

# **THE LABOR THEORY OF CULTURE**

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The Labor Theory of Culture is a rigorous inquiry into the commonsense of contemporary cultural theory and an effort to articulate a materialist cultural theory as an alternative to the commonsense. Cultural theory, I believe, in focusing on the immanence of culture separate from economics, has ultimately separated culture entirely from the labor relations and conflicts in which it is always involved. It has become so focused on the details of culture and cultural difference that it cannot address cultural difference except on its own immanent terms. It has therefore been increasingly unable, I suggest, to account for the new complexities of culture in relation to the emerging global class dynamics of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. I argue that by developing a labor theory of culture based on the texts of classical Marxism it becomes possible to address not only the immanent specifics of culture but culture's relation to its outside, which I think provides for a more comprehensive analysis of culture. I realize that to argue for a labor theory of culture today is to write against the grain of cultural theory. I therefore spend some time closely analyzing some of the central assumptions undergirding "culturalism" by reading specific texts of theorists such as Georg Lukacs, Stuart Hall, Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Zizek, and Antonio Negri, whose work has transformed the vocabularies and interpretive strategies of contemporary cultural theory. The self-situating of the labor theory of culture is important because almost all contemporary cultural theories regard themselves to be material, if not materialist. The question of what makes materiality in cultural theory is therefore

a central question of my project. I for the most part focus on (post)modern North-Atlantic cultural theory and look at the way that the relation of culture to materiality has been deployed in the texts of Immanuel Kant, Roger Scruton, Tom Cohen, Fredric Jameson and Antonio Negri, as well as provide detailed readings of literature (Kafka), art (Matthew Barney), film (The Butcher Boy), and the "culture wars," to make my argument for a labor theory of culture in the contemporary more concrete.

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## INTRODUCTION

In his influential essay "The Centrality of Culture," Stuart Hall writes that our time is one of "'cultural revolution' in the substantive, empirical and material senses of the word. Substantively, the domain constituted by the activities, institutions and practices we call 'culture' has expanded out of all recognition" (209). Never before has "culture" been as conspicuous as the present. Everything—including, as Fredric Jameson argues, nature and the unconscious (Postmodernism)—is seen as "cultural" now and the older sense of culture—as the opposite of natural and singular because created/creative—loses its meaning. Everything from diseases and genetics to happiness and war is now made a matter of social construction, and its workings are analyzed in terms of signifying practices and differences. Such a highly reflexive understanding of culture assumes that "language is constitutive of that which it names" (Barker, Making Sense of Cultural Studies 3). Culture is made into a rhetorical figure of Derridean undecidability as it "can be both a descriptive and evaluative term," as Terry Eagleton argues, and is taken as a sign that the world has moved beyond the binaries of history such as naturalism and idealism, freedom and necessity, consciousness and spontaneity, contingency and necessity (The Idea of Culture 5). And yet, this discursive view of culture gives a highly reified understanding of the social that separates it entirely from the underlying labor relations people must inhabit in order to live, especially the ruthless binary of class. The fundamental separation of culture from the economic in the discourse theory of culture normalizes the existing social inequality as a matter

of lifestyles and self-fashioning in the marketplace (David Chaney, Lifestyles). It also formalizes culture itself by treating it as a self-enclosed and auto-intelligible practice. The canonic all-is-culture theory of the social almost always leads to one conclusion: "The old distinction which classical Marxism used to make between the economic 'base' and the ideological 'superstructure' is difficult to sustain in circumstances where the media both form a critical part of the material infrastructure of modern societies and are a principal means by which ideas and images are circulated" (Stuart Hall, "The Centrality of Culture" 209).

The Labor Theory of Culture will be a rigorous inquiry into the commonsense of contemporary cultural theory and an effort to articulate a materialist cultural theory as an alternative to the commonsense. Cultural theory, I believe, in focusing on the immanence of culture separate from economics, has ultimately separated culture entirely from the labor relations and conflicts in which it is always involved. It has become so focused on the details of culture and cultural difference that it cannot address cultural difference except on its own immanent terms. It has therefore been increasingly unable, I will suggest, to account for the new complexities of culture in relation to the emerging global class dynamics of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. I will argue that by developing a labor theory of culture it becomes possible to address not only the immanent specifics of culture but culture's relation to its outside, which I think provides for a more comprehensive analysis of culture. I will do so by a sustained and comprehensive engagement with major contemporary theories of culture and by reading specific texts of theorists such as Georg Lukacs, Stuart Hall, Tom Cohen, Slavoj Zizek, and Antonio Negri, whose work have transformed the vocabularies and interpretive strategies of contemporary cultural theory.

I realize that to argue for a labor theory of culture today is to write against the grain of cultural theory. I will therefore spend some time closely analyzing some of the central assumptions under girding culturalism, as a basis for advancing a labor theory of culture in the contemporary. The self-situating of the labor theory of culture is important because almost all contemporary cultural theories regard themselves to be material, if not materialist. The question of what makes materiality in cultural theory will therefore be a central question of my project. I will for the most part be focusing on (post)modern North-Atlantic cultural theory and look at the way that the relation of culture to materiality has been deployed in the texts of Immanuel Kant, Roger Scruton, Tom Cohen, Slavoj Zizek and Antonio Negri, in order to explore the need for my own labor theory of culture. Closely related to the question of materiality is the question of what constitutes a theory of culture. One of my arguments will be that theory as description of the textual surfaces of culture has taken the place of theory as an explanation of culture in the humanities today. Explanation is usually considered a totalitarian act of closure because it is a causal understanding of practices and phenomena that contains an implicit claim to Truth (capital T) that is thus the arch-binary of truth and falsehood. Since Nietzsche's critique of causality (The Will to Power 293-300) cultural critique has moved away from explanation and embraced description as a mode of knowing that "interprets" culture in its own terms but refuses to relate it to an "outside" (i.e. cause). The Labor Theory of Culture returns to theory as explanation and will therefore make extensive use of the classical texts of materialist cultural theory such as those of Marx and Engels which prioritize causal understandings of culture. My use of these texts will be to elaborate a materialist cultural theory and distinguish it from different understandings of materialism in the humanities today which are mostly descriptive and against explanation.

I distinguish between three forms of cultural theory according to the mode in which they theorize materiality: materiality as in opposition to culture (humanist), as synonymous with culture (discursive), and, as the basis of culture (materialist). Using melodrama as a focus in chapter 1 I will distinguish between these forms of cultural theory in more detail. These different modes of materiality in cultural theory cut across intellectual and political differences such as Marxism or deconstruction. There have been "humanist" marxisms as well as "materialist" understandings of right wing thought, for example.<sup>1</sup> These modes of intelligibility are therefore more effectively understood historically. Raymond Williams's theorization of "dominant," "residual" and "emergent" structures of feeling (Marxism and Literature 121-7) will help explain what I mean. In Williams's terms, the intelligibility of cultural forms is dependent on their relative degree of incorporation into the hegemonic order—an incorporation that according to him is finally impossible—and not simply a matter of the formal specification of characteristics supposedly delineating different styles of thought. The importance of such a conceptualization of culture is that provides an explanatory understanding of culture that can uncover the material forces that enable social change rather than a merely descriptive analytics that fails to penetrate the surface of culture. Thus "humanism," for instance, is "residual" in the contemporary not because, as mainstream commentary would have it, it has been eclipsed by postmodern thought. In actuality the fundamental assumptions of humanism in cultural theory about the place of the subject in the social have been called into question by new social forces and developments, such as a globalization and the multicultural workforce, that have thrown its self-evidencies, such as the idea that culture unites society above and beyond its material differences, into crisis. In short, I am arguing that humanism is more effectively read as

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Frederic Jameson, Fables of Agression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist.

symptomatic of a total cultural moment explained by a social basis outside the cultural superstructure, what Williams, following Marx, calls its "mode of production" (Marxism and Literature 125), a basis which it legitimates and helps organize and without which it loses its ability to provide the subject with a sense of the rational and real. Postmodern modes of intelligibility are culturally dominant in the contemporary but its assumptions about culture are themselves in crisis under the impact of an emergent materialist cultural theory, as I will later discuss. For example, the idea that culture testifies to an "incredulity toward grand narratives" (Lyotard) is not only logically problematic as a truth claim but more importantly historically problematic under the global dominance of neoliberalism.

Theory since Plato has been an inquiry into the "essence" behind appearances. At this level of generality however there would appear to be no difference between Plato's "timeless" and spiritual understanding of essence, for example, and Marx's inquiry into the economic laws of motion of social formations. Discursivist theory has formalized theory and translated its search for the causes behind phenomena into the "metaphysics of presence," the belief in an "extra-discursive" essence, and has thus blurred the lines between idealist and materialist theory. Theory is now "radical" when it un-fixes binaries such "inside" and "outside" by translating them into multiple significations that proliferate the pleasures of the text beyond all master codes. But what kind of reading-pleasure is this that suppresses the contestation on the first premises of theory and fails to consider the very different practical conclusions that follow from whether one believes that the world is a reflection of ideas, or, conversely, that ideas reflect material conditions?<sup>2</sup> If the world is conditioned by ideas ending inequality would simply be a matter of changing ideas (enlightenment), which, for all its opposition to the Enlightenment, is what

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler for example calls the latter "left conservatism" because of its rejection of liberal pluralism.

discursivist theory itself argues: the composite writer JK Gibson-Graham for example, one of whom serves on the editorial board of *Rethinking Marxism*, argue that inequality will end with the end of "capital-centrism" (*The End of Capitalism [As We Knew It]*). Conversely, if ideas are seen in the context of social inequality and unequal access to resources changes at the level of ideas must be understood as secondary reflections of more primary changes in the struggle over material resources: "ideas that revolutionize society... express the fact... that the dissolution of the old ideas keeps even pace with the dissolution of the old conditions of existence" (Marx and Engels, *Manifesto* 489).

There are important cultural issues raised by the basic difference in theory as well. In viewing a film for example do we "identify" with the "characters" and the ups and downs of their "story" or are we being placed ideologically in relation to corporate power and given to think that ideas shape the world we see? Is *Seabiscuit* (dir. Gary Ross), for instance, the story of the triumph of the human spirit (in a horse?) over all obstacles that empowers its viewers with a sense of the possible, or, is it about how "spirit" itself is an obstacle to entrepreneurial freedom in a "posthuman" present that demands new ethical subjectivities to mitigate the social consequences of global capitalism? What is a text anyway? Is it a figural arrangement of tropes more or less "aesthetically" arranged to confuse "reference with phenomenalism" as Paul de Man writes, or, is it an "arena of class struggle" as Voloshinov argues? And, what about language itself? Is it an arbitrary construct "without positive terms" (Sausurre) or a product of labor that embodies positive knowledge (Engels)? These questions of course assume the possibility of decided answers grounded in reliable foundations ("essence") and thus raise the question of the need for theory. But theory as an inquiry into origins is today declared to be dead. Theory is labeled "spectral" by the theorists themselves (Derrida, *Specters of Marx; Ghostly Demarcations*,

ed. Michael Sprinker) on the grounds that theory is "essentialist" while its foundations have disappeared. Leaving aside for the moment that anti-foundationalism is itself a foundation, discursivist theory has made the specter of theory the limit text of theory and claimed that this "unconditional" theory, which is supposed to exist without foundations, is the most radical theory because it rejects the dogmatic. By disconnecting theory from the class relations that shape culture, however, theory has come to be the most dogmatic assertion that the way things are is incontestable. Theory has been turned from being an inquiry into the conditions of knowing from which a transformative understanding of the totality is produced into an ornament of speculation and the legitimation of "spiritual" solutions for inequality that has placed theory in crisis. As a result the theorists have in their statements become indistinguishable from the humanists they once distanced themselves from for whom theory simply interferes with aesthetic pleasure.

The question of the "popular" is central to ongoing debates in cultural studies. This is not only because of the serious consequences its theorization has for social praxis in shaping the emergent globality in the wake of the anti-capitalist protests, but, more importantly, because in capitalism "popular" is used to hide class antagonism (through such descriptive concepts as "status" and "lifestyle" for example). In chapter 1 I argue for an oppositional and enabling theory of the popular as the other of pluralism. Pluralism, as in the semiotic democracy of the cultural left, alibis the totalitarianism of the free market which is based on wage-slavery of the many for the profit of a few. What is popular, I will argue, is not a question of "subjectivity" (freedom of speech) but of objectivity (economic freedom)—not a matter of political desire but of material need. It is not "popular," in other words, to occult consciousness of the class antagonism in society but an elitist bourgeois practice that maintains exploitation. However,

what is "radical" now is precisely a post-class understanding of the popular that alibis class inequality. For this reason, I will argue that for a truly radical cultural studies it is necessary to provide "root" knowledge of the social (Marx, Reader 60)—knowledge of the social relations of production ("class")—against the complexification (masked as analytical subtlety) and the fetishism of singularities (that supports a "free" market ideology of agency) which make up the populist reason of post-al capitalism in the knowledge industry. Root knowledge is essential in order to foreground the binary in the "popular" between popular-as-populist post-class ideology and popular-as-class critique. The blending and blurring of the binary supports the ruling class by dehistoricizing and normalizing capitalist subjectivities and displacing the historical "outside" (socialism) with a pietistic "beyond" (utopia).

Melodrama has always been a site of the "class struggle at the level of theory" (Althusser) where the populist sentimentality and critique-al knowledge of the social have fought it out. This is not surprising because, as one critic puts it, melodrama has been a popular way to "deal with the dynamics of early capitalist economics" (Elsaesser 73) and now, under the neoliberal populism of the market pedagogy in global capitalism, "society... is more and more splitting up into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat" (Marx and Engels, Reader 474). In the market pedagogy, the "popularity" of melodrama has been considered a matter of its formal plurality and made central to understanding the form. In other words, the secondary issue that melodramas are "spectacular, and based on broad appeal" (Elsaesser 75) or, similarly, because they originally were "written for a public that extended from the lower classes... through all sectors of the middle class, and even embraced members of the aristocracy" (Brooks xvi), or, in different language, because they "served as a crucial space in which the cultural, political, and economic exigencies... were played out and transformed into public

discourses" (Hays and Nikolopoulou viii); or, more common-sensically because melodrama is "powered by emotion" and thus "liberating for people" (Lang 20) to consume; because of its "insistence on the importance of the ordinary" and the "everyday" as a site of "desire" (Byars 11); or its formal "irony" in structuring "experience" in such a way that "ignorance of the properly social and political dimensions of these changes [social crises] and their causality" is given "symbolic plausibility" (Elsaesser 72-3) by being placed on an "existential level" (86), has been made primary and the material basis of melodrama in class conflict has been occulted. To say these are secondary considerations is not to deny that culturalist theory of melodrama is internally constituted by a local division over whether the popularity of melodrama is due to its being a transparent representation of people's "lived experience," or, rather, because it gives a post-mimetic representation that displays the constructedness of the real (a regional contradiction I engage within the text). It is only by making the class politics of melodrama primary, however, that the cultural struggles can be clarified and melodrama provide an occasion to produce root knowledge and radical subjectivities capable of engaging in the praxis of social change.

What I call "(post)melodrama" is essential to such a critique. Such a concept is needed to mark the ensemble of practices that diffuses culture into an empty plurality of consumer attachments that makes the populist common-sense of global capitalism that agency is a matter of knowledge (values) not praxis (labor). The critique of (post)melodrama will also provide a theorization of what in the discourses of Marxism has been put forward as a popular melodrama in which the class conflicts over the real are made central to transforming cultural practices for revolutionary change.

In chapter 1 I outline how the historical shifts in the discussion of melodrama reveal the political economy of the "subject" and agency under capitalism and thus explain that what

appears to be a debate over the politics of the popular in the dominant writings is in actuality an inter-class debate about which subjectivities better alibi the ruling class and facilitate the construction of a compliant workforce. Later in the chapter I will demonstrate the effectiveness of this theorization in reading the (post)melodramatic text of The Butcher Boy (dir. Neil Jordan, 1997).

My first chapter also begins to analyze humanist cultural theory more closely by reading some of its central tutor-texts; Plato and Kant's. In Kant's Critique of Judgment the aesthetic is considered "pure" and "disinterested" and is made a kind of experience prior to conceptuality as well as a necessary precondition of understanding. His view indicates a late shift in the Enlightenment project to the primacy of the senses over reason and has been used, by Lyotard and de Man for instance, to argue for a theory of materiality as in excess of concepts. Besides indicating a late shift in humanist thought that de-values reason, Kant's aesthetic turn is an important moment in the genealogy of culturalism that is widely seen as leading, through Nietzsche, toward a (post)modern materialism.

So dominant is the theory of materiality authorized by Kant's third critique that it shapes as well the writings of contemporary conservative critics such as Roger Scruton, who is supposedly opposed to postmodernism. I will also investigate Scruton's cultural theory as a contemporary humanist approach which argues that culture reflects a timeless human essence (spirit) opposed to the modern forces of materiality (consumer society). In this way I propose to show that humanist theories of culture such as Kant and Scruton's presume the same ahistorical theory of materiality one finds in postmodern theorists who argue for the materiality of signs as an allegory of the opacity of desire.

In order to further explain the ideological coincidence of humanist and discursive cultural theory more closely I will engage the writings of Tom Cohen in chapter two. Cohen understands materiality as cultural "inscription" and argues that the real is an effect of signification. Cohen rejects all other theories of materiality as ideological because they are more or less "mimetic" and lack the kind of discursive self-reflexivity he thinks makes the writings of de Man in particular culturally radical. His own writings show, however, that more important than surface differences over mimesis is the deep commitment of culturalism against a materialist cultural theory, an antagonism that unites the otherwise intellectually opposed positions of humanist and discursive cultural theory.

What Cohen's writings thus show despite themselves is that at stake in the debates over mimesis is not mimesis but different ways of knowing the world that have different and opposed political consequences in terms of the ongoing class conflicts over the cultural real. To clarify this point, I will look at a specific cultural reading that Cohen proposes as a model for discursivist cultural studies, his reading of Alfred Hitchcock's The 39 Steps.

In the remainder of chapter 2 I turn to Franz Kafka as an example of the crisis of the contemporary totality so as to make my arguments above regarding culture as a site of conflict over materiality more concrete. Kafka's writings and their "readings" have become not only a layered cultural signpost but also a threshold in critical and cultural theory. In their readings of Kafka, Lukács and Derrida, to take two of his most careful readers, bring out not only the complexities of his texts but also mark the way in which the act of reading itself has become a complex and materially consequential cultural practice. Kafka is usually seen as the opposite of a "realistic" writer because of the attenuated view of the world in his texts and the impossibility of an authentic human response to these conditions they seem to represent. This

view fails to read Kafka as reflecting on social relations because it conflates reflection with "reference" and concludes that because his writing lacks systemic awareness of society and modalities of change it must be read in "existential" or "metaphysical" terms and that are common-sensically assumed to be above politics and free of class ideology. Conversely, I will show how in the spectrality of its details Kafka's text registers the fact that capitalism as it develops must alienate all social activity and productions to serve the rule of profit so that nothing in the end is able to remain a local and self-enclosed activity but rather entails an invisible (but global) system for its production. I will argue that Kafka follows a culturalist logic by surfacing the contradictions of daily life under monopoly capitalism while mystifying any causal systemic explanation for them. What the culturalist reading of Kafka is blind to and what materialist reading emphasizes, however, is the textual resistance in the texts of Kafka to the system of monopoly capitalism which transforms daily life into a regimented life regulated by the logic of the commodity (exchange value)—Kafka's symbolic protest of culture as "mere training to act like a machine" (Marx and Engels, The Manifesto of the Communist Party) that provides the index of labor in his text.

Across chapters 2 and 3 I give a genealogy of culturalism in terms of its engagement with materialism and social relations, demonstrating how the opposition of culture and materiality in humanist theory was critiqued by discursive cultural theory while at the same time the primary ideological function of maintaining the immanence of culture as separate from labor has been preserved. More recently culturalism is itself being contested and is under pressure because of the sharp economic antagonisms structuring daily life. This has given rise to a renewed interest in those theories that claim to provide a theory of culture which takes the economic into account. Here the neo-marxist theories of materiality of Jameson and Negri are of significance and will be

investigated in chapter 3. While providing a political economic critique of the dominant cultural theory, their articulation of the economic and the labor relations is in fact limited. In opposition, I argue that it is necessary to return to the understanding of labor found in the texts of classical Marxism. Such a view of labor provides a more effective understanding of culture (as, for example, found in the writings of Lenin and Lukács) and provides the founding notions for a labor theory of culture.

Like all other modes and forms of cultural theory, the very theoretical identity of Marxism is itself contested of course—not just from non- and anti-Marxists who question the very "real" (by which they mean the "practical" as under free-market criteria) existence of any kind of Marxism now but, perhaps more tellingly, from within the Marxist tradition itself. In chapter 2, therefore, I also outline what I regard to be the distinguishing marks of classical Marxism, which I will later elaborate on as providing the core of a materialist cultural theory. Here I will put forward the ideas of a labor theory of culture such as "labor," "value," "surplus-value," "capital," "commodity," and "production," through a reading of Marx's Capital, and I will counterpose these ideas to the revisionist discourses of the humanist and postmodern marxisms authorized by the writings of Rosemary Hennessey and Slavoj Žižek respectively. In this chapter I will argue that the "culturalism" of the dominant cultural theory denies not only history and the materiality of culture but also denies "agency"—i.e., how men and women make history and change the social relations and themselves through their productive activity, or what Marx calls "labor." Culture as self-made and auto-intelligible is, in other words, a form of understanding that foreshortens any historical understanding of culture and its place in shaping the contemporary. In this chapter I will also explore the possibility of a different form of cultural studies, one located in the history and materiality of culture and committed to foregrounding the

agency of labor. By labor I do not mean a superstructural mediation, the "constitutive power" Negri for example locates in high-tech "affective labor" or the "lived experience" of class E. P. Thompson finds in the consumption habits of working people. I mean labor as a social relation, specifically the ratio between necessary and surplus-labor time that inaugurates the exploitation central to capitalism and that explains its central contradiction: the antagonism between profit (exchange value) and need (use value).

The value of a materialist cultural theory is its integrated view of culture in the social formation and opposition to all one-sided and reified understandings. As Adolfo Sanchez Vázquez has explained, what gives to materialist cultural theory its explanatory power is the recognition that culture is at root labor. Labor, not as "work... a merely economic category" (42), in the sense that Negri understands culture as "immaterial labor," but labor as what Vázquez calls "artistic concreteness" (32)—"a particular form of creative work" (Vázquez, Art and Society 42) whose object is to shape men and women themselves: "man is the specific object of art even if he is not always the object of artistic representation" (31). Vázquez theorizes culture as providing a certain kind of knowing that enables men and women to change reality. This is primarily a result of the fact that culture transforms the material world in such a way as to "capture... human reality in its essential aspects and tear... off the veil of its mystification" (34) thus providing the necessary consciousness skills (theory as explanation) required for broader transformations. Because of its "artistic concreteness" as demystification culture may act as a critique of the "objective concreteness" of science as well and militate against the reified view of things that science takes under capitalism, a one-sided view of self-enclosed processes with no relation to human social relations and needs. Vázquez himself may participate in such reification, however, in so far as his conception of "artistic concreteness" is tied to the idea of "an artistic

structure or totality that has its own set of laws" (24) that are universal for all time. How is such a theory of materiality itself not the same as the reified materiality he attributes to science? In my last chapter I will investigate the status of materiality in materialist cultural theory and contemporary culture in order to conceptualize a more historical theory of materiality for cultural theory than he seems to allow.

In chapter 3 I will continue the practice begun in previous chapters of embedding the debates over materiality in the practices of culture. For this purpose I will analyze the retrospective exhibit and reception of Matthew Barney's The Cremaster Cycle (Guggenheim 2003) as a limit-text of materiality in transnational capitalism and tease out its class politics. The Cremaster Cycle provides an important occasion to inquire into the ongoing debates in cultural theory around questions of materiality and agency. The reason for this is because of the way the work is committed to a logic of excess that seems to defy conceptual boundaries and thus apparently produces a space of freedom for the subject in the daily, while in the process immunizing the social relations from an ideology critique, by (re)turning to class struggle as merely a trope of desire for example. However, I also propose to read The Cremaster Cycle as a modality of labor because of how the way it challenges multicultural and postmodern cultural politics—by returning to conflictual understandings of the social totality for instance—transforms the cultural real in accordance with the emergent material needs of global capitalism. I will argue that such a densely layered text as The Cremaster Cycle provides a lesson in global literacy that has become historically necessary under transnational capitalism in ways that were first announced in materialist cultural theory, in texts such as The Manifesto of The Communist Party and The German Ideology. It produces this dialectical effect by evacuating all conceptual binaries of their historicity by relaying them through a thick network of multiple significations

that is framed in the cultural imaginary, as the public reception of the work shows, as exceeding ideological closure but that are in actuality a socially necessary ensemble of consciousness skills, a global subjectivity, in the global factory.

## **1.0 CULTURE AND ITS OUTSIDE**

### **1.1 CULTURALISM**

One of the mainstays of contemporary cultural theory is the argument that the social is primarily shaped by culture. Culture, that is, not as a collection of artifacts or an archive of progress, but, rather, following the writings of Antonio Gramsci, as "an arena of consent and resistance" (Stuart Hall, "Deconstructing" 239) over the shape of the social. Contemporary cultural theory has extended the understanding of culture beyond universalist, and, therefore, supposedly elitist assumptions and normative hegemonic conclusions about culture and instead focused on culture as "the articulation and activation of meaning" (Storey xiii) on the grounds that it is primarily discourse that possesses "the power and the authority to define social reality" (Storey xii). The meanings in a culture that both secure and contest the dominant social arrangements are thought to lie in what Michel de Certeau calls "secondary production" (Storey xiii): the sphere of consumption, rather than originating in the economic sphere of production. In these terms, it is the "consumer who in effect 'produces in use'" (Storey xiii) the meanings of the culture that determine social reality. So much has such a focus on the daily practices of consumption and identification been "central to the project of cultural studies" (Storey xi) that some have simply argued that "cultural studies could be described... perhaps more accurately as ideological studies" (James Carey qtd. in Storey xii). The focus in cultural theory on the constitutive power of

discourse to define social reality has shifted the attention of cultural studies from the wider social relations of production which shape consumption and, as I will argue, in fact determine the social real.

The assumption that consumption is more important than production, which has steadily shaped cultural theory since the 60s, has become the common-sense of both cultural theory and daily culture itself. And, like all common-sense assumptions, the assumption of the priority of culture over class, which I will refer to as "culturalism," has gained the status of a self-evident fact. In this chapter I offer a sustained inquiry into the commonsense of culturalism and an articulation of a labor theory of culture. The point is not only to offer the labor theory of culture as an "alternative," however, but to explain why culturalism has become dominant, to inquire into what its material effects and limits are, and what its relation to the existing social arrangements is.

Cultural theory, I believe, has become so focused on the details of culture and cultural difference that it cannot address cultural difference except on the culturalist terms described above. Cultural theory has ultimately insulated culture entirely from the labor relations and conflicts in which it is always involved. People's "lifestyles" (which is another way of referring to the commodities they consume and how they consume them) are assumed to be more significant, in these terms, than the labor relations they must enter into as a necessary precondition of consumption. Such an assumption concludes that the markers and beliefs that position individuals in culture as men and women, black, latino, gay,... are more important than the fact that they are wage workers that must first sell themselves daily to capital before they can acquire the cultural markers of identity. My argument in this text is that by developing a labor theory of culture, it becomes possible to address not only the specificities of culture focused on

exclusively by the culturalist approach but also culture's relation to its "outside," the labor arrangements an examination of which, I think, provides for a more comprehensive analysis of culture and that will return cultural theory to being what Marx called a "material force" because it produces root knowledge of inequality (Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right). Such an understanding of the priority of the economic is seen on the cultural left as "left conservatism" (Butler, Bove, et. al.) because it (supposedly) forecloses difference. But, as Teresa Ebert has argued, "differences in class societies are always exploitative" (169) because they serve to divide and segment the working class and foster competition between the workers. What is needed in cultural theory is not more thick description of difference but its critique.

The theorization of culturalism I provide in this essay contests the "insider" story usually told about its emergence which in one way or another posits history as changes in knowledge and maintains that a break in the order of knowledge has occurred which suspends the laws of motion of capitalism that explain culture as a superstructural phenomena (i.e., ideology as false consciousness of the economic). The most popular and therefore taken for granted story that contemporary culture forms a self-enclosed area of shifting meanings and values unconnected to class relations is the "globalization" story. In different articulations "globalization" is taken as the dominance of the market over areas once believed to be sacred or natural. In this story capitalism is seen as a liberating force that frees human desire from any normative constraints. Through the manufacturing of endless choices in the marketplace, this story assumes, people are made to believe that objective reality itself is simply a matter of "free choice" and are thereby empowered to change the world.<sup>3</sup> Social conflicts, on this logic, are treated as basically moral

conflicts over rival interpretations about the world at a time when positive knowledge of the world is held to be unavailable because it has dissolved in the matrices of exchange and subject to constant renegotiation. Perhaps the most popular exponent of this view is New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, who has simply popularized ideas which had their beginnings in Nietzsche's writings (which argue that an historic reversal of values has occurred that has orphaned all meanings and rendered them essentially ironic), and have since made their way through the writings of the Frankfurt School, Daniel Bell, Francis Fukuyama, Jean Baudrillard, and Anthony Giddens.

According to Friedman in the year 2000 the world entered a "whole new era" (The World is Flat 10) because of a fortuitous "convergence" (10) of technologies and market forces that have made the world "flat" as "it is now possible for more people than ever to collaborate and compete in real time with more other people on more different kinds of work from more different corners of the planet and on a more equal footing than at any previous time in the history of the world" (8). In the "new" flat world it is culture — in the form of "software, brainpower, complex algorithms, knowledge workers, call centers, transmission protocols, [and] breakthroughs in optical engineering" (4) — that constitutes "the source of wealth" (4) and "explain[s] what [is] happening in the world today" (7) and not the conflict between capital and labor. For neoliberals like Friedman, as it is for leftists such as Hardt and Negri, "knowledge work" is a code for more "cooperative" transnational systems of production that are taken to constitute a basically non-exploitative ("creative") form of labor. All contemporary cultural theory makes this assumption that labor is no longer exploitative because it is "cooperative" and "creative" knowledge-work

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<sup>3</sup> So popular is this story that the comedian Stephen Colbert has parodied it on his cable television show with the neologism "wikiality" ("truth by consensus" rather than fact), which is a portmanteau of "Wikipedia" (the user edited online encyclopedia) and "reality."

(i.e., post-industrial and post-Fordist). Implicit in "knowledge work" is the assumption that labor is an experiential matter defined by the type of work engaged in, rather than a social relation. However, unlike work, which takes place in a specific location and expends labor power on a set of given materials for a particular end, labor is an abstract social process that can only be set in motion through the combined activity of the whole society. The claim that contemporary society is defined by "knowledge work" is a gross reification of labor in which one particular kind of work (usually service work which requires "affective" performance) is taken as a metaphor for social relations as a whole while the basic class structure is disappeared from view and society is emptied of its historicity. By turning labor into a metaphor of a highly reified experience of living in cyber-capitalism "labor" is given a conservative meaning whose function is to police the boundaries of knowledge by turning attention away from the exploitative basis of capitalism. Labor is actually exploitative at root. Labor is exploitative not because it is more or less coercive or creative but because it takes place in an economy in which the social means of production have been expropriated by a few who thereby force the majority into wage slavery to produce profit for themselves. To call such a global social relation "cooperative" and "creative" is to mystify the exploitative basis of labor and turn cultural theory against the workers.

Because cyber-capitalism is seen as transcending class struggle in the economic base in "globalization" discourse the conflicts of today are themselves regarded as purely cultural having nothing to do with the division between the haves and have nots. Freidman for example argues that class is itself cultural. According to him, class is essentially a psychological matter: "class is a state of mind" (The World is Flat 461). What divides people in other words is not access to the material resources they need to live but "hope"—whether they "believe they have a pathway out of poverty or lower-income status toward a higher standard of living and a better future for their

kids" (461) or not. For Hardt and Negri too class is essentially a cultural matter: "class is determined by class struggle" (Multitude 104). According to them "class is a political concept" (104) rather than an economic one. It is culture (hope, struggle) that explains inequality and not inequality that explains culture in culturalist theory. For Friedman "the line between those who are in the flat world and those who are not is this line of hope" (The World is Flat 461-2). The "hopeful" are "cooperative" with the imperatives of the global economy and the hopeless are just "sick" (462) or demoralized by bad government (462). In this narrative of a "new" capitalism culture is given a culturalist validation and the world is flattened to the terms of the market where power no longer divides people and everything appears to be a matter of choices between morally free and equal persons. On this logic "the poor are actually extraordinarily wealthy" (Hardt and Negri Multitude 131) because "despite the myriad mechanisms of hierarchy and subordination" they are "creative" and "express an enormous power of life" (129) by resisting power from above. Inequality is here assumed to be residual and for the most part history, while now is the time of creative self-expression and a new found freedom. What is never examined in this familiar story on which soap operas are based is how behind the appearance of formal equality in the market lies the material inequality in production that actually explains culture and its differences and conflicts as caused by unequal access to material resources like energy, housing, food, health care and communications. By considering culture only on its own terms culture is idealized as a series of emotional attachments to free floating ideas that immunizes the division of labor from critique and pathologizes the contradictions of class society. In other words, rather than examining the ideological function of thoughts, ideas, desires, affects, experiences, etc. to legitimate and mystify class relations culturalist theory reads culture on its

own terms as simply concerning matters of personal belief with merely an emotional basis in order to construct the story of an eternal capitalism.

Friedman calls himself a "technological determinist" (The World is Flat 160) but then quickly clarifies that what he means by that is not that technology determines subjectivity—"Using them does not make you modern, smart, more wise, fair or decent"—but it "just makes you able to communicate, compete, and collaborate farther and faster" (460). Leaving aside the fact that such social changes as are being described have of course already changed what it means to be "smart," "fair," etc., if the experience of new technologies does not in itself produce a more progressive society in Friedman's view of the world the "hope" that it does so is assumed to be essential for a good society. And yet, such an empty "hope" without a basis in objective reality relies on a religious view of the world that transcends the material conflicts arising out of class society into eternal cultural wars over beliefs and is actually antithetical to the socially collaborative nature of the contemporary work process Friedman formally idealizes and celebrates. It is for this reason in fact that Friedman must posit a "hope" in technology rather than religion, a religion of technology as it were, so as to overcome the contradiction between the real social nature of work in the world today and the alienated consciousness it actually produces in the context of market competition. But, such an irrational reconciliation between the fact of modern technology and cultural values as Friedman proposes simply maintains the everyday alienated consciousness of both and fails to see them as grounded in the social relations of production, which would entail implicating technology and culture in the alienated nature of private property (exploitation) in general, which is the objective cause of contemporary ideology. It is the coercive appropriation of the labor of others by a few that produces the view that technology is merely technical (associated with "work" and "making a living" rather than a part

of "life" and "creative") and that it does not have an historical tendency to "simplify" and revolutionize class relations, as The Manifesto of the Communist Party argues, by deskilling and impoverishing the laborer. The idea that culture is a free floating realm of beliefs and passionate attachments which carry no trace of class interest and have no ideological consequences in maintaining class society is equally a product of the same material conditions of exploitation which causes people to view what are in actuality social relations as relations between things and ideas because the actual basis of society is mystified by the expropriation and command of the social wealth by a few. If the command and fruits of labor were also socialized, as its execution and discipline currently is, the alienated consciousness of culture ("life") and technique ("work") would dissolve and "the government of persons... replaced by the administration of things" (Engels Socialism: Utopian and Scientific) undertaken on behalf of the "free association of producers" (Marx). Friedman's formal contrasting of technology and culture is an ideological device to maintain that individuals are morally free and equal, but the categorical nature of this division which places humanity in a spiritual beyond actually helps to reinforce the subjugation of people to their alienated existence which is in reality caused by their lack of access to and control over their own social production. Freedom is not a cultural matter of belief or proudly maintaining "dignity" in the face of negative circumstances. Neither is it brought about by re-defining work as a "creative" act. Freedom is at root a matter of access to the material conditions of life and the free time it brings to help cultivate and appropriate the powers of social labor.

Another popular story about the rise of culturalism is really an inversion of the above aimed at a different demographic that while critical of globalization in some respects secretly maintains its culturalist terms. In this story—which is manufactured for the lower "middle classes" who are resentful at finding themselves proletarianized rather than the entrepreneurial

upper layer that Friedman is addressing who as yet still hope to "make it"—everything is a matter of cultural conflicts, including the infrastructure of technology and market forces. This is the contemporary understood as what Foucault called the regime of "bio-power" in which, he argues, "phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species" finally entered into "the sphere of political techniques" (The History of Sexuality 141-2). This view has become central to the later writings of Negri written with Hardt, such as Empire and Multitude, which reflect the views of the anti-globalization movement. According to Foucault, the form of society had fundamentally changed during the eighteenth century and power was essentially redefined; from an subtractive "right of seizure" that subjected people and things to the imperatives of the state, the modality of power changed to a "productive" one in which individuals are disciplined by social institutions, such as the factory, school and prison, so as to augment control over life and redefine it as a compulsive social norm. Because the "normalizing society" (144) legitimates itself in terms of improving "life" itself, first in opposition to the repressive rule previously reserved to the sovereign and then in terms of productivity and efficiency, all political conflicts since the eighteenth century, Foucault argues, tend to revolve around "basic needs, man's concrete essence, [and] the realization of his potential" (145). Thus for Foucault political demands for "basic needs" (145) do not fundamentally challenge the system as they "rel[y] for support on the very thing it invested, that is, on life and man as a living being" (144). Struggles over material life are thus re-understood by Foucault: rather than being fundamental to the system in the way that Marx argued they touched upon its very roots, they are assumed to be merely cultural struggles which take as a given the continued reproduction of capitalism. Since "power and knowledge assumed responsibility for the life processes" (142) bringing "its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations" (143) what really matters according to

Foucault is not class struggles over resources but how life "constantly escapes" (143) rational calculation and throws man's "existence as a living being in question" (143).

Actually the form of rule of capital, whether it be politically suppressive or juridically regulative, is explained by the need for the capitalist class to make profit from the labor of others and not some will to power over life as such. The "excesses" of bio-power such as the atomic bomb and microbiology that cause Foucault to revise the classical definition of Man as a "rational animal" on the grounds that "modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question" (The History of Sexuality 143) are not irrational "excesses" from the point of view of profit accumulation, which is the true norm under capitalism and not productivity. If productivity, the control of forces for the meeting of the requirements of life and the proliferation of techniques for its control, were really the norm and not profit there would be no unemployment or "homelessness," for example. It was after all to the fear of roaming "masterless men" produced by the privatization of the commons in Europe in the eighteenth century that Foucault attributes the rise of the "carcereal society" in Discipline and Punish, so then what explains the existence of the unemployed and the poor today? To say unemployment depends on a political calculation made on the basis of an arbitrary cultural definition of health and well-being that serves a few while precluding extending its privileges to others who are singled out for poverty does not explain the existence of poverty but simply re-describes the common-sense about it in a more sophisticated language. It assumes that poverty is cultural and has to do with how well or ill someone conforms to societal norms like how "smart" they are, or whether they have made "good" choices or not, and not their access to the means of production, whether they own them and can use them to exploit the labor of others or are exploited. It is actually access to and control over the means of production that empowers a few

to establish social norms and enforce conformity to them as well as explains the content of those norms and what lies outside them, rather than the struggle over such norms in themselves and what they (dis)allow. Foucault's understanding of power depends on seeing it as "horizontal" and proscriptive rather than "vertical" or hierarchical, but such a view presupposes a basic equality in material terms. Foucault assumes, for example, that "the accumulation of men and the accumulation of capital—cannot be separated... each makes the other possible and necessary" (History of Sexuality 221). Such a formal understanding of the relation of the social to the means of production denies any causal relation of determination between them while silently assuming that production serves "to increase the docility and utility of all the elements of the system" (218), in other words, that production is a "political technology" (205) for the "utopia of the perfectly governed" (198). The self-enclosed mechanical circularity of production in this account, as in Friedman, simply alienates production from its class basis and thereby uncritically reflects the way production is actually alienated in practice as private property without implicating the structure of ownership in the exploitation of labor and examining the way the division of labor (class) shapes culture and consciousness. The result of such a view is to shift contestation from the base to the superstructure so that it is power, reified from its material basis, rather than structural inequality that is contested. Thus what is basic to capitalism according to Foucault is not exploitation but "these tiny, everyday, physical mechanisms [of] micro-power that are essentially non-egalitarian and asymmetrical that we call the disciplines" (History of Sexuality 222) and it is on these local terms that power is exercised: "power is everywhere" (93) and "where there is power, there is resistance" (95). By segregating power from its social basis in the exploitation of wage labor, which is where the division between the powerful and powerless is materially determined, and shifting it to the level of its effects in the

local and everyday micro practices, Foucault accommodates capital in the base and as a consequence cannot explain the self-negation of capitalism produced by its own law of value, which leads to the polarization of classes and revolution. His theory is thus itself part of the dream of a perfectly governed utopia albeit with the spectacle of resistance but, just the same, with no social revolutions. Despite the formal inversion to be found in Foucault's writings of the technologist position that Friedman represents, the rule of the market is yet assumed to be the limit of history and all struggles are seen as merely symbolic struggles that do not touch on the basic class relations. For both of them culture is segregated from the economic base and in this way they eternalize capitalism through a culturalist argument and place cultural theory in the service of the ruling class.

The culturalist account of the rise of culturalism is not an explanation of why contemporary culture is ruled by the logic of capitalism and so obsessed with the "inside" practices of everyday life that the "outside" is disappeared. In fact they make an explanation from the outside impossible by consigning its terms to the past on the grounds that the present is basically different because of new technologies and exceeds any logic except the a-logic of desire, which is of course the voluntarist logic of the market.

The disguising of class conflicts in terms of culture is of course as old as class society itself. Every ruling class in history has identified its particular form of rule with the general good and justified its mode of appropriating the labor of others in cultural, and for the most part religious, terms. It was with the rise of capitalism, however, that culture begins to take on an independent basis and is seen as by definition "free," as in Humanist and Enlightenment discourses; free from religious and political coercion on the one hand, and free of the rule of the market on the other. Because the freedom of culture was only ever an ideal of bourgeois society

contradicted in daily practice it became a dogma that culture was a timeless space that expresses what is most rational, moral and beautiful—the best that has been thought and said—and as such the essence of what it means to be a person. The reason for this idealization of culture has an economic basis however in the basic inequality of capitalism and it is necessary to unpack this relation in order to explain the present dominance of culturalism and why it has replaced humanism as an apologetic for inequality.

In the period between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries capitalism systematically dispossessed the laborer of not only his labor power or ability to work but also of all the material preconditions through which labor is alone possible, such as the material to be worked upon, the instruments of labor and the means of subsistence of the laborer. This systematic expropriation of the material conditions of productive social life commodified the worker as an "individual" unit of the production process and this individual that is free to work or starve is the real material basis for bourgeois philosophy and culture since the Enlightenment and what is behind the basic division in the human sciences between the subject (culture) and its "soft" knowledges, such as the humanities and social sciences, and the object (nature), which is investigated by the "hard" physical sciences. Capitalism needs persons to be defined as individuals because it needs them to voluntarily enter into an economic agreement to exchange their labor power for wages. An idealist view of culture is the necessary result of a society that defines its highest achievements in terms of individual freedom, because it depends on the free exchange of labor for wages, and has been forced to attack any other cultural basis for defining freedom, such as social equality. Because the development of capitalism itself has come more and more to limit individual freedom to those who can monetarily afford it, the "individual" has been displaced as the standard of knowing and achievement, especially since the historic economic downturn

experienced by the Western democracies since the mid-70s. It was then that culturalism emerged and has since become dominant.

Culturalism is not simply the use of culture to disguise and legitimate class oppression as idealism and religion have always done. Neither is it simply an extension of the humanist ideology of culture as the free expression of free subjects which relegates inequality to nature and explains it away as differences of knowledge or natural abilities. Culturalism is the systematic inculcation in the regime of discourse which gives all social practices a cultural foundation in codes, conventions, discourse, values, perceptions, and affect—rather than explain social practices as at root economic and grounded in the division of labor and the interaction of labor and the natural world—at a time when it becomes impossible to justify capitalism on its own terms because of the crisis of profitability and the increasing inequality it produces. The changes in technology which are commonly supposed to explain the reification of culture in the contemporary are themselves explained as effects of class forces, especially the drive to innovate endemic to market competition which has as a necessary result the increasing alienation of the worker from her own labor power through under-/unemployment. The shift from "modernism" as a cultural dominant to "postmodernism," which in the humanities is represented as a shift from "humanism" to "culturalism," is a cultural effect of the global crisis of cyber-capitalism and not its triumphant "globalization" as culturalist discourses argue. The reason for this is because capitalism cannot ultimately survive the reification of culture it makes necessary as this reification itself is caused by the separation of the laborer from the productive process entirely, thus leading to a crisis of overproduction and the fall in the rate of profit.

For roughly the last thirty years the capitalist West has experienced a prolonged crisis of profitability which comes from systemic overproduction—it has reached the point that

technological efficiency has massively lowered the need for labor worldwide thus raising unemployment (often disguised as under-employment) while the profit imperative is brutally maintained as the rationale of production. Capitalism now is finding it difficult to secure new areas of labor for productive investment, which among other things (such as financial speculation) forces it to expand its market geographically and at great cost in both material and ideological terms. The global expansion of capitalism is actually a short term way to stave off the inevitable fall in the rate of profit that comes from the introduction of technological innovations in the context of market competition. The value of capital depends on its ability to productively employ wage-labor and realize a surplus-value over and above the costs of production and the reproduction of the laborer. In order to realize a bigger share of surplus-value in the context of market competition capitalists are forced to lower the amount of necessary labor it takes to produce commodities and this is for the most part done by increasing the productivity of labor through the introduction of labor saving devices. With the spread of the most efficient methods of production the general result is to raise the amount of capital socially invested in plant and equipment relative to the amount invested in labor thus increasing what Marx calls "the organic composition of capital" at the expense of the working class who find themselves deskilled, their wages cheapened and unemployed. The rising organic composition of capital is what produces a fall in the rate of profit because of the social costs it inflicts on the workforce, the consumers of the commodities.<sup>4</sup> Capitalism, through the workings of the law of value which governs the production of commodities, inevitably reaches the point where it calls itself into

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<sup>4</sup> In the post-war period up to 1980 the value composition of fixed capital (that is, capital invested in raw materials, plant and equipment that is necessary to set labor in motion) rose by over 77 percent, seeing the biggest rise in the mid-70s, and the rate of profit fell by a third, according to the US Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Statistics (Shaikh and Tonak, Measuring the Wealth of Nations). According to Shaikh and Tonak, corporate profits to corporate net stock fell 13 percent between 1969-73, from 11-15 percent to between 8.8 and 11 percent. It has since only risen to about 9.4 percent in 1996 (Measuring the Wealth of Nations 12).

question as it is "incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery, because it cannot help letting him sink into such a state, that it has to feed him, instead of being fed by him" (Marx and Engels, The Manifesto of the Communist Party). Because capitalism over the last thirty years has not been able to "deliver the goods" to more and more people and prove the superiority of the market for insuring individual freedom the "free subject" of the classical period of bourgeois ascendancy has been placed in crisis and a self-enclosed understanding of culture has taken its place in the dominant ideology as the self-regulating mechanism that protects the market from a class-based critique that would implicate "ideas" in the terms of inequality. Culture serves this crisis management function most effectively by not simply dismissing inequality and the antagonisms it generates (how could it?), but by translating (reifying) the contradictions into cultural terms that leave the foundation of capitalism basically intact. At the core of the labor theory of culture is the explanation of how culturalism itself has an economic basis—it reflects the interests of those who having had their material needs already met from the labor of the other can afford to focus on their desires in the market at a time of inescapable social inequality and it projects this special interest as universal, as ideology has always done.

By drawing out the ways in which cultural theory is shaped by the developments of labor, a labor theory of culture works to connect the most pressing cultural questions to the economic and political structures that determine how people live their lives. The connection of culture and daily life is based on the recognition that culture has an economic root in labor: the "process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature" (Marx Capital 283). Before there can be a culture of consent and resistance over the socially consequential meaning(s) that shape people's lives, there first needs to be their material life itself. By grasping the material dependence of culture on the metabolism between

labor and nature it follows, as Marx goes on to explain, "that the man who possesses no other property than his labour power, must, in all conditions of society and culture, be the slave of other men who have made themselves the owners of the material conditions of labour" ("Gotha Programme" 81). In other words, according to Marx, labor is not simply a natural process necessary to sustain life but is also a historical zone of conflicts over control of the means of production. It follows then that culture is not merely an expression of technological capacity or even a symbolic compensation for material contradictions, as Jameson for example argues (Political Unconscious 79), but the arena "in which men become conscious of this [economic] conflict and fight it out" (Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy 21). In short, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Marx, 21).

Marx's labor theory has for the most part been dismissed in cultural theory as "humanist" because for him labor names "the human essence" ("Theses on Feuerbach" 145) which explains culture. But such a reading misses the fact that for Marx the human essence (labor) is neither a metaphysical "abstraction inherent in each single individual" (145), such as the "rationality" of *homo economicus* in classical political economy or rational choice theory, nor is it an idealist representation of "'society as the subject'" (The German Ideology, 59) that regards the "interrelated individuals ... as a single individual, which accomplishes the mystery of generating itself" (59). Rather, labor refers to "the ensemble of the social relations" (145) under which men and women interact with the material world and each other and is therefore a materialist rather than a speculative concept. The boundaries of culture are on this logic defined not by cultural struggles themselves but by the possibilities of labor as the material basis of culture (what people need in order to consume), and the meanings attached to these practices (as essential and

consequential or not) are dependent on the collective social project of production (the global division of labor and the conflicts over it). Although debates over cultural "values" tend to begin where it seems that labor ends—in the sphere of consumption—the options of what can and cannot be consumed in any culture are determined by the kind and level of activity in production at any given historical moment. It is this necessary material "context" that determines the "meanings" available in a society's signifying practices.

Currently, for instance, there is what is widely commented on as a "return to ideology" and the world is seen as divided between rival "fundamentalisms." Leaving aside that fundamentalism in the Islamic world is not just about values (although that is the way it is represented in the Western media, it is essentially about inequality), in the US it is seen in purely cultural terms as a rise in religious feelings in response to an invasion of "alien" cultural values represented under the sign of 9-11 (Samuel Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations). What the narrative of a cultural war over "values" silently covers over is the accumulation of surplus profits in the countries of the North from the countries of the South. When "they" say that the West is on a crusade to destroy Islam, this is a code for "the West is plundering our oil, forcing our governments to spend our money on military weapons, giving us cell phones and DVDs instead of drinking water,... ." Fundamentalism is basically an economic struggle transcoded into populist religious languages for organizational reasons (in mosques, by governments, in the media, etc.). US fundamentalism is also represented domestically as the dominance of a "red" state mentality over its "blue" rival, purportedly testifying to basic differences in cultural consumption (as in the writings of such mainstream commentators as David Brooks and Thomas Frank); latte drinking, Volvo driving and IKEA shopping versus soft drinks, NASCAR and Wal-Mart for example. On the latter terms US fundamentalism is supposed to signal the dominance

of an oil dependent mode of production located in the "red states" over a service economy mostly located in the "blue states." Whether seen as a clash of civilizations between the West and the rest or a cultural war within the US, what is being disguised under "cultural wars" is the material (that is, economic) domination that explains both the cultural differences within the US, whether one shops at Wal-Mart or IKEA or drinks latte or a Big Gulp for example, as well as the culturalist ideology which claims that cultural difference explains material inequality in the world rather than the reverse. Without the accumulation and concentration of capital in the North at the expense of the South there would not be the array of commodities there are in the US nor would there be the culture industry promoting culturalism as the global frame of intelligibility explaining the contemporary.

The declining rate of profit produced by the growing concentration and centralization of capital, that can be seen in the wave of corporate merges and layoffs in recent years, necessitates ever more cheapening of the costs of production through such things as technical innovations and the global search for, and more and more the forcible seizure of, markets of cheap labor to increase the amount of surplus-value over wages (and related marginal costs) per unit output. The constant innovations produce cultural differences within and between markets as every capitalist tries to realize more surplus-value by introducing competitive differences in how products are made that increases their value in relation to those of their rivals. Big Gulp versus latte drinking is not simply a difference in lifestyle choices. Both deliver caffeine and sugar to keep workers awake and alert on the job but they differ in the manner that they do to reflect differences that have arisen within the division of labor, between "hi" and "lo-tech" workers for example. While both contain high doses of caffeine the sugar content of a latte is more variable reflecting the "participatory management process" of more highly skilled urban workers

compared to the mass of unskilled workers who shop at places like 7-Eleven and Wal-mart. In general the more choices any given commodity entails for its consumption the more it reflects the needs of a self-regulating workforce whose job description dictates more thought because it has not yet been technically rationalized.

To argue as I am that culture is economically determined by the global division of labor is not to deny cultural differences and the micro-practices of the everyday but to explain them as the effects of more primary economic causes. My reason for doing so is because contemporary cultural theory is dominated by a culturalist ideology that focuses solely on culture and not its material cause in labor arrangements and thus makes it seem as if the world we see is culturally determined, that it is "spirit" that moves the world. Culturalism reifies culture and blocks the consciousness of necessity that is needed for social emancipation. In actuality the effects of culture on subjectivity and social practices such as voting and shopping are relays of economic production and reflect as imperatives and drives what are at root economic interests tied to the division of labor. Red state versus blue state cultural practices and consumption patterns reflect different segments of capital in the US and the degree to which they are competitive in world markets, whether like the oil industry they are struggling for hegemony or whether like the information technology sector they enjoy a relative economic dominance and profit from more cooperation with rivals and increase their profits incrementally through constant (planned as obsolescent) innovations. Big Gulp or NASCAR racing signify as they do not because the workers who consume them work for big oil or because they have been brainwashed by Republican talk radio. The efficient "jolt" offered by a Big Gulp and the "rush" enjoyed in NASCAR in the presence of loud and fast machines is an effect of the division of labor and the kinds of needs and skills required by capitalism both to normalize these workers to the type of

low skill work that they do and to make them more productive by suppressing the need for class conscious cultural practices and displacing them with training in competitive "brand wars" (disguised as culture wars). To be blind to the economic needs reflected in culture by considering culture to be merely the self-enclosed production of signs and the contestations over meaning is, therefore, to engage in the production of "false consciousness" (Engels, "Letters" 766) and to "imagine... false or seeming motive forces" (766) in place of "the real motive forces" (766) that compel individuals. The real force determining culture—which is mainly reduced under capitalism to the culture of consumption and "mere training to act as a machine" (Marx and Engels, Collected Works Vol. 6 Communist Manifesto 497)—is profit and the precondition of profit is exploited and alienated labor.

According to the labor theory of culture,

It was through labor that humanity created itself as a skillful, large-brained, language-using animal, and through labor that it created an elaborate cultural superstructure. The very impressiveness of mankind's mental achievements, however, has obscured the fundamental significance of labor. Furthermore, the separation of planning for labor from the labor itself, a development of complex society, contributed to the rise of an idealistic world outlook, one that explains people's actions as "arising out of thoughts instead of their needs" [Engels]. (E. B. Leacock qtd. in Woolfson 77)

By considering the historical alienation of social labor into culture as a realm of ideas that obscures its own socio-economic basis Engels transforms our understanding of labor from being simply a natural-technical activity into a crucial critique-al concept opposed to ideology. Culture is a "reflection" of the economic base because it "explains people's actions as arising out of

thoughts instead of their needs" as it must of necessity given the complexity of the division of labor which demands flexible signifying practices and literacies while at the same time demanding technical rationalization of the relationship of society to nature. As a concrete historical activity labor of course transforms the material world in accordance with subjective human needs and abilities and, in the process, expands them. Labor is a constant social activity expended on nature that through the course of history requires the abilities of the laborer be adjusted to the conditions in which labor is carried out. The consciousness of the laborer is thus also the product of accumulated (or "dead" as Marx says) social labor. However, it is the prioritization of this abstract (natural and social) compulsion shaping the concrete instance of labor and its effects that allows Engels to define labor as the opposite of ideology, as the real social activity and material precondition that explains human practices. As the other of ideology labor is thus what Marx in his "Theses on Feuerbach" calls a "'revolutionary'... practical-critical, activity" (Reader 143) and ideology is understood in a material way as the spontaneous reflection of the complexity of labor arrangements that mystifies the real causes of human activity, rather than simply a cultural bias for example. As a "revolutionary practical-critical activity," or "praxis," labor acts as a material force that transforms the natural world to serve human purposes and in the process—through, for example, the development of abstract signs and languages that allow them to generalize from the specific occasion and to foresee the future—transforms human beings themselves from being slaves to nature into a conscious and collective agent. Theory thus has a necessary function in the labor process in that it makes it possible to abstract from the immediately given reality and to project into the future a different reality that corresponds more with evolving human needs in a way that culture as a spontaneous reflection of the existing order does not. In this sense theory must be understood as grasping the outside of culture and unlike

culture in general cannot be reduced to ideology, which is the uncriti(que)al reflection of the social relations that arises spontaneously from the division of labor.

Taken as something "in itself" separate from the labor practices, as a realm of ideas or "culture," an ideological distortion takes place which mystifies rather than clarifies the place of culture in the social. This separation and distortion is itself necessitated by history (past labor) as capitalism demands that more and more areas of life be technically rationalized in order to increase the rate of profit as, "The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society" (Marx and Engels, The Manifesto of the Communist Party 476). This rationalization demanded by production for exchange ultimately "strip[s] of its halo every occupation" (476) and compels man "to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind" (476). Whereas up till now particular cultural activities were alienated from their social basis by the market and given their own distinct disciplinary formations, such as "art," "philosophy," or "ethics," the same process of rationalization for the market has now made culture as a whole seem like a thing in itself (a realm of values) unconnected to the social base of production because it has become the object of specialized producers. Culture has always had an economic function, however, in co-coordinating labor in relation to its material task and in reconciling the energies of individuals to work in common, as can more clearly be seen in tribal agricultural societies. The form of culture of course changes depending on the nature of the class relations it reflects. Prior to its commodification culture used to be a reflection of a more spontaneous and organic division of labor that arose from the more direct and forcible class system of feudalism in which land served as the primary resource and culture was embedded within a religious framework which provided a highly codified symbolic interpretation of the

world and one's place in it. With the advent of capitalism and the privatization of the communal lands that formed the basis of agricultural economy the "organic" symbolic edifice of culture was destroyed and it could no longer be seen in its traditional guise as a self-evident expression of the way the world is, and culture begins to take on a highly rational purpose to provide an independent justification for all human activities without appealing to religion or tradition. Culture, in short, is always the production of men and women within a particular historic relation to the means of production through which they (re)produce their existence. It is only under transnational capitalism that culture appears totally alienated from the social relations of production as a realm of purely discursive "values" because the rule of capital systematically alienates labor from the laborer by forcing her to produce not according to her needs but solely for exchange on the market.

Capitalism, by depriving the worker of access to the means of production, forces the worker to work for wages the value of which is equivalent to the number of commodities she needs in order to survive and return to work. The amount of time required for this "necessary labor" given the technical productivity of labor is minimal. The rest of the time the worker is engaged in "surplus labor"—labor which forms neither a part of wages nor the consumption of the capitalist but is engaged in solely to create values which later can be exchanged on the market for a profit by the capitalist. The alienated labor is the basis of culture because it creates a world of commodities as well as the alienated perception of production in which it appears that labor is exchanged for wages (articles of consumption) rather than the source of all value. If production for need was the rule rather than production for profit there would be no "culture" in the one-sided way it is currently understood as a realm of consumption (which is coded in culturalist theory as discursive "production"). Culturalism, which posits that values shape the

world we see, is the ideology of the class whose existence depends on the exploitation of wage-labor, the exploitation of which, furthermore, in actuality produces the commodification in which culture takes on an alienated appearance as a separate and self-enclosed area free of economic determination. And yet, labor in reality creates the "all-sided production of the whole earth" (Marx and Engels, German Ideology 59), both objectively in the transformation of nature and subjectively in the transformation of the laborer whose exploited labor can in no way be *experienced* as a creative and self-fulfilling act (i.e., as agency) because of its abstract economic basis. And yet because labor is the "*all-round* dependence" (59) of this "*world-historical* cooperation of individuals" (59), as Marx and Engels argue, it also necessarily produces the basis for "the control and conscious mastery of these powers, which born of the action of men on one another, have till now overawed and ruled men as powers completely alien to them" (59) and thereby provides the basis for the materialist critique of ideology and the empowerment of the worker as a criti(que)al citizen of the world. Labor is thus more than the source of value, it is a "'revolutionary' practical-critical, activity" that transforms our understanding of culture from an ideological one that trivializes culture as a "thing-in-itself" to a criti(que)al one that implicates culture in the material world and thereby helps to emancipate consciousness from the rule of capital. In the remainder of this chapter I will investigate the construction of "popular culture" in general and melodrama in particular and lay bare how they are made to support the ideology of culturalism in the knowledge industry. In doing so I will explain what is living (productive) and what is dead (reproductive) in popular culture and why.

## 1.2 POPULISM AND THE CULTURAL TECHNOLOGIES OF CAPITAL

"Popular culture" has become the almost exclusive focus of cultural theory in the knowledge industry of the metropole and, in this sense, popular culture can be understood as "central to the project of cultural studies" (Storey, Popular Culture xi). In contemporary cultural theory popular culture is no longer seen as a collection of artifacts or an archive of progress, as in anthropological discourses, but, rather, following the writings of Antonio Gramsci, "an arena of consent and resistance" (Hall, "Deconstructing" 239) over the shape of the social. Popular culture, in other words, is analytically opposed to dominant culture, and, far from being a trivial matter is considered instrumental for consolidating support for the status quo. The trivializing of popular culture in theory and practice as mere "leisure" or "entertainment" makes it a particularly effective place for securing the consent of the governed. The study of popular culture is therefore political. "Popular culture," seen as the place "where hegemony arises, and where it is secured" (Hall, "Deconstructing" 239), is used in cultural studies to contest idealist understandings of culture that position mass consumer culture in a lower scale of value in relation to "high" culture. The traditional distinction between "high" and "low" culture presumes culture to have a civilizing mission to "humanize" the other, and yet it ignores, and thereby stabilizes, social inequality. Popular culture, in the broad political sense it currently carries, extends the understanding of culture beyond homogeneous, and, therefore, supposedly elitist assumptions and normative hegemonic conclusions "about who can claim the power and the authority to define social reality" (Storey, Popular Culture xii). Thus, the politics of popular culture is often times a matter of looking at how culture is "made from within and below" by "subordinated peoples" (Fiske 2) in opposition to the dominant interests and agencies that control material production. The study of popular culture in cultural studies is mostly and primarily

concerned with discourse, or, in other words, "the articulation and activation of meaning" (Storey xiii) in a culture that is used to secure and contest power at the site of subjectivity.

Popular culture has become the object of contestation because of its own hegemonic function in cultural studies. For example, Lawrence Grossberg, editor of the influential journal Cultural Studies, writes that the argument for "why popular culture matters," given by Stuart Hall in his founding essay quoted above, "continues to leave the relationship between culture and capital unexamined" ("Speculations" 16). In contrast to his own years of denying any causal relationship between capitalism and culture<sup>5</sup> Grossberg now argues that "cultural studies must explicitly return to questions of economics" and "the exploitation of... labor" if it is going to be able to understand, respond to, and transform "the changing configurations of... systems of inequality" (16). Similarly, Douglas Kellner argues that the "turn[] away from so-called high or elite culture in favor of the popular... merely inverts the positive/negative valorizations of the older high/low distinction" and, as a result, "disconnects cultural studies from attempts to develop oppositional forms of culture" that "wanted to develop art that would revolutionize society" ("Cultural Studies" 142-3). The study of popular culture as in itself subversive of dominant culture is here seen as a populist and anti-democratic assumption.

The study of "popular culture" today thus raises the question: is popular culture a relay of the dominant ideology that legitimates the way things are, or, does it carry an oppositional value as critique for a new society? Is popular best understood as the spontaneous expression of oppression and resistance "made from within and below" by "subordinated peoples," or, revolutionary because it corresponds to the material needs of the oppressed and exploited to be socially emancipated, as for example in Georg Lukács' understanding of "imputed class

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<sup>5</sup> See for example, Bringing it all Back Home: Essays on Cultural Studies.

consciousness" (History and Class Consciousness)? Or is the focus on culture meeting people's needs itself an example of reified thinking because such a focus marginalizes the liberating power of pleasure, the "Everything Bad is Good for You" (Steven Johnson) argument that sees in popular culture such as the Internet an insurgent savvy awareness?

Melodrama has always been a site of the "class struggle at the level of theory" (Althusser) where the populist sentimentality of cultural resistance and critique-al knowledge of the social have fought it out. In this chapter I wish to discuss melodrama as a way to make theorization of the popular and popular culture more concrete and answer the questions it poses for cultural studies. I will outline how the historical shifts in the discussion of melodrama reveal the political economy of the "subject" and agency under capitalism and thus explain that what appears to be a debate over the politics of the popular in cultural studies is in actuality an inter-class debate about which subjectivities better alibi the ruling class and facilitate the construction of a compliant workforce. Later, I will demonstrate the effectiveness of this theorization through a reading of The Butcher Boy (dir. Neil Jordan, 1997).

The question of the "popular" is central to ongoing debates in cultural studies not only because of the serious consequences its theorization has for social praxis in shaping the emergent globality in the wake of the mass protests in Seattle and Genoa and around the world in protest of the US invasion of Iraq, but, more importantly, because in capitalism the "popular" is used to hide *class* antagonism (through such descriptive concepts as "status" and "lifestyle," for example). Before I theorize the conflicts over the popular in contemporary discourses I give a brief history of the term here.

"Popular" comes from the Latin *popularis* (belonging to the people) and was "originally a legal and political" (Williams, Keywords) term in the sense that it denoted the properties,

resources and rights set aside for "citizens" by the state. The contemporary meaning of the term as "widely favored" or "well-liked" also stems from the original Latin meaning in the sense that it presupposes a similar social division of labor between what is "private" (and protected from the majority by the armed coercive power of the state) and what is "public" (and maintained by the "consensus" of the governed). The coercive division between the public and the private in classical Roman society produced the need for "tribunes of the people" who sought popular election to office by defending the public interest and forming "popular opinion." For this reason as well "popular" may denote an opportunist trivialization of important issues for the sake of personal gain, as in "popularizing." With the industrial revolution and the emergence of mass culture the term for the most part loses the connotations of status which it always had up to this point and takes on the meaning of that which comes from "the people themselves" as if it simply denoted a homogeneous and spontaneous activity on their part with no political content. In the German idealist tradition popular as "of the people" becomes a central concept for talking about culture as "made by the people themselves" (i.e., "folk-culture") sometimes within a utopian framework which opposed itself to industrial "civilization." It was the evacuation of the concept's traditional critical function as a political term by romantic anti-capitalist thought that caused the term to undergo another change in meaning which in some ways reactivates the older usage as that which marks a division between what belongs to "the people" (public) and what does not (private). This is the usage found in the socialist and communist tradition: "popular" as that which serves the interests of the majority, the property-less masses who have been expropriated by capital from control and ownership of the social wealth they have produced. Thus what is "popular" for Marx denotes "a class of civil society which is not a class of civil

society"<sup>6</sup> but "the dissolution of all classes" (Marx, Early Writings 256)—the proletariat. The proletariat embodies the popular for Marx for because its condition of life is the norm under capitalism as well as because of how in accordance with this position the proletariat "cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from—and thereby emancipating—all other spheres of society" (Marx 256). Popular is thus a term that designates both the material interest and historical task of the proletariat as it has been formed by capitalist production and is no longer a merely cultural marker of "status" (whether "high" as in the classical Roman idea of the citizen or "low" as in romantic ideology) or simply political. With the emergence of the revolutionary usage of the popular as of the proletariat a "populist" backlash occurs and the term acquires its contemporary apologetic character as denoting a "cross-class" or "post-class" mode of intelligibility in which the class antagonisms in culture are suppressed for the purposes of mere local reforms, as in the writings of Stephen Greenblatt for instance. Thus, according to Greenblatt theatre constitutes a "felt community" that circulates a "social energy" that represents an image of society "in which convictions and class do not divide people, for social energy cuts across differences and 'trickles down' from the high and mighty to the low and abject, including all to explode together in laughter, anxiety, and exhalation" (Siebers 61). It is no surprise that

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<sup>6</sup> Marx argues that the proletariat can claim "no particular right" (Early Writings 256) under capitalism because as a class of civil society it shares in the universal bourgeois right to sell its labor freely in the market while at the same time it remains a class whose cause of formation lies outside civil society in the fact of the means of production having been privatized in the hands of a few and the daily expropriation of labor this entails as a consequence.

the meaning of popular today is so controversial as it is the site of a class war in which it either denotes the idea of the negation of capitalism or coming to peace with global inequality.

What is popular, I will argue, is not a question of "subjectivity" (freedom of speech) but of objectivity (economic freedom): the popular is not a matter of desire and pleasure but of material need and historic necessity. It is not "popular" but an ideological operation, in other words, to occult consciousness of the class antagonism at the base of society between capital and wage-labor. Popular in this ideological sense is in actuality an elitist bourgeois practice that maintains exploitation. And yet this is precisely the sense of popular used by the dominant cultural studies which argues that popular culture is radical because it is "made from within and below" by "subordinated peoples" (Fiske, The Popular 2) and as such "resistant" to the dominant. What is "radical" now is precisely a populist post-class understanding of the popular that alibis class inequality by reducing questions of inequality to the signifying dynamics of consumption where power can seem to be aleatory and shifting. Because of the contemporary equation of radical with the surface features of culture it is necessary to reactivate radical as "root" knowledge of the social (Marx, Reader 60)—knowledge of the social relations of production (class). Root knowledge is essential in order to foreground the binary in the "popular" between popular-as-populist post-class ideology which normalizes inequality through the symbolic practices of cultural resistance and popular-as-class critique which desediments the culture and reveals the material forces of change. The blending and blurring of the binary supports the ruling class by dehistoricizing and normalizing capitalist subjectivities and displacing the historical "outside" (socialism) with a pietistic "beyond" (utopia). In such terms, the outside (labor) is thought to be an effect of the inside (tropes), as Jacques Derrida for example argues in his critique of structuralism; the binary inside/outside that governs materialist theory of culture is

itself an effect of *différance*, the internal tropic play of the structure itself as it tries to "fix" its absent center ("Structure, Sign, and Play" 247-65).<sup>7</sup> In these terms, it is assumed that "once the deconstruction of those categories [of identity] fully reveals the power games that govern their actual structuration, new and more complex hegemonico-political moves become possible within them" (Laclau, Making 2). According to this discursive logic, it becomes impossible to connect the secondary processes and mediations of culture to their more basic economic causes, which is necessary for changing the social totality from a "realm of necessity" to a "realm of freedom" (Marx, Capital Vol. III, 958-9). By disconnecting the outside (social relations of production) from the inside (cultural practices of meaning) the relation of determination between the two is reversed and culture is assumed to constitute the real and re-make history.

The dominant cultural studies reads "the popular" as "post-class"—an opaque network of discursive strategies and flexi-subjects free of the material universality of labor. This is the popular as a relay of the dogma that "discourse" is "co-extensive with the social as such" (Laclau, "Populist" 87) which displaces class consciousness of the social totality outside of discourse with an entrepreneurial "desire" for "equality" in consumption (Laclau and Mouffe 164). In cultural studies now the rule is that "'Society' is not a valid object of discourse" because "there is no single underlying principle... constituting" it (Laclau and Mouffe 111) such as "surplus-value." Surplus-value is the unit of laboring productivity privately consumed by the owning class that is daily expended by the working class over and above that portion of the work day whose use value is equivalent to the worker's historically attained means of subsistence.

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<sup>7</sup> Derrida's "linguistic turn" in cultural theory is widely seen as necessitated by an historical break, as he himself has stated: "never as much as at the present has it [the *problem of language*] invaded, *as such*, the global horizon" (Of Grammatology 6). A "peculiarity of our epoch," he goes on to argue, which occurs at precisely the same "moment when the phoneticization of writing... begins to lay hold on world culture" (4).

Without the concept of surplus-value there cannot be root critique of culture as ideology that maintains class inequality in the base. In other words, the classical Marxist critique of the global regime of wage-labor and its knowledge industries cannot guide collective praxis for the emancipation of all from the rule of profit when "truth is plural," as Derrida says (Spurs 103). "Truth is plural" is another way of saying that all knowledge is local and thus not reliable for securing universal social equality. The coercive equality of the market needs the popular as common-sense liberal pluralism which maintains the system of wage-labor, not popular as knowledge of the commonality of labor which is necessary to change it. It is the same common-sense which dismisses critique as domineering, as when the unity of "a 'universal class'" and "a 'knowing' vanguard subject" is read as the mark of "totalitarianism" (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 3). But, without such a unity of theory and practice in the commonality of labor cultural theory dissolves itself into an empty populism that supports the wage-slavery of the global market as "resistance." The populist cultural studies which celebrates people's symbolic resistance in the pleasures of consumption cannot explain why there can be no equality in consumption while a few continue to live off the unpaid surplus-labor of the many.

I am arguing that the "popular" is not the rule of desire and ignorance enshrined in the cultural studies that takes the limits of the market as the limits of history: rather, I treat the "popular" as the arena of concepts of, and conflicts over, the cultural "real" (Zavarzadeh, Seeing Films Politically 5). The cultural real is neither the space of the actual (the market), which is merely the surface appearance of society, nor is it the ideological reflection of the existing regime in people's minds (ideology). The cultural real is where the contradictions between the ideological and the actual, which are caused by the material forces behind appearances that are actually shaping the actual and thus perpetually bring the ideological to crisis, surface and must

be contained. Popular in the sense that I mean as the structure of conflicts shaping the social real, reconnects theory with the daily by implicating everyday practices into the ensemble of practices that makes the totality under capitalism (what Marx calls the "workday," Capital 1, Ch. 6). In other words, popular marks the place where "what is" has come to be and that furthermore explains why "what is" must change. Change is theorized as a matter of necessity, particularly the need for men and women to (re)produce as a totality their material conditions of life. From this it follows that what is popular is not merely a rhetorical question about how culture "figures" the real and "persuades" by appealing to "desire." Persuasion, as Marx explains, is always a matter of "the silent compulsion of the economic" (Capital Vol. 1, 899). Rather, as Brecht explains, "popular" is a question of "the representation of truth, of the real mechanism of society" that enables people to "make history, change the world and themselves" (83, 81). As Marx puts it, men and women "make history" when they become "conscious of the conflicts" (which are "not chosen by themselves" but a matter of what they are "compelled to do"), "take sides" and "fight it out" (Critique of Political Economy, 21).

The populist argument in cultural studies says that Marxist theory is not revolutionary because its commitment to class analysis prevents it from understanding the "excess" pleasure generated by capitalism beyond exploitation, which it locates in such popular cultural forms as melodrama. The passionate attachments people form in consuming commodity culture on this reading are seen as open to being re-signified into post-capitalist commitments. In Slavoj Žižek's writings, for example, capitalism is not based on exploitation in production (surplus-labor) but on struggles over consumption ("surplus-enjoyment"). Revolutionary practice is always informed by class consciousness and transformative cultural critique has always aimed at producing class consciousness by laying bare the false consciousness that ruling ideology

institutes in the everyday. Transformative cultural critique, in other words, is always a linking of consciousness to production practices from which a knowledge of social totality emerges. Žižek considers classical Marxism to have an epistemologically naïve theory of "ideology" that fails to account for the persistence of "desire" beyond critique, the "enlightened false-consciousness" of The Sublime Object of Ideology, Mapping Ideology, and so on. Žižek's more recent "return to the centrality of the Marxist critique" (Preface, Reader ix) is, as a result, a purely tropic voluntarism of the kind he endlessly celebrates in his diffusionist readings of culture as desire-al moments when social norms are violated and personal emotions spontaneously experienced as absolutely compulsory (as "drive"). Žižek's concept of revolutionary Marxist praxis consists of re-describing it as an "excessive" lifestyle choice—analogue to pedophilia and other culturally marginalized practices (Ticklish Subject 381-8). In his reading, Marxism is the only metaphorical displacement of "desire" into "surplus-pleasure" that makes imperative the "direct socialization of the productive process" (350) and that thus causes the subjects committed to it to experience a Symbolic death at the hands of the neoliberal culture industry. It is this "affirmative" reversal of familiar anti-communist narratives that makes Žižek's writings so highly praised in the bourgeois "high-theory" market—where it is read as "subtle" and an example of "deep thinking" because it confirms a transcendental position considered above politics by making all politics ideological. If everything is ideology, however, there can be no fundamental social change only formal repetition and "reversal of values" (Nietzsche). Žižek's pastiche of psycho-marxism consists in presenting what is only theoretically possible for the capitalist—those few who have already met, in excess, their material needs through the exploitation of the labor of the other and who can therefore afford to elaborate fantasies of desire—as a universal form of agency freely available to everyone (surplus-enjoyment).

In the affirmative cultural studies represented by Žižek, popular culture is not a site of false-consciousness of the totality as Marxism argues because the subject is seen as taking from her experience of consumption what are widely considered to be knowledges at odds with the normative values of the dominant ideology. Take Erin Brockovich (Soderbergh, 2000) for example. In a populist reading what is of value in the film is the way in which sexist representations of women are re-iterated as enabling of an activist subjectivity that radically questions the normativity of global representations. Thus, what will be necessary to focus on are such scenes that stage and reiterate the sexist norm, like the bedroom scene between Erin and George, her biker boyfriend, when, faced with unemployment once again, Erin is forced to admit that her adolescent fantasy of herself as "Miss Wichita" did not mean that she was "going to do something important with her life." The scene becomes a staged parody of her acceptance of the crown which goes on to mock the global values she claimed that her reign would be devoted to: ending world hunger and bringing about world peace. It is the knowledge of the impossibility of such goals being brought about through such means as a "beauty contest" that justifies as more "realistic" Erin's use of her body—what the film refers to as her "boobs"—in her work as a legal aid/activist dedicated to uncovering and prosecuting the class action case against The Pacific Gas & Electric Company.

The excess of the purely filmic experience—the moment staging the fantasy of women's sexuality as an agent of world-historic change—is read in the affirmative cultural studies as a "structure of feeling" that gives "the very first indication[] that... a new structure is forming" (Williams, Marxism and Literature 133) within the Symbolic edifice of a culture's norms and regulations that radically calls into question its more traditional values. In this reading the "affective" is "read" as an effect of "power" and given its own separate genealogy that cuts it off

from its relation to the economic base, which actually determines social change. The "power" of these films to "affect" change by imaginative means is thus reduced to re-iterating the reformist notion that change is a matter of the contingent and aleatory self-change of cultural practices themselves. As in Foucault, power spontaneously emerges from the body and is contained and re-signified through dominant representations which themselves gradually change (proliferate) through such contacts and re-containments. But such a reading must assume that cultural practices and cultural studies are not part of the same regime of labor. In actuality, what is being called the "affective" and coded as an "excess" in Erin Brockovich, where the real is shown to be a fantasy open to political re-signification, is not merely a theoretical construction (culturalism), but itself the product of an historical laboring process through which people are being trained daily by mass industrial production through an ensemble of practices (education, popular culture, the cinema, the family, personal relationships, . . . ) to see culture as self-enclosed and come to assume this training as a natural basis for reading/writing/thinking/acting in the structure of global capitalism (the workday). Affect and excess, in other words, which are attributed to the consumer's experience in the affirmative cultural studies, are alibis for dissimulating as a spontaneous experience of the subject what is in fact the role of the culture industry as a whole in training the postmodern workforce in the consciousness skills of culturalism.

The question of the popular and affective in reading the commodified cultural practices of the daily such as film melodrama therefore is: Does melodrama stage the performative display of self-enclosed/self-affective power conflicts in society or, as Marx argued, is it part of "the history of *industry*" and therefore part of "the *open* book of the essential powers of man, man's psychology present in tangible form" ("Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" 354) and thus capable of producing knowledge that the structure of people's "wants and pleasures" is an effect

of labor and that the structures of feeling available in a society are always tied to their economic arrangements. When the global (industrial) history of the affective is uncovered what is revealed is that there is nothing spontaneous and resistant about people's feelings at all because as Marx explains "our wants and pleasures have their origin in society" and are not therefore measured "in relation to the objects which serve for their gratification" but always "in relation to society" (Wage-Labour 33). Because of the social division of labor between those who work for a living and those whose ownership of the means of production allows them to live off the labor of others "enjoyment and labour, production and consumption" always "devolve on different individuals" (Marx and Engels, The German Ideology 45). The affectivity of melodrama which is seen as "excessive" and "resistant" in the dominant cultural studies is a form of false consciousness of class relations that corresponds to the actual class interest of the capitalists against the workers. Melodrama occults and mystifies the structure of society and translates its crises and contradictions into matters of the heart. Melodrama fetishizes the affective by cutting it off from industrial production and thereby trivializes people's emotions. Rather than constructing people's emotions as rooted in class and producing a global knowledge of them such a global knowledge is rather positioned in melodrama as the inhuman other of a passionate involvement with the world as it is and that therefore takes "what is" as "what ought to be." In the global melodrama of contemporary transnational capitalism the inhuman other is always coded as those in whom knowledge has suppressed their freedom so as to scapegoat theory for social change as outdated in the world without borders. Thus in Erin Brockovich it is the lawyers (professionals) who continually are shown as providing alibis for the corporate powers that be by blaming people's "lifestyle" for their health problems which are actually the result of the "environmental" pollution of industry. Their knowledge skills are positioned against the "people skills" of Erin who shares

the worker's lifestyle and herself experiences the prejudice of her boss and co-workers for it. Class as culture and affective knowing (being "in touch" with the people and experiencing cultural oppression) is thus placed against elitist knowledge (theory) as the means to effect change while knowledge is turned into a matter of "people skills" (cultural values).

Because the global crisis of capitalism has become impossible to ignore melodrama has become the site of a basic class contradiction. This is the contradiction between the role of melodrama in reproducing the cultural needs of exploited workers and its more basic function, which is to maintain a high rate of profit for the capitalist. It is no surprise therefore that critics, in the attempt to revive interest in the form by making it seem relevant to the conflicts of the times, have come to identify melodrama as a genre of "crisis." Peter Brooks reads melodrama as a form of material "resistance" and agency because of its anti-normative stylistic excesses which, he claims, sutures the spectator into an affective zone of interiority following the loss of the sacred in modern society. He argues that melodrama offers a moral solution to the unresolvable social contradictions of modernity due to the collapse of the sacred into the political following the French Revolution. Melodrama thus provides a "moral occult"—a "realm of meaning and value... masked by the surface of reality" (5)—to manage the social crisis unleashed by the revolutionary de-sacralization of social life which yet still depends upon "the individual's 'sacrifice to the ideal'" (6) for the reproduction of the social order. Melodrama thus is an instance of what Foucault calls "political technology" because it installs a new structure of feeling in the world. For Brooks this new feeling is the assumption of an "act of interpretation" (what Foucault, following Nietzsche, called "conscience") in everyday life in a world that constantly confronts the subject with the need to take sides in the ongoing struggles. Brooks thus displaces the class basis of the social crisis by representing history in a voluntarist way, as the emergence

of the traumatic in social life provoking a universal search for stable meaning. Such a move makes positive and reliable knowledge of the world independent of the subject impossible. Such a view of the crisis as the loss of transcendence normalizes capitalism by treating history as the scene of an empty repetition—the eternal return of what Žižek, for example, understands as the traumatic traversal of the fantasmatic unity of the hegemonic Symbolic order—without the basic continuity of and conflicts over labor relations.

One sees the same normalization of crisis dramatized in popular contemporary melodramas such as Erin Brockovich in the "uncanny" consciousness skills of the working mother played by Julia Roberts, which "shocks" the knowledge elite (the cadre of corporate lawyers she works with) by its sheer acuity—coming as it does from such an "unexpected" source. It is the same spontaneous knowledge that, by contrast, is coded as "people skills" that makes her an "organic intellectual" of the working-class community which has been medically devastated by the corporate polluting of their ground water. Erin's uncanny skills are shown to place her "in touch" with the lives of the workers in a way that is not available to professionals. Her subjectivity—what in real life Erin Brockovich Ellis refers to as women's "compassion" that she thinks is central to the "American Spirit" (Interview) and in the narrative of pleasure provided by the film is simply called "boobs"—is thus central to the way that the film displaces class from production relations to superstructural relations by re-coding class as knowledge skills (cultural values). "People skills"/"American Spirit"/"boobs" are code words for a kind of consciousness that cannot be explained by the existing relations of production, which are thus immunized from critique. What such a voluntarist notion of agency as knowledge does is produce an occult critique of the existing that mystifies the actual dependence of labor on the wages provided by capital so as to naturalize the historically specific bourgeois appropriation of

surplus-value and protect it from critique. If workers can be shown to be ingenious at finding resources and making do with what exists, then there is no need for the revolutionary expropriation of property and the reappropriation of their alienated social wealth from the capitalist class. Contemporary melodrama is all about finding such pockets of resistance within the daily and providing the subject with the consciousness skills to cope with things as they are.

The same mystification of capital as life skills is popularized by public intellectuals like Hernando de Soto and Pierre Bourdieu in such organs of finance capital as The New York Times and The London Financial Times. "Capital," in Bourdieu for example, functions as the basis of social commonality, as in Weberian sociology generally, as "income" and cultural "skill" that is merely inequitably distributed as "life chances" on the market and not, as in Marx, as property, the objective material basis that allows a minority parasitical to social production to exploit the labor of the majority. In classical Marxism *capital* is precisely what *divides* the working class from the capitalist class: capital is the accumulated surplus-value extracted by the bourgeois owners who, having monopolized the means of production, have forced the majority of people to engage in unpaid surplus-labor in order to survive. In Bourdieu capital doesn't divide people materially (in production), it unites them culturally (in the market). According to Bourdieu, capital is anything capable of being culturally valued and whose possession establishes group distinctions ("habitus") and thus motivates competition and rivalry over the "symbolic profits" accruing around social status markers (like "boobs"). The working class need not engage in class struggle because it can just make do by voluntarily re-fashioning its cultural values into marketable assets, as does Erin Brockovich in the imagined reality of contemporary melodrama.

The formalist approach to melodrama normalizes the historical conflicts into empty signifiers of symbolic and traumatic "crises" that reveal the de-centered basis of the social and

thus occults the ideological function of melodrama in the class struggle—by, for example, conflating those moments when melodrama serves to normalize the division of labor by mystifying the social basis of life and those moments in which it has served the people by clarifying the daily struggles. Thus other cultural critics responding to the crisis of melodrama under global capitalism have situated its intelligibility more specifically in cultural struggles over meaning and have refused ascribing a meta-historical significance to the form. Brooks' argument that melodrama provides a moral resolution to symbolic conflicts is thus opposed in writing about melodrama today on the grounds that it fails to deal with the "specificity" of melodrama, its insertion into social struggles and "regimes of discourse" (the academy, Hollywood star-system, queer camp, etc.). But cultural struggle here is diffused into local struggles and follows Foucault's conservative reading of culture as contingent struggles over power that are assumed to be unaffected by economic determination and the object of which is to open discourse to other "voices." To bring to bear the productive base of social practices as a critique of the superstructure is considered an elitist move on this localized reading of culture because it violates the fetish of "pleasure" which is considered the spontaneous political agency of marginalized "voices" (the body of the other excluded from dominant representations). Popular consciousness is supposed to be "mobilized" by the excessiveness of the melodrama, its difference from the normative regime of values imposed by dominant history and power, and thus enabling because it allows the "voice" of the other to be heard. But this is really populist sentimentality which actively denies the centrality of class in social life, the fact that before one is politically oppressed as a Latino, lesbian, woman, etc. one is socially exploited by being inserted into labor relations that culture functions to legitimate. The constituencies whose voice is considered to be marginalized are in fact divided by class and mostly consist of wage laborers

who have an alienated relation to culture because of their separation from the social means of production and the wealth it produces, not because they are formally excluded from dominant institutions and have no "voice." What global workers need is not more freedom of speech, which trivializes the needs of the working people, but freedom from exploitation.

The ideological effect of contemporary melodrama is not in the "story," which tends to be clichéd and familiar anyway, nor in the manner that the story is figured in the zone of the affective, how it formally stages subjective fantasies for example, but more in the way the story is imag(in)ed. When referring to the "imag(in)ed" story of contemporary melodrama I mean more than its self-enclosed processes of signification and excessive disavowals—such a reading would simply return cultural criticism to formalist readings. The imag(in)ed text refers to the placing of the subject in labor relations with a false consciousness of these relations—either as relations voluntarily entered into or as the performative display of the cultural politics of subjectivity—that correspond to the alienated reality of capitalism. I take the dominance of the imag(in)ed text in contemporary melodrama over "story" and "signification" as evidence of my argument that what at any moment is considered "affective" is itself an effect of the ensemble of the social relations.

Take The Matrix (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999) or Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (Ang Lee, 2001) for example. These films can be said to be melodramatic because of how they engage with class antagonism (by containing class to the superstructure as differences in knowledge "skills" and cultural "taste") while at the same time they are concerned to provide a global image of agency beyond class in the transvaluation of the cultural symbolic order where class has been contained by the dominant ideology. In The Matrix class is re-signified as knowledge of the matrix itself, the virtual reality of twenty-first century capitalism that covers

over the reality of a post-apocalyptic world enslaved by machines. It is on this knowledge base that agency is figured in the film as a conflict between those who knowing the real choose to fight and sacrifice their passionate attachments given to them by the matrix (Neo, Trinity, Morpheus) while they use it as a medium to liberate others and those who despite knowing the truth choose the matrix anyway (Cypher) because they cannot sacrifice their personal pleasure for the collective good. Similarly, in Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon there are two orders in which people are divided: the "official" order represented by the Wudan code of monastic-feudal society and the "outlaw" order of Giang Hu, composed of "tigers and dragons" and ruled by the bandit code of "kill or be killed." Agency here is gained not by those who use their knowledge skills to liberate the oppressed (such as Jade Fox [Cheng Pei Pei] who has stolen the Wudan knowledge because it is used to keep women subordinate to men), or themselves (such as Li Mu Bai [Chow Yun Fat] who has discovered that enlightenment is merely just a "deep and sorrowful silence"), but by Jen Yu (Zhang Ziyi) who as an outlaw aristocrat occupies a hybrid location. Jen Yu values personal freedom over everything else and makes the Wudan knowledge she has helped Jade Fox to steal her own private property by refusing to teach her accomplice how to use it fully (for ending patriarchy). Ang Lee calls her the "real hero" of the film (Lee).

What is effective about these melodramas and what makes them so popular is not what is endlessly reiterated in the culture industry and retained in the memory of the viewer: it is not the sensational "look" of these films in relation to others, the way that the use of "wire-work" (Crouching Tiger) or "bullet-time" (Matrix) photography re-works on-screen action to please the viewer for example. Nor of course is it the story lines, which are based on empty New-Age-y premises which repeat familiar religious themes that have become the mantras of cyber-business culture, sold as self-management techniques by business gurus on Oprah and late night

infomercials. Neither is the effect of these films a matter of how their innovative "look" makes "appealing" the message big business wishes to "communicate" to the audience. What makes them popular is their imaginative and affirmative placing of the postmodern worker into the newer flexible managerial systems of cyber-capitalism, which is staged as a virtual reality in The Matrix and as "a realm under the surface of society and the rule of law, called Giang Hu" (139) in Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, a realm imag(in)ed purely as an arena of symbolic struggles over social status where knowledge determines one's class position rather than labor.

These films are popular because they are concerned with re-training the workforce in the kinds of consciousness skills needed by newer, more flexible, labor relations which have massively privatized the means of social reproduction. At the same time, they are alienated products of bourgeois production based on profit which determines that change can only take place in a commodified form as local innovation rather than situate agency collectively as the global praxis of labor. Personal invention (transvaluation) rather than social transformation (revolution) depends on the naturalization of labor relations (private property) as that bedrock real that cannot be changed. When workers consume The Matrix or Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon they are being provided with the consciousness skills of a highly advanced capitalist society and are being ideologically trained to see change in an alienated way, as separate from social relations as a whole and therefore as spontaneous/voluntarist, making for a more compliant workforce open to the terms of social reproduction of class relations under capitalism. It is the need for the ideological construction of a compliant workforce that makes agency in today's melodramas always appear to be a matter of spontaneous (voluntarist) skills subverting normative hierarchies: from the uncanny cognitive skills of Matt Damon in Good Will Hunting (Gus Van Sant, 1997) or Julia Roberts in Erin Brokovitch (2000) that makes their characters

upwardly mobile; to the elaborate narrative performativity of The Notebook (Nick Cassavetes, 2004) where an older Noah has to daily reconstruct his relationship to Allie who has lost her memory to Alzheimer's by reading to her the story she's written of their youthful romance that subverts the class divide between them by constructing an image of him as a self-made man; to the young democrats' voluntary rejection of "foreign aid" and embrace of the values of self-determination in Ousmane Sembene's Guelwaar (1992); or of the Maori tribal resistance to the value practices of patriarchal modernity in Once Were Warriors (Lee Tamahori, 1995), to name a few.

The governing logic of the global melodrama of today in which class conflicts are central albeit represented as cultural conflicts is that the spontaneous experience of the people transforms fixed regimes of power. It is the old popular front ideology of "people vs. power bloc" now passing as "democracy against capitalism" on the North Left by those like Ellen Meiksins Wood, who follows E. P. Thompson and argues that

because production relations are experienced by subordinate classes in their own particular ways... they can come into contradiction with the 'common-sense of power'; and it is such contradictions that produce the struggles which determine the reorganization and transformation of modes of production.  
(Democracy 65)

On these terms the raw experience of oppression and displacement leads to revolutionary changes without the need for materialist social theory. This populist logic is valorized in the global melodrama of cyber-capitalism by being imag(in)ed as resistant to capitalism by giving the worker a false consciousness of class that turns capitalism and class into cultural matters. In

this cyber-imaginary, global cultural changes like the Internet and the new eco-friendly lifestyle politics are supposed to have empowered the people against totalitarian structures by decentering and deregulating their lives so that they can find freedom in the local and everyday, the sphere of consumption, rather than, as in the past, through class struggle over the socio-economic conditions of production. The dominance of this view has even produced a soap-operetic leftism.

Rosemary Hennessy's Profit and Pleasure, for example, is rooted in the notion that politics is basically a community activity. In bourgeois cultural criticism, the idea of "community activity" is a code term that signals the substitution of shared "ideas," "assumptions," and "emotions" for "class" solidarity. What, therefore, lies at the core of "community" is not a structure (class) but a "feeling" (emotional intensity). Hennessy, who is not as subtle as Zizek, is quite open about the valorization of "feeling" ("opened her heart" [xii], "feisty politics" [xii], "precious friendship" [xiii], "a path with heart" [xiii], "warmth and love" [xiii]). The mark of membership in her imagined community is "heartache": in this evaluative social scheme, she who has felt the most "heartache" (emotional intensity) is the most authentic member of the community. This appeal to a "comradeship" based on the intensity of "feeling" clearly indicates that no matter what Marxist or quasi-Marxist language Hennessy uses elsewhere in her book, she basically believes that people's lives are changed not by revolutionary praxis but by encountering other "feeling" people: "During the last year of writing this book, I met... and my life has not been the same since" (xiii). The lesson of this encounter, Hennessy indicates, was not the classic lessons of Marxism that social change is a product of structural change, but that social change comes about by means of something called "revolutionary love" ("*amor revolucionario*," xiii) which—according to her—has taken her "time and again to the other side" ("*llevarme una y otra*

*vez al otro lado,*" xiii). The other lesson is the danger of vanguardism: "revolutionary love" has also reminded her that "power is finally and always in the hands of the people" ("*el poder es finalmente y siempre en los manos de la gente,*" xiii)—People as spontaneous actors. This activist subject whose agency lies in civil society rather than production is of course central to normalizing the neoliberal order. It is the new citizenship of post-national market subject who is driven by imperatives of consumption rather than class.

This is not surprising because, as one critic puts it, melodrama has been a popular way to "deal with the dynamics of early capitalist economics" (Elsaesser 73) and "society... is more and more splitting up into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat" (Marx and Engels, Reader 474). Take the way, for example, that what Thomas Elsaesser calls Balzac's "vital and melodramatic" experience of "early" capitalism sounds more like a description of the contradictions of "late" transnational capitalism.

The good/evil dichotomy has almost disappeared, and the Manichean conflicts have shifted away from questions of morality to the paradoxes of psychology and economics. What we see is a Schopenhauerian struggle of the will: the ruthlessness of industrial entrepreneurs and bankers, the spectacle of an uprooted, "decadent" aristocracy still holding tremendous political power, the sudden twists of fortune with no-good parasites becoming millionaires overnight (or vice versa) through speculation and the stock exchange, the antics hangers-on, parvenus and cynical artist-intellectuals, the demonic, spell-binding potency of money and capital, the contrasts between abysmal poverty and unheard of affluence and waste which characterized the "anarchic" phase of industrialization and high finance. (73)

By privatizing melodrama as a "mode of experience" (74) specific to a "given historical and social context" (72) of "intense social and ideological crisis" (70) Elsaesser quietly displaces class struggle to an "earlier" time (an "'anarchic' phase of industrialization and high finance") and announces a new post-class moment free of the contradictions of the past. By reifying the affective in this way—taking it out of the ongoing conflicts over the social real of class arrangements—culturalist theory makes melodrama a populist apologetic of capitalism. Melodramas have in fact always served to contain rather than deepen the class antagonism in this way by concealing class relations under a "sensational" and "catastrophic" façade which "attract[s] a heterogeneous public, the majority, avid for illusions" in a world that "demands action from them and, at the same time, eliminates all possibilities for that action" (Alea 111-2). I use the term "(post)melodrama" for the culturalist ideology which always considers melodrama popular because it provides a "post-class" space that resolves the antagonisms in the superstructural imaginary where they become matters of an "affective" pedagogy that naturalizes class inequality. (Post)melodrama has become an institution in the culture industry because it has become impossible to ignore or otherwise escape the effects of the class polarization of the globe. (Post)melodrama displaces root knowledge of the class conflicts for the enslaved market subject who finds it impossible to take sides in a world of side taking because to do so would compromise their access to consumption.

The popularity of melodrama has usually been made an idealist matter by attributing it to the openness of the form, because it is considered a transparent representation of people's "lived experience," or, because in its opacity it gives a post-mimetic representation that displays the constructedness of the real (a regional contradiction I will focus on later). In cultural studies as it is currently constituted a formal division is thus maintained between "ideology" (as

representation) and the cultural "real," the effect of which is to place the social in excess of representation in such a way as to make it unavailable for transformation. The pedagogical effect of this split which perhaps carries the most important political consequences for engaging the contestation over melodrama is whether the cultural real is read as a "utopian" position from which to organize the ambiguity of contemporary experience into a seamless existential identity (as in Benjamin, Brooks, Elsaesser, Lang, Klinger, Byars), or, whether it is a matter of how the textual excesses of melodrama de-regulate "desire" making it unavailable for anchorage in the social for the purposes of collectivity (as in the writings of Althusser, Butler, Hays and Nikolopoulou). However, what this internal division prioritizes is the question *how* experience is represented in melodrama, which at most considers agency to be a local question of "re-description" of the ideological (as in Foucault's localism of "where there is power, there is resistance," History 95), and not *why* the dispersal of the social into the local and affective as is found in melodrama is needed by capitalism to alibi class relations. For this reason there needs to be a critique of the contemporary construction of the popularity of melodrama because it occults the class struggle between those who own and those who must work for them.

What I call (post)melodrama is essential to such a critique. Such a concept is needed to mark the ensemble of practices that diffuses culture into an empty plurality of consumer attachments that constitutes the populist common-sense of global capitalism which requires that agency be considered a matter of knowledge (values) not praxis (labor). The critique of (post)melodrama will also provide a theorization of what in the discourses of Marxism has been put forward as a popular (global) theory of melodrama in which the class conflicts over the real are made central to transforming cultural practices for revolutionary change.

I understand the oppositional relation of a "popular" or "global melodrama" and what I am calling contemporary (post)melodrama as similar to Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's theorization of the difference between "popular film" and "people's film." "Popular cinema," he explains, is the cinema of commodification in the sense that it "attract[s] a heterogeneous public, the majority, avid for illusions" ("The Viewer's Dialectic" 111) and does so by becoming a "costly and complex industry" that "has had to invent all kinds of formulae and recipes in order that the show it offers pleases the broadest public" (112) so as to make a profit, rather than serving as "an expression of the people—of the sectors most oppressed and exploited by an alienating system of production" (111) as does the "people's cinema." (Post)melodrama, like Alea's "popular cinema," has "been the major vehicle used to encourage viewers' false illusions" as well as "the most effective expression of a culture of the masses as a function of passive consumers, of contemplating and heartbroken spectators" in a world that "demands action from them and, at the same time, eliminates all possibilities for that action" (112). On the other hand, what I am calling "global melodrama" is like the people's cinema in that it is "popular, because it express[es] the interests, aspirations and values of broad sectors of the population" which are "carrying history onward" (113). Alea's praxical conclusion is that "*popular* ought to respond not only to immediate interests (expressed in the need to enjoy oneself, to play, to abandon oneself to the moment, to elude. . . ) but also to basic needs and to the final objective: transforming reality and bettering mankind" (111). Therefore, as Alea concludes, "if we want to find some kind of concrete criterion of what *popular* means it is necessary to know what those people represent... in terms of the historical moment and their specific class" (115). It is only in accordance with the objective criterion of class that foregrounds the "basic" and "vital needs" of the people that Alea's theory of the popular enables us to expose the dissimulations of

transnational capitalism in (post)melodrama and explain how "an authentically popular cinema" will only be possible "in a socialist society" (115) which has abolished wage-labor.

What is normatively framed in writing on melodrama as a split between a "realist" or "modern" aesthetic and an "avant-garde" or "postmodern" cultural politics has monopolized debate and broadly divides research in the field. That it is a staged debate with a predetermined outcome is evident in that both sides represent melodrama as a self-enclosed regime of discourse with no necessary connection to the laws of motion of capitalism. I therefore use the concept (post)melodrama to draw out the continuity across what is considered, because of the historical overtones associated with "postmodernism," an epochal shift in history in theorizing melodrama. The "postmodern" writings on melodrama are actually more like "neomodern" texts because of the way they posit the agency of culture as the resistance embodied in consumption and mystify the political economy of the subject. That they do so on the argument that melodrama is popular and more radically democratic because of its textual excesses than are the more self-reflexive *auteurist* works celebrated in high modernism does not really constitute so important a distinction as to justify the "post" prefix in distinguishing writing on melodrama. More important is it to see such a distinction in the context of changing modalities of labor practices as providing the kinds of consciousness skills needed under the globalizing economy.

"(Post)melodrama" is meant to indicate this local shift in capitalist subjectivities which maintains the class binary in the totality. Changes in how melodrama has been produced and consumed and "imag(in)ed" reflect broader social changes in the division of labor. I would now like to examine these changes more closely.

I read melodrama in four ways that depend on how cultural conflicts were being engaged in ideology under the impact of changes in capitalism. All reify a cultural zone of spontaneity (of

"affect-ivity" and "popular-ity") from "*everyday, material industry*" (Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" 354) under the impact of globalizing cyber-capitalism:

1. humanist melodrama considered a generic "fictional system for making sense of experience" (Brooks xvii), nostalgic about a past community of meaning in which "fiction" and "experience" were strictly demarcated.

2. a purely cinematic modern "anti-melodrama" with its auteurist aesthetics of "irony" in which melodrama is read as an elaborate tropics of "unfreedom" (Elsaesser 88) plotting "the agonies that have accompanied the demise of the 'affirmative culture'" (89).

3. the "neomelodramas" of neoliberalism that read melodrama as "discourse," i.e., an "allegory of reading" about "the construction and contestation of the mimetic illusion itself" as an "occasion to trace the repeated transformation of... gendered gestures from a promised mimesis into a subversive performativity" (Butler, "Melodramatic Repetition" 3-4) which represents a dogmatic turn to the voluntarist subjectivity of the free market.

4. the activist "post-melodrama" of today in which, as in Althusser, melodrama is read as an "immanent critique" of ideology because it is "decentered" or "marked by an internal disassociation, an unresolved alterity" (Althusser "The 'Piccolo Teatro'" 142) that is believed to constitute the cultural Real. In (post)melodrama

the performance "is the spectator's consciousness" (150) which is itself "incomplete, like any other consciousness, but moved by this incompleteness itself" toward "the production of a new spectator, an actor who starts where the performance ends, who only starts so as to complete it, but in life" (151).

The "classic" or "humanist" melodrama theorized by Walter Benjamin (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*) and Peter Brooks (*The Melodramatic Imagination*) is premised on a Hegelian view of history as the agency of culture. Hegel saw modernity as a "period of transition" in which while "the spirit of the time... disintegrates one fragment after another of the structure of the previous world," while "the wealth of the bygone life... is still consciously present in recollection" (Phenomenology 75-6) because it is embedded in the cultural archive. Humanist readings of melodrama are framed as a critical project to "restore" to the cultural archive its buried, popular utopian function. Under the expansion and consolidation of capitalism in the West after both world wars and the impact of market forces which were commodifying the "lifeworld" and "subjectivity," critics reacted with a nostalgia for an earlier form of capitalism characterized by a lower level of contradiction. Readings of melodrama functioned as myth at these times to secure what was seen as a lost communal totality in which individuals were freer of the market logic that is changing the world into a global factory.

For example, in the writings of traditional liberal humanists like Brooks melodrama is read as a "sense making enterprise" (xvii) that "represents both the urge toward resacralization and the impossibility of conceiving sacralization other than in personal terms" (16) in times when "there is no universally accepted social code" (21). On this view, history is seen as constituted by a break with the past, a crisis which moves the subject away from the cultural

common-sense that provides him with a "meaningful" existence. Melodrama thus acts as therapy for the culturally orphaned subject by representing a "greater aesthetic self-consciousness" (xvi), a "mode of conception and expression... for making sense of experience" through "the discovery of meaning" in the "act of interpretation itself" (Brooks xvii).

The humanist mode of intelligibility in cultural theory put forward by Brooks assumes that culture is free of material and conceptual conflicts and is the space of the aesthetic. In this view, culture is above politics, economics, and theory, and provides a zone where the subject has access to an emotional plenitude that negates the dehumanizing imperatives of modern life and returns him to his essential humanity. A list of humanist cultural critics may include such diverse writers as Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, Lionel Trilling, Cleanth Brooks, George Steiner, Herbert Marcuse, Simone de Beauvoir, E. P. Thompson, Paul Goodman, and Gertrude Himmelfarb. These different writers, despite their intellectual and political differences, all share a commitment to culture as transcending daily life, which is itself placed in the position of being inauthentic and oppressive of the experiential agency of the subject. What makes the subject differs within and between different humanist positions—desire, reason, or moral choice for example, have all been made essential to what it means to be human—but the basic form of the subject is the same: it is a being uniquely capable of genuine thoughts and feelings whose authentic expression and communication provides moving experiences that stand to "humanize" the world. Culture is thus the tradition of ideas and works that distinguishes Man as unique in nature.

The humanist mode of reading culture is residual in the contemporary and its fundamental premises have been radically called into question by postmodern cultural theory, which argues that with changes in the technologies of writing foundational understandings of

culture that posit a fundamental binary between culture and "not culture" are epistemologically and politically suspect as they must foreclose awareness of the materiality of culture itself.

Brooks has argued for the hegemonic function of melodrama in cultural theory on the grounds that its framing of experience is "an inescapable and central form of our cultural lives" (xii) that is "vital to the modern imagination" (xv). He has therefore been criticized for making "overarching generalizations about affect" by excluding "the ways in which melodrama served as a crucial space in which the cultural, political and economic exigencies" are "played out and transformed into public discourses" (Hays and Nikolopoulou viii). In a new preface, Brooks defends himself from such criticism by reiterating the normative containment function provided by melodrama:

One of the heartening characteristics of our moment in intellectual and scholarly life is that we are all reading one another—to the extent that we are able—across disciplinary boundaries, with a sense of recognition, and a sense that the aesthetic and cultural stakes are the same. What we have learned... is that the melodramatic mode no longer needs to be approached in the mode of apology... we have also learned that it... can do things for us that other genres and modes can't. Perhaps melodrama alone is adequate to contemporary psychic affect. It has the flexibility, the multifariousness, to dramatize and to explicate life in imaginative forms that transgress the traditional generic constraints, and the traditional demarcations of high culture from popular entertainment. (xii)

Thus the study of melodrama brings its own melodramatic rewards (it is "heartening") in that it recovers the ideological function of the "popular" to bring about "the greatest mixture of social

classes" (xvi) in an economically pragmatic way, by "transgressing" social divisions (such as "high"/"low culture" and "humanism"/"postmodernism"), in other words, by simply masking the class antagonisms at the level of theory and culture through an aesthetic relay. To say it again, what is popular in the humanist tradition is an aesthetics of privatization that occults knowledge of the class inequality that makes the social antagonisms. Thus for Brooks melodrama functions as a post-ideological "third way" in which class antagonism disappears in the moral homilies of "good" prose: "While its social implications may be variously revolutionary or conservative, it is in all cases radically democratic, striving to make its representations clear and legible to everyone" (15).

In his study of German *Trauerspiel* (mourning-plays) written by Protestants under the Counter-Reformation of the seventeenth-century, Walter Benjamin provides an earlier example of the humanist position in what has become a tutor-text of neo-marxist cultural theory. In his text on The Origin of German Tragic-Drama (written in 1925 and published for the first time in English in 1977) Benjamin reads the origin of cultural modernity as a due to a crisis of "sovereignty" that has brought about a permanent "state of emergency," an "aversion to constitutive ideas" (40) in general and a "fragmenting" of scientific knowledge in particular into multi-disciplines that do not cohere into a universally valid system of truth (33). Because Benjamin considers the idea of the sovereignty of the State to have withered away since the seventeenth-century popular revolutionary movements did away with the divine right of kings, his theory of history proposes the becoming political of theory itself because as a result of these developments it is "quite impossible" he says,

to derive an easy moral satisfaction...from the tyrant's end. For if the tyrant falls, not simply in his own name, as an individual, but as a ruler and in the name of mankind and history, then his fall has the quality of a judgment, in which the subject too is implicated.  
(72)

Benjamin's investment in the cultural politics of the symbolic essentially undermines the radical project of cultural theory as it can no longer be seen as able to provide reliable and positive knowledge of the world needed to change it. Instead, cultural theory assumes primarily an aesthetic function for Benjamin who uses the crisis of meaning unleashed by modernity as an opportunity to "restore, by representation, the primacy of the symbolic character of the word... by recalling in memory the primordial form of perception" (36), which for him is found in the baroque tragic dramatic use of "allegory." Benjamin's cultural theory is thus an instance of "redemptive critique" (Habermas, quoted in Wolin 29-77), what Benjamin himself understood as the recovery of the "truth content" of works (their situatedness under specific material conditions) from their "material content" (their immediate form of appearance) so as to reactivate the historicity of the present. A redemptive critique consists of restoring through a hermeneutic operation an "existential" or organic unity of consciousness in the cultural archive that has been forgotten due to the de-sacralizing of cultural texts by historic progress. In the Origin this existential unity is considered the "truth-content" of baroque allegory as a utopian longing for the sacred—a world without class contradictions—which had to be coded under the dictatorship of the Church during the Counter-Reformation in the guise of "mourning," a universal condition of creaturely existence given over to despair because of the excess and intractability of the contemporary political contradictions.

Benjamin reads *Trauerspiel* as an earlier attempt to restore the need for the sacred by emphasizing the "fallen" and "creaturely" status of humanity associated with the spread of modernity. As an example, take the fragment by Christoph Männing from his Theatre of Death (1692) that Benjamin places as preface to the final chapter on "Allegory and Trauerspiel":

Whosoever would grace this frail cottage, in which poverty adorns every corner, with a rational epitome, would be making no inept statement nor overstepping the mark of well-founded truth if he called the world a general store, a customs-house of death, in which man is the merchandise, death the wondrous merchant, God the most conscientious book-keeper, but the grave the bonded draper's hall and ware house. (Origin 159)

The effect of the inscription is not so as to argue following Marx that religion is "the heart of a heartless world" (Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right) that has been overtaken by the desacralizing imperative of the commodity form. On Benjamin's terms such a materialist insight would be equated with the surface "material content" of the text. The point of the inscription rather is the "existential" truth it contains in which religion and commerce function as metaphorical elaboration of a spirit of mourning. This is the "truth-content" of the baroque age Benjamin seeks to hermeneutically "redeem" so as to restore a popular subjectivity in the present. According to Benjamin, the popular originally emerged from the cultural conflicts of seventeenth-century Europe in so far as the "thesis of the age" required "spirit," understood as "both strict inner discipline and unscrupulous external action" in order "to exercise dictatorship" (98). The valorization of spirit brought into being a reaction of "faith": "a mood of mourning [*Trauer*] in the creature stripped of all naïve impulses" that "opens

the way for the unlimited compromise with the world" (98) from which baroque culture "extracts a profusion of things which customarily escaped the grasp of artistic formulation" (66) and which "bore the imprint of the absolutist maxim: everything for the people, nothing by the people themselves" (48-9).

Benjamin's turning to the popular culture of baroque allegory was part of a messianic project to restore the hegemonic function of the State (during a revolutionary "state of emergency") "whose constitutional position," he assumed, establishes a unity that traverses constituted "power" and constitutive "faith" and, thereby, "guarantees the continuity of the community" (Origin 65) under dictatorship. Its potential to do so, he believed, was due to the fact that while the "present day heirs of the baroque writers... if not actually hostile to the state, that is revolutionary" are "characterized by the absence of any idea of the state" (56), and are for this reason ignorant of the popular need for a hegemonic authority, "the baroque writer felt bound in every particular to the ideal of an absolutist constitution" (56) and therefore preserved the presently lacking ideal of community. In short, hegemony makes faith in a post-class utopia necessary at the same time that it makes actual social emancipation impossible. Both "spirit" (power) and "faith" (mourning) are revealed to be extreme moral codes that, although originating from an historically specific political antagonism (Catholic absolutism vs. Protestant revolutionism), constitute the matrix of the modern totality according to Benjamin. Benjamin turns to a restorationist cultural milieu because he sees the "national" orthodoxy of his day as blind to its own hegemony in marginalizing the melodramatic heritage and thus blind to its own role in exacerbating the loss "of any idea of the state" to the point of fomenting a contemporary "extreme" "revolutionary" "hostility" to it. Thus, his critique of contemporary German philology was that it could not authentically fulfill its national-popular function because in the cultural

sphere, where the issue was preserving the "spirit" of "the literary heritage of Germany," it marginalized the "non-popular" (but populist) baroque *Trauerspiel*:

The drama, more than any other literary form, needs a resonance in history. Baroque drama has been denied this resonance. The renewal of the literary heritage of Germany, which began with romanticism, has, even today, hardly touched baroque literature... German philology looked on the totally non-popular efforts of an educated bureaucracy with suspicion. Notwithstanding the genuine importance of what these men did for the language and the national heritage, and notwithstanding their conscious participation in the development of a national literature—their work too obviously bore the imprint of the absolutist maxim: everything for the people, nothing by the people themselves, to be able to win over [the] philologists... A spirit, which prevented them—although they were laboring on the construction of a German drama—from ever using the material of German popular culture. (Origin 48-9)

Benjamin's cultural *populism* celebrates "the totally non-popular efforts of an educated bureaucracy" which "bore the imprint of the absolutist maxim: everything for the people, nothing by the people themselves," and valorizes the dictatorial counter-revolutionary State as guarantor of "the continuity of the community" in utopia. His brand of cultural populism is what is now being turned to in cultural studies as the "essence" of Marxism because it teaches how it is "possible to read... a work of culture in order to reveal its message of transcendence and hope" (Grant 144), as, for example, in the writings of the later Derrida (Specters of Marx), Badiou and Žižek to name a few. And yet, Benjamin's national-popular messianism and its nostalgic dream of a post-class State puts him in direct opposition to Marxist internationalism which argues for

exactly the opposite view of history—"the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Manifesto of the Communist Party). This class-consciousness of history is the other of Benjamin's messianic historicity because as a theory of history it could only have emerged, as Marx and Engels explain, "since the establishment of Modern Industry and the world market, conquered for itself, in the modern representative State, exclusive political sway" (Collected Works 486). The State on these terms is "but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" (CW 486) in their united interest in exploiting the global working class and thus cannot serve as a compensatory utopian alternative to cultural alienation. Writing on melodrama has of course changed since Benjamin's and Brooks' studies of it as a popular modern imaginary. Significantly, Brooks himself, who is considered to have written a "foundational text in theorizing the genre" (Bratton 1), now "applies Foucaultian theories of the body to his earlier conception" (2), displacing his previous focus on the "personal" (Brooks 16) as what is central to consolidating the modern symbolic order. What has not changed, however, is the class politics. For example, although Hays and Nikolopoulou, as shown above, criticize the "excess-ive" view of melodrama in Brooks and the humanist tradition because it reifies aesthetic considerations from the broader cultural conflicts, they themselves situate melodrama in excess of history (as class struggle). On the grounds that "the genetic mutability of melodrama is a sign that it responds more to historical than to aesthetic demands" (xiv), they argue that melodrama has the function of "'resolving' the historical complexities that lie behind its intersecting horizons" (x) by "revising notions of value" (xi) and "refashioning... the terms that define interpersonal relations" (xi-xii). Thus, unlike the "closed historical narrative" of "the novel" which "elides" cultural and political struggles, melodrama, by incorporating "the discourses of imperialism, nationalism, and class conflict" (x), they argue, cannot serve a

"canonical" function and, therefore, represents an "ideology of defeat that actually inverts the bourgeois ethos of moral superiority and altruism" (xi). Thus, melodrama represents a formally empty utopic space "not yet... fully codified" that can be "put to use either to imagine alternatives or to enforce the cultural paradigms that dominate" (xiv). In short, melodrama is made a matter of never-ending "ideological dynamics" (vii), by which of course is meant merely cultural struggles over "values," that serves the purpose of mystifying rather than clarifying the materiality of culture as a site of class struggles over social resources.

In the cultural theory of Hays and Nikolopoulou, culture is itself material because it is the singular means as well as the medium in which the "sense of the real" is discursively constructed and the place of the subject in history and the social is primarily determined. "The entities discourse refers to are," on this view, "constituted in and by discourse" (Hindess and Hirst, Mode of Production and Social Formation 19-20). Culture, in other words, is not the other of a real world lying "out there" beyond the means with which we attempt to grasp it—what is "outside" (e.g., nature or truth) is really an effect of the "inside" of the modes of signification available in a culture. The discursivist cultural theory they represent is traced through a list of by now canonic signatures: Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jean Baudrillard, Louis Althusser, bell hooks, and Judith Butler. I realize this list may seem problematic to some because of its inclusion of what are usually considered diverse theorists working on incommensurate problematics. Is not the "body" in Foucault different than the "body" in Barthes or Lacan? My argument here is that despite the apparent differences between Foucault's analytics of the body as the object of "political technologies" and Barthes' performatives of the "grain of the voice" or Lacan's "speaking subject," they all consider materiality as the non-discursive "real" and as such conceptually opaque. Despite his criticisms of Lacan's

logocentrism, Derrida too in his dense philosophical texts such as Of Grammatology as well as his performative writings like Glas understands materiality as basically matter: "différance" is not only an example of the undecidable play of language but also a tutor-text on the "materiality of the signifier." And despite Althusser's commitment to class analysis his pluralization of production through the concept of "overdetermination" effectively argues against capitalism as a foundational concept and functions not much differently in social theory from what Derrida calls the "supplement." Althusser's deconstruction of the binary of base and superstructure, which is the order of determination in history, leads him to a merely descriptive social theory that reifies the localities of the social formation as ideological state apparatuses (the school, church, etc.) and takes as material "what is." But "what is" is always a matter of the codes of culture that cannot grasp how "what is" came to be and why, through the class struggle.

What is material for discursivist cultural theory is the materiality of the signifier, the excessive differential slippage of the signifier over the series of signifieds. Since all conceptual oppositions emerge in the process of signification, and because human practices are conventionally made intelligible through the habitual repetition of linguistic codes, what is material is considered a "language effect." Agency, on this view, is not a matter of "expressing" or "communicating" a human essence (logos) but rather a matter of "paralogy" (Lyotard), the performance of innovative linguistic acts that resignify and challenge the mode of intelligibility of the dominant discourses in a culture. Agency, in short, is a matter of what Lacan called "the agency of the letter" that eludes all attempts to halt signification and secure meaning in a culture as difference is the origin of meaning and thus materially basic to knowing, as Derrida shows (Margins of Philosophy 1-27).

Rather than only reading the shift in writing on melodrama immanently and discursively as a movement from "closural" to "flexible" styles of thought as in the dominant discursivist cultural studies, it is more important to see these characterizations themselves as an index of the historicity of changes in the division of labor from a national to a transnational basis. The shift in focus to a "flexible" and "pluralist" view of culture and movement away from a humanist aesthetic as "authoritarian" and "elitist" as is found in postmodern writings on melodrama is in actuality a labeling dictated by capital as it de-regulates on a world scale in order to facilitate the accumulation process.

The coding is done because previously capitalism needed a subject capable of synthesizing his experiences into an intelligible whole, i.e., one who was capable of extracting a "meaning-full" pattern from the contradictions of his experience. What this imperative did was to normalize a certain division of labor that carried a more pronounced relation of authority between upper management and workers than exists now. The "author" in the humanist tradition—who stands in for the authority of the culture—was thought to "create" meaning directly from his "experience" and deposit it into an integral "work." The "reader" was expected to extract the "meaning" by showing that she had grasped the author's "intention" thus proving herself to be a responsible member of the community capable of being trusted with safeguarding the pre-established codes of the culture. The humanist view of culture made "sense" (i.e., was capable of reproducing the social relations) when labor was organized into a division between a higher managerial layer and a more broad layer of unskilled workers. Humanism fell into crisis when these relations changed due to advances in the forces of production.

These advances have de-skilled labor to a greater degree on a global scale so that anyone with a minimum of training can perform it and the workers who do so are increasingly

multinational and multicultural. As a result, the "managers" of the past have been transformed into wage-laborers so that under global capitalism there are basically two classes: exploiters and exploited. Thus capitalism no longer needs the cumbersome apparatus of idealist humanist aesthetic found in Brooks' or Benjamin's writings on melodrama, but a more flexible regime of discourse as in Hays and Nikolopoulou with a higher degree of tolerance of contradictions. The discursive flexibility is necessary to contain the cultural crisis under capitalism in which culture stands revealed for the global majority as "mere training to act like a machine" (Marx and Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party)—i.e., a performative operation lacking a principled basis of intelligibility outside its own repetition, for the production of pragmatic subjectivities who go along to get along under the existing state of things. Hays and Nikolopoulou fulfill this function in the most effective way by jettisoning the past norms while evacuating culture of its social function to reproduce labor relations under the "radical" alibi that power in class society is open to discursive change. Their surface theory of the social as "ideologically dynamic" mirrors the sensationalism of bourgeois melodrama to the same effect of mystifying the social relations of production, while their merely descriptive theory of melodrama is seen as more concrete because it mirrors the specificity of the form. But by valorizing a merely semiotic democracy in melodrama they support a cultural regime in which practice is naturalized as local pragmatics that maintains class inequality rather than socially transformative praxis to meet the needs of all. They actually miss the concrete specificity of melodrama too by occulting its praxical function in the division of labor. Melodrama has actually always been an effect of the fact that "men make their own history" but not "under circumstances chosen by themselves" (595) and thus either "served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles... of magnifying the given tasks in

imagination" or "parodying the old" and "taking flight from their solution in reality" (Marx, Reader 596).

Discursivist cultural theory is dominant as it has incorporated the traditional ideas of cultural theory in ways that account for the plurality and artificiality of modern culture without simply dismissing them as "irrational" and "dehumanizing" forces against an ideal norm about what it essentially means to be human, supposedly uniquely reflected and expressed in Culture (the tradition of Great Works). However, discursivist cultural theory is being challenged by the emergent discourses of a materialist cultural theory that questions the exclusive focus on discourse as not very different from the humanist idealization of culture as free of the social. In these terms, the social is not just the mechanism of inscription of the subject, as humanist and discursivist theory both maintain, but social as relations of production. Such a critical practice traces itself in the texts of Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Franz Fanon, Raymond Williams, Catherine Belsey, Frederic Jameson, Terry Eagleton, Jorge Larrain, and Barbara Foley, to name a few. These theorists have all in various ways provided valuable critiques of the process of capitalist reification that explains the idealization of culture as having its roots in the logic of capitalism.

Because of its dominance discursivist cultural theory is usually seen as the limit of the political on the grounds that its foregrounding of the materiality of difference seems to privilege traditionally marginalized cultures whose sense of the real is articulated in other than monumental and essentialized terms, such as queer or black cultures (which themselves contain and marginalize internal differences like lesbigay and brown), or, "low" or popular culture, which is consumed for pleasures other than that of cultural negation, innovation and transformation. But, this assumes that the conflicts and contradictions of the world are simply

"differences" in lifestyles that form around contrary significations and values rather than antagonisms that are based on social relations of power such as over access to material resources.

Materialist cultural studies thus asks the question: Is it more enabling to see the binaries of race, for instance, as merely a cultural conflict that arises because of the privileging of certain values that will change with a change in the discourse we use to understand them? Or, is it more effective to see race as a material conflict over the power and wealth available in a society that although relayed in cultural terms always exceeds the fate of signs? Is the difference between popular and high culture simply a question of contrary value judgments over the status of and attitude toward pleasure in a culture, or is something materially at stake here regarding the possibility of a new society with greater cultural freedom than presently exists?

The needs of the working class—which always include a "moral and historical component" (Marx) such as the need for dramatic entertainment—are conditioned by the class position of the workers in the division of labor and can be understood only by grasping these basic arrangements. Because of the material crisis in social life under the regime of capital and wage-labor between production for meeting human needs (use-value) and production for profit (exchange-value), culture has always been the site of intense class conflicts. Melodrama has always been a more or less successful (i.e., popular) way to represent these conflicts in dramatic and imaginative ways while naturalizing and normalizing the division of labor. What Ernest Mandel wrote about "crime stories" is true for melodramas as well: They are

fuelled by an anxiety..., a contradiction between biological impulses and social constraints that bourgeois society has not solved, and indeed cannot solve... an objective need for the bourgeois class to reconcile awareness of the 'biological fate' of

humanity, of the violence of passions, of the inevitability of crime, with the defense of and apology for the existing social order. Revolt against private property becomes individualized... The criminalization of attacks on private property makes it possible to turn these attacks themselves into ideological supports of private property. (8-9)

Although melodramas are more broadly concerned with moral transgressions than crime as such, Mandel's reading of the process of "criminalization" of revolts against property presupposing the reification of the social as natural follows Marx's reading of melodrama as a "spiritualization" of the material needs and motivations of the working classes which denies that their agency is determined by the capitalist form of appropriation (exploitation). In their critique of the melodramatic imagination of Eugène Sue and the Left Hegelians in The Holy Family, Marx and Engels engaged with the need on the part of the bourgeoisie to construct an "ethical socialism" to contain the emergent revolutionary agency of the proletariat represented by their own "scientific socialism." They explained how this was done by valorizing popular culture and in the process occluding the material basis of class consciousness in labor relations. Since then melodrama has been more or less successful in containing class conflicts to the degree to which it has met the needs of the people to consume imaginative representations of their real conditions of life (i.e., provided a use-value under capitalism) while stabilizing exploitation. At times when the class struggle between labor and capital becomes impossible to ignore because of the relative immiseration of workers in relation to the owners and when all aspects of everyday life become implicated in the class struggle, melodrama has been less successful in meeting social needs and seems "irrelevant," "forced," "fake," or "clichéd" (even in its self-consciously "revolutionary" forms, which pale in comparison with the struggle in reality at such times as it has assumed such

a role). As capitalism has expanded across the globe to the point that the world has come to seem nothing but "an immense collection of commodities" (Marx, Capital Vol. 1, 125) melodrama has more and more been subsumed under capital as well and made to serve the profit motive by being reduced to the status of escapist entertainment which is to say, as in the words of The Manifesto of the Communist Party, reduced to "mere training to act as a machine" (Reader 487). The culture industry of contemporary melodramas thus offers "a ludicrous parenthesis in the middle of everyday reality" (Alea 116) in which the subject is imag(in)ed in ways that keep workers available for exploitation by the ruling class.

Before the emergence of melodrama as a form of semiotic democracy in discursivist cultural theory under neoliberalism there was the "anti-melodrama" of the seventies. Under the impact of formalist narratology and (post)structuralist poetics there was practically a complete inversion of the meaning of melodrama in the seventies from its earlier post-war humanist and existentialist articulations. From a "redemptive" aesthetic critique of modern social alienation it became a technically alienated critique (attributed to the spontaneous "gaze" of the cinematic apparatus) of capitalist aesthetics (what Elsaesser calls "liberal idealism"). In the anti-melodrama discussed by such writers as Elsaesser, the focus is shifted from reading "plays" and "novels" to reading "film." This shift in focus also displaces the "communal" agency of universal "myth" sought for by the modernists for an "auteurist" ideology (in which Sirk and later Fassbinder stand as heroes) typical of the cultural avant-garde. What provides the agency of melodrama here is its commodification into a cinema of "sensations," which is read as the "sublimation of dramatic conflict into décor, colour, gesture and composition of frame" (Elsaesser 76), that renders the ideology of liberal individualism ironic because while on the one hand these films "advocate... that the remedy is to apply more of the same" old affirmative

idealism on the other they reveal the inadequacy of doing so because of "the very mediocrity of the human beings involved" (89). Whereas classical melodrama was sentimental and nostalgic for a time before the market polarized society into "haves" and "have nots," anti-melodrama is post-nostalgic and unapologetic about supporting the ideology of the market as the agency of social change on the grounds that ideology is subverted through its cynical repetition. It is the "ironic" untimeliness of setting the ideology of "liberal idealism" contained in the melodramatic form in the time of the coercive harmony ("affirmative culture" 89) of the market that makes Elsaesser conclude that (auteurist) melodrama spontaneously constitutes a "devastating critique" of ideology (85). I want to focus on Elsaesser's text for a moment because of the way that it reads like a survey of what have become the familiar moves of the discursivist cultural theory that has displaced knowledge of the class antagonism in melodrama by valorizing voluntarism over history and pluralism over critique.

According to Elsaesser, "problems of melodrama" can be reduced to "problems of style" (74): in other words, to aesthetic conventions. He therefore presupposes that its historical changes are not made in connection with the social totality and the materiality of labor, but by an overdetermined succession of merely contingent epistemic breaks in which narrative "modes of experience" fall into ideological crisis by the emergence of newer narrative technologies. Thus, according to him, whereas writers in nineteenth-century Europe "understood the melodrama as a form which carried its own values and already embodied its own significant content" because "it served as the literary equivalent of a particular, historically and socially conditioned *mode of experience*" (74) this is in actuality the result of their, and our own, thinking in "conformity with literary standards of verisimilitude" found in "the novel" whose sheer "size connotes solid

emotional involvement for the reader" (76). "We," on the other hand, because of the dominance of cinema, ordinarily "call something melodramatic" when there

is an exaggerated rise-and-fall pattern in human actions and emotional responses, a from-the-sublime-to-the-ridiculous movement, a foreshortening of lived time in favour of intensity—all of which produces a graph of much greater fluctuation, a quicker swing from one extreme to the other than is considered natural. (76)

Cinema, according to Elsaesser, has thus made melodrama into "an expressive code... a particular form of dramatic *mise-en-scène*, characterized by a dynamic use of spatial and musical categories, as opposed to intellectual or literary ones" (75) that "appeal to the reality of the psyche" (73), characterized by "ignorance of the properly social and political... causality [of] social crises" (72). Thus, according to him, Balzac depicts the "Manichean conflicts" of "early capitalist economics" (73) because of a hegemonic literary technology, but in the cinematic melodramas of Sirk, Minnelli, Ray and Cukor—because of "the fact that commercial necessities, political censorship and the various morality codes restricted directors in what they could tackle as a subject" and therefore "entailed a different awareness of what constituted a worthwhile subject" (77)—"alienation is recognized as a basic condition" (86) and what is shown is "how the economics of the psyche are as vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation as is a person's labour" (88).

Under the affective alibi of an arbitrary change in the *techne* of narrative, because, for example, "*speech* in the American cinema loses some of its semantic importance in favour of its material aspects as sound" (76), Elsaesser claims that "the domestic melodrama in colour and

wide screen, as it appeared in the 40s and 50s" represents a formal "sublimation of dramatic conflict into décor, colour, gesture and composition of frame" (76) that manages "to present *all* the characters convincingly as victims" rather than motivated by private interest and personal psychology (86) and thereby provides "a devastating critique of the ideology which supports" (85) the bourgeois subject. In other words, the auteurism of cinematic melodrama subverts the "exalted vision of man" contained in "the American dream" (89) that personal liberty necessarily leads to the social good. On this reading, what is also subverted, however, is the critique-al subject whose positive knowledge of the objective world is necessary for transformative praxis. Elsaesser's "anti-melodrama" represents a cynical opportunism in which the general lack of "class consciousness" (Elsaesser 86) is conveniently read as a spontaneous and culturally liberating de-moralization: a lack of affect toward meta-narratives that subverts their rule. The displacement of class to morality—which has always been the effect of melodrama—is attributed to changes in technology, but this is in fact simply a new-er twist in an old story about "ethical socialism" (Marx and Engels, The Holy Family). Elsaesser reproduces class in the superstructure (as differences in values) even as he erases it in the base (where it is a matter of which class produces and which consumes surplus-labor). He does so by arguing for melodrama as "a conscious use of style-as-meaning," as "the very condition of a modernist sensibility working in popular culture" (77) that "privileges the spectator" because it "activates very strongly an audience's participation, for there is a desire to make up for the emotional deficiency" (88) of the characters in the film. In Elsaesser's cultural theory there stands on the one side technically conscious auteurs who know how melodrama is "emotionally exploitative" and who "privilege the spectator" by "giving" them this knowledge for a profit while on the other side stand the masses with their "ignorance of the properly social and political" (72) changes that

have taken place in melodrama and how it is used in exploitative ways and are hungry for spectacle. Elsaesser thus provides the social division of labor with a complimentary, cooperative and harmonious façade in the popular need for ideology. Melodrama in this opportunist sense is "the last word and the only seriously meant word of bourgeois Socialism. It is summed up in the phrase: the bourgeois is a bourgeois—for the benefit of the working class" (Marx and Engels, Reader 497).

By the eighties the cynical criticism of affirmative culture was no longer acceptable because of its residual critique of liberal ideology. Because of the expansion of capitalism and contraction of socialism in the world it became normative to think that society had entered a "post-ideological" zone in which what socially mattered was how to manage the new post-industrial "knowledge" economy that was ushering in the "end of history" with the "death of class." As a result, there emerged a neo-melodrama that returns to the liberal ideology of the subject of the classic melodrama, not in the mode of a universal critique for a utopian society, but as the sovereign consumer, the subject of pleasure celebrated in the later Foucault. This neo-melodrama makes "desire" foundational to the social by dissolving social relations in the performativity of subjectivity. In the process of endlessly reiterating the normative codes and conventions of culture the subject finds moments of liberation by extracting "pleasure" in the subtle displacement of their normative significance. Neomelodrama is a form of cultural pluralism in which a Rortyan pragmatics displaces power analysis as tied to structural positions of intelligibility. Neo-melodrama, as articulated in Hays and Nikolopoulou's reading of it as performing the "overdetermined" status of culture, reflect the securing of neoliberalism in the eighties and the de-regulation of the State. With the growing class polarization that has taken place under this regime, however, there is a return to a universal concept of ideology as the

anchorage of the subject in the social relations and cultural theory begins to talk about globalization and neoliberalism. With the return of the concept of an ideological social totality, critique becomes a prerequisite for political agency and instrumental in making social change. However, the return, as do all returns, presupposes a debt. And the debt here is marked by the emptying of the concept of ideology as "false consciousness" of class, as in the writings of Althusser for example, in favor of ideology as therapy to suture the "trauma" of subjectivity—what Žižek calls "the absent center of political ontology" or Lyotard "the incredulity toward grand-narratives"—as in the (re-turning) religious writings of Benjamin which place the affective as central to the community.

What I am calling (post)melodrama is dominant in the nineties under the crisis of globalization and returns to neomarxist writers like Althusser for a political critique of capitalist hegemony. It accepts the post-al dogma of the pan-insidism of ideology as brought about by the "absent cause" of the proletariat at the center of global capitalism but in such a way as to authorize activist subjects who identify their desire with a utopic social real. Desire is now not simply the pluralized desire of neoliberal ideology motivated by the constitutive lack of social attachment as discursivist cultural theory celebrated in the eighties but the alienated desire of the Symbolic order itself which makes subjects into bearers of utopian ideals because it totally excludes their feelings. For example, a recent text in Rethinking Marxism repeats Derrida's call for a "hauntology" that "will blow to pieces the stasis of the present and free it from what Benjamin would term the homogenous 'continuum of history'" (71), as an argument for a "queer politics" manned by "gay incendiaries" because "what is the messianic in relationship to the contemporary symbolic order if not the death drive?" (Wegner 76). On these terms the subject becomes the figure of an impossible desire for universality that cannot be realized and which

mobilizes illusions and fantasies as the basis of a re-newed popular life. Wegner thus argues that the blockbuster movie Independence Day (Roland Emmerich, 1996) offers "a figure of the revolution itself" in the alien's "eradication of a worldwide archive of the cultural heritage" (71) because such images "tap into contemporary desires for a radical change of affairs" (72) at a time of "collective inability to do anything that might transform the social, cultural, and political landscape" (67). This text assumes that a "radical" theory of popular culture consists of re-describing its libertarian rhetoric in a "revolutionary" way—as reiterating what it calls "the classical Marxist resistance to the thoroughly utopian idealist project of representing a new social order before its actual material achievement" (69)—and thus attaching to it the significance of a popular "desire" for change without the need of theory. Wegner assumes that what is revolutionary are "marginalized" (?) lifestyles without a future and thereby accepts the volunteerist dogma of bourgeois agency that mystifies collectivity by making change a question of local rearrangements of discourse. Wegner doesn't seem to realize that what he calls "restoring to Marxism its revolutionary energies" (70) is simply a relay—more and more put forward in a religious language in the academy—of what bourgeois economists like Schumpeter call "creative destruction," which is deployed in times of overproduction to "bolster consumer confidence" as the Fed puts it, i.e., to stimulate consumption. To celebrate popular consumption as a revolutionary desire by "reappropriating the discourse" of "pleasure" within class society has nothing to do with Marxism. It is a libertarian practice to "pleasure" the self at the expense of the other. What Wegner's text proves is how anarchism has become vital to big business in the US. In other words, as Scott Forsyth recently put it, this is a "strangely elitist brand of populism" ("Marxism, Film and Theory" 272) which finding "subversion is everywhere" in popular culture

because of its "textuality" (273) has helped define cultural studies as "the rule and triumph of the market" (273) in the academy.

The dominant cultural studies of melodrama today has become the scene of a staged contest between: (1) those who extend its meaning so as to cover all forms of representation, making it a meta category synonymous with the de-centered real of (post)modernity (e.g., Brooks, Lang, Zizek), and, (2) those who locate it more and more specifically within local "regimes of power/knowledge" in which the possibility of knowledge of the social totality is considered to be constitutively lacking (as in Butler and Hays and Nicolopoulou for example). Like all debates this one too is staged for the mutual benefit of the participants because of its exclusion of an other (class) position which brings to bear the needs of the global working class against the regime of profit. Both participants to the official debate presuppose the same matrix of assumptions which forms the contemporary common-sense of what Mas'ud Zavarzadeh calls "post-ality": "a regime of class struggle against the workers" (1) which dis-connects cultural practices (power relations) from their implication in labor relations (exploitation) giving them an independent basis in knowledge (values).

I am proposing an other reading of cultural practices that will have a significant effect on how melodrama is read. My reading re-situates melodrama as a global mode of intelligibility in the dialectic of social production and class praxis. My argument is within the problematic of cultural studies broadly considered in so far as it socially situates melodrama within an historical context but it does not reduce that context to the contingencies of the local (a historicity without the materiality of labor). Rather it implicates the local in the global, but not the global as the "real" locus of subjectivity, a regime of general and generic ideas or meta-narratives competing for Symbolic status against others. By global I mean the objective historic class relations of

capitalism (mode of production) and its laws of motion. My reading therefore goes outside the imag(in)ed debates of the post-al culture industry—the affirmative post-Marxist cultural studies which fetishizes the local and presupposes we live in a post-labor regime based on knowledge (values)—by engaging with popular culture as symptomatic of the necessity of and need for class consciousness (knowledge of social totality).

Like all commodities, what I am calling global melodrama (the culture industry of films and theory providing an occult critique of neoliberalism) meets certain general human needs (i.e., has a "use-value") under the specific social and historical conditions imposed by capitalism (production for exchange and profit). To understand what are widely seen as extra-economic cultural practices like melodrama as a commodity it is first necessary to explain what is capitalism which is not at all self-evident given the absolute dominance of the bourgeois knowledges.

In the dominant knowledges capitalism is itself considered post-capitalist by reading the social in terms of "power" (itself considered to be de-centered) rather than labor (which is historically determinate). Antonio Negri, for example, evacuates capitalism of its class basis by following Foucault, who reads capitalism as a mode of "governance," a regime of "biopower" that is "nothing less than the entry of life into history, that is the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species into the order of knowledge and power [which] undertook to control and modify them" (History 141-2). Foucault provided an alibi for capitalism by marking "the 'right' to life, to one's body, to health, to happiness, to the satisfaction of needs" (145) as a zone "outside history" (143) because life itself had become a "political object" (145) of technoscience. On such a reading, it is knowledge, not labor, that becomes central to the social. "Knowledge" is what Negri calls "immaterial labor" which he places in the center of capitalism.

Immaterial labor represents for him the "real communism" of the "immaterial, abstract, cooperative characteristics of social work" ("Later Althusser" 60) that he reads as "autonomous" of the logic of capital and which makes existing society post-capitalist already so that revolution is not necessary (Empire). Capitalism is thus rejected as an object of analysis because such a global theory privileges the economic as basic to the social and therefore repeats what is considered to be the basic function of what Negri elsewhere calls "constituted power" (Savage Anomaly), which is to marginalize alternative social practices. Capitalism is thus diffused throughout the social as a logic ("constituted power") which by definition must always deny the performance of power in "fixing" the social real. The object of Foucauldean power analysis is to block a class theoretics of the social and present the new as lying in the localities of the system. Thus post-Marxists like Foucault call capitalism the regime of "biopower," Deleuze and Guattari talk about "territoriality" and "coding," and Gibson-Graham reject capitalism as "capitocentrism" and valorize local pragmatics and marginal economies. Capitalism is explained away on these readings as a mode of production of material life by being made into an overdetermined political order without a center, following Althusser. Capitalism is therefore always already post-capitalist because as an overdetermined social formation it depends for its stability on the hegemonic articulation of different economic practices not necessarily tied to wage-labor which the transnational left rejects as central to the social by rejecting the orthodoxy (as fixed ideas) of Marxist "economism." Capitalism is thus understood as a constitutively "out of joint" (Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*) social formation that has hegemonized the social and marginalized alternative economic practices that exceed the logic of capital explained by classical Marxism. It is by re-signifying marginal economic practices into the primary constitutive of capitalism against the

orthodox Marxist reading of them as secondary to class exploitation that the transnational left thinks social change will be brought about.

In actuality, capitalism is still basically capitalism—and this explains the emergence of the purely superstructural readings of capitalism as a discursive regime held in place by fixed ideas—because of the basic expropriation of labor from the workers. All anti-capitalist theories which foresee social change being brought about without the abolition of exploitation in the base are in fact sentimental morality tales masquerading as critiques of capitalism (which is what makes the flexodox economics so useful as the imag(in)ed social relations of global melodrama). Capitalism, as classical Marxism explains, is the global mode of social production in which labor has been transformed into a commodity by totally separating the worker from the means of production. The result of this global expropriation is the class binary (that taboo term of mainstream theory) between exploiters and exploited because it forces those who have only their labor-power to sell to work for the owners of the means of production and produce profit for them or starve. It is this systematic exploitation of labor that makes capitalism capitalism, not its maintenance of oppressive regimes of labor outside the logic of capital.

The forms of oppression thought to exceed the logic of capital on the transnational left are in actuality part of capitalism not "autonomous" of it. Their existence testifies to the degree to which capitalism has rationalized productive labor. Oppression (extra-economic coercion) is a *secondary* contradiction of capitalism because it is an effect of its uneven development. This uneven development is the contradiction between the advanced sectors of capitalism, based on free labor markets, coming into conflict with, firstly, pre-capitalist social relations (e.g., communal, feudal) based on "unfree labor" or "extra-economic" coercion, and, secondly, a mode of capitalism in which labor has only formally rather than really been subsumed under

capitalism, i.e., a stage in the development of the capitalist mode of production before scientific mastery of the production process has been instituted and the only way to generate surplus-value is through the extraction of absolute surplus-value (by lengthening the working day, for example, or cutting wages directly). However, as soon as capitalism organized itself historically into monopoly capitalism, modes of production based on extra-economic coercion were bound to disappear and have in fact disappeared. The "extra-economic" forms of exploitation in the world today are residual of an older capitalism which has been displaced from the center of the social by more productive forms of labor. In other words, they are not outside capitalism or residual of pre-capitalist forms of appropriation based on extra-economic forms of coercion but marginal forms of capitalism itself based on the exploitation of the center. The cultural and real violence done to women, people of color, and lesbian people in other words stems from the persistence of the economic exploitation of the working class central to capitalism and is not an independent political domination held in place by a separate patriarchal, homophobic, Eurocentric regimes of fixed ideas demanding their own special theory of change as identity politics maintains. By disarticulating the totality of production practices the cultural left authorizes capitalism without gender, race, discrimination and thus accepts economic inequality as an integral part of human societies. For them capitalism is here to stay and the best that can be done is to make its cruelties more tolerable, more humane. This humanization (not eradication) of capitalism is the sole goal of all contemporary lefts (marxism, feminism, anti-racism, queeries, . . .) as well as the imag(in)ed real of global melodrama. Global melodrama is what I call the cultural process whereby social relations are reified into dramatic representations of crisis and conflict and turned into "indirect apologetics" (Lukács) for late ("moribund, " Lenin) capitalism. The fact that this

process of cultural reification has become systemic and thus conscious testifies to the very real material possibility of transforming culture to serve human needs.

The Butcher Boy provides an occasion to investigate a contemporary melodramatic text as popular culture for global capitalism. On the surface it appears to be the (conventionally melodramatic) life-story of Francie Brady (as told by himself in recollection), a young working-class boy living in a small town in Ireland at the height of the Cold War who, under the impact of a dysfunctional family situation and the death of his parents, becomes a delinquent and is institutionalized. However, it is the "excessive" tale of the film that shatters conventional narrative coherence and imag(in)es the subject in the autonomy of the affective for global capitalism that makes the text (post)melodramatic in the activist sense which I have argued above is central to global melodrama.

As the film unfolds, Francie is shown to be a split-subject who is subject to a paranoid fantasy that leads him to brutally murder a petty-bourgeois woman of the town, Mrs. Nugent, under the delusion that she is the "alien" cause of the loss of his childhood happiness with his "blood-brother" Joe Purcell. In the first scene—which, as is later revealed, takes place in the "garage," the place where people who "break down" go (i.e., the local mental institution)—young Francie, in answer to the melodramatic question, "Why Francie, why you'd have broken your poor mother's heart?" explains (as his older self in voice-over narration) that

When I was a young lad 20 or 30 or 40 years ago, I lived in a small town were they were all after me on account of what I done on Mrs. Nugent. If she hadn't poked her nose in between me and Joe everything would have been all right. Of all the wrong things I'd done I suppose the apples were the first. They started all the

trouble. And Francie Brady didn't need any old snake to give him one. He robbed them himself.

The film will systematically disrupt this origin story of paradise lost by revealing the fantasmatic basis of the subject of the narrative, which is not Francie Brady the socially "victimized" boy who is shown bandaged from head to toe in the "garage," but the older Francie Brady narrating the story who, having finally realized he is the "snake" who "robbed... himself" of paradise, we later learn, is finally being released from the mental institution into what his doctor tells him is "the real world" it was about time he "joined." The film depicts a split in Francis Brady's personality—between a "heroic" self-determining character the film-text marks as "Mr. Francie Brady"; "The Incredible Francie Brady" who, like "The Great Algernon Cruthers," "travels through the wastes of space and time"; "Al Capone"; "Francie-Brady-The-Butcher-Boy"; and Francie Brady, the neglected and despised boy who becomes the "reformed" narrator of the story of a more conventional melodramatic tradition. The film rehearses the narrative that Francie's self-alienation is the result of traumatic experiences of abuse, neglect and abandonment by his mentally ill mother and alcoholic father in colonial Ireland. Because of the flashback narration, however, the tale is unreliable not only because it includes impossible delusional elements (e.g., the persecution fantasy of Mrs. Nugent), but also because in the process of narration itself the older Francie actively participates in the re-narrated action as young Francie's spectral interlocutor (as, for example, in the scene where young Francie vandalizes the Nugent house under the "instruction" of the older Francie in the voice-over). This de-centered subjectivity is an index of the "structure of feeling" the film foregrounds and is tied in the narrative to the replacement of "the family" (the traditional structure for the private reproduction of socially necessary labor under capitalism based on heredity) with "the friend" (the commodified private

sphere of reproduction under cyber-capitalism which even more leaves up to the individual the private reproduction of labor-power). Through these moves and displacements the film argues that people are basically "free" to "make" themselves what they are and should not be artificially limited by traditional social institutions and conventions. The connection of the free subject and commodification is clear in the film because Francie and Joe's voluntary association as "blood brothers" as well as its fantasmatic support as a protection against the alienating effects of Mrs. Nugent is modeled on the latest export products of the emerging post-war metropole: Cold War television, comics, film noir and science fiction. Mrs. Nugent represents a global threat of annihilation in the film as in Francie's fantasy she is synonymous with a "Cuban-Communist-alien" invasion that destroys the world "as we know it." The destruction of the world "as we know it" is the precondition for a utopian aesthetic of "hope" later in the film which frames the narrative as a movement from the sublime to the beautiful that parallels Francie's feelings of attachment to and detachment from the social.

The (post) melodramatic text of the film does not consist of the "story" or its "context," but in what Althusser called its "dynamic and latent structure" ("Piccolo Teatro") and in how its contradictions lead to "the production of a new spectator, an actor who starts where the performance ends, who only starts so as to complete it, but in life." This is the post-al subject of the "post-ideological" moment—one who has left behind both the narcissistic status of "innocent victim" with its constitutive ignorance of "personal responsibility," and the reformed "voice" of the "real world," who assumes control of the narrative and re-writes his own life over the suppressed voice of his youth. It is this post-al subject that provides the activist alibi that what matters is knowledge (of textuality, of affectivity, . . . ), rather than the extra-textual real of class, that is needed by contemporary cyber-capitalism. The post-al subject is imag(in)ed in the

narrative of The Butcher Boy by its systematically representing a world divided in two, the cause of which is constitutively absent because of the "traumatic" kernel of subjectivity at the basis of the social real. By placing the origin story of the film in the mouth of a split subjectivity The Butcher Boy argues that the social totality is in actuality a performative construct that yet remains unchanging in its essence rather than an effect of class society open to change. As in Zizek, this construct serves the post-al ideology by arguing that

externalization of the cause into 'social conditions' [the patriarchal family, its role in the totality of the reproduction of the capitalist system, and so on] is... false, in so far as it enables the subject to avoid confronting the real of his or her desire. (Mapping 6)

In other words, the object of the (post)melodramatic text is to disrupt a causal explanation of the global division of labor on moral grounds—because to do so "discharge[s] us of responsibility for it" (Mapping 30). That this is not seen as a newer return to liberal ideology of the subject is due to the increased commodification and pluralization of symbolic commitments in cyber-capitalism that the film references and performs in the context of colonial Ireland in the fifties. The return to the "personal" as constitutive of the political is considered enabling because it positions the subject in the market for a politics thereby "refusing" to accept a socially fixed form of politics under the alibi that fixed ideas are "hegemonic" (what Negri calls "constituted power") while flexible ideas are "subversive" or "constitutive power" (Savage Anomaly, Preface). The resulting display of lifestyle as politics goes along with the commodification of the real that characterizes globalization. Change becomes a matter of pietistic belief, choosing the metaphysics that chooses you, as in the contemporary neomarxist writings which model

themselves on messianic theology. This flexi-theology serves to naturalize the global market as a post-class social real constituted by ideas.

The Butcher Boy performs the reversal of causality not only by making the subject of the narrative an unreliable source but by building up tension in the narrative between a series of absolute binary oppositions the global logic of which is itself arbitrary because, as one of the town women says to Francie, "the problem is you just don't know who you're dealing with" anymore from one moment to the next. Although she is referring to the Communists in their struggle against US imperialism over the installation of nuclear missiles in Cuba, later in the film her statement is repeated in a dream sequence of Francie's in such a way as to give it the global meaning that the "time is out of joint" and it is up to the subject to "make it right" (Derrida *Spectres of Marx*). Significantly, in this scene Francie is sedated and dreaming that the "Communists-aliens-Mrs. Nugent" have finally dropped the bomb and annihilated the town. As he and Joe walk amidst the rubble and view the corpses of the town's people, who are pigs in the fantasy, phrases from the past, such as the one from the woman in town, are repeated. On "hearing" in the dream "the problem is you just don't know who you're dealing with" again, however, Francie replies to the woman/dead pig, "So who's the pig now ladies?" and in this way appropriates the social trauma of "not knowing" who "they are" into his own personal narrative. In Francie's fantasy the feared other is not only known and annihilated but known because they are annihilated in Francie's personal fantasy. In other words, the materiality of the "other" is inverted: it is not an effect of the class binary (what the film codes as American/Communist) but a matter of value coding (margin/center) that is contingent on merely subjective belief systems. The scene thus stages the (post)melodramatic logic of global capitalism by making the subject and his affective desire the cause of the social rather than the reverse.

In order to displace global knowledge of the social cause of the contradictions the (post)melodramatic text must segregate the social into a field of plural flexi-attachments ruled by an occasionalist knowledge of "desire." In this way it produces an opportunist subject who rejects "taking sides" as an unnecessary imposition on the pleasures to be found in re-fashioning and re-narrating the social contradictions on an *ad hoc* basis. Such a subject of course does take sides by displacing class contradiction into merely local differences and thus making knowledge (values) central to the social and not labor (praxis). In other words, it is a subject who supports the bourgeois culturalist ideology that change only happens in the superstructure and not in the base. In The Butcher Boy there is a series of binary oppositions including: the Kennedys (i.e., Irish-American elites whose portraits are ubiquitously placed next to the religious icon of "Our Lady") and the Communists ("Krushev bastard"); England (source of Mrs. Nugent's "airs and graces" with which she "walked all around the place as if she owned the town" and where Uncle Alo has employment with "10 men under 'im") and "the town" (a "big garage" and "pig pen" where Francie's father is an underemployed alcoholic horn player); the town (where Francie has "adventures" that provide him with knowledge of mass psychology he uses to mimic the State by "inventing" a "pig poll tax" with which to intimidate Mrs. Nugent on her walks and to teach the "bog-men" how to follow and protect him in his identity of "Al Capone") and country (land of follow-the-leader "bog-men" who all "dance like wading through manure" because of their "ass in the air and nose to the ground" mentality); the Catholic "home" for juvenile delinquents ("the house with a hundred windows just like the one Da and Alo spent all those happy days") and "home" (where "Ma" the "bun woman" who acts like a "cake machine" is abused by "Da" who treats her "like a pig" and is most of the time passed out and whom Francie comes to see as "Mr. and Mrs. Monkey"); the "garage" (the place where the locals go who "break down") and the

church (a place filled with "bog-men who think they're at a football game" through which Francie must go to get the "Francie-Brady-Not-A-Bad-Bastard-Award"); the "old town" (before the death of Francie's parents that he compares to "a great big ocean liner lying at the bottom of the ocean") and the carnivalesque "new town" (that was "rising up getting ready to sail anywhere you wanted to go" and that "looked like the brightest and happiest town in the whole world" because it was putting on "the end-of-the-world-show" in which everybody is "holy-ing out" with a "we're all in this together" spirit because of the fear of nuclear annihilation); and finally the "real world" (filled with all these contradictions) and the "alien world" (the narrative in which "communists-aliens-Mrs. Nugent" are out to destroy "all the beautiful things" especially the "blood brother-hood" between Francie and Joe).

The subject that the (post)melodramatic text valorizes by imagining the world in localities is one whose emotionally intense experiences serve as the source of an "inventive" imagination that symbolically competes with the hegemonic grand-narratives of established institutions and conventions and in the process reveals them to be themselves performances anchored in desire. The film in fact offers a tour of these normative institutions in Francie's "travels through the wastes" of Irish colonial society that reveals them to be, like the town as a whole according to Joe, "cracked", i.e., unable to secure consent. They are shown in this way because they are unable to contain the spontaneous "dissensus" Francie introduces into them, not as a free subject who "naturally" rebels against their authority because they are unjust and who thereby supports the principle of individual "sovereignty" underlying that authority, but as a subject of surplus desire who over-identifies himself with public figures of authority in order to himself become the object of popular desire and who therefore represents the "illogic" of desire standing in for social authority. For example, take the way he, Francie, assumes the role of the

"pig toll tax" collector, a "business," he tells the women of the town who gossip in the general store, he "invented" in order to "prove" to them that Mrs. Nugent is a public nuisance because she refuses to pay it. Another example would be when in the Catholic home for delinquent boys Francie first becomes an altar-boy so as to get the "Francie-Brady-Not-A-Bad-Bastard-Award" so that he can more quickly be released and be "right at the foot of the fountain again with Joe Purcell, KING OF ALL TIME" and then pretends to have visions of "Our Lady" because the priests tell the boys stories like this as proof that "she knew that the soul of a child is purest of all." The universal desire for transcendence that constitutes the social in The Butcher Boy is called "the beautiful" and it is associated with the end of the social (as class antagonism). It is symbolized in the final scene when Francie learns to accept the fact that "the world goes one way and we go another" and thereby abandons his passionate attachment to (his Christ like ideal of) Joe and in return is given a "beautiful" snowdrop flower by "Our Lady" on entry into the "real world"—the same flower that rained as fallout from the nuclear blast that annihilated the town in his fantasy. The movement from the sublime (end-of-the-world nuclear holocaust) to the beautiful (enter-the-world single flower) parallels the movement from the dead family ("Mr. And Mrs. Monkey") to performative family ("blood brother") and from lost blood-brother to entry into the "real world." The "real world" is thus a place beyond social struggle or solidarity, a place of pure aesthetic "hope" in the subject to be "inventive" and take care of himself. This is the socially necessary subject of global capitalism that (post)melodrama must perform if it is going to be effective ("popular") in containing contemporary social contradictions.

## 2.0 MATERIALITY AND THE PRAXIS OF THE OUTSIDE

### 2.1 POST-THEORY

One of the crisis texts of cultural theory is the Critical Inquiry conference on "theory" held recently in Chicago (April 2003). The conference was a defense of the "spectral" (anti-foundational) theory that has dominated the academy in the eighties and nineties, but because this theory of theory has since lost its credibility with the loss of US economic hegemony and political legitimacy in the world the presentors all had to acknowledge in different ways the need for an "other" theory, hence the popularity of "ethics," "aesthetics," and "activism" at the conference. Because it was typical I will focus on Bruno Latour's essay that formed the initial statement of the issue of Critical Inquiry that covered the conference.

In his text Latour claims that theory is dead because it has cancelled itself: it has been "eaten up by the same debunking impetus" it used to reserve for "matters of fact" (232). Theory forgot, according to Latour, that matters of fact are really "renderings of matters of concern" (232) that reflect "the things really close to our hearts" like "the God to whom I pray, the works of art I cherish, the colon cancer I have been fighting, the piece of law I am studying, the desire I feel, indeed, the very book I am writing" (243). Theory, he claims, has traditionally mistaken its own concern "*toward* the conditions" (231) that make facts possible in the first place as a universal concern and thus "distanced" itself from matters of the "heart."

Latour's story about the death of theory and the re-birth of the spiritual depends on representing theory in a technological guise against the naturalness of the "heart": he calls theory "equipment" (231) and compares it to armaments (225, 231) on the one hand and contrasts it to the "new" theory as a "rendering of matters of concern" on the other. It is the function of the "equipment" of theory to "debunk": "debunking" is what Latour calls the search for "causal explanations" (229) that "reveal the real objective and incontrovertible facts hidden behind the illusions of prejudices" (227). The effect of making theory-as-critique a kind of "tool" is to reify theory from the social relations and to consider that what happens in theory is self-caused and self-involved. Thus, his claim that "causal explanations" have "outlived their usefulness" (228) because they depend on "the whole notion of social and society" (230) which he dismisses as a "social neverland" (230) that no longer exists anyway "since... the proletariat... passed away" (226). But it is Latour's understanding of theory as "equipment" that has consumed itself that is an illusion and not the connection between theory and labor. If the material rootedness of theory in the labor relations was simply false after all and theory stands revealed as an illusion why would Latour need to spend so much time "debunking" it by the "facts" of the "heart"? Latour gives one indication of why—his paycheck. He mentions, as if it were the result of theory eating itself and not the privatization of the university by big business, that "after that, the lights of the Enlightenment were slowly turned off, and some sort of darkness appears to have fallen on campuses" (232). The life and death of theory is a matter of the rise and fall of profit, in short, not self-caused.

Theory was needed during the Cold War to counter the critique of capitalism by socialism and at that time it served in the humanities to deconstruct all binaries turning them into formal equivalents and thus serving the dominant. After the Berlin Wall was destroyed theory

changed and the anti-foundationism that was once the result of a highly mediated and literate deconstruction in the founding texts of theory became normalized as a social theory of difference—in the writings of Foucault and Laclau for example—and theory legitimated the new borderless capitalism. Today the West has lost its economic hegemony to emergent capitalist regimes such as China and theory is declared to be over. Culturalism, which puts values in place of concepts, has taken its place to manage the crisis. By turning theory from a rigorous inquiry into the conditions of knowledge production to an ethics that adjusts itself to existing prejudices Latour distances theory from the daily to make it more amenable to capital. A sign of this fact is that he has to represent theory in the guise of technology and even as he argues theory is dead he defends a new "rendering" of it, theory with a heart, that will "inspire respect for... the objects of science and technology" (232) in the same way it inspires respect for God or art.

Latour assumes that theory is a tool (equipment) and that with changes in the types of tools used today a fundamental change has taken place that changes theory. In his story about the end of theory, theory-as-critique loses its claim to legitimacy since the public has absorbed "a popularized, that is teachable version of social critique" (228) —a conclusion he seems to have reached by noticing the marketing campaign of a recent film he alludes to—that is out of touch with "the challenges of the present" (231). According to Latour, because the public practices a form of "gullible criticism" (230) in which "Everything is suspect... Everyone is for sale... And nothing is what it seems" (quoting *L.A. Confidential*, 230) it is necessary to "no longer... debunk but to protect and to care... to inspire respect for... the objects of science and technology" (232). On the one hand Latour claims that theory (as root knowledge) is dead because there no longer exists a class for whom such "equipment" is necessary, while on the other hand, he declares the popularity of such root inquiry as itself a deligitimation of theory, which he assumes is supposed

to "care" about things and "inspire respect" for "things of the heart" and not give practical explanations. Latour constructs a theory of theory that fetishizes theory as technology and makes it the spiritual essence of history. In his narrative theory is a self-moving technique of thought without a subject whose changes produce the world we see. Hence according to him theory as critique is dead because the proletariat no longer exists and "there is no greater crime than to address with the equipment of an older period the challenges of the present one" (231). The "present" in this story demands an end to causal knowledge of the world because history has produced a new "sacred" relation to science and technology. Such a theory of theory as a self-enclosed activity that functions on its own independently of the social simply passively reflects the fact that the present is characterized by a drive for technological innovation in the context of ruthless transnational competition for profits that demands of that the population care about the needs of big business. What the death and rebirth of theory that is represented by Latour as a shift from the heartless theory-as-critique to an ethical theory with a heart shows is that what is at stake in theory is not in actuality the morality of theory but the class function of theory.

Latour's assumption that theory is a kind of "equipment" that cancels its own origins is in actuality itself rooted in the mode of production. Engels after all, who thought of "theory" as an "appetite for purely scientific investigation," had already long ago recognized (in his text on Feuerbach) that the traditional social basis of theory had disappeared with the dominance of capitalism. He explained that because theory depends for its exercise on the freedom of inquiry "irrespective of whether the result obtained" is "practically applicable or not" or whether it is "likely to offend the police authorities or not" (241), it "disappear[s] completely" (242) at a time when "an anxious concern for career and income, descending to the most vulgar job hunting" and "patronage from above" (242) becomes a necessity. However, unlike Latour who presently at

such a time calls for the dismantling of theory and a turn toward sentimentality Engel's argues that it is precisely at such times that theory is most of all necessary if thought is not to become "an ideology, that is, occupation with thought as with independent entities, developing independently and subject to their own laws" (237), which would effectively make theory merely a reflection of the given estrangement of men and women from their own productions, enshrining the monopolization of material resources by the powers that be. It is at such times that theory as critique becomes revolutionary according to Engels because "the more ruthlessly and disinterestedly science proceeds" despite such economic obstacles "the more it finds itself in harmony with the interests and aspirations of the workers" who have "no concern for careers" or "profit making" (242). In short, Engels draws the exact opposite conclusion from the "end of theory" as does Latour and finds in it not the disappearance of material causality and positive knowledge and a new age of faith-based initiatives but further evidence of the link between ideas and their material basis in class relations.

Theory is not "equipment" or the "box of tools" Deleuze reduced it to the easier to claim the end of ideology and the death of critique (*A Thousand Plateaus*). The reason to consider theory as a "tool," as the writings of Heidegger show with their consideration of theory as "ready-to-hand" explanations of the world, is to mystify the social conditions which alone explain why theory is a necessity and make the agent of theory the individual, the private property owner, and thus turn theory into a commodity. The privatization of theory has always been the not so hidden agenda of Western Humanism since Plato and it needs to be sharply contrasted with Marx's understanding of theory as "conscious life activity" (*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* 68) in common (species-being), theory as the "appropriation of man's essential powers... in thought" (129), a necessary precondition for what he calls "consistent

humanism" (92) or "communism". Theory in this sense "represents a class" (*Postface* to the Second Edition of *Capital*, 98) who "have no ideals to realize" (Marx, *Civil War*) because of their position in the division of labor with only their labor power to sell and who are thus forced "to face with sober senses [their] real conditions of life" (Communist Manifesto).

Theory as critique is under attack today by culturalist discourses because it exposes the complicity of knowledge with class and thereby compromises the ideology of knowledge as the source of value that is central to cyber-capitalism. Because of the need of capital for science, however, the attack on theory is forced to take on the form of a defense of theory, but a theory shorn of its root knowledge and turned into a speculative value, hence the spectral theory represented by *Critical Inquiry*. In its attack on the "gullible criticism" of the masses Latour's defense of the spectral theory is ultimately not a very effective way of marketing theory in the knowledge industry. Now the most effective defense of the emptying out of theory in the name of theory itself is when the spirit of theory is pitted against the injustices of capitalism, as in Terry Eagleton's *After Theory*. Eagleton offers what he claims is a marxist defense of theory, but effectively abandons the materialist project of critique by giving a highly reified notion of theory that repeats the dominant (ghost) story about it in another guise. Eagleton defends materialist theory by uncovering the need for a concept of "materiality" as that which "gets in the way" (118) of the "capitalist success ethic" (116) which depends on the idea that "we might be able to know what it was to live well just by looking into ourselves, or simply by instinct" (110). Because capitalism according to Eagleton depends on a "ruthlessly instrumental logic" (119) that demands "everything... must have its point and purpose" (116) so as to build up the expectation of a "reward" for "acting well" (116), and reserves punishments for acting in ways which do "not have a goal" (115), he argues that defending the idea of "the material 'species being' of

humanity" (120) is a radical act of transgression (119) because he sees this concept as positing humanity as having a cultural root while culture for him is understood as purposeless activity for its own sake. But is "the idea of fulfilling your nature" Eagleton finds exemplified in aesthetics really "inimical to the capitalist success ethic" (110)? Capitalism after all depends on constant technical innovation to realize relative surplus value by cutting the amount of time workers engage in necessary labor to reproduce the value equivalent of their wages and increasing the amount of time spent in surplus labor which forms the basis of the capitalist's profit. To argue that "it is in our nature to go beyond ourselves" and "give birth to culture, which is always changeable, diverse and open ended" (119) is to naturalize the law of value that drives capitalism by embedding the drive for innovation in human nature. Making culture the root of humanity also homogenizes culture as reflecting a universal "sense of belonging" (21) rather than a space of class antagonisms over the material resources of society.

But what about Eagleton's argument that not only is culture essentially anti-capitalist but that it is the material root of human nature and as such an incontestable "absolute truth" (After Theory 103)? On this argument he says that in the same way that "you cannot ask why a giraffe should do the things it does" (116) one cannot ask why humanity produces culture, or, in other words, ask what is the purpose of culture. In both cases, however, nature is taken as static and unchanging, as if giraffes ever existed outside a changing material environment which, actually, always does explain why they should do what they do and not something else, which, of course, is what Darwin's theory of natural selection is all about. Not only does Eagleton assume that what makes a giraffe is immanent to the giraffe outside the material context in which it must find food, shelter and other giraffes, thus effectively giving the giraffe in place of its actual nature a normative cultural identity, but he also naturalizes human culture by treating it as a kind of

secretion that is spontaneously produced by human beings as such. Eagleton, following an aesthetic tradition within Western (Hegelian) Marxism since Adorno, defends "the concept of culture" as "the cultivation of human powers as ends in themselves" (24) on the argument that not only is an immanent understanding of culture "resistant" to the law of value it is also embedded in human nature. But such a self-reflexive concept of culture is not coincident with humanity as a species and a long period of natural evolution from bipedalism and the opposable thumb to economic (i.e., socially conscious) organization and tool making precedes language and "art," the first cultural practices which have the formation of the subject specifically as their purpose. It is only by suppressing knowledge of human evolution and the origins of culture in labor that culture can be made to seem "purposeless" (i.e., naturally subjective rather than socially objective). But, not only is culture purposeful because it is economic in essence—it produces a consciousness of the material process necessary to sustain human life and helps wrest control over nature so that humans are not the slaves of chance—it also has cross-purposes that arise, for instance, when short and long term purposes come into conflict, such as when the needs of immediate survival conflict with long term sustainability, or, as when culture serves to contain antagonistic class interests.

Culture in the sense Eagleton uses it is held to be "disinterested" activity that is carried out for its own sake rather than instrumentally as a means to an end, as Kant argued. But whereas Kant believed that culture was grounded in and reflected transcendental truths Eagleton maintains that "cultural ideas change with the world they reflect upon" (After Theory 22). Although he calls this world the "historical context" (22) or, simply, "reality" (23), clearly if ideas are determined by what they "reflect upon," rather than what they reflect, no matter what one calls the "thing-in-itself," what is being claimed is that ideas reflect themselves in the sense

that ideas when put to work take themselves for their own material. Thus, Eagleton's understanding of theory is totally spectral; he calls it "critical self-reflection" (27), "a reasonably systematic reflection on our given assumptions" (2), which is just another way of saying that ideas are self-caused, that "ideas change with the world they reflect upon" rather than change with changes in the structure of necessity. On Eagleton's logic, ideas "reflect" reality and the reality that theory "reflects" is its own ideas! So, not only is Eagleton's concept of "species-being" in the end not a materialist understanding of humanity but a cultural one, culture itself is thought of as merely reflecting ideas thus effectively defining the human spiritually. To define theory as an "end-in-itself" in the way Eagleton does is simply to uncritically accept a highly reified notion of reality where thought is held to exist in itself in contradistinction to the real world lying "out there" and thus to relegate change to the level of ideas and posit "nature" as an untransformable and therefore incontestable "bottom-line concept" (116). Not only is such a theory of theory not anti-capitalist, capitalism actually necessitates such theory in which relations between human beings are seen as relations between determinate things on the one hand while ideas are essentially free on the other because it specializes labor into different technical activities that require special skills and in the process mystifies the social process as a whole. To "cultivate" such a reified notion of human activity as a cultural "end-in-itself" against the "is-ness" of the world simply facilitates the process of reification, which is grounded in exploitation, and helps privatize knowledge, thus strengthening the grip of necessity of bourgeois rule.

In Marx's terms Eagleton's culturalist theory is trying to end the "ideal" estrangement of humanity at the level of ideas by returning culture to its root in species-being while forgetting the dependence of humanity on the "real" or "practical" estrangement of private property. Such a distinction is "metaphysical" for culturalist theory of course—if culture is both the root of human

nature and an absolute truth in itself what real distinction is there between ideas and material reality? But this is to elide a very important distinction that Marx raises. Marx's argument is not that "real" estrangement (private property) is more important than ideal estrangement (cultural alienation) so that ending it must come first, he actually argues that "the nature of the movement [the re-appropriation of estranged human life] initially depends on whether the actual and *acknowledged* life of the people has its being more in consciousness or in the external world, in ideal or real life" (Early Writings 345). Neither does real for Marx mean "absolute" or "categorical" for defining the moral essence of Man. Marx is using real in the sense of practical or material in that the movement to abolish "real" estrangement "embraces both aspects" (349) of estrangement at once—the estrangement of ideas from their social basis when they are considered self-caused and the estrangement of human powers embodied in private property—whereas the opposite is not true. What is radical about Marx's critique of estrangement and the theory of humanism he advances is that it foresees the need of overcoming the necessity of expressing humanity negatively through the concept of the "re-appropriation" of its estranged essence as a whole, as he argues it is "only when we have superseded this mediation—which is however a necessary precondition—will *positive* humanism, positively originating in itself, come into being (345). In other words, the question is not about whether alienation is primarily ideal or material in essence, which is an idealist way to present the issue because the cause of alienation is historically relative, but about de-fetishizing theory, the root knowledge necessary to end alienation. If the cause of alienation is considered purely a matter of ideology then Hegel would be right and the end of "objectification" would come about through the movement of concepts, when the subject realizes that what he assumed to be "substance" is in actuality "subject" and therefore concludes that the "real is rational" and thereby learns, in effect, to

identify agency with support of the status quo. On the other hand, if alienation is seen as having purely natural causes, either lying in the brain or simply personal hardships, then ending it would simply be a technical problem like changing one's lifestyle or brain chemistry. Both these positions turn theory into therapy and adjust themselves to getting along within the existing conditions. As in spiritual discourses they represent agency as the negation of the object world rather than its productive transformation through collective labor. Marx's "consistent humanism" is thus "distinct from both idealism and materialism, and constitutes at the same time the unifying truth of both" (135) in that it overcomes the traditional one-sidedness of both these positions with a concept of critique-al praxis, in short, labor as the creative self-objectification of humanity.

Latour and Eagleton's idealizations of theory as a self-enclosed cultural activity represent a return in the contemporary to the Enlightenment view of theory, or, in other words, humanist cultural theory, which posits culture as the other of materiality. Humanist cultural theory since Kant considers culture—grasped as essentially spiritual and aesthetic values—as free of material and conceptual conflicts. Culture is above politics, economics, and sharp conceptual distinctions, and provides a soothing compensation against the dehumanizing imperatives of modern life as well as a timeless expression of our basic humanity. Humanism is supposed to put Man as he is at the center of things, but the subject of humanism is not humanity as it is encountered in nature but a timeless individual who embodies "our dignity as moderately rational creatures" (Eagleton *After Theory* 109) who is arbitrarily placed in opposition to the general cultural decay. Culture, as a consequence, is considered "a harmonious totality" (Eagleton 25) that distinguishes Man as unique in nature because he is spiritual in essence and history is seen

as "the steady unfolding... of the essence of humanity" (33) from out of itself rather than as part of natural history.

It is within this idealist humanist tradition that Heidegger claims that "every humanism is either grounded in a metaphysics or is itself to be the ground of one" ("Letter on Humanism" 225) and effectively collapses the distinction between idealism and materialism. Where Marx argues that the "unifying truth" of idealist and materialist theory is labor, Heidegger claims "labor" is a "metaphysical determination" (243) and that "language is the house of Being" (217) thus negating the distinction and placing language outside the material series of social practices. But even Heidegger's concept of language is a material activity inserted into socially abstract labor. His own "liberation of language from grammar into a more original essential framework" is articulated in opposition to the "technical interpretation of thinking" (218), "objectification" (221), and the "dictatorship of the public realm" (221), and in a materialist framework can be seen as an idealist appropriation of estranged labor. It is idealist because the language of "multidimensionality" that Heidegger claims resists the "deliberate linguistic formulation[s]" of the sciences ("philosophy" [220] as well as 'logic,' 'ethics,' and 'physics,' 219) is itself a highly rationalized discourse that presupposes a high level of social production. But in his resistance to "objectification" Heidegger embraces "feeling or mood" as "more reasonable—that is, more intelligently perceptive—because more open to Being than all that reason" ("The Origin of the Work of Art" 151) and tries to present his concepts in the guise of spontaneous insights into the essence of things. Heidegger reinscribes "experience" as the basis of knowing, not the experience of John Locke, but an inverted form of it in which the knowledge said to inhere in the object is always culturally mediated by the "world" of the subject:

We never really first perceive a throng of sensations, e.g., tones and noises, in the appearance of things, as this thing-concept alleges; rather we hear the storm whistling in the chimney, we hear the three-motored plane, we hear the Mercedes in immediate distinction from the Volks wagen. Much closer to us than all sensations are the things themselves. (151-2)

The thing in itself on this reading is an effect of the subject who "bestows essence as a gift" (220) on something whenever he "loves" (220) it, in much the same way that Latour argues that theory is always a "rendering of matters of concern" or Eagleton's understanding of culture as self-realization, rather than an inquiry into materiality. It is the opposition made between culture (language, concern, self-realization) and materiality as mere "technique" in these discourses that exemplifies what I have been calling humanist cultural theory, as distinct from a materialist humanism which sees in ideal as well as real things the objectifications of social labor transforming nature in accordance with human need.

## **2.2 MIMESIS AND IDEOLOGY**

It has become almost impossible to distinguish idealist and materialist theory today because cultural theory is almost totally discussed in terms of language and what is thought to distinguish theories is their position on "language" rather than their orientation to labor. Without such a distinction being possible cultural theory remains bound to culturalism and simply updates a rather traditional humanist (idealist) aesthetics rather than move beyond it toward a consistent and positive (materialist) humanism. Because, as one text on the new humanities puts it, "One of

the most important contemporary forms of the debate about humanism centers on the relation between language and meaning" (Fuery and Mansfield, 4), it is necessary to investigate questions revolving around *mimesis* and theory of language to explain the contestations over humanism in contemporary cultural theory.

Humanist cultural theory since Plato understands language as mimesis. Mimesis is the imitation, or, in terms of linguistics, the "representation" of nature in human rationality. Culture, on these terms, is transcendent of the material world and the depository of reason. The classical theory of "representation" (*mimesis*) as rational was considered necessary for giving men *mastery* over their own nature. For example, the play of light and shadow in Plato's cave is an allegory of knowledge "to illustrate the degrees in which our nature may be enlightened or unenlightened" (The Republic vii 514) and is a highly value coded mediation on representation: hence if the "prisoners" chained in the cave in such a way so as to be only able to see the shadows cast by the light behind them "could talk to one another, would they not suppose that their words referred only to those passing shadows?" (vii 514), while "release from the chains... of meaningless illusion" brings one "nearer to reality" able to see "things themselves" which are "the cause of all" (vii 515-16). Such knowledge of cause is considered necessary for "healing" the "unwisdom" (vii 515) of those who take appearances as real. Understanding the place of representation as secondary (effect of a cause) is thus necessary for establishing the good and is also what subordinates representation to a pedagogical purpose that necessitates a distinction between orders of the real in nature. Plato's allegory is after all analogous to the "puppet show" being viewed by the prisoners in that it contains images of "persons carrying along various artificial objects" (vii 514) that merely represent "things themselves" indirectly to people who if they did view the objects directly would be "perplexed and believe the objects now shown... to

be not so real as he formally saw" (vii 515). Because representation is at one and the same time "meaningless illusion" and a necessary pedagogical mediation, Plato must make a distinction that will prove the power of man's judgment and mastery of himself as a maker of men. Thus "representation in general" (x 595), or *mimesis*, is a mere semblance of knowledge because it presumes to name a "real mastery" of "not only all technical matters but also all about human conduct" (x 599) without in actuality possessing such knowledge as would qualify one "to educate people and make them better men" (x 600). It follows that an "artist" merely works in "images" so as "to impress an audience which is equally ignorant and judges only by the form of expression" (x 600) while the true master changes men by revealing to them "what courses of conduct will make men better or worse as individuals or as citizens" (x 600).

As Plato's text shows, culturalism is not new. It has even recently codified its own canon (The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism), which dates its beginning to ancient Greece. What has always distinguished culturalism from materialism is its giving priority to "ideas" in the understanding of nature and the separation of ideas from the natural world. Materialism on the contrary has always insisted that "ideas" themselves are the result of a certain organization of objective reality. Culturalism represents nature in a reified way, or, in another way of saying the same thing, it has ascribed objectivity to ideas and considered the material world a "bad" copy. Central to culturalism has always been the question of "value" as a spiritual essence that gives meaning to the material world rather than being a social relation. The question of "value" is one of the intellectual issues that has shaped the entire course of Western philosophy. In Plato's Phaedo, for example, value is made central to Socrates' discourse on method, which consists of assuming "some principle... judged to be the strongest" which allows the individual to affirm as "true whatever seemed to agree with this... and that which disagreed" to be regarded as "untrue"

(100a). In Aristotle too the goal of philosophical inquiry is to secure the "good" through the judicial use of "reason" (*logos*). The subject of reason was the subject capable of making a value judgment considered as a "free choice" between the "good" and its opposite. In ancient Greek, *logos* names the principle of "computation," "accounting," "proportion," and "measure," as well as "ground," "reason," and "law," and was synonymous with *axios* ("good") and *axia* ("value"). Applied to persons, value judgment was believed to adhere to an individual's essential "character" or "disposition" which is what makes them "unique" ("character" in ancient Greek means to "engrave," "stamp" or "brand" and is synonymous with "ethos," a person's "bearing," which indicates "rank" or "status," what in Latin is called *habitus*). To be able to determine "value" (what a thing "is" by nature or a person's essential "character") was connected to determining what it would become, so the question of value is therefore also a question of "causality" (how things enter being) and "agency" (the power to make change). Acquiring knowledge of the self or "soul" (the origin of which was considered Divine) was connected with "action" (the power to make change). Determining a person's worth or value was essential to making and maintaining the "good life" for all, i.e., a life lead in accordance with Divine law (which in ancient Greece meant accepting a highly unequal slave society). Knowledge of value was therefore connected to "culture" and "pedagogy."

Value is a layered historical discourse that has traditionally been used in culturalist theories to privatize the subject in her own experience. Experience is made the zone of "feeling" (the aesthetic) and placed in static opposition to rationality (knowledge of the object world) and morality (the practical realm of society and politics), as in Kant for example. In the discourses of the Enlightenment, of which Kant's writings are exemplary, aesthetic value was considered crucial for an understanding of the "free subject" which had seemed to become overdetermined

in philosophy up to that time because of the emphasis on "reason" as central to understanding, not least of all by Kant himself in his Critique of Pure Reason. If the project of Enlightenment was to liberate the subject from "self incurred tutelage," as Kant put it in his *What is Enlightenment?*, and such freedom was defined solely from the point of view of the possession of a priori logical precepts, this did not seem to leave much room for understanding the self-motivations of individuals on which the bourgeois revolution pinned its democratic hopes of a more equal society than was then offered by feudal absolutism. In these terms, the aesthetic was considered a kind of knowing without concepts, a "purposiveness without a purpose" ("*Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck*"), as Kant put it, that everyone equally possessed and exercised in judgments of taste and which was considered to be prior to the logical understanding of things (science). "In all judgements by which we describe anything as beautiful," Kant explains, "we tolerate no one else being of a different opinion, and in taking up this position we do not rest our judgement upon concepts, but only on our feeling. Accordingly, we introduce this fundamental feeling not as a private feeling, but as a public sense" (Critique of Judgment §22). It was this "sensus communis" (or "common sense") that was supposed to found the free subject in German idealist philosophy in the period when the aesthetic first emerged as a disciplinary formation.

Inscribed in the idealist doctrine of the aesthetic is the notion that "experience" is a bedrock knowing that exists independently of conceptuality and which gives to knowledge its objects in sensual form. This set of assumptions taken over from empiricism inscribes a closely related idea about governance which assumes that a social order most effectively constitutes itself (or not) to the relative degree that it incorporates the "hearts" as well as the "minds" of its subjects by getting them to identify the realization of their desires with its reproduction. The founding discourse of the aesthetic in the Enlightenment thus contained a contradiction: on the

one hand it argued that sensual immediacy was prior to knowledge and unavailable to the rule of reason, and, on the other, that such an irrational knowing was the basis of the social consensus on which the ideal State was founded. In later more Romantic writers this contradiction was exploited and the aesthetic was valorized over science as the source of freedom. An appreciation of the "poetic" qualities of language and representation were then considered more important than the earlier attempt to locate the aesthetic in the order of reason which was seen as necessary for basing politics on rational principles of governance, as Kant's Critique of Pure Reason tried to do. Freedom came to be defined exclusively in terms of "taste" or "culture" rather than the rigors of scientific inquiry or the "excesses" of democracy whose instrumental manipulations of the natural and traditional orders were seen as tied to the horrors of modernization by the ruling classes.

This brief look at the question of aesthetic value is a necessary precondition, to my mind, in understanding a labor theory of culture. For one thing it helps to show that the aesthetic has always been the site of ideology and is not a spontaneous form of knowing that comes from experience. In other words, a labor theory of culture shows how the specificities of experience that are described as aesthetic because they demarcate a zone of knowing free of conceptuality is in actuality an historically produced way of knowing tied to social relations. My point in this brief excursus has not been to provide a genealogy of "value" but to give some indication of its connection to a series of concepts with which it is related philosophically in the Western humanist tradition. My reason for doing so is because I will argue that the question of value—which is the question in theory of what has priority, "ideality" or "materiality"—is not simply an epistemological issue about "how" meaning is constructed (as in poststructuralist discourses), nor is it a question about what matters to people (as the cultural common-sense leads us to believe),

but is at root the question of what makes the social and why (labor). Humanist cultural theory assumes that the social is an effect of ideas, the "free choices" of "individuals," and thereby naturalizes the free market in labor that makes profit for the ruling class and exploits workers. The discursive cultural theory, although it problematizes the humanist theory by showing how the subject is always mediated through cultural systems, ultimately reinscribes the ideological function of humanism in the way it makes culture into a self-enclosed regime of signification. The "autonomy" of culture as textuality is not very different ideologically than the "autonomy" of the subject in humanism. Both separate culture from its material basis in the economic arrangements that metabolize nature and humanity. The reification of culture from labor relations in discursive cultural theory is the same in terms of its ideological function as the reification of the human from its material basis in social production that is found in humanist thought. Materialist cultural theory provides a critique of the ideology of culturalist theory of the subject by implicating the subject in "the ensemble of social relations" (Marx "Theses on Feuerbach") of which it is an effect, showing how what makes the subject is always tied to labor arrangements. Materialist theory explains language and mimesis as "reflection" of nature through social labor. Culture is a relay of material forces, especially labor relations (class).

The labor theory of culture in which basic economic laws of motion arising from class relations explain superstructural practices is dismissed by culturalist theory as "mimetic" and therefore conservative. Mimetic, that is, in the way Derrida for instance argues in his theorization of mimesis in "The Double Session" that "the whole history of Western philosophy" (191) depends on "a certain interpretation of *mimesis*" (183) which "implies that somewhere the being of something that *is*, is being imitated" (206) and so conceives of language as simply a "detour" through which "the element of the same, always aims at coming back to the pleasure or

the presence that has been deferred" ("Differance" 72). In his text Derrida problematizes the relation "between literature and truth" (177) which in Western philosophy since Plato has subordinated the former to the latter on the assumption that the reflection of reality in human understanding given by philosophy was more essential than the appearances of things given in sense perception, which is imitated in art. In an initial move "'Truth'," Derrida argues, "has always meant two different things" ("Double Session" 192): "dialectics and ontology" (185). In other words, truth has never been singular and originary as defined in essentialist terms because although truth has always been defined as referring to "things as such" (185), on the one hand, or, in other words, a "sole standard of measurement" through recourse to which "one can always decide" what "is or is not true" (185), it has as well been understood self-reflexively or discursively as "the truth of truth" (192), or "the history of the essence of truth" (192), that is as contingent and dialectical, within the same tradition. Derrida thereby shows that the difference within Western philosophy between the dialectical and ontological conception of truth has been covered over by "classical semiology" or "mimesis," of which Plato's writings are exemplary, which makes "the substitution of the sign for the thing... both *secondary* and *provisional*" ("Differance" 61). By considering ontology and dialectics a "difference" in the order of truth rather than a consequence of the material dependence of knowledge on the objective world (*mimesis*), Derrida makes difference (the structure of knowledge) rather than reference (the authority of experience) "originary" (62). In other words, by uncovering the "two different things" that "truth" has always stood in for in Western philosophy that remains hidden by a mimetic theory of language in which the sign is always assumed to be "secondary and provisional" in relation to the true, Derrida shows how truth is always differential (or dialectical in the classical terminology) and not referential (or ontological) in its origins. But the

deconstruction of truth set out in "The Double Session" is not simply the uncovering of difference at the origin that has been sutured over by essentialism because the act of revealing itself effects a reversal of the order of priority between dialectics (signs, writing, culture) and ontology (things, speech, nature) as authorized by mimesis. Whereas mimesis places nature as originary and writing or art in a secondary position as its imitation, such reversal demands conceiving the contrary to be true, that experience does not provide the truth of the world but is itself a cultural inscription.

However, Derrida argues for going beyond such a necessary reversal calling it merely an "apparent" inversion (192) of Platonism which shares "the same root" ("Double Session" 192) with it and he associates such an apparent reversal with aesthetics, the view which "strongly stressed that art, as imitation (representation, description, expression, imagination, etc.) should not be 'slavish'... and that consequently... art can create works that are more valuable than that which they imitate" (192). Derrida's deconstruction of the order of truth that conceptually organizes Western culture is thus not to be understood as a materialist inversion of idealism which places language in the primary position and understands concepts as superstructural. He actually maintains that "any attempt to reverse mimetologism or escape it in one fell swoop by leaping out of it *with both feet* would only amount to an inevitable fall back into its system" (207) by maintaining the dialectic between "writing" (as mimesis) and "reality" as the "outside" of representation. However, the explanation of the referential conception of language (mimesis) as a form of difference makes the dialectic of truth, the history of philosophy and writing generally, which Derrida reveals to be the cultural figuration of the true, more important than inquiry into "things as such" or ontology, which besides being simply mimetic and subordinate to an idealized understanding of nature as it has been in the idealist tradition since Plato has also

been dialectical and concerned itself with the social interaction of labor and nature. Rather than a materialist inversion that would provide a critique of idealism from outside its premises Derrida argues for an awareness of the "materialism of the idea" (207) of "value" as a certain opacity of conceptuality inscribed in the order of signification of Western culture that has served an essentially reproductive function to police the boundaries of knowledge. In Mallarme's Mimique for example Derrida finds not simply the reversal of mimesis which installs figuration as the basis of intelligibility but the preservation of its structure without its Platonic or metaphysical interpretation, the interpretation that always implies that somewhere the being of something that *is*, is being imitated" (206), as in Mallarme's text "the mime imitates nothing" (194). Because the mime performs an imitation without reference to an original in other words, "we are faced with mimicry imitating nothing... a reference without a referent" (206). Writing is thus understood as mimesis without reflection, a "speculum" that "reflects no reality" but rather "produces reality-effects" (206) while performing the structure of reference in which it appears that reality is being imitated or reflected. But by identifying materiality with that which is opaque to consciousness Derrida also contains a critique from the historical outside of culture, which is the structure of labor relations and its necessary ideological reflection.

Derrida brackets the socio-economic function of Platonism and considers it in purely epistemological terms, which are expanded in such a way that the traditional understanding of concepts as referring to things themselves is disrupted and these concepts are treated materially as the things in themselves which delimit thinking thereby producing an immanent awareness of the coercive basis of thought. The classical representation of "representation" (mimesis) is of course a highly value coded mediation on representation in which knowledge is considered

necessary for acquiring that which gives men mastery of nature for the social good. But, Platonism is not strictly an epistemological matter—at root it is economic.

The Platonic separation of "reason" (logos) and "materiality" (appearance) was not simply a cultural bias inscribed in the structure of philosophy but a reflection within theory of the class structure of ancient society in which the socially necessary labor was carried out by slaves at a low level of technological capacity. The "logocentrism" of Plato is actually the result of the undeveloped economic structure of slave society which did not allow for a view of culture in other than vulgar materialist terms as little more than instrumental working upon raw materials. The rudimentary transformation of nature produced the view of knowledge as changeless and fixed as well as beyond the mundane world because technical innovations did not yet have an economic incentive to augment wealth. The modern "reversal of Platonism" Derrida dismisses as merely aesthetic also reflects changes in the division of labor. With economic development and more complex division of labor it became impossible by Kant's time, for instance, to maintain a simple distinction between "logos" and social praxis and this was reflected in shifts within humanist theory, in the demotion of "reason" and the new valorization of the "aesthetic" and emotional, most notably in Kant's Critique of Judgment (1790) for example. By the time Kant writes his third critique the socialization of wage labor and the production of capital had revolutionized humanity's relationship to nature, placing such a premium on innovation that "modernity" was seen as a threat to "reason" and as the unleashing of "irrational" forces, such as "democracy" (rule by the majority). Kant attempted to harness these material forces by providing "reason" a more material foundation than the ancient canon allowed. He argued that the *apriori* rules of reason, which his own Critique of Pure Reason itself understood as "transcendental" categories, were ineffectual without an understanding of their anchorage in the

manifold of sense perception (what for Plato was the origin of illusion), which Kant took to be the work of the "imagination" and found exemplified in aesthetic experience. If "reason" was not "free" of the material for Kant in the way that Plato assumed, his understanding of materiality was itself still highly reified. For Kant the "thing in itself" is always mediated and the "medium" of consciousness is only considered purely subjectively, as "categories" of understanding and the aesthetic apperception of "mere form." Such an understanding of materiality as the other of subjectivity reflects a high degree of social commodification in which labor is alienated from the producers and circulates as exchange value so that people can only fulfill their needs in an alienated way through the market and in the process submit to being exploited. The subjective "freedom" of the human in the natural exercise of his "imagination" was in actuality a reflection of the submission of the worker to the status of a passive consumer alienated from social praxis.

Derrida's deconstruction and reinscription of mimesis as a purely epistemological problematic indicates that what is at issue in the rejection of the labor theory of culture is not in actuality mimesis, but, rather, about which theories go along with the dominant ideology and which do not. Derrida's theorization of differance represents itself as a more rigorously materialist critique of idealism than the labor theory of culture because it does not posit a Truth around which to organize its own authority but rather relies on a close reading of the act of signification itself which frames all linguistic claims. The labor theory of culture would thus seem to depend on a "referential" theory of language in which language is conceived instrumentally as referring to a reality independent of consciousness, which is thereby given transcendental status, what Derrida calls "Platonism" ("The Double Session" 191). "Platonism" depends, according to Derrida, on the elision of the difference between two different figures of truth whose hierarchal ordering constitutes the story of Western philosophy. But, by remaining

immanent to the cultural superstructure Derrida repeats the dominant ideology of culturalism which disconnects ideas from their class basis and thus naturalizes the existing. Differance is a thus made a "general law" ("Differance" 67) that is held to be incontestable as such. Derrida inscribes the "outside" (the relation of labor to nature) in the "inside" (the binaries of figuration) and thereby re-inscribes the cognitive as the limit text of knowing, a move which is itself constitutive of Western metaphysics. His theory of difference informs the postmodern understanding that culture is material in itself (simulacral), which assumes that what at any time is considered natural and given the status of the real is an effect of signification. Such an assumption is not very different than the humanist one that nature is the origin of truth in that both maintain the self-evidence of the world as it is as the basis of knowing by making intelligibility a purely formal matter of representation. There is not much difference between considering truth the site of "inscription" of the codes and conventions of culture, or, considering it as the final "guarantee" of meaning, in that both views place subjectivity above the material conditions of its production in class society.

Humanist cultural theory has changed since Kant's time of course. For one thing it has come to define itself in more materialist terms. The conservative cultural critic Roger Scruton, for instance, represents a new kind of humanist in so far as he positions himself as a materialist against "the idealist doctrine" that art is free of the political, "that art does not advise, describe or moralize" (Aesthetic Understanding 4). Such an idealist view as classical humanist theory assumed, he argues, cannot "lead us to a general aesthetics" (6) as it cannot serve "to demarcate the exact place of imaginative experience in the life of a rational being" (13). On the other hand, the value of culture is not a matter of its reflecting an "idea" that exists outside it either, according to Scruton. Rather, he argues that value is found immanently within culture, which he

sees as a mode of signification bound up with the "abrogation of reference" (19) and "indeterminacy" (18) that he believes is more "true to life" (17) than true to fact (concept).

The "abrogation of reference" is, according to Scruton, more "true to life" than a theory that relates the aesthetic to "ideas" (the true-to-fact) or, more importantly, to "its origin in productive activity" (Aesthetic Understanding 8). For him what explains the aesthetic is "not a property of the text itself" (19), nor is it a matter of "the economic conditions under which it is conceived" (8), rather it is a question of "the response of the observer" (28) who has come to possess "the requisite intellectual and emotional capacities" (28) and learned to appreciate the "penumbra of significance" (14) issuing from artistic "indeterminacy." In other words, the aesthetic is experiential and made the other of abstraction, a theory of the place of art in the totality, and is thus "material" for Scruton. And yet, at the same time materiality is sentimentalized and considered a purely affective matter: "an education of the heart" (Scruton, Guide to Modern Culture, 149).

Because capitalism is at root dependent on wage-labor it is no surprise to find that discussion of value and what makes the social still takes the idealist form it assumed in ancient slave society which denies the basic class logic that underlies the cultural. Humanist cultural theory situates "value" exclusively within the superstructure of society in which the subject is hailed as a free agent of free market forces and occults the relation of this subject's freedom and the unfreedom of the material base where the class antagonism between capital and labor is articulated. The result is an idealist theory of the social as constituted by the everyday agency of "desire" (an "education of the heart") rather than "labor" (class consciousness). The subject of "desire" normalizes the status quo by valorizing singular acts of consumption that occult why

whatever everyday pleasure there is for a few is connected to the coerced surplus-labor of the many in what Marx calls the "workday" (Capital Vol. 1, pp. 283-344).

Humanism as a whole makes a fetish of subjectivity and agency by cutting theory of the subject off from the social totality in ways that reflect the dominance of exchange value in capitalism; humanism thereby helps produce the mass dehumanization, inequality and slavery that humanism usually defines itself in opposition to (especially in its modern forms such as in the Enlightenment or Romanticism). Although culturalism strictly speaking emerged as a critique of idealist cultural theories such as humanism—in the writings of Nietzsche and Heidegger for example—it reinscribes the same ideological function that humanism served in previous moments of capitalism. Humanist cultural theory places Man at the center of the world as the bearer of "reason" and marginalizes differences. It considers culture to be at once a monument testifying to the dignity of the individual and an archive of progress which gives the highest expression of his innate freedom. Humanism posits Man as outside nature and the result has been to see culture as "above" politics and economics.

Although its origins lie in ancient (pre-Socratic) Greek philosophy humanism consolidates itself with the rise of capitalism in Europe and the beginnings of colonial conquest in the sixteenth century and receives further impetus with the spread of the world market in the eighteenth century. Its insistence on universal codes of knowledge and ethics helped establish a common market within the framework of European nation states and it equated such a development with the goal of history itself. Under the impact of imperialism, however, humanism was implicated in the practices of oppression and barbarism it formally denounces. The crisis of humanism has led to its immanent critique in the discourses of postmodernism which questions the value of its central concepts such as universality, progress and emancipation.

And yet such critique is limited to teasing out the immanent contradictions of humanist discourse and therefore reinscribes the central logic of humanism which posits culture as the other of class.

What makes the texts of Plato and Rousseau humanist is not simply, as Derrida has argued, because they maintain a logocentric binary in which writing is subordinated to "speech" (the "presence" of human experience). What makes humanism is not strictly an epistemological matter at all but is at root economic—humanism has always reified the division of labor and represented it in epistemological terms, as cultural differences. And yet, culture is always a reflection of the economic base. It is the division of labor (class), and not "difference," "re-signification," or "transvaluation," that determines the meanings available in a society's signifying practices. "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force" (Marx and Engels, The German Ideology). It is one's relation to the means of production or class position, in other words, that determines one's access to culture and the means of representation which in turn determines one's place in the cultural series. In short, how "smart," "good looking," "reliable," "trust worthy," "literate," etc., one is depends on one's class position, which is what allows access to the practices that constitute such values.

Culturalist theory rejects the materialist theory of culture as "bad" epistemology—what Derrida calls "the tyranny of transparency"—on the grounds that it is blind to and therefore subordinates the materiality and agency of the signifier to a secondary position on the metaphysical basis of a privileged "transcendental signified" (Derrida). But it is itself "metaphysical" to claim that *differance* is "neither a word nor a concept" and the law of conceptuality, which only shows that the point is not what is or is not metaphysical but what is the political economy of metaphysics and whose interests it serves. Because labor is held to be

basic to a materialist cultural theory and used as an explanation of superstructural practices it stands accused in discursive cultural theory of supporting what de Man calls "aesthetic ideology" on the grounds that the mode of intelligibility it authorizes collapses the phenomenal and the real as in referential theories of language. According to de Man, "ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism" (Resistance to Theory 11) that disguises "the linguistics of literariness" (11), which "more than any other mode of inquiry, including economics... is a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence" (11). On such a view, the "rhetorical or tropological dimension of language" (17), or, in other words, the "materiality of the letter" (de Man Aesthetic Ideology 90), represents the limit text of materiality and because it is "impossible to maintain a clear line of distinction between rhetoric, abstraction, symbol, and all other forms of language" (49) is thought to ground "the universal theory of the impossibility of theory" (Resistance to Theory 19). Because every "decoding of a text leaves a residue of indetermination that has to be, but cannot be resolved" (15) such an anti-theory theory is considered "subversive" (8) of all "totalizing (and potentially totalitarian)" (19) ways of thinking. The formal operations of language are assumed to be primary and material in discursivist cultural theory and to argue for implicating language into the social division of labor is considered the mark of a totalitarian imposition on the differential logic of the social inscribed in the free play of signification where it is claimed that "whoever loses wins, and in which one loses and wins on every turn" (Derrida, "Differance" 72-3). If all reading is a matter of tropes then one text is as true as any another and rather than being a matter of social inequality the social is seen as a semiotic democracy where all are equal in relation to language. The attack on materialist cultural theory in terms of a semiotic democracy fails to engage with materialist

theory through the relay of an epistemological ruse that displaces the question of materiality from social praxis to rhetoric, thus conflating material agency with the experience of "pleasure" that is held to be the effect of the opacity of errant tropes in a text which exceed its normative meanings. The linguistic turn in cultural theory is deeply conservative because on its terms it becomes impossible to connect the inside of culture to its outside in class which is necessary for explaining why life chances on the market are brutally determined by the structure of exploitation that sacrifices worker's needs to the pleasures of the capitalist while at the same time it gives to capitalism the alibi of the a-logic of desire and attributes to pleasure a universal significance, as demanded by consumerism. Nothing could be more comforting to the ruling class than such an anti-theory theory which turns the source of profit in unpaid labor into a trope of pleasure and pronounces all conflicts to be "undecidable" stalemates so that nothing need change. Differance is not immanent to language as such, however, but, rather such a view of language is itself an effect of the ratio of exploitation in which labor stands in a historically necessary relation to capital. It was not until the rising organic composition of capital produced the steep decline of profits beginning in the mid-1970s that post-structural theory of language emerged and gained institutional legitimacy as a general cultural theory. The pan-insidism of language and the "death of the subject" reflects the degree to which labor has been subordinated to capital on a global scale. In short, the labor relations explain the cultural logic and not the other way around. To assume the opposite is to "imagine... false or seeming motive forces" in place of "the real motive forces," as Engels says.

The rejection of the labor theory of culture as "mimetic" also reveals the lack of engagement of the dominant theories of culture with the labor theory of culture as can be seen when one turns to Lenin's understanding of culture as "reflection." Lenin's understanding of

culture as "reflection" is not intelligible if one only sees in it the secondary issue of epistemology, the familiar question of how a text constructs meaning through (dis)simulation at the level of its immanent formal properties. Even such an otherwise careful reader of Lenin as Pierre Macherey in his Theory of Literary Production argues that Lenin's materialist understanding of writing as "reflection" is not effective because it fails to grasp the immanent "literariness of the text" (119), which for him is a matter of how the text performs "an internal displacement of ideology" (133) that resists "all attempts to 'demystify'" (133) it from its outside. Lenin, according to Macherey, by failing to grasp the immanent function of literature "to present ideology in a non-ideological form" (133), as a text must always "include an ideology—which by itself does not belong to it" (127), is thus a slave to the idea of historical "content" in the same way as "bourgeois criticism" (119) despite the oppositional use Lenin makes of its concepts. But it is Macherey who in this way is reinscribing the bourgeois ideology of the literary text by placing it in a zone held to be immune from ideology critique. The understanding of "reflection" in bourgeois criticism has always done this by focusing on the means of representation as determinate to the exclusion of the economic function of representation in the social. For Lenin, however, "reflection" is a recognition of the working of necessity behind all acts of knowledge production in which writing is implicated in social praxis. Writing, that is, as reflecting not the "free" consciousness of the writer as in humanist discourses, or the "excess" of "desire" as it is in culturalist theory, but rather writing as inserted into the revolutionary dialectic of the social real (the class struggle). This is a reflection without mimesis: writing "reflects" the class struggle behind culture of which writing itself has a more or less active part and is therefore in no way to be understood as a static and transparent reflection (as mimesis, verisimilitude, naturalism, e.g.).

When Lenin reads Tolstoy, for example, he first emphasizes that by "reflection" he does not mean simple "mimesis," a purely formal operation of adequation between the codes and conventions of language, conceived as a pure medium of expression, a vessel of a timeless consciousness, or, a mirror held up to a presumably static and inert reality:

To identify the great artist with the revolution which he has obviously failed to understand, and from which he obviously stands aloof, may at first sight seem strange and artificial. A mirror which does not reflect things correctly could hardly be called a mirror. ("Tolstoy as the Mirror of the Russian Revolution" 202)

Reflection, in Lenin's terms, is thus not about the "transparency" of "meaning" (verisimilitude). It is about reading effects at the level of culture in terms of their more primary causes in an unfolding revolutionary social process or, in other words, their "historical and economic conditions" (208). Furthermore, Lenin recognizes that "transparency" is not the issue because what is being reflected is itself contradictory, that the historical and economic conditions themselves are conflicted such that any reflection is bound to be partial and to a certain extent distorting as it must reflect partial and contrary class interests. At the same time he does not fall into a liberal pluralism and dogmatic eclecticism by maintaining that the complexity of the real makes it finally impossible to have a true representation of things but argues for dialectics on the grounds that despite the fact that truth "is something we cannot ever hope to achieve completely" the continual approximations made toward it act as a "guard against mistakes and rigidity" and an "indicator of its connection with human wants," its "use and *connection* with the surrounding world" ("Once Again on the Trade Unions," Collected Works Vol. 32, 70-107).

Lenin thus reads for social and ideological contradictions that militate against the ahistorical and abstract understanding of reflection as posited by (post)modern formalist reading strategies. What Lenin reads as a reflection is the way in which contradictions at the level of consciousness—between Tolstoy's "merciless criticism of capitalist exploitation," on the one hand, and "crackpot preaching of submission, 'resist not evil' with violence" ("Tolstoy" 205) on the other, for example—are tied to contradictions in the social relations:

The contradictions in Tolstoy's views are not contradictions inherent in his personal views alone, but are a reflection of the extremely complex, contradictory conditions, social influences and historical traditions which determined the psychology of various classes and various sections of Russian society in the post-Reform, but pre-revolutionary era. ("Leo Tolstoy" 325)

Lenin's materialist reading is not dependent on a naturalistic view of the text as a stylistic mode of reflecting on a static and fixed reality, whether located in the mind or in the material world. Rather, it directs reading to the interaction of the text as a locus of ideological struggles over the social real and the conflictual reality of social struggles in the ongoing material praxis of labor interacting with the objective world.

Contrary to the view that says a materialist cultural theory is disabling because it reduces "agency" (the agency of consciousness, the agency of the signifier, *etc.*) to a secondary position, the direct opposite is true. Without the recognition of the determination of culture (consciousness, affects, signification, *etc.*) by labor, what is called agency is really a symptom of reification as a part of social reality is placed in the position of being the whole of reality thus stabilizing the dominant order by protecting it from critique.

### 2.3 WHAT IS ORTHODOX MARXISM?.

The question of agency if it is not to be simply a code for free-market volunteer-ism must engage the nature of the objective world that determines historic change and why the material world conditions what is socially possible. I argue that "agency" is not a matter of individuality in its bourgeois sense, but a materialist question. More specifically, agency is a question of class. I am arguing, in other words, that the most rigorous theory of the subject has to be located in a class theory and class itself has to be understood not in cultural terms but on a materialist and objective basis that goes beyond the logic of profit. Such a theory of agency will not only provide guidelines for collective action for reorganizing the existing social institutions and practices but will also have deep consequences for contemporary theory and cultural studies.

Any effective cultural theory therefore will have to do at least two things: it will have to offer an integrated understanding of social practices and, based on such an interrelated knowledge, offer a guideline for praxis. My main argument in the remainder of this chapter is that among all contesting cultural theories now, only classical Marxism has been able to produce an integrated knowledge of the existing social totality and provide lines of praxis that will lead to building a society free from necessity.

But first I must clarify what I mean by classical Marxism. Like all other modes and forms of political theory, the very theoretical identity of Marxism is itself contested—not just from non-and anti-Marxists who question the very "real" (by which they mean the "practical" as under free-market criteria) existence of any kind of Marxism now but, perhaps more tellingly, from within the Marxist tradition itself. I will, therefore, first say what I regard to be the distinguishing marks of classical Marxism and then outline a short polemical map of contestation over classical

Marxism within the Marxist theories now. I will end by arguing for its effectivity in bringing about a new society based not on human rights but on freedom from necessity.

I will argue that to know contemporary culture—and to be able to act on such knowledge—one has to first of all know what makes the existing social totality. I will argue that the dominant social totality is based on inequality—not just inequality of power but inequality of economic access (which then determines access to health care, education, housing, diet, transportation, . . . ). This systematic inequality cannot be explained by gender, race, sexuality, disability, ethnicity, or nationality. These are all secondary contradictions and are all determined by the fundamental contradiction of capitalism which is inscribed in the relation of capital and labor. All modes of Marxism now explain social inequalities primarily on the basis of these secondary contradictions and in doing so—and this is my main argument—legitimate capitalism. Why? Because such arguments authorize capitalism without gender, race, discrimination and thus accept economic inequality as an integral part of human societies. They accept a sunny capitalism—a capitalism beyond capitalism. Such a society, based on cultural equality but economic inequality, has always been the not-so-hidden agenda of the bourgeois left—whether it has been called "new left," "postmarxism," or "radical democracy." This is, by the way, the main reason for its popularity in the culture industry—from the academy (Jameson, Harvey, Haraway, Butler, . . . ) to daily politics (Michael Harrington, Ralph Nader, Jesse Jackson, . . . ) to . . . . For all, capitalism is here to stay and the best that can be done is to make its cruelties more tolerable, more humane. This humanization (not eradication) of capitalism is the sole goal of *all* contemporary lefts (marxism, feminism, anti-racism, queeries, . . . ).

Such an understanding of social inequality is based on the fundamental notion that the source of wealth is human knowledge and not human labor. That is, wealth is produced by the

human mind and is thus free from the actual objective conditions that shape the historical relations of labor and capital. Only classical Marxism recognizes the historicity of labor and its primacy as the source of all human wealth. I argue that any emancipatory theory has to be founded on recognition of the priority of Marx's labor theory of value and not repeat the technological determinism of corporate theory ("knowledge work") that masquerades as social theory.

Finally, it is only classical Marxism that recognizes the inevitability and also the necessity of communism—the necessity, that is, of a society in which "from each according to their ability to each according to their needs" (Marx) is the rule.

A parody of politics has taken over left politics in the U.S. and Europe. A parody in which—after the dead-end of the designer socialisms of postmarxisms—suddenly *everyone* is an "orthodox" Marxist: from Zizek who in the introduction to a selection of his work writes of the need to "return to the centrality of the Marxist critique of political economy" (Reader ix); to Michael Sprinker who referred to himself as a "neo-conservative marxist" ("Forum" 68). In calling himself a "neoconservative" Sprinker was embracing with pride Butler's definition of the term in her "Merely Cultural" in which she equates it with "leftist orthodoxy" (268). Then there is Paul Smith who now, after mocking classical Marxism in Discerning the Subject and Universal Abandon, says he has a "fairly orthodox understanding of what Marx and the Marxist tradition has had to say about capitalism" (Millennial Dreams 3).

Parody is always the effect of a slippage and the slippage here is that in spite of the sudden popularity of "orthodox" Marxism, the *actual* theories and practices of the newly orthodox are more than ever before *flexodox*. It seems as if once more Lenin's notion that when the class antagonism emerges more sharply "the liberals. . . dare not deny the class struggle, but

attempt to narrow down [and] to curtail. . . the concept" ("Liberal and Marxist Conceptions of the Class Struggle," 122) has been proven by history.

"Orthodox" Marxism has become the latest cover by which the bourgeois left authenticates its credentials and proceeds to legitimate the economics of the ruling class and its anti-proletarian politics.

Take Paul Smith, for example. In classical Marxism class is the central issue. (I put aside here that in his writings, on subjectivity for example, Smith has already gotten rid of the "central" by a deconstructive logic). What Smith does with class is a rather interesting test of how Marxism is being used to legitimate the class interests of the owners. Smith reworks class and turns it into a useless Habermasian communicative act. He writes that "classes are what are formed in struggle, not something that exists prior to struggle" (Millennial Dreams 60). To say it again: the old ideological textualization of the "new left" is not working any more (just look at the resistance against globalization), so the ruling class is now reworking the "old left" to defend itself. Against the classical Marxist theory of class, Smith evacuates class of an objective basis in the extraction of surplus labor in production, and makes it the effect of local conflicts. In short, Smith reverses the classical Marxist position that, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (Marx, Contribution, 21), and turns it into a neomarxist view that what matters is their consciousness. In this he in fact shares a great deal with conservative theories that make "values" (the subjective) as what matters in social life and *not* economic access.

Zizek provides another example of the flexodox parody of Marxism today. Capitalism in classical Marxism is explained as an historical mode of production based on the privatization of the means of subsistence in the hands of a few, i.e., the systemic exploitation of labor by capital.

Capitalism is the world-historic regime of unpaid surplus-labor. In Žižek's writings, capitalism is not based on exploitation in production (surplus-labor), but on struggles over consumption ("surplus-enjoyment"). The Marxist concepts that lay bare the exploitative production relations in order to change them are thus replaced with a "psycho-marxist" pastiche of consumption in his writings, a revisionist move that has proven immensely successful in the bourgeois cultural criticism. Žižek, however, has taken to representing this displacement of labor (production) with desire (consumption) as "strictly correlative" to the concept of "revolutionary praxis" found in the texts of orthodox Marxism (e.g., "Repeating Lenin"). Revolutionary practice is always informed by class consciousness and transformative cultural critique has always aimed at producing class consciousness by laying bare the false consciousness that ruling ideology institutes in the everyday. Transformative cultural critique, in other words, is always a linking of consciousness to production practices from which a knowledge of social totality emerges. Žižek, however, long ago abandoned classical Marxist ideology critique as an epistemologically naïve theory of "ideology" because it could not account for the persistence of "desire" beyond critique (the "enlightened false-consciousness" of The Sublime Object of Ideology, Mapping Ideology, . . .). His more recent "return to the centrality of the Marxist critique" is, as a result, a purely tropic voluntarism of the kind he endlessly celebrates in his diffusionist readings of culture as desire-al moments when social norms are violated and personal emotions spontaneously experienced as absolutely compulsory (as "drive"). His concept of revolutionary Marxist praxis thus consists of re-describing it as an "excessive" lifestyle choice (analogous to pedophilia and other culturally marginalized practices, The Ticklish Subject 381-8). On this reading, Marxism is the only metaphorical displacement of "desire" into "surplus-pleasure" that makes imperative the "direct socialization of the productive process" (350) and that thus causes the subjects committed to it to

experience a Symbolic death at the hands of the neoliberal culture industry. It is this "affirmative" reversal of the right-wing anti-Marxist narrative that makes Zizek's writings so highly praised in the bourgeois "high-theory" market, where it is read as "subtle" and an example of "deep thinking" because it confirms a transcendental position considered above politics by making all politics ideological. If everything is ideology then there can be no fundamental social change only formal repetition and reversal of values (Nietzsche). Zizek's pastiche of psycho-marxism thus consists in presenting what is only theoretically possible for the exploiter—those few who have already met, in excess, their material needs through the exploitation of the labor of the other and who can therefore afford to elaborate fantasies of desire—as a universal form of agency freely available to everyone.

Psycho-marxism does what bourgeois ideology has always done—maintain the bourgeois hegemony over social production by commodifying, through an aesthetic relay, the contradictions of the wages system. What bourgeois ideology does above all is deny that the mode of social production has an historic agency of its own independent of the subject. Zizek's "return" to "orthodox" Marxism erases its materialist theory of desire—that "our wants and their satisfaction have their origin in society" (Marx, Wage-Labour and Capital, 33) and do not stand in "excess" of it. In fact, he says exactly the opposite and turns the need for Marxist theory now into a phantom desire of individuals: he makes "class struggle" an effect of a "totalitarian" desire to polarize the social between "us" and "them" (using the "friend/enemy" binary found in the writings of the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, Ticklish Subject 226).

What is basic only to classical Marxist theory, however, which is what enables it to produce class consciousness through a critique of ideology, is its materialist prioritization of "need" over "desire." Only classical Marxism recognizes that although capitalism is compelled to

continually expand the needs of workers because of the profit motive it at the same time cannot satisfy these needs because of its logic of profit. "Desire" is always an effect of class relations, of the gap between the material level and historical potential of the forces of production and the social actuality of un-met needs.

In spite of their formal "criticality," the writings of Smith and Zizek, and other theorists of designer socialisms such as Hennessey, Jameson and Negri, produce concepts that legitimate the existing social relations. The notion of class in their work, for example, is the one that now is commonly deployed in the bourgeois newspapers. In their reporting on what has become known as the "Battle of Seattle," and in the coverage of the rising tide of protest against the financial institutions of U.S. monopoly capital which are pillaging the nations of the South, the bourgeois media represents the emergent class struggles as a matter of an alternative "lifestyle choice" (e.g., the Los Angeles Times, "Hey Hey, Ho Ho, Catch Our Anti-Corporate Puppet Show!"). On this diffusional narrative, "class" is nothing more than an opportunity for surplus-pleasure "outside" the market for those who have voluntarily "discarded" the normal pleasures of U.S. culture. It is the same "lifestyle" politics that in the flexodox marxism of Antonio Negri is made an autonomous zone of "immaterial labor" which he locates as the "real communism" that makes existing society post-capitalist already so that revolution is not necessary (Empire). What is at the core of both the flexodox marxism and the popular culture of class as "lifestyle" is a de-politicization of the concepts of classical Marxism which neutralizes them as indexes of social inequality and reduces them to merely descriptive categories which take what is for what ought to be. Take the writings of Pierre Bourdieu for example. Bourdieu turns Marx's dialectical concepts of "class" and "capital" which lay bare the social totality, into floating "categories" and reflexive "classifications" that can be formally applied to any social practice because they have

been cut off from their connection to the objective global relations of production. Bourdieu, in short, legitimates the pattern of class as "lifestyle" in the bourgeois media by his view that "class" is an outcome of struggles over "symbolic capital" in any "field." I leave aside here that his diffusion of the logic of capital into "cultural capital," "educational capital" and the like is itself part of a depoliticization of the relation between capital and labor and thus a blurring of class antagonism. What Bourdieu's "field" theory of class struggle does is segregate the struggles into so many autonomous zones lacking in systemic determination by the historic structure of property so that everyone is considered to be equally in possession of "capital" (ownership is rhetorically democratized) making socialist revolution unnecessary. What the reduction of "class" and "capital" to the self-evidency of local cultural differences cannot explain is the systemic primacy of the production of surplus-value in unpaid-labor, the basic condition of the global majority which determines that their needs are not being met and compels them collectively into class struggles.

Without totalizing knowledge of exploitation—which is why such dialectical concepts as "capital" form the basis of classical Marxist class theory—exploitation cannot be abolished. The cultural idealism of the de-politicized voiding of Marxist concepts fits right in with the "volunteer-ism" of the neoliberals and "compassionate" conservatives that they use to justify their massive privatization programs. Considering class struggle politics as a matter of cultural struggles over symbolic status is identical to the strategy of considering the dismantling of social welfare as an opportunity for "local" agency freed from coercive state power, i.e., the bedrock of the "non-governmental" activism and "community" building of the bourgeois reformists. When George W. Bush seeks to mobilize what he calls the "armies of compassion" against the "Washington insiders" and return "power" to the "people" it is the old cultural studies logic that

all politics is "people vs. power bloc," a warmed over popular frontism that makes politics a matter of building de-politicized cross-class coalitions for bourgeois right, utopic models of a post-political social order without class struggle possessing equality of representation that excludes the revolutionary vanguard. As Marx and Engels said of the "bourgeois socialists" of their day, such utopian measures "at. . . best, lessen the cost, and simplify the administrative work, of bourgeois government" (Manifesto of the Communist Party, Selected Works, 59). Zizek's "affirmation" of revolutionary Marxism as a "totalitarian" desire that polarizes the cultural "lifeworld" between "friends" and "enemies" is another relay of "class-as-an-after-effect of 'struggle'" of the networked left. What the parody does is make class struggle a rhetorical "invention" of Marx(ists) analogous to the bourgeois "rights" politics of the transnational coalitional regime of exploitation ruling today, and erases the need for a global theory of social change. Classical Marxism cuts through the closed atmosphere of the "friends" of the networked left and their embrace of a voluntarist "compassionate" millenarianism with a critique from outside so to expose the global collective need for a revolutionary social theory and red cultural studies to end exploitation for all.

The hollowing out of Marxism in the name of (orthodox) Marxism by such theorists as Smith, Sprinker and Zizek is based on the ideological un-said of the bourgeois right of property and its underpinning logic of the market which are represented as natural ("inalienable") "human rights," or more commonly, in daily practices, as individual rights. Revolutionary struggles against these "rights" (of property) are assumed to be signs of dogmatism, ruthless impersonality, vanguardism and totalitarianism—all "obvious" markers of orthodox Marxism. The remedy put forward by these theorists is to resist the revolutionary vanguard in the name of "democracy from below," which is itself a code phrase for "spontaneity." Spontaneity—the kind of supposed

"freedom" which is the fabric of bourgeois daily life—is itself a layered notion that, in its folds, hides a sentimentalism that in reality constitutes "democracy from below" and its allied notion of the "individual," and the "human subject." Zizek and other "high theorists" manage to conceal this naïve emotionalism in the rather abstract language of "theory." What is subtly implicit in the discourses of "high theory," however, becomes explicit in the annotations of middle theory—that is, in bourgeois cultural commentary and criticism. Hennessy's Profit and Pleasure is the most recent and perhaps most popular attack on classical Marxism in the name of Marxism itself.

On this view, orthodox Marxism is dogmatic and totalitarian. So to "correct" its "faults," Hennessy empties its revolutionary vanguard of its commitment and puts feeling (manifested by "heartache") in its place. What is, of course, so significant is that Hennessy installs such sentimentality as the ultimate layer of her Marxism in the name of Marxism itself. This is what makes the work of bourgeois writers like Zizek, Smith, Sprinker and Hennessy effective and welcome in the academy and the culture industry: they do not (like regular right-wingers) attack Marxism but they reduce its explanatory power and its revolutionary force by substituting spontaneity for revolutionary praxis. For these writers social transformation is the effect not of revolutionary praxis but of a spontaneous and emotionally intense exchange between two kindred "spirits." It is the spirit that moves the world. What in Hennessy is presented as Marxism or feminism turns out to be a souped-up version of the old bourgeois cultural feminism which, running away from revolution, retreats once again into community, spontaneity, affectivity, and above all the autonomous subject who gives and receives love above and beyond all social and economic processes.

One of the ways such writers hollow out Marxism of its Marxism and produce a Marxism beyond Marxism is by their overt acknowledgement of the way Marxism is treated in the

bourgeois culture industry. Hennessy, for example, writes that Marxism in English Departments (the trope of the culture industry) is both "courted and tamed" (Profit and Pleasure 2). In other words, by announcing her awareness of the way that Marxism is tamed, she hopes to inoculate herself from the charge that she is doing so. The message the reader is supposed to get is this: because she knows Marxism is always being "tamed," she herself would never do that. Under cover of this ideological self-inoculation, Hennessy then goes on to produce her "tamed" version of Marxism that is only metaphorically "marxist" because it is void of all the concepts and practices that make Marxism Marxism.

My larger point is of course that the most effective writings for the ruling class are located in the middle register, in that register of writing usually praised as lucid, clear, jargon-free and above all "readable." Zizek is abstract; Hennessy is concrete. This is another way of saying that the work of Hennessy and other such "tamers" of Marxism is always a work of synthesis and consolidation—they make concrete the work of high theory: it is for this reason that their work forms the very center of the culture industry. Finally, to be clear, the question here is not to play a game of determining the "good" from the "bad" Marxism. What is good Marxism—what is effective in overcoming inequality—is determined by history itself. The question is whether what is being done actualizes the historical potential made possible by the development of the forces of production and thus brings about change in the existing social relations of production (overcomes class inequality) or whether it plays within the existing actuality and thus turns the limits of the actually existing into the very limits of reality as such. And in doing so, reifies the present social relations of production. Flexodox Marxists like Hennessy accept the proposition that capitalism is here to stay and thus reject as "impractical" any pressure put on the external supports of capitalism (capital and labor relations) and then

work within capitalism—on the basis of community and emotional intensity—to make its ongoing process of the exploitation of the labor of the world's workers more "humane" and tolerable.

Capitalism is, according to Hennessy's soap-operatic leftism, something that one should always keep in mind but not seriously consider overthrowing. She is too cynical to take even her own views seriously: "This means that eliminating the social structures of exploitation that capitalism absolutely requires and so violently enacts at the expense of human needs must be on the political agenda, at the every least as the horizon that sets the terms for imagining change" (Profit and Pleasure 232). Capitalist exploitation is a heuristic consideration not a revolutionary imperative.

Beyond the theatrical moves of the bourgeois left, however, classical Marxism is emerging as the only understanding of the new global formations that lead to transformative praxis. Orthodox Marxism has become impossible to ignore because the objective possibility of transforming the regime of wage-labor into a system in which the priority is not profit but meeting the needs of all is confronted as a daily actuality. The flexodox left turns the emergent class struggles into self-enclosed struggles for symbolic power so to represent class hegemony in the relations of production as capable of being changed through cross-class "coalitions" when in fact exploitation is everywhere in the world maintained by such coalitions which are losing their legitimacy and breaking apart under the weight of their own contradictions precisely because the class divide is growing under their rule and beyond their borders. Only classical Marxism demonstrates that the productive forces of capitalism have reached tremendous levels and have the ability to feed, clothe, and house the world many times over but are fettered by capitalism's existing social relations: its fundamental drive to privately consume the social resources of

collective labor. That the left today has, in dramatic fashion, been forced to return (if only rhetorically) to orthodox Marxism marks the fact that the struggle to transform capitalism has reached a stage of development that necessitates a systemic theoretical basis for revolutionary praxis. The hegemonic left now wants to incorporate orthodox Marxism into its dogmatic coalitional logic as a discourse which depends for its identity on "class" as "real": which is a code for the "lived experience" or the transcendental ineffable politics (Lacan) of class as an outside inferred from the inside (the side of subjective "values") and as such held to be unavailable for positive knowing. Which is another way of saying that class is a matter of "persuasion" and "seduction" rather than production. What the resulting flexodox marxism cannot explain therefore is that class

is not a matter of what this or that proletarian or even the proletariat as a whole *pictures* as its goal. It is a matter of *what the proletariat is in actuality* and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do (Marx-Engels Reader 135).

Orthodox Marxism does not consist of raising "class" as a dogmatic banner of the "real," but in the critique of false consciousness that divides the workers by occulting their collective interest by shifting the focus from their position in social production, their *material* antagonism with the capitalist class. "Class as real" (a spectral agency) cannot explain, and therefore cannot engage in, the material process through which capitalism, by its very own laws of motion, produces its own "gravedigger" in the global proletariat. What the flexodox return to and hollowing out of the concepts of orthodox Marxism proves, among other things, is that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (Marx and Engels, The German Ideology 67) and history

progresses despite this ideological hegemony through the agency of labor. In short—"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."

Orthodox Marxism has become a test-case of the "radical" today. Yet, what passes for orthodoxy on the left—whether like Smith and Zizek they claim to support it, or, like Butler and Rorty they want to "achieve our country" by excluding it from "U.S. Intellectual life" ("On Left Conservatism"), is a parody of orthodoxy which hybridizes its central concepts and renders them into flexodox simulations. Yet, even in its very textuality, however, the orthodox is a resistance to the flexodox. Contrary to the common-sensical view of "orthodox" as "traditional" or "conformist" "opinions," is its other meaning: ortho-doxy not as flexodox "hybridity," but as "original" "ideas." "Original," not in the sense of epistemic "event," "authorial" originality and so forth, but, as in chemistry, in its opposition to "para," "meta," "post" and other ludic hybridities: thus "ortho" as resistance to the annotations that mystify the original ideas of Marxism and hybridize it for the "special interests" of various groups.

The "original" ideas of Marxism are inseparable from their effect as "demystification" of ideology—for example the deployment of "class" that allows a demystification of daily life from the haze of consumption. Class is thus an "original idea" of Marxism in the sense that it cuts through the hype of cultural agency under capitalism and reveals how culture and consumption are tied to labor, the everyday determined by the workday: how the amount of time workers spend engaging in surplus-labor determines the amount of time they get for reproducing and cultivating their needs. Without changing this division of labor social change is impossible. Orthodoxy is a rejection of the ideological annotations: hence, on the one hand, the resistance to orthodoxy as "rigid" and "dogmatic" "determinism," and, on the other, its hybridization by the flexodox as the result of which it has become almost impossible today to read the original ideas

of Marxism, such as "exploitation"; "surplus-value"; "class"; "class antagonism"; "class struggle"; "revolution"; "science" (i.e., objective knowledge); "ideology" (as "false consciousness"). Yet, it is these ideas alone that clarify the elemental truths through which theory ceases to be a gray activism of tropes, desire and affect, and becomes, instead, a red, revolutionary guide to praxis for a new society freed from exploitation and injustice.

Marx's original scientific discovery was his labor theory of value. Marx's labor theory of value is an elemental truth of Marxism that is rejected by the flexodox left as the central dogmatism of a "totalitarian" Marxism. It is only Marx's labor theory of value, however, that exposes the mystification of the wages system that disguises exploitation as a "fair exchange" between capital and labor and reveals the truth about this relation as one of exploitation. Only orthodox Marxism explains how what the workers sell to the capitalist is not labor, a commodity like any other whose price is determined by fluctuations in supply and demand, but their labor-power—their ability to labor in a system which has systematically "freed" them from the means of production so they are forced to work or starve—whose value is determined by the amount of time socially necessary to reproduce it daily. The value of labor-power is equivalent to the value of wages workers consume daily in the form of commodities that keep them alive to be exploited tomorrow. Given the technical composition of production today this amount of time is a slight fraction of the workday the majority of which workers spend producing surplus-value over and above their needs. The surplus-value is what is pocketed by the capitalists in the form of profit when the commodities are sold. Class is the antagonistic division thus established between the exploited and their exploiters. Without Marx's labor theory of value one could only contest the after effects of this outright theft of social labor-power rather than its cause lying in the private ownership of production. The flexodox rejection of the labor theory of value as the "dogmatic"

core of a totalitarian Marxism therefore is a not so subtle rejection of the principled defense of the (scientific, ie, positive and reliable) knowledge workers need for their emancipation from exploitation because only the labor theory of value exposes the opportunism of knowledges (ideology) that occult this exploitation. Without the labor theory of value socialism would only be a moral dogma that appeals to the sentiments of "fairness" and "equality" for a "just" distribution of the social wealth that does the work of capital by naturalizing the exploitation of labor under capitalism giving it an acceptable "human face."

It is only classical Marxism that explains socialism as an historical inevitability that is tied to the development of social production itself and its requirements. Orthodox Marxism makes socialism scientific because it explains how in the capitalist system, based on the private consumption of labor-power (competition), the objective tendency is to reduce the amount of time labor spends in reproducing itself (necessary labor) while expanding the amount of time labor is engaged in producing surplus-value (surplus-labor) for the capitalist through the introduction of machinery into the production process by the capitalists themselves to lower their own labor costs. Because of the competitive drive for profits under capitalism it is historically *inevitable* that a point is reached when the technical mastery—the amount of time socially necessary on average to meet the needs of society through the processing of natural resources—is such that the conditions of the workers worsen relative to the owners and becomes an unbearable global social contradiction in the midst of the ever greater mass of wealth produced. It is therefore just as inevitable that at such a moment it begins to make more sense to socialize production and meet the needs of all to avoid the explosive social conflicts perpetually generated by private property than to maintain the system at the risk of total social collapse on a world scale. "Socialism or barbarism," as Rosa Luxemburg put it, is the inevitable choice faced by

humanity because of capitalism. Either maintain private property and the exploitation of labor in production, in which case more and more social resources will go into policing the growingly desperate surplus-population generated by the technical efficiency of social production, or socialize production and inaugurate a society whose founding principle is "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" (Marx, Critique of the Gotha Program, Selected Works, 325) and "in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (Manifesto of the Communist Party, Selected Works, 53).

The time has come to state it clearly so that even the flexodox opportunists may grasp it: Orthodox Marxism is not a free-floating "language-game" or "meta-narrative" for arbitrarily constructing local utopian communities or spectral activist inversions of ideology meant to seduce "desire" and "mobilize" (glorify) subjectivity—it is an absolute prerequisite for our emancipation from exploitation and a new society freed from necessity. Orthodox Marxism is the only global theory of social change. Only Orthodox Marxism has explained why under the system of wage-labor and capital communism is not "an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself" but "the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things" (The German Ideology 57) because of its objective explanation of and ceaseless commitment to "the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority" (Manifesto of the Communist Party, Selected Works, 45) to end social inequality forever.

It is my understanding that by drawing out the ways in which culture is shaped by the developments of labor, a labor theory of culture works to connect the most pressing cultural questions to the economic and political structures which determine how people live their lives. This understanding is based on the recognition that labor, as Marx explains, is the "process by

which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature" (Capital 283). Before there can be a culture of consent and resistance over the socially consequential meaning(s) that shape people's lives, there first needs to be their material life itself. From this material dependence of culture on the metabolism between labor and nature it follows, as Marx goes on to explain, "that the man who possesses no other property than his labour power, must, in all conditions of society and culture, be the slave of other men who have made themselves the owners of the material conditions of labour" ("Gotha Programme" 81). Thus, for Marx, labor is not simply a natural material process necessary to sustain life but is also a historical zone of conflicts over control of the means of production. Culture, therefore, is the arena "in which men become conscious of this [economic] conflict and fight it out" (Critique of Political Economy 21); culture is the place, in other words, where the awareness of labor as the source of all value is articulated, as well as contested and resisted in "ideology" (21). The boundaries of culture are thus defined by the possibilities of labor as both the material basis of culture (what people need to consume), and the meanings attached to these practices (as essential and consequential or not), are dependent on the collective social project of production (the global class division of labor).

Culture is at root labor. Culture is always coextensive with the social relations men and women must enter into in order to live and it participates in shaping these relations. As Marx explains:

Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces,

setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway. (Capital, CW Vol. 35, 187)

The material dependence of human beings on nature in turn acts to shape human nature and this "metabolism," as Marx calls it, between the two is what establishes culture. Culture is thus at root the material realization of human purposes in the natural world necessary to support life itself at a given level of development.

As human beings realize their vital purposes in the natural world they are also required, as Marx explains, to pay "close attention" to their own labor process and thus come to be aware of how it "determine[s] the mode of [their] activity with the rigidity of a law" (Capital, CW Vol. 35, 187). Culture is thus not only the realization of human ends in the material world but also the awareness and internal compulsion of these ends themselves which we subjectively experience as needs. In other words, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire" CW Vol. 11, 103). Culture is thus also the medium for the transmission of needs that have arisen under particular social circumstances and that are required to be satisfied and which in being realized reproduce the social relations, as well as compel further changes.

Such an understanding of culture as co-extensive with the labor process presupposes the materiality of language. But such an understanding of the necessary coexistence of language and social praxis demands that we understand its materiality historically and not as a self-enclosed

system of signs. By "material," what I, therefore, do not mean is the body (Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter), the signifier (J. Hillis Miller, "The Work of Cultural Criticism in the Age of Digital Reproduction" in his Illustration), or the general resistance of language to conceptuality (Christopher Fynsk, The Claim of Language: A Case for the Humanities). Instead by material, I mean what Marx (Capital, 1, 198; 290) calls, "social metabolism"—the relation of labor, its circulation in society, and its relation with nature. Language is material not because the signifier exceeds all signifieds and therefore is a non-translatable "this-ness" that resists all abstract concepts but because it is part of "social metabolism"—it is a form of labor: "language is practical, real consciousness that... only arises from the need, the necessity of intercourse with other men" (Marx, The German Ideology 49). Language is material due to the "close attention" required by a growingly complex labor process which gives to it "the rigidity of a law" which is indispensable to social life. It is the relative rigidity of language that allows it to be a tool of scientific abstraction capable of being applied elsewhere than the location of its emergence which helps produce new changes in nature. It is the co-extension, but non-coincidence, of culture and the labor process that therefore distinguishes "science" as the kind of knowledge that is self-aware of the non-identity of consciousness and the material world which determines it, and "ideology," the "false-consciousness" of real socio-economic necessity, compulsion and development.

The material changes effected by social labor in the abstract come to compel social changes, and the consciousness of the necessity of such changes and the need to bring them about is also cultural. Culture thus comes to have the function of planning future labor to bring about required changes that have arisen due to material changes that have been effected in the past. Culture, therefore, in its totality is the product of past labor, the awareness of present labor,

and the plan of future labor. In short, culture is the superstructural relay that is always coextensive with the ongoing necessity of labor. The labor theory of culture of Marx explains the historical specificity of culture (which emerges with socially abstract labor), the place of culture in the social totality of practices (as a superstructural relay determined by labor arrangements) as well as the necessity of culture for humanity (as scientific knowledge of progress).

It is the underlying dependence of human beings on nature that explains the emergence of culture as specifically a reflex of human labor. Marx gives a two part answer for this that explains how and why. In the first place the labor theory of culture entails recognizing that

Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.  
(The German Ideology 37)

What this means is that "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy 21). Before looking at the social productions of human beings we have to recognize the production whose product they are, which means looking at the material structures of nature and society that shape their lives. This first premise of a labor theory of culture is important because it clarifies a basic problem of cultural theory which is the problem of how to objectively determine "value" given that it is always the evaluation of a subject. Marx argues it is possible to have a cultural theory at all because it is

always possible to distinguish between "the economic conditions of production" (21), or, in other words, the "social metabolism" of humanity and nature, and "the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out" (21). Without such an awareness culture will be naturalized as a self-enclosed type of activity whose meaning is purely auto-referential that is assumed to give the rule to nature. In other words, without the recognition of the dependence of culture on nature culture becomes sacralized and serves to mystify the place of humanity in the material world.

The second part of Marx's explanation for how labor explains culture rather than the reverse entails recognizing that it is in fact a necessary by-product of capitalism that we come to see culture as a thing in itself reified from the material conditions of its emergence. It is for this reason that in his discussion of "labor" Marx is very careful to avoid naturalizing the category by considering it only a concrete activity, or, on the contrary, as the essence of humanity as such (Grundrisse 100-8). Labor is not a "transcendental signified," that demands we see the world as a homologous type of activity or the sign of a singular meaning. Labor is simply a concept for how "the ensemble of the social relations" ("Theses on Feuerbach" 145) is the ground which determines what makes "meanings" meaningful in the first place because it is that matrix of conditions over which we are always struggling and attempting to make sense. If this is inverted and labor is taken to mean just another word that attempts to give meaning to something which spontaneously resists conceptuality then it is impossible to have any cultural theory or anything like an explanation of culture and we are left with surface description and nominalism, the belief that names make the world, and both the world and the names are assumed to be free of history.

The dependence on nature which necessitates and explains culture is what makes it possible to discuss objects of art, commodities, social practices, and discourses in the singular

form of culture and not the obvious fact that such activities carry meaning for the subject. Meaning is always a secondary effect of the social relations. The idea that discourse constitutes culture is a formalist move that belies the claim of a discourse theory of culture to respect the specificity of culture which is always a matter of "paying close attention," as Marx puts it, to the interaction of the social labor process and the material world.

## 2.4 MATERIALITY WITHOUT MATERIALISM

Because almost all contemporary cultural theories regard themselves to be material, if not materialist, the first issue to be addressed in putting forward a labor theory of culture now is what materiality is in contemporary cultural theory. To clarify the issues involved in the contestations over culture, materiality and the project of cultural studies, I begin with a close reading of Tom Cohen's writings, which offer one of the most advanced articulations of the project for a discursive cultural studies as well as a sustained argument against any attempt to move toward what I am calling a materialist cultural studies.

Cohen claims that there are, on the contemporary scene, three modes of "cultural studies": the cultural studies that are grounded in a "mimetic" theory of language, one which represents itself as recognizing the non-mimetic of language but remains mimetic, and a third truly non-mimetic cultural studies, which he sees as the only advanced mode of reading culture. He finds that most of what passes for cultural studies now "evades the problematic and programming of inscription" (Material xi) by "relapsing" into mimetic codes of "a pragmatic, everyday, referential, socio-historicist 'politics'" (Ideology 102) that serves to "preclude alternative modes of thought, or action... that remain key... to addressing the accelerated

evisceration of terrestrial resources in the machinery of mimeto-capitalism" (107). In his emphasis on the mimeticism (or not) of language, what becomes clear is that Cohen's reading of cultural studies is an attempt to absorb the cultural turn in an earlier linguistic turn and to therefore argue that culture, far from being a site of plenitude (which he seems to think is the underlying idea of mainstream cultural studies), is itself a language effect. Language, he argues, is a material formation that determines meaning in a culture independently of labor. In other words, unlike Marx for whom language is material only to the extent that as "practical consciousness" (German Ideology 49) it is inserted in the "process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature" (Capital 283), for Cohen language is material in itself. It is thus in the terms of this immanent materiality of language that Cohen advances what he claims is a "materialist" understanding of culture.

For Cohen, what is material is the excessive differential slippage (free play) of the signifier over the series of signifieds as without origin or end. Since all concepts (signifieds) emerge in the process of signification, and because human practices are conventionally made intelligible through the habitual repetition of linguistic codes, the material is thus a language effect—what Cohen calls the "inscription of anteriority" in discourse—in relation to which all other values are then determined. In the discursive cultural theory represented by Cohen, culture is thus itself material because it is the singular means as well as the medium in which the "sense of the real" is constructed in language and the place of the subject primarily determined. This immanent cultural theory assumes that "the entities discourse refers to are constituted in and by discourse" (Hindess and Hirst 19-20). Culture, in other words, is not the other of a real world lying "out there" beyond the means with which we attempt to grasp it—what is "outside" (e.g.,

nature or truth) is always already an effect of the "inside" of the modes of signification available in a culture. Moreover, according to Cohen, the concept of ideology should be equated with "mimesis"—"ideology is always mimetic," (Material xii)—because referentiality in language fails to reflect the immanent cultural process of the inscription of meaning. In other words, as Paul de Man puts it, "ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism" (Resistance 11) and not "false consciousness" of the outside of labor relations, as I am arguing.

How then, does this theorization of the materiality of culture as opposed to the mimeticism of ideology bear out in the project of a discursive cultural studies as a mode of opposition to the dominant social relations that Cohen is advancing? In fact, for Cohen, "mimesis" is more than simply a mode of representation that "reflects" on the world. It is the mode of rule of an "aesthetic state"—a "ghost state" that actually "does not exist" (Material 120) because it is "an entire regime of cognition, interpretation and experience" that exceeds "political ideology" (118) and the "logics attributed to capital" (121)—that "is designed to efface a materiality of inscription" (120). The "ghost state" is, like ideology and materiality for Cohen, a purely cognitive matter with no connection to an outside in labor arrangements. He argues that the mode of intelligibility authorized by the "aesthetic state" dissimulates its own production of meaning in natural reality and thus deflects awareness of the "eventfulness" of history. Historic change, in other words, comes from knowing that the past is always retroactively constructed in the present, which provides a sense of the otherness of the future for Cohen. It is then this "eventfulness" of history that is represented by Cohen, citing Benjamin, as the project of a "material historiography" (ix) which would found a discursive cultural studies for the contemporary and which would constitute an operation of "deinscription" that is a "performative

intervention at the site of prerecordings" (x) which articulate "a radical (re)programming of the (historical) archive out of which the 'sensorium' would be alternatively produced" (x).

Cohen understands his project of a discursive cultural studies that is more attentive to inscription to be materially embedded in texts themselves. Specifically it is a matter of the way texts perform the impossibility of their own signification in their very tropes and testify to the ghostly power of inscription over reality. And yet, by locating the impossibility of self-same meaning in the text itself Cohen reinscribes the very mimetic logic he claims to be opposing. But, the logical contradiction—the fact that what Cohen deploys as the most oppositional narrative toward mimesis is itself mimetic—points to the fact that what is at issue here is not epistemology, as Cohen seems to think, and not an ethical question of "bad" (mimetic) versus "good" (post-mimetic) epistemic models of culture. Rather, the fact that in Cohen's writings the post-mimetic is mimetic with a vengeance indicates that representation, as Jameson has argued, is always mimetic because it presupposes a relation to history:

Indeed, no working model of the functioning of language, the nature of communication or of the speech act, and the dynamics of formal and stylistic change is conceivable which does not imply a whole philosophy of history. (Political Unconscious 59)

What Cohen's writings thus show despite themselves is that at stake in the debates over mimesis is not mimesis, but different ways of knowing the world that have different and opposed political consequences in terms of the ongoing class conflicts over the cultural real. To clarify this point, it will be useful here to look at a specific cultural reading that Cohen proposes as a model for discursivist cultural studies, his reading of Alfred Hitchcock's The 39 Steps.

According to Cohen, The 39 Steps demonstrates the "sheer exteriority" of meaning and subjectivity as the effect of inscription and the "resistance" to it that comes from the impossibility of its project to program the culture and police its boundaries. The 39 Steps is thus made to tell a story about history and culture in which the origin and limits of domination are purely formal and emerge from within cultural processes, either within the code of mimesis and its "inscription of anteriority," or, oppositionally, in what Cohen calls "allographics," a writing that reveals its own processes of inscription as purely textual and arbitrary.

In his reading of The 39 Steps, Cohen makes Mr. Memory (the vaudeville performer who serves as a pawn between the rival spy agencies in the story) the agent subverting the dominant ideology because he articulates the purely linguistic basis of its rule when he utters a "meaningless" string of numbers and words at the moment in the narrative when he reveals the state secret that stands to undermine its power if it gets into the enemy state's hands. Because in the climactic scene the secret words Mr. Memory utters are audible to the viewer only as sounds they do not signify except in a purely literal way: what they thus signify, for Cohen, is that the State's secret is its own performativity and what they thus teach the viewer is that the way to resist the dominant is to mime it and reveal the cultural process of inscription and subjection to the dominant order. Because the significance of Mr. Memory's statement is purely discursive, the meaning of the utterance is not that of a subversive state secret as referred to in the story but rather what for Cohen is the secret of the State itself: that the State is an effect of a relation in discourse between signifiers that are actually lacking any order of priority. Thus what Cohen's "deinscriptive" reading from the "inside" proposes is that the agency of resistance to the culture's dominant meanings and values is not based on a materially oppressed subject that has been foreclosed from representation and that therefore stands as a critique of it, but comes from within

the dominant order itself at those moments when its own textual performativity is revealed to be the basis of its power (as opposed to any objective, "outside" order of causality.) Yet what such a reading itself forecloses is how the text of The 39 Steps is the scene not of a self-dismantling of the State but in fact of a hegemonic struggle over the state.

How does The 39 Steps reveal this hegemonic struggle? What Cohen codes as a difference within discourse that is relayed as the contestation between (on the one hand) the State and its mimetic agents and (on the other) the subject of (de)inscription, is actually a conflict between basically opposed social orders, the State of capital based on the logic of exchange and an other emergent State within the State based on the materiality of need. The alternative hegemony is dismissed by Cohen when he fails to read the political economy of significance behind the "unnamed enemy state" (Material xiii) Mr. Memory is en route to in the story.

What the material conditions under which anyone would want to be going to an enemy state are is an important subtext of the film from its very opening scenes when, during Mr. Memory's performance in the music hall, there is a class struggle over the use of his ability to recall facts. Not only does the scene make clear that different classes and groups need to know different facts, but the scene also shows that they are competing for the power to represent their needs as socially real; a farmer is so preoccupied with his cattle as to repeatedly ask his question about horticulture, while a proletarian is so consumed with Mae West and alcohol as to instigate a fight when he does not receive the reply he is looking for.

This class struggle over the means of representation is carried through the film and it effectively reveals that the central issue involved in the State is not whether it is "representative" (mimetic) or not, but the fact that there are different social orders demanding representation. Thus, when Hannay, whose run from the police for a false murder charge carries the bulk of the

story, ducks into a public assembly hall and poses as a politician it doesn't matter that he is acting and his utopian speech in which all social conflicts are overcome is met with popular enthusiasm. The enthusiasm in fact indicates a popular need to overcome what are intractable social conflicts that have reached the point where they can be spontaneously represented by Hannay as a fight between "nation and nation" as well as "neighbor against neighbor." These moments, in short, point to the popular need for a State where material need has priority over the politics of representation—the false question of whether the State is or is not representative of an extra-discursive real that transcends the class struggle.

For Cohen, most of what passes for cultural studies "evades the problematic and programming of inscription" (Material xi) by "relapsing" into mimetic codes of "a pragmatic, everyday, referential, socio-historicist 'politics'" (Ideology 102). But how effective is Cohen's argument for focusing on inscription as the hegemonic logic of the political in order to contest the logic of capital? Cohen proposes that getting rid of "reference" (mimesis) is more important for changing the world than combating exploitation (the appropriation of surplus labor in the daily). In fact, in advancing such a position Cohen himself comes perilously close to articulating the logic of transnational capital in relation to the State by proclaiming in effect its material irrelevance, as when he claims that the State cannot be explained according to the "logics attributed to capital" (Material 121). Because the ideological function of the State is primarily programming the "sensorium" and hegemonizing consciousness, according to Cohen, such as to create belief in "a pragmatic, everyday, referential, socio-historical 'politics'" (Ideology 102), his own theory which argues for "de-inscribing" the State in actuality itself aestheticizes the State and fails to see it as a site of social conflicts. Indeed, the "ghost state" is, like ideology and materiality, for Cohen a purely cognitive matter. Thus, the matter of how social relations shape

consciousness is occulted and capitalism is aestheticized as "mimeto-capitalism," a cognitive regime ruled by a "ghost state" that can only be known at the level of its effects on subjectivity and not in relation to its material pre-conditions. Far from being "materialist," Cohen's war on the referent—the objective relations which precede their "conceptualization"—is in fact a return to a form of neo-Kantian idealism in which "matter" is understood ahistorically as that which produces effects at the level of consciousness but which itself cannot positively be known. But what this occludes, as opaque to consciousness, is precisely the labor relations that precede it, the fact that, as Marx and Engels argue in The German Ideology, the "first premise of all human existence" (including the operations of the linguistic and cultural realms<sup>8</sup>) is that "men must be in a position to live in order to 'make history'," and

life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing and various other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. (47)

By supplanting this production of material life and the agency of labor, what Cohen in fact does is limit any understanding of the material to the terms of the cultural and thus privilege the regime of "ideas" (tropes) as instrumental in shaping the world. History is dematerialized of labor and made strictly a matter of shifting tropes.

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<sup>8</sup> Even "poetry," as George Thomson explains, which historically has been the most non-mimetic of the cultural arts, produces "a closer communion of imaginative sympathy" (Marxism 23), which as much as it may express a "weakness in the face of nature" (24), yet "succeed[s] to some extent in overcoming it" (24) to the extent that it serves to focus on and to clarify the "subjective aspect" (29) of labor, that is, "the inner, psychical struggle" (29) labor produces in the worker.

Cohen believes that a non-mimetic cultural studies captures the materiality of culture in ways that mimetic types do not and is oppositional because it frees culture from the tyranny of transparency and phenomenality he sees as the primary ideological support of contemporary capitalism. However, his theory of materiality as a language effect is itself the dominant understanding of culture as is evidenced by the fact that it shares with overtly representational theories of culture a hostility to any cultural analysis that implicates the text in the class conflicts which precede and constitute the internal dynamics of cultural texts. Indeed, Cohen's own "post-mimetic" understanding of culture as immanent and constitutive of the contemporary real is actually just as much in evidence in liberal humanist cultural theories such as Scruton's which argue that representation reflects "timeless" truths about human beings. While they remain formally opposed in terms of the cultural politics of representation they are nevertheless underwritten by a common emphasis on the autonomy of culture, an autonomy that severs the cultural from its material determinations.

In the remainder of this chapter I wish to turn to Kafka and his readers as an example of the crisis of the contemporary totality so as to make my arguments above regarding culture as a site of conflict over materiality more concrete in terms of cultural practices, addressing the question what is to be done for a transformative cultural theory. Kafka is popularly seen as the opposite of a "realistic" writer because of the attenuated view of the world in his texts and the impossibility of an authentic human response to these conditions. This view fails to read Kafka's text as reflecting on social relations because it conflates reflection with "reference" and assumes that as Kafka does not refer directly to the shape of social relations, or, indeed, any metanarrative of explanation, his texts cannot be said to be "about" social relations. The conclusion is that because Kafka's writing lacks systemic awareness of society and modalities of change it must be

read in "existential" or "metaphysical" terms that are common-sensically assumed to be above politics and free of labor. However, as I will show, the labor theory of culture is needed in order to penetrate the fog of "aboutness" (reference) and uncover the necessary reflection of labor relations in the text: on such a reading if class relations are absent in the narrative this is more than a problem of reference (knowledge), it is a social problem (ideology) while classes exist. The conflation of reflection with reference that concludes class is absent in Kafka is itself a class narrative that not only provides an apologetic for inequality but also distorts the intelligibility of narratives which are not exhausted by their content, as Lenin's labor theory of reading shows in its understanding of a non-mimetic reflection. The labor theory of reading is needed to turn reading from being quietist and complicit with the dominant culturalist ideology and make it a struggle practice for social emancipation and equality.

## 2.5 EPILOGUE: BEFORE THE LAW—READING CULTURE MATERIALLY

Kafka's writings and their "readings" have become not only a layered cultural signpost but also a threshold in critical and cultural theory. In their analyses of Kafka, Lukács and Derrida, to take two of his most careful readers, bring out not only the complexities of his texts but also mark the way in which the act of reading itself has become a complex and materially consequential cultural practice. In this epilogue I will investigate these readings, but first I reproduce Kafka's Before the Law here.

## BEFORE THE LAW

Before the Law stands a doorkeeper. To this doorkeeper there comes a man from the country and prays for admittance to the Law. But the doorkeeper says that he cannot grant admittance at the moment. The man thinks it over and then asks if he will be allowed in later. "It is possible," says the doorkeeper, "but not at the moment." Since the gate stands open, as usual, and the doorkeeper steps to one side, the man stoops to peer through the gateway into the interior. Observing that, the doorkeeper laughs and says: "If you are so drawn to it, 'just try to go in despite my veto. But take note: I am powerful. And I am only the least of the doorkeepers. From hall to hall there is one doorkeeper after another, each more powerful than the last. The third doorkeeper is already so terrible that even I cannot bear to look at him." These are difficulties the man from the country has not expected; the Law, he thinks, should surely be accessible at all times and to everyone, but as he now takes a closer look at the doorkeeper in his fur coat, with his big sharp nose and long, thin, black Tartar beard, he decides that it is better to wait until he gets permission to enter. The doorkeeper gives him a stool and lets him sit down at one side of the door. There he sits for days and years. He makes many attempts to be admitted, and wearies the doorkeeper by his importunity. The doorkeeper frequently has little interviews with him, asking him questions about his home and many other things, but the questions are put indifferently, as great lords put them, and always finish with the statement that he cannot be let in yet. The man, who has furnished himself with many things for his journey, sacrifices all he has, however valuable, to bribe the doorkeeper. The doorkeeper accepts everything, but always with the remark: "I am only taking it to keep you from thinking you have omitted anything." During these many years the man fixes his attention almost continuously on the doorkeeper. He forgets the other doorkeepers, and this first one seems to him the sole obstacle preventing access to the Law. He curses his bad luck, in his early years boldly and loudly; later, as he grows old, he only grumbles to himself. He becomes childish, and since in his yearlong contemplation of the doorkeeper he has come to know even the fleas in his fur collar, he begs the flea's as well to help him and to change the doorkeeper's mind. At length his eyesight begins to fail, and he does not know whether the world is really darker or

whether his eyes are only deceiving him. Yet in his darkness he is now aware of a radiance that streams inextinguishably from the gateway of the Law. Now he has not very long to live. Before he dies, all his experiences in these long years gather themselves in his head to one point, a question he has not yet asked the doorkeeper. He waves him nearer, since he can no longer raise his stiffening body. The doorkeeper has to bend low toward him, for the difference in height between them has altered much to the man's disadvantage. "What do you want to know now?" asks the doorkeeper; "you are insatiable." "Everyone strives to reach the Law," says the man, "so how does it happen that for all these many years no one but myself has ever begged for admittance?" The doorkeeper recognizes that the man has reached his end, and, to let his failing senses catch the words, roars in his ear: "No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it."<sup>9</sup>

In reading Kafka's Before the Law, Derrida, with meticulous attention to the working of rhetoric in the text, makes reading the practice of teasing out the singularities that put in question all generalizations about the text, including its own laws of genre. Before the Law, he argues, is a text of "subversive juridicity" (Acts of Literature 216) that, "owing to the referential equivocation of certain linguistic structures" (216), "does not tell or describe anything but itself as text" (211) and therefore "tells us perhaps of the being-before-the-law of any text" (215)—including the law of literature that, Derrida maintains, is evident "when the categorical engages the idiomatic, as a literature always must" (213). Derrida problematizes the law of literature (fiction) through the idiomatic in the way that the title Before the Law is both positioned

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<sup>9</sup>Translation of Franz Kafka, "Before the Law" in Wedding Preparations in the Country and Other Stories, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978).

"before" the "story" of the law as well as within the first sentence of the story ("Before the Law stands a doorkeeper."), a doubling that renders the identity of the literary "undecidable":

The former, the title, is before the text and remains external if not to the fiction then at least to the content of the fictional narration. The latter is also at the head of the text, before it, but already in it; this is a first internal element of the narration's fictive content. And yet, although it is outside the fictional narrative or the story that is being told, the title (Before the Law) remains a fiction... We would say that the title belongs to literature even if its belonging has neither the structure nor the status of that which it entitles, to which it remains essentially heterogeneous. (Acts of Literature 189)

This doubling suggests that "the law had entitled itself" (189) in the displacement of the words "Before the Law" from its place in the fiction to the place of the title, which is supposed to be the "non-fictional" identity that grounds the text in the institution of Literature, as it simply "refers" to the "story." The law of literature, whose "inside" is supposed to be fictional while "outside" it theory (science) and practice (politics) are not, is thus deconstructed and the text reveals a "fictive narrativity... without author or end" (199) which is as much "the origin of literature as the origin of law" (199). Before the Law is thus a text that enacts the performative "idiomatic" basis of the general (law) by showing how the general is always dissected by the singularity of its performative iteration.

Derrida goes on to show how the law—which, as the country man assumes, "should surely be accessible at all times to everyone,"—never materializes its presence because of a series of delays and deferrals. The country man for example only prevents himself from entering

as he is not prohibited ("It is possible,' says the doorkeeper...") so much as delayed by the "guarded" appearance of the Law and the "terrible" aspect of the doorkeeper ("in his fur coat, with his big sharp nose and long, thin, black Tartar beard"). The undecidable appearance of the Law as both accessible and guarded, a prohibition which does not prohibit anything so much as perform it as the doorkeeper suggests by his own placement outside the Law because of another absent doorkeeper ("so terrible that even I cannot look at him"), reveals, according to Derrida, that the Law is in actuality a fiction as "nothing really presents itself in this appearance" (Acts of Literature 191). Rather, the appearance "fuels desire for the origin" (197) and in this sense, Derrida argues, "Kafka's text tells us perhaps of the being-before-the-law of any text" (215) that "the law of the law... is neither natural nor institutional" (205), its origin does not lie in class oppression for example, and its secret is rather that it does not repress so much as allow "oneself [to] be enticed, provoked, and hailed by the history of this non-history" of "pure morality" (191), as the categorical command that says "you must not" (192) always just as much says "you must" (192). Derrida seems to argue that, if power is necessary to thinking about the law (or, as he puts it, "if the nobility is necessary" [205]), that is so only because of the desire of "the lot of 'guardians,' critics, academics, literary theorists, writers, and philosophers" (215) that depend on "the legal personality of the text" (185) as a form of property and who therefore presumably have an interest in deferring access to the "secret" of the law: that, "The secret is nothing" (205). "This is the secret that has to be kept well" (205), in Derrida's reading, in order to "fuel desire for the origin": the desire which authorizes the contemporary "system of laws and conventions" (185) as much as the desire for their subversion. But what could be more comforting to the dominant than that their dominance has no basis to critique and that it is merely a conventional (consensual) mode of capturing desire? Derrida's "desire-full" reading is a commodified reading

that places desire in a beyond and thereby naturalizes the division of labor that systematically produces desire in opposition to need, providing the exploiters with the means to desire from the labor of others and relegating the majority to unmet needs. To read the problem of reading as a desire for proprietary rights and to propose an endless deferral of such rights as Derrida does is to install an ethical reading practice in which the individual is empowered over the collective and which thus fails to problematize the bourgeois right to exploit workers.

Derrida provides an immanent reading of Before the Law that subverts the binary of truth and fiction in order to conclude that conclusions are not only unnecessary but impossible and that any law defers us to other signifiers without end—"The work, the opus, does not belong to the field, it is the transformer of the field" (Acts of Literature 215) and "none receives an answer" in reading the cultural text "that does not involve *différance*: (no) more law and (no) more literature" (215). In this way Derrida underwrites the very ideology he puts in question by maintaining the fiction that law is "pure morality," a merely formal and empty universal standing outside the political economy of the contemporary real.

Deleuze and Guattari's reading of Kafka although putting itself forward as a "political" (Minor Literature 7) and even "revolutionary" (18) reading, turns the political into a question of free speech—by, for example, detailing the ways the tropic reversals of the Kafka text demonstrate the blockage and flow of "desire" which is itself presented in an ahistorical and post-ideological way.

Deleuze and Guattari's reading of Kafka is a rather traditional close reading that severs the text from its social and historical reality on the grounds that their reading is non-interpretive and thus closer to the way the text itself works. "We believe only in a Kafka politics that is neither imaginary nor symbolic" (Minor Literature 7), they assert, because of what are basically

stylistic considerations; because, they argue, the signifiers in Kafka are not attached to definite signifieds but rather are "lines of flight" or, in other words, moments of conceptual opacity that are taken to exceed and to spontaneously resist "meaning." What is being called "political" here is a violent reinscription of bourgeois reading, reading as a transcendental moment of plenitude above and beyond social conflicts. Such an ahistorical ideology of reading of course relies on a rather traditional empiricism that assumes that knowledge of the object or text adheres in the text itself and is unmediated by language and ideology: "We believe only in a Kafka experimentation that is without interpretation or significance and rests only on tests of experience" (7).

Not only is their reading itself, however, a reading that dogmatically takes its own presuppositions as self-evidently factual and therefore mystifies its own participation in the ongoing contestations in reading, but it does not do what it says it will, which is demonstrate the way in which Kafka's text is "free" of "reflecting" the social real. What they in fact do is take the very thing about Kafka that needs to be explained, which is the question how to read the way in which he inscribes agency at the level of materiality, and explain it away by repeating an idealist theory of agency as absolutely "free" of material conditions.

Deleuze and Guattari's is a speculative reading because it cuts off Kafka's text from its implicatedness in ongoing social praxis by treating it as a self-enclosed relay of tropes that open up ("deterritorialize") and close off ("reterritorialize") the pleasure of the subject in reading (Minor Literature 4). They claim that they "aren't even trying to interpret, to say this means that" (7) and that they are simply describing those moments of pure material opacity in the text itself, such as "how the intrusion of sound occurs in Kafka" in such a way that it "cuts it off from all its connections" (4), for example.

What interests Kafka is a pure and intense sonorous material that is always connected to its own abolition—a deterritorialized musical sound, a cry that escapes signification, composition, song, words—a sonority that ruptures in order to break away from a chain that is still all too signifying. (Minor Literature 6)

Their assumption of course is that "signifying" is "territorializing" and contains desire to normative conventions of pleasure, as against the significations of experience (as "non-signification") in a text which provides a kind of pleasure in subverting the containing drive in signification.

The reader is thus taught to read Kafka in a post-ideological matrix that Deleuze and Guattari take as the limit of the political. Thus, the "problem is not that of being free but of finding a way out" (Minor Literature 7) of this problem by always reading "within" the terms of the text as a "rhizome," "assemblage," or "desiring machine"—as a self-enclosed and free floating space filled with "states of desire, free of all interpretations" (7). What such an immanent reading does is reinscribe "territoriality" as a systemic logic while displacing it to the locality of the text so as to immunize the text from a symptomatic reading whereby its tropic moves are seen to reflect ongoing and consequential social conflicts of intelligibility over the shape of the social real.

When Deleuze and Guattari consider the politics of the text in an extra-textual way at all it is a merely cultural politics that opposes a "minor literature" to a "major" one on the grounds that "minor literature" is "revolutionary" because it uses the "major literature" for constructing a "collective assemblage of enunciation" (Minor Literature 18), or, in other words, it seeks to extend the freedom of speech to cover marginalized cultures. Not only is this not a revolutionary reading, because it contains freedom to merely formal terms and does not grasp the need for

economic freedom, but its politics do not go very far either if the point is to advance collectivity. Where is the advance in collectivity if all politics must reinscribe the dominant terms and collectivity be always already assumed to be "minor"? This is the reduction of the political to the stylistic. Furthermore, it does not take style very seriously by cutting it off from the class struggle.

Lukács begins his materialist reading of Kafka at this very point because he reads in Kafka's style —"the attenuation of reality" in his texts—a reflection of the "terror generated by the world of imperialist capitalism... where human beings are degraded to mere objects" (Literature and the Class Struggle 52). In Lukács terms, to cut Kafka's style off from "its social basis" (47) is to mystify the politics of style, which is a matter of how "the social structure of imperialism" impacts on "the bourgeois intelligentsia" (73). Thus "the crucial question" posed by Kafka, Lukács argues, is

whether a man escapes from the life of his time into a realm of abstraction —it is then that angst is engendered in human consciousness—or confronts modern life determined to fight its evils and support what is good in it. The first decision leads to another: is man the helpless victim of transcendental and inexplicable forces, or is he a member of a human community in which he can play a part, however small, towards its modification or reform? (80-1)

The task of the reader in materialist reading is thus a "critical" and not "libidinal" one: to "establish by examination of the work whether a writer's view of the world is based on the

acceptance or rejection of angst, whether it involves a flight from reality or a willingness to face up to it" (83). This entails asking a rather sharp question in reading the text:

is it able to include—or, better, demands—a dynamic, complex, analytical rendering of social relationships, or whether it leads to loss of perspective and historicity. (82)

Lukács' reading of Kafka is critical and dialectical. It is not a dogmatic reading in the way that an immanent culturalist reading is because it does not assume the text as "static" and self-enclosed, spontaneously resistant to the production of "meaning" ("the Law of *differance*"). My reading of Lukács thus argues against a "formalist" interpretation of his work as providing, as Lunn puts it, a "philosophical underpinning for... socialist realism" (77). Lunn argues that because Lukács "reduced works of art (including literary techniques) to reflexes of class ideology... modernist forms such as those of expressionism were apparently tied indissolubly to late bourgeois ideological decay and thus could not be transformed to serve other purposes" (85). This view of Lukács' work fails to take into account his dialectical account of literary form which militates against all formalist solutions in art for what are in actuality intractable class conflicts. Rather, than imposing some set of formal prescriptions as a guarantee of a pre-determined meaning and effectivity, Lukács' materialist reading of culture grasps the meaning of the text and of literary technique as the site of conflicting class structures that militate against any singularity of meaning in a world more and more "transfer[ed] into the proletariat" (Marx and Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party 494). Furthermore, his materialist cultural theory does not fetishize the way that literature must inevitably reflect the reification of social life under capitalism because, as Lukács' argues, texts carry an inevitable protest of "the diabolical

character of the world of modern capitalism" (77) as well. In Kafka's case, this protest of capitalism is precisely located in the very realism of detail that Derrida, for example, sees as the "idiomatic" expression of a disavowed desire inscribed in law that is essentially "free" of history.

Derrida can only see in the "terrible" aspect of the doorkeeper a trope of castration because "in his fur coat, with his big sharp nose and long, thin, black Tartar beard" the doorkeeper suggests the phallus in imagery as well as effect, since in seeing him the man from the country "decides that it is better to wait until he gets permission" to enter. Yet Derrida does not see in this detail the trappings of feudalism and its symbols of rank radically out of joint with the impersonality of the Law and the abstract freedom it demands under capitalism. While the "terrible aspect" of the doorkeeper is in keeping with the extra-economic form of coercion demanded by the feudal division of labor, with which the "man from the country" is familiar we can assume, at least his reaction seems to suggest so as it gives him fearful associations, its application on the Law as he encounters it, "open, as usual" and precisely "accessible at all times and to everyone" as he expected to find it, reflects the contradiction of the Law under capitalism in which the worker must freely submit to his own exploitation. Thus, whereas Derrida concludes that the appearance of the Law, which precisely prohibits while provoking a desire because of its categorically imperative form ("you must-/not"), thus placing the man in a position to "decide" to prohibit himself, a materialist reading finds in such self-contradictory details a trace of the "silent compulsion of economic relations" (Marx, Capital 899) that is the real "secret" of the Law under capitalism. The Law under capitalism does not need the extra-economic coercion of pre-capitalist social formations because in capitalism inequality is primarily economic not political. What the text reflects, therefore, using the terms of Lukács' materialist reading, is not a "fixed" (logical) contradiction good for all and for all time, as

Derrida's deconstructive reading posits, but an historical contradiction that has unavoidable effects on representation rendering it internally inconsistent as well as socially and personally unsettling.

Lukács' reading of the material real in Kafka is the opposite of Derrida's non-reading of the real as displaced desire. For Lukács:

Kafka is one of the very few modernist writers whose attitude to detail is selective, not naturalistic. Formally, his treatment of detail is not dissimilar to that of a realist. The difference becomes apparent only when we examine his basic commitment, the principles determining the selection and sequence of detail. With Kafka these principles are his belief in a transcendental force (Nothingness)... But the problem cannot be approached formalistically. There are great realistic writers in whose works immediate social and historical reality is transcended, where realism in detail is based on a belief in a supernatural world... In Hoffmann, realism in detail goes hand in hand with a belief in the spectral nature of reality... Kafka is more secular than Hoffman. His ghosts belong to everyday bourgeois life; and since this life itself is unreal, there is no need of supernatural ghosts... But the unity of the world is broken up, since an essentially subjective vision is identified with reality itself. The terror generated by the world of imperialist capitalism... where human beings are degraded to mere objects—this fear, originally a subjective experience, becomes an objective entity. (Realism 53)

Lukács is here implicating a deconstructive reading which assumes that "extreme subjectivism, the static nature of reality, and the senselessness of its surface phenomenon, are

absolute truths requiring no proof" (72) by revealing the class basis of this view as "a certain way of looking at reality" (73) that does not see "what goal history is moving"(59) toward due to the "strong counter forces" (91) at work in the world that are productive of social collectivity.

"Kafka" is a cultural sign of the logic of reification in capitalism—what has already been theorized above as the immanent culturalism of the dominant discourses. Kafka's Before the Law follows a (post)modern culturalist logic by his surfacing of the contradictions of daily life under monopoly capitalism and mystifying any causal systemic explanation for them. What the spectral reading of Kafka is blind to and what materialist reading emphasizes is its "protest" of the system of monopoly capitalism which transforms daily life into a regimented life regulated by the logic of the commodity (exchange value)—culture as "mere training to act like a machine" (Marx and Engels). In the spectrality of its details Before the Law registers the fact that capitalism as it develops must alienate all social activity and productions to serve the rule of profit so that nothing in the end is able to remain a local and self-enclosed activity but rather entails an invisible global system for its production. The fetishism of detail in Kafka is in reaction to this impersonal machinery that has overtaken the social relations. Derrida limits the materiality of Kafka's text to epistemological terms by only seeing in its details an "idiomatic" implication of the concept of the general (law).

However, materialist reading does not idealize the "protest" embedded in Kafka's text as it is finally merely cultural in its assumptions and effects. Kafka's works presuppose a kind of bureaucratic reason run amok—where even those institutions which are supposed to provide a space of freedom from the market logic for the subject (such as the family, romantic love, the law, etc.) are themselves reproducing the dominant logic—that finds its negation in a voluntary leap into "absurdity," an existential act of empty negation that puts a seal of condemnation of the

system as a whole—"inhuman" ("since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it."). What Kafka shows is the systematicity of commodity fetishism in daily life. What he does not show is the equally systemic negation of this logic in the production of the collectivity of labor, the material force that has produced and is alone in a position to control the "machine."

The one-sided presentation of the socialization of production in Kafka has effects on the understanding of "reflection" in materialist cultural theory. On Lukács' reading, Kafka capitulates to the general process of reification necessitated by extension of the logic of capital over more and more areas of social life, which as a consequence turns literature from being a force for change to one of reaction by strengthening the grip of necessity over cultural productions. For Lukács the role of literature is to "de-reify" the social and, "demand... a dynamic, complex, analytical rendering of social relationships" that can guide humanity in its struggles toward a realm of freedom. On Lenin's terms, however, this means that culture is expected to have a realistic "mimetic" function rather than an ideologically "reflective" one because it assumes that "consciousness" can take the place of collective praxis as the agency of social change. Social relations cannot be "de-reified" in consciousness while classes continue to exist. The socialization of consciousness can only assume a class basis under capitalism and every representation of social relations and the relationship of humanity to nature until then is necessarily class divided, supporting either bourgeois or proletarian interests. For a materialist cultural theory to advance the cause of social equality it must base itself on a labor theory of culture or risk reifying materiality and falling into a merely pragmatic understanding of culture that works within the dominant terms that construct the naturalness of the cultural real rather than challenge these terms with the root knowledge of class.

### 3.0 LABOR AND THE POETICS OF CAPITAL

#### 3.1 IMMATERIAL APOLOGETICS

The discourse theory of canonical poststructuralism is today being challenged by a materialist cultural theory that questions the exclusive focus on textuality as not very different from the humanist idealization of culture as free of the social. Contemporary cultural studies has practically become obsessed with what it calls the "economic" in ways that challenge the textual materialism of the past. In new books such as Cultural Studies in Question and Marxism and Modernity and Postcolonial Studies, for example, there is an increasing call for cultural studies to return to its "roots" in discussions of capitalism and inequality. Also significant, is Lawrence Grossberg, editor of the influential journal Cultural Studies, writing that having replaced a class politics with a semiotic politics, cultural studies "continues to leave the relationship between culture and capital unexamined" ("Speculations" 16). In contrast to his own years of denying any causal relationship between capitalism (base) and culture (superstructure) (e.g., Bringing it all Back Home: Essays on Cultural Studies), Grossberg now declares the necessity of "return[ing] to questions of economics" and "the exploitation of... labor" if cultural studies is going to be able to understand, respond to, and transform "the changing configurations of... systems of inequality" ("Speculations" 16).

The recent turn to economics in contemporary cultural theory contests the reification of the social in terms of discourse. This economic turn has, however, both a rhetorical mode, represented above by writers such as Grossberg who yet continue to assert that "economics is itself a discourse" ("Speculations" 17), and a more serious mode which returns to Marxist concepts of the social totality in order to investigate the materiality of culture, in the texts of neo-marxist writers such as Fredric Jameson and Antonio Negri for example. In the neo-marxist cultural theory, however, social relations are dematerialized as symbolic production. Relying on Althusser's revision of base/superstructure, Negri and Jameson argue that the root of the contemporary social formation is "immaterial" and unavailable as a basis for transformative materialist critique because it has become primarily symbolic. In order to articulate the classical Marxist labor theory of culture today it is therefore necessary to look at the contemporary cultural theories that put themselves forward as materialist critiques of the dominant cultural theory of immanence.

In "The Specter's Smile" for example, Negri uses Derrida's Specters of Marx to show how the spectral materialism put forward there remains immersed in "the phenomenology of capitalist production" (7) in a way that "corresponds with common experience" (9) and that fails to describe its "ontological" basis, the "new productive reality" (9) of the laboring subject whose experience it is. As Derrida ignores the fact that "human labor, both mental and manual, is increasingly implicated in exploitation" (11) he is thus "a prisoner of the ontology he critiques" (13). Negri thus explicitly re-privileges ontology in ways that Derrida rejected as classically idealist (Platonism) on the grounds that the hierarchy between writing and reality authorized by this binary subordinates conceptuality to the general cultural economy. But, Derrida's textualism itself reinscribes the dominant ideology in which culture is understood immanently and fails to

investigate the conflict in ontology which reflects antagonistic class interests. Ontology has always maintained that being determines consciousness, but has disagreed about the organization of being: whether being is a static and inert category as in mechanical materialist theories of nature (such as Eagleton's) or whether it is historical and changes according to knowable laws as in dialectical materialism. Negri's position in so far as according to him labor has become primarily "immaterial" and "directly produces social relationships and forms of life" (Multitude 110) must be seen as a speculative ontology that posits "'society as the subject'" (Marx and Engels, The German Ideology, 59) and regards the "interrelated individuals... as a single individual, which accomplishes the mystery of generating itself" (59). Negri maintains that labor is the central organizing factor of the contemporary, but his concept of labor is so general ("creative capacities" Multitude 105) that it effectively becomes a trope of experience, which is what he means by ontology ("a common experience," "Specter's Smile" 9).

While prioritizing concepts central to a materialist theory of culture such as labor, production, exploitation, and revolution, Negri evacuates them of their historical and material basis in the capitalist mode of production, however, by maintaining that in the contemporary "the law of value no longer works in describing the entire process of capital" (10). Thus, while, on the one hand, exploitation is global, according to Negri—and explains the "spectral" logic of the discursivist cultural theory, which Derrida claims exceeds all (mimeto)logics, as in fact miming the logic of capital—on the other hand exploitation no longer concerns the extraction of surplus-value from labor, as Marx explained the source of profit. "Accumulation nowadays," Negri claims, consists of "fixing hierarchal and expropriative dividing lines" in the "acquisition of knowledge and social activity taking place within... communicative horizons" (11) such as "the Internet" (11). Negri thus displaces a theory of material exploitation with an analytics of cultural

domination on the grounds that labor has become "immaterial" and primarily cultural. In his bestseller Empire, he occults any structure of necessity behind labor by treating labor as a trope of desire, describing it as "a horizon of activities, resistances, wills, and desires that refuse the hegemonic order, propose lines of flight and forge alternative constitutive itineraries" (48). While claiming that "immaterial labor" constitutes a voluntary "refusal" of the hegemonic order Negri also makes it a "figure of labor that exerts hegemony" over all other kinds of labor (Multitude 107) such that service work—"labor that produces or manipulates affects" (108)—is made the model of labor globally. In this way Negri's labor theory reifies global labor by reducing it to the form of labor located in the West which no longer produces anything at a time when productive labor (i.e., profitable investment) has shifted elsewhere (China, India, etc.). His theory takes the lack of investment in labor in the West as a voluntary refusal of labor that liberates it from the rule of capital and because this non-productive labor is the global model of labor for Negri labor is understood in a purely subjective way such that "even when labor is subjugated by capital it always necessarily maintains its own autonomy" (Multitude 54).

For all his criticism of Derridean spectrality, Negri basically agrees that "there's no longer an outside" ("Specter's Smile" 9) to capitalism and "no longer a measuring gauge of value" (8) upon which to base an emancipatory critique of it. His criticisms of the spectral are thus themselves spectral. They are no more than semantic differences in a merely cultural war, what he calls "the new class wars that define [the] exploitation of labor in a world of immateriality and spectral production" (11). "New class wars" indicates that the base of the social is not up for contestation, which is why Negri displaces social theory of the contemporary for "ontology"—"*a common experience of spectrality as clear as the sun*" (9) which takes as a given that Marxism is "out of date" (10) because "no reasonable person could... affirm exploitation's identical form then

and now" (10). Negri argues for implicating Derrida's spectral concepts in "productive reality" only to end up appealing to the self-evidence of experience as the limit text of the "reasonable." But "reason" is not independent of class interest. To assert as "unreasonable" the materialist theory of exploitation as based on the expropriation of surplus-labor in production on the grounds that production is an "affective" experience in which "despite the myriad mechanisms of hierarchy and subordination" (Multitude 129) yet makes workers feel "extraordinarily wealthy" (131) in spirit is to take the side of the owners who find "reasonable" whatever maintains and justifies the source of their wealth. To claim that "common experience" provides the truth of the contemporary and the non-truth of the law of value is simply to take the continued existence of capitalism for granted and turn it from something historical to something eternal. It is also to dissolve the necessity of theory in general and put thick description in its place as in a rather traditional empiricism. But as Marx argues "all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided" (Capital Vol. III, 804). "Immaterial labor" is a cultural theory that has emerged to reconcile the contradiction between social production and private appropriation that argues that class society need not be transformed because labor already has the power to create reality and the given reality has already superseded exploitation. Such a theory is necessary to explain away the need for revolution at a time of growing social inequality on a world scale.

Negri's understanding of the contemporary is purely cultural despite the language of Marxism he uses because he ignores the material measure of value—profit. Negri has of course become a celebrated figure in the culture industry (by the New York Times and the Charlie Rose show, for example) for his bestseller Empire, which argues that "imperialism is over" (xiv) and has been replaced by "empire," a social formation that lies beyond "the fiction of any measure of

the working day" (402). But, if the work day is a fiction then there would be no more profit. Profit is the measure of the working day Negri claims no longer exists. Profit comes from surplus-labor, that labor expended in the work day whose value is over and above the value of the necessary labor expended in order to maintain the existence of the laborer, as Marx explains ("The Working Day" Book I, Chap. 10, Capital Vol. I, 340-416). Profit can only be materially explained as coming from the basically unequal relations of production in capitalism. It is capitalism that has monopolized the productive forces of society into a few hands and dispossessed the many of everything but their labor power to sell. Without Marx's labor theory of value there can be no basic contestation of capitalism, only moral condemnation of its more oppressive effects that keeps exploitation intact by immunizing it from materialist critique. Thus, in place of an understanding of labor as an historical structure of conflicts that reveals "the real movement that abolishes the present state of things" (German Ideology 57) and that thus inaugurates the necessity of communism for Marx and Engels, Negri gives a "parable of change" ("The Specter's Smile" 12) which finds communism ready-made in "the rupture with memory" (14) demanded by the "mobile and flexible reality" of (12) spectral production and says good-bye to the working class as the agent of history.

In place of a materialist theory of social change Negri tells stories about the potential for spontaneous rebellion due to newer technologies. What defines contemporary exploitation now, according to Negri, is not labor in the classical Marxist sense, but the "body" ("The Specter's Smile" 13): the "experience" of high-tech work today. Negri claims that contemporary capitalism has brought into being "a common experience of spectrality" (9) in the lives of "a laboring subject amassed in intellectuality and cooperative force" (12). The "new social force of mass intellectuality" (15), he claims, produces a subject at home in the body, who therefore

"refuses transcendence and chooses to live a worldly, laic [secular] and rational ascesis [self-discipline] that will lead him towards a constitutive hermeneutics and an ethics of liberation" (11-2), or, the "new theory of revolution" (14) that Negri calls "communism" (14). Negri's communism, however, has nothing material to say against exploitation because it is a "rupture with memory" (14). On the one hand, exploitation is real, according to Negri, because

we have communication and the wealth that accumulates therein; on the other, we have the solitude, the misery, the sadness, the exodus and the new class wars that define this exploitation of labor in a world of immateriality and spectral production. (11)

But in these terms, emotions give the truth of the world (not the social relations of production) and exploitation is made a matter of moral sentiments (not labor). Morality, however, is not autonomous of class but an expression of class. The morality of the ruling class is an eclectic blend of "timeless" axioms that provide an imaginary compensation for inequality and pragmatic codes that go along to get along in the system while deflecting attention from the underlying social relations. Negri's opposition to inequality is not based on a material foundation that will lead to changing it but a sentimental one that distracts attention from what is to be done to change it. His theory of change is basically religious: to "re-value" poverty ("the poor are not merely victims but also powerful agents," Multitude 129). But poverty is not caused by moral ostracism. Its cause is profit. Actually, it is because Negri's cultural theory is so invested in making hi-tech service work in the West the model of all labor because it is "creative" that his texts are so caught up in trying to "re-value" the labor of the other.

But even in such moral terms exploitation is a thing of the past for Negri because the "common experience" of the contemporary that "deem[s] the Marxist ontology out of date" ("The Specter's Smile" 10) is that "no longer are capitalist relations of production exercised solely on a subject characterized through misery" (12). The "common experience" of the contemporary that Negri speaks for is that of a post-exploitative "dual state of mind" (11) which "lead[s] the mind to grasp the very nature of Desire, beyond the (past) determinations of existence or the (present) external dialectic of sadness and joy" (11). "Passion" thus figures in his imaginary as "destructive of the world of capital and constructive of freedom" (15) more so than historical materialist theory that uncovers the unmet needs of the majority and brings it to bear upon the ideological. Through the trope of "immaterial" and "affective" labor as constitutive of the contemporary real, Negri first displaces concepts that explain the contemporary in terms of conflicts over the ratio of exploitation demanded by the work day with sentimental categories, and then, in a second move, injects into this emotional plenitude a voluntarist rebelliousness that morally transcends both the affirmation (joy) and negation (sadness) of the existing in the "constituent spirit of the ontological violence of transformation" (15). Again, as in idealist theories, it is Spirit (passion) that moves the world, not labor.

For a more materialist cultural theory of the contemporary one has to turn to the writings of Fredric Jameson to understand how the utopian "passion" of a cultural transcendence of labor relations is specifically tied to the capitalist mode of production. This is because central to Jameson's writings is Marx's concept of "commodity fetishism," which he understands primarily through Lukács' theory of "reification"—the material process of production whereby social relations are depersonalized and seen as relations between things and ideas due to the dominance of exchange-value (production for profit). In the Grundrisse Marx theorized that the technical

and naturalistic ways of discussing labor in classical political economy was a symptom of the real practical indifference toward individual labors in capitalism that reflects the concrete social whole in an ideological way (104). Following Marx, Jameson argues that any conception of the autonomous separation of culture from the economic is "a symptom and a reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life" (20) due to the "universal commodification of labor power" (Political Unconscious 66):

Such a distinction reconfirms that structural, experiential, and conceptual gap between the public and the private, between the social and the psychological, or the political and the poetic, between history or society and the "individual," which—the tendential law of social life under capitalism—maims our existence as individual subjects and paralyzes our thinking about time and change just as surely as it alienates us from our speech itself.. To imagine that, sheltered from the omnipresence of history and the implacable influence of the social, there already exists a realm of freedom... is only to strengthen the grip of Necessity over all such blind zones in which the individual seeks refuge, in pursuit of a purely individual, a merely psychological, project of salvation. (20)

Culture, in short, is ideological, as "the production of aesthetic or narrative form" has "the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (79) thus "strengthening the grip of Necessity" in culture. It is in "detecting the traces of this uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history" (20) that Jameson understands the goal of a materialist cultural theory as participating in labor, "the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of

Necessity" (19), citing Marx. Thus, Jameson is in a position to implicate Negri's story of communism as a new "passion" brought about by technical changes impacting the working body as itself a commodification of the senses necessitated by private property, in a manner similar to the way he reads Conrad's "impressionistic" style, for example, which attempts "to rewrite in terms of the aesthetic, of sense perception... a reality you prefer not to conceptualize" (215). In these terms, Jameson's use of commodity fetishism would seem to show that far from being a site of resistance to capital, the "senses" are an extension of exploitative relations: the site of ideology. This is significant because he thus establishes the need to read culture and cultural experience (the "senses") not in their own terms, but in relation to their outside, namely the commodity relations that both necessitate such experiences and provide "ready-made" interpretations that justify existing unequal relations. He shows, in short, that the senses, experience, passion, etc. are not explainable on their own terms (since they are produced under certain circumstances) but require explanation (concepts).

Jameson, however, (both in his early and later work) seems to simultaneously undermine this very conclusion in ultimately arguing against the ability to conceptualize economic relations and in suggesting that culture (contrary to what he has already critiqued) should be seen as not only "semi-autonomous" from class relations but as an (immediate) site of libidinal resistance to class inequality. For instance, he ultimately rejects a materialist theory of ideology which argues that "superstructural phenomena, are mere reflexes, epiphenomenal projections of infrastructural realities" (Political Unconscious 42), on the grounds that "history... is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization" (35). There is, in other words, no outside to ideology, according to Jameson. By getting rid of the outside Jameson is here duplicating culturalism. The effects of this capitulation

to culturalism on Jameson's social theory has been devastating. In his "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," for instance, he argues for a theory of the "world capitalist system" (68) as constituted by "two cultural logics" (85) that "overdetermine each other" (73) that displaces a political economic understanding of the global inequality between imperialist countries and their colonies with the banality that a "different ratio of the political to the personal" (69) is evident and the "controlling forces are... difficult to represent" (81). On these terms "psychology, or more specifically, libidinal investment, is to be read in primarily political and social terms" (72) in countries which have suffered the experience of colonialism and imperialism whose culture as a result "must be situational and materialist despite itself" (85) such that the personal is political. At the same time, the culture of imperialist nations is considered "bereft of any possibility of grasping the social totality" (85) and "sexuality and politics might be in homology to each other" (73) such that the personal functions as the political. Jameson's discourse on "national allegory" is itself a class allegory in which class is renarrated as "culture" and instead of an economically integrated world internally divided between exploiters and exploited the world is composed of "two cultural logics" that program radically different subjectivities that remain essentially alien to each other and from which there can only be extracted a pious wish that they may be united someday in a "future utopia" of "collective cooperation" (81) while in the meantime it serves to remind the Western consumers of the third-world text of the "optional nature" (79) of culture and identity. By shifting attention from the basic conditions that establish the relation between imperialist and imperialized nations onto superstructural features of culture and subjectivity Jameson aestheticizes the political and underwrites the commodification of the third-world, which is what actually drives imperialism.

For a materialist cultural studies the other of ideology is not some radical identity elsewhere, but the positive knowledge (science) of the real motive forces compelling individuals as they (re)produce their material life under specific historical circumstances. On Jameson's culturalist terms it is impossible to give a critique of ideology as a false-consciousness of the economic and produce an awareness of the necessity for social change. Because Jameson abandons the critique of ideology he therefore speculates that beyond the historical specification of ideology as global commodification that acts as a "containment" of the awareness of the historicity of labor in capitalism, culture also provides the individual with a therapeutic "compensation" for a thoroughly commodified social life in the form of the "libidinal transformation" (Political Unconscious 237) of the senses:

We stressed the semi-autonomy of the fragmented senses, the new autonomy and intrinsic logic of their henceforth abstract objects such as color and pure sound; but it is precisely this new semi-autonomy and the presence of these waste products of capitalist rationalization that opens up a life space in which the opposite and the negation of such rationalization can be, at least imaginatively, experienced. The increasing abstraction of visual art thus proves not only to express the abstraction of daily life and to presuppose fragmentation and reification; it also constitutes a Utopian compensation for everything lost in the process of the development of capitalism—the place of quality in an increasingly quantified world, the place of the archaic and of feeling amid the desacralization of the market system, the place of sheer color and intensity within the grayness of measurable extension and geometrical abstraction. The perceptual is in this sense a

historically new experience, which has no equivalent in older kinds of social life. (236-7)

What Jameson is calling a utopian compensation for alienation in the experiential immediacy of the senses is really a sign of his own capitulation to the "prior textualization" of the economic imposed by the culture industry that makes imperative the folding of culture in on itself so as to bolster consumption and marginalize an awareness of culture as an arena of class struggle. In his later writings, such as Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Jameson goes further in arguing that "the infrastructural... is necessarily itself already cultural" (xv), as postmodern theory claims, by arguing that contemporary "experience" itself can be considered a "supreme act of nomination" which "wields a material impact and, like lightning striking from the superstructure back to the base, fuses its unlikely materials" (xiii) into new hybrid shapes that, therefore, cannot be explained in terms of the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production. Jameson, to put this differently, substitutes the immediacy of a compensatory sensuality (culture) for critique (knowledge of the social totality), which, as Marx argues, is necessary to intervene in the workings of ideology from the outside so to end the regime of necessity imposed by capital.

As Jameson himself realizes, the cultural production of the senses has an economic function through which men and women "are culturally and psychologically retrained for life in the market system" (Political Unconscious 236). Culture, under capitalism, is, in short, "mere training to act as a machine" (Marx and Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party, 501). There is nothing more impersonal and machine-like than the idea of culture as a privately "sensual" and "experiential" matter free of the logic of capital in the world of global production and the massive unmet need produced by capital. Furthermore, the "place" where Jameson locates

culture, at the site of consumption and in the immediacy of the senses, actually contradicts his own understanding of the prior textualization, or, cultural work, behind the sense-perception of the world.

When one implicates this cultural work in the wider division of labor it becomes possible to see that the senses are not the site of an immediacy but the site of class conflict in which immediacy serves as an ideological mystification of the historical production of the senses. Take the work of Matthew Barney for example, which is read as a new way of seeing art in the new millennium; the New York Times has labeled Barney "the most important American artist of his generation" and celebrated his work as heralding a "new freedom" for "art in the new century" (Kimmelman). The reason for such praise is that his work is taken to be beyond ideology, or, as the Times critic puts it, it is "Free To Play and Be Gooley." Barney's art is taken to be beyond ideology in the mainstream commentary because of its multi-media complexity, from Vaseline and self-lubricating plastic to tapioca, precious metals, sculpture, drawing, and film, and its cross-cultural references to Masonry, Irish nationalism, pop culture, and high art for example, and the way such complexity of means disrupts its narrative coherence which seems to eschew any decided content or closure (The Cremaster Cycle is about the failure of gender differentiation and identity). The Cremaster Cycle represents a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) that installs a new modality of seeing that exemplifies Jameson's diagnosis of the contemporary as a crisis of metanarrative brought about by global commodification and its ceaseless production of sensual compensations.

The main trope of Barney's work is "restraint" and it is graphically represented by the barred lozenge figure that recurs again and again in his work and that stands in for the work as a whole as a kind of marketing logo. Barney's understanding of artistic production, and by

implication production in general, is that it is always the product of restraint whether of a self-imposed discipline (such as the early "drawing restraint" harnesses and strategies) or the social restraint of conventions and rituals, whose performances form such a major part of the films (especially Drawing Restraint 9, 2006). "Restraint" is what Foucault called "discipline": the organization of bodies in practices producing a proliferation of counter-practices and narrative inversions. The "way of seeing" produced by Barney's work, however, is not the product of restraint, whether understood as immanent and local as in Foucault or, as in Jameson, the end result of the rationalization of the market. Rather, "restraint" is a mode of sense-making with which to contain awareness of the social production of culture and the senses. In other words, the need for a "total work of art" and the multi-plex way of seeing it inaugurates in The Cremaster Cycle is not necessitated by the technology of production fetishized in Barney's films, nor is it the necessary product of the destruction of metanarratives of the contemporary caused by the triumph of the market over social life. These are superstructural effects that are treated as causes on the grounds that material causal knowledge is finally impossible now that "knowledge" has displaced labor as the source of value. In actuality, "restraint" is necessitated by the absolute dependence of labor on capital in the contemporary which has normalized the self-reproduction of the worker. It teaches the workers to see the neoliberal privatization of social resources as the precondition for "self-fashioning" (acquiring an identity) and thus normalizes the flexibility (precariousness) of the current labor market.

As Marx predicted (in the "Appendix" to Capital Volume I, "The Results of the Immediate Process of Production"), the universalization of the market has led to the normalization of relative surplus value, through such techniques as speed-ups and micro-taylorization, over absolute surplus value, cutting wages directly or increasing working hours.

This state of affairs represents the "real subsumption" of labor under capitalism in which capital takes on the costs of its own augmentation through systematic innovations, rather than as in the past when labor was only "formally" subsumed under capital through the mechanism of the market and the costs of labor were subsidized through extra-economic means (such as the welfare state). In the "global factory" the worker is totally dependent on the market and the capitalist has receded from the production process and turned it over, highly rationalized and de-skilled, to the workers who now organize themselves to be more productive at the risk of losing their livelihoods completely. It is the emergence of the "global worker" who is both de-skilled and central to the relative production of surplus-value that necessitates a "global art" which places a premium on complexity and multi-linguality and a high tolerance of ambiguity and sensual immediacy such as Matthew Barney's. The modality of seeing culture as a multifarious practice of "restraint" (of a primary "gooey-ness") is to deny labor as the subject of history and normalize containment of such awareness under the guise of complexity and sheer pleasure.

Jameson did not have to go far to realize this point as it was the basis for Marx's critique of "sensuous certainty" as Feuerbach understood it. In his critique of Feuerbach's "sensuous certainty" Marx was concerned to emphasize how the new ways to perceive that emerge in the development of capitalism—"the secrets which are disclosed to the eye of the physicist and chemist" (German Ideology 46)—are the product of "industry and commerce" as "[e]ven this 'pure' natural science is provided with an aim, as with its material, only through trade and industry, through the sensuous activity of men" (46). It is in this sense that, as Marx says, "[t]he senses have therefore become directly in their practice *theoreticians*," and, "they relate themselves to the *thing* for the sake of the thing, but the thing itself is an *objective human* relation to itself and to man, and vice-versa" (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts 300).

Thus, if the senses are always a relation of men and women to each other and their development has reached the point where it becomes productive to experience objects in themselves, according to their essential natural properties like color and form as in modern science and art, to the point that the totality of human production itself is seen as an object (e.g., what Jameson calls a "narrative") free of labor, this is as much as to say that culture has become commodified and thus its "enjoyment and labor, production and consumption, devolve on different individuals" (Marx and Engels, German Ideology 51) and cannot act as an affective compensation for exploitation. Thus, to hold out a libidinal compensation in consumption in the pleasure of the senses is to conveniently forget that access to consumption is a class matter determined by one's place in production and to block further access to this consumption on the part of the exploited.

Jameson's deployment of culture as a libidinal compensation for exploitation deconceptualizes the senses and once again turns culture into a self-enclosed locality cut off from the world historicity of labor. A materialist reading of culture, conversely, brings to the fore the necessity of praxis in all cultural productions: "praxis" as what Marx theorized as the materiality of labor, a "'revolutionary'... practical-critical, activity" that in transforming the objective world transforms humanity ("Theses on Feuerbach" 143). For a materialist reading, culture "reflects" objective reality, especially the dialectical interaction between humanity and nature as well as between men and women themselves. The enclosing of culture in on itself that Jameson recognizes to be a product of capitalist rationalization and the alienation of the senses it brings about, besides being a symptom of the commodification of culture and an index of exploitation is also a precondition for the emancipation of culture from capital. The reification of culture from the labor relations of which it is always a part and the phantom objectivity it assumes in ideology represents the moment when culture ceases to be grasped in the mode of "tradition" or

"convention" and becomes the object of conscious activity. The commodification of culture coincides with the social production of culture. As the current battles over "intellectual copyright" show, the political economy of culture problematizes its privatization on the market as an article of personal consumption. Contemporary culture is the combined activity of workers around the world in ways that call into question the private norms of ownership demanded by capitalism. The dominant ideology of culture has fetishized the new forms of culture such as the Internet and the global anti-corporatism and contrasts them with what is considered a hierarchal "modernist" past ruled by a linear and analogical thinking obsessed with its own identity and reproduction. But there can be no freedom from oppression without awareness of the ongoing collectivity of labor at the root of culture and the need of its emancipation from capital.

The "senses," "emotions," "passions," are not "spontaneous"—they are the product of a history of labor in production ("the senses have... become directly in their practice *theoreticians*"). By positing "emotions" (passions, etc.) as independent of the history of labor Negri and Jameson block any investigation into the *praxical* production of the emotions in capitalism. In short, the "passions" etc. (which is a code word for "experience") is an effect which needs to be conceptually interrogated by investigating its conditions of production (through inquiry into the social relations of production, as I am arguing) not taken as a given (i.e. as a self-motivating "cause"). By valorizing the experiential and subjective, Negri and Jameson cut off the possibility of such a conceptual reading and reify the effects of capitalism thus limiting their theories to the terms set by the dominant culturalist ideology and its class politics. Culture as free of the history of production is a reified view of culture that corresponds to the needs of those who have had their material needs met from the labor of the other. The "place" of culture in the totality does not lie in the experiences of the "heart" (sensuality) but in

root knowledge (economics): "the all sided production of the whole earth" (Marx and Engels, German Ideology 59). It is only when the materiality of culture in labor relations is grasped that the "liberation of each single individual will be accomplished" (Marx and Engels 59). Jameson and Negri are participating in a more general "ethical turn" to validate the experience of workers in their celebrations of the compensatory value of culture in terms of experience. Against such a move it is necessary to return to Lenin's critique of "spontaneity" and "proletarian culture," of the "artificially restricted limits of '*literature for workers*'" promoted by "(bad) intellectuals [who] believe it is enough 'for workers' to be told a few things about factory conditions and to have repeated to them over and over what has long been known" (What Is To Be Done?). Against all local delimitations of culture and pleading on the part of "special interests" Lenin put forward the universality of culture and the necessity of grasping and completing the thoughts and actions of the past through "critique" thus advancing culture to its inevitable conclusion in the construction of a truly free society—communism (The Tasks of the Youth Leagues).

### 3.2 BARNEYWORLD

The retrospective exhibition of Matthew Barney's Cremaster Cycle at the Guggenheim museum in New York provides an important occasion to inquire into the ongoing debates over the contemporary "real". One reason for this is because of the work's basic commitment to reactivate metanarrative as the after-effect of conflicting binary forces and to explore how this return to the extra-discursive real challenges some of the basic assumptions of postmodernism, which argues that all the big issues that have divided masses, classes and nations in the past, such

as social inequality for instance, are essentially over and attention now needs to be shifted to the local and micro-political, the space of discursive ethics and care of the self ("little-narratives").

Formally moving against the postmodern, the Cremaster project as a whole is a meta-tropic elaboration of the Lacanian Real that gets figured in biological, psychological, hermeneutic, mythopoeic and sociological terms. As Žižek explains, the Lacanian Real is "the non-symbolizable traumatic kernel that finds expression... in the very distortions of reality, in the fantasized displacement of the 'actual'... in the guise of spectral apparitions" (Mapping 25-6). In other words, what is outside culture is "real" at the level of its effects in constituting and disrupting discourse, but cannot itself be positively and reliably known. I will argue that much discussion of The Cremaster Cycle has given undue importance to the biological tropes of the work by reading it exclusively in terms of cultural wars over sexual identity and misses its placement in the politics of the extra-discursive "real" as "non-symbolizable trauma." What focusing on the biological misses is the way in which cultural conventions like gender and sexuality are themselves shaped by historical material forces such as class which are also being engaged in The Cremaster Cycle and, more importantly, at a time when never before has the world been so polarized between excess wealth and unmet need as now.

At the same time, however, "class" is being deployed in The Cremaster Cycle in the idealist space of the Lacanian Real, which, as Žižek elaborates, insists on the "interpretation of social antagonism (class struggle) as Real not as (part of) objective social reality" (Mapping 25). This gesture to and displacement of class as Real is an act of bourgeois cynicism that gets figured in the academic left imaginary, especially in the writings of Žižek, as the height of the political on the assumption that class as inscribed in the social relations of production—the result

of the extraction of surplus-labor from propertyless wage-laborers—is no longer a reliable analytic in what are assumed to be new times.

My argument here that "class" is an explanatory concept of the contemporary that reveals the workings of bourgeois false consciousness will of course easily be dismissed as naïve on the grounds that it relies on an epistemological foundation that is not only subject to textual slippage and as such is unreliable as a guide to revolutionary truth, but also, as in post- and neo-marxist writings, because it presupposes a social basis whose time is past. The familiar objections to "class" as explanatory of the contemporary social totality because it is epistemologically unsound and/or an idea whose time has past are themselves, however, reified understandings of the conceptual detached from its material basis in bourgeois property relations; the structure of ownership of the means of production that has not basically changed and that yet determines for the majority that their needs are incapable of being met so that they labor to provide profit for a few. The important thing that needs to be critiqued in Barney's Cremaster Cycle is its return to and evacuation of class as a tropic performance in the time of global social inequality.

To repeat: The commentary surrounding Barney's work focuses on the politics of sexual identity as inscribed in culture. This is in part due to the fact that the word "cremaster" itself, in many ways the master trope of the cycle, is a biological term that refers to the muscular organ in the male that raises or lowers the testicles, whether because of fear and anxiety, or, for procreative purposes, for regulating the temperature of the sperm. In utero the cremaster muscle is also central to determining the sexual destiny of the fetus and therefore represents a primary determination of gender difference. On these terms, Barney is read as primarily engaged in a post-feminist queer art practice because of how his work both undermines gender difference while at the same time politicizing masculinity by revealing its cultural constructedness thus

pointing to the possibility of a "third," "hybrid" or cyber-sexed subject free of the normative gender ideologies of the past (Hodge). While focusing exclusively on the sexual politics of the work and how it subverts normative gender hierarchies appears radical in the left imaginary it in actuality reflects the interests of the entrepreneurial "middle class" who are deeply invested in making class contradictions into conflicts over cultural values to defend their precarious position in the global division of labor as skilled workers at a time of rising awareness as to the social costs of corporate dominance in the world.

The exhibition of the The Cremaster Cycle at the Guggenheim itself marks its importance beyond the culture wars that assume that people's values are more important than class inequality. Barney was not the first recipient of the Hugo Boss award and given open access to the Guggenheim with funding in the millions of dollars by Delta Airlines because these powerful institutions believe that people's values are more important than profits, after all. Rather, Barney's celebrity signals the need for institutionalizing and legitimating the end of the post-al dogma that maintains the world has entered a new order in which the conflicts and concepts of the past have lost their explanatory and transformative power and circulate as merely ghostly simulacra and vehicles of consumer desires and cultural values at a time of rising class inequality.

What the dominant cultural commentary of The Cremaster Cycle misses because of its exclusive focus on cultural values is what is centralized by the Guggenheim exhibit itself in Barney's performance of The Order which was staged in the museum: the return to such concepts as "totality", "class" and "class struggle" in Barney's work as well as the historical need to contain these concepts to the spectrality of the cultural as a zone free of the centrality of exploitation that grounds the ideology critique of capitalism and its knowledge industries. In

short, Barney does the ideological work of the "center" by reconciling in the imaginary the poles of class society so as to in effect make side-taking seem "extreme" and therefore discredited because it violates the norm of democracy as liberal pluralism which maintains the status quo. But, democracy is really the freedom to exploit labor power and it is this basic violence of capitalism that needs to be marked as extreme for a new society of equality.

A sign of the need to move beyond the merely cultural debates of postmodernism is how Barney is being framed in millenarian tones in the popular discourses as a "savior" of the dominant at a time of crisis: as The Village Voice put it, Barney is "absolutely American" because, "[e]ven though his art can be oppressive, fussy, grandiose, melodramatic, supermale, hollow, hokey, dogged, and daft, I'm smitten by it" (Saltz). Being "moved" by art despite knowing its ideological function in the context of social injustice is said to have saved the "art world... in crisis" (Saltz). This is of course the formula of cynicism which Zizek has stated as "they know very well what they are doing, yet they are doing it" ("Spectre" 8). What it reveals is a structure of assumptions, that Barney is re-activating, central to the dominant consumer consciousness that "saves" the people from thinking and having decided political judgments about art at a time when it is becoming impossible not to do so. It is this fundamental cynicism that makes his work "absolutely American."

The millenarian reading of Barney as savior of America at a time of ideological crisis is not only a journalistic convention as it is featured in the title of Nancy Spector's curatorial introduction to The Cremaster Cycle itself, put out by the Guggenheim: "Only the Perverse Fantasy Can Still Save Us." The "perverse fantasy" is the "hubris" showcased in Barney's work because of its commitment to exhibit "pre-symbolic" drives as post-ideological: i.e., because of its deep investment in symbolic innovations that disrupt normative conventions in the manner of

a merely formal avant-garde tradition, but that do so at a time when such a project cannot be taken literally, because of its being obviously marked as masculinist and authoritarian in the cultural politics of desire in consumer capitalism, and must therefore be seen as ironic.

Barney is seen as an ironic savior of the dominant in times of crisis not because, as the Voice critic thinks, "Like all great art, Barney's exists beyond language," and, therefore, saves us from thinking seriously about art. Neither is it because of Barney's "hubris" in asserting that his use of form "isn't overdetermined" (The Cremaster Cycle 7) by the ideological because it is multimedia, multicultural, transdisciplinary and refuses narrative closure. He is seen as a "savior," in short, not because his work maintains a commitment to the freedom of the aesthetic above and beyond the analytical and political, but, rather, because he makes it seem so at a time when it has become impossible not to see the ideological function of contemporary culture as either going along with or resisting the growing social inequality forming in the wake of global capitalism—hence the cynical and defensive tone of the critics who laud it "even though it is oppressive".

By containing the political to the cultural the dominant left imagines that parody is liberating because it undermines decided position taking and thus opens up a space for negotiations and local reforms ("radical democracy"). Far from being an emancipatory politics, however, the ludic as radical democracy is a steady ally of the dominant, which needs to contain critique to the cultural superstructure so as to normalize the contradictions of the economic base. What radical democracy and its reformist codes does is reduce binarity to the epistemological so to reveal the *differences within* every term and thereby occults the actual violence of the *difference between* exploiters and exploited. The most reliable guide to the ideological function

of Barney's work is how it, albeit in an ironic tone, yet legitimates the deeply conservative reading of art as "free" of class interest in the world divided between profit and need.

This contradiction of how pure and disinterested aesthetic form is at the same time the most ideologically invested and dogmatically defended gives to the cultural commentary of Barney's work a cynical tone ("even though it is oppressive... still..."; "only the perverse can save us") that mirrors the parodic quality of his work itself that is activated in the discourses of the academic left as the limit of the political now. What needs to be re-activated as the political, however, is what is to be done to end exploitation and build a new society where the needs of all can be met because the material preconditions of socialism have already been produced by capitalism and further deferrals of what is needed only feeds more the barbarism of its decay. It is in the gap between what needs to be done and what is being done in the left imaginary in the name of the radical and emancipatory that The Cremaster Cycle turns class into another ludic narrative for the pleasure of the bourgeoisie.

Thus, even as discussions of The Cremaster Cycle insist on its integrity as what Spector calls a "self-enclosed aesthetic system" and the Guggenheim exhibit itself (The Order), is a work about a work, a self-referential relay of the entire Cremaster project which consists of five films and numerous sculpture, drawings installations and books, this self-referentiality must be asserted with what Hegel called an "unhappy consciousness" that is divided in itself because it cannot reconcile the conflict between its knowledge of the "unchangeable" (the principled truth of class politics) and its practice as situated in the "changeable" ("things of this world," Hegel, 126), the contingency of everyday life in capitalism. Specifically, it cannot now reconcile the knowledge that any freedom in capitalism is merely formal as it serves to alibi the exploitation of labor. This is especially true now that contemporary art like Barney's is so expensive to produce

as to be capable of being funded only by corporations and to bear the marks of this complicity. It is an act of the highest cynicism for instance that the symbol of the Cremaster project itself—the barred lozenge figure that represents the cycle as a whole and signifies not only the impossibility of gender difference but of all conceptual binaries—functions like a corporate logo for the products of what the New York Times calls "Barneyworld," such as the "concert" t-shirts and iron on patches sold in the Guggenheim museum store and globally on the internet as souvenirs of the exhibition.

Barneyworld, in short, is *absolutely* American because it has transformed the museum, which is supposed to be an art space for producing oppositional knowledges that protect the public good from powerful special interests, into an annex of the market celebrating the power of capital.

Behind the celebration of Barney as what the New York Times critic calls "the most important American artist of his generation" and his claim that Barneyworld represents a "new freedom" for "art in the new century" (Kimmelman) is the commodification of art by monopoly capital. What is being marked as a savvy self-reflexivity in Barney's work ("hubris" etc.) and a new found freedom in contemporary art from the ideological past is in actuality a cynical awareness that art is enslaved by class in the contemporary and a thinly veiled attempt to alibi its corporate take-over as serving the social good.

The Order itself not only represents a summary presentation of the entire Cremaster Cycle in symbolic form, because in it Barney has turned the ramps of the museum into five stages of a mock Masonic ritual that mirror the entire cycle of films that make up the project as a whole, but it is also an allegory of the cycle that appears within the film Cremaster 3, which is the five part cycle's central work. This doubling is significant because it symbolically identifies

the Guggenheim with the Chrysler building whose construction provides the narrative backdrop to the film. This overlapping suggests the loss of the museum's autonomy from capital as well as the need for capital to have an ideological cover of its power.

In the narrative of Cremaster 3, despite its Masonic theology and its Oedipal overtones, Barney appears as a worker in struggle against the capitalist played by the artist Richard Serra. Although these figures have been to a certain extent "declassified" in the highly allegorical presentation staged in the Guggenheim, the fact that crowning the work is the barred lozenge figure which functions as the corporate logo of Barneyworld, its draping over the rotunda's glass ceiling implying a limit to the upward mobility enacted in the performance of The Order in the museum, seems to suggest an awareness that what one sees in the museum now is not a cultural enclave that protects the public good from vested interests that have grown too powerful, but rather the signaling of the impossibility of such protection because of the final commodification of the space of art and the end of social progress. An end of social progress because The Order provides a spectacle presentation of absolute corporate power above and beyond its internal contradictions as well as any external limit. This can be seen not only in the story line of the work because of how it resolves the struggle between the "boss-master" (Serra) and "worker-apprentice" (Barney) in the mutual destruction of both, but also in the mode of the narration itself because of how at the end of the work, at the top of the Guggenheim ramp, the viewer is ushered into a room of mourning in which the symbols of artistic freedom—the stylized manacles of the escape artist Harry Houdini played by Barney in Cremaster 5—lie entombed in a coffin of glass, a testimony to the trap that art has become because of its being tied to the failed libertarian ideology of individualism, the self-made subject whose loss the narrative of upward mobility The Order rehearses and, finally, mourns.

The story of failed mastery/progress is ironically mocked by the tone of its presentation which the catalogue refers to as "game show meets NFL or, perhaps, Let's Make A Deal meets American Gladiator" (The Order 4) because of the use of Barney's signature blue Astroturf and athletic padding (from Cremaster 1) as well as the presentation of the spectacle of Barney's climb to the top of the hundred foot spiral of the museum on the five massive video screens that hang suspended from the ceiling of its Rotunda as in a sports event. But, in another way, the narrative is pervaded by a crude biological literalism that dissimulates its politics in nature and proposes as a movement beyond the dismissive politics of ludic parody a counter-narrative of the Real as the impossibility of binarity that, by implication, maintains the ideology of the end of the historical materiality of power in the contemporary.

Barney's ascent in the Guggenheim space symbolizes the descent of the testicles that is mapped in The Cremaster Cycle and therefore, in the biological tropes of the cycle, narrates the story of gender differentiation: in the character of the Entered Apprentice, the Masonic surrogate of the worker from Cremaster 3, Barney wears the costume of a Scottish tribesman but colored in skin tones crisscrossed with the blue and red of veins and arteries symbolizing the Cremaster muscle itself. He enters the first level where he encounters some Rockettes in the costume of The Order of Rainbow Girls, a Masonic organization for women, who echo the Busby Berkeley synchronized dancers of Cremaster 1 that represent a state of sexual undifferentiation in the mythos of the cycle. On the next "degree" the Apprentice encounters two New York City hardcore bands (Agnostic Front and Murphy's Law) that symbolically represent the Law of the Father, which imposes systemic cultural violence on the subject so as to construct sexual difference for the purpose of regulating social reproduction. They thus refer back to Cremaster 2 which tells the story of Garry Gilmore who was executed by the State of Utah for murder and

who was so confused as to his own sexuality that he thought of his execution as a way to resolve it and become the "man" he was expected to be by Mormon law. Next the Apprentice confronts the sexual drive itself in the form of Aimee Mullins, the amputee tack star and fashion model who in the hybrid form of a cheetah inflicts a wound on the Apprentice and is killed by him so that he may become the fully adult male represented by Richard Serra in the character of the Master Mason at the next level, which in this way also incorporates the story of Cremaster 4 where the testicles finally descend by force because they are attached to two racing motorcycles symbolizing the biological drive. The mutual death of the Apprentice and the Master leads to the work of mourning in Cremaster 5 and the last exhibit room of The Order that tops the Guggenheim ramp, which documents the loss of the self that up to this point had been totally identified with a highly naturalized understanding of sexuality as biological destiny. In the mythopoeic imaginary of The Cremaster Cycle, mourning the loss of the male self as adult-father represents the ultimate impossibility of fixing sexual identity and thus the possibility of escaping its social normativity.

Such an understanding is of course itself marked by class privilege in so far as it posits individual escape from social norms as the limit of human freedom rather than collective transformation of the social itself for the good of all. In other words, within the sexual politics of the work is reflected the bourgeois ideology of the contemporary as being shaped by knowledge—the knowledge that with the breakup of the modern patriarchal family and its related codes gender must be seen as a cultural construct—rather than labor—the actuality that capitalism has jettisoned the family and its fixed gender norms because these institutions no longer adequately serve to reproduce labor relations and augment profit in the transnational high-tech economy.

The ideological effect of The Cremaster Cycle is more than a matter of identifying its position in ongoing debates about gender or agency. Such a reading fails to engage its basic commitment to a logic of "excess" that formally challenges normativity and the way such a commitment evacuates the multiple forms the project robs of their historicity and therefore of their conceptual value as tied to social relations as a whole—especially the logic of exploitation inscribed in the antagonism between capital and wage-labor. More important than any unproblematic statement it seems to make as commentary about contemporary social relations and the possibility of change or how it constructs decided knowledge as an arbitrary but imperative choice for the subject, The Cremaster Cycle seems to exceed the possibility of securing positive and reliable knowledge because of its being multimedia, multicultural, and transdisciplinary. More important because in the contemporary dominant imaginary "knowledge" has displaced "labor" as "the principle force of production" (Lyotard 5). In short, I am arguing that it is the conceptual hybridity of the work—its inscription of the social difference between the owners and workers as differences within ideas—that provides the necessary ideological work of capital in the contemporary because of how it indexes an historically necessary global consciousness—what Marx and Engels in The German Ideology theorized as an emergent "world historical communist consciousness" produced by capitalism itself. The ideological function of The Cremaster Cycle is to contain this emergent communist consciousness to the secondary by locating it in the matrix of culture at a moment in history when classical Marxist theory has never been more explanatory and, therefore, more of a global "material force" in transforming capitalism into socialism.

It is more because Barney mixes media by producing video, film, sculpture, drawing, performance, etc., places Vaseline next to precious metals, pop culture such as Busby Berkley,

hardcore bands, country and western alongside high culture like opera and the discourses of the arts and sciences, mixes the metaphors of the arts and sciences themselves by appropriating tropes from biology, mythology, theology, ideology, politics, psychoanalysis, philosophy, etc., hybridizes gender and sexuality, blurs the line between antagonistic social forces such as capital and labor, public and private, Irish republicanism and British imperialism, and deconstructs the personal and political as a matter of tropes, that has made him such steady ally of the dominant today and such a celebrated figure in the media. It is in this way that Barney's work provides the necessary consciousness skills now needed by big business to reproduce the high-tech labor force from which it realizes the most surplus-value. These workers need to be given complex knowledges to work with the globally integrated digitalized production systems of the global factory. At the same time the knowledge must be presented in such a way as to produce what Althusser called "good subjects," i.e., subjects who go along with what is good for capital and "spontaneously" resist knowledge of their collective exploitation.

It is not only the underlying tone of cynicism that pervades Barney's work because of its deep commitment to epistemic undecidability as resistance to cultural norms that makes it ideologically effective in disguising class inequality in the contemporary. What could be less effective than repeating an old avant-garde? Rather, its main effectivity lies in how Barney maintains the old story of culture as free of the economic while providing the viewer with an encounter with complexity that demands a global knowledge, even as the work argues against its possibility in the story it provides. In this way, The Cremaster Cycle serves the ruling class by jettisoning its outdated ideas. As Marx says

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society... Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones... And as in material, so also in intellectual production... The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature. (The Manifesto of the Communist Party 476)

Following Marx, I argue that The Cremaster Cycle provides a lesson in "global literacy" that has become necessary under transnational capitalism, which needs multicultural and high-tech workers to consent to their own exploitation as wage-laborers and secures this precondition of profit by giving them a false-consciousness of their position. The Cremaster Cycle produces this class effect by evacuating all conceptual binaries of their historical materiality by relaying them through a thick network of multiple significations that is framed as exceeding ideological closure but that is in actuality a socially necessary ensemble of consciousness skills in the global factory.

In the narrative of The Order staged in the Guggenheim contemporary class conflicts are re-narrated as personal obstacles in a complex and dramatic story of self-fashioning that finally fails to achieve the autonomy of identity and freedom of agency promised by an older bourgeois ideology. The ideological effect of its mode of presentation, however, is that when one enters Barneyworld the conflicts and contradictions of the past are discursively suspended so as to be

appreciated as an encyclopedic archive that the aesthetic ideology of the ruling class positions as the site of pure immediacy and pleasure above and beyond class exploitation and conflict. Barneyworld, in the voice of the New York Times, makes us "Free To Play and Be Gooey" and to cynically assert, as the Village Voice says, as proof of one's own absolute Americanism, that "Even though his art can be oppressive, fussy, grandiose, melodramatic, supermale, hollow, hokey, dogged, and daft" still—"I'm smitten by it." The point of a radical materialist cultural critique, however, is to resist the logic of the "smitten" by re-activating the conceptual, not as more ludic mediations and local negotiations, but as root knowledge of the social as exploitation—for social change.

## 4.0 CULTURAL THEORY NOW

### 4.1 CULTURAL STUDIES IN SEARCH OF A MARKET

Cultural studies has become exhausted. A mark of its exhaustion can be seen when Lawrence Grossberg asks, "How did cultural studies get so f\*\*\*\*\* boring?" (8) and takes the boredom as a sign that "cultural studies has failed" ("Does Cultural Studies Have a Future?" 8). It seems for a moment that Grossberg will open a productive and enabling inquiry in cultural studies in one of its premiere journals of which he is an editor by going beyond the self-evidency of boredom as a sign of the ineffectivity of cultural studies because it is not popular and arguing that cultural studies is "boring" because of its "culturalism" (24), which has "disembodied and disconnected [power] from the material relations of inequality and domination that are its anchor in everyday life" (12). Despite this passing insight, however, his way of engaging the "boring" is not to make cultural studies more materialist and read boredom as an ideological symptom rooted in the exploitative structure of daily life and to argue for cultural studies to engage with the causes of inequality, but in the manner of a crisis manager he reads boredom on its own terms and proposes that cultural studies needs to be made more appealing. On the assumption that cultural studies has become boring because of the "limited ambiguity of the concept of culture" (8) that gives a reductive view of culture as "ideology" (22) he reads the boredom, in other words, not as a political issue but as basically an aesthetic matter to be addressed by what he considers to be a

more exciting view of ideology as discourse. For Grossberg the energies of cultural studies will be revived not by recommitting itself to a materialist analytic of culture that brings to bear upon the haze of daily life the sobering reality of class inequality but by pluralizing the concept of ideology into a merely descriptive term for the "geographical differences amongst specific configurations of capitalism" (5). Leaving aside the fact that cultural studies has largely abandoned the concept of ideology as false consciousness of class and turned it into "thick description" of the surfaces of everyday life and has abandoned critique as a totalitarian imposition upon the pleasures of consumption, Grossberg's more ambiguous, and therefore presumably more exciting, concept of culture is itself a culturalist understanding that has been dominant since the early 70s. By pluralizing capitalism into different geographical localities Grossberg's "ambiguous" concept of culture does not escape the ideological but simply maintains the very culturalism he himself cannot help but acknowledge has led to the failure of cultural studies in the first place, because it disconnects power from the material relations of production from which inequality comes and renders the social as basically an aesthetic construct.

Despite his opposition to the reductiveness of the concept of culture as ideology (false consciousness) Grossberg has no problem with the reduction of culture to the aesthetic, which is to say ideological, terms of culturalist discourse. But, the aesthetic in his text clearly has a class function. On his "figural" understanding of the contemporary as different inscriptions of capitalism the assumption is that "culture continues to be dominant in the current conjuncture" (17) because "financial capital... investment is more important than labor as a source of wealth" (15). It seems that Grossberg's passing observation that cultural studies has failed because of its culturalism is simply a way to suggest as he is aware of the problem he would never do it himself even as he performs a reification of capital such that its material basis is dematerialized as

geographical configurations of (dis)investment and capital itself figures as the source of wealth and the motor of change. It is, finally, for class reasons that culture is depoliticized in Grossberg's discourse as "not in the last instance about ideology" (22) and given an aesthetic value by being made to seem more ambiguous. In his cultural theory, wealth is no longer produced in the "social metabolism" (Marx) between labor and nature, but is a matter of individual choices in the market, which is to say the social is an effect of mind. By making capitalism a superstructural matter of the local patterns of investment which follow what are for him the ambiguous movements of knowledge rather than the global ratio of exploitation inscribed in wage labor, which demands a critique of the surface appearances of capitalism, Grossberg wants to further the ambiguity of culture in the "hope" that this will liberate our minds to "imagine new futures and new strategies for realizing them" (5). For all his opposition to the concept of culture as ideology his argument turns out to be precisely one in which it is expected that culture must serve market imperatives, which in his text means that culture must be made to seem ambiguous in order to further the wealth creating activities of financial speculation. And yet his concept of culture fails to examine the material basis of capital and wage-labor relations in its pan-cultural understanding of capitalism as market configurations even as it complains about the lack of an adequate theory of materiality in contemporary cultural theory and the political crisis this entails for cultural studies.

Grossberg's understanding of "the material relations of inequality" (12) is itself a culturalist understanding of inequality that acts as more of an ethical acknowledgement to manage the crisis of cultural studies rather than an actual explanation for why in the midst of the global accumulation of wealth evident today do the majority continue to not even be able to meet their needs and how these facts impact upon culture. According to him, what constitutes

inequality are the global patterns of investment through which wealth is generated by market choices. Inequality will therefore change, presumably, with a "reconfiguration" of investment into new global patterns. But such a reconfiguration does nothing to change the basic class relation inscribed in wage-labor, however, and in fact equates the achievement of equality with the equalization of the terms of exploitation as any new geographical configuration of capitalism depends upon the continued existence of the private appropriation of surplus-labor. The global normalization of capitalism is thus equated with the realization of equality in Grossberg's cultural theory. It is this apology for rather than opposition to capitalism that has actually placed cultural studies in crisis so it has come to be irrelevant for grasping the contemporary and made ideology critique come to seem boring to the dominant who want to move on to something new and exciting at a time of increasing inequality. What is new and exciting to them it turns out is another re-writing of capitalism that "disconnects power from the material relations of inequality and domination that are its anchor in everyday life" and maintains the global division of labor.

Grossberg text is part of a wider turn to deconstruction in the cultural theory of the late twentieth and beginning twenty-first century as an "ethical" response to the global inequality of transnational capitalism that renders the social a regime of signs and proposes surface reconfigurations in the attempt to suppress the need for a materialist cultural theory and root change. Deconstruction has become the primary means today whereby cultural studies spiritualizes materiality as a question of values and secures its place in the state apparatus of the academy which safeguards the "truth" that capitalism is here to stay as it co-opts any and all opposition. The deconstruction of the concept of culture as ideology that Grossberg performs which turns culture into a self-circling motor of wealth creation on the "hope" that this will empower the people and, if not end, then at least lessen inequality, is part of a more general turn

to deconstruction in cultural studies that abandons even the pretense of "resistance" — which has been the project of cultural theory since the Enlightenment — as any opposition to capitalism is now perceived to be aesthetically unappealing in the logic of the marketplace. Gus Hall, for instance, writing in a special issue of the online journal Culture Machine (No. 6, 2004) devoted to bringing cultural studies closer to deconstruction (Deconstruction is/in America: A New Sense of the Political), argues that the concept of culture as ideology in cultural studies "reduces cultural studies to being merely an expression of its particular social and historical circumstances" and dismisses it as an "uninteresting" and "boring" form of cultural studies that needs to be opposed by a more "unreadable" understanding of the contemporary in which "it cannot be decided in advance that capitalism and globalization are, in every singular instance and manifestation, unambiguously bad" (no online pagination). Hall, without a tinge of irony, shows no awareness of the fact that it is precisely the "ambiguous" and "unreadable" concept of culture in cultural studies today which separates it from consideration of class relations (exploitation) that has placed cultural studies in the service of capital, or, to use his own words, "reduced cultural studies to being merely an expression of its particular social and historical circumstances," and made it a structure of repetition which always concludes that capitalism is "open" to surface re-writings and re-vision. Rather than understanding cultural studies in materialist terms Hall tells a story about cultural studies in which movements within knowledge are determinate and capitalism is immunized from a base critique. In the introduction to the issue, for which Hall is an editor, the current state of cultural studies is thus described as "a general drift away from 'theory' and 'back to reality' and the political and the economic" that has "marginalized" deconstruction and therefore "excluded" what is "difficult," "provocative," and "vital" in theory. As the slash in the title of the issue indicates, the journal will not be committed

to examining the causes of what it calls the "post-theoretical' urgency" that has "taken place within cultural studies over the course of the 1990s and early 2000s," in the words of the introduction text, but to rendering the relation of cultural studies to deconstruction "undecidable" therefore reifying theory from its basis in contemporary class conflicts, as deconstruction has always done. What is being called "a new sense of the political" by the journal is thus not a situating of theory in the new global struggles — which of course has been the theoretical project of cultural studies all along and not just a recent post-theory "sense of urgency" that has overtaken it as Hall's revisionist account has it — but a return to a past of theory that was dominant when a lower level of social contradictions allowed theory to present itself as meditations on the aporias of language as free of the material conditions which shape all knowledge. In Hall's view returning to a past less politicized moment of theory will have the singular effect of re-vitalizing cultural studies in the current conjuncture, as "the deconstruction of identity essentialism" cannot be explained as caused by "global capitalism's production, hierarchization and exploitation of difference" and therefore, presumably, provides a basis for "agency." But clearly the deconstruction of identity is a euphemism for the bourgeois take over of cultural studies because Hall has no problem with thinking of deconstruction in terms of identity as when he claims it represents the "voice" of the dispossessed that has "reconceptualized the world from their perspective and asserted the power of the marginalized." The deconstruction of identity as grounded in the social relations of production and its reinscription as the voice of the marginalized is not only logically contradictory but is itself a class strategy to make culture appear unconnected to the economic roots of inequality which actually explain power relations and to instead claim that power is a matter of representation, or more commonly, the freedom of speech. The freedom of speech, however, is not a basis of

freedom — it simply regulates the terms of the outright theft of labor power. Freedom is always an economic matter that comes with the triumph over necessity. The equation of freedom with speech and representation is simply an ideological maneuver to make the freedom of capital appear universally good while deflecting attention from the roots of inequality.

Deconstruction functions as an "ethical materialism" in cultural studies today; an evasive oscillation between idealism and mechanical materialism. While it suggests that the dynamics of historical change is objective reality, it uses "ethics" to deal with the objective reality. The objective reality of capitalism for example is formally acknowledged as a "global" logic only to promote a cultural opportunism that represents change as a local and contingent outcome, a move that displaces the logic of class (which is a matter of necessity) with the logic of desire (the alea of "chance").<sup>10</sup> Such an ethical materialism is useful to contemporary cultural studies to contest the more obvious contradictions of capitalism only to more effectively mystify its underlying basis in exploitation; in doing so it makes its own reformism look like a radical alternative to capitalism and its contradictions and gains political credibility. What makes deconstruction so "vital" and "exciting" to those such as the editors of Culture Machine and Cultural Studies who see it as necessary for rescuing cultural studies from materialist critique, is that deconstruction — despite its deep conservatism and regardless of the fact that what is being represented as "new" has been a highly institutionalized discourse since the late seventies — provides them with an historical imaginary of a capitalism that has canceled its basic class

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<sup>10</sup> This cultural opportunism is so popular on the left that some represent materialism itself as an "oscillation". In Peter Hitchcock's Oscillating Wildly for example materialism names "a mode of analysis that isolates the cultural from the social, the superstructure from the base, and thus always arrives at *'a problem, whose solution is always a unique, ad-hoc intervention'*"(quoting Jameson, 9).

contradiction and an ethical justification which promises that in the "new" capitalism social inequality is a matter of discourse and will change through its rewritings.

In the discursivist cultural studies deconstruction represents a commitment to a view of the social as the space of differences without antagonism that changes with changes in representation.<sup>11</sup> Such a discursive view of culture relies on two primary assumptions:

- culture is material in itself as it is no longer tied to social relations and therefore cannot be conceptually grasped as a totality (logocentrism), and
- culture is ruled by the "free play" of the signifier, which is assumed to have its own immanent laws (*différance*) independent of history (as class struggle).

On these assumptions the discursivist cultural theory posits a break in history in which the present cannot be understood in terms of the ongoingness of exploitation as capitalism is

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<sup>11</sup> Deconstruction, at least for those who consider it to be a rigorously philosophical engagement with the canonical texts of Western culture, has been understood to consist of two closely related conceptual moves: the "dehierarchization" of all binaries as instances of the "logocentrism" of Western metaphysics and the "reinscription" of knowledge as a purely epistemological matter (Gasche). In these terms, "there is no outside text" (Derrida, Of Grammatology) to fix meanings, or, in other words, no extra-discursive real that would serve to anchor the "free play" of signification (*différance*) and secure positive and reliable knowledge. By making intelligibility a matter of the interior of language deconstruction reduces the social relations outside of language to the "extra-discursive" and thereby returns to an eighteenth century view of matter as that which is opaque to consciousness, rather than understand matter as in terms of its self-movement and development. In cultural theory more broadly the "extra-discursive" is made a language effect, as in the writings of Laclau and Mouffe who argue that "'Society' is not a valid object of discourse... there is no single principle fixing — and hence constituting — the whole field of differences" (Hegemony 111).

thought to have canceled its basic contradiction inscribed in wage-labor and become a regime of signs.<sup>12</sup>

This culturalist story about a "new" capitalism, which unlike the old capitalism based on exploitation is no longer exploitative but radically democratic because it is based on knowledge rather than labor, is perhaps nowhere more compellingly made, compelling that is if analytical subtlety and stylistic facility are any indication, than in the writings of J. Hillis Miller, who could be called a reconstructed deconstructionist for the way he updates Paul de Man's literary theory of ideology for cybercapitalism. Miller rescues de Man's theory of ideology — which because of how it turns ideology into a matter of the confusion of linguistics for natural reality that separates it from power had come to be seen as too close to fascism by its "aestheticization of the political" (Benjamin) — by updating it in the language of cyber-culture. Thus, according to Miller, "it is not so much language as such that generates the delusion of ideologies, but rather language as moulded by one or another medium" (Interview 129) that does so. This shift of register in ideology from the medium of language to media in general underwrites an historical imaginary in which an "epochal cultural displacement" (127) is said to have occurred from "the book age" to "the hypertext age" (127) that militates against "a diagnostic or constative response, that is, a description or critique of the present situation" (135) because the "new technologies... confound all... inside/outside divisions" (126) as they "exploit the strange propensity to dwell in fictional or phantasmal spaces that each human being has" (129). The deconstruction of the inside/outside is made an incontestable ontological reality in Miller's theory rather than being simply a discursive analytic to desediment foundational understandings

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<sup>12</sup> See Baudrillard, The Mirror of Production, and, for a critique of this position, Zavarzadeh, "Post-ality and the Dissimulations of Cyber-Capitalism."

of the real as in classical deconstruction and carries profound implications for grasping the contemporary. For instance, in these terms Miller argues that whereas "the economies of the self, the home, the workplace, the university, and the nation-state's politics... were traditionally ordered around the firm boundaries of an inside-outside dichotomy" and relied upon "the regime of representation or a certain kind of mimesis" between "extra-linguistic things as they are and the representation of those things in language" (132), the "new electronic space, the space of television, cinema, telephone, videos, fax, e-mail, hypertext, and the Internet" have insured that the "private space has been invaded and permeated by a vast simultaneous crowd of ghostly, verbal, aural, and visual images existing in cyberspace's simulacrum of presence" (126) such that ideology can no longer be considered a misrecognition of reality but rather must be seen as having the "power... to intervene in history and makes things happen" (129). It is the performative misappropriation of reality due to ideology on Miller's account of the contemporary that constitutes "that seemingly irresistible force for globalization, the World Wide Web" (128) that has abolished all "rigid boundaries... between one person and another, one class race, or gender and another" (132) and empowers all equally to "create the truths" we take to be "self-evident" (136). Therefore it follows, in Miller's historical imaginary, that the inequality we see in the world is a language effect that only continues to exist because of a too "rigid" and "polarizing" (mimetic) use of ideology that remains blind to its "unforeseeable" and "impossible" (performative) uses as "new forms of co-operative human praxis" (136) at a time when "the opposition between representation and reality... disappears" (133). According to Miller, technology has empowered the mind to create its own reality (ideology) above and beyond class relations and it is precisely the insistence on addressing the extra-linguistic causes of social inequality that, ironically, produces it by exempting individuals from participating in the

"coming community" (citing Agamben 136) thereby fostering conflicts and delaying the realization of "new forms of co-operative human praxis." Ending class inequality is equated with changing our ideas about class from being a material antagonism to being a kind of collective ritual.<sup>13</sup> Such a shift does nothing to end class inequality of course but simply reinscribes class inside culture where it appears all are equal in terms of representation. One would be hard pressed to find any fundamental difference between Miller's account of the contemporary and the one represented by a Bush aide who sees the world divided between a "reality based community" of people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality," on the one side, and "history's actors" on the other, who in touch with "the way the world really works" maintain that "we're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality" (Suskind). There is a rhetorical difference of course in that Miller seems to take it to heart that some will feel alienated and at a loss in the brave new age and so he presents it in a more utopian and subtle (less brutal?) language.

Deconstruction initially appeared at a time when capitalism was dismantling the welfare state on a world scale and its knowledge industries were primarily directed against Marxism as the materialist theory of history which combines the movement for democracy with the need to end the exploitation of wage-labor/capital relations (Duménil and Lévy). At that time deconstruction was primarily concerned to disrupt all binaries as instances of logocentrism, which was considered a totalitarian formation of knowledge that depended on a hierarchy of value in which reason was made sovereign at the expense of marginalizing the freedom of

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<sup>13</sup> Saying that ideology has the power to create the real is like when Pierre Bourdieu says that "class as it is observed is... the product of the theoretical effect of Marx's work" (Other Words 18) because "the symbolic order. . . is the condition of the functioning of the economic order" (Acts 82). Because Marxism is assumed to dominate the discussion of class on these terms the deconstruction of Marxist theory is made the precondition for ending inequality.

language and the aesthetic pleasures it offers, such as the joy of poetic discoveries and the novelties of rhetorical experimentation. With the global expropriation of socialist property on a world scale following the destruction of the Soviet Union and the consolidation of neoliberal global capitalism the intellectual commitments of deconstruction have changed. Now rather than providing a rigorous analytical display of the rhetorical foundations of Truth (with a capital T) by revealing them to be grounded on the differential and therefore undecidable slippages of signification, deconstruction is more concerned with consolidating its own epistemological speculations as an incontestable law immune to critique. Derrida's late texts thus display a less experimental play with language and are more concerned to legitimate an idealist tradition in philosophy from Kant to Heidegger and are deeply respectful of religious themes and concerns, thereby making deconstruction more and more at home in religion departments. In an interview released a few years before his death, for example, Derrida argues that God is the "absolute third" (A Taste for the Secret 71) that grounds all binaries, the proper name for that "unconditional" limit ("there has to be a limit," 64) that represents "the best shared thing in the world" in which "we have nothing in common" (58) now that "language is no longer a region" and has "won the totality of space" (80). God, according to Derrida, is the "common capital" (86) that "we draw on all the time... that makes it possible to understand one another" (86) above and beyond material differences such as "language, culture, place, home" or "communities, of property and ownership" (85). Leaving aside the allusion to Bourdieu's field theory of capital which turns capital into a symbolic rather than economic matter,<sup>14</sup> such a religious limit to knowing must be insisted on, according to Derrida, "for something to happen" (64) in the first place, "something non-thematizable, non-objectifiable, non-sharable" (57) that will force a

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<sup>14</sup> See my, "Pierre Bourdieu as New Global Intellectual for Capital."

"dislocation of the present, which renders the present non-contemporary to itself" (7) and insures that philosophy will not be limited to a "social welfare service" (7) but "would at best reinforce incoherence" (13). For Derrida deconstruction is just another name for "what happens" (82) in "a world in the process of changing, and thus of 'deconstructing'" (81) which rather than provide a transformative knowledge of the present in cultural theory puts in its place a story about knowledge as a performative game that imagines change comes about primarily through what are held to be mysterious symbolic processes that will come to insure individual liberty and, therefore, that nothing need ever change in a socially revolutionary way.

Derrida's A Taste for the Secret provides an occasion to examine the ethics of deconstruction and its values for cultural theory. This text is aligned with a collection of others, from those of the leftist sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to those of the conservative pundit David Brooks, in addressing class issues while turning class into a cult(ural) category and in place of providing a reliable knowledge of inequality grounded in the exploitation of wage-labor makes class into a mysterious congeniality of taste existing above "communities, of property and ownership" (85). Perhaps the most explicit deconstruction and reinscription of class as taste occurs in Derrida's text when in response to the question, "Why deconstruct?" he answers,

I must confess that I cannot answer the question: Why deconstruct?  
To what end deconstruct? If deconstruction is anything but an initiative of my own, or a method, or a technique, but what happens, the event one takes note of, then why go in that direction? Why make the situation worse? Should it be remedied? Should it be reconstructed? ... one has to know if one is *for* or *against*, if one is happy about it or not, and if one wishes to accentuate the process or slow it down. It is here that I have no answer. (82). I am

not the bearer of a universal reason on the basis of which I justify the fact of speaking of one thing rather than another... rather I recognize a sort of affinity... There is no justification but there is congeniality. (84)

Such statements of mystical belonging depend on a primary disavowal of the "interestedness" or "partisanship" of knowledge which is formed by its implication in the existing class structure in which the interests of the ruling class have the privilege to appear "universal" and "true," and thus a disinterested statement of just the way things are, while any opposition to the dominant arrangements must therefore appear as disingenuous and disrespectful of the norms of civilized discussion. When discussing deconstruction Derrida deploys such depoliticizing language by referring to deconstruction as an "event" inscribed in the real itself, rather than an analytical method or technique for example — deconstruction is just "what happens" (82) in "a world in the process of changing, and thus of 'deconstructing'" (81). Whereas deconstruction used to provide a rigorous analytics of figuration in a highly abstract language whose effect was to render the text opaque to the point of seeming material in itself thus disrupting easy access to the real which was seen as a mimetic illusion, more recently Derrida had appeared in films and given interviews with friends while assuming a more informal style in which the presuppositions of deconstruction are left unexamined and dogmatically assumed to be commensurate with the real as such on the claim that "language is no longer a region" and has "won the totality of space" (80). I realize that in the leftist imaginary of the dominant cultural studies it will be argued that Derrida is problematizing such depoliticizing language in A Taste for the Secret when he asserts that "desire" or "taste" is behind all knowledge, in a way similar to Nietzsche who argued that philosophy is a mode of life, or

biography, which like all texts establishes its coherence by marginalizing other modes of knowing. However, in actuality such a move gives desire a metaphysical primacy and turns existing social antagonisms which are rooted in the structure of property and demand material resolutions into cultural differences which can only be endlessly described and metaphorically elaborated making them seem effectively eternal and immutable and thus, it is "hoped," "resistant" to instrumental co-optation by the ruling order in the historical imaginary of cultural studies today. But if "congeniality" (affinities of taste) is what shapes the social, which is a way to say desire rather than need explains the existing, the critique of the existing rooted in the class analysis of capitalism is what deconstruction is most firmly set against and for necessary not merely cultural reasons: because such an analysis uncovers the basis of taste in the exploitation of labor as well and lays bare the cultural masquerade for what it is — a tired justification of privilege. It is in the defense of class privilege that the enemy of deconstruction and freedom itself in Derrida's discourse is thus the "totalitarianism of democracy" (59) or, in other words, "a public space that makes no room for the secret" which is that "I have a taste for... not-belonging" (59). Derrida's "not belonging" is of course a highly ironic statement given that deconstruction has been an institutionalized discourse in the West for the last twenty or so years that like all such discourses mystifies its material basis in class society and thereby serves a very decidedly conservative function to make the way things are appear as the way they should be.

Unlike a traditional ethics which bases itself on a normative view of reason that attempts to derive the good from the true, the ethics of deconstruction has abandoned the search for truth as a reliable foundation and understands reality as primarily an aesthetic matter. Its mode of addressing issues of inequality is basically to turn them into instances of linguistic confusion (mimesis) that spontaneously self-deconstruct in the spectral exchanges of cyber-culture ruled by

the (a)logic of desire. A deconstructive ethics grounds itself intellectually in the ambiguous status of truth in modern cultural theory which traces itself in the writings of Kant. In Kant's theory, for example, although the ethical is derived from the rational the basis of reason itself in empirical reality is held to be essentially unknowable (*noumenal*) so as to allow for the free play of imagination that is taken to be an expression of the essential autonomy of the subject. Kant argued that human dignity was compromised by the utilitarian philosophy of capitalism by taking individual self-interest as its basis. On Kant's view a utilitarian ethics limits the understanding of human nature and therefore curtails its freedom. By contrast, Kant seems to argue that as reality is essentially unknowable any ethical theory must therefore take account of the incomprehensible motivations of individuals who do not always act in rational ways according to their interests because of their basically imaginative relation to reality. Kant's "categorical imperative" which mandates that others be treated as ends in themselves rather than as means to an end is, among other things, an aesthetic opposition to utilitarian philosophy because it sees the individual as essentially a spiritual entity for whom materiality functions as a negative limitation of freedom. In a deconstructive ethics the supplemental relation between imagination and reason put forward in idealist philosophy since Kant, in which objective reality appears to depend on imaginative faculties, is thought to undermine the possibility of securing a universal good as it bars access to any positive and reliable knowledge of material reality (essence). Rather, following the reversal of causality in Nietzsche's writings (Will to Power 293-300), the real itself is made a matter of the figurations of truth inscribed in cultural practices thus rendering the materialist project of cultural theory an essentially undecidable and contingent matter. The figural is then understood as culturally material rather than strictly imaginative in a subjectively interior way as in classical idealist philosophy while at the same time materiality is

understood pragmatically as a creative tropological force with the power to reconfigure the real rather than simply the negation of human freedom. However, by delinking agency from the subject and making it immanent to the real itself (as textuality) a deconstructive ethics cannot advance the knowable good (social equality), which demands the recognition and understanding of the workings of material causality, and thereby does what religion has always done which is to reconcile the subject to getting along with what is rather than fighting to change it.

Ethics has always attempted to derive the good from an immanent rather than transcendental concept of truth as in religion, but like religion it has always opposed a materialist conception of truth (causality) and thus reinscribed the ideological function of religion to mystify the social relations. In materialist cultural theory on the contrary the good is seen as arising from the "social metabolism" (Marx) between labor and nature at a certain moment of development, which establishes what is true in practice in accordance with human need based on what the primary conditions make possible. Before there can be a culture of consent and resistance over the socially consequential meaning(s) that shape people's lives there first needs to be their material life itself. In materialist cultural theory culture is connected to daily life on the recognition that it has an economic root in labor: the "process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature" (Marx Capital 283). Thus in materialist cultural theory "freedom," "equality," "ideology," "ambiguity," "unreadability," "oscillation," ... all cultural values, are not simply derived from our wants nor are they an effect of the (de)limitations of knowledge or the cultural inscriptions of truth, but, rather, are terms whose values are always determined in relation to social production. The transcendental ethical, logical and aesthetic values of ancient societies about the good, truth and beauty which are held to be divine in origin are actually the effect of a hierarchal social order

based on a low level of technological mastery of nature which tended to remain static for long periods of time because of the limits of surplus wealth produced in the conditions of slavery, so that these values were seen as fixed for all and for all time and what was considered good was whatever reproduced the ruling order. With the expansion of the market into agricultural products and relations in Europe in the early modern period the social wealth is greatly increased and demands the resources of the entire world for its arena of activities as well as a "free worker" who is compelled to develop his "individuality" (Marx Capital Vol. 1, 1019-38) and thus truth is more and more seen as relative to human practices and the good comes to be seen as that which augments human creativity. As the contradictions of capitalism ripen and the rottenness of the system begins to reveal itself it can no longer be legitimated in universal terms of humanity and yet legitimated it must be in order to insure the reproduction of the class relations which are its basis. A deconstructive ethics is at home in late, transnational, cyber-capitalism because the value it places on contingency and undecidability allows for the displacements and contradictions of the system driven by profit motivated technical innovations and violent social interventions while reifying materiality as figuration and textuality, thus mystifying the social basis of these brutal and irrational social relations and promoting commodity fetishism (consumerism).

The assumption authorized by deconstruction that cyber-capitalism is constituted through a ruptural event that liberates cultural singularities from the logic of history such that the present can no longer be understood in terms of exploitation is in actuality only possible because of the general economy of history. The notion that culture (ideology) is material in itself, for example, is only explained concretely by investigating what Marx calls, in a draft text of a chapter of Capital Volume 1 ("The Results of the Immediate Process of Production"), the "formal

subsumption of labor under capital" — i.e., the alienation of wage labor in which the "social character of his labour confronts the worker as something not merely alien, but hostile and antagonistic, when it appears to him objectified and personified in capital" (1024-5). It is the expropriation of labor from the means of production in the form of private property that gives culture the appearance of autonomy and self-movement enshrined by deconstruction, rather than the singularity of cyber-capitalism as a "post-al" (post-Fordist, post-modern,... ) regime. Prior to capitalism culture primarily consisted in a religious worldview that justified inequality in terms of a divine order of things so as to normalize the division of labor in society in which the ruling class lived by appropriating the surplus product of the toiling class. By separating the worker from the means of production (the communal lands) and rationalizing the work process capitalism transformed labor from being bound to craft traditions in which work consisted primarily in the production of use-values to a socially abstract form undertaken for wages and productive of surplus-value. Separated from the immediate labor of the producers culture is no longer tied to the ideological reproduction of the given conditions of production and comes to seem autonomous. The commodification of labor makes culture serve as an economic compulsion on the worker to submit to being exploited because labor is no longer for the direct satisfaction of needs as in pre-capitalist cultures but rather for their expansion in a commodified culture. The change in labor from being primarily a use-value for meeting the worker's (and ruler's) immediate needs to becoming an exchange-value to be bought and sold on the market is due to a change in the mode of production that destroys the organic conception of culture of pre-modern societies. The cultural politics of the bourgeois revolution thus consisted in liberating culture from its ties to Church and State — culture was thus considered "free" when its ideas reflected the freedom of the market in Enlightenment theory. Furthermore, at a certain moment

of production when it becomes no longer feasible given the terms of competition to produce surplus-value absolutely by, for example, lengthening the working day or cutting wages directly, capital "revolutionizes" (Marx 1021) itself by assuming control of its own valorization and at that point realizes relative surplus-value by incrementally increasing the ratio of surplus to necessary labor through technological innovations. Marx calls this moment of the self-valorization of capital on its own terms the moment of the "real subsumption of labor under capital" and understands by this that capitalism has reached the point that it can no longer simply maintain the worker at a given level of subsistence but requires the worker to become a cultured person to engage with the more complex production process thereby diversifying her needs so as to increase the rate of profit. Marx discusses how "increasing diversity in modes of working" through technology favors the "development of *versatility among the workers*" (1026-7) and "allows for the worker's *individuality*" (1032) by providing "an incentive to develop his own labour power" (1032) by acquiring new needs, such as "newspapers" (1033). As a consequence, whereas before "men were... forced to labour because *they were slaves to others*; men are now forced to labour because they are *slaves of their own wants*" (Marx quoting Steurt 1028) as the worker's "existence and that of his family depends on his ability continuously to renew the sale of his labour power to the capitalist" (1031). At the moment of the real subsumption of labor by capital culture becomes an absolutely economic imperative as Marx explains (1037) — liberated from all fixed limitations it becomes an "end-in-itself" to augment the value of labor in the context of increased (and "much more violent," 1028) exploitation, more violent because the worker is no longer able to increase the value of her labor power through extra-economic means and is forced to prove her value solely in terms of the production process itself. The "constant development of *new forms of work*... corresponds to the diversification of use-values" and

through this process the "free worker" (1031) of capitalism "is impelled by his wants" and develops a "related feeling (sense) of *responsibility*" (1031) and "*learns to control himself, in contrast to the slave, who needs a master*" (1033). Culture, in short, is reified as a realm in itself by capitalism which requires it to perform a primarily economic function to commodify the worker's subjectivity in accordance with the needs of production rather than being simply a political tool to create consensus for the existing order, for example. The primary value of culture today is to foster diversity at the moment in capitalism when the socially necessary labor time needed to reproduce the relations of production has greatly decreased due to technical rationalization of the production process and the stimulation of needs — which function as the markers of cultural identity and the differences around which "culture wars" and "lifestyle" politics are formed — becomes an economic necessity because of the falling rate of profit produced by the increased economic efficiency in production. It is in these global conditions of labor that culture comes to seem the source of wealth and labor itself is naturalized as a transhistorical creative force that all equally possess, rather than what it is: "a system of slavery" in which "the wage worker has permission... to *live*, only in so far as he works for a certain time gratis for the capitalist," a system that only "becomes more severe in proportion as the social productive forces of labour develop" (Marx, Critique of the Gotha Program 535).

Difference, the (a)logic of desire that drives the slippages of signification and undermines all fixed reference, is not the "law" of the singular whose unpredictable vacillations disrupt history as culturalist discourses represent it, but itself *reflects* in an ideologically inverted way the logic of the general economy. Deconstruction (which is the logic of culturalism) is in actuality a reflection of the "diversification of labor" (1028-34) that, as Marx explains, is brought about by the rising organic composition of capital driven by the law of value (profit

accumulation). By making the singular the disruption of the historical and an excess of the social logic deconstruction places the singular beyond conceptuality and actually turns the singular into a stale generic ideology in support of what exists. The singular is always tied to the transformations of the totality and the space of freedom it promises will only become real on a new basis in which labor is not exploited and the social logic is no longer production for profit but "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!" (Marx, Critique of the Gotha Programme).

The cultural "resistance" within the circuits of exchange enshrined in cultural studies, which celebrates aesthetic values as a sign of spontaneity and the liberation from norms, is in actuality an index of the values of an older form of labor which have become unproductive to capital coming into conflict with the new terms of the more productive labor. Take for example the way that Melville's *Bartleby* has become a folk-hero on the Left because the form of his refusal ("I would prefer not to") is read as a singular act of rebellion to the ruling order because it refuses not only to obey a command but also to provide a reason for refusal, as the lack of positive knowledge is considered to be what is singular about cyber-capitalism as a regime of writing (knowledge work).<sup>15</sup> "*Bartleby*" has become a sign post in cultural theory for a new politics of a new capitalism in which wealth and inequality are made a matter of mind. Whether understood thematically as simply a refusal of work (Negri), or, figuratively as a new form of praxis (Zizek, Agamben), *Bartleby* functions for the transpatriotic Left as a lexography in which capitalism has outlived its basic contradiction inscribed in wage-labor and has become the only basis of human freedom. The celebration of cultural resistance in cultural studies is a form of romantic utopianism of a locally regulated capitalism, capitalism with a human face, that serves

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<sup>15</sup> Derrida, Negri, Zizek, Agamben, and Naomi Reed, to name just a few, give versions of this reading.

to disguise the needs of global capital in rationalizing labor through its production and development of the "free worker" who is economically compelled to cultivate her individuality or starve. Cultural resistance displaces the agency workers only possess collectively in production in material antagonism with capital and replaces it with a bourgeois model of agency in the superstructure where agency seems a matter of the purely voluntary acts of individuals while in actuality the individual is only capable of putting already appropriated surplus-value in motion (i.e., exchanging wages for articles of consumption), subsequent to submitting to her own exploitation.

Modern cultural theory since Kant has been concerned to liberate culture in terms of individual aesthetic sensibility from the "leveling" imperatives of the State on the one hand (hegemony) and the homogenous logic of the market on the other (commodification). Culture was seen as an elusive middle term that because of the ambiguity of reference embodied in judgments of taste disrupted totalitarian regimes of signification as such, especially in the writings of the Frankfurt School which saw in the defamiliarizing effects of aesthetic discourse a form of resistance to the "instrumental reason" of "consumer capitalism" (Judith Grant, "The Cultural Turn in Marxism"). In the cultural theory of the generation of '68 that followed from the Birmingham school of cultural studies the project of aesthetic resistance was located in more popular forms and consumption in general was understood as the locus of resistance that promised the space of freedom. Cultural studies understood "resistance" not only as a form of opposition to entrenched power but also as an attack on Marxism for its cultural "elitism," because its materialist critique of ideology is based on a positive knowledge of economic necessity lying outside the spontaneous experience of everyday life. At the same time cultural studies is indebted to western marxism for its argument that culture has become the arena of

struggle in "consumer capitalism" which is seen as depending for its reproduction on inculcating certain values, such as productivity, calculability and legibility. One of my arguments here is to distinguish an even earlier still materialist cultural studies in classical Marxism, which sees culture as an arena of class struggle and ideology critique as a means to wrest a realm of freedom from the grip of necessity, from a later cultural studies that understands capitalism as itself an effect of social struggles over values, critique is made the other of pleasure, and agency is understood as an individual aesthetic liberation from norms, rather than the economic freedom from necessity. My argument entails looking at how changing definitions of capitalism in cultural studies have explained the actual changes in capitalism throughout the twentieth century, from Marx, Lenin, Gramsci, Adorno, Jameson, Hall and beyond. Broadly, there are two contrasting conceptions of capitalism in cultural studies:

- 1) The first is *Marxist* in that it sees capitalism in terms outlined by Marx and Engels as based on the extraction of surplus-labor in production and culture as subsumed by capital and so functionally related to increasing profits, and
- 2) the second is (small m) *marxist* and sees capitalism as universal alienation brought about by the tendency of capital to rationalize production and regulate people's lives, as Lukacs, Gramsci, Adorno, Benjamin, Jameson and Foucault argue.

The latter argument is culturalist in that it defines the social whole in relation to one of its parts (efficiency) and is therefore in its premises actually self-canceling in that it claims to be materialist and opposed to reification. Furthermore, this culturalist position is utopian because it defines capitalism in spiritual terms, as the negation of spirit (culture) which it places in the zone of the autonomous, excessive, and incalculable. This idealist utopianism actually unites the marxism of the Frankfurt School with the institutionalized discursive cultural studies of today despite the populist understanding of culture that has replaced the earlier aesthetic understandings of Lukacs, Adorno, and Benjamin, for example, that is usually taken to be the most important difference in cultural theory. The focus on culture as a self-acting cause that exceeds the (socio)logic of the real is itself a bourgeois ideology of culture meant to promote consumerism and counter falling profits. The defense of such an ideological notion of culture in cultural studies in more or less populist language needs to be contrasted with the critique-al understanding of culture in classical Marxism which has always argued for a view of culture as a weapon in the class struggle and so has demonstrated, for example, what in Hegel, or, Balzac, or, Tolstoy, or, Kafka was progressive because it revealed how "consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life" (Marx Critique of Political Economy 21) and what was reactionary apologetics for exploitation because it maintains that it is "the ideological forms in which men become conscious... that determines their existence" (21).

The assumptions of deconstruction have turned cultural studies from being a materialist critique that implicates knowledge into the political economy of the real to being an apologetics of inequality that makes knowledge the primary matter of society and underwrites the volunteerist subject of capital as, for example, in Derrida's insistence in his late texts that "language is no longer a region" and has "won the totality of space" (Taste for the Secret 80) that

provides the opportunity to force a "dislocation of the present, which renders the present non-contemporary to itself" (7) by insuring a sense of "not-belonging" that inaugurates a "democracy to come." Although Derrida can be seen to be appealing to Benjamin's concept of "messianic time" which the latter had theorized as a necessary tactical maneuver "to blast open the continuum of history" (Benjamin 262) in the manner of "revolutionary classes at the moment of their action" ("Theses on the Philosophy of History" 261) at a time when the class struggle was more organized around State rivalries, Derrida's religious language is considered too alienating to be truly radical now and its premises have been updated in more recent cultural theory which has returned to the more revolutionary rhetoric of (small m) marxism as a corrective, as in the texts of Badiou, Agamben and Zizek.

Agamben for example argues that Derrida's theory of language is too idealist as it takes language on its own terms and does not confront what is truly unsettling in the human experience of it. Agamben seems to understand a purely immanent theory of language to be an expression of "the experience of manufacturing work" (Infancy and History 105) and therefore conservative as it cannot produce the "authentic concept of historicity" (106) he takes to be "resolutely revolutionary" (111). For Agamben the outside of language is not a "transcendental signified" within language that attempts to halt the play of signification and secure meaning, as Derrida argues, but "the experience of the difference between language and speech" (60) that "marks out the human from other living beings" (59) and "opens the space of history" (60). By maintaining a semiotic concept of language indebted to Saussure's general theory of it as *la langue*, a system of "differences without positive terms," Derrida, according to Agamben, reinscribes the Western metaphysical separation of language (culture) and humanity (nature) even as Derrida must assume that language constitutes the human rather than being the instrument of man who is its

origin, as in Aristotle for example. According to Agamben linguistics "never arrives at a chronological beginning of language, an 'anterior' of language" (56) not because "there is no outside text" (Derrida), but because "it is a speaking man that we find in the world, a man speaking to another man, and it is language whereby man is defined as man" (56), and not because man is "an animal endowed with speech" (59), but rather because man is a being whose "nature means being always-already inside language" (59) experiencing the difference between language and speech "painfully" as "the inability... to take possession of his own historical nature" (109). Agamben understands his linguistic theory as an historical materialist (99-115) one because it achieves "a more authentic concept of historicity" (106) by confronting "man's original historico-transcendental dimension" (60) as a being whose nature is constituted socially by being alienated in speech, but on his theory, as in Derrida's immanent theory of language, "any such [extra-linguistic] conception of the origin of language" such as labor is "fatuitous" (56). And yet, the origin of speech is not auto-poiesis, it does not lie in the use of language for its own sake, nor is it primarily for man's spiritual self-definition and realization as religious discourses maintain, because as Marx explains:

Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.  
(The German Ideology 37)

Although, as Marx theorizes, "language is as old as consciousness" and "only arises from the need, the necessity of intercourse with other men" (49) this is the case because it is "practical consciousness," because it takes part in what he calls "the first historical act, ... the production of material life itself " (47) through labor. Agamben's "more authentic concept of historicity" is precisely one which depends on erasing from view the pre-historic and pre-linguistic dependence of humanity on nature, or, in other words, the co-existence of humanity and labor which necessitates language in the first place. His understanding that the difference between language and speech is "man's original historico-transcendental dimension" and a more authentic mode of being in the world that can be recaptured by philosophy in order to make history is not actually one proven by the "natural sciences themselves" (Infancy and History 56), as he claims, because it has nullified causality, the reliance on a notion of "a primary cause which separates in time a before and after" (56), and, rather, reaffirms experience (60). By defining man as an entity who must experience his own being as a painful separation from nature due to speech, rather than a species-being that must (re)produce itself through the practical interaction with nature, Agamben defines humanity in terms of consciousness and makes man a spiritual being, as in religion. When Agamben therefore agrees, following Benjamin, that a revolutionary theory of history consists precisely in the cancellation of time (99) and the recovery of meaning he is making praxis into an aesthetic act because the "continuous origin" (60) of man that constitutes the "first historical act" that "founds history" is understood as primarily undertaken for reasons of spiritual recovery rather than a material act of subsistence grounded in actual socio-historical conditions.

Agamben's theory of language as the expropriation of experience that founds history as an alienated discourse has profound implications for grasping the present and made him a popular figure post 9/11. Using Benjamin's argument that the "state of emergency" invoked by

sovereign power as a means to bolster its rule at times of crisis has made the suspension of law and rule by violence the norm of modern life, Agamben argues that the metaphysical separation of language and the authentic human experience of it extending in philosophy from Aristotle to Derrida has become the central political logic of society today that justifies a condition of "bare life" in which individuals "can be killed but not sacrificed," i.e., not killed according to legal norms which would give their deaths a ritual collective meaning (Homo Sacer). Agamben is seen as a radical figure because of the way his theory, taking the US concentration camp at Guantanamo as a universal model, understands democracy as demanding a violent curtailment of freedom rather than providing for its realization because of how it normalizes the regulation of life and thus leaves it bereft of authentic experience and unique meaning. But his theory of (bio)politics separates power entirely from class interests by considering politics purely from the point of view of how it gives us to understand the meaning of our lives (experience). In consequence what is considered material in Agamben's theory is the experience of power rather than its objective causes. Thus according to him, "politics is the sphere neither of an end in itself nor of means subordinated to an end; rather, it is the sphere of a pure mediality without end intended as the field of human action and of human thought" (Means without End 117). Agamben thus succeeds in making power an eternal fact of life, a medium to express human nature, rather than an historically developed means to impose class rule and normalize exploitation. The result is that the sphere of human action and human thought is radically curtailed in his own theory in a way that accommodates itself to rather than challenges the status quo. If power is the medium of human existence and its present expression is necessarily radically nihilistic because it projects its own operation onto nature and mortifies people's experience how is Agamben's own prescription that change comes about through a new

conception of power as "a sort of dispossession of the self" in which "your life becomes a work of art... without the artist" (Interview 21) a challenge to it? The resignification of power as a self-creative act simply makes a virtue out of necessity through a trope, as religion has always done. "Bare life" is a condition of absolute dispossession that produces compensatory illusions of authentic being while negating a truly authentic life in the same way that for the bourgeois morality is always "higher" than mere survival demanding an indifference to it because inequality is a fact of life. The unsaid of course is that the moral view of life is a product of class relations in which the needs of the dominant class are met from the labor of others.

Slavoj Zizek too has opposed deconstruction in the name of historical materialism while coming to exactly its same conclusions about the contemporary as a post-exploitative moment of freedom. In his latest book (The Parallax View) for example he argues that *différance* now functions as a "neologism whose very notoriety obfuscates its unprecedented materialist potential" (11) to reveal the "minimal difference" (11) between the Symbolic edifice of cultural meanings and its foundation in the Real, "the hard bone of contention" (26) that constitutes a "fundamental *social fact*... that undermines every narrative solution" (19). But in Zizek's psycho-marxist logic the Real is not a product of "collective praxis" (5), not, in other words, a matter of a "social antagonism ('class struggle')" that is "an effect of objective socioeconomic forces" (11). Zizek argues it is necessary to "rehabilitate... dialectical materialism" (4) as the "philosophical underpinning of Marxism" (5) by rejecting "the philosophically naïve notion of thought as a reflection/mirroring of being (of 'independent objectively existing reality')" (6). Rather he argues that "the gap between the individual and the... social is to be inscribed back within the individual himself: *this objective arche of the social Substance exists only insofar as individuals treat it as such, relate to it as such*" (6). Why

Marxism has failed, according to Žižek, is because to "elevate society" into a "general ontology" (7) that explains thought as its "reflection" cannot explain the "negativity of thought" which he takes to be a "withdrawal into reflexive distance from being" (6). Žižek's rehabilitated and more enlightened view of materialism it turns out basically amounts to the moral platitude that in the order of things the belly comes first and before we can address the big issues we must first take care of ourselves. He can only conceive of thought as a "withdrawal from being" or a naïve conformism to the "general ontology" and cannot conceive of an integrated human praxis in which thought arises out of objective conditions as their approximation and a guide for transformation. The result is catastrophic for Marxist theory because it turns a "radical intervention" (6) from being a critique of the "multitude of appearances" (26) that covers over the material roots of inequality so as to change it into a kind of moral sermon that provides an "infinite judgment" (5) on the present from a position which assumes "the speculative identity between the highest and the lowest" (5) and thus "cuts diagonally across all particular groups" (9). And that sermon preaches that "the loss of substantial communal identities" (9) affects us all. As with Derrida for whom theory "would at best reinforce incoherence" (A Taste for the Secret 13), for Žižek too it consists of "confronting a universality with its 'unbearable' example" (The Parallax View 13) on the assumption that the loss of meaning is more important today than losing one's means of subsistence by having one's life depend on working "for a certain time gratis for the capitalist" (Marx, Critique of the Gotha Program 535). In other words, theory must be "ethical" on their view or it is nothing at all in a world in which nothing matters anymore anyway because what matters is finally what matters to "me."

## 4.2 LEARNING TO LIVE WITH CAPITALISM

The cultural resistance enshired as agency in cultural studies has been practically co-opted by the market and not only functions as its ideological apology but also serves to maintain the level of profit by providing the consciousness skills for what have become vital technical innovations for capital, and for managing the consequent social displacements. The co-optation of cultural studies by the market which has made the project of ideology critique seem boring to its canonic defenders who want cultural studies to aestheticize the world for capital is more clearly evident still in the publication of such books as Everything Bad is Good For You (Steven Johnson) which simply bypass the radical lexicon of cultural theory and embrace the pleasure of consumption as a necessary skill for negotiating the cyber-culture of today. In the popular idiom of self-help books, Johnson takes the themes of cultural studies such as how the singularly "overdetermined" nature of contemporary society exceeds the possibility of reliable knowledge (critique) and how "pleasure" is therefore an enabling cultural practice because it disrupts the dominant norms, and presents them as ready made cognitive skills available in popular culture (e.g., video games) that are tailor made for getting along in cyber-capitalism.

Johnson is dismissive of cultural studies because he sees it as caught up with merely "symbolic" understandings of culture whereas culture on his understanding is like "man-made weather" — a kind of excretion produced by the biological (brain) and technological nexus of today's hi-tech capitalism. Instead of investigating the unity of base and superstructure in which culture has a subordinate relation to the class structure he assumes an organic view of culture, ultimately indebted to Hegel, and posits their identity — culture thus "expresses" the kinds of ideas required by the social environment. Such a view of course de-politicizes culture as an arena of conflicts, hence Johnson's assumption that culture is a matter of "competence" (skill)

without "ideology" (class). It should be pointed out that cultural studies itself opened the way to the total de-politicization of culture (the Oprahization of culture as therapy for getting along) by de-linking the superstructure from the base through "mediations" (the self-circling "complexity" of culture that has subsumed the social and canceled the opposition of nature and culture too in textuality). Johnson's book sets up its terms for a therapeutic account of culture by dismissing critique as "moralizing" because it is obsessed with "meanings" (the message) and "progress" (or improvement) and therefore fails to realize that there are many truths, not just the logical kind, of which the most important of all is the "emotional intelligence" that is necessary for living in today's highly mediated world where it is not always possible to discern the meaning. Given this thesis it of course should be expected that the book does not give a logically coherent narrative about the contemporary cultural moment but takes the form of outlining with bullet point clarity what it assumes are self-evident facts, such as:

- Book learning and school are not as important as life experience and in some ways actually harmful because they are "outdated" and "moralizing" — i.e., they do not offer as many "choices" as popular culture and therefore do not offer as many opportunities to make decisions that exercise the brain and prepare it for today's complex social environment.
- Knowledge should not have a necessary result that leads to decided conclusions about the way things should be because (a) the world is a complex place and it is not always possible to know, and, (b) admitting it is not always possible to know is a more trustworthy character trait and

therefore more persuasive (being persuasive is a necessary leadership skill in today's world).

- Knowledge should be "pleasurable" — i.e., offer many opportunities for making choices rather than limiting them to the certain and familiar ones — because it stimulates the desire to learn (as brain scans have proven dopamine is released in the brain as a reward for cognitive effort).
- Consuming popular culture is not mindless and unproductive entertainment therefore because it is actually performing a form of "intellectual work" in the way it challenges the mind to explore and familiarize itself with "complexity" (plurality and ambiguity).
- Consuming popular culture — especially playing video games — will not make you a better person (nothing can guarantee that), but it will teach you basic things that are useful for managing the kinds of social interactions that are more and more required today, such as "problem solving" and "emotional intelligence."

That such points are not as clear and coherent as they may appear becomes evident by teasing out some of their unspoken assumptions with a few sharp observations. How is the argument that knowledge should be limited to getting along in the world as it is and not for "improving" it not itself a moral argument (and therefore outdated)? If "intellectual work" is just

about learning how to "map" and "manage" with the world as it is and possesses the ubiquity of "man made weather," why must the knowledge for transforming the world be dismissed and excluded through such books as Everything Bad is Good For You? Is complexity finally unknowable because it is not in our power to grasp it, or is this a rather simplistic view of both complexity and humanity (that one finds on soap operas)? What about the ways humans ideologically "complexify" the world to subjugate others and the complex ways human labor has developed to interact with the natural world that prove scientific knowledge is emancipatory? What about the people who do not have access to the electronic culture of the West — is it their lot in life to serve the masters who do? Or, is the focus on popular culture and the commitment to justify it as a necessary knowledge of the way the world really is itself a form of mystification, a comforting story the West tells about itself at a time when it is no longer economically competitive with the technologies of China and India, for example?

Everything Bad is Good For You shows how culture has been implicated in the political economy of the real — not only theoretically but practically. It has become corporatized as "emotional labor" and made necessary for realizing profit by normalizing consumption and has lost even the tinge of "resistance." The incorporation of culture places the practices of cultural resistance in question as it reveals such values to be manufactured by the culture industry itself and in no way to be considered a threat to capitalism. Everything Bad is Good For You is a cultural marker for the intellectual and political bankruptcy of cultural studies which itself has abandoned even the pretence of resistance as "boring," and has embraced capitalism. The critique of cultural studies in class terms is today considered boring on the same logic as "everything bad is good for you" because cyber-capitalism has done away with a universal good (theory for social equality) by making ideology the meaning of life in a world that has abolished the line between

technology (culture) and biology (nature). What this means is that ideology critique is more than ever necessary now to, among other things, uncover the ways in which the dominant try to dissimulate under an aesthetic ruse how the culturalist project to realize a society of equality within capitalism has failed and the discursive strategies of cultural studies are now more effectively taken up by the commodity.

The reaction of cultural studies to its crisis of knowledge has been to make culture an ethical matter and under the guise of consideration for the practical consequences of cultural representations in the context of ongoing inequality to abandon any pretense of resistance as a "bad" elitist value because of its residual opposition to pleasure (consumption). Take for example Jonathan Sterne's contribution to a recent anthology (The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies) in which he writes in tones of boredom about the sheer repetition of critiques about its market populism. Sterne sees cultural studies as caught up in debates over culture as "use" (a means to an end) versus culture as "pleasure" (an end in itself) that share a basic presupposition which has acquired the force of a dogma — that culture is at root a matter of production. He argues that insofar as cultural studies theorizes culture as contestation over the shape of the social, when it is not being politically instrumentalist in its readings of pleasure as ideology it is equally instrumentalist in its aesthetic use of pleasure as "resistance." Freedom for Sterne, on the contrary, is said to reside in "feelings," which he takes to be the basis of a new aesthetics of "meaningless, nondirected activity" (99). But Sterne shows no awareness of the fact that feelings have become incorporated as "emotional labor" and made instrumental for profit. His own "articulation" of the relations between feelings and the social which seeks to defend feeling on its own terms is itself evidence of the political economy of feelings — feelings as a space of

freedom for recuperation from work.<sup>16</sup> Feelings as the zone of the private and the ultra of disinterested experience is, in other words, an effect of economics. For all of Sterne's boredom with the materialist critique of cultural studies he fails to advance the issue because he does not himself inquire into the contestations over "production" he claims are paramount — his own notion of the sheer pleasure of having feelings is as a result equally instrumentalist in its contrast to work as the paradigm of "production" he complains about.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Stern argues that cultural studies can no longer expect students or citizens to engage in critique because they are too exhausted by work:

"One reason that Americans watch so much TV is that it's easy to do after a long and draining day or work. Instead of criticizing the paucity of leisure time left over after the ever-extending workday...Budd, Entman, and Stienman want to put their subjects right back to work for social change. Sure, that would be nice, but I suspect that many of their subjects are tired and drained, and not particularly in the mood to foment revolution in their sparse evening hours. Though Fiske has given up on significant social changes, he at least builds affect into his theory of culture: people watch TV or listen to music because it brings them pleasure. Given that so many people hate their jobs, we ought to take that seriously. To take it seriously, we need to treat "doing nothing" as a worthwhile practice in itself" (97).

<sup>17</sup> Janice Peck also concludes that cultural studies suffers from an unquestioned "economism" despite its own opposition to the base/superstructure theory of classical Marxism most notably in the writings of Stuart Hall. She argues that cultural studies has separated culture from production to such an extent that it is unable to question the economic function of culture and so reproduces its logic in a reified form by treating culture as a thing in itself that determines society independently of social agency. It is interesting as well as indicative of the state of cultural studies that while Sterne complains of the "instrumentalism" of cultural studies which he seems to see as a form of economism, Peck takes issue with its lack of economics and how this carries an economist presupposition about the affectivity of culture. Peck however goes back to Williams' account of mode of production as a corrective to the culturalism of cultural studies, which is to say she goes back to the very texts that have discredited base and superstructure as "economism" in the Birmingham school of cultural studies.

Production is the "paradigm" of culture in materialist cultural theory not because culture is the locus of effectivity as in pragmatism, or, the site of work itself as in cyber-labor discourses about "emotional labor" being "creative"; the question of whether culture is useful or valuable in itself is already a highly reified understanding of culture which takes what is a social matter of the level of class antagonism and turns it into a subjective question of whether individuals engage in cultural activities because they want to realize an end or not, as in Miller's opposition of "mimetic" communities which seek to describe and/or critique and "performative" communities. Such a moral understanding of culture assumes that individuals are something independent of culture, something material in themselves, because of the opacity of their desires. But the individual only exists in and because of a culture which in turn embodies the values that reflect the existing social conditions of production and the conflicts over it. Culture and the individual are co-extensive with production and only have their existence in it. The separation of the individual as a model of agency from the social as a whole is a purely speculative abstraction, undertaken in Sterne's case to "resist" the paradigm of production ("instrumentality"). And yet, this abstraction is also a real one necessitated by the social relations — what is outside work is structurally determined to be the zone of the private and individual because it is the site for the private reproduction and consumption of labor power under capitalism. Production is the "paradigm" of materialist cultural theory because culture has become primarily an economic matter and instrumental to profit accumulation. Without such knowledge of what is it is impossible to change it.

Without an understanding of the labor relations which shape contemporary culture student-citizen-workers are inculcated in the regime of immediacy that cyber-culture instantiates in which it is assumed that the subject is essentially a consumer who interacts with the real

merely through signs and images and that the real itself has become virtual. An education in cyber-culture should rather enable the student to question such immediacy and what is being sold as agency and literacy — such an understanding from outside the immediate has always been the goal of the humanities and it is fundamentally put in question in contemporary cultural studies and cyber-culture discourse.

Contemporary culture demands to be analyzed, not pragmatically within the terms of culture itself — which are actually the terms of empiricism and cognitive psychology more or less under the cloak of poststructuralist theory masquerading as cultural theory today — but analyzed conceptually so that its own terms are explained by re-situating them from the ground up (class). The problem with existing accounts of culture is that even the criticisms accept the fundamental premise of cyber-culture as a "new" phenomenon that causes the changes we experience every day and thereby maintains the social alienation of labor which is actually at the root of the rapid technological innovations and the reified thinking of them. Cultural studies today ontologizes its own categories and takes what are primarily epistemological ways of discussing technology (for its impact on "how" meaning is constructed) as the limit of the real as such because of the supposed centrality of information technologies to cyber-capitalism. There is then no "outside" to cyber-capitalism because any outside presupposes "mediation," which is seen as central to the reigning cyber-culture. What this story leaves out of account is the question: How did mediation become the universal law of motion of human societies in the first place? There is a difference after all between the local and concrete use of information for some particular end and the abstract universal requirement of information for society as such. How did society itself come to depend on information? Cyber-culture discourse for the most part assumes that information and society are synonymous (there is no outside) and thereby conflates social

relations with exchanges of "meaning." This means that it takes information exchange as the primary form of activity that constitutes society. But, how are "meanings" more important than material survival? One answer is that work has become knowledge (Negri), a "creative" force that is therefore central to constituting society. Another is that "knowledge work" is more important than "manual" work because it has taken over the whole of society. But it does nothing to further our understanding of contemporary cyber-culture to see "cognitive work" as "productive labor" on the argument that technological efficiency makes necessary labor a minimal part of the workday (as neo-marxists like Negri, Read, and Witherford argue). Rather, what this does is make it impossible to see culture in terms other than what are necessary for capital. The forms of "cognitive work" Johnson takes to be central to society, which are simply managerial skills, are actually unproductive forms of labor (circulatory activities) and to consider them "creative" of a new sociality, as Hardt and Negri do, is simply to mystify the dominant social arrangements which require a "free worker" who feels responsible to his wants and experiences his slavery to capital intimately as self-preservation. The productive intellectual labor is actually that which increases surplus-value by reducing the necessary labor time required to reproduce the worker (i.e., lowers wage costs). This labor requires as a consequence of its reproduction the "diversification" of needs which workers are forced to acquire to remain competitive on the market. What Johnson claims is an "environmental" incentive whereby technological changes trigger chemical reactions in the organism (dopamine) is in actuality "the silent compulsion of economic relations" (Marx Capital 1, 899) whereby the law of value (profit accumulation) demands that workers increase their consumption while decreasing the cost of their labor — "intellectual labor" and "cognitive work" are what this more rationalized form of exploitation is called in which the worker is "more violently exploited" (Marx). Current

discussions of cyber-culture all assume that work is the primary activity of society as if the purpose of life itself were wage-labor. Their solution to wage-labor is to re-value work as "creative" and aestheticize culture as so "ambiguous" and complex as to defy any "outside" understanding. But how did work (utilitarian practices) become the universal form of all practice? In other words, such accounts of contemporary culture beg the question how are non-utilitarian (emancipatory) concepts of culture and work materially possible given the universality of "knowledge work" as the end of human society? Marx's answer depends on understanding the transformation of nature by labor: an "outside" to labor that changes it. What is missing in cyber-culture discourse is an account of the self-negation of the new cyber work-culture — of how cyber work-culture produces its own negation in the form of the revolutionary proletariat whose work does not meet its needs and indeed serves to brutally curtail them thus necessitating an ideology critique of culture that furthers the collective project of overthrowing capitalism (socialism).

### **4.3 CULTURE AS ALIENATED LABOR**

A real positive account of cyber-culture would re-understand contemporary culture as itself a "social project" alienated from itself — cyber-culture as alienated and exploited labor. Cyber-culture has produced new ways of interacting with nature that allows greater control over it and that changes how we think about our own humanity — just look at the bio-tech industry. But these new powers and needs have been formed under the economic coercion of capitalism in which everything is made to serve profit rather than human emancipation. It is the enslavement of culture to capital that produces the cyber-culture discourse in which technology is given a

spiritual value as "creative labor" to compensate for social alienation. A materialist account of cyber-culture on the contrary is not dismissive of it in the way that "positivist" accounts of it are — which assume cyber-culture represents the "new" which cancels history — because it understands culture as the subjective side of the labor process that performs certain ideological work (to "invert" the material conditions and make them appear to be mental). Cyber-culture does the ideological work of capital but not by simply asserting "what is" as what "ought to be". Rather it sutures "what is" to "what ought to be" through the mediation of a discourse about technology having the utopic power to realize our hopes and dreams on the assumption that the socially democratic project of Marxism has failed.

Thinking of cyber-culture as alienated and estranged labor raises some difficulties of course. The first may be described as a thematic one in that cyber-culture itself includes the discourse of alienation but reunderstands it as basically a cognitive matter — the subject as alienated from herself, the loss of personality (Memento, The Matrix, etc.), or, in more popular discourses, alienation from the "love," "security," etc. offered by "community" (which new technologies of the self will suture — The Notebook, Erin Brockovich, e.g.). In this way cyber-culture naturalizes alienation as a fact of life and proposes itself as a spiritual or therapeutic solution. The "new" cyber-culture in fact re-installs some very "old" ideas in this way of addressing the cultural effects of capitalist exploitation rather than its causes in the division of labor.

Take the crisis of the humanities as an example. In cyber-culture discourses (Bill Readings, J. Hillis Miller, Negri, et. al.) the crisis of the humanities is considered a result of purely demographic and spatial changes brought about by a new technological proximity to the other that calls patriotic intelligibilities into question. On this account, the existing hegemon is

thought to depend on a certain regime of discourse which installs an imaginary distance from the real (mimesis) that allows him to manipulate it and so dominate those who do not possess the privilege of distance. Cyber-culture, it is argued, calls this subject in question by collapsing the illusion of distance and levelling all discourses so that none are seen to offer a privileged relation to the real but rather the real is seen to be a performative construct open to multiple configurations. It is by embracing rather than opposing the cyber-culture that the humanities will prove its value in the "new" world here. This discourse assumes that the role of the humanities is basically conservative rather than critique-al — to construct a new hegemonic subject that assents to the dominant regime as his own creation rather than experiencing it as a foreign imposition. But the shift from considering the real as objective reality to performative effect abolishes the outside (revolution) and thus manufactures consent for what exists. By abolishing a critique-al outside the liberal pluralist humanities (which supports the status quo) is rescued from the critique-al humanities. My point here is to emphasize how the "positivist" account of cyber-culture which is given the power of determination spontaneously through its sheer hegemony must "naturalize" in its conclusions that which it "negates" in its technological premises in the manner of deconstruction and so reproduces a very old story about "what is" as impossible to change (for what are assumed to be ethical, spiritual, etc. reasons) – that capitalist hegemony is essential to humanity.

More important than the thematic problem of seeing culture as alienated and estranged labor at a time of global commodification is the conceptual problem in that it seems to assume labor as a transhistorical ontological reality that resists change when in actuality labor itself is alienated social praxis.

In a world where humanity has mastered the productive forces of nature so as to meet its needs the concept of labor as essential to humanity loses its meaning because human need will no longer be limited by its given natural requirements but will itself become a productive force. In other words, freed from the conditions of necessity that compel humanity to expend its energies in laboring activities these energies will be primarily expended in the transformation and expansion of needs through new social combinations.

The cyber-culture of today produced by the highly globalized production system is transforming the senses and necessitating a global awareness that is highly distorted by bourgeois ideology and private property. In cyber-culture capital is seen as the sole productive force and given highly symbolic meanings and quasi mystical status as "creative labor" and so on while the impoverishment of the working class is disappeared.

It is not new technologies that are producing a "ghostly proximity" that has changed the traditional senses (from mimesis to spectrality) but the new transnational relations of labor that are doing so and necessitating what Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* call "communist consciousness," which is an awareness of the need to abolish labor in a world in which it has become the only mode of life.

Cultural theory today is in awe of the creative power of labor but it has nothing to say about the brutal reality of the workers whose mode of life it is. The "end of work" is the "ideal" of cyber-culture in which cultural theory has turned into an "idea" about how work has become creative because of newer technology and that therefore capitalism does not need to be overthrown.

What is needed now is the communist consciousness that the global power of capital is producing an international revolutionary class unified by their conditions of life and the ideal that it is necessary to change it.

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