "clues"—such as the above quote from Welty—that help support our ideas that allegedly pure modernist writers such as Welty might have been influenced by film.<sup>3</sup> Of course Eudora Welty saw many movies. You would be hard pressed to find a writer who spent most of her formative years in the twentieth century who didn't. There has been relatively little in-depth discussion about cinematic allusions in Welty's work, and I want to avoid what I consider a pitfall within some of that literature: Namely, I want to come up with a more limited version of what we can call "cinematic." If, as critics say, Welty uses discourse to show how characters create a seemingly "objective" reality out of chaotic events, then the mass media—through its sheer omnipresence—works as a way for her characters, and her works, to "frame" events in a way that makes sense to them, and us. Mass culture—and film in particular—isn't just a formal window dressing for her works. Welty is explicitly interested in how we use film to make sense of a senseless world and, conversely, how that framing can interact with the place of art in our

society. However, the value of this framing is considerably undermined by how mass culture can give a reductive worldview. When characters try to see things in terms of movies, the worldviews that they create are frequently lacking in the emotional complexity necessary to make lasting human connections. Welty presents art as having a slightly privileged edge over mass culture, in part because of its spontaneity and complexity, attributes that mass cultures lacks. But art itself is not enough. Welty, with her focus on created communities, stresses that art is only the first step, and it must be coupled with a genuine attempt at human understanding in order for it to have a positive impact on society.<sup>4</sup>

As Robert B. Ray says, “If from the early days of film criticism the cinema invited comparison with literature (rather than with music, sculpture, architecture, or painting), the reason was obvious: both were narrative in format” (39). There is nothing inherent to the form of films (or literature, for that matter) that dictates that they must tell stories. It’s just the way that film (and literature) developed. The aspect of film that is often considered unique to that medium—editing—itself is rooted in literature, as discussed by pioneering Soviet director and film theorist Sergei Eisenstein, who gives John Milton as an example: “Paradise Lost itself is a first-rate school in which to study montage and audio-video relationships” (58). If we were to argue that a particular part of a movie, or that a movie as a whole, is “novelistic,” we would very likely be right, but we would also probably be stating the obvious. To say the opposite, that a part of a novel is particularly “cinematic,” is, I think, something that can run into the same problem. In the first essay to discuss Welty’s relationship to film in detail, Leslie A. Kaplansky writes:

The presence of these film allusions in her stories attests to Welty’s engaged involvement with film *culture*, to be sure. But I would argue that her works reveal a formal association with film as well—one that centers on her use of various cinematic *techniques* that, learned from her experience as a moviegoer, afforded Welty new ways of experiencing “stories” and, in turn, inspired new ways of writing them.” (580)

A specific example Kaplansky gives is the following: “But one of Welty’s most pronounced and characteristic manipulations of rhythm is her verbal equivalent of filmic slow-motion—a specific cinematic rhythm used to heighten a profound moment of (subjective) revelation” (583). The problem is that there is nothing inherently cinematic about slow motion, and any examples of Welty’s languid writing style could be attributed to other sources. It might be like a movie, but it’s also like a lot of other things. Taking a similar cue, Dina Smith, discussing *The Golden Apples*, says, “We enter into Morgana and the lives of its former citizens through a myriad of voices and eyes, or through a series of narrative ‘reframings.’ In this way the text operates like a camera that moves about a space, repositioning its gaze.” (84) Again, there is nothing inherently camera-like with any type of floating, changing narrative point of view. Both of these critics make worthwhile observations about Welty’s work, but they also engage in just the type of criticism that I’m trying to avoid: namely, the type of criticism where almost anything can be labeled “cinematic.” I am not saying that there are no cinematic elements in Welty’s writing, but I want to limit my discussion to parts of her writing that both call attention to film specifically and then go further by exploring the elements of film and how they can work in the lives of the characters. As with my chapters on Wright and Schwartz, I want to focus on the moments in the text that draw a direct comparison to elements of film. So while I don’t think there’s anything specifically filmic about the slow-motion example I cite earlier, I do think it’s significant that *The Golden Apples*’ Virgie Rainey makes her living playing piano in the Bijou, Morgana’s silent movie theater, and I think it’s even more significant that Virgie makes one of her first appearances in a scene that calls specific attention both to movies and the act of movie-making. In fact, Virgie is the character who is most consistently aligned with movies, and we often see her, both implicitly and explicitly, as being like a silent movie star. The overt filmic thread that runs through *The Golden Apples* explores how the people of Morgana almost always see Virgie as a fading silent film star and, additionally, how Virgie’s

piano playing allows her to fight back against the status being inscribed upon her and perhaps find a true human connection.

Before talking about Virgie in depth, I want to discuss the short story “A Memory,” which is featured in Welty’s 1941 story collection, *A Curtain of Green*. Though this brief piece only nominally deals with moviemaking, it perhaps encapsulates much of how Welty’s works deal with elements of the mass media. The narrator of “A Memory” is a woman looking back on her girlhood when she would lie on the beach and think of her first love. Part of her reminiscence goes as follows:

From my position I was looking at a rectangle brightly lit, actually glaring at me, with sun, sand, water, a little pavilion, a few solitary people in fixed attitudes, and around it all a border of dark rounded oak trees, like the engraved thunderclouds surrounding illustrations in the Bible. Ever since I had begun taking painting lessons, I had made small frames with my fingers, to look out at everything. (75)

She compares this scene to a picture from an edition of the Bible, and she has only begun this approach to looking at things because of her painting lessons. Neither of these things are particularly related to the mass media, but creating frames with fingers is what directors and cinematographers do when beginning to frame a shot for a movie, and she later says that “All through this summer I had lain on the sand beside the small lake, with my hands squared over my eyes, finger tips touching, looking out by this device to see everything: which appeared as a kind of projection” (75-76). There is a subtle, though very important, semantic significance to Welty’s choice of the word “projection.” Though the idea of framing might hint at a camera lens, cameras don’t project anything; they record, and projectors project. Someone with a camera is able to make subjective decisions about what to record and not to record. Once the film is being projected, it’s already been recorded. All you can do is watch. Of course, the narrator is not literally tied in to an unmoving projection. She can move her fingers, which hints not only at the dialectic between subjectivity and objectivity inherent in making and watching

films but also in watching people's lives. This is further reinforced by the narrator's next thoughts:

It did not matter to me what I looked at; from my observation I would conclude that a secret life had been nearly revealed to me—for I was obsessed with notions about concealment, and from the smallest gesture of a stranger I would wrest what was to me a communications or a presentiment. (76)

It is through her "device" that the narrator tries to make sense of the details of her subjects' secret lives. What is happening on the beach—what is being "projected" is outside of her control. It's people doing what they do. It is in her subjective interpretations of these relatively objective events that the narrator finds some kind of meaning. In this instance, an allegorical film is the mediating force through which the narrator finds meaning in what's happening—a meaning that is unique to her and is likely neither what the person she is watching intended nor what another viewer, watching from a different angle, would take from the situation.

These projections, according to the narrator, are deeply influenced by her infatuation with a boy at school:

This state of exaltation was heightened, or even brought about, by the fact that I was in love for the first time: I had identified love at once. The truth is that never since has any passion I have felt remained so hopelessly unexpressed within me or appeared so grotesquely altered in the outside world. (76)

She first identifies the boy as a friend, but then says that that isn't exactly true, since the two have never spoken to each other. Her love is based on their hands brushing at school, which she admits happened "by accident, and he pretended not to notice" (76). Of course, the possibility remains that he wasn't pretending; he simply didn't notice at all. Additionally, she knows nothing about this boy—where he lives, what his house is like, who his parents are—and she doesn't even mention his name. There is nothing concrete about this boy that the reader can grasp on, so the boy remains largely a fantasy. Yet what matters most is the magnitude of the feelings for the narrator. As she says, "Through some intensity I had come almost into a dual life, as observer and dreamer. I felt a necessity for conformity to my ideas in any happening I

witnessed” (76). She has already established the filmic nature of how she observes the world, and we now know that these projections are “grotesquely altered” in the outside world. She is both an observer and a dreamer, and the two are so closely linked that she can’t separate them. As she says, “I still would not care to say which was more real—the dream I could make blossom at will, or the sight of the bathers. I am presenting them, you see, only as simultaneous” (77).

There are two images here, and the one that the narrator is literally framing with her hands seems to have little to do with her schoolyard crush. I agree with Stephen M. Fuller when he writes that the story “encourages readers to separate and disentangle one memory from another, yet attempting to do so only tightens the bonds that ensure that each recollection remains contiguous with those memories surrounding it and positively not singular or discrete” (331). I do, however, think he’s taking it a bit far when he argues that the bathers the narrator is watching are merely a dream, her own projection of her Oedipal frustrations. This group of bathers—they are darker skinned, and the narrator says that they would have been known as “common” in her youth—is playing on the beach. There are two boys, whom, because of their physical similarities, the narrator assumes to be brothers. Additionally, there are two women and a man, whose relationship is unclear—though the likeliest explanation is that they are the mother, father, and eldest daughter. We get a sense of playfulness from these people’s interactions. The boys are chasing each other; the man is pouring sand on one of the women’s legs and then into her bathing suit; and the boys are throwing sand into the man’s hair. Yet there is a darkness here, at least to the narrator, who says that she “saw that they were all resigned to each other’s daring and ugliness” and that

There had been no words spoken among these people, but I began to comprehend a progression, a circle of answers, which they were flinging toward one another in their own way, in the confusion of vulgarity and hatred which twined among them all like a wreath of steam rising from the wet sand. (78)

What she is observing, though, is a general playfulness among the five people, who are laughing as they throw sand about. The narrator even says that the man, while looking around and smiling, “even looked at me, and included me. Looking back, stunned, I wished they were all dead” (78). The extremity of this last sentence is a bit surprising. It’s hard to see what kind of “ugliness,” “vulgarity,” and “hatred” is on display here, when most observers would, presumably, see a carefree family outing. Of course, the narrator has already told us, in regard to her feelings for the unnamed boy that “never since has any passion I have felt remained so hopelessly unexpressed within me or appeared so grotesquely altered in the outward world” (76) and that she wanted a conformity between what she witnessed and what she felt. So, whether the family’s actions are friendly frolicking or a passive-aggressive power struggle, the narrator sees all of this through the lens of her own blossoming sexual frustration. Her framed hands are both a camera and a projector, and just as it is overwhelmingly difficult to parse one memory out from another, it is overwhelmingly difficult to parse out the different elements of film. Movies are *always* both record of some kind of physical reality and a collection of subjective decisions—from technical aspects such as the framing of shots to more abstract elements, such as how the director’s worldview affects what ends up on the screen.

The story ends with a return to the filmic camera/projector element, when the narrator says,

I remember continuing to lie there, squaring my vision with my hands, trying to think ahead to the time of my return to school in winter. I could imagine the boy I loved walking into a classroom, where I would watch him with this hour on the beach accompanying my recovered dream and added to my love. I could even foresee the way he would stare back, speechless and innocent, a medium-sized boy with blond hair, his unconscious eyes looking beyond me and out the window, solitary and unprotected.  
(80)

We are reminded here that she has been looking at everything on the beach through her squared fingers (which, in actuality, would be more rectangular, like a widescreen movie screen). This frame, as she has said, is the element through which she mediates the outside world and the

inside world, trying to make the two cohere. But the end of the story shows us that she envisions the boy looking past her, as if she weren't there. His being "solitary and unprotected" shows a level of isolation, at least from her, that she knows she can't overcome. Lest this story seem to be merely a particularly eloquent description of an unrequited school crush—and it certainly is that—we should also understand the problems she has in collapsing these disparate images together into one coherent whole.

It is the complex mingling of different elements—not only does the narrator reveal her sexual frustration but also her classist attitude, since she is afraid the boy of her dreams might be poor and subsequently thinks that the bathers are "common"—that show how filmic representation always involves not just the subject being documented but also the attitudes and thoughts of the one doing the documenting (in film a director; here, the narrator). But the story ends with the boy's solitary nature reaffirmed. In spite of the complex, dialectical process through which dream and reality are synthesized through her filmic fingers, the subject remains out of reach. There is only so much that a film can tell us. For all of the complexities allowed in film, there is still a sense in which the events we get are reductive. The story stresses how this crush is based not on a real emotional bond with the boy but on an idealized version of him. By discussing this incomplete idealization in filmic terms, the story stresses how the culture industry, whatever its value, can hinder us from gaining complex insight into its subjects. These ideas are developed in much further detail in *The Golden Apples*. While "A Memory" is a more intimate story about how a girl tries to represent the boy of her dreams, *The Golden Apples* broadens these filmic elements. In "A Memory," the subject being documented is the boy, and we know him exclusively through what the narrator tells us. In *The Golden Apples*, the subject is Virgie Rainey, but we get no stable representation of her through the book. Throughout "June Recital" and "The Wanderers," the two stories in *The Golden Apples* in which Virgie plays a major role, we frequently see her as a sort of battleground for the high/low divide.

Many of the people in Morgana see her framed in terms of being a silent film star, aligning her with the mass cultural representations found in movies. But these filmic representations are not monolithic. They mean different things to different people at different points in Virgie's life. We frequently know Virgie through film. This is not an inherently bad situation. It is through this that we can understand some of her failed dreams and her limited ability to fight back against her dire situation. But it is also limiting. It calls attention to the artificiality of such constructions. We are seeing *a* Virgie, but by no means are we seeing *the* Virgie. What we are seeing is closer to a movie, which, for all its trappings of reality, is not a complete representation of Virgie. Conversely, Miss Eckhart's desire for Virgie to leave Morgana for Europe and become a concert pianist is something to which Virgie responds with ambivalence and occasionally with hatred. Miss Eckhart's aspirations are just that: Miss Eckhart's aspirations. They represent more her failed dreams than they do Virgie's. In fact, throughout most of *The Golden Apples*, we never know what, exactly, Virgie wants out of life, perhaps because she herself doesn't know. It is only in "The Wanderers," the final story in the book, that Virgie makes the link between artistic performance and personal connection that the reader can see how *The Golden Apples* presents the more nuanced conception of art.

According to film theorist Andre Bazin:

If the origins of an art reveal something of its nature, then one may legitimately consider the silent and the sound film as a stage of a technical development that little by little made a reality out of the original "myth." It is understandable from this point of view that it would be absurd to take the silent film as a state of primal perfection which has gradually been forsaken by the realism of sound and color. The primacy of the image is both historically and technically accidental. The nostalgia that some feel for the silent screen does not go far enough back into the childhood of the seventh art. The real primitives of the cinema, existing only in the imaginations of a few men of the nineteenth century, are in complete imitation of nature. Every new development added to the cinema must, paradoxically, take it nearer and nearer to its origins. In short, cinema has not yet been invented! (21)

In Bazin's conception, the "myth" of total cinema is a kind of unattainable representation of reality toward which film has been moving ever closer since its introduction. If his assessment

seems a bit utopian—it ignores, for example, the subjective choices made by filmmakers that can distort the sense of “reality” allowed by sound and color films—it does perhaps give us a starting point from which we can begin to discuss how Eudora Welty imagines film in “June Recital.” Though bits of mass culture pop up throughout *The Golden Apples*, “June Recital” has the most sustained discussion of how silent film—due, as Bazin might say, to its incompleteness—allows for a level of audience interpretation that resists any type of totalizing message that film might seek to provide.

As the story opens, Loch Morrison, at this point a young boy, watches through his telescope the abandoned house next door to his. As the story progresses, we learn that the house Loch watches was once the residence of Miss Eckhart, who—for several reasons, including her German roots, her refusal to marry, and her rape at the hands of a black man—becomes an outsider in the small town of Morgana. Miss Eckhart made her living by giving piano lessons to the local children, and once a year the house would be the site of the titular June recitals, and Miss Eckhart, through her music, would create a kind of space where, however briefly, the area women could come together to hear their daughters play music. Her star pupil, Virgie Rainey, is unable to break out of the sexist norms of Morgana and ends up—as opposed to using her abilities to become a concert pianist, as Miss Eckhart wishes—becoming the accompanying pianist at the Bijou, the local movie theater. Neither the reader nor Loch knows any of this when the story opens. All we have is Loch watching the house through his telescope.<sup>5</sup>

From the beginning we know that Loch—in an attitude not unexpected from a young boy—sees things in terms of movies he’s seen. He sees a house where, “The roof spread falling to the front, the porch came around the side leaning on the curve, where it hung with banisters gone, like a cliff in a serial at the Bijou” (21). The narration goes on to say, however, that instead of “cowboys in danger,” it’s merely chickens that wander around outside of the ramshackle house. Though written in the third person, the story is told from Loch’s point of

view, so we can see that though Loch sees the house as being like a movie in many ways, he also has the critical faculties to understand that it isn't a movie. A movie would have cowboys, while the house just has chickens.

When Virgie brings her sailor boyfriend to the house, Loch “trained the telescope to the back and caught” them in his view (23). The narration then tells us that “The girl was the piano player at the picture show” (24), showing that her relation to the movie theater—and not her first name, which he also knows—is how Loch first identifies Virgie. Loch later thinks, while Virgie and the sailor are playfully flirting and chasing each other around the bed that they “went around and around like the policeman and Charlie Chaplin, both intending to fall down” (30), again linking what he’s seeing to the act of watching a movie. And to Loch, much of what is happening is like a movie. Meanwhile, as Virgie and the sailor are having their tryst upstairs, Miss Eckhart, who has spent the previous few years institutionalized, has entered the house downstairs and has begun to recreate the festive atmosphere of her June recitals. This involves putting up banners and her metronome. As Loch sees it, Miss Eckhart, though we don’t know yet who she is, is the sailor’s mother, and she is upset at her son for running around with Virgie. In the paragraph right after Loch compares Virgie and the sailor to a Charlie Chaplin movie, the narration tells us, “Downstairs, the sailor’s mother was doing something just as fanciful. She was putting up decorations” (30). Miss Eckhart, frustrated with Virgie’s inability to leave Morgana and realize her artistic potential, plans to burn down the house as an act of protest. Though Loch realizes that Miss Eckhart wants to burn down the house, he still sees things in terms of a movie, since he thinks that the ticking metronome on top of the piano is in fact a bomb that Miss Eckhart has planted. According to the narration, Loch “both wanted the plot to work and wanted it to fail” (32), which not only further reinforces the event’s status as a movie “plot” but also shows how film can involve a level of interpretation and, occasionally, collaboration. Because the events here are “silent”—Loch can’t hear what’s going on—and

because every movie that Loch has ever seen is in fact silent, he is used to interpreting images—along with the occasional cue cards—as the sole means to understanding a film. Written 20 years after the advent of synchronized sound, *The Golden Apples* is of a time when movies were fully able to “tell” you what’s going on, and the book reflects on a time when movies could only “show.” With no sound comes greater possibility for audience interpretation, as we see with Loch’s misinterpretation of what’s happening. The use of silent film imagery is additionally important because it doesn’t allow Virgie a chance to speak. Everything we know about Virgie is inscribed upon her by Loch—and, by extension, the community of Morgana. This scene is, in microcosm, what we read about Virgie through all of the story. She is rendered silent by the town’s insistence on seeing her solely as the girl who plays piano at the picture show. The only “voice” that Virgie has is her piano playing, which gives her opportunities to fight back against the silencing that the culture industry helps perpetuate.

At this point it’s worth bringing up that Loch’s interpretation of the event is not solely influenced by what he does know—in his case, movies—but also by what he doesn’t know—such as the relationship between Miss Eckhart and the sailor and Virgie and what exactly Virgie and the sailor are doing in the bedroom. At this point in the story, the reader has not yet learned of Virgie’s and Miss Eckhart’s back story, so we approach the situation in the abandoned house with as little knowledge as Loch does. However, unlike Loch, the reader presumably knows what sex is, and we know that Virgie and the sailor are doing more in the bedroom than eating “pickles out of an open sack between them” (29). While Loch never explicitly describes any sexual activity, he wouldn’t know what it is anyway, so he probably wouldn’t consider it worth mentioning. We, as older readers, however, know that for a young man and young woman to spend time alone in the bedroom of an abandoned house is a fairly certain sign that they’re having sex. Here, I believe Smith is correct when she says that Loch “substitutes conventional film narratives (pirates and cowboys) for the events that would

otherwise make no sense to him. The world becomes readable only by making it cinematic” (95). The reader of the story only can see what Loch can see through his telescope, just as an audience member can only see what the camera sees. While a telescope isn’t an inherently cinematic device, I would argue that its similarities to a camera make its use more open to readings about uses of cinematic techniques in literature, and Loch’s film references make the link, at least in this story, explicit. Additionally, Loch is watching movies in a period when the idea of cinema spectatorship was changing. As Miriam Hansen discusses in *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, early films, those from the invention of film in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the early-to-mid teens were almost exclusively shot from a standard fixed position that made it look as if the camera were positioned in the audience of a theater, a seemingly objective point of view that mirrored that of the vaudeville experience on which so many early films were based. There was no real idea that a spectator might have his own point of view. However:

Classical narration crucially expanded the possibilities of placing, or “positioning,” the spectator in relation to the represented events, in both figurative and literal sense of “position.” Early narrative films had tried sporadically to guide and interpret the viewer’s perception—through allegorical tableaux, parallelism, or expository titles—though such commentary remained largely outside the narrative. Transitional films sought more consistently to ensure the spectator’s perceptual placement *within narrative space*, by means of different camera set-ups and editing devices such as shot-reverse shot, the 180-degree rule, eyeline match, and point of view. Such devices were not just attempts to position the spectator in relation to particular aspects of the scene; they were part of a system that assumed the very notion of a spectator as an implicit reference point, functionally comparable to the vanishing point in Renaissance perspective. (81)

To put this succinctly, in the mid-teens films were beginning to be made with the specific points of view of audience members in mind. Someone like Loch, watching movies during this period, would be trained to think that the “movie” he’s watching would be for him, because many of the movies he had watched before were made with the point of view of viewers such as himself in mind. Loch is in effect watching Virgie’s escapades as if they are there solely for

his enjoyment, just as the sailor is using Virgie's body more literally for his own sexual pleasure. What Virgie must strive to do is find a way to assert her voice to show that she is not something to be defined by the voyeuristic desires of men.

So Loch sees things as if they were a movie, and all of the movies that Loch has seen are silent. And aside from the more obvious differences between silent films and reality—namely that silent films lack color and sound—silent films are played at a different frame rate than sound films. Sound films might not be “real,” but they are projected at frame rate that shows a 1:1 correlation between the speed of action on the screen and how quickly things happen in real life. Silent films don't, creating a greater sense of unreality. We know, of course, that movies aren't real, but silent films are even less real, as Bazin said. This unreality defines how we will know Virgie throughout the story. Just as a silent movie is an approximation of reality—but an approximation whose unreality we are almost constantly aware of, through its lack of color and sound and its off-kilter frame rate—our idea of Virgie will only be an approximation in “June Recital.” We don't know what's really going on with her inner life. Loch knows roughly as much about Virgie as an audience would have known about any movie character, which is to say not much, aside from what's on the screen. That Virgie's appearance involves a level of voyeuristic exploitation—we and Loch are, after all, watching her have sex, though Loch doesn't yet know what that is—is an early exploration of how film itself can be used for sexist exploitation. All we know about Virgie is what the camera sees, and in this case, in spite of Loch's ignorance of sex, the camera's (Loch's) access to the more intimate aspects of her personal life allows the readers a level of voyeuristic sexual exploitation. As Faye E. Dudden says,

The actress has been equated with the whore so persistently that no amount of clean living and rectitude among actual performers has ever served to cancel the equation. Acting is linked to sexuality because it is an embodied art—in contrast to the relatively disembodied business of writing, or the decorative arts so long associated with women. To act you must be present in the body, available to be seen. The woman who acts is

thus inherently liable, whatever her own intent, to become the object of male sexual fantasy and voyeuristic pleasure. Acting is a particularly acute case of the general phenomenon of women being reduced to sexual object. (2)

In a sense, “June Recital” reverses Dudden’s postulation: The town equates the “whore” Virgie with being an actress. Her sexuality is deeply linked with the way that the residents of Morgana define her as someone to be looked at, a person who is denied any voice of her own.<sup>6</sup> Or, to put it more succinctly, Loch’s (and the town’s) view of Virgie highlights her “to-be-looked-at-ness,” in Laura Mulvey’s words (63). That Virgie is stuck in Morgana playing at the movie theater and not out in the world practicing her art might suggest that “June Recital” doesn’t hold film in the highest regard. Playing for the movies is not the greatest realization of Virgie’s talent, but, then again, neither was giving piano lessons the highest realization of Miss Eckhart’s talents. Of course, there were many good things about Miss Eckhart’s piano lessons, the blossoming of Virgie’s talent and the recitals of the title not least among them. And even though Virgie’s playing for the movies is a compromise, she, like Miss Eckhart, is able to wrest some beauty out of that compromise. We learn about her piano playing for the movies:

Virgie Rainey had gone straight from taking music to playing the piano in the picture show. With her customary swiftness and lightness she had managed to skip an interval, some world-in-between where Cassie and Missie and Parnell were, all dyeing scarves. Virgie had gone direct into the world of power and emotion, which was beginning to seem even bigger than they had all thought. She belonged now with the Gish and the Talmadge sisters. With her yellow pencil she hit the tin plate when the tent opened where Valentino lived. (59)

Welty’s comparison of Virgie’s time playing for the movies with the lives of these actresses is significant. Of the two Gish sisters and three Talmadge sisters to rise to fame in silent-era Hollywood, the one most recognizable to contemporary audiences is probably Lillian Gish, who played the lead female role in *The Birth of a Nation* and made probably her most famous appearance in a sound film in 1955’s *Night of the Hunter* (which, of course, was released after Welty wrote the story). Norma Talmadge was one of the most famous stars of the silent era, but is almost unknown today. What these two women—along with Lillian’s sisters Dorothy Gish

and Norma's sisters Constance and Natalie Talmadge—also share is that they were major silent stars who were unable to maintain their stardom in the age of talkies. Discussing stars such as these, Paula Marantz Cohen says, “These cases suggest that the most prominent stars to emerge during the silent period were possessed of an unusual plasticity of character and that they followed the cues of public response to shape themselves along the lines that the public wanted” (140). The narration doesn't allow us enough insight into Virgie's thinking to know how consciously crafted her public life is, but it remains clear that Virgie does allow much of her life to be defined by the ways that people in Morgana, such as Loch, see her. The characters in “June Recital” wouldn't know that the stars they compare Virgie with would fade, of course. When the story takes place, these women were still the epitome of glamour, but when *The Golden Apples* was published in 1949, more than 20 years after the advent of synchronized sound, these women had largely faded from public view. It is not accidental that Virgie “belonged” with these women after the story explicitly introduces her, from Loch's point of view, in terms of being in a silent movie. This world of “power and emotion” is fleeting and transitory. Rudolph Valentino would die in 1926, so that tent where he lived would soon be empty. “The Wanderers” takes place during a period after talkies have helped usher out the age of these stars, showing that the book has a sense of historical perspective that the characters watching Virgie play don't. So, these movie stars, like Virgie, have different meanings, depending on the perspective. No matter how fleeting, their glamour is real, but the distance that time offers allows us to see them in a drastically different way. In “Eudora Welty Goes to the Movies” David McWhirter argues that the Bijou's showing of “Orientalist” movies such as *The Sheik* with Rudolph Valentino allows not only for examples of multiculturalism in the seemingly closed-off world of Morgana but also as “sustaining an ambivalent function, providing both an escape from and a reinforcement of the conventional southern scripts of female sexuality that surround and restrict Morgana's white middle-class and movie-going

girls” (78). He goes on to say that these movies “also provided a means for the Mississippi middle-class girls to project themselves into the world, a language that helped them not only to give names to their desire, but to see themselves and be seen, differently, out there, and ‘terribly recognizable’ “ (83). Because Virgie’s playing in the movie theater carries a whiff of tragedy, we make a mistake by trying to represent Welty’s fiction as completely enamored with the possibilities of cinema. It isn’t. We, as readers, always approach film with a sense of ambivalence. The ways that McWhirter discusses these “Orientalist” films as both opening up and closing off the world to the movie-going girls of Morgana is applicable to Virgie most of all. Virgie has control over what she plays, and plays a part in how the audience interprets these different films. But, no matter how beautiful her playing might be—and regardless of whether Miss Eckhart’s dreams of Virgie’s becoming a concert pianist are what Virgie really wants or what is best for her—Virgie is still stuck in Morgana. That the narration in “June Recital” never lets us into Virgie’s mind helps reinforce her isolation from the rest of Morgana. We don’t know exactly what she needs, whether Miss Eckhart’s dreams are really what’s best for her, but we cannot escape the feeling that whatever Virgie needs to do, it has to involve leaving Morgana.

During the silent era, it was common for small movie houses to have pianists like Virgie to play music to accompany the films. Sometimes there were scores composed specifically for the films—an important early score was that written for 1915’s *The Birth of a Nation*<sup>7</sup>—though movie studios often worried that local piano players wouldn’t have been able to perform them adequately. As time went on, film scores became more elaborate, and orchestras were eventually used in larger theaters. However, Virgie is playing in a time and place where she can play pretty much whatever she wants with the movie.<sup>8</sup> The book makes explicit how much control she has over what she plays: “Some evenings, she would lean back in her chair and let a whole forest fire burn in dead silence on the screen, and then when the sweethearts had found

each other, she would switch on her light with a loud click and start up with creeping minor runs—perhaps Anitra’s Dance” (59). All of this interferes with the interpretations of the films that the filmmakers might have intended. The right music would heighten the tension of a scene with a raging fire. No music would drastically alter how the audience perceives things.<sup>9</sup> As I discussed with McWhirter’s essay, the Bijou could be a place where the audience was opened up to a myriad of possibilities, and Virgie, through her piano playing, was instrumental in helping create those possibilities. As Jacques Polet says of film-going in the silent era, “spectators were caught in two opposite processes: one tied to images, which tended to *centering* in a hegemonic manner; the other, associated with sounds, which *decentered* the audience’s attention” (194). The filmic images in “June Recital” are hegemonic in the way that Polet discusses: They all center on Virgie as a particular image of a silent film star. She is having different meanings inscribed upon her. It seems unlikely that Loch would have seen Virgie’s encounter in the abandoned house quite the way he did if he hadn’t already associated Virgie with the Bijou. To this degree, Virgie is allowed a degree of control over how the movie is perceived by the audience. It is here that her artistic abilities, which, through their creative spontaneity, allow her to break through the prescribed confines of the culture industry. Ironically, it is when Virgie is playing for a silent movie that she has the opportunity to break out of her silence. Even though she is compromised by the movies, and all of Morgana, Virgie does get to practice her art, and this art gives her a voice. She is no longer defined solely as the patriarchal attitudes of Morgana frame her, but instead gets a chance at her own self-definition, which, in “The Wanderers,” shows us her art’s ability for human connection.

However, before moving on to “The Wanderers,” it’s worth spending a moment with “Music From Spain,” the second-to-last story in the book. “Music From Spain” stands apart from the rest of the stories in that it is the only one that doesn’t take place in the rural town of Morgana; instead, the locale is California, the heart of the movie industry. Eugene MacLain,

Morgana transplant and possible half-brother of Virgie Rainey, abruptly slaps his wife one morning and leaves the house to go walking about the streets of San Francisco. During his walk, Eugene comes across a Spanish guitarist whom he and his wife had seen play the night before. Eugene thinks that the guitarist is a “stranger and yet not a stranger, going along measuredly and sedately before, the only black-clad figured on the Western street, head and shoulders above all the rest” (194). Eugene, who struck his wife in part because of the unbearable grief he feels over their dead child, sees the guitarist as someone who is above the rest of the city, someone who clearly stands apart from the world Eugene identifies with his dead child and dying marriage.

Eugene, though, doesn't speak Spanish, and the guitarist doesn't speak English. At no point do the two say anything that the other can understand. Unlike the more complex understanding of art that we'll see in “The Wanderers,” Eugene's feelings toward the guitarist are not an honest attempt at emotional connection. He sees the guitarist merely as something to represent the freedom that he lacks, just as the people of Morgana see Virgie as a representation of the glory of silent film without truly making an attempt to understand her. Significantly, when Eugene and the guitarist go to a restaurant to have a meal, Eugene sees things in terms of film: “To Eugene the room was somehow old-fashioned and boxy, like a scene in some old silent movie” (200). And, while Eugene imagines the guitarist having an exotic black mistress, he “envisioned some silent (and this time, foreign) movie with that never spoken-in-love word, ‘enjoy,’ dancing for an instant upon the bouquet of flowers he'd be taking her” (201). Though the adult Eugene is dealing in more complex fantasies than Loch with his movie serials, Eugene is still reducing the guitarist to his own personal fantasies, not making any legitimate attempt to understand. In the midst of this meal that Eugene is framing as a movie, he thinks that he “had been easily satisfied of one thing—the formidable artist was free. There was no one he loved, to tell him anything, to lay down the law” (201).

Of course, Eugene can't know this. He doesn't know anything about this man. He is, instead, projecting his own fantasies onto him, similar to how characters in "June Recital" and "A Memory" do. Eugene even goes so far as to say, "You assaulted your wife" (221) to the guitarist, but after following that up with "But in your heart," he says no more, because it "was his lifelong trouble, he had never been able to express himself at all when it came to the very moment" (221). Eugene hopes that this guitarist, this perfect artist, can help him articulate his deepest emotions, but Eugene is always blocked, and he frequently returns to film imagery to make sense of things. As he thinks, "It struck Eugene that [the guitarist] looked like that Doctor Caligari in the old silent movie days, ringing his bell on the sideshow platform" (213). The film references reinforce Eugene's desires to see the guitarist in simpler terms, terms that make it difficult, if not impossible, for Eugene to express the fullness of what he's feeling. The story continues to parallel Eugene's inability to communicate with the guitarist with his inability to communicate with Emma, his wife. While the two men are travelling over a rocky beach, Eugene slips and the guitarist grabs him<sup>10</sup>, which makes Eugene think of the physical intimacy of being in bed with Emma, with the feeling of something "round in his mouth":

It was as if he were trying to swallow a cherry but found he was only the size of the stem of the cherry. His mouth received and was explored by some immensity. It became more and more immense while he waited. All knowledge of the rest of his body and the feeling in it would be leave him; he would not find it possible to describe his position in the bed, where his legs were or his hands; his mouth alone felt and it felt enormity. Only the finest, frailest thread of his own body seemed to exist, in order to provide the mouth. He seemed to have the world on his tongue. And it had no taste—only size. (223)

This enormity between them is the death of their daughter, Fan, an event so overwhelming that Eugene is unable to articulate it. After imagining a future moment of tenderness between him and Emma, Eugene thinks, "If he could have spoken! It was out of this relentlessness, not out of the gush of tears, that there would be a child again" (224). Certainly, finding a way to speak about his grief would not bring his daughter back, but it could begin to heal the violent chasm that has sprung up between him and his wife. Artistry might be the beginning of a way to

address the pains of life, but Eugene's views of the guitarist show how art itself is not enough. Welty stresses that human connections—ones that are based on an attempt at fundamental understanding—are necessary for art to help in alleviating the isolated nature of human existence. Eugene cannot do this, and he and the guitarist part ways without making any genuine connection.

In "The Wanderers," the final story in *The Golden Apples*, we learn that Virgie, after leaving home briefly, has returned to live with her mother and work as a secretary for Mr. Nesbitt, the industrialist who, as the narration says, is "out depleting the woods" (238). Considering the obvious debt cinema owes to industrialization, we might be tempted to view this as a lateral move. Mr. Nesbitt's company would just be more obvious in its dehumanizing effects. This idea seems to be reinforced when, after Virgie's mother dies, Virgie thinks, "Always in a house of death... all the stories come evident, show forth from the person, become a part of the public domain. Not the dead's story, but the living" (238). Literally, Virgie is reflecting on the gossiping going on during her mother's wake. But the "house of death" echoes back both to the Bijou and to Miss Eckhart's house where Loch (and the reader) spied on Virgie having sex. Miss Eckhart's long-abandoned house, based especially on the descriptions we get from Loch, is metaphorically "dead." The June recitals are long past, and instead of a place where young girls can discover their musical abilities, the house has become a run-down dump and a scene for Loch's impromptu silent movie. The Bijou, similarly, is the scene of Virgie's seeming "selling out," where she is explicitly linked with faded (or dead) silent screen stars and a general go-nowhere life. Of course, Virgie is not dead. In Miss Eckhart's house, the intimacy of her sex life became part of the "public domain" when Loch and the readers became privy to it. More hopefully, though, the living stories of Virgie's music are able to make some impact in the Bijou. An incident near the very end of the book provides us with a complex synthesis of how *The Golden Apples* approaches cinema.

On the night of Virgie's mother's funeral, after everyone else has either gone home or to bed, an old woman comes to Virgie's house and gives her a flower. The woman says, "It's for you. Keep it—won't do the dead no good. And tomorrow it'll look like a wrung chicken's neck. Look at it enduring the night" (267). Rebecca Mark, in her book-length study of *The Golden Apples*, sees Virgie's discarding of this flower—she throws it into the woods—as representative of Virgie's rejection of an incomplete version of femininity. Since the flower would only "endure through the night," and will die in the daytime, Mark aligns it with the type of femininity that has kept Virgie shackled to Morgana. Now that her mother is dead, Virgie "will never have to move back to her mother's house, to Miss Eckhart's stifling studio, or even to Moon Lake. Virgie can release everything and leave" (256). When Virgie invites the woman in, she says, "No, oh no. You used to play the pi-anna in the picture show when you's little and I's young and in town, dear love. ... Sorry about your mama: didn't suppose anyone make as pretty music as you *ever* have no trouble—I thought you's the prettiest little thing ever was" (267). At this point near the end of *The Golden Apples* we find a character who knows Virgie in terms similar to how Loch did when he helps introduce us to her at the beginning of "June Recital." Both knew her as the girl who played the piano at the picture show. We don't know anything about this woman. She is just one of the thousands of patrons to sit in the darkened theater and listen to Virgie play piano. To this woman, it is not so much Virgie's physical beauty, though she does mention that, but the beauty of her piano playing, which the old woman mentions first, that has endeared Virgie so much to her—to the point where she would come to Virgie's house more than 20 years after. There is an intense sense of tender beauty to this scene. Virgie's piano playing in the movie theater, which Miss Eckhart viewed as a denial of her talents, made such a profound impact on this woman that she would come visit Virgie decades later to try to offer her a small consolation on the day of her mother's funeral. This

scene is all the more striking when contrasted with the often-condescending attention that Virgie has received all day from her friends and family.

Of course, the woman only knows Virgie from her piano playing, and when she says she “didn’t suppose anyone make as pretty music as you *ever* have no trouble” she shows that she herself has idealized Virgie in a way that denies her full complexity—much as Loch does at the beginning of “June Recital” and much like viewers do with the movie stars to whom Virgie is compared. *Of course* Virgie would have troubles in life. Everyone who ever lived does. And, the place where Virgie made such an impact on the woman, the movie theater, is a site that embodies many of Virgie’s “troubles.” Throughout *The Golden Apples*, movies are associated with lies and dashed dreams. That the woman was so affected by Virgie’s piano playing is indeed touching, but it only helped her create a version of Virgie that doesn’t exist, and her refusal to come in—Virgie barely gets a word in to her—suggests that the woman isn’t terribly interested in knowing Virgie at all. Once she learned that Virgie’s mother died, the woman had to face how her idea of Virgie was not as perfect as she wanted it to be. It is for this idea of female perfection—one both fostered by and continually associated with the movies—that the woman is truly mourning. But, at the same time, we make a mistake if we reduce the old woman’s view of Virgie into an exact parallel of Loch’s. This woman’s enduring affection for the young girl who played the piano is far more complex than a young boy’s construction of a movie adventure while he is home sick one day. When Loch spies on Virgie earlier in the book, Loch and his views on film dictate how we view Virgie. However, at this point, the reader has seen how Virgie wrests some control in the movie theater, how the spontaneity and complexity of her artistic abilities help her break out from the confining nature of film. It is this artist—an artist that is still beholden to a degree to the culture industry—whom the old woman mourns. There is a reductive element that is aligned with Virgie’s being a movie-house pianist. The woman simplifies Virgie in a way that Loch and Eugene both simplify things through film.

However, unlike Loch and Eugene, the old woman, by giving the flower, attempts an honest human connection with Virgie. We know that Virgie's piano playing, which had artistic possibilities beyond the confines of the culture industry, helped this woman make that real human connection with Virgie, however slightly compromised.

Though this woman clearly still views Virgie in terms of her relationship to the movies, one of the significant differences between "The Wanderers" and "June Recital" is how we, as readers, get to spend more time with Virgie's personal thoughts and no longer see her defined exclusively in terms of silent movies. Significantly, before the woman comes, Virgie goes swimming in the river and, "She felt the sand, grains intricate as little cogged wheels, minute shells of old seas, and the many dark ribbons of grass and mud touch her and leave her, like suggestions and withdrawals of some bondage that might have been dear, now dismembering and losing itself" (248). This scene is the first time in the book where we spend a significant amount of time with Virgie alone. She has spent her life being defined and controlled by others. We know that it is "not from Virgie" that Katie Rainey, her domineering mother, would have "suffered contradiction" (232). But now, this bondage is "dismembering" and "losing itself." Her mother, the reason she returned to Morgana in the first place, is dead. Virgie's problems are larger than the movies, as we can see from her unfulfilling life with a pushy mom and her earlier series of meaningless sexual encounters with young men, but the movies are almost always the device through which her alienation is framed. Her visit from the old lady reinforces how, at least in Morgana, she will always be known in these terms. But, as she realizes while swimming, she has a freedom now. She can, as the adult Cassie tells her "go away like Loch... A life of your own, away—I'm so glad for people like you and Loch, I really am" (272). Loch, as we learn, has fought in the First World War and now lives in New York. He has gotten out of Morgana, and Cassie, Loch's older sister, wishes the same for Virgie.

And getting out of Morgana is what Miss Eckhart always wanted for Virgie, which brings us back to one of the central relationships in *The Golden Apples*. In “June Recital,” We learn that Virgie can play the opening of the Liszt concerto, and the narration tells us of Miss Eckhart’s thoughts: “Virgie Rainey, she repeated over and over, had a gift, and she must go away from Morgana. From them all. From her studio. In the world, she must study and practice her music for the rest of her life. In repeating all this, Miss Eckhart suffered” (60). Miss Eckhart feels that Virgie is too good for the stultifying atmosphere of Morgana, and she fears that Virgie must get out if she is ever to become a true artist. But, as the last sentence of this quote suggests, Miss Eckhart suffers because she always fears that Virgie will live the life that she herself has: that of a social outcast who makes a meager living playing piano for money and not for the sake of art. But these dreams are Miss Eckhart’s, not Virgie’s. And, in fact, in “The Wanderers,” Virgie visits the town graveyard and thinks of “Miss Eckhart, her old piano teacher whom she had hated...” (260). If we understand that the attempts to frame Virgie in terms of mass culture are reductive, we must avoid the pitfall of assuming that Miss Eckhart’s high-art aspirations for Virgie are inherently the better choice, since Virgie reacts against this with a feeling of hatred.

Certainly there is an element of this hatred that can be explained away as youthful insolence. At the very end of the “The Wanderers,” just before Virgie leaves Morgana, she reflects on her time with Miss Eckhart:

Miss Eckhart, whom Virgie had not, after all, hated—had come near to loving, for she had taken Miss Eckhart’s hate, and then her love, extracted them, the thorn and then the overflow—had hung the picture on the wall for herself. She had absorbed the hero and the victim and then, stoutly, could sit down to the piano with all of Beethoven ahead of her. With her hate, with her love, and with the small gnawing feelings that ate them, she offered Virgie her Beethoven. She offered, offered, offered—and when Virgie was young, in the strange wisdom of youth that is accepting of more than is given, she had accepted *the* Beethoven, as with the dragon’s blood. That was the gift she had touched with her fingers that had drifted and left her. (276)

This passage draws a distinction between *the* Beethoven—the idea that there is one perfect representation of Beethoven and his music—and *Miss Eckhart's* Beethoven—the idea that instead of being a perfect representation of art, an end in itself, Beethoven's music is a mediating force through which Miss Eckhart can try to show her feelings for Virgie. Virgie, too young to understand what Miss Eckhart is truly offering her, rejects Beethoven, since she cannot see what it truly represents. The high/low divide is deeply complicated in *The Golden Apples*. Beethoven's music initially does little good to Virgie, in spite of her technical proficiency in playing it—not because of anything inherent in Beethoven, but because Virgie is unable to understand why Miss Eckhart is trying to teach it to her. The music to Virgie might be a series of rote memorizations, but to Miss Eckhart, it is the only way she knows to show her faith in and affection for Virgie. But by using what Miss Eckhart taught her while playing in the Bijou, Virgie is able to make a connection with the old woman, though she won't know it until much later. As Naoko Fuwa Thornton says, Virgie now realizes that “in the heroic act the self and the other become one composite being of the two, that the true meaning of heroism is to absorb the other within the self” (108).

She thinks of the movie theater one last time, noting that “She had sometimes come alone to the Maclain Bijou after Mr. Nesbitt let her go in the afternoon” (274). She thinks this while at the train station in town. She has just driven there, and the narration tells us that “She had often done this, if only to turn around and go right back after a rest of a few moments. ...” (272). She has always tried to leave Morgana but never has until today. While waiting at the stile at the station, a man passes her by: “Then she was all to herself” (275). The narration continues: “Was she that? Could she ever be, would she be, where she was going?” (275). Can Virgie, a woman whom the town saw as a faded, beautiful movie star, ever be all to herself? Can she be defined on her own terms?<sup>11</sup> It is significant that Virgie wrestles with these issues after articulating the value of what Miss Eckhart tried to teach her. Miss Eckhart's piano

lessons, a sign of the love for and faith in Virgie, gave Virgie a creativity and spontaneity in her playing that reverberated far more than Virgie realized while she was a movie-house piano player. Virgie comes to this realization while she is also realizing the creativity and spontaneity necessary for her to move beyond Morgana, just as she moved beyond the strict confines of the culture industry.

Of the four writers I've discussed in this project, Eudora Welty, in her *The Golden Apples*, gives what I consider to be the most hopeful ending. William Faulkner's, works, as I discussed, show the reader frequently terrible endings and urge him to focus on the moments of ambivalence and resistance along the way. Wright and Schwartz, similarly, give endings that display characters in moments of profound isolation. I am not trying to set up a simple binary with Welty on one side and the other three writers on the other. Faulkner, Wright, and Schwartz are clearly interested in moments where the possibility of human connection is real: The relationship between Byron Bunch and Lena Grove in *Light in August* is perhaps the most hopeful. But that novel also ends with Lena spurning Byron's advances in the hopes that Joe Brown will come back to her, all while Joe Christmas's story is in danger of being reduced to just another lynching. *The Golden Apples* ends with Virgie making a profound realization about her relationship with Miss Eckhart, and then it connects that realization with Virgie's waiting to leave Morgana, a place where everyone defined her in the terms dictated by the culture industry, for a future that is unwritten. If the book were to continue Virgie's story, she would certainly have more troubles, but Welty's focus on the power of genuine personal connection suggests a level of healing that the other writers have trouble reaching.

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#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ruth D. Weston's *Gothic Traditions and Narrative Techniques in the Fiction of Eudora Welty*, as its title suggests, explores the gothic influence on Welty's writing. Though the book is not explicitly concerned with the culture industry, it's worth noting, as I discussed more in

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depth in my chapter on Richard Wright, that many American readers during Welty's era would be familiar with gothic conventions through pieces of mass culture.

<sup>2</sup> *A Daughter of the Gods* (1916), released a year after the epochal *The Birth of a Nation*, was the first Hollywood film to cost a million dollars, and had a score so elaborate that an orchestra was always there to perform it.

<sup>3</sup> There is a larger problem with Welty scholarship here, namely what I see as many critics using *One Writer's Beginning* as a way to retroactively explain whatever's happening in Welty's fiction. I don't think that the small biographical details Welty provides should be used as the final word for readings of her works.

<sup>4</sup> For good discussions on the social construction of the perception of reality in *The Golden Apples* see "The Fierce Humanity of Morgana: Welty's *The Golden Apples*" by Jeffrey J. Folks, "The Madwoman Can't Speak: Postwar Culture, Feminist Criticism, and Welty's 'June Recital'" by Marta Caminero-Santangelo, and "Story-Making in *The Golden Apples*: Point of View, Gender, and the Importance of Cassie Morrison" by Harriet Pollack.

<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, it's uncanny how much of the story's telescope voyeur-as-filmmaker ideas would be echoed in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954).

<sup>6</sup> John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* gives a useful overview of the way that men look at women: "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (47).

<sup>7</sup> See Martin Miller Marks's *Music and the Silent Film* for an in-depth discussion of this.

<sup>8</sup> For further background, see Miller, along with Rick Altman's *Silent Film Sound* and Roy M. Prendergast's *A Neglected Art*.

<sup>9</sup> For an easily available opportunity to gauge the effects that a score can have on a silent film, I suggest watching the Criterion Collection's DVD release of the 1922 Swedish horror film *Haxan*. The DVD contains both the original film with a performance of its original score and the edited version that played in America during the late 1960s. This shorter cut of the movie features a new free jazz score and narration by William Burroughs. What is often haunting and beautiful in the 1922 version comes across as laughable in the American version because of the elitist condescension of the new soundtrack.

<sup>10</sup> Some critics see events such as this as evidence of Eugene's homosexuality, which he has previously repressed. See, for example "Song From San Francisco: Space, Time, and Character in Eudora Welty's 'Music From Spain'" by Matt Huculak. I think, however, that the story gives us enough of the possibility of reconciliation with Emma to suggest that the dead child, and not Eugene's sexual orientation, is at the center of the couple's marriage problems.

<sup>11</sup> For in-depth discussion of how Virgie moves beyond the confines of Morgana, though one that doesn't discuss it in terms of the high-low divide, see "Eudora Welty's *The Golden Apples*:"

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Abjection and the Maternal South” by Joel B. Peckham Jr. and Jan Nordby Gretlund’s *Eudora Welty’s Aesthetics of Place*.

## Conclusion

As I mentioned in my chapter on William Faulkner, though there has been a substantial amount of criticism discussing the relationship between Faulkner's work and film, Faulkner's works make very few explicit references to films. However, the brief mention of film in Faulkner's 1942 novel *Go Down, Moses* sets up a situation that encapsulates much of the tension I've been exploring in this dissertation. Though the novel was originally published as *Go Down, Moses, and Other Stories*, Faulkner insisted that the book was a novel and should be read as such. Like Welty's *The Golden Apples* (to which it has been frequently compared) *Go Down, Moses* is a collection of interrelated stories without a clear narrative progression tying them together. Chronicling roughly a century in the history of the McCaslin family, a family that includes both black and white members, the novel is one of Faulkner's most profound explorations of race in the South, and "Pantaloon in Black" gives a sustained portrait of the grief of a black man, whom we only know as Rider, whose wife has recently died. The first half of the story is told from the point of view of a relatively omniscient narrator who tells us during the funeral that the grave is surrounded by "objects insignificant to sight but actually of a profound meaning and fatal to touch, which no white man could have read" (132). Already, the story is acknowledging aspects of the black experience that are fundamentally unknowable to white people, an idea that comes into play in the second half of the story, which is told by the white sheriff's deputy to his wife.

The story's first portion has Rider experiencing a profound sense of grief as he gets drunk, loses his job, and eventually gets arrested for killing a white man—an act that is very likely self-defense—who is running a crooked dice game. In the story's second section, the sheriff's deputy begins the story to his wife with a profoundly racist outburst:

"Them damn niggers... I swear to godfrey, it's a wonder we have as little trouble with them as we do. Because why? Because they ain't human. They look like a man and they walk on their hind legs like a man, and they can talk and you can understand them and

you think they are understanding you, at least now and then. But when it comes to the normal human feelings and sentiments of human beings, they might as well be a damn herd of wild buffaloes. Now you take this one today—” (149-150)

What the first part of the story offers, of course, is a pre-emptive rejoinder to the notion that black people “ain’t human.” Rider’s grief at the death of his wife, along with the presentation of family members who are trying to pull him back from the edge, are ample evidence of the humanity of all the black characters in the story. The story’s mention of film comes after the deputy tells his wife about how Rider went home after the killing and let the police arrest him without putting up any resistance. In his cell, Rider tears the cot off the wall and then rips the cell door off its hinges. It takes several men to subdue him, and the deputy says to his wife that Rider was “laughing and laughing and saying, ‘Hit look lack Ah just cant quit thinking. Look Like I just cant quit.’ And what do you think of that?” (154).

To this his wife responds that “I think if you eat any supper in this? you’ll do it in the next five minutes... I’m going to clear this table then and I’m going to the picture show” (154). In this instance whatever movie she is going to see is put in direct contrast to the significantly more complicated story the deputy is telling. Though the racist tone of his earlier language suggests that he thinks he knows everything there is to know about the lives of black Americans, the question that he asks his wife, in light of Rider’s enigmatic words, shows that the deputy has encountered a situation that he truly can’t explain. His wife’s insistence that he eat dinner so she can clean up and go see a movie indicates that she is more interested in whatever simpler fare can be found at the picture show than she is in the genuinely complex, and unanswerable, question that her husband is asking. Readers of *Go Down, Moses* have been forced to question and analyze the complexities and contradictions of race in the South in ways that neither the deputy nor his wife have. The question that the sheriff asks his wife certainly doesn’t erase the generations of racial injustice that the novel explores, but it challenges reader

to think more complexly about how black Americans have been forced, through generations of violence both physical and social, to tell their stories in a language that no white man can read.

But his wife chooses the movie, and the story ends. While this is one of the few explicit mentions of film in Faulkner's works, there is nothing that is film-specific about it. The final passage of the story would have had the same effect if she had said she needed to get back to reading her magazine or listening to her radio program. My point is that the story positions a more simplistic piece of the culture industry in direct contrast to a situation that is far more complex and has no simple solution. My chapter on Faulkner explored how he contrasts print mass culture with his more complex stories, and while the mention of movies isn't nearly as sustained in "Pantaloon in Black" as the instances of mass culture are in the other novels I've discussed, the movie is presented as a simplistic alternative to a complex story in a way not unlike the presentation of the culture industry in his other novels.

It isn't just that she chooses to go see a movie—something that Wright, Welty, and Schwartz wouldn't necessarily see as such a trivial thing—it's that she chooses the movie instead of thinking about the more consequential implications of Rider's story. Broadly speaking, all four of the writers I'm discussing are engaged in a similar critique. That the culture industry is capable of nuances and isn't always selling products with regressive, simplistic content is undoubtedly true. This doesn't, however, negate the Adornian conception of the culture industry as just that—an industry set on marketing and selling exactly what sells, and what sells is frequently material of considerably less complexity and nuance than the modernist works of the four writers I've spent this dissertation discussing. In essence, they are all asking the reader to pay more attention to what they're writing than to a movie whose content would be far less likely to be critically engaged with pressing social issues. It is well-trod territory to say that modernism and mass culture exist in a continual state of tension, a tension that, according to many critics, has been broken down considerably with the advent of

postmodernism. I began the research for this dissertation convinced that the high/low tension wasn't really there in modernist literature, and I finish the dissertation strongly convinced that it is. I am not trying to negate the valuable contributions made by the critics I deal with in my opening chapter. I think it's important to view the high/low divide not as an immutable separation but as two highly contested fields engaged in a constant process of negotiation.

A level of engagement by writers with the culture industry is inescapable—Adorno's theories acknowledged this—and virtually all modernist writers display different approaches to this engagement. Faulkner, of the four writers I've discussed, is the least interested in engaging with the tropes of mass culture, yet he still does so quite frequently, though not nearly on the same level as Wright. Elements of the detective story are certainly present in *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, but not nearly to the degree that they are in *Native Son*. Wright, along with Welty and Schwartz, spend significant portions of their writings exploring explicitly the formal aspects of film, certainly to critique it, but also because film itself gave them new ways to present their modernist writings. However, though the engagement with mass culture is very real, I don't think it's a coincidence that these four writers are all clearly concerned with positioning their writings as also significantly different from the pieces of mass culture that they present in their works. They all show several moments where the reader is urged to question how what she is reading is different from the mass culture the characters are consuming. These writers were making their art during a period when the culture industry hadn't reached the level of saturation it has today.

Faulkner, more than any of the other writers I'm discussing, is concerned with a sense of fatalism that he presents as frequently inherent to the culture industry. His characters focus on the ending, since the ending promises either what those characters want out of life or an ideology that is comforting in the ways that it reaffirms a less complex worldview. Life is not so simple, and neither are Faulkner's books. The focus on the ending ignores the nuances and

complexities along the way, and it always leads Faulkner's characters to disaster. More than any of the other texts I've discussed, Faulkner's books stress a near-total rejection of the culture industry. Just as Thomas Sutpen goes to his cave to contemplate the injury that was visited upon him, readers of Faulkner are invited to engage in the type of thoughtful, dialectical process that can help them see that the fatalistic worldview put forth by the culture industry is not some kind of Gospel truth that cannot be altered but is instead a series of simple stories that can be resisted by the type of nuanced thinking found in Faulkner's novels.

We can only speculate whether Wright's career would have turned out differently if the overtly modernist *Lawd Today!* had been his first published novel, as he intended. Though Wright, in his writings, framed *Native Son* as, in many ways, a response to the white reaction to his first published book, the short story collection *Uncle Tom's Children*, reading *Native Son* today in tandem with *Lawd Today!* suggests that Wright was thinking intensely about how he saw his novels fitting into the context of the culture industry. There has been an occasional tendency to approach Wright as socially and historically important while downplaying his aesthetic abilities, but part of what remains remarkable about *Native Son* is how it is both a compulsively readable pastiche of many of the popular forms of the late 1930s and a self-reflexive modernist work that asks the reader to question how the popular forms that the novel is displaying are also part of an inherently racist system. To enjoy *Native Son* is, in many ways, to become complicit in the racism that the novel is examining. As I mentioned, with *Native Son*, Wright wrote a more complex piece of mass culture, one that provides both the immediate pleasures we associate with the culture industry and compels readers to think about how those cultural products are themselves parts of a racist system.

Considering the amount of work being done on the relationships between literature and mass culture, it remains particularly distressing that Delmore Schwartz remains largely absent from critical discussion. Schwartz's stories, especially the three I've discussed here, display a

complex approach to the culture industry, one that explores the possibilities that arise from different people approaching the same cultural product. Schwartz's protagonists are the type of modernist heroes who value the autonomy of art; and while that approach to the world isn't adequate when it comes to dealing with the problems of real life, it does allow the artist to approach the products of the culture industry in a more complex way. The masses are represented as approaching a movie expecting simple entertainment, and that's what they get. The artists look for more, and we, as readers, can see that mass culture is capable of displaying complex social truths. What we need to do is approach those pieces of popular culture with an artistically inclined worldview, one that is more capable of seeing the nuances within mass culture that some audience members are more inclined to dismiss as "only a movie."

While Faulkner, Wright, and Schwartz aren't nihilistic, their writing can still display a clear pessimism about the hopes for humanity to resist the near-totalizing forces of modernity. While it's a mistake to read any book or story focusing solely on the ending, this doesn't make the point at which the writer chooses to end her story inconsequential. The sense of isolation that is a significant element of modernist literature is prevalent in all of the writers I'm discussing, and virtually all of the stories and novels I've discussed by Faulkner, Wright, and Schwartz end with their protagonists alone or dead. While Welty's *The Golden Apples* ends with Virgie Rainey alone at the train station, she has just buried her domineering mother and is leaving Morgana, likely forever, so that she can, we hope, create a future of her own. This scene takes place after Virgie has made the profound realization that Mrs. Eckhart, whom she at one point felt she hated, had actually given freely of herself in the only way she could—through her piano lessons. For Welty, art is a salve to the alienating nature of modernity—here, embodied by the movies—in its ability to help forge genuine human connections. The culture industry might be nearly omnipresent—the only place Virgie can make a living playing piano is at the movie theater—but it's still possible to wrest some artistic control in spite of that culture

industry. Virgie's piano playing at the theater makes an indelible mark on the old woman who comes to Virgie's house years later to try to comfort her after her mother's death. For Welty, it is the bonds that people make with each other—bonds that can be strengthened by the spontaneity and complexity of art—that help people resist the alienating nature of modernity.

I think part of the value of modernist literature is in how its great formal innovations and its drive for autonomy can help create a framework for unique, individual resistance in the face of seemingly overwhelming situations. This is not elitism—a charge that is frequently leveled against modernism. Rather, it is an attempt to assert a true human dignity in the face of tendencies to see everything in terms of something to be bought or sold.

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## Vita

Jason Dupuy grew up around New Orleans and graduated from Loyola University in 2002 with a degree in communications. After spending two years he'll never get back in the newspaper industry, he came to his senses and enrolled at LSU to study English, where he earned a Master of Arts degree in 2004 and a Doctor of Philosophy degree in 2010. As of this writing he lives in Baton Rouge with his girlfriend, Melinda, and two dogs, Charley and Yuki.