Thinking Aesthetics and Politics in the age of Pervasive Apocalypse

By

EuiHuack Kang
B.A., Korea University, 1997
M.A., Seoul National University, 2004

Thesis
Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Chicago, 2016 Chicago, Illinois

Chicago, Illinois

Defense Committee:

Nicholas Brown, Chair and Advisor
Walter Benn Michaels
Sunil Agnani
Rachel Havrelock
Emilio Sauri (Univ. of Massachusetts Boston)
This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Minyoung Park, who sacrificed part of her life for my dissertation.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>Introduction: The End of Narrative to Narratives of the End—A Critique...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. “The End of Narrative” and its Sublimity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. The Politics of Postmodernism and its Beyond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Structure of Dissertation and Chapter Descriptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.</td>
<td>Chapter 1: The Form of the Author</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Barthes: the Beginning of the Genealogy of “Death of the Author”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Lukacs and Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Ranciere and Mimesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Derrida and Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Conclusion: Refusal of the Arrogance of Discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.</td>
<td>Chapter 2: In Search of an Apocalypse: Cormac McCarthy's <em>The Road</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Locating <em>The Road</em> in the Historical Divide and its Discontents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Constructing a Non-mimetic Apocalypse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Characterizing the Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Form and Content: the Style and its Historical Content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Synchronic Dialectics Diachronic Dialectics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.</td>
<td>Chapter 3: A Narrative Materialization of History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>—Zoe Wicomb’s <em>David’s Story</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Reading through the “And”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. David’s Project of Genealogy—a Displaced Historiography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. The Narrator’s Project of Subversion—a Re-placed Historiography, and the Emergence of a New Realist Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Wicomb’s Narrative Project—Representing the Unrepresentable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.</td>
<td>Chapter 4: The Politicality of Realism in the Contemporary Era</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>—In Lee ChangDong's Film <em>Secret Sunshine</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Political Art?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. <em>Secret Sunshine</em>’s First Moment/movement—(melo-Drama)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. <em>Secret Sunshine</em>’s Second and Third Moments/movements —Realism and Allegory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI: Works Cited</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <em>Secret Sunshine</em>: Jong-Chan’s “ordinary” gaze at Shin-Ae’s conversion</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <em>Secret Sunshine</em>: Shin-Ae at the Hairdresser’s</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <em>Secret Sunshine</em>: Shin-Ae and Jong-Chan’s prison visit</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <em>Secret Sunshine</em>: Shin-Ae and Jong-Chan’s prison visit (reverse cut)</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <em>Secret Sunshine</em>: Shin-Ae receiving the Ransom Call</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. <em>Secret Sunshine</em>: Camera movement at the Funeral 1</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. <em>Secret Sunshine</em>: Camera movement at the Funeral 2 (Jong-Chan)</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. <em>Secret Sunshine</em>: On-spot-inspection of the body of Shin-Ae’s son (Extreme Long Shot)</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. <em>Secret Sunshine</em>: Outside Church Prayer meeting</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary

I am interested in my dissertation in how and why we are surrounded by so many apocalyptic discourses and cultural products. In my introduction, I try my best to clearly explain my understanding of this phenomenon—the dialectic tension between the sense of an ending that dominates our everyday life and the displacement of a necessary urgency to apocalypse onto infinite playfulness. The displacement of urgency to playfulness itself is, I argue, an expression of utter frustration in the face of the blooming of global capitalism. But what matters to me is not the formidable power of globalization but a peculiar attitude that endorses the ongoing globalization as something beyond the reach of our aesthetic and political practice. The retreat of the political is, instead of necessitating the re-treat of the political, used as evidence to justify the status quo. Against this status-quoism, in chapter 1 I examine the political possibility of authorship and of aesthetic form as a vehicle of social change. Chapters 2, 3, 4 are my readings of, respectively, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, Zoe Wicomb’s *David’s Story*, and Lee Chang-Dong’s *Secret Sunshine*. Through my readings of these works, I investigate how and what political art should and can do in our age of pervasive Apocalypse.
Introduction: The End of Narrative to Narratives of the End: A Critique

1. “The End of Narrative” and Its Sublimity

Addressing the general condition of our contemporary art production, Arthur Danto declares:

We live at a moment when it is clear that art can be made of anything, and where there is no mark (my emphasis) through which works of art can be perceptually different from the most ordinary objects. This is what the example of Brillo Box is meant to show. The class of artworks is simply unlimited, as media can be adjoined to media, and art unconstrained by anything save the laws of nature in one direction, and moral laws on the other. When I say that this condition is the end of art, I mean essentially that it is the end of the possibility of any particular internal direction for art to take. It is the end of the possibility of progressive development. ... it means the end of tyranny of history—that in order to achieve success as an artist one must drive art history forward, colonizing the future novelty by novelty. (“The End of Art” 139-40)

Here Danto finds a foundational expression of the current art production in Andy Warhol's Brillo Box. As Danto explains, what Warhol's Brillo Box amounts to is that “you cannot tell when something is a work of art just by looking at it, for there is no particular way that art has to look” (Beyond The Brillo Box 5). In his account, in other words, art and object are phenomenally indiscernible since there is no “mark” that differentiates art from object in contemporary artworks. Accordingly, an artwork is an artwork “when it is seen interpretively” (“The End of Art” 130). Or, to put this in a more complex way, the artness of an artwork is determined not by the shape of the artwork but by the way the content of the artwork is presented to viewers. Thus Warhol's Brillo Box is fine art, because the content of it is not the actual Brillo Box but the “aboutness”(130) that Brillo Box embodies—i.e. the content is what may be called a philosophy of Brillo
Box, be it concerned about a celebration of “a fragment of daily life in the American Lebenswelt,” (142), or “philosophical questions” concerning “something about art” (142). In terms of presentation, Brillo Box is fine art because its aboutness is presented by means of imitation—i.e. Brillo Box itself is not merely an imitation; the imitation is a means employed to convey Brillo Box's “meaning,” part of which is the problematization of the relationship between Brillo Box and the actual Brillo Boxes themselves as well as what this relationship is about.

Crucial to understanding Danto's theorization is the individual character of aboutness. In his account, Judy Chicago's Dinner Party is not just a massive installation of a dinner table but an artwork as long as it is “about sisterhood, presented in terms of the ritual of a spiritual community”, just as Betty Woodman's ceramic vases are not just vases but vases “about the vase” (137). In a nutshell, Danto's aboutness belongs to each individual art object. And this is what makes his aboutness distinct from modernism's dictum that “art becomes its own subject” (136). To put this differently, the point of aboutness as it is exemplified in Brillo Box is that aboutness can be applied to anything and thus that aboutness comes from the absence of the artistic mark—the mark that used to indicate modernist art’s autonomy. In the postmodern artworld, aboutness emerges as “the clearest statement of the philosophical nature of art” (139) when modernism's philosophico-aesthetic “mark” that used to determine the historical development of modernism disappears. For example, if Greenbergian medium specificity was the mark that enabled the self-conscious progress of modern painting as a genre and through which modern art “becomes its own subject,” Danto's aboutness is a theory of art that accompanies each individual artwork. Consequently, there are as many aboutnesses as
the number of empirical artworks. This is why he asserts in the above passage that the
end of art thesis means “the end of tyranny of history” as well as “the end of the
possibility of any particular internal direction for art [in general] to take.” For Danto, the
end of art consists of “ultimate pluralism” or “extreme differences” (128). It is because he
sees these immense possibilities stemming from the end of art that he defines it not as “a
theory of exhaustion” but “a theory of consciousness—of how a developmental sequence
of events terminates in the consciousness of that sequence as a whole” (137).

If an artwork's aboutness is what guarantees the status of an artwork, Danto's
aboutness, as an interpretative principle, consists of two inter-related moments:
indiscernibility and discernibility. First, the moment of indiscernibility occurs when one
cannot discern an artwork from a commodity object by its appearance alone. And in its
second moment, discernibility occurs in the form of aboutness, despite the
indiscernibility. Once one recognizes the aboutness of a fine art, then, an artwork's
difference from a commodity is absolute—absolute because the difference is
conceptually and externally given. However, on a closer look, something crucial is
missing in Danto's account of aboutness—that is, the transition from indiscernibility to
discernibility. In other words, the question becomes where does the “discernibility” come
from? Simply put, how do we discern two indiscernible objects? The answer is, in fact,
pre-supposed in Danto's formulation of aboutness; when Danto juxtaposes *Brillo Box* and
the actual “Brillo Box of warehouses and storerooms” (141 emphasis mine), what pre-
determines the status of fine art is the space in which the artwork is placed, such as an art
gallery, an exhibition space, or museum. Only in a museum space, then, does *Brillo Box*
acquire its acknowledgement as a work of art precisely because *Brillo Box* and the actual
Brillo Box are exactly the same in their shape and appearance. In this context, the predominance of space in postmodern art cannot be overemphasized because the museum provides a kind of logic that insulates fine arts from the commodity world.

Within the conceptual structure of aboutness, indiscernibility and discernibility are mediated by space. But why this triangular relationship? Why do we need the mediation of space between antinomical moments of discernibility and indiscernibility? The answer lies in the respective functionalities of Danto’s two moments. First, indiscernibility is what differentiates postmodern art from modern art; modern art is marked in the way postmodern art is not. In this sense, the absence of mark is the mark of postmodern art in contradistinction to modern art. Indiscernibility points also to the proximity between postmodern art and commodity object. Second, discernibility is what differentiates postmodern art from commodity object. This time, the optical identity of fine art and commodity turns out to be illusory because postmodern art is marked by the absence of mark in a way commodity object is not. Third, this invisible postmodern mark—the mark of absence of mark—is given only spatially. That is, spatial separation of postmodern art generates the aboutness of an art object. In short, aboutness is a spatial logic that creates a singular space of artwork, which not only breaks with its synchronic partner, the commodity, but also breaks with its diachronic partner, modern art. And the result is absolute singularity—singularity demarcated by space.

This singularity, however, does not entail something like modernism's authorial signature of “style.” On the contrary, because the conspicuous mark of postmodern singular art is the lack of (modern) mark, every time postmodern art establishes itself, it does so by invoking its difference from modern art history. In other words, the
postmodern singularity has in its essence the repression of what Danto calls modern art's “tyranny of history” (140). Danto's “ultimate pluralism” of the postmodern artworld, then, consists of singular artworks each of which declares the end of art in order to create its own space of singularity. And it is at this precise moment that we witness the production of meta-narrative that governs each and every piece of postmodern art—a meta-narrative that announces the end of modern meta-narrative. When discussing Jean-François Lyotard's thesis of the end of master-narrative, Fredric Jameson observes a secret moment of the “unforeseeable return of narrative as the narrative of the end of narratives” (emphasis mine, Postmodernism xii). Just as Danto proclaims “the impossibility of any further large narrative” (128), Lyotard pronounces the death of modern master-narratives: emancipation, salvation, scientific knowledge, and the dialectic. In doing so, Lyotard as well as Danto not only respond to the recent technological and artistic transformations of postmodernism but also argue that many postmodern theories and artworks are based on the concept of the end of modern practice. This “narrative of the end” (rather than “the end of the narrative”) is, in other words, the meta-narrative of various contemporary end-time discourses and practices. Because they come into being through the negation of the modern meta-narrative, they secretly endorse another meta-narrative they owe their existence to—the meta-narrative of the end of the meta-narrative.

Of course, throughout history, numerous art movements have established their raison d'être by declaring the bankruptcy of previous art movements. In fact, a new art movement's violent rupture from its predecessor has been the major motive for the successive historical development of modern art. The postmodern meta-narrative is
interesting in that it de-substantiates itself, as this meta-narrative is dispersed into the rhythm of its artworks’ plural movements. For example, each postmodern artwork enacts its own singularity and as a result, postmodern artworks have no ostensible tie with other artworks. Postmodern artworks, as Danto's claim goes, have no historical “mark” that binds them together. However, if Danto's postmodern rupture is qualitatively different from the numerous ruptures that punctuated the history of modern art, it is only because the temporality is displaced onto a kind of spatial singularity. In other words, precisely because each postmodern artwork enacts a forgetting of its own historicity, by secretly remembering the death of modernism, and because this non-temporality is embodied in a spatial singularity, the postmodern meta-narrative functions as if it was not a meta-narrative.

Another name for this postmodern narrative is, of course, pluralism. Whereas various modernist movements are invested in creating a new after, what governs Danto's “after” is the pervasive end—the end that is internalized into an ever-increasing constellation of “extreme differences” (128). In it, the historicity gives way to the pluralism of many singular spaces. Danto's postmodern artworld, then, is a “world of space,” a world whose effect Jameson characterizes as “the spatialization of the temporal” (156). And in fact, spatialization of the temporal has been one of the most visible contemporary phenomena. For example, in his 1993 book Symbolic Exchange and Death, Jean Baudrillard declares:

The system of reference for production, signification, affect, substance and history, all this equivalence of a 'real' content, loading the sign with the burden of 'utility,' with gravity—its form of representative equivalence—all this is over with. Now the stage of value has the upper hand, a total relativity, general commutation, combination, and simulation—simulation in the sense that, from now on, signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real. (29)
Baudrillard's symbolic world is, needless to say, a world of homogenized space where each piece of temporal content is magically transformed into a spatial element. And indeed, many postmodern works of art are characterized by this spatialization of temporality. For example, Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* can be read essentially as a spatialization of narrative. In it, the hero, trying to read a Calvino novel, finds himself lost in other stories. Any linear or “master” narrative that traditionally structures narrative details is radically undermined and, in its stead, multiple alternative narratives are scattered. In the penultimate chapter, the hero confesses: “it seems to me that in the world there now exists only stories that remain suspended or get lost along the way” (256-7). In this experiment, the major subject matter is the “end” of the traditional narrative form. As a result, multiple narratives take up the novelistic space where narrative temporality disappears. It would not be hard to find a “master-narrative” here—that is, the author's rigorous negation of the traditional master narrative of the novel form. This suspicion of the traditional narrative form is also found in many of E. L. Doctorow's “factions,” which systematically undermine what traditional historical fiction tried to achieve—narrating a historical meaning of a particular period. By combining historical figures and fictional characters into the narrative space, his “factions” dismantle the boundary between fact and fiction, history and re-presentation, and by extension, production and reproduction. Especially in *Ragtime*, Doctorow builds the historical “contents” around and *upon* our ideas and stereotypes; the novel is read *not* as a representation of our historical past but as a “re-presentation” of our ideas and stereotypes of the historical past (Jameson 24-25). The use of pastiche, in this case,
formally captures the postmodern anxiety about historical representation and, essentially fills the novel with “pop images and simulacra of that history” (25). What is lost in this narrative experiment is the temporality of the historical past as the novel spatializes historical events in such a way that those events seem to belong to our present moment.

If multiple narratives in Calvino's postmodern novel make the novel a space of present perspectival differences, and if Doctorow's rigorous interlacing of historical images with fictional characters evaporates historical contents onto the present intertextual space, Warhol's “art object” manifests itself as a space in a museum, but only after its refusal of the modernist “mark” of the “tyranny of history” (140). But the spatialization reveals a poverty of aboutness: the truth is that the postmodern spatialization is a formal displacement of modernist practice’s historical content. Calvino's and Doctorow's respective experiments “about” narrativity are formal through and through. Warhol's pop art consists of its formal differentiation from the modernist form. In other words, the crucial “content” of Brillo Box is the end of modernist form itself; its “philosophical” non-mark is the mark of its artness. Whereas, if we turn our eyes to the modernists' “formal” experiments, modernist form was not separable from lived content. In many modernist artworks, the source of the unity of form and content—or more accurately, the dialectical unity in disunity of form and content—was expressed as the imaginary and formal sublimation of various social and historical life issues. The modernist sublime testifies to the tension between form and content; the epiphany, for example, takes place when an ultimate despair coming from the failure to properly register the unbounded social reality is elevated onto a formal/aesthetic expression of totality. On the contrary, Warhol's paradigmatic “anything” collapses the contradiction
between aesthetic form and life content. But the result is not the aestheticization of life. Rather, what comes out of the dissolution of art and commodity is an absolute singularity whose spatial logic comes into operation only through internalizing the end of the modernist form. And along with the collapse of the contradiction of aesthetics and life, form and content, individual and society, it also discards the modernist dilemma of representing our social reality. The postmodern artwork, in other words, internalizes the unrepresentibility of life at the core of its singularity.

In this respect, “the postmodern,” Lyotard argues, “would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable (81).” Because the postmodern establishes its formal logic upon the end of meta-narrative of totality, its ostensible content, such as everyday life (Warhol) and historical events (Doctorow), is formalized by way of the spatialization onto the postmodern sublimity of the “unrepresentability” of life. Unlike its modern counterpart, the postmodern sublimity is the expression of its frustration and resignation. The individual “freedom” of the postmodern plural artworld is, then, ephemeral since the freedom is maintained only insofar as its claustrophobic embrace of the commodity world is folded back on its absolute spatial demarcation. The aforementioned “ultimate pluralism” of postmodern art is itself a forgetting of its own historicity.

In the meantime, we also have equivalents of postmodernism in politics and economics—Foucaultian biopolitics and neoliberalism. Though contemporary biopolitics
has a wide spectrum, if we can focus on Foucault as the theorist of biopolitics *par excellence*, then biopolitics is defined as a new paradigm of politics. Under this paradigm, power is essentially defined as discursive power, meaning that power cannot be possessed by or transferred to, say, political parties and thus is the object of exchange and circulation in our discursive life. If, for Foucault, the traditional power originated from what he calls the “politico-juridical model” of state sovereignty, bio-political subjects are consumers as well as producers of a governance whose rationality is to “foster life or disallow it to the point of death” (138). Bio-power operates on two distinct levels: disciplinary power functions by imposing norms on individuals and bio-power functions by producing discourses of dangers and their management of populations. In this formulation of power, the vision that Foucaultian biopolitics ultimately endorses is captured in the concept of “normalization.” The discipline of individual bodies is linked with the regulation of populations in their aim to produce subjects; subjects become operative only by voluntarily participating in the production and circulation of norms. Viewed in this way, Foucaultian biopolitics is not only immune to any master narrative (e.g. class struggle) but is also insulated from political normativity. Because society is rendered as a field of struggle/negotiation of multiple discourses in the Foucaultian system, and because the said normalization is the outcome of the relations of power/discourse, the norms at issue here are another expression of the genealogical acknowledgement of the latest and fittest—that is, normalization is indifferent or at least oblique to political concerns of the suffering people. Normalization itself, then, is a narrative of the end. By absolutizing the latest “norms,” the method of normalization blocks one from historicizing our present.
Likewise, neoliberalism sees society as a field of individual competitions where market logic moves towards efficiency as less efficient ways and practices cannot survive competition. As Francis Fukuyama’s prototypical “end of history” shows, neoliberalism's triumphant assertion of market liberalism has as its starting point a theory of an end, in this case, of the end of cold war era. What remains after the collapse of the actually existing socialism is “only one competitor standing in the ring as an ideology of potentially universal validity: liberal democracy, the doctrine of individual freedom and popular sovereignty” (42). Liberal democracy is to political institution as market liberalism is to economic order: the recent historical trajectory, Fukuyama argues, shows that market liberalism has been constantly moving towards “the elimination of the conventional and cultural sources of inequality” (290). Note here the logic of postponement attached to “universality”—just as liberal democracy is potential universality, the universality of market liberalism has not yet materialized. And what this unfinished universality entails is the radical discrepancy of the universal and the particular. Because the universality in question here is abstract, spurious, and post-historical, concrete social problems are rendered as merely “historical” obstacles on the universality's way to “the elimination of the conventional sources of inequality” (290). Then, what Fukuyama means by historical is something like “merely particular”—that is, contingent on particular cultural or conventional settings. Here again, the central logic is that of spatialization. Once the empirical end of the Soviet Union is transferred onto the abstract notion of the (potentially!) universal validity of liberal democracy, what is properly historical is also transformed into “conventional and cultural barriers.” The result is devastating; in Fukuyama's idiosyncratic use—that of an essentialist
individualism—the universality of liberal democracy becomes a sort of political market where political normativity is replaced by individuals' “democratic” movement, which, in turn, is presumed to eliminate political irrationalities. Neoliberalism, in a nutshell, builds itself upon the self-sustaining mechanism of the market, and it does so only by bringing into its immanence the death sentence of political normativity. If Fukuyama sees society “now at a point where we cannot imagine a world substantially different from our own, in which there is no apparent or obvious way in which the future will represent a fundamental improvement over our current order, then we must also take into consideration the possibility that History itself might be at an end (51),” it is precisely because he chose this perspective.

All in all, one cannot deny that a strong sense of an ending governs our contemporary society: the “end” has become part and parcel of our cultural, economic, and political life, as various discourses announce and conceptualize certain “ends.” To be more precise, all of these responses have a certain end as their foundational moment that, in turn, continually fuels their logical movements. The “end” is not simply a diagnosis of the present; the end is immanent to the discourses' diagnoses themselves. The end is that which must constantly reappear since the logic of these diagnoses is conditioned upon the perpetual inscription of the end moment. For example, neoliberalism is understood as the only political alternative that remains in our current moment, just as much as postmodernism operates a constant reminder of our society's difference from previous societies. While it is true that the sense (or “ethos”) of pervasive ending structures the rhythm of much contemporary thought, what causes the pervasiveness of these endings is not at all clear.
At this precise point, one cannot help but be reminded of Marx’s observation that the trajectory of capitalism is necessarily punctuated by crises. It is true that the problems facing our society are unprecedented; but crisis with unforeseeable solution has always been the case. In other words, as Hegel explains with his “cunning of history,” any rational knowledge cannot form foreknowledge about the advance of history. The current crisis, by definition, always comes out of our past, and thus the present moment fundamentally lacks the solution or resolution of the crisis at the time of its occurrence; to imagine beyond our age and its crisis is simply impossible since our thought and language are limited by various ideological and historical limitations. Viewed from this perspective, the various discourses of the contemporary apocalypse, while the insights from these end-time discourses are never to be taken lightly, are “apocalyptic” in so far as they actively position themselves as apocalyptic. In other words, the apocalyptic discourses have to be qualitatively distinguished from the many catastrophic, often inter-related, objective phenomena that can be described under the broad term of globalization—the ecological and environmental disasters, the unrestrained growth of bio-genetics, the recent financial crisis and its world-wide consequence, energy depletion, the enlarging gap between the rich and the poor, etc. And all these “apocalyptic” phenomena exist regardless of the various end discourses; apocalyptic discourse is but one possible response among many. Still, the point to be made about these phenomena is that the scope and impact of these exceed the capacity of our current political, national, cultural, economic setting—be it the international flow of finance capital or human capital, or the global ecological crisis, or the enlarging gap between north and south coming from a capitalist world system, or the bio-genetics or property rights whose
market-induced self-fertilization de-codifies the ethical and legal fabric of society.

The crucial distinction between Marx and many contemporary postmodern movements is found in Marx's notorious “infrastructure,” otherwise known as the mode of production. But Marx's “economic determinism” cannot be read as a naïve materialism or a stubborn dualistic world view.\(^3\) As the well-known Marxian phrase “man-made history” exemplifies\(^4\), subjective intervention holds the power to mold our life world. Marx's point here is neither that of social constructivism nor the monolithic abstraction of measured economic objectivity. Consigning economics to the determining element in the final instance is to see the mode of production as the historical horizon in which conscious human intervention is practiced upon reality in order to change the historical horizon. In other words, while the historical materiality of the mode of production cannot be denied, it has always been the task of politics (politics broadly defined as to include cultural politics) to try to materialize collective longing. Even if the utopian attempt ultimately fails due to the present ideological and material constraints, the fundamental impulse to change the society into a better place cannot be discarded because that is what collectivity amounts to. And herein lies the anti-politicality of various end-time discourses. In other words, politics has always been the endeavor to represent/materialize a better future within the confines of the present; once a discourse conceptualizes the present with the idea of end, there is not much to explore except for an uncritical celebration or a disapproving nihilism.

That said, it seems clear that globalization (or late capitalism in Jameson's term) has become our historical horizon, and the many end-time discourses are particular narrative positions in response to globalization. With their pronounced “end” as the
unquestionable premise of the very discourses, their narrative of end becomes a kind of structural status quoism as well as the foreclosure of the analysis of its own historical condition of existence. For example, Baudrillard's extreme version of end-narrative is, due to its own locality, blind to the historical condition that generates the very theory. The historical condition is, of course, the uneven development of capitalism; his theory will not stand the scrutiny of reality where the “reproduction” or “exchange,” far from replacing “production” or “utility,” depends on production and exploitation of those who cannot be explained by the logic of surplus—the marginalized of the uneven development of global capitalism. His theory, in other words, has only partial explanatory power as an investment in a local social phenomenon—the emergence of hyper-reality or of multiple narratives as a new and important site of our experience. Here the locality of the theory precisely comes from the misconstrued universalization of the locality. The point is not that one should be able to thoroughly grasp and theorize the totality of globalization—that is not possible anyways. Rather, the point is that, even though globalization poses an immense challenge that is perhaps beyond our capacity, ideological, cultural, political limitation cannot be legitimized as a grounds for some declaration of the end.

The scandal of the postmodern meta-narrative of “end,” then, lies in its voluntary inability to look at its own historical conditions of possibility from which it emerges. Precisely because it functions on the basis of the impossibility of representing historical contents, the way to sublation is systematically arrested. The postmodern sublime is an expression of this systematic arrest of historical dialectics. As long as the postmodern sublime has unrepresentibility at its core, it is urgent to develop various political and aesthetic forms that will, in distinction to the regime of the postmodern, represent our
concrete life experience.

2. The politics of Postmodernism and its Beyond

While postmodern artworks establish their own aesthetic sublimity by championing a plurality of difference and preference, many postmodernists emphasize one undeniable merit that qualitatively differentiates postmodernism from modernism: democracy. Though there are many different names for this vision of democracy—from Ihab Hassan's classic argument of pluralism, Leslie Fiedler's praise of pop culture as a border crossing (between high and low cultures), Arthur Danto's the end of history, Linda Hutcheon's politics of representation, Rosalind Krauss's nuanced approach to “political” sculpture, Steven Best and Douglas Keller's broad historical endorsement of postmodernism—all these thinkers of postmodernism point out the “political” achievement of postmodernism. While drawing the topography of postmodernism is not possible here (which requires a vast amount of close reading of many individual works) and simplifying their complicated arguments in a wholesale manner into a single narrative (let alone ignoring many meaningful “political” attempts in the practice of many postmodern artists) is not the aim of this paper, it seems possible to underscore the question their “political” engagement raises.

The central tenet of postmodernism's political engagement is that various postmodern arts renounce, deconstruct, parody, and de-differentiate conventional boundaries, such as high/low art, reality/virtuality, author/reader, and one medium from another. The logic is that because the aesthetic purity legislated by high art academism essentially makes itself antagonistic to the people's experience of the existing society,
though this experience may be mediatized, commodified, and mass-cultural, aesthetics and people's life have been dissociated. Accordingly, if the people's various everyday life experiences and their multiple voices were suffocated in high modernism's aesthetic transcendence, the postmodern artistic immanence in our life will subvert high modernism's autonomy, and thus collapse life into art by returning to the representation and presentation of everyday life objects. In other words, in spite of the positional difference between theorists of postmodernism (for example, Hassan's pluralism might well be critiqued as “ludic” postmodernism by Best and Kellner which they oppose to “postmodernism of resistance”), the political thread that binds various postmodern movements is the democratic impulse to give voices to people's variously different life experience.

However, before we celebrate the democracy ensuing from the collapse of life and art and before we appreciate the many individual political artworks, especially found in the *October* group, it seems crucial to examine the meaning and effect of the postmodern method of eclecticism which has different names such as parody, pastiche, assemblage, and intertextuality along with its political pluralism, relativism, and multiculturalism. Take Jacques Rancière's example of *Untitled* by Josephine Meckseper exhibited in the Seville Biennial 2006. In it, while the background is taken up with anti-war demonstrators holding placards, a dustbin is foregrounded with its contents overflowing onto the ground. Comparing Meckseper's with Martha Rosler's 1970's photomontage series “Bring the War Home,” Rancière argues that while Rosler's image consists of heterogeneous elements (images of the Vietnam war and its victims vs.

images of a happy American domestic interior), the photograph of the demonstrators and
the dustbin “underscores their basic homogeneity” in that “political radicalism” as well as “a phenomenon of youth fashion” belong to “the same reality” (28). Further, he argues that despite the difference in their respective assumptions of reality (in the former, the appearance of interior luxury in an American family is contrasted with the hidden reality of war; in the latter, the protestors against the “distant war” (emphasis mine) are in fact consumers of 911 images as the over-consumption at the feet of them demonstrates, and thus the photograph testifies to the disappearance of the contrast of appearance and reality), they inherit the same didactic critical tradition where the author tries to show what the reader/spectator “does not know how to see” (29).

But Rosler's aesthetics depend not so much on uncovering the “hidden reality” as upon their “collage” of contrasting images. In an already de-realized, fragmented, mediatized society, the critical edge of her photomontage lies not in the indexical presentation of hidden reality, but in the negatively expressed impulse towards totality that the carefully constructed contrast inevitably calls for. In other words, Rosler's aesthetic is essentially a modernist one where the sublime is, in the case of Balloons, the dead infant that, with its absolute materiality, defies any representation except by way of its form-collage. Meanwhile, what determines the relation of Meckseper's two disparate elements is that of subsumption, rather than homogeneity. The focal point of the photograph is not equally given to the protestors and the dustbin with cans around it. In other words, the message is that “even” a political protest cannot be otherwise than the consumption of commodities. What the asymmetricality of the “contrast” implies is, then, that the protest against the war in Iraq and Afghanistan can be easily replaced by any other “political” consumption because the street demonstration is rendered as political
spectacle within the spatial logic of the photograph. In this sense, what is ultimately problematized is not the particular political reality that the demonstrators are against, but the all-embracing commodity culture. Further, the subsumption of one by the other also generates parallax views that, in turn, invoke political cynicism; the gaze that the dustbin and spilled cans generate is a properly postmodern parallax which is indifferent, cynical, and/or contingent to whatever the political slogan is.

Rancière's comparison with Rosler's photomontage is pertinent; the point is that one cannot not compare Meckseper with Rosler, or postmodernism with modernism. If Meckseper's photographic image followed the same logic as Rosler's, it would be banal, non-creative, or at most, ingenuous. In other words, Rosler's aesthetic construction inevitably registers the “reality” of war as its content, and Meckseper's aesthetics start where Rosler's modernism ends. The relationship is, of course, one of commentary or intertextuality. Of course, Rosler's commodity photograph is also a commentary on Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and other pop artists. The problem is this intertextuality can go on and on. As a result, any political content, such as Meckseper's anti-war protest, is exposed to the risk of being another spectacle, which Meckseper's art emblematically demonstrates. In full postmodernism where “there is no outside text,” political representations are viewed as systematic disseminations of various texts, images, and fragments. Where political life has been volatilized, the dispersal of meaning through the web of intertextuality looms large. If the modern “master” narrative provides at least a certain normativity, the postmodern declaration of the end of the normativity invites radical relativism in areas of the political.

Still, Meckseper's photograph has a strong critical fiber and its power comes from
its critique of the image as a commodity. But the power is acquired not by constructing
an image that transcends our everyday life, as is the case of Rosler, but through a
complete immanence in consumerism. Rosler's utopian form is radically dismantled onto
what Lyotard calls “that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in
presentation itself” (81). Here, the central object “dustbin” does not function as Rosler's
dead infant does, condensing the aesthetic/formal resolution of its fragmentary and
frustrating incapacity to politically represent what is not war-like society. Rather, the
dustbin is, as long as it is a work of art—that is, as long as it forms an intertextual
network with other artworks—a (non-)commodity that nurtures itself from intertextuality.
Put differently, the dustbin is a commodity; but at the same time it is severed from the
commodity world by way of its constant announcement of the end of modernist
representation. What the dustbin ultimately crystallizes, then, is the postmodern sublimity
that comes from the concoction of commoditiness and a theory of forms of art.

Given the sheer number of postmodern art strands (depending on the art form they
problematize), the argument for the democracy of postmodern art seems facile. The
historical and political contents are diffused onto relativized multiple narratives. What a
spectator/reader has access to in postmodernism is not so much their everyday life as the
complicated artistic theory of end. Furthermore, if it is ever possible to detach aesthetic
theory from the postmodern art commodity or to completely collapse the distance
between author and reader, that would simply mean the total governance of market.
Simply put, if we eliminate all the normative struggles from aesthetics and politics, good
or bad, what would be left are only markets. In other words, if the market utilizes various
political logics as marketable “styles” or “images”—which is already happening—the
postmodern sublimity is that which sustains the aesthetic normativity which finds its place only in museum and gallery and without which art and politics would become objects conditioned by the “freedom to choose” or more cynically, the freedom to consume.

From a slightly different perspective, one might say that the political and aesthetic crisis of our contemporary is not new. For example, various 20th century avant-gardists concerned themselves with the crisis of art and life in bourgeois society. But as Peter Burger succinctly explains, the avant-gardists' attempt to “organize a new life praxis from a basis in art (49)” ended up with a tragedy:

An art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance. During the time of the historical avant-garde movements, the attempt to do away with the distance between art and life still had all the pathos of historical progressiveness on its side. But in the meantime, the culture industry has brought about the false elimination of the distance between art and life, and this also allows one to recognize the contradictoriness of the avant-garde undertaking. (50)

The point of Burger's argument is not that the avant-gardist movement was a failure. Rather, the point is that their failure itself is the expression of their profound sense of crisis. What they were not able to foresee was the movement from the opposite side; if avant-garde art was to try merge life into aesthetics, the culture industry was trying to aesthetics into commercial life. Still, the avant-gardists' failure is not farcical but tragic because what characterized their movements was a sense of historical urgency. Likewise, Benjamin's 1940 argument in his “Thesis on Philosophy of History” that “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of exception' in which we live is not the exception but rule” (257) is an expression of the urgent historical necessity of a materialist dialectic in which people's lived lives can acquire relevancy against the fascist regime. While
postmodernism also shares a sense of crisis, the crucial difference seems to lie in its normalization of the state of exception—which is the basis of its sublimity. What postmodernism is missing in its life/art negotiation is the temporality of life events as well as its own historicity. The perpetual and pervasive end of modernist forms along with postmodernism’s intertextuality essentially makes any historical content a matter of parallax views—a problem of “present” perspectives.

Needless to say, the conundrum of postmodernism springs from the present condition of our society as it is de-realized, fragmentalized, textualized, and image-saturated. Life is governed by commodity, art is conscripted by industry. And this dismal situation is, in fact, the world that Adorno was witnessing in his *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. As is well known, under the enlightenment's rational paradigm, objects’ relation to subjects is instrumental—i.e., the knowing subjects exhaust the identity of objects through “concepts.” As instrumental reason governs the world and as exchange value dominates the commodity relationship, the non-identity of objects (objects as they are) is subsumed under Enlightenment reason. Here even human subjects become instrumental as they lose their meaning outside the seamless web of subjective/instrumental production and consumption. Objects, then, lose their “reality” in the unity on the axis of the privileged “enlightenment reason.”

For the Enlightenment, only what can be encompassed by unity has the status of an existent or an event; its ideal is the system from which everything and anything follows. Its rationalist and empiricist versions do not differ on that point. Although the various schools may have interpreted its axioms differently, the structure of unitary science has always been the same. ... . The multiplicity of forms is reduced to position and arrangement, history to fact, things to matter. (4)

The historical fulfillment of the enlightenment project is negative. The project mis-carried to the point where the consummation of enlightenment coincides with the
absolute domination of instrumental reason. The result is that “Absolute subject,” as Adorno puts it, is “subjectless. The self lives solely through transformation into otherness; as the secure residue of the subject which cuts itself off from everything alien, it becomes the blind residue of the world” (Prisms 263). The negative, then, is true. The mediation of the negative by (genuine) reason is, Adorno suggests, the engine of disenchantment. The appearance of the fulfillment of Enlightenment promise is true; its domination has no exception. But it is also untrue because what dominates is, contrary to its own claim, not the Spirit/subjectivity.

Thus, the power of literature for Adorno does not come from the mimetic function of realism precisely because the “reality” itself is already fragmented, reified, and instrumentalized. Rather, the kind of literature that is privileged for Adorno is one that seems completely immersed/saturated in the instrumental reason of the commodity world and thus that invokes/testifies to the already fragmented reality and consciousness as fragmented. The main characters in Kafka's stories or Beckett's Endgame are thoroughly permeated by the logic of late capitalism to the degree that they think and act like things/objects. The very loss of subjectivity in the enclosure of capitalist coordination is what makes Kafka's characters not only problematic but also testimonial—that is, they capture the very “truth” of late capitalist society. From this sheer governance of late capitalism comes Adorno's famous dictum that “[art] becomes social by virtue of its oppositional position to society itself, a position it can occupy only by defining itself as autonomous” (qtd. in Jameson, Late Marxism 179). In other words, from the very beginning the (modernist) aesthetic institution has that which is negative within its own institutional logic. The dilemma is that the absolute denial of “social” content is no less
impossible than a demand for its absolute autonomy from the market. This is why the modernist investment in form and style and the sublime is grasped only in terms of its “aesthetic” reconciliation of social/historical problems. Of course, during the valorization process of the aesthetic institution there emerge various versions of modernism: from Flaubert's well-known “impossibility” to write “a book about nothing” “which would be held together by the internal strength of its style” (The Letters of Gustave Flaubert 154), Joyce's sublime epiphany, to Greenberg's medium-specificity. But ultimately the power of modernism lies not in the unity of form and content (Flaubert's impossibility) but in the disunity that is codified through the aesthetic unity of the sublime.

If we can extrapolate Adorno's historical account of the modernist aesthetic institution to our contemporary moment, we can see that the postmodern promise of democracy is premised by the spatialization of historical contradiction. Though the elitism of high modernism is a problem to be overcome, it is not only a problem of our contemporary art-life space but also a problem that has been developed historically. Still, Adorno's aestheticism is not satisfactory. It is not because Adorno's diagnosis of late capitalism is irrelevant or his anti-social aestheticism is itself naïve. On the contrary, it is because Adorno's vision has been fulfilled with a vengeance. What the culture industry's advancement amounts to is the commercialization of the entire globe, including aesthetics. As late capitalism's hottest commodity, aesthetics becomes an inventory of styles from which the market gets its most profitable source.

All this apocalyptic situation oddly resonates with Hegel's “the being of Spirit is a bone” (Phenomenology 208), where historically limited and absurd-sounding appearance is a motor of the further process of logical negation and cultural/historical sublation.
Hegel's point in the context of *Phenomenology* is that the pseudo-science (phrenology)'s judgment, “spirit is a bone” (spirit is a thing), is ultimately grasped as a tragedy—a tragedy of observational reason in its attempt to understand spirit. Through this failure, the observing reason moves toward what seems external to “science” at this stage—namely, the realm of culture and community where normativity such as Sittlichkeit (ethical life) plays a central role. In other words, the absurdity of a phenomenon is not simply discarded as irrelevant, in which case the absurdity is not overcome but simply dismissed by way of a logic that is external to the said phenomenon, but rather is sublated by the contradiction inherent to the phenomenon, in which case the “truth” lies in the absurdity that sustains its appearance and propels a dialectical movement beyond itself.

The dialectical movement of sublation is “the immanent transcending, in which the one-sidedness and restrictedness of the determinations of the understanding displays itself as what it is, i.e., as their negation” (*Encyclopedia* 128). If our postmodern contemporary is plagued by the immediacy of spirit and bone, aesthetics and industry, and life and market, the moment of sublation should be found within our apocalyptic life experience.

However, the dialectical movement beyond itself requires negation as a crucial moment: spirit is not a bone. Simple and easy as it may seem, the pervasive and eloquent narrative of end in postmodernism avows and disavows that everything is bone or commodity. Or, perhaps what postmodernism tries to say with its sublimity is that “spirit is not a bone, but the only thing available for us is a bone.” To break out of the immediacy and mediate our historicity is challenging. But it has always been challenging.

For Lukács, literature is a form giving act—a work of mediation. In his *Theory of the Novel*, he defines form as a fundamental vehicle of meaning.
For crime and madness are objectivations of transcendental homelessness – the homelessness of an action in the human order of social relations, the homelessness of a soul in the ideal order of a supra-personal system of values. Every form is the resolution of a fundamental dissonance of existence; every form restores the absurd to its proper place as the vehicle, the necessary condition of meaning. (61–2)

Though Lukácsian realism is not possible after the disintegration of organic society where a “world-historical” individual concretely condenses disparate social conflicts and contradictions, his insight about the author's conscious role in mediating people's concrete (historical) experience cannot be over-estimated. This conscious mediation of history demands a new historico-aesthetic form just as realism and montage were two great forms that gave meaningful shape to their respective historical experiences. For this, before readily taking up the pervasive rhythm of apocalypse in our postmodern life, one must ask questions: “who is suffering from what apocalypse and how do we mediate the suffering?”

3. Structure of the Dissertation and Chapter Descriptions

The starting point of my dissertation project is, as I hope it is already clear through this introduction, the sense of an ending that has become part and parcel of our cultural and political life. While many popular genres that dominate our cultural landscape such as novels, movies, and pop culture generally utilize this sense of an ending, the sense itself is oddly dictated by playfulness and complacency. In this way, apocalypse in our age is an apocalypse without apocalyptic urgency, a formalized apocalypse without content, an infinitely postponed apocalypse. Of course, this sense of apocalypse is a historical response to the loss of historicity in our cultural life; faced with the formidable transformation of the society by globalization, the traditional ways of
historicizing and representing the community and its value are replaced with the immediate expression of this frustration in its displaced form of the complacent apocalypse. Traditional politics are privatized and a survivalist economics of neoliberalism ascends to political arena.

However, the most problematic part of our contemporary apocalypse is not its phenomenal prevalence in our society but the structural reproduction of the form of this particular apocalypse in areas of aesthetics and politics. What is urgent and relevant, in other words, is to regain historicity by rethinking and revisiting the conditions of possibility of political and aesthetic practice, instead of immediately responding to ongoing globalization. In the following chapters, I argue that one possibility to regain a critical historicity can be found in the renewed application of the Lukacian notion of author, Brechtian defamiliarization, and Adornian aesthetic dialectics. In other words, the following chapters are not the investigation of the contemporary apocalypse per se; but they consist in my search for new politico-aesthetic possibilities against the background of the figure of imagined aesthetic apocalypse.

Chapter 2 is a theoretical case study on “Death of the Author” discourse. Here I argue that this discourse is a highly sophisticated version of apocalyptic thinking. While the discursive systematization of “Death of the Author” and its aesthetic generalization make it seem like the only possible ground for our aesthetic practice, I argue that the “Death of the Author” discourse is a historically particular form of discourse that is open and waiting for needed intervention. While “Death of the Author” discourses have emerged as powerful tools for understanding our historical present and for making interventions in contemporary literary work, they are developed in a way that subsumes
the author’s social function and responsibility under the operations of a discursive economy. Against this phenomenon, I argue that a renewed and historicized conceptualization of the author is essential for the representation of our historical present and that the aesthetic form is the political vehicle for the author to engage with the reader and her material conditions.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are my readings of literary works. In Chapter 3, I read Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. *The Road* is an interesting literary experiment because it tries to negotiate the long-rooted contradiction of high literature and low culture. Translating the conventions of post-apocalyptic genre fiction into aesthetic language, McCarthy creates a highly aestheticized world of post-apocalypse. However, I argue that, despite its complicated aesthetic nature, *The Road* ends up with a version of the formalized apocalypse without content, which is all the more problematic precisely because it is thoroughly ideological due to its radical refusal of any ideological underpinnings.

In Chapter 4, I read Zoe Wicomb’s *David’s Story* as a remarkable realist experiment that finds a new possibility at the limit of traditional realism. Wicomb’s realism may be called a fragmentary realism as the novel represents South Africa’s unrepresentable historical present by weaving many failures of fragmentary attempts to represent South African historicity as such. Self-consciously refusing to subscribe to any available discourse, the novel constructs a world where the narrator, the main character, the author, the reader, South Africa’s present, and many literary texts are engaged in a competing and dialectical interaction.
The last Chapter is about a South Korean film, *Secret Sunshine*. Here Director Lee Chang-Dong’s politico-aesthetic form dialectically imbricates two opposing forms of realism and melodrama. By pairing an occasion of personal suffering with a general vision of South Korea’s historical present and by communicating with the spectator through Brectian defamiliarization, Lee’s film warns against the danger of immediate representation of the suffering on the one hand and finds a way to entice the spectator to engage in *what caused* the suffering on the other. Lee’s experiment is all the more significant because it finds a possibility for political art in documentary realism, melodrama, and allegory all of which have been thought to have exhausted their political potency.
This is not to argue that Foucaultian theory as a whole has to be discarded. Foucault’s power theory, for example, has still an immense explanatory power. However, his genealogical methodology seems to have been largely uncritically accepted and circulated. Genealogy famously eschews the grand historical concepts such as class, nation, and capitalism. In this rejection of master-narrative, it pursues the traces of certain concepts whose winding and contingency-driven route to current form is marked by historically differentiated meanings and applications. While this is a useful political practice, it risks jettisoning political principle as it excludes “grand” concepts as linear, teleological, and oppressive. Thus, for example, Nietzsche’s genealogy of morals makes sense by rendering the normativity of the suffering/struggle as contingent on historical interpretations. What is most troubling here is the ambiguous positionality of the writing subject of genealogy. It seems that the methodology of genealogy effectively precludes the question of subject as Foucault’s conceptualization of subject as both subjection and subjectification shows, which ultimately leads the genealogy to normalization. However, Foucault’s concept of subject should not be taken as an ‘objective’ explanation or a neutral phenomenon; rather, his conceptualization itself is his subjective position. In other words, his theory of subject, despite its explanatory power, endorses a particular subjective attitude towards society and discourse. This attitude is one that sees the present state as the end point of normalization; the starting point of a genealogical project could be easily the end point without a political principle. While the genealogical emphasis on contingency often leads to the necessity for the political change, it can equally lead to the acknowledgement of the status quo.

Here is the complete passage where Hegel explains “cunning of reason”: “Reason is cunning as it is mighty. Its cunning generally consists in the mediating activity which, while it allows its objects to act on another according to their own nature and wear each other out, accomplishes its own purpose without itself mingling in the process. In this sense we can say that with regard to the world and its process, divine providence behaves with absolute cunning. God lets men, who have their particular passions and interests, do as they please, and what results is the accomplishment of his intentions, which are something other than those whom he employs directly concerned about” (The Encyclopaedia Logic I §209A).

Raymond Williams argues that traditional Marxists’ account of base and superstructure misses Marx’s point of determination—that is, Marx’s original criticism was “directed against the separation of areas’ of thought and activity (as in the separation of consciousness from material production) and against the related evacuation of specific content—real human activities—by the imposition of abstract categories” (78). The charge of Marxism economic determinism seems to be still around. But it seems that this very economic determinism is at the core of neoliberalism and many postmodern discourses as they consider the current economic setting as the horizon for any further human intervention. Needless to say, Marx’s infrastructure or mode of production does not refer to the current economic edifice.

In Marx and Engels’ first joint publication, The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism (1844), the concept of man-made-history is clearly explained: “History does nothing...It is man, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; ‘history’ is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve its own aims, history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims” (79-80). Here Marx is not simply saying that men can do anything. The context of man-made-history is that historical possibility has to be matched by the subject’s active intervention to realize it. The whole human act is unfolded in the field of history for Marx. The liberatory possibility (for proletariat in the book’s context) is also what historical process necessitates. (79-80)

For detailed arguments, see Leslie Fiedler, “Close the Border—Close that Gap” where he argues “Pop Art is, whatever its overt politics, subversive: a threat to all hierarchies insofar as it is hostile to order and ordering in its own realm” (360). See also Ihab Hassan’s “The Question of Postmodernism,” Linda Hutcheon’s The Politics of Postmodenism, Krauss’ “Scultpere in the Expanded Field,” and Best & Keller’s The Postmodern Turn (especially chap. 4 “Postmodernism in the Arts: Pastiche, Implosion, and the Popular”).

Best and Keller borrow the terms from Hal Foster and Teresa Ebert. Ludic postmodernism (Ebert) or “the reactionary postmodernism” (Foster) refers to aesthetic practice that indulges in playfulness of linguistic and formal experiments and generally affirms/exploits the status quo. As opposed to it, “the postmodernism
of resistance” (Foster) questions and tries to change the society by deconstructing high modernism and reactionary postmodernism. Keller & Best, “Postmodernism in the Arts”; Foster “Introduction” in the Anti-Aesthetic; Teresa Elbert, Ludic Feminism and After.
Chapter 1. The Form of the Author

1. Introduction

The term “author” has been one of the most problematized concepts throughout the modern and post-modern times to the extent to which “author” has become an opposite code word for “reader” or even “democracy.” The term “author,” especially due to a series of powerful discourses that eventually structured our current cultural geography in terms of author-reader contradiction, has been rendered as a now obsolete cultural/literary “authority/tyranny” (Roland Barthes), “an ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning” (Michel Foucault), a social construction constituted by an “interpretive community” (Stanley Fish), an anachronistic/romantic conception of authorial “intention” (Jacques Derrida), and/or a mistakenly privileged position ensuing from the modern—as opposed to “contemporary”—regime of mimesis (Jacques Ranciere). \(^1\) In fact, the contestations around the author and authorship have been the main currents of the modern and postmodern literary edifices. Also, the discourse of the “birth of the reader,” as the logical corollary of the death of the author, has been an almost clichéd postmodern practice that has come to dominate our reading culture. The recent surge of “surface reading” is an academic event that consummates this long history of the relegation of authorship. \(^2\) For the project of surface reading is an investigation of “the way we read now” whose self-confidence consists in not raising the question of the author in their proclamation that the purpose of surface reading is “to register what the text itself is saying” (8). Because the primary concern for the authors of surface reading is to liberate readers from Jamesonian “symptomatic” reading which moves “beyond the text and
across several interpretive ‘horizons’” (6) in search of “hidden, repressed, deep” meaning (1), their rendering of the text as surface cut off from its author or author’s historical background is an unsaid foundation for the argument of surface readers.

The coupling of the problematization of the author and the empowerment of reader has been deeply embedded in the historical institutionalization of literary and cultural practices, which, by definition, cannot be fully grasped without an inquiry into the larger problematic of cultural and social transformations. The various forms of thought in which the author is validated and sanctioned, in other words, are intricately imbricated with a constellation of socio-political power dynamics whose force is beyond the magnitude of the narrowly defined literary space. Commonsensically speaking, then, if authority is historically given to the institutional practice in favor of the readership and against authorship, the legitimization of this particular form of practice is well suited in the broader process of the construction of social consensus. Further, the social consensus is usually supposed to reflect or mirror the changing material and technological environment.

However, what David Harvey’s analysis of neoliberalism shows is that a legitimization process is a much more violent one—that is, the current social and material edifice is constructed through neoliberalism’s systematic attempt to “[penetrate] ‘common-sense’ understanding” (41). While global response to neoliberalism in “many parts of the world has increasingly been to see it as a necessary, even wholly ‘natural,’ way for the social order to be regulated,” the process of procuring hegemony by mobilizing cultural values and “fears (of communists, immigrants, strangers, or ‘others’)” and manipulating ‘common-sense’ is achieved by “mask[ing] other realities” (41). 3 The
crucial point in this paper’s context is that this neoliberal revolution “had to be accomplished by democratic means” (41). And by “democratic means” he means by discursive and institutional practices. Of course, it is not possible that whatever discursive and institutional practice emerges does so without a material foundation. However, it is more than possible that a particular discursive practice gains hegemony and thus transforms the social and material environment by “masking other realities” (39). In fact, the power of a discourse lies in its ability to find its realities.

Explaining his project of discourse, Foucault succinctly summarizes the structural and structuring power of discourse in terms of its relation to what he calls “‘pre-discursive’ experiences.”

I have no wish at the outset to exclude any effort to uncover and free these ‘pre-discursive’ experiences from the tyranny of the text. But what we are concerned with here is not to neutralize discourse, to make it the sign of something else, and to pierce through its density in order to reach what remains silently anterior to it, but on the contrary to maintain it in its consistency, to make it emerge in its own complexity. What, in short, we wish to do is to dispense with ‘things’. To ‘depresentify’ them. … To substitute for the enigmatic treasure of ‘things’ anterior to discourse, the regular formation of objects that emerge only in discourse. To define these objects without reference to the ground, the foundation of things, but by relating them to the body of rules that enable them to form as objects of a discourse and thus constitute the conditions of their historical appearance. (Archeology of Knowledge 47-48)

Here Foucault’s idea is that discourse is what mobilizes our experience in the first place. By providing what is said, unsaid, sayable, and unsayable, discourse functions like a frame (Foucault’s word is “grid”) in a camera shoot, in which the fundamental operation begins with demarcating the boundary. This framing functionality of discourse determines what can be registered within the discursive frame according to the logic of the discourse while relegating that which is not sayable within the discursive frame to the
outside, to the point of non-possibility. In other words, the power of discursive operation is that even the “contents” or “things” can emerge only through the discursive form.

Harvey would agree with Foucault about the power of discourse except for that Foucault’s notion of power does not provide room for the “framing” function to extend to human subjects. For discursive practice is not the final point to determine the sayable and unsayable for Harvey; discursive practice has to be checked and re-directed by human subjects and their political principle and agency. As is well-known, discourse in a Foucaultian system has a crucial functionality in the construction of subjectivity. Individuals’ subjection to discourse is immanent to individual subjectivation; individual subjects exercise discursive “practice” to assume a subject position in a given society. Though Foucaultian subjectivation does not exclude what has been designated as “praxis” in another critical tradition, Foucault essentially cuts off the collectivity from praxis by relegating collective agency to the function of discourse. Because Foucaultian discourse works through the ever-fluctuating economy of trans-subjective discursive formations where constant shifts, breaks, aleatory transformations, and discontinuity among discourses register and produce the contents of our life—what Foucault in the above passage calls “things”—terms such as break, chance, and shift take the place of the collectivity which was at the core of revolutionary politics in the Marxist tradition. What is more problematic is that since the fluctuating discursive economy takes up the function of framing (what is sayable and unsayable) in the process of discursive normalization, subjects lose the power of authoring a political frame as they become consumer and audience of discourse. Under the trans-subjective discursive economy, the production of political frame is rendered as an effect of the economy of competing discourses and,
subsequently, individuals become subjects only to the point they become consumers of discourse.

Perhaps one might want to see the legitimization process of the “Death of the Author (DOA)” as a normalization of discourses in a Foucaultian manner. If one applies his notion of discourse as a “field of strategic possibilities (37)” that provides each individual subject with the boundary of potential discursive practices, modern literary history can be seen as a series of breaks in which the dynamic process ultimately sets the grid through which our (discursive) experiences are registered. From this line of thinking, the shift from author discourse to reader discourse is immanent to the structural transformation of power dynamics in the society. This type of cultural genealogy is, in fact, very influential in explaining how the discourse on reading/reader has become a dominant norm in our literary practice. From this position, the modern and postmodern legitimization process of reading/reader-oriented discourse is neatly set in the social transition from modern to postmodern society.

However, understanding the legitimization process is much more complex because it not only invites Harvey’s question on the role of subjectivity in discourse but also involves a political evaluation of the transition from modern to postmodern society. In other words, to examine the legitimization process is to mean that one has to deal with the questions about the scope and function of cultural subjectivity, the politicality of the literary production, the ideological underpinnings for the dichotomy and choice between author and reader, the functionality and power of discourse and its relation to the material transformation, and finally the problem of periodization of modern/postmodern society. At this point, it is worth noting that the fact that there has been a legitimization process
doesn’t necessarily determine the political relevance of the reading-oriented discourse. Rather, one can’t overstate that political acts always demand an authorial determination—that is, whether it be ethical, aesthetic, and/or broadly political, political subjectivation always involves an active and new invention/framing of a collective environment where subjectivity is re-situated (or, re-situates itself) in terms of economic conditions as well as political possibility. In other words, political subjectivation is marked by its act of breaking with the ideological condition from inside (ideological in its broad sense of the word, meaning discursive as well as material). Foucault’s notion of discourse, in this sense, unwittingly witnesses its own ideological function because the framing capacity given to discourse has to be grasped as a highly ideological. For ideology operates not merely on the level of “a set of beliefs” but essentially on the level of interaction between material condition and its intellectual and aesthetic interpretation.

Perhaps questioning the legitimization of readership as a critical trend is vexing because the rise of the reader-oriented discourse seems to be a historical imperative in a postmodern society where supreme value is given to diversity. The egalitarian impulse behind the ascendancy of the discourse cannot be denied. However, the idea of empowering readership should be checked and politicized in the context of the global advance of the culture industry and its discontents. Without the proper contextualization and evaluation of the status of reader and reading culture, the praise of readership risks a mere naïveté or even an active, though unwitting, participation in the ongoing capitalization and vulgarization of readership. In fact, the shift of emphasis from author to reader in literary and artistic discourse can be understood as another version of apocalyptic discourse—“apocalyptic” in its fetishistic sense, in which the confrontation
of the current problem is postponed and displaced onto spectacular entertainment while the critical consciousness is re-directed into the indulgence in and endorsement of the status quo. For the democracy of readership is not possible in our current milieu where culture is hardly autonomous—i.e. the relationship of work of art and readership is hardly grasped on their own terms—and in which the power of money capital becomes the determinant factor in any cultural products and the way they are consumed. If the propensity to valorize readership is a simple reversal of the author-ity of modernism on the basis of the accusation of the modernism’s obsolescence, as is the case in many postmodern movements, then it misses the necessary process of examining of its own raison d’être. For what criticism needs to do is scrutinize the very conditions of discursive possibility from which the postmodern readership emerges by way of the death of the author, rather than to take the phenomenon as a given and endorse it.

2. Barthes: the Beginning of the Genealogy of “Death of the Author”

The concept of author, or the concept of authoring new forms of life, has long been rejected in the course of the exorcism of the romantic conceptualization of authoritative and unified author, in which “[A]n ‘author’ is an individual who is solely responsible—and thus exclusively deserving of credit—for the production of a unique individual work.” (Woodmansee 35). In fact, this Kantian authorization of individual subjectivity as embodying the genius creativity and novelty was a philosophical intervention that punctuated the advancement of modern subjects after the long ages of evolution of subjectivity. The Enlightenment celebration of individual authorship, however, as many authors of DOA discourse indicate, is at best a naive conceptualization without proper theorization of “work of art” or “text.” In fact, the dominant feature of
anti-author contestations is their excoriation of the unified author concept and of the assumption of text as the embodiment of author’s (unified) voice or intention. This critical practice, however, is anachronistic. To argue for the “death of the author” on the basis of this critique of romantic authorship is not productive in itself because the refutation of the romantic concept already lost its aesthetic and political relevance and stopped serving as a ground for the empowerment of readership. However, reading DOA as a still dominant discourse in our cultural environment requires much more than a matter of finding logical (in-)correctness. The critical practice of reading a current discourse demands a critical distance from which to observe the range and power of the discourse in our cultural life, rather than understanding and focusing on its inner complexity and dynamic. If the “understanding” approach is usually drawn to the positive aspect of a discursive event, the “distance” approach has to also deal with the negative of the discourse—what it does not, can not, and will not say. For what matters in reading a discourse is never simply whether it is logically correct or not. Rather, the reading has to reach the premises that determine its ideological nature in a way in which the discursive form sways its power on our life. That is because a discourse, with its relatively coherent protean (or post-structural) economy, is capable of its reproduction only in a given socio-cultural environment and because it holds practical effect in spite of, and because of, its logical flaws, reading a discourse such as DOA has to include an investigation of its socio-political value—what kind of political action it endorses and invalidates, what kind of social image it authenticates and forecloses. This reading, in practice, requires a critical reconstruction of the genealogy of the discourse in a way not to endorse the genealogy but to locate its reproduction mechanism.
The foundational figure for DOA discourse is Roland Barthes, and the starting point of DOA argument is to locate the transition “from work to text.” With this fundamental move in criticism, literary practice shifts its focus from an author and her labor to the dynamics of text in and for itself. This shift from authorial production to the circulation of language and to consumption by readers is ambitious to the degree that what is initially formulated as a perspectival shift soon leads to the establishment of a body of discourse, a science of reading and writing.

The work is caught up in a process of filiation. Are postulated: a determination of the work by the world … , a consecution of works amongst themselves, and a conformity of the work to the author. The author is reputed the father and the owner of his work: literary science therefore teaches respect for the manuscript and the author’s declared intentions, while society asserts the legality of the relation of author to work … . As for the Text, it reads without the inscription of the Father. Here again, the metaphor of the Text separates from that of the work: the latter refers to the image of an organism which grows by vital expansion, by ‘development’… ; the metaphor of the Text is that of the network … it can be read without the guarantee of its father, the restitution of the inter-text paradoxically abolishing any legacy.” (“From Work to Text” 160-161)

… writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body of writing. (“Death of the Author” 142)

Barthes’ rhetoric that calls for the attention to the “tyranny” of the author, as many readers of the Barthes’ texts indicated, is bold and effective. The author-father figure in the romantic institutionalization of author is rendered here as the unified and uniform source of meaning. As Barthes frequently evokes the Author-God analogy, the term author sends a “theological” meaning to the reader as it governs the signification movement, restricts the interpretational boundary, and imposes a unified meaning by supposing the unitary and expressive cause to the textual result (146). Here the rejection of the author provides the ground for further elaboration of a science of discourse on
“writing” per se. By pitting the linear interpretative “developmental” logic of “author” against the egalitarian “network” logic, “the removal of the author,” Barthes writes, “is not merely an historical fact or an act of writing; it utterly transforms the modern text” (145).

In the new science of writing, authorial voice is not only unnecessary but also systematically silenced.

In complete contrast [to the author], the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now. The fact is … that writing can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, ‘depiction’; rather, it designates exactly what linguists … call a performative, a rare verbal form … in which the enunciation has not other content … than the act by which it is uttered … . For him, … the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin—or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins. (145-6)

The footprints of the linguistic turn and the subsequent blooming of structuralism is everywhere in the above quote. Undoubtedly, this new discourse is linked with the historical transformation of the modern society. Further, Barthes’ conceptualization of text cannot be thought without its link to the institutionalization of modern aesthetics. The notion of text exemplifies the aesthetic break from romanticism and from realism in the wake of the rapid dissolution of traditional aesthetics of representation. The modern “scriptor,” equipped with a new linguistic sensibility, radically departs from representational aesthetics by evaporating ‘referent’ or ‘reality’ into textual play. What manifests in the idea of “scriptor” is, in other words, modernism’s refusal of romanticism and mimesis—mimesis as it is understood, in a rather simplistic manner (more about this later), as the one-on-one correspondence between language and world. Accordingly, the
old concept of author as a representational subject is debunked; here, author neither represents her intention (romantic author), nor even represents the outside world (realism). The text is rendered as a self-sufficient entity with its own structural unity. Barthes’ scriptor aspires to construct a non-representational aesthetic world “of a triumphant plural, unimpoverished by any constraint of representation (of imitation)” (S/Z 5). In this textual world, “the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one” (5).

While there are moments where Barthes’ conceptualization of text sounds like a full-blown postmodern theory, it should be noted that his theory of author/text is based on modernism. For Barthes’ own writing clearly shows the dichotomy of nature and culture, reality and textuality, along with his disdain for mass culture and the privileged status given to high modernist texts such as Flaubert in his analysis. The crucial phenomenon that Barthes depends on for his theorization is the autonomy of the modern aesthetic institution, which became established with the “Great Divide” which is, in turn, premised on the existence of a non-aesthetic realm of reality such as culture industry (in contradistinction to aesthetic autonomy), mediocre everyday life (as opposed to textual freedom), and capitalized reality (against aesthetic purity). Just as the modern society had to bear the unsolvable contradiction of subjective construction and objective environment, Barthes’ theoretical trajectory is structured by the modern dichotomy. The point to be made here is that Barthes’ theoretical choice is in favor of the subjective construction rather than the objective environment. If Barthes sounds like a high theory of
postmodernity, then it is because Barthes’ choice was to be developed into a dominant postmodern discourse. And this also means that there were, and have been, other alternative directions. Instead of rehearsing the complicated history of discourses, one example suffices here: fragmentation, despite its intricate relevance to Barthes’ concept of author and his structuralism, never enters the Barthian theoretical world.

Still, Barthes’ declaration of the “Death of the Author” contains many important doctrines that will grow to be major postmodern discourses. As the concept of the author is excommunicated from the text, it now becomes a writer/ scriptor whose only power is “to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them” (“Death of the Author” 146). Here, the principle of textual anteriority in DOA discourse emerges; what is anterior to a text/writing is not the author, but texts/writings—the world of writings. Writing (écriture), a subjectless performance of language, refuses to be confined by the author and opens the space of text to the playfulness of a multitude of writings. In this open space of writing, the scriptor is a functional lens for merging and diverging of textual performances. And even this functionality of scriptor cannot be conceived prior to reading; it is rather a retro-active creation in the process of reading. Consequently, in a text “of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation,” the only place where all these constituents are not lost but enjoyed is the reader. “The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the Author” (148).

Barthes’ declaration, understandably, invited many critical evaluations. Especially DOA’s apparent target—the notion of repressive author—has been criticized for its anachronistic and exaggerated claim. Corrective interventions such as Alexander
Nehamas’s author figure, Wayne Booth’s implied author, Kendall Warton’s apparent artist, William Irwin’s urauthor, have been made. While these authors’ disparate arguments cannot be summarized here in a wholesale manner, it can be argued that what they share is, as Jason Holt indicates, “the view that, without an author construct, interpretation is hamstrung” (72). This constructivism enables one to avoid what has been known as “the fallacy of intentionalism.” The author-construct, in other words, does not have a necessary co-relationship with the actual author and her intention. For example, Nehamas’s author figure is that figure which every interpretive act must postulate. The author figure is a product of interpretation in the sense that interpretation is not an act of finding what is hidden or concealed behind the text such as the author’s intended meaning, but an act of reading a text as a product of an action—writing. Within the interpretative movement, each passage, and, by extension, each book, automatically conjures up the idea of an agent, whose figure is consistently exemplified in perhaps mutually (in)consistent passages. Since interpretation is “the activity by means of which we try to construe movements and objects in the world around us as actions and their products” (103), the author figure and its consistency is constructed as the reader reads the textual movement as it is—that is, as the text’s “parts” are mutually interrelated in the interpretation process as to generate the proliferation of meaning and significance. Likewise, Warton’s apparent artist is found in the “style” of a text and Irwin’s urauthor is the reader’s construction about a hypothetical author’s intention.

While these anti-DOA arguments are persuasive in each of their accounts, it is not clear whether the author-construct effectively captures and debunks the premises on which the DOA discourse stands. For one, Barthes’s DOA is based on his reading of high
modernist literature—or what he calls writerly text; thus a political propaganda is an intentional piece of writing, but Barthes’ DOA is hardly useful or applicable for an interpretation of it. The point is that Barthes’s DOA—which is a historical response—and its postmodern version have to be distinguished. Furthermore, the return of the repressed author is also found within the discourse of DOA. Barthes’ scriptor in this discourse, for example, can be understood as a weak form of the author construct. In fact, in our literary practice, the concept of the author is almost always assumed even when one is reading DOA from the standpoint of DOA. It seems that what DOA discourse performs is not the repetition of “the death of the author” thesis itself but a construction of world-view in which the subjectivity of the author has to be reduced to its minimal and mechanical functionalism. If one starts from the place of text, which is a kind of universal regulation for DOA discourse, perhaps the best one can theorize about the author-subjectivity is the author construct. Which is to say that the author construct is essentially a product of reading. The return of the author-construct seems, in other words, perfectly commensurable with DOA. For, within the system of DOA, there is nothing that corresponds with the traditional notion of the author. What produces the text is, rather, writing (Ecriture), a structural (when emphasis is given to the text’s inner structure) or a post-structural (when emphasis is on the inter-textual fluctuating economy) movement. Once the writing becomes the principle of production, anti-mimesis follows while the readers are, as participants in the proliferation of inter-textual expansion, empowered to the position of true subjectivity.

What is not sayable in the discourse of DOA is, thus, not the concept of the author, but author-subjectivity. To argue for author-subjectivity is, however, not to argue for
going back to the classical concept of author as a unified source of meaning. Along with this, there is no denial of the status of work of art as an objective textual entity. Likewise, the intertextuality of texts is not to be dismissible. However, to argue for author-subjectivity is to look at all of these elements from a different perspective than DOA.

3. Lukács and Form

If ideology is defined as a discourse-material complex, it is because the workings of ideology have a framing power on our lives. Fredric Jameson’s notion of “the strategies of containment” explicates the way ideology operates in our society. According to him, all the cultural texts are in one way or another underpinned by the limits imposed by the “strategies of containment.” The implicit and immanent “strategies” find the subject matter to be discussed, recommend desirable forms of practice in a given time, discover new fields of study, and invent social and artistic relevance. A strategy of containment, in a sense, works like a master-narrative that “allows what can be thought to seem internally coherent in its own terms, while repressing the unthinkable which lies beyond its boundaries” (*Political Unconscious* 53). However, Jameson’s conceptualization of strategies of containment should not be taken as a version of ideological determinism. Rather, in spite of, or better, because of, the strategies of containment, many cultural movements and texts are invested in “utopian” politics. That is, even though the ideological appears to have a firm grasp of the social present, dynamic social and material changes take place because each participant’s active attempt to carve out what cannot be articulated with the symbolic means that are already reified into ideological edifice. Here, various experiential content whose nature and meaning cannot be exhausted with the languages of already established form constantly strive to
invent their forms to convey said content. In a nutshell, the dialectical movement between form and content has the power of re-framing of our collective life. Of course, constructing a fore-knowledge about our political future is not possible. For our current symbolic means, by definition, are not designed to articulate what has not yet been articulated. But precisely because of the limits imposed by the current symbolic environment, inventing a new form out of an old form, broadly speaking, is a political act of recognizing what has been oppressed and repressed in the previous regime of discourse-material complex. And this is why political subjectivation is set in motion with the invention of new forms of collective life. And therein lies the author’s power and responsibility; the essence of the author, as Lukacs argues, lies in her form-giving act—that is, the author’s capacity to frame a hitherto repressed reality brings a fissure, rupture, and discontinuity into a world of seemingly seamless ideological operation. The possibility for change and re-direction of social and cultural geography comes from the authorial act of framing a collective reality through an aesthetic form.

Already some hundred years ago, Georg Lukacs launched a prescient philosophical investigation on the relationship of author and the form of artwork. Though largely influenced by Kantian aesthetics, his “The Subject-Object Relation in Aesthetics” gives the most clear-cut expression on artistic and literary form. Lukacs starts with distinguishing aesthetic subject (author) from logical and ethical subjects which correspond respectively to the three Kantian critiques of (aesthetic) judgment, pure/logical reason, practical/ethical reason. If theoretical subjectivity is marked by its self-abolishment in its pursuit of logical objectivity and if ethical subjectivity lacks objectivity in its formulation of the norm for inner actions, aesthetic subjectivity is, while it has to be
distinguished from empirical subjectivity, one version of subjectivity in which the work of art, an autonomous objective structure, though it appears opposed to authorial subjectivity, ultimately forms a dialectical relationship with the creative subject in the course of establishing a work of art. In terms of experience, a logical statement is determined by its “objective” universality and an ethical subject is ultimately determined by her conformity to an inner law, and thus these two spheres either transcend or render substrate the vast realm of “experience.” In contrast to them, the determinate character of the aesthetic sphere is what Lukacs calls “normative experience” where “experience is itself the normative kind of conduct” (6). For the work of art, while it is a product of subjective labor, is governed by an inner norm for which “it[the work of art] has to keep away from itself (indeed, it should let sink into nonexistence, even into inconceivability) everything which doesn’t belong to this homogeneous stream or which could even impede its course” (7). Here, as in the cases of many modernists, the work of art is described as a self-sufficient objective entity. However, Lukacian aesthetic objectivity cannot be reduced to its singular thing-in-the-world status. Rather, the singular aesthetic universe of a work of art comes into being precisely because of a subjective investment in the form of art.

Once an artist sets out a journey into her creation, the process is governed by a “directedness of the subject upon a world which is completely appropriate to the immanent demands of experience, a world which is valid towards the subject in the subject’s normatively associated object, that is, in the work” (7). In other words, while the artist has to follow the inner logic of the art form, she is the one who finds the validity and directedness of the artwork at its onset. What drives the singularity of a work of art,
then, is the subject’s decision to carve out a particular aesthetic experience for the constitution of which the subject (author) is determined to sacrifice whatever is not immanent to the experience. Thus, the artistic world testifies to an unprecedented aesthetic experience whose emergence is enacted in no other way than the specific form invented by the author. The value of this aesthetic world is determined within the form of objectivity (work of art), which has to be differentiated from logical statements (where value is determined by universal or ideal applicability) and from ethical acts (where value emerges in the form of law that transcends empirical acts) respectively (13). The directed experience of a work of art, thus, achieves its aesthetic value only in its mediation of form. The author’s intention, in this case, cannot be confused with a theoretical statement or even ethical/moral injunctions. Instead, the author’s intention in the realm of aesthetics is a particular one that frames a new artistic reality and pushes it to the fulfillment of the immanent world so that an entirely incomparable (to the outside as well as to other works of art) experience/value obtains. The totality and singularity of an artwork comes from its fullness, whose autonomy is dependent on its particular form/content, which is, in turn, determined by the subject’s labor of finding/inventing a frame that will become the immanent boundary of the artwork. In this sense, the subject’s labor to authorize an experience that is only expressible through the internal logic of the form is what distinguishes an artwork from any “contingent” object (9).

Where the artist’s empirical self or intention is transformed in the workings of the immanent-constitutive logic of artwork, into a new subjectivity (which we might call author-construct using recent theoretical terms, but from a perspective of reader), there emerges the work of art, Lukacs writes, as “microcosm” whose totality owes its existence
to its “boundaries”—boundaries that “contain nothing limiting in themselves, since they are not supposed to serve as anything more than designations of the maximum degree of internal fulfillment and internal experiencing-self-fully” (12). Note that Lukacs’ logic pivots on the notion of sublation in its two-fold sense: abolishing and preserving. The subject/author produces an artwork by abolishing its empirical experience in favor of the immanent workings of an artwork; artistic objectivity preserves and fulfills the otherwise inexpressible subject’s experience precisely because it is posited/framed (the actually used German word is “Setzen,” which is variously translatable into posit, place, position, or establish) by the subject. In this sense and in this sense only, the artistic world is a product of authorial framing—a “subjectivation” (15, 17) in Lukacs’ words. However, the full realization of this subjectivity is simply unattainable. For, in spite of the subject’s aspiration for “pure subjectivity”—i.e., the subject’s intention to express what amounts to its own “reality”—the artistic process of creation is severely restricted by what might have been termed by Lukacs himself as “reification” inherent to any content-form dialectics. Since the author’s intent prior to its formalization is in principle incommunicable, she has to find an adequate form, which is the only way to make the concrete content of experience experienceable and thus communicable. But this authorial positing by way of a form immediately leads to the danger of reification. While this process is fundamentally recognized as forma formans (form as shaping) on the part of the author, the artwork is received as forma formata (form as shaped) by the reader. Lukacs writes: “as completion of artistic activity, the work wholly transcends the subject of the artist, but the work’s capacity for ideas, its going out over and beyond the mere being-an-object …, is reflected in the infinite process of artistic activity and in the fissure
which crowns this process” (21, my emphasis). The fissure, “as positing the attainment of the unattainable and as resignation in the moment of having achieved realization” is the core of Lukacian dialectics. In short, the author’s achievement lies in her failure. As the contradiction inherent to authorial subjectivity and aesthetic object is the driving force of the artistic production, the fissure is what enacts authorial framing in the first place.

The “fissure” is central in De Man’s reading; he sees the fissure as a psychological and existential element. The fissure (his English translation of “Sprung” is “leap”) is the act of “an attempt to exist in a time that would no longer be the fallen temporality of everyday existence. The artist projects himself into the future of his work as if it were possible to maintain an authentic temporality, but at the same time he knows this to be impossible, a pure gageure” (“Sublimation of Self” 44). In this reading, the thematic essence of the De Manian poetic self lies in the “authentic” self’s radical break from its everyday life experience. However, De Man’s reading is not satisfactory because the fissure in Lukacs cannot be reduced to the “sublimation of the (authorial) self” (the title of De Man’s article). Rather, Lukacian fissure/leap is one that goes in both directions—that is, the fissure (Sprung) at once liberates the author in that the posited/framed reality is enacted through an invention of a new form, and restricts the author in that the authentic authorial intent has to be transformed into the historical realm of the form that awaits the communication with the reader. Then the temporality of this created reality is utopian in the word’s Jamesonian sense—that is, the new artistic reality comes into being by violating and trespassing the limits of the already established and thus reified communicational and ideological form. At the same time, this utopian temporality is not simply about a radically different future but an embodiment of the
aspiration for an already-here-but-not-yet realized reality. In short, form, for Lukacs, is not a springboard for psychological “leap” but an essential vehicle that cannot be separated from the aesthetic content that enables communication with the reader however perilous the communication’s output may be. The art form, in other words, has two irreconcilable sides of \textit{forma formata} and \textit{forma formans}, and this very formal contradiction is not that which the author sublimates as much as the condition of possibilities for the author’s aspired-to sublation.

While proper critical attention has not been given to Lukacs’ article probably due to its phenomenological nature, re-reading it in terms of the problem of the author is worthwhile especially because Lukacs is first and foremost a theorist of the author throughout his career. Though early Lukacs is usually read as a thinker of modernist literature as opposed to his later emphasis on realism, his focus was, even when he was in full commitment to realism, on the author’s capacity to represent the historical contradiction through form rather than through a simple representation of outside reality. His critique of naturalism emblematically shows that his theory of realism is not designed to endorse the now established realism as a \textit{genre}.\textsuperscript{15} Further, it is not only that his \textit{Historical Novel} can be read as a theory of the author, but also that his entire theory of realism cannot be thought of separated from his theory of the author.\textsuperscript{16} What drives his literary career, despite the seemingly different thematic matters, is his insight on the author’s capacity to create a form in society. “The creation of forms [by the author],” Lukacs writes in his \textit{Theory of the Novel}, “is the most profound confirmation of the existence of dissonance. But in all other genres … this affirmation of dissonance precedes the act of form-giving, whereas in the novel it is the form itself” (72). For Lukacs, then,
the form-giving act is absolutely necessary to make sense out of the dissonance of our lives. While this principle of the form-giving act applies to every human act of meaning-making, the reason for the privilege given to the novel is that the novel inevitably brings in the life experience of dissonance. While “every form is the resolution of a fundamental dissonance of existence; every form restores the absurd to its proper place as the vehicle, the necessary condition of meaning” (72), the kind of the absurdity found by the author of the novel determines the structure (as it is understood by Lukacs—that is, form as content) of the novel itself.

From the standpoint of Lukacian tradition, then, what is crucially missing or unsaid in DOA discourse is the historical nature of form. Every text comes into being through the author’s endeavor to find a new form for a new experience. And a new form, because it differentiates itself from previous forms, is a revolt against tradition. At the same time, the new form, in spite of its newness, or even, because of its newness, owes its revolutionary character to the old form. The new form and the old form are dialectically related in the production of a work of art. What mediates this dialectical transformation of form in the production process is, of course, another dialectical axis of subject and object relation. The objectivity of a work of art, as many postmodern theorists argue, generates multiple interpretations where the properly inter-textual interpretive proliferation takes place. However, the author-subject’s “creation” is always mediated by the form as much as the reader’s interpretation is attended by the form. If the previous form imposes a certain limit on the part of the author, it is also the source of creativity for her since the newness is acquired by breaking the boundary designated by the previous
form. Likewise, while the already established form provides a pre-knowledge to the reader, reading always pursues more than the repetition of conventional wisdom.

Form’s restrictive nature comes from its historical sedimentation on the one hand and from the repressive nature of reified society on the other. Radicalizing Lukacs’s form and content dialectic, Adorno expands it as to engage with historical and social dimensions. If Lukcas’ phenomenological project significantly confines the form-content dialectics within the range of subject-object relationship, Adorno opens the aesthetic field by incorporating “what it is not.”

Art is explainable only according to its law of movement, not through invariants. It [art] is determined by its relation to what it is not. The specifically artistic in art originates out of its other. . . . Art becomes specific by means of separating itself from what it develops out of.

. . .

Art negates the categorial determinations stamped on the empirical world and yet harbors what is empirically existing in its own substance. If art opposes the empirical through the element of form—and the mediation of form and content is not to be grasped without their differentiation—the mediation is to be sought in the recognition of aesthetic form as sedimented content.

(Aesthetic Theory 3, 5)

Adorno’s “what it[art] is not” will be, in Adorno’s words, “capitalist society” (54)—the world understood in its totalizing tendency. In the specific terms of art production, “what art is not” is the already established social categories and determinations that would threaten the particularity of art. Though art negates what has been already formalized and subsumed under capitalist relations—including already reified aesthetic forms—the negation of the empirical by art is performed in a way in which art contains the empirical as its substance. As this paradox between art and the empirical is mediated by its form, art enables the production of a new reality. But the production circle does not end here. What is produced as an artwork is immediately
placed on the market. As the subject’s production (*forma formans*) is transformed into its final objectivity (*forma formata*) in the empirical world, the new found reality/content becomes a mere form in the sedimentation process. If the new found reality/content cannot be severed from the artistic form in its unity, this unity stands in disunity, foregrounded by the historical process of sedimentation. The “sedimentation” is, if we use a less-materialistic vocabulary, the historical development of art form. Adorno’s “what art is not,” then, explains how a seemingly other-worldly aesthetic unity paradoxically relates, and is related with, the empirical world in the historical development of aesthetics. The dialectic of the aesthetic and its externality points to the historical nature of form as the crucial organ of its development.

Though Adorno’s dialectics around this issue is, strictly speaking, not a theory of the author, the author as a form-giving agent is implicit and immanent in his theorization of form as (anti-)social and historical. And this spatial and temporal dimension of form opens the text up to multiple interpretations. Still, “multiple interpretations” doesn’t lead to a kind of absolute liberation of the reader in its interpretation as the DOA discourse asserts. For what is not in the text cannot be read by the reader. The historical and social dimension of form enriches the reading because the historicity is embedded in an artwork’s dialectic with “what art is not.” At the same time, however, reading “what art is not” is not equivalent to a reading of what is not in the text. As Nehamas, and recently Surface readers, point out, reading a text does not necessarily involve the act of finding a “hidden” meaning “beyond” or “behind” a text. Because trying to find the meaning of a text outside the text means importing an ideological premise, the “depth” reading would sacrifice the “surface” of the text for the mere reiteration of a pre-formulated ideological
doxa. (“The Way We Read Now” 102-4). However, reading the “surface” of a text should not exclude a reading of the historical and ideological dimensions of the text because the form of a text is always historical and social, and thus ideological. A form, whether it is a modernist one or a postmodernist one, arises in a specific socio-historical conjuncture; a revolutionary content/form for an author is soon to be rendered a restrictive form for another author. In this sense, one can read “what is external to art” precisely because what is external paradoxically resides in an artwork. As many critics argue, “surface reading” makes sense only if the “surface” is deep or the appearance turns out to be essential.17

What seems to be more problematic in surface reading is, however, not (only) its attempt to deny the historical reading of art form but its attempt to affirm the text by reifying it as an end product. Of course, a text, when produced and put on the market, is an end product. However, seeing a text only as an object blinds one from seeing it as a practice. Producing a text has always been a way of practicing one’s political and social engagement. Since the surface reading, or the affirmative reading, is very much invested in the text only as a final and objective entity, its affirmation of the text’s ontological status de-substantiates the author. By declaring the death of the author and by erasing the authorial practice from the surface, the affirmative reading nominalizes the author into the final product. The author lives an apparitional life in reading; this time, neutralized and divested of her politicality.

Lukacs’ point that to produce a text is to produce a frame through which a new reality is carved out by way of a form is, in this sense, read as a critique of the affirmative reading as well as of the romantic conceptualization of the author. For what Lukacs
argues when he argues that an author’s role lies in her form-giving act is neither a simple endorsement of the author nor a detachment of the author from the text. Rather, Lukacs’ contribution, from our current perspective, lies in his implicit argument that not only the end product but also the authorial production itself have to be read and judged. This is not to say that a literary text is a political agenda; one cannot read the former in the same way one reads the latter. For the literary form is not same as the form of a political pamphlet. Likewise, the way people read authors’ intentions should vary depending on the individual form of a text as well as the historical development of form. As the act of authorial framing fundamentally operates on what Nicholas Brown calls the principle of selection (of form, character, the kind of experience to be unfolded in the text, vocabulary, grammar, etc.), reading a literary text includes the recognition of the author’s ideological and social position. This kind of reading inevitably invites “what the text is not” into the reading practice by way of the form. For example, in Lukacs’ reading, Zola’s naturalism cannot be untied from his ideological position precisely because description (or observation, in Zola’s own term) is not a neutral and scientific way of recording the outside world but a highly ideological way of finding and framing a reality. Here Zola’s ideology lies in his attempt to endorse the objective world through the “objective” method of writing.

4. **Ranceire and Mimesis**

While Lukacs’ reading of naturalism seems to give a clear picture of the political nature of the authorial intervention, it in fact raises another critical issue regarding the DOA discourse. For both (Lukacian) realism and naturalism seem to subscribe to the notion of mimesis—a notion the denial of which becomes the ground for DOA’s post-
modern conceptualization of “writing” (Ecriture) and intertextuality. While it is true that already in Barthes the notion of mimesis or representation was rendered problematic, he did not deny the very possibility of mimesis. For example, Barthes writes, “realism … consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy of the real: this famous reality … is set farther away, postponed, or at least captured through the pictorial matrix in which it has been steeped before being put into words: code upon code, known as realism” (S/Z 55). Barthes’ argument is that 19th century realism is fundamentally based on the code of realism—that is, the realist literature is rendered realistic not because it accurately represents the outside world but because it shares the code of realism with the readers. This code is, of course, ideological through and through as its assumption of the match between literary description and the outside referent is unfounded. What Barthes argues is, in other words, not the overall abolition of representation per se. Barthes’ preference for modernists such as Lautréamont and Mallarme over Balzac and Flaubert is not so much based on the total rejection of literature’s representational aesthetics as on the refutation of the anachronism of the non-aesthetic or extra-aesthetic convention of realism/reflectionism. If we compare Barthes’ seminal version of mimesis with its postmodern counterpart of DOA, for example, that of Ranciere, the difference is obvious: the target of the latter’s attack is the very notion of mimesis and representation itself.

Ranciere’s anti-representationalism is, in fact, one of the most influential and advanced versions of the DOA discursive practices. Since his notion of “distribution of the sensible” provides a consummation of the DOA discourse with its egalitarian tone, especially in dealing with the readers (spectators), it is worth reading how Ranciere’s
conceptualization of *mimesis* leads to the idea of “emancipation” of the spectator. For him the point of modernism lies in its radical departure from the old literary practice the foundation of which is *mimesis*. Modernism’s historical departure from the “representational regime of art” which was dominant up to 19th century leads to the rise of the “aesthetic regime of art”.

The crucial difference between this new “aesthetic regime of art” and its previous counterpart lies in the former’s egalitarian and radical reconfiguration of the “distribution of the sensible” (establishing and distributing the possible modes of perception that will ultimately determine the ways of participating in the common society). The new distribution of the sensible, then, enables the hitherto excluded voices to be heard and to speak because the new regime of art breaks away with *mimesis*’ pedagogical model from within. While the operation of mimesis depends on the adequation between the art and the world, the “adequation” does not simply designate the collapse of the distance between art and life. On the contrary, the adequation is based on the initial distinction between art and life. Subjects that appear in the art can appear in it because they are rendered as an adequate subject matter. This pre-conceived notion of representation/*mimesis* makes the “representation” possible; life in the world is “represented” in a hierarchical way because the regime of representation provides such a hierarchical vision.

Thus the driving force of the regime of representation is the pedagogical principle on which the knowing try to make visible what is hidden to the ignorant.

This paternal concern, and the diagnosis of incapacity it involved, were widely adopted by those who wanted to use the science of social reality to enable the men and women of the people to become aware of their real situation disguised by mendacious images. They endorsed them because they espoused their own vision of the general dynamic of commodity production as automatic production of illusions for the agents subjected to them. In this way, they also endorsed the
transformation of capacities dangerous for the social order into fatal incapacities. In effect, the procedures of social critique have as their goal treating the incapable: those who do not know how to see, who do not understand the meaning of what they see, who do not know how to transform acquired knowledge into activist energy. … To treat incapacities, they need to reproduce them indefinitely. Now to ensure that reproduction, the twist suffices which periodically transforms health into sickness and sickness into health.  (*The Emancipated Spectator* 47-48)

Because the logic of *mimesis* is based on the systematic production of hierarchy of knowledge, and because the modern and contemporary critical practice has still been modeled on *mimesis*, Ranciere argues, any critical practice, as long as it is based on this model, merely reproduces its own structural condition—the dichotomy of the capable and the incapable. As opposed to this structuring of the world, his suggestion is the aesthetic regime whose supplementary (in the word’s Derridian sense) existence has constantly challenged the structures of hierarchy. In this new regime of art, the representational norm is replaced by the principle of expression. Through the pores of representative artistic practice emerges the new regime of art imbued with new recognition that anything—including quotidian products and things of everyday life of the common people—can be an art. Thus it reconfigures a new way of perceiving the world—“an organization of the sensible where there is neither a reality concealed behind appearances nor a single regime of presentation and interpretation of the given imposing its obviousness” (*Emancipated* 48-49). The literary world thus created is no longer governed by the representational relations of power because its task is neither to uncover a hidden message nor to elicit/teach a certain response from/to the reader. If representational art tries to “tell” its message to audience, “aesthetic” art simply “exists.” For Ranciere, Flaubert’s “naturalism” exemplifies the egalitarianism of this new aesthetic intervention:

It [Flaubertian naturalism] is the loss of representative proportions and properties. Such is the disruption that critics of Flaubert denounced at the time under the
heading of realism: everything is now on the same level, the great and the small, important events and insignificant episodes, human beings and things. Everything is equal, equally representable. And this ‘equally representable’ spells the ruin of the representative system. Contrasting with the representative scene of the visibility of speech is an equality of the visible that invades discourse and paralyses action. For what is newly visible has very specific properties. It does not make visible; it imposes presence. But this presence is itself singular. … it exhibits its particular opacity, the under-determined character of its power to ‘make visible.’ (The Future of the Image 120-1)

Flaubert’s language is precise and descriptive. But the lavish flourish of its realist/naturalist writing shows the precise condition of the representational impasse for Ranciere because the exhaustive expressiveness of the “naturalism” in the description of things and human beings stops “representing” the hierarchical representation of the external world. Rather, the novelistic visualization of objects simply and randomly attributes the “expressiveness” to the objects in the text. In other words, if the “narrative” or representative axis of Flaubert’s novel constitutes a “telling” with, for example, its conventional plot development, the “aesthetic” axis intersects it with “existing” by randomly deploying human beings and things in such a way as to disobey the logic of the representative movement. This movement of the “aesthetic regime” is egalitarian because “the wordless, senseless materiality of the visible (9)” proposes a “principle of equality of all speaking beings” instead of imposing certain messages and hierarchies on “the ignorant” as in the case of the representative regime of art. As a result, the readers (now we should call it the spectator since Ranciere’s egalitarianism is based on the “wordless” and mute expressiveness of the visible) are postulated as having “equal intelligence.”

The crucial movement of Ranciere’s logic, first and foremost, lies in his qualitative distinction of representation and description, the textual and the visual, narration and expression. If the representation/narration is mimetic in the sense that it
invokes the commensurability of inside and outside and also in the sense that its narrative structure coordinates the proper or adequate functions among various elements (plot, characters, situations, manners of speech assigned to characters, etc.), what is described/expressed belongs to the thing/person that is described. The representation’s principle of adequation not only between inside and outside but also within the textual structure is radically dismantled with the advent of things merely described. Thus once the tie between inside and outside is broken, the language creates a singular “community of sense” where objects in literature refer to what they refer to within the textual space and against the representational logic of the text. Due to the enigmatic singularity of the things described, the presence of things refuses to refer to the outside referent (situated in a hierarchical structure) and to be subsumed under the structural logic of the text. And this singularity is what opens the text to a future community of anonymous spectators. As a result, the artworks “are torn away from their original destination, from any specific community”; instead, it “remains in front of the anonymous and indeterminate spectators” (Emancipated 69). Finally, what links the literary inside and the outside community of spectators is the sensory character of the language—language that creates a hitherto unforeseen sensory fabric through which words directly circulate among the participant spectators, instead of “representing” the already fixed and “adequate” relations.

What is remarkable in Ranciere’s reading of naturalism as the principal example of anti-representational aesthetics is its polar opposition to Lukacs’ assessment of naturalism. What partly justifies Ranciere’s reading of naturalism, in a sense, comes from the ideological nature of 19th century realism. The mimesis in the sense of reflection of the external world was a historically acknowledged ideological assumption of the 19th
century’s literary practice. Certainly, Lukacsian realism is not free from this historical limitation. However, Ranciere’s judgment far exceeds the indication of the historical nature of realism. Rather, Ranciere’s central point is that any “realistic” representation of, say, workers in 1930s is problematic not simply because its naïve and pre-aesthetic assumption of one-on-one correspondence between literature and the world is ungrounded. It is rather because the “realistic” representation would not only re-enforce the already hierarchized social reality but also impose a hierarchical vision through which the social reality is constituted. In other words, Ranciere’s politico-aesthetic judgment on realism comes from the idea that a discursive practice, in this case realism, has the force to structure our reality. The essential theoretical movement here is that the hierarchical reality is the product of discursive practice. What is historical is, in other words, discursive practice since discourse is the foundational source for social reality.

In contrast to Ranciere’s reading of naturalism, Lukacs sees the historical necessity of the emergence of realism and naturalism. For him, both literary forms are thoroughly ideological and historical in their respective response to the changing historical and material condition.

New styles, new ways of representing reality, though always linked to old forms and styles, never arise from any immanent dialectic within artistic forms. Every new style is socially and historically determined and is the product of a social development. … Narration and description represent the principal modes of fiction appropriate to these periods [early and late 19th century].” (“Narrate or Describe” 119)

While, from our current perspective, both of these forms cannot be thought of apart from the strong historical influence of the pre-aesthetic premise of reflectionism, Lukacs’ politico-aesthetic point lies not in the concordance between literature and world but the mediation of world through the literary form. In fact, it is here in Lukacs’
emphasis on form that one can see modernist aesthetics even in Lukacs’ later commitment to realism. In a sense, Lukacs was also aware of the discursive power of engendering a certain reality while blinding another reality; Lukacs’ critique of naturalism is precisely that the meticulous and “objective” description based on the one-on-one correspondence between literature and world is ideological through and through. The ideological blindness of the “indifferent” description of naturalism lies in what is systematically ousted within the formal logic—the historicity of the described present. The naturalist literary form tacitly endorses literally described reality as an absolute given reality by spatially distributing objects lifted from their historical contexts. The ideology of naturalism, in other words, lies in its insistence on “objectivity” which reveals its merely “subjective” perspective: “The method of observation and description developed as part of an attempt to make literature scientific … [But] these modes of composition easily slip into their polar opposite—complete subjectivism” (140). And this problem of ideology equally applies to realism. Any literary form, including realism, is exposed to the danger of “subjective” distortion and its partiality. Lukacs’ well-known solution is, of course, totality. The aesthetic point of Lukacian totality is that realism, this time understood as a principle of inner dramatic unity among variously heterogeneous novelistic events, creates a world of unity where, regardless of the writer’s class position or personal prejudice, historical contradiction and its inherent conflict of social, political, and cultural forces is registered through an individual character’s novelistic journey. It is true that our contemporary society no longer imagines the “world-historical” individual character (or, Balzacian monstrous individual) that also embodies the overall historical forces that work in the transformation of the novelistic world. The point to be made
here is that literary form is always a mediation through which one has access to “reality” which is itself historical and social. Further, realism is privileged by Lukacs not because it exactly represents and thus solidifies the social hierarchy of the present world but because it historicizes the narrated social hierarchy by re-presenting within the force field of totality—where the dichotomous separation of present and past, individual and society, and subjectivity and objectivity is transformed into the dialectical inter-connectedness. The thus constructed aesthetic totality makes the novel complete in itself. The political quality of great realist novels, in other words, comes not from the writer’s political propensity but from the sublation of writer-subject into the artwork’s totality. In contradistinction to realism, naturalism is guilty of a mere subjectivism precisely because its obsessive description, which, for Ranciere, embodies the principle of egalitarian democracy, is badly and abstractly formal and indicative of Bourgeois complacency and their reactionary attitude especially after the failed revolution of 1848.

Already evident in Lukacs’ aesthetics of totality is the idea that “reality” is accessible only by means of form. Thus, reality is an unreliable concept even for Lukacs because the term reality always carries the connotation of the subject’s empirical experience. Naturalism’s “reality” is different from realism’s “reality” just as bourgeois’ reality is differently experienced from the reality of the proletariat. But, this should not mean that material conditions vary depending on the subjective perspectives experiencing them. Totality, as it was positively conceptualized as the principle of realism by Lukacs, is what sets in constant motion the otherwise subjective and local experiential reality towards the historical and material force field. Again if we articulate Lukacs’ error from our vantage point, it is not so much with his conceptualization of totality in a positivistic
way because it is a historical trope in a certain historical stage where an individual experience can encompass the structural transformation of society; rather, the error is his trans-historical valorization of one mediational form—realism—as the only guarantee for access to historical materiality. Contrary to his understanding of post-realism as formally decadent, various modernist works can be approached as an attempt to pierce through the modern unreal reality from where there is no longer the happy coincidence between the socio-historical capitalist structure and the individuals’ fragmented lived experience. Visited this way, Lukacsian representation/mimesis perhaps contains, as Ranciere asserts, the “realistic” representation of social hierarchy; but “realistic” in a different sense. For Lukacs, the “realistic” novel designates not a (re-)production of hierarchical social norm but a literary realization of an undeniable historico-material force. The difference is time—that is, it is one thing to agree that a discursive practice can structure our present thought and it is another to claim that it can temporalize/historicize an already materialized present structure so as to open it to further historical change. Further, the Lukacsian “realistic” is always embedded in a particular form just as naturalism’s realistic description, in his account, is an ideological form. Thus what is described or represented in a work of art cannot be separated from its literary form. On the part of the reader, what they read is the formal unity along with the content; readers also read the ideology of the form. In other words, the representation cannot be reduced to a simple concordance between inside and outside precisely because the form urges the reader to read it in its entirety; in the same vein, things simply described don’t speak for themselves because they cannot be severed from the ideology of the form. Ultimately, what the author produces through literary form is not the kind of knowledge that
originates from the “pedagogical concern” to educate the ignorant. Rather, what is produced is a kind of objectified world of alternative reality that provides many interpretive possibilities and also that, despite its openness to various interpretations, has undeniable aesthetic unity and presence in our cultural life.

Now if we change our angle from the regime of representation to the regime of art, the emergence of this new regime of art is crucial to Ranciere’s politics of aesthetics. For aesthetic practice is the primary vehicle for bringing fissures to the already imposed meaning for an object and to the hierarchy that legitimates the fixed meaning. The foremost political efficacy of the regime of aesthetics lies in the power of disruption, in changing and re-assigning what is sayable and visible and troubling the rigid boundaries set up by the representational regime between literature and life or artistic and non-artistic. The regime of aesthetics finds a new space where art presents a different sensory configuration of everyday objects by means of which new forms of life are experienced. In this process of modernity, art becomes absolutely “singular” as it becomes liberated from “any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres” (Politics of Aesthetics 23). At the same time, the liberation from the representative regime establishes an expressive relationship with the future community members by way of art’s singular refusal to be identified with whatever has been previously marked by its “adequate” place. And this is why Flaubert’s leveled out description of “the great and the small, important events and insignificant episodes, human beings and things” is privileged for Ranciere (Future of Image 120). In other words, art in the aesthetic regime defies any already assigned meaning and is necessarily opaque and intransitive. For the promise of the future meaning subsists only through its radical refusal of hermeneutics. Thus, Ranciere
explains, at the heart of the aesthetic regime, is the “fundamental identity of opposites”
between “the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to
shape itself” (Politics of Aesthetics 23-24).

Here, what propels Ranciere’s argument is his endorsement of a particular
formalism. That is, the very act of dissensus becomes a formal guarantee for his politics
of aesthetics. The problem is that this act of making fissure in the status quo is oriented
in the future and the future only. And this is precisely the point of the “mute
expressiveness” of things in Madam Bovary. Since any definitive meaning is suspended,
the only way to access to the “meaning” or “sense” of the things is to go through the new
sensorium embodied in the singular objects. The things, in other words, is necessarily
separated from the present sense and projected onto the future configuration. However, in
order for a quotidian object to be aesthetic, or better, in order for a thing to be singular, it
has to be lifted out of its “real” and historical context. And this process of lifting is
nothing more than a form-giving act on the part of the author and an aesthetic placement
on the part of the object. In other words, an object has to be re-framed/re-posited onto the
artistic space so that it obtains the future community of spectators by breaking its tie with
the mundane everyday life. Which is to say that an object’s singularity comes not from
the object itself but from the particular relationship an art form establishes with its artistic
object. And it is here in the “particular” relationship that the immense aporia is founded.
For the singularity of an object collapses the very artistic distance that is generated by the
art form. A mundane object, in other words, becomes “singular” by way of the art form,
but the form employed here should be freed from any formal logic—for example, the
bourgeois ideology that Lukacs sees inherent in Flaubert’s naturalist form. The condition
of possibility for singularity is the leap from any determinations including the formal one. To say this from a different perspective, a singular form and a singular object are two entirely different things. To speak about a singular form, say, of a particular novel, is a way of acknowledging the unity of the form and content, and thus, the autonomous nature of an artwork. To speak about a singular object is to separate the object from the form of art. Further, if an art form is determined by its own ideological/historical underpinnings, it would make an artistic object historical rather than singular and thus render it contaminated/contained by what governs mundane everyday life. Ultimately, a singular artistic object is necessarily non-artistic when every art form is representational (meaning: historical). Since the point of singularity is the object’s anti-representatibility by any other means than itself, any form that posits the object within a framed space is rendered an unnecessary and surplus technique or medium that is antinomical to the singular object’s expressiveness. Medium’s communicability is what a singular object cannot stand even though the latter stands on the former.

Perhaps the aporia of singularity and form is what makes Ranciere’s politics future-oriented. Because singularity defies any mundane, political, ethical, and even aesthetic situatedness, a singular object not only makes itself useless (in a positive sense) in the present milieu but also makes useless (in a negative sense) the place out of which it has been lifted. The singularity’s undecidability or anti-representationalism constantly empties out the historical logic of form. In its stead, it calls for the logic of postponement. It is a pure form of waiting to be populated by anonymous spectators. In a sense, this ‘people to come’ can be a universality, a universal form of democracy. But this universal
space is where particular and individual residents are absent. It is in this sense that Ranciere’s dissensus is a formalism.

Still, his project is generally understood as an attempt to re-invigorate the aesthetic realm as a site of highly polemical political forces. The upshot of his project of the politicization of aesthetics, however, seems to be the reverse—the aestheticization of politics. Even if we can bracket off his bitter diagnosis on the critical tradition, the properly political—that is, one that includes the economic and sociological sphere as well as what has been designated as political—is de-politicized. The notion of “the distribution of the sensible” is, in other words, foregrounded by the radical rejection of whatever has been produced in any form. Of course, the code word for “whatever has been produced” is *mimesis*. In this sense, Adorno’s theory of aesthetics has a seeming affinity with his politics. Even though Adorno stands in a different philosophical and critical tradition, his conceptualization of *mimesis* is wide-ranging enough to mean that the project of enlightenment subsumes, or *polices* if we use Ranciere’s word, nearly all of the properties of objects by imposing identity to them. The Enlightenment’s identarian thinking, according to Adorno, fuels the modern scientific positivism that appears to exist apart from human subjects and, thus, that systematically ignores human suffering by rendering humans as objects of the positivistic mimetic representation. The result is that non-identical moments and experiences are excluded to the point of inconceivability.

While this simplified sketch of Adorno seems to underwrite Ranciere’s aesthetic vision, the crucial difference is that, for Adorno, any act of aesthetics cannot arise from a historical vacuum. The historical constraints are the very condition for the emergence of new art.
Art is imitation exclusively as the imitation of an objective expression, remote from psychology, of which the sensorium was perhaps once conscious in the world and which now subsists only in artworks. Through expression art closes itself off to being-for-other, which always threatens to engulf it, and becomes eloquent in itself: This is art’s mimetic consummation. Its expression is the antithesis of expressing something. Such mimesis is the ideal of art, not its practical procedure, nor is it an attitude directed toward expressive values. The contribution made to expression by the artist is the power of mimicry, which in him releases the expressed. (Aesthetic Theory 112)

Art’s expression arises as an antithesis of what Ranciere generalized as representation—“expressing something.” This “expressing something” signifies the modern subject’s desire to colonize the lived world by imposing what the subject thinks it should be, representing it in the way that the subject thinks, appropriating its properties, curtailing the form in which it emerges, and constructing a seamless flow between subject and object. This mimesis is undeniably a violent one—the one in which our everyday life unfolds according to Adorno. This mimesis is also one that is instrumentalized; as the mimesis becomes a mere means for the realization of the seamless causality of subject and object, it is dominated by the logic of “being-for-other.” As a result, the subject’s representation coincides with the object world with such a vengeance that the subject itself becomes an instrument. Against this mimesis, Adorno proposes a different kind of representation/mimesis which he calls “expression” here. Artistic mimesis enables the artwork’s expression in and for itself. Here, the artist’s expression is not the representation of something, but the representation of representation itself. As the artist lends her voice to a non-identical object (such as an experience that is not subsumed under the regime of positivistic mimesis, or an other that is not conceivable within the logic of self) to speak in and for itself, “the expressed” is “released” in the artist. The artist “expresses” the artwork not in the way in which everything in it is subsumed by her purpose but in the way in which the artist grants subjectivity to the artwork so that it
“becomes eloquent in itself.” While the author-subject has to surrender to the immanent normativity of the artwork, the author’s subjectivity lies in her capacity to lend her voice—“the power of mimicry” of “expressing something.” Of course, this power to “lend a voice” is the power to sublate the artist’s subjectivity through the normativity of artistic form. The authorial mimesis, then, consists of re-presentation (via non-identity) of representation (of positivistic mimesis). The fissure made by the author is always against the background of constraint; that is to say, the re-doubled subjectivation—that of the author and that of the expressed—is historical and dialectical. Historical because the framing of the site of non-identity involves the making of a fissure (Sprung) in a specific historical conjuncture. Dialectical because lending a voice to an “other” involves the expressed’s leap (Sprung) onto the process of subjectivation.

Adorno’s dialectic of mimesis, unlike Ranciere’s formalism, dramatizes the constant transformation of the unity in disunity between artistic mimesis and the reified mimetic world. In his dialectical movement, “no single select category, not even the aesthetically central concept of the law of form, names the essence of art and suffices to judge its products. Essential to art are defining characteristics that contradict its fixed art-philosophical concept” (Aesthetic Theory 7). Ranciere inverts Adorno’s dialectics between art and what art is not into the structural antinomy of expression and what it is not. While the antithetical relationship of inside/literature and outside/world is always mediated by literary form for Adorno, what is important for Ranciere is the inner distinction of expression and representation each of which directly corresponds respectively to spectators and to the hierarchically structured world. What Ranciere does not see here is the historical dialectics of form and representation. For what determines
the relative commensurability or incommensurability of inside and out was not some self-enclosed logic. There is no definitive and trans-historical logic of representation in the history of culture. From our current perspective, every representational form including 19th century realism has its historical limit; but this doesn’t mean a fixed quality of condescending and pedagogical nature for representation *per se*. Representation, in other words, takes place in the realm of culture where discursive practice constantly tries to form alternative space of politics within and against the confines of materialized conditions of possibility. That is, representation is at once “representation/imitation” and “re-presentation/expression” in Adorno’s terms.

In terms of political and aesthetic subjectivity, if, for Lukacs and Adorno, the politicality of literature comes from the author’s choice of the aesthetic form through which to represent that which is not representable under the historical limit, Ranciere’s egalitarian politics comes from the structural difference between representation and expression. As the expression is the guarantee of the principle of “equality of intelligence” of spectators (*Emancipated* 9), everything that has been already represented or historically determined has to be de-identified in the expressive aesthetic movement.

This [the aesthetic regime’s] politics of literature is not the politics of writers. … It is a politics inherent in literature as an art of writing that has broken the rules which make definite forms of feeling and expression correspond to specific character or subject matters. (*Emancipated* 72)

The author is de-subjectivated precisely because the impulse for political meaning comes from “an art of writing”. What is political in art then necessarily defies any codified expression of a thought or a feeling. Instead, the politicization of art lies in “a way in which things themselves speak and are silent. In a sense, it comes to lodge at the heart of things as their silent speech” (*Future of Image* 13). The muteness of an object
then is emancipatory precisely because it does not “teach” the audience/spectator. Spectators are presumed to have equal intelligence in front of the things that directly inscribe “sense” through the new community of senses. This formal liberation of the new sensibility is the very emancipation of the spectators. However, the causality that Ranciere proposes here is a strange one. For in order for a distribution of the sensible to be “new” it has to be performed always in a particular, “old,” historical conjuncture; the newness of the new sensations does not necessarily lead to the constitution of an egalitarian community. Of course, Ranciere’s point is the discursive one—one that produces what has not come yet, rather than simply reproducing a material condition that sustains the hierarchy in question. However, this is the point. Discursive practice has the power to see things differently. But, the power of discourse does not lie in the creation of what is not possible, but in the positing/framing of what is not visible and sayable due to the historical limit. Unmatched by a concrete material condition, the new distribution of the sensible is merely perspectival. In the same vein, inequality is not only a matter of “representation” or a particular way of seeing the world but essentially a matter of historico-material relations that generate different forms of seeing the world. The problem of inequality, of course, involves a perspectival difference (what is diversity for some people is a mere rhetorical device to silence other people); but the perspectival difference itself is institutionalized and endorsed by historical and material determinations.

Accordingly, Ranciere’s egalitarian spectator is also questionable. In his egalitarian world of spectators there is no inequality. It is a pure democracy insulated from the world of representation. On the one hand, the anonymity of the spectator
originates, in his system of aesthetics, from the expressed literary world’s severance form any “intended” readership. On the other hand, the pure egalitarian spectatorship comes form the structural exclusion of what he calls representation. By this “structural” movement the spectator becomes free of historical and material inequality. However, this exclusion of inequality is not only discursive but also conceptual. The inequality-free egalitarian world is necessarily anonymous precisely because it exists only as a thus-declared space where the individuals’ temporalities are suspended. In our material and discursive reality, if the problem of equality appears in its positivistic form, it is only when it is affirmed as an empty rhetorical principle. A legal equality, for example, when it is positively affirmed, usually signifies a status-quoism or a complacent voluntarism on the part of the speaker. It is when inequality is posited through a particular situation that the universality of equality obtains its meaning. Perhaps the only place where a radical egalitarianism is practically practiced in our contemporary society is the market. In the market liberalism, a commodity’s “meaning” is open to anonymous consumers and equal intelligence is established as the principle of commerce. As the market declares the autonomy of its space, the problem of economic inequality is hijacked into the narrowly defined realm of political discourse. The Rancieran spectator’s sheer equality in and for itself is, in practice, not far from the ideal of market.

5. **Derrida and Writing**

If a literary and artistic form is said to have its intended reader, then it would not mean a group of ignorant people that the author wants to “teach.” Rather, it would mean the general community who can share what the artistic form entails—namely the historical limits imposed on the course of the aesthetic development into the current form
as well as the aspirations embodied in the form. The author’s “intention” in the production of art lies in what she says through the formal unity in which the authorial experience is transformed into a textual objectivity. However, the contemporary DOA discourse has reached its current dominance by cutting off the textual objectivity from its dialectical relation with the authorial subject. This discursive refusal of author-subject by way of “textual movement” has an oblique relationship with Rancieran politics of aesthetics. For if Ranciere’s aesthetics is dependent on the exclusion of representation per se, the textual politics is built upon the incessant interpretive expansion of representation through intertextuality. Though these two objects are different and disparate in each of their systematizations, they share the common goal of the liberation of the reader.

In the enterprise of textual politics, the most rigorous philosophical support for the textual politics comes from Jacques Derrida’s philosophical works. Derrida’s deconstructive mode of writing helps him to read the targeted text as it unfolds its own oppositional premise against its announced essence, intention, or idea. In a sense, deconstruction is mode of reading that forces a text to reveal and accept that it has to repress and/or re-press the marginal workings of difference, spacing, and dissemination in opposition to identity, telos, and meaning. The merit of deconstruction is that it produces a necessary critique of our social edifice, especially of the philosophical underpinnings that discursively sustain the institutional and ideological structure. As a reading “method,” deconstructive reading has proven itself to be extremely effective throughout its discursive life. And part of this success comes from its own peculiar methodological nature—that is, its mode is supplementary, deconstructing its target text without being essentialized into a content (which would have to be deconstructed
following its own logical movement). This methodological minimalism, however, poses a serious question as regards the idea of author-subject because deconstruction’s grammatology (Derrida’s neologism from the Greek word *gramma* meaning letter or writing) is a philosophical expansion of Roland Barthes’ notion of text-writing (écriture) which was originally formulated as a systematic corollary to “Death of the Author.”

According to Derrida, writing (écriture)’s textual movement has been constantly forbidden or repressed throughout the history of western thought. Western metaphysics, Derrida argues, was operational upon the assumption of the “presence” of voice, intention, and logos. Though Derrida’s early deconstruction aims at the most rigorously intentional texts such as philosophical ones, his methodology of deconstruction soon becomes the principle of writing (écriture).

In his *Of Grammatology*, Derrida defines writing as “no longer indicating a particular, derivative, auxiliary form of language … no longer designating the exterior surface, the insubstantial double of a major signifier, the signifier [written signs] of the signifier [speech] … go[ing] beyond the extension of language” (7). And the conceptualization of writing “amounts to destroying the concept of “sign” and its entire logic” (7). Already here, Derrida formulates writing not as a specifically linguistic phenomenon but as something that transcends the logic of language. In the same book, explaining his own reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s writing, he asserts the paradigmatic force of writing.

Yet if reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general. That is why the methodological considerations that we risk
applying here to an example are closely dependent on general propositions that we have elaborated above; as regards the absence of the referent or the transcendental signified. *There is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside-text; *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*]. And that is neither because Jean-Jacques' life, or the existence of Mamma or Therese *themselves*, is not of prime interest to us, nor because we have access to their so-called "real" existence only in the text and we have neither any means of altering this, nor any right to neglect this limitation. All reasons of this type would already be sufficient, to be sure, but there are more radical reasons. What we have tried to show by following the guiding line of the "dangerous supplement," is that in what one calls the real life of these existences "of flesh and bone," beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau's text, there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the "real" supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. (158-9)

Here we see the much-misused and notorious “there is no outside the text.” But surprisingly, what Derrida tries to do is neither to confine his reading within the linguistic structure nor to subsume the world of reference under the signification of language, as he explicitly explains “to transgress the text towards something other than it, toward a referent” is illegitimate. Rather, his project is to show “what one calls the real life of these existences ‘of flesh and bone’” is anything but writing. In other words, writing is not merely a term that designates a differential structure of linguistics as in Saussure but that which is behind every “presence,” be it linguistic, intentional, and even material. Writing is a movement whose peculiarity can be manifested in the terms of ‘trace,’ ‘différance,’ ‘supplementarity,’ ‘iterability,’ and others. Though these terms are different in their usages and contexts, all of them are coined to express the conjoining of two or more functionalities as their aim is to disrupt and deconstruct targeted binary oppositions. *Différance* conjoins the differing and deferring movements just as trace plays the game of presence and absence; supplementarity has two aspects of supplanting and supplementing and iterability is a cohesion of repetition and alterity.
In terms of DOA, the place where Derrida’s writing is mostly manifested antithetical to the author-subjectivity is *Limited Inc.* because the book mainly consists of his response to the “intention” of the author. The central conceptual movement in the book is embodied in the term “iterability.” Iterability is, despite its “systematic link” with “code” or “a kind of conventionality” (64), a “pre-logical” force (93). In order to understand this “pre-logical” dimension of iterability, it is necessary to see its relationship with “mark” since Derrida asserts iterability is “indispensable [not only] to the functioning of all language” but also “to that of every mark” (53). In order for a mark to exist, in other words, the very moment of its presence paradoxically has to recognize that there has been a kind of code in an inverted way; a mark is a mark because it is mark-able and because, if it is mark-able, it is re-mark-able. While there has been no actual iteration made before the mark’s coming-into-being, its presence itself foregrounds, by definition, an infinite number of iterations (re-mark-ability). Or, an infinite number of iterations have been “traced” from the presence of the mark. Plus, because the “trace” establishes that the presence of the mark has been the result of the differentiation from other (possible) marks and beings, its repeatability arises by way of its differentiation from others. Since if the mark is not re-markable through the systematic difference its identity is lost, the repeatability of the mark confirms its identity. Iterability here “a priori, always and already, without delay, at once” inscribes, as a structure (code) and as a singular event, alteration in repetition (62). In sum, within the structure of iterability and with the event of iterability, repetition enables the mark to be identified with temporally other (possible) marks and alteration generates difference between the
mark and spatially other (possible) marks. Therefore, mark assumes an identity but only in the sense of (self-) differentiation. Never a self-identity without iterability.

The most interesting part of Derrida’s conceptualization of iterability is that it is the principle of being. The difference in question is what Derrida calls *différance* in another context; the simultaneously differing and deferring force of *différance* determines what he calls arche-writing—that is, a process of infinite referral, delay, spacing, of not arriving at identity itself. Through arche-writing, a mark/presence/meaning takes place on the basis of becoming-space (spacing) of *différance* as it is deferring/delaying/postponing the identity-meaning and differing/differentiating the identity-presence through an endless chain of signifiers. At once, arche-writing is a synchronic structure and a diachronic genesis.

The gram as *différance* … is a structure and a movement no longer conceivable on the basis of the opposition presence/absence. *Différance* is the systemic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other. This spacing is the simultaneously active and passive (the *a* of *différance*, indicates this indecision as concerns activity and passivity, that which cannot governed by or distributed between the terms of this opposition) production of the internals without which the ‘full’ terms would not signify, would not function. It is also the becoming-space of the spoken chain—which has been called temporal or linear; a becoming-space which makes possible both writing and every correspondence between speech and writing, every passage from on to the other. (*Positions* 27)

Once the binary of the linguistic and the non-linguistic is deconstructed through this theoretical underpinnings, then the force of the logic of iterability and *différance* is found everywhere: there is no outside the text. Two other inter-related terms quickly follow in terms of author-subject: citationality and supplementarity. While citationality refers to a possibility of continuity in discontinuous spatio-temporal surroundings in and out of textual body and supplementarity is called for to disrupt the hierarchical binary of
host-parasite and center-margin within a discursive body, the iterability of any being—the very possibility of the mark to break from its specific context, engendering other contexts by being inscribed in those contexts (79)—constrains the authorial intention from governing the entire scene of the utterance. Since “the time and place of the other time [are] already at work, altering from the start the start itself, the first time, the at once” (62), any expression cannot fully correspond to author’s intention. Further, the realization of intention is frustrated by unconsciousness from the start. In all probability, Derrida argues, the author’s conscious intention itself may arise in the course of incorporating all sorts of unconscious and anonymous instances, let alone all kinds of meaningful signs she consciously references to exclude others (75-76). Therefore, not only can context or context not be exhausted by the intention, the intention itself is in fact always supplemented by unconsciousness. Meaningfulness of intention or the full saturation of context by the author would be guaranteed only on the condition of the presence of “conscious ego” which “however limited it may be, can never be isolated ideally in its pure identity” (76). Here Derrida’s statement “there is nothing outside the text” is, as he clarifies, “there is nothing outside the context” (136).

As such, Derrida’s conceptual apparatus, in his own words, “opened,” instead of “only protected,” a reading (Of Grammatology 158). Not stopping at the closed and clear understanding of what the utterance purports to manifest, writing leads the meaning of an utterance into the traces embedded in the utterance, from intention of the author into “the essential absence of intending the actuality of utterance” (59, “Signature, Event, Context” 18). Supplementarity of a text guides its reading to the location of the hierarchical and uneven power relations between center and margin and host and parasite; citationality of
a text brings its reading to con-text, to “the time and place of other time (Limited Inc. 62)”; In this sense, writing liberates the reader from the authorial intention.

However, while the author’s full intention, in its simplistic and romantic sense, is never realized and realizable within the text, this doesn’t necessarily lead to Derridean con-textual reading. For what the form of an artwork means is that there is a unity in and of it. This unity is, of course, not a unity of self-sameness, but a unity-in-disunity between form and content, between author-subjectivity and artwork-objectivity, between inside and outside and, in Derridian context, citation and citationality. In the actual practice of reading, citationality is usually assumed (which can be translated into representation *per se* for Lukacs, and mimesis for Adorno). But at the same time, the boundary of citationality is always finite, though neither definite nor definitive, due to the workings of the form because, in a work of art, the meaning of an element/utterance is first and foremost determined within the textual space and in its relation with other elements/utterances. Once an utterance is placed within a formal objectivity, the formal unity comes into operation as a primary vehicle of communication. Even if the citationality becomes independent and works like the principle of creation, as is the case in many postmodern artworks, it doesn’t really entail something like an artwork without a form; rather, the citationality itself becomes a form under which the author tries to find a meaning from the very denial of form. In either case, the movement of Derridian citationality might be said to be *behind* the production of a work of art. But it is *far behind* the production of a work of art because the form of an artistic unity is a historical determination. On the part of the author, this means that the artwork comes into being through a finite number of series of chains of selection. On the part of the reader, the
“presence” of an utterance/citation prevents it from being replaced by another citation; reading the “traces” of a citation is absolutely possible and even desirable, but this reading is not a reading of an artwork as an artwork. In other words, the Derridian movement might be said to be involved in the production, but once the author places a citation in a specific textual unity, the meaning of the citation comes not so much from citationality but from citation itself. This actualization of a citation in an artwork by the author is, to put it differently, mediated by the form through which the author performs her “writing” on the principle of selection. The author’s intended meaning cannot exhaust the signifier’s excess—the surplus emerging from the Derridian game of presence and absence—but the author’s voluntary subjection (which is also subjectivation) to form binds the signifiers into an artistic entity.

One might say the above reading of Derrida is an unjust criticism since he never practiced a vulgarized citaionalism (infinite referencism). Though referencism seems to be the logical corollary of Derridian apparatus, especially of his conceptualization of writing as a deconstruction of the textual and the non-textual, it can be justly said that the postmodern referencism comes from the reification of Derridian philosophy. Strictly speaking, the series of Derridean jargons—iterability, différance, citationality—never appear in his text apart from their “-bilities.” Typical to his well-known playful style of writing, his terminologies are “neither a word nor a concept” (“Différance” 7). But in an article “Force and Signification” he provides the most succinct definition of the nature of his deconstructive project.

Our intention here is not, through the simple motions of balancing, equilibration or overturning, to oppose duration to space, quality to quantity, force to form, the depth of meaning or value to the surface of figures. Quite to the contrary. To counter this simple alternative, to counter the simple choice of one of the terms or
one of the series against the other, we maintain that it is necessary to seek new concepts and new models, an economy escaping this system of metaphysical oppositions. If we appear to oppose one series to the other; it is because from within the classical system we wish to make apparent the noncritical privilege naively granted to the other series by a certain structuralism. Our discourse irreducibly belongs to the system of metaphysical oppositions. The break with this structure of belonging can be announced only through a certain organization, a certain strategic arrangement which, within the field of metaphysical opposition, uses the strengths of the field to turn its own stratagems against it, producing a force of dislocation that spreads itself throughout the entire system, fissuring it in every direction and thoroughly delimiting it (emphasis mine). (“Force and Signification” 19-20) 33

The passage immediately brings us back to deconstruction’s lack of content (and thus its avoiding of being essentialized and deconstructed)—the question raised at the beginning of this section. That deconstruction’s minimalism never permits itself to be actualized is the key to its strategic movement, since its purpose is to construct an “economy,” “strategic arrangement,” and “[to] produce a force of dislocation” from within the entire system of western metaphysics. Precisely because the deconstructive method has to remain a force, its movement cannot and should not assume a definite form of content. If it is substantiated into a positive form, it would immediately subsumed by the logic of presence. This is why the terms that designate the movements of writing remain “-bility”—deconstruction as a project of (im-)possibility. What this entails is that the dislocating force is indifferent to the qualitative difference between the variously traceable historical contexts it always calls for in its textual politics. The neutrality and a-politicality of the dislocating force in its dealings with specific historical events, in turn, is utilized to justify inter-textual and multi-cultural postmodernism. The immense political possibility in Derrida’s radicalization of difference and the other, in this sense, seems to be overwhelmed by its own textual politics. The ethical principle of the other is easily employed by the “self,” especially in a postmodern society where a diverse number
of selves claim their own contextual otherness. Further, what seems to be a much more serious issue with deconstruction is that its force that is “fissuring in every direction” the system of logos, in a sense, arrests its own political efficacy by its stubborn insistence on remaining on the level of force/economy (“Force and Signification” 20). The result is that the Derridean difference does not have its historical correspondence in the material economy of the world. 34

In this context, the crucial merit in dealing with a text as a historical form is that it enables one to see its relevance. Locating a historical relevance (or, relevances) does not mean the text is foreclosed. It rather enriches an interpretation of the text by adding the historical and material dimensions, while still retaining the textual meaning in its unity. However, claiming the essentiality of form is not equivalent to claiming the futility of deconstruction. The point is that if the process of dissemination and deconstruction is unnecessarily emphasized, then the relevance or the “kairos” of the text is blinded. The project of deconstruction is undoubtedly relevant to the understanding of our contemporary moment. But as Jameson suggests in his reading of Derrida’s reading of Marx, what is more relevant now is to historicize Derrida’s argument rather than reifying it by uncritically following or copying him (“Marx’s Purloined Letter”).

6. Conclusion: Refusal of The Arrogance of Discourse

Throughout the modern and postmodern times, DOA discourse has been among the main currents in our literary society. For Barthes, the formulation of the discursive logic was modeled on the historical development of modernism on the one hand, and was situated in the larger social context of the demise of the romanticized and unified subject. However, the later development of DOA discourse shows its competent growth despite
the many contestations on the necessity of the author-construct. It is true that this
discursive evolution largely reflects the transformation of the modern society into the
postmodern social space. However, to say that the proliferation of DOA discourse is
foregrounded by the historical transformation does not exactly mean that the DOA’s
historical advancement into the declaration of the liberation of the reader, with the
enormous emphasis on the reading culture, should be legitimized. Even if the
contemporary discourse imagines a legitimacy to reading culture, that doesn’t necessarily
mean that it has to be taken as a horizon for our political thinking. Rather, whatever
discursive and representational edifice we have now should be rigorously re-thought
through our political necessity. Our present comes as a result of the dialectical dynamic
between subjective intervention and a materialized condition of possibilities, and our
future will be the same. In its actual history of development of the DOA discourse, the
foundational Barthes’ proposition sees its consummation in two different but inter-related
discursive practices, namely Derridean Writing and Rancierian aesthetics of singularity.
To simplify, while the former pushes to the extreme the seminal idea of writing (écriture)
the latter radicalizes the separation of text/art and world. The formidable explosion of,
and the enormous emphasis on, the discourse of “reading,” as is exemplified by the recent
“surface reading,” however, cannot be simply explained and legitimized as an aesthetic
politics of our time. For, contrary to the claims of these politics, the reader has not been
liberated. The historical and material condition has not been properly rendered in each of
their discursive practices. Far from the liberation of the reader, what has changed in “the
way we read now” is merely the way we read the readership. Without the fundamental
change in the historical form of readership, the perspectival change does not amount to its
claimed liberation of the reader. In reality, the lion’s share of this perspectival change is
given to those who actively accept and practice the DOA discourse—critics, artists,
producers, and curators.

What is the most vexing in this phenomenon is the arrogance of discourse. The
DOA discourse converts itself into the principle of creation in the postmodern age. The
discursive practice of DOA asserts its confidence by creating its own correspondence in
the material world. While one may say this conversion itself is emblematic of the
contemporary social transformation, the simple fact that there is ever-increasing global
suffering that this recent DOA cannot take into its own account provides enough
justification for a re-investigation of the dominance of the DOA discourse. What it has
failed to create, or better, what it has not make sayable, is subjectivity: the subjectivity of
the author as well as the subjectivity of the reader. As the DOA discourse essentially
transfers subjective power to the aesthetic structure (Ranciere) or to the economy of
writing (Derrida), the discursive practice is, despite its liberatory aspiration,
apocalyptic—apocalyptic in the sense that it stops changing the present material
condition by averting its eyes toward utopian fetish. The arrogance of discourse arises
when a discourse stops looking at the historico-material condition for its own
proliferation and legitimizes what it has seen as the absolute horizon for what will be.
The arrogance, in other words, flows through the instrumentalization of itself—making
its own discourse the condition of possibility for its practice.

Against this arrogance, numerous artists and authors have been positing, finding,
inventing, and framing what has already been present but not yet actualized in their
literary and artistic forms. Author-subjectivity is, as it has been indicated numerous times,
not a unified one. As Lukács argues, the subjectivity can only subjectivize itself by sublating itself through the historical form of art that, in turn, liberates what is expressed from the confines and restraints of historical and material/technological limits. Ultimately, this author-subjectivity is enabled by and enacted on the basis of people’s collective practice because the changing world is, in the final analysis, given as the totality of people’s practice. Author-subjectivity is the name for the mediation from people to people.

In the contemporary society, the proposed liberation by the DOA is a wish-fulfillment ungrounded by the material condition. Though there is nothing inherently wrong with wish-fulfillment, the present form of the DOA discourse invites a serious criticism. For the DOA discourse shows the paradigmatic form of the postmodern apocalypse. Of course, the apocalypse, if it were enacted as a desperate collective longing for a different time, would amount to one of the most politically volatile form of literature as the biblical apocalypse exemplifies. But the contemporary pop apocalypse is a complacent one in the sense that the apocalypse itself is ossified into an entertainment form whose content is a mere variation of the same thing. The dialectical tension between the art form and the world is severed. As shown in Adorno’s critique of the culture industry, the repetition here leads not to a difference but to an identity precisely because the historical form of the pop apocalypse lost its dialectical tension with the outside world. The kind of logic that is involved here is one that Marx mobilizes to explain the transition from formal subsumption to real subsumption. Real subsumption is the way in which a universal alters particulars through the distribution of the reproduction technology that presumably produces the universality within the particular bodies. Of
course, this universality is, as Adorno calls it, false universality because the particulars are mere exemplars of the universality as they lose their individuality (*Dialectics of Enlightenment* 107). And this is the point of return of the dialectics. For the absolute altercation of the particulars is only the ideal of capital and it cannot possibly subsume the various individuals’ “non-identical” experience.

However, the return of the repressed is not an automatic and objective process that is severed from subjective intervention. For while it is a historical reality, it is also a political normativity that calls for subjective involvement.

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. (*Illuminations* 256)

What Walter Benjamin’s much quoted passage demonstrates, aside from the barbarity of civilization, is the difficulty involved in documenting the barbarism. The documentation requires a “tiger’s leap” on the part of the documenting subject (261). The repressed returns not as a (political) subject but in the form of barbarism; the repressed was repressed because it had no share in the “civilization.” In other words, the repressed is itself unsayable in a particular cultural and political setting. The return of the repressed would never mean something like “the people are always right.” That positive statement would, at best, simply demonstrate a naiveté. Under the current societal circumstance it would mostly mean “consumers are always right,” which is true only from the position of a capitalist. In the same vein, the readers are always right, only in the market.

Still, if the phrase of “the return of the repressed” can be considered as a fact, as an undeniable reality, and as a political normativity, then it is because one cannot deny the suffering of the repressed.
The power of the status quo puts up the façades into which our consciousness crashes. It must seek to crash through them. This alone would free the postulate of depth from ideology. Surviving in such resistance is the speculative moment: what will not have its law prescribed for it by given facts transcends them even in the closest contact with the objects, and in repudiating a sacrosanct transcendence. Where the thought transcends the bonds it tied in resistance—there is its freedom. Freedom follows the subject’s urge to express itself. The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed. (Negative Dialectics 17-18, emphasis mine)

From the position of the suffering, the status quo is ideology. Because the suffering has to break from the ideological bonds and relations to gain the freedom “to express itself,” the possibility of survival is “speculative.” But precisely due to the undeniability of the suffering, an author’s task is to “lend a voice to suffering” which “is the condition of all truth” (against the background of the ideology of the status quo). As such, this “lending a voice to suffering” is the foundation of political aesthetics. For this “lending” demands from the author the toil of finding/framing/positing and expressing the unheard voice objectively—that is, through the sublation of the author to the artwork.

The suffering in question is also the unnamable names that false universality systematically excludes in its real subsumption. In this profound sense, the suffering figure is one that is denied “the right to have rights.”38 This Arendtian notion sharply points out the vulnerability of stateless people under an inter-war situation. But it is also perfectly applicable to any dominant discursive enterprise—what Adorno calls ideology in the above passage—that renders non-identical experience and thought unsayable. In other words, the Arendtian state of emergency is not the exception but the rule as our society enters the stage of the real subsumption both in terms of capitalism and discursive virtuality. In this broad sense, “the right to have rights” entails the responsibility to say the unsayable, the “need to lend a voice.” At the same time, the corollary of the notion is
the right to hear suffering, to read what has not yet been offered, to see what has been excluded. The subjectivation of the author, to put it differently, is not unrelated to the subjectivation of the reader. If the author’s subjectivation lies in her ability to frame according to the principle of selection, a similar logic applies to the reader. The reader’s act of reading should be based on the principle of selection. But the principle of selection is antithetical to “the freedom to choose.”

1 See Roland Barthes, “Death of the Author” in Image, Music, Text; Michel Foucault, “What is an Author”; Stanley Fish, “Interpreting the Variorum” in Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authorities of Interpretive Communities (147-73); Jacques Derrida, Limited Inc.; Jacques Ranciere, “the Distribution of the Sensible” in The Politics of Aesthetics (7-46).


3 Harvey makes a clear distinction between common-sense and common sense. The hyphenated common-sense is defined as “the sense held in common” following Gramsci, while “Common sense is constructed out of long-standing practices of cultural socialization often rooted deep in regional or national traditions” (39).

4 Because subjectivation is a political term that demands aesthetic or ethical determination, which also involves the active construction of oneself (or others), it has to be differentiated from, for example, economic determinism, political voluntarism, or even from Foucaudian discursivism. For example, Badiou’s subjectification has to be understood as a radical break from objective conditions. The truth-process, which constitutes the essence for subjectivation, takes place against the background of a “‘culture-technology-management-sexuality’ system, which has the immense merit of being homogenous to the market, and all of whose terms designate a category of commercial presentation” (12). For Badiou, subjectivation is an act of making a break from the reified system through the subject’s pursuit for universality in the un-territorialized areas of art-science-politics-love. (Saint Paul)

5 Martha Woodmansee, The Author, Art, and the Market: Reading the History of Aesthetics. Woodmansee traces the development of German aesthetics and the subsequent legitimization of the Kantian notion of author in the emerging middle-class culture in the18th century.

Woodmansee deftly employs a historical, materialist focus to trace the growth of the middle-class in eighteenth-century Germany and to analyze its startling, significant effects on literary aesthetics and the construction of canon, genre, and treatment of gender. The first five chapters are devoted, essentially, to an outline of the development of German aesthetics and the concluding chapter to the English reception of Kant. Woodmansee's study offers much insight into the period and helps greatly to demonstrate "how a cultural formation that evolved as recently as 'art' could have entrenched itself so thoroughly that we imagine it always to have existed" (p. 8).

6 Jerome McGann argues in his The Romantic Ideology (especially Part I “Romanticism and its Critical Representations”) that romantic poems were concrete historical responses to their particular social and historical contexts and problems. The romantic ideology, according to him, was belatedly formed under the influence of German philosophy and romanticized romantic poets—i.e. the ideologization of Romanticism was constructed after romanticism. In fact, the idea that the “author” in romanticism is a unified one is untenable. But this was the long-standing belief.
Barthes’ “From Work to Text” was originally produced in 1971 and “The Death of the Author” in 1968. The text I use here is *Image-Music-Text* (1978) where his important essays about DOA discourse are collected.

For an introduction to the critical re-evaluation of Barthes, see Sean Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*.

Regarding Barthes’ orientation in Modernism, see Jameson “ideology of text” in *Ideology of Theory* (20-75); Andreas Huyssen, “Mapping the Postmodern” in *After the Great Divide* (179-221).


Barthes’ distinction between readerly and writerly texts is well-known. Readerly texts adhere to the literary convention and status quo in its style and content. Since meaning is often pre-determined outside the text, the main business here is reading or accepting information. Writerly texts are different in that the reader takes the constructive function. Thus, writerly text is “a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable” (S/Z 5).

De Man’s reading seems to draw its conclusion from Lukacs’ phenomenological reading which puts, in fact, too much emphasis on the subject-object’s phenomenological relationship. Thus Lukacs doesn’t deal with the historical dimension of aesthetics, which seems to direct De Man’s reading to the psychological/existential one. But, even though Lukacs is not explicit about the historical nature of form, the orientation of his argument on the Hegelian sublation seems to point at a different direction from De Man’s “sublimation.” For if sublimation implies the displacement of the repressed onto a highly cultural/social form of invention and thus suggests a perspective from the end product, sublation refers to more of a process of transformation and expansion than the final outcome.

Jameson argues in his “Introduction” to *The Historical Novel* that Lukacs’ strong critique of European naturalism is a veiled attempt aimed at the dogmatic socialism.

The most persistent issue in Lukacs’ career is the issue of subjectivity and author. It seems not plausible to read his aesthetic as well as social writings without taking into account his conceptualization of subject and author.

Nicholas Brown explains the term: “the selection a particular formal or thematic problem as central, and the rewriting of the history of the medium or genre or even socio-cultural aesthetic field as the history of that problem.” (“The Work of Art in the Age of its Real Subsumption under Capital”)
Ranciere’s theory of political aesthetics is based on his distinction of three regimes of art. First, in the ethical regime of art, artistic activity is viewed only as a method to bring a direct moral and political impact on the society. As this follows the Plato’s model, artistic activity is discussed according to the ethical parameters—for example, how and whether theatre can educate citizens/audience and conform harmonious organization of city. Second, in the representative or poetic regime of art, “poetics” means a general relationship between an artistic form and the world. As this corresponds with Aristotle’s model of poetics or mimesis, fictional forms are necessarily linked to their inner “representational” rules (genre, convention, etc.). This regime is maintained by its underlying norm of pedagogy that tries to make visible what is hidden. In other words, mimesis as a principle is not defined in terms of accuracy between copy and original (which belongs to the ethical regime); mimesis is a principle that allows certain practices to be seen as arts by inscribing the copy-original relation to spectators/audience. According to this pedagogical principle, the hierarchical order of arts and subject matters are established: the priority of the textual over the visual, or language over image. The representational rules also “police” what is adequate and not for the representational form and subject matter. Ultimately, this regime is founded on the commensurability of the fictional world and the norms of the society. Consequently, what sustains this regime is that a representative (author, critic) is destined to “teach” the ignorant. Lastly, the regime of art is defined as it is freed from the hierarchies of the representational regime. Here artwork is an object for a singular sensory experience as an art object is neither an imitation nor a formal entity expressing hierarchy. See “Aesthetics as Politics” in Aesthetics and its Discontents (19-44).

His primary historical example for the regime of representation is the belles lettres and the beaux arts that predates the emergence of modernism. See Dissensus 152-161.

Ranciere’s notion of “community of sense” comes from his reading of Kant’s account of the universality of aesthetic judgment. The universality of aesthetic judgment is based on “common sense” (community of senses) where the free play among cognitive faculties (imagination and understanding) takes place. While this process is experienced by everyone through their common sense, thus is rendered universal, the art object in question does not elicit a unified response. The premise of this aesthetic process is that the object should stand disinterested in any imposing concepts or categories. See Katharine Wolfe, “From Aesthetic to Politics: Ranciere, Kant and Deleuze.”

See Ranciere, Emancipated Spectator 18-19.

For example, Lukacs critiques naturalism because “description contemporizes everything. Narration recounts the past. One describes what one sees, and the spatial ‘present’ confers a temporal ‘present’ on men and objects. But it is an illusory present, not the present of immediate action of the drama. The best modern narrative has been able to infuse the dramatic element into the novel by transferring events into the past. But the contemporaneity of the observer making a description is the antithesis of the contemporaneity of the drama. Static situations are described, states or attitudes of mind of human beings or conditions of thing—still lives” (“Narrate or Describe” 130).
26 See Lukacs Historical Novel 43-44.

27 The term “the triumph of realism,” which appears often in Lukacs’ oeuvre, demonstrates the dialectics of sublation between the author and his artistic product.


29 Marx’s critique of his contemporary Utopianism exactly applies here. He criticized that the then prevalent various forms of utopianism such as those claimed by Fourier, Saint-Simon, and Owen are not grounded in the existing material and subjective conditions. In German Ideology, he writes: “All epoch-making systems have as their real content the needs of the time in which they arose. Each one of them is based on the whole of its class relations with their political, moral, philosophical and other consequences” (German Ideology 488).

30 Susan Buck-Moss gives a clear explanation of human universality in the context of Haitian anti-colonial struggle. “[H]uman universality emerges at the point of rupture. It is in the discontinuities of history that people whose culture has been strained to the breaking point give expression to a humanity that goes beyond cultural limits. And it is in our emphatic identification with this raw, free, and vulnerable state, that we have a chance of understanding what they say. Common humanity exists in spite of culture and its differences. A Person’s non-identity with the collective allows for subterranean solidarities that have a chance of appealing to universal, moral sentiment, the source of today’s enthusiasm and hope. It is not through culture, but through the threat of culture’s betrayal that consciousness of a common humanity comes to be” (133). Buck-Moss’ conceptualization shows that once universality is reified in a positivistic form, then its particular content is easily evaporated. Instead, the particular/concrete universality is where human universality obtains its political meaning.

31 Geoffrey Bennington argues that Derrida’s notion of Writing (Ecriture) is far from a “linguistic imperialism (87)” as if there was only language and no world. According to him, Saussurean linguistics is a version of this ultra-linguisticism where the limits imposed by the language and structure defines the world that one can experience because one can make sense of the world only through the language. In this version of linguisticism, the problem of referent is rendered as irrelevant since the referent cannot be an object of science. As opposed to the linguistic imperialism, he argues, “in Derridean language … the traditional opposition of language and world is deconstructed” (87). In other words, Derridean writing is not confined to linguistic structure; it is mode of being—“language and world are the same, text and trace, which is neither simply language nor world” (96).

32 Derrida explicitly remarks in his book Margins of Philosophy that writing is the principle of being: “I should like to show that the features that can be recognized in the classical and narrowly defined concept of writing are generalisable. [In my view] they would be valid not only for all orders of ‘signs’ and for all language in general but, beyond semio-linguistic communication, for the whole field of what philosophy would call experience, or even the experience of being: so-called ‘presence’” (“Signature, Event, Context” 277).

33 While Derrida uses the term “form” frequently in this article, his target is not form as dialectically understood, but structuralism’s static/synchronic approach to form as the following passage clearly indicates. “In this demand for the flat and the horizontal, what is intolerable for structuralism is indeed the richness implied by the volume, every element of signification that cannot be spread out into the simultaneity of a form.” (25)

34 This paper mainly focuses on early Derrida. According the Jameson, the later Derrida is marked by its active incorporation of Levinas, which characterizes his project as a pursuit of politics of justice and ethics (“The Purloined Letter” 156). In his philosophical system, both textual politics and politics of the Other are clearly located. If his earlier career is marked by the more playful concept of difference, his later theoretical trajectory is much more invested in politics of the Other, which makes his later writings much more political and interesting. On the influence of Levinas on later Derrida, see Theodore Jennings, Reading Derrida, Thinking Paul: on Justice.

36 However, the degeneration of pop-apocalypse doesn’t mean that there can’t be any “serious” apocalyptic literature. On the contrary, this is the very condition for the emergence of serious apocalyptic narratives such as McCarthy’s *The Road* and Ursula Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*.

37 Here is the complete passage by Adorno. “Its [the totality of the culture industry’s] element is repetition. The fact that its characteristic innovations are in cases mere improvements to mass production is not extraneous to the system. With good reason the interest of countless consumers is focused on the technology, not on the rigidly repeated, threadbare and half-abandoned content. The social power levered by the spectators manifests itself more effectively in the technically enforced ubiquity of stereotype than in the stale ideologies which the ephemeral contents have to endorse” (*Dialectics of Enlightenment*108). This passage is interesting because it provides a “historical” way of looking at identity and difference. The passage implies that the relationship between identity and difference has to be grasped in a concrete historical conjuncture.

38 The phrase “the right to have rights” is found in chap. 9 “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man” in Hanna Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In the book’s context, “the right to have rights” means the basic human right “to belong to a political community, … to be in a framework where one is judged by one’s actions and opinions” (267).
Chapter 2  In Search of an Apocalypse: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

1. Locating *The Road* in the Historical Divide and its Discontents

Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel *The Road* is an anti-climactic novel. There is no gradual intensification of a central conflict: the event that fills the entire narrative space is the unnamed father and son’s struggle for survival in the completely destroyed post-apocalyptic world. The novel begins with their journey to the south: “They were moving south. There’d be no surviving another winter here” (4). The extreme circumstances of deadly hunger and coldness force the protagonists on a constant move on the road in their desperate search for food and a warmer place. But their journey is unlike the classical road narrative; their journey is not punctuated by the development of a major conflict and its denouement. Rather, the conflict between the protagonists and the antagonistic circumstances of their world is maintained throughout. The father and son constantly find themselves encountering the deadly threats of cold and hunger on the one hand and, on the other hand, the threat of the other survivors’ violent search for food. The result is that the central rhythm and logic of the novel is that of repetition. In fact, though their long and “uncalledared” (273) journey is a constant alternation between musings about desolate landscapes and descriptive episodes of their encounters with other wretched survivors, none of these moments is central. In other words, the conflict between the protagonists and the antagonists never develops to a point of explosion because the conflict is constant, repetitive, sporadic, and episodic. And by definition, without the development of the major conflict, there is no climax.

However, towards the end of the novel there is a moment where the author shows
a sweeping vision of the world which is unmatched by any other scene of the novel in its scope and degree, save the very last passage (which we will visit later). As a moment of a kind of awakening, the passage functions as an anti-climactic climax.

The road crossed a dried slough where pipes of ice stood out of the frozen mud like formations in a cave. The remains of an old fire by the side of the road. Beyond that a long concrete causeway. A dead swamp. Dead trees standing out of the gray water trailing gray and relic hagmoss. The silky spills of ash against the curbing. He stood leaning on the gritty concrete rail. Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence. (274)

Here, beginning with a detailed description of “a dried slough” the narrative presents an explosive expansion of its vision of a pervasive desolation of the whole world in a passage composed of eleven sentences. What is remarkable here is the changing sentence rhythm that accompanies each turn of narrative vision. The first, relatively long and realistic sentence ends with the dark and dreary image of a cave, in which a distant vision of the road and its landscape is mixed with an autistic, narrow vision. The second sentence differentiates itself from the verbose prose of the first sentence while maintaining the descriptive tone, as the vision escapes from ice-like “formations in a cave” on to the “remains of an old fire” on the road. The rhythm of the third sentence is much faster, as the word “beyond” signals, and the vision here expands to a more expansive distance without losing the tactile (“concrete”) detail of its description. With the fourth sentence fragment, the fast-paced rhythm comes to a full stop and here the descriptive language is mixed with the abstract significance of the word “dead,” whose linguistic effect is the determination of mood and mode of the so far described scene and image. But this grip of narrative space by the abstraction of death is eased by the longer and descriptive fifth sentence. This time, however, the description involves an expansion
to a visual and temporal image ("gray and relic hagmoss"). The sixth sentence also catches a tempo of accelerando with its short sentence fragment, but the sentence ends with a concrete object ("the curbing") and brings the reader's attention back to the novelistic reality from the abstract idea of death. From this dreary reality the father emerges; but he is delineated from a long distance, as a fragile and delicate form, as the word "leaning" implies in its contradistinction to the "gritty concrete" rail. What follows is a radical expansion of the vision of the world as the dramatic monologue continues from the eighth to the eleventh and final sentence. Once the imagination reaches the enormity of "how it was made" in the eighth sentence, the explosiveness of the vision is embodied in two short words of massive visual significance—"oceans, mountains."

These spectacular images are, however, immediately re-defined as "the ponderous counterspectacle"—that is, spectacles that are "ceasing to be" and thus become "the sweeping waste." Finally, the chiasmatic reversal of a spectacle (or spectacles) into the counterspectacle converts two massive images of "oceans, mountains" into one monolithic blur of waste, which is, in turn, to be expressed only through "silence." If in the first half of the passage the rhythm mainly relates to the perspectival shifts between closed-up objects and long-distanced scenes, the second half's rhythm comes from the repetition of the same long distance view that, through the syntactic variation of length of sentences and through the chiasmatic reversal of the meaning of the objects, that produces a textual transformation of verbal virtuosity into silence by turning many (mountains and oceans) into one (waste).

This close reading of the passage then locates two notable characteristics. First, the passage demonstrates a highly sophisticated linguistic register—abstruse words, terse
sentence fragments, relatively long realistic sentences of description, poetic similes, nuanced arrangements of contrasting images—that is typical of the modernist literary practice. Second, the passage also an expansion of perspective, only to suddenly stop at the final truncated sentence, which is the culmination of this expansion of vision, rather than the departure from the vision. In other words, the central tenet of the passage is similar to that of modernist aesthetics—namely, the sublime. In fact, it would hardly make sense to read the absoluteness of the vision without begging the question of the sublime. To recapitulate, the entirety of the above passage seems to demand from a reader a particular reading practice; by recalling everything that is modernist, the textual dynamic imposes the kind of reading that the reader exercises when facing a modernist text.

However, given that the language is essentially that of the modernist and given that it is tempting therefore to read the novel as essentially a modernist narrative, a closer inspection soon betrays idiosyncrasies that cannot be attributed to the modernist practice. First of all, the absolute vision laid out in the passage cannot be understood as the modernist absolute or sublime. As for the sublime as such, it takes place when the enormity of objects/events does not allow a proper grasp or representation of it since the object/event is beyond our current symbolic system. Thus the sublime marks the limits of our present understanding and expression in modernist aesthetics; only the cognitive failure of a proper expression demonstrates the sense of the sublime. As Kant puts it, “[T]he sublime can … be found in a formless object, either [as] in the object or because the object prompts us to present it, while yet we add to this unboundedness the thought of totality” (98).¹ In other words, the sublime has two inter-related but conceptually distinct
moments—the viewing subject’s frustration and that subject’s subsequent imaginative overcoming by way of the expansion of the human capacity of reason. And this pairing of two successive but contradictory moments is at the core of the sublime, whether it is between unrepresentibility of object/event and representation of the unrepresentibility itself, unboundedness and totality, formlessness and aesthetic formalization, absolute particularity and universalization. As for the modernist sublime, its difference from the Kantian sublime is that while the latter directly relates to natural objects or phenomena, as in his examples such as “massive mountains climbing skyward, deep gorges with raging streams in them” (129), the direct encounter with nature is either out of question or rendered naïve in modernist aesthetics. While the modernist sublime still retains the two-fold structure of the absolute and the representation of it, the experience of the absolute is always mediated by the modern social conflict. In other words, under the modernist paradigm, the formal resolution of an unsurpassible conflict is conceivable when social (not merely natural) problems are experienced as an abyss whose many names include the meaninglessness of life, incommunicability, loneliness, the irreconcilable gap of individual and society.

This brief survey of the modern sublime gives us a better look at the above passage from The Road. McCarthy's sublime has, in fact, a structural affinity with the modernist sublime in that both involve two moments of frustration and the expansion of imagination. “The silence” is an expression of the sheer frustration in the face of the absolute while “Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle” captures the expanded vision. However, the order is curiously reversed; contrary to the modernist sublime, the imaginative expansion comes first and then the frustration follows. This
reversal changes everything. If the modernist expansion of imagination is provided as a symbolic resolution of a conflict, here the conflict between the protagonist and the dead environment is not resolved. The opposite is true: through the expansion of vision the conflict itself acquires an enormity. In other words, the expansion of vision is not an aesthetic resolution of a conflict, but an aesthetic absolutization of the conflict. The frustrating moment takes place in this passage, accordingly, not when a subject encounters the impossibility of a conceptual and symbolic representation whose enormity cannot be grasped at the moment (as in the modernist practice of the sublime), but when the subject affirms the absoluteness of the conflict. This is why the passage is an anti-climactic climax; the sublimity of the passage is not given as a climactic representation of a gradually developed problem of a novel, but it functions as a “climactic” repetition of the problem that the novel sets forth from the beginning.

But the above problem is, viewed from a slightly different angle, not really a problem. For the conflict between the protagonists and the destroyed world is not so much a problem as a background or a setting in the *The Road*’s narrative space. This is precisely because *The Road* is a post-apocalyptic novel where said problem is one of the basic conventions of the genre. And this is where the nature of McCarthy's literary experiment comes on the scene. McCarthy's experiment aims at the long standing dichotomy of the modernist aesthetics and the culture industry's genre novel. On the one hand, the post-apocalyptic novel's genre convention, which is notoriously formulaic and plot-based, is translated with the “aesthetic” literary language. And the result is that the genre novel's linguistic banality, which is only compensated by the exotic and extreme apocalyptic situation, is transformed into poetic prose. On the other hand, the modernist
sublime, which is the aesthetic resolution of a social conflict, gives way to a kind of brutal textual realism that precludes any symbolic or formal solution/resolution. McCarthy's experiment, then, is an attempt to not only negotiate the two spheres of the longstanding divide but also create a narrative space that differentiates itself from them.

The fact that *The Road* is classified as an apocalyptic genre fiction—one of the most popular genres in our contemporary cultural scene—raises an immediate question about its linguistic experiment. While the adjective “genre” does not necessarily make a novel inherently bad, it does bring a connotation of the repetition of the same or patterned motives, plots, characters, and settings. And this “bad” connotation has its roots in a long standing historical, not merely conceptual, divide that has been structuring our cultural life throughout the modern and postmodern era. As Andreas Huyssen persuasively argues in *After the Great Divide*, despite “a plethora of strategic moves tending to destabilize the high/low opposition from within,” the opposition of high vs. low, serious vs. light, modernist aesthetics vs. the culture industry, proves “amazingly resilient” (16). And this tenacious dichotomy is not simply due to “the inherent quality of the one [modernism] and the depravations of the other [culture industry] (vii)” but the fact that “from its beginnings the autonomy of art has been related dialectically to the commodity form” (17). In other words, the horizon of modernist aesthetics is its anti-market autonomy precisely because the non-commoditiness, or, using Kantian language, the “disinterestedness” embodied in the art commodity, is the very guarantee of its status as an artwork. It is this “disinterestedness” that fuels modernism's historical development as an institution whose historical trajectory obsessively registers its own self-awareness as a unique social institution within the larger process of modern compartmentalization. As
Huyssen puts it, “modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination [by the commodity culture]” (vii). Visited this way, on the level of institution, modernist aesthetics and the culture industry are mutually antagonistic institutions.

However, what is problematic to the high/low dichotomy is not merely the dichotomy itself but the historically developed limitations of each sphere, which are imposed by the divide itself. This historical antinomy immediately leads us to the now clichéd but serious motif of elitism—that is, high modernism’s departure from people’s life experience. To this familiar charge, one might want, of course, to forge an affirmative account of modernism and defend it: various great modernist works deal with social, political, and economic issues. In this version of modernism, one can see the modernist aesthetic form as encompassing the depth and breadth of people’s lived life. However, one should also remember that the historical development of modernism was a response to an already reified life condition. Modernism, and the institutionalization of art, emerged as a skeptical response to the 19th century realism’s confidence to “represent” the social reality. Needless to say, what lies in the transition from realism to modernism is the recognition that the highly fragmented life experience does not allow for a mimesis-based representation of social totality. As a result, the social totality was only negatively represented under the paradigm of the modernist sublime. In other words, while it is true that modernist aesthetics exert great efforts to capture the depth and width of people’s lives, the material condition that generates modernist aesthetics—which has been variously named as fragmentalization, specialization, compartmentalization, reification, etc.—has intensified throughout the modern and postmodern era to the point
that the great depth/breadth found in some modernists’ works is hardly likely to be found in our contemporary cultural life. The aesthetic institution, throughout its process of development, seems more and more focused on self-conscious formal/aesthetic experiments, as people’s life experience itself is filled with the consumption of commodities. Hence the charge of elitism gains ground; the promise of the modernist aesthetics—the promise to pierce through the fragmentariness of the outside world—is problematized and, consequently, modernist aesthetic practice is often accused of operating in “a league of its own.”

The draining of life content within aesthetic practice also threatens what might be called the “anti-political politicality” at the core of the modernist aesthetics. If modernist aesthetics is not merely aesthetic, the reason is that the aesthetic freedom at issue is dearly bought through its projection of aesthetic (re-)solution of the social issues of the material world. To elaborate, while the anti-political politicality of modernist aesthetics lies in its radical refusal to be subordinated to the political economy of capitalism, or the politics of market, the paradoxical politicality of modernist aesthetics is embodied in the strategy of “creating an aesthetic world” severed from the market mechanism. Under the universality of “aesthetics” as their ideal, which is only definable against the commodified and market-driven world, each modernist author creates his or her own literary world and standards while also piecing together the fragmented life contents in the artwork. The autonomy of art is, then, a very loose constellation of singular works of art whose normativity is fundamentally anchored in its anti-market nature while, at the same time, the aesthetic material of each work is made up of variously fragmented psychic and material experience. The much discussed modernist “style” should be
understood in this vein. That is, modernist style is another name of the form, which enables the authorial expression of that which would not be expressed without the formal innovation. Modernist style is, in other words, a grid on its own terms ordered by authorial uniqueness, and thus, it provides a unique form through which the social experience is registered. In short, modernist aesthetic work is *sui generis* and *social*. Now if we turn our eyes to our contemporary moment, the formidable power of “market” magically converts any “social” content (such as the suffering of the poor) into commodities on the market. The marketization of the social content makes social content itself into a spectacular commodity whose market value is determined by the buyer's choice. The fragmentariness of our life, in other words, de-realizes any social content; without the communal consensus about what is properly social, anything social is experienced as a merely individual choice and as a commodity.

And at the heart of this commodification process lies the historical development of the culture industry. As Adorno, the theorist of the culture industry *par excellence*, formulates, what governs the culture industry is the ever-repetitive rhythm of the capitalist logic of maximization of profit. As long as this “means without ends” (instrumentalization), or capitalist empty form, completely dominates cultural production, consumption, and circulation, any space for genuine author-reader function is not to be found. Just as consumer’s “freedom to choose” is to choose “what is always same” (167), “in the culture industry the individual is an illusion not merely because of the standardization of the means of production. He is tolerated only so long as his complete identification with the generality is unquestioned” (154). As the market territorializes “culture” whose very aesthetic/critical institutionalization was established out of its
distancing from the market, the culture industry feeds its consumers with entertaining spectacles which consist of a “false” and “illusory” promise that is “no more than a commendation of the depressing everyday world it sought to escape” (139). Here, Adorno's theorization of the culture industry as the subsumption of aesthetics by the market is most useful because the “totality of the culture industry” more aptly describes our contemporary phenomenon rather than that of 1944—the year that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was published (126). In fact, Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* is read as an elaboration of Adorno's culture industry thesis. Debord's argument that the dominant form of commodity consumption becomes the *image* as our society transforms itself into a “society of spectacle” is a grave diagnosis that the culture—the last fortress of non-commodity—is rapidly eroded by the logic of the market. Debord's “image” is, of course, a commodity with a style or goods with aesthetic quality. In his argument, the commercialization of culture finally reaches a point where a commodity is freed from any trace of social relations. Very often, the image that is then consumed is, as Adorno says, one of escape. The fragmentary and mundane everyday life finds a spectacular escape in “aesthetic” commodity.

One of the most pertinent examples of the culture industry in our era is genre fiction. In terms of language and style, it has often been positioned at the other extreme from modernist aesthetics. In terms of content, genre fiction notoriously exploits exoticism as mere variations on a familiar motif. Here again the dichotomous logic exactly applies. Just as much of the content is already formulated or patterned, the use of “style” in the mass produced genre fiction does not any more signify the authorial dialectic of form and content. Style is generally a non-organic element in a genre novel.
More accurately, though any number of genre fictions can also claim their “styles”, the style is mostly denotative and, at best, decorative—while all kinds of “styles” from high modernists can be adapted in genre novel, the adapted style is external to the contents. Because the “style” of writing is something that the genre novel is less focused on, the writing is very often dry and merely informative. Genre writing therefore is often instrumental and, likewise, other “literary” techniques and their effects are not the central focus. ³

Given this high and low dichotomy in our cultural development, the recent appearance of the “serious” authors on the genre fiction stage provides an interesting site for aesthetic and political investigation. For example, Lev Grossman argues that some genre fictions are “grafting the sophisticated, intensely aware literary language of Modernism onto the sturdy narrative roots of genre fiction ...They’re forging connections between literary spheres that have been hermetically sealed off from one another for a century.” From a slightly different context, Andrew Hoberek also points to the “contemporary transformation of what counts as serious fiction” (485). He argues that “[the] return to the pre-modernist canon [meaning: genre fiction] of literary respectability” by authors such as Cormac McCarthy, Thomas Pynchon, and Michael Chabon make genre fiction “resume[s] its status as a respectable terrain” (486). ⁴ The validity of this claim aside, Hoberek eloquently situates McCarthy’s *The Road* in contemporary cultural contradiction. As we briefly saw at this beginning of this chapter, McCarthy's writing demonstrates his authorial response to two traditional modernist traditions—aesthetic language and the sublime. Likewise, his conscious intervention into the postapocalyptic genre novel’s conventions through modernist language is already
clear. Of course, this “conscious” intervention does not entail something like an author’s “conscious” comment on the problems at table. Rather, it involves the author’s framing on the level of content as well as form—the kind of framing that Nicholas Brown calls “the principle of selection”; “the selection of a particular formal or thematic problem as central, and the rewriting of the history of the medium or genre or even socio-cultural aesthetic field as the history of that problem” (“The Work of Art in the Age of its Real Subsumption under Capital”). It is in this sense of framing that *The Road* is particularly interesting. For the novel tries to negotiate the old dichotomies by re-framing the pop genre of post-apocalypse with aesthetic languages. At the very basic level, the author’s attention to “popular” life through the adaptation of the familiar topic of post-apocalypse is historical.

2. **Constructing a Non-mimetic Post-apocalypse**

From the very beginning of *The Road*, what conspicuously catches readers' attention is the stark contrast between the characters—the father and son—and the bleak reality that they confront.

When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world. (1)

As this beginning sets the apocalyptic tone and mood that will dominate the entire narrative, nature itself is described in terms of its hostile coldness for the father and son. In fact, throughout the novel, night is always narrated as threatening their survival with its “cold autistic” (15) dark just as the grey daylight shows only a “barren, silent, godless” (4) world. The father and son's desperate journey is unfolded on the roads
covered with ash—the aftermath of a nuclear war (which the reader will be able to guess as the cause of the apocalypse). Their journey to “south” which is supposed to be less cold, or warm enough for their survival, takes up the entire plot line and, in this sense, the coldness of nature not only motivates the survival journey to escape the onset of winter but also defines the outside world with its brutal hostility. If the coldness and hostility of nature makes the father-son bond contradistinctive, what equally or more glaringly manifests about nature to the reader's eye is its impenetrability. With “nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before”, any meaningful interaction between humans and nature is foreclosed (3). The “nature” in question here is, of course, completely severed from the traditional concept of mother nature—there's nothing in the novel's nature that reminds the reader of an idyllic or nostalgic image of nature. It is “sightless and impenetrable” and “autistic” (15). This impenetrability together with its coldness literally alienates human subjects. Any subjective construction in and through the “cauterized terrain” (14) or “ashen scabland” (16) is fundamentally denied since the alienation is due to nature's absolute otherness. In other words, what the reader gets, through the author's rigorous selection of words that describe the objective natural world, is the minimal, strange, vague, and almost unimaginable image of nature. This grim image of nature is mostly expressed in the language of characters' sensuous experience—cold, dead, flattened, black, grey, etc. etc., which render nature not only utterly indifferent to but also non-conducive to human life at all.

The carefully narrativized, essentially dead, natural world frames the novel as an atypical post-apocalyptic narrative. For what is also conspicuous from the book's replete descriptions of nature is what may be called a realism of obscurity. For example, with its
two distinctively characteristic colors of dark (night) and grey (day), the image of nature is almost ghostly. But this is not because the protagonists' understanding or description of it is obscure or inaccurate. On the contrary, the novel constantly emphasizes the lifelessness of nature as a fact; birds and fish are extinct in the father’s reminiscence and the endpoint of the protagonists’ journey at the seaside re-affirms the extinction of wildlife—“one vast salt sepulchre” with “a woven mat of weeds and the ribs of fishes in their millions stretching along the shore” (222). While the natural world in The Road is, as the other of the subjects, ultimately not to be assimilated back into our protagonists’ lives, the reader can recognize its otherness precisely because the blackness or fogginess is the only way that nature is experienced in the novelistic world. If the reader tries to find a correspondent reality outside the novel, she will fail; nature is to be understood only through the narrative movement and even then as foggy and obscure. Thus, the obscurity of nature is the sign of the fictionally concretized reality. And this realism—a realism that intends to describe what is obscure as obscure—is what distinguishes The Road from many contemporary novels' almost imaginable and, in many cases, already imagined “post-apocalyptic” world. For example, in James Kunstler's World Made by Hand, a survival text in a small town in upstate New York after the collapse of American government, the described environment is not much different from what Edward James identifies as the typical narrative of the post-apocalyptic genre. James indicates that the holocaust of the world in the genre novel is a “useful cleansing exercise” (90) that generates many survivalist narratives in which individuals experiment with a new construction of civilization in various settings. While the “cleansing exercise” still remains the dominant paradigm in the genre, the problem with this trope of renewal and
redemption is, given that the social and cultural trauma of the actual Holocaust highlights the trope’s naiveté, that the revelation of a genuinely new start seems untenable. In fact, most post-apocalyptic novels depend on popular imagination of “pre-historic” land for its spatial setting, and The Road radically departs from the generic convention.

At the same time, various non-natural objects of the novel are also shadowed and populated by death. In a world completely destroyed, what remains is the remnants of capitalist production. The landscape is awash with barren aluminum houses, deserted and destroyed streets, graves, broken fences, etc. The protagonists frequently encounter dried or drying dead bodies. In this world, the survival of the remaining people depends upon the scrap economy. The father and son's continued journey on the road is the curse of the scrap economy; they either constantly move to find the leftovers of the already dead such as canned food, not-yet-rotten grains, or bottled water, or they are destined to die. In this sense, their life is contingent on their willed journey where only something like sheer luck of finding food will save their life. Everything that they eat and drink is disposable in this post-capitalist world. Everything is to be consumed and trashed. And that demand will ultimately end the cycle since social as well as natural metabolism has ended. This setting of the novel can be described as “anti-social” in the sense that it does not allow the reader to mirror the novel's situation on our present society. The author takes detailed efforts to erase whatever is traceable to our present. Though familiar objects from capitalist society appear, such as Coca-cola, trains, trucks, canned foods, they are not commodities any more. The function they play in the narrative space is to indicate that capitalism no longer is in operation. Whether it is a Coca-cola or a canned jam is immaterial in this context. The object in question is not to be circulated as it doesn't have
exchange value. Devoid of the market, the non-natural objects are the last vestiges of capitalism. The production of them belongs to the past just as, for example, a coca-cola can reminds the father of his past, which ultimately underlines a particular past that will be forever gone with the last drop of Coca-cola. In a barren house yard, the protagonists are surprised with joy to find a bunker full of canned food. But the cans are only “the richness of a vanished world” (139) and the two soon have to leave that “tiny paradise” (150).

Therefore, the novel cautiously details a narratively self-sufficient world on the level of setting. In other words, in terms of setting the rigorous selection of the author's vocabulary manifestly refuses mimetic reading. This aesthetic construction of the novelistic setting is, on the part of the author, a movement away from the genre conventions within the larger genre frame. This movement to build a non-mimetic world on the ground of a “popular” genre is also seen on the content level. For example, the fact that the reader is never informed of the cause of the apocalypse is significant. A kind of nuclear war is implied as the plausible cause since the already-destroyed world is full of ashes. But what the reader is informed of is not the exact cause of the present apocalypse but the fact that there was a brief period of transition after the initial cause—whatever it was. This transitional period is described as “People sitting on the sidewalk in the dawn half immolate and smoking in their clothes. Like failed sectarian suicides. Others would come to help them. Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road.” (32-33) But even here, the stress is not on the transitional phase itself but on the current state of the world viewed by the father. More precisely, the description of the transitional
period is mobilized to explain how the father looks at the present. “On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world. Query: How does the never to be differ from what never was?” (32) The father’s question essentially makes the past the present problem. In other words, if “what never was” in its past tense implies a different future, the a-temporal “the never” gives the sense of the exitlessness of the eternal present. With this subtle shift from the past to present, the present state is re-defined as the void of even religious fanaticism and its apocalyptic message. Again, the point of this narrative movement is to make whatever the cause of the present end of the world was, as long as it is external to the textual world, indifferent to the narrative. Considering many apocalyptic novels are committed to various “motifs” and a descriptive justification to secure verisimilitude, it is notable that the author of *The Road* is not interested in the “thematic” variations that are the very convention of the genre. In fact, there are some already patterned motifs in the genre—pests, nuclear war, technology gone mad, extra-terrestrial beings, viruses, etc. and many new apocalyptic themes are being introduced. The point of these variations of the culture industry is that they are pointless. In other words, the kind of reality the various genre novels are committed to is spectacular and speculative exoticism simply because they have the same or patterned plots, structures, themes, heroes, etc. only with the exception of subject matter, whereas McCarthyian realism is solely devoted to the “present” of the novel. Instead of depending on popular imagination of what the aftermath of a nuclear war would be like, the realism of *The Road* urges the reader to parenthesize the genre convention and to indulge in the textual world of destruction.

In this sense, McCarthy’s non-mimetic construction of the post-apocalyptic world
not only eschews the problem of exoticism but also radically problematizes the generic condition that usually forces various exotic thematic variations. For what determines the genre convention is, James Berger argues, “the post-apocalyptic representational impasse”: “it is impossible to write absolute alterity. The other can only be inscribed in an already existing discourse” (13). In other words, the representation of apocalypse always falls back on our present since our current discourse and imagination is not designed to narrate that which has not existed linguistically and symbolically. Representations of apocalypse will, then, also be representations of our present. And here's the contemporary problem of mass-produced genre fiction. What it uniformly represents is our present, but this present, in most cases, is a vague exploitation of popular eschatological fear and anxiety. By conveniently substituting the current cultural and social setting with the fantasy, it refuses to deal with the “cause” of the present sentiment of apocalypse and only repeats and replicates the popular sentiment. Under this circumstance, the sort of politics involved in cultural mass production is the politics of fear and the hysterical enjoyment coming from its repetition. Consequently, narrative characters are clichéd and caricatured—any question of subjectivity is suffocated under the politics of fear in its clichéd restoration of public or domestic order. As Michael Chabon succinctly summarizes in his review “After the Apocalypse,” McCarthy's choice is “to annihilate the world” and “simultaneously write it into being.” Thus The Road is a book of “blank pages, white as ash” (Chabon).

But at the same time, McCarthy’s meta-generic narrative construction of the setting also invites a Jamesonian question about the political function of utopian narratives. In fact, Berger’s argument on the representational impasse of the post-
apocalypse may well be an application of Jameson’s idea of “political unconscious.”

According to Jameson, the current ideological and historical setting does not allow one to formulate the solution of the ongoing contradiction because our symbolic and non-symbolic system has been developed, say, not for the solution of the current contradiction but for the formation of the current contradiction itself. Conversely, the sublation of the contradiction is possible only through the collective attempt to bring about utopia in our present world, which will ultimately fail, but whose very failure evolves to become the engine of historical sublation. Though the authors cannot symbolically materialize the unknowable future, the representational attempt and failure of each individual author’s utopian intervention forms the political unconscious. This is why, when discussing recent “powerful new works” of science fiction, Jameson asserts that “its [SF’s] deepest vocation is over and over again to demonstrate our incapacity to imagine the future, to body forth, through apparently full representations which prove on closer inspection to be structurally and constructively impoverished, the atrophy of our time of what Marcuse has called the utopian imagination, the imagination of otherness and radical difference” (*Archaeologies* 288-9).

What Jameson suggests is a correction of Adorno's theory of the culture industry and its rigid dichotomous logic. For Adorno's theory of culture industry is exaggerated to such a degree that his Weberian formulation of the logic of the culture industry exerting iron-cage-like total power does not allow any positive approach within the sphere of the culture industry. The thesis of total dominance of the culture industry blocks one from reading the subjectivity behind the industry's obsessive question of “What do people
want?” Since the culture industry is also a politics of population, subjectivity, however passive and unconscious it might be, can be reconstructed, even though the trace of subjectivity is mostly erased from the surface of the cultural products. Put differently, though the escape from our mundane life is a false promise of the market and thus itself is an ideology, the escape as demanded by people is real. Already in 1970s, for example, Darco Suvin sees from science fiction people's collective utopian critique of the historical situation that begets each fictional narrative. Translating Bertolt Brecht's “Verfremdung” into a popular genre, he suggests the concept of “cognitive estrangement” (4) where science fiction is to be read as a dramatization and defamiliarization of our familiar reality into the fictional world, the effect of which is to secure a critical distance to our reified reality and to express the collective and desperate desire to search for “the possibility of making it different” (82). In his reading, the aesthetic quality of the science fictional genre is determined according to the degree in which science fictional “novum” concretizes the “ethical pathos and effect or communal (political) relevance” (82). In this tradition, science fiction as well as the post-apocalyptic novel is a fertile cultural site for investigating either the ideological underpinnings of fictional narratives or the profound social critique of the current social environment that they represent in mirror.10

Approached from a Jamesonian perspective, then, The Road’s non-mimetic representation not only suspends the genre’s commodity feature of exoticism but also erases the social mirroring that a conventional post-apocalyptic narrative inevitably brings in.

3. Characterizing the Father
The fact that economic and social metabolism has ended in *The Road* carves out the space of the story as one that occurs after the enlightenment. All the inventions of the civilizing process—technologies as well as social relations—are gone and there is no trace of anything that gives a sense of cultural identity or social subjectivity. Human relations are no exception to this. Throughout the novel, the animalization of humans is conspicuous. The world is “populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes” (181) and, in fact, the father and son see humans stacked in storage as food in an underground bunker (110-11) and “a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit” on the road (198). In a situation where any cultural, political, social, institutional, and material traits of humanity are completely destroyed, the survival journey of the father and son who constantly re-assure each other they are “good guys” is the journey where they search for the meaning of “good guys.” Or, given the animalization of human beings, the question they ask in the form of definitive repetition of “good guys” is the question of subjectivity—what makes a human subject a human subject?

The correlative of subjectivity is, of course, violence in the narrative space. Since “good guys” is essentially defined against the “bad guys” or the replete violence, many critics have focused on the meaning(lessness) of violence and redemption in *The Road*. In fact, the total violence with its culmination of cannibalism leads many critics to two disparate responses. On the one hand, some critics emphasize the violence as it is. William Kennedy argues that where “cannibalism became a major enterprise” “the overarching theme in McCarthy's work has been the face-off of good and evil with evil invariantly triumphant through the bloodiest possible slaughter” (10). In this reading, the
language of redemption—frequently used especially to describe the boy in such sentences (spoken by the father) as “If he [the boy] is not the word of God God never spoke” (5) and “My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you.” (77)—is but an empty gesture not to be fulfilled. The biblical allusions of the novel are used not to reveal the possibility of redemption as opposed to the violence-saturated world but “as a remnant of an irrecoverable world” (Rambo 101). On the other hand, critics with a different reading argue that “while grace and redemption are at best tenuous, unrealized possibilities in prior McCarthy novels, in The Road these aspects fundamentally drive the narrative: out of love for his child and hope for some salvation, the man pushes himself to the point of death to preserve the child's physical and spiritual safety” (Kunsa 58). In other words, even though McCarthy's typical “metaphysic” in his previous novels is, as Vereen M. Bell argues, “none, in effect—no first principles, no foundational truth” (9) (as, for example, the anti-heroic characterization of protagonists like Culla Holme (Outer Dark 1968), who rapes his sister and lets their baby die), the boy's union with another family after the death of the father signifies the persistence of hope and love.

However, the question of redemption seems secondary because when McCarthy refuses the conventional survivalist trope of post-apocalyptic renewal/redemption, it is already clear that the strictly post-apocalyptic setting of The Road blocks any possibility of a sense of renewal. The boy’s reunion with another family, at best, implies the elongated repetition of the survival struggle. In fact, if the idea of renewal or even revelation functions, as in many other post-apocalyptic novels, as a minimal guarantee/gesture of the genre’s political involvement, The Road seems to declare the
bankruptcy of this tradition, since the novel’s premise is the end of this trope as such. Further, even though the protagonists of McCarthy's previous novels are more horrific, anti-heroic figures, this doesn't make *The Road* inherently better (or worse for that matter) ethically. For the issue of redemption has to be read in the dynamic of a novel’s overall narrativization of the ethical, spiritual, and political relationship the characters make with the (novelistic) society, rather than in a plot line or characterization. Given that *The Road* lacks in this social dimension, the question of redemption seems irrelevant.

But at the same time, *The Road* curiously resurrects the fundamental genre convention of the clash between good and evil and focalizes this familiar motif in a setting where all the social traces are vaporized. Further, though the world is now “barren, silent, godless” (4), the father frequently employs religious imagery to describe the boy, implying the boy’s goodness is otherworldly. Here the religious language does not express his belief in God; rather, as the father’s fragmented monologue of “the sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality” (89) shows, the religious language is at once the essential marker of the goodness of the protagonists and the indicator of the futility of language itself in the barrenness of the world. As a result, the old motif of good vs. evil is intensified to the point that it encompasses the clash between the protagonists and the entire barren world. Because the redemption from outside (God) is foreclosed and because the redemption from inside (society) is precluded, the question of redemption is rendered external.

While the novel structurally relegates the question of redemption, it asks, in its stead, the reader to engage in the novel’s present events and the characters’ affective dimension. In fact, the narrative utilizes three different languages and perspectives to
maximize the contrast among father, son, and “bad guys.” The father’s language is always sophisticated, emotional, religious, and even philosophical and it dominates the mood of the entire narrative. The boy’s language is simple and denotative and it underscores the ingenuity of the boy. When the bad guys appear on the narrative surface, the narrator’s language is brutally exact, descriptive, graphic and their cruelty and ruthlessness is focalized. This linguistic differentiation leads the reader to clearly distinguish three narrative positions at work in the novel. Namely, the father, the son, and the narrator. Of these, the narrator effectively utilizes two other narrative positions to describe looters that are typical to the dead world.

An army in tennis shoes, tramping. Carrying three-foot lengths of pipe with leather wrappings. Lanyards at the wrist. Some of the pipes were threaded through with lengths of chain fitted at their ends with every manner of bludgeon. They clanked past, marching with a swaying gait like wind-up toys. Bearded, their breath smoking through their masks. Shh, he said. Shh. The phalanx following carried spears or lances tasseled with ribbons, the long blades hammered out of trucksprings in some crude forge up-country. The boy lay with his face in his arms, terrified. They passed two hundred feet away, the ground shuddering lightly. Tramping. Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed against the cold and fitted in dogcollars and yoked each to each. All passed on. They lay listening. (91-92)

The narrator’s lengthy and graphic description of “bad guys” strikes the reader with its vividness. While this encounter is followed by a short confrontation with another group of bandits, one of whom ends up being killed by the father, this scene is much grimmer because it shows a version of systematized violence that epitomizes the brutal acts perpetrated by humans in this world. The above description is punctuated by two brief interruptive focal shifts from and to the “march.” The first of these is the father’s “Shh” and the second is the boy's intensifying terror experienced through the tremor of
the ground. These two interruptions, in fact, document the two main characters’ distinct responses to violence; the father's repeated whisper of “Shh” dramatizes his single-minded pursuit of survival whereas the boy's effort not to witness the violence ironically results in a maximized feeling of terror. Thus through this scene the narrator informs the reader of the two main characters' undeniable difference. Further, the two brief suspensions of the graphic display also enable one to see the organized nature of the looters. This mode of their existence is apparently an animalized one—one that implicitly affirms the goodness of the protagonists.

However, there is a strange sense in the narrator’s language of this graphic description; it entices the reader to indulge in the over-simplified brutality of the looters and also in the magnified horror that the protagonists go through. And this is the very core of post-apocalyptic genre convention in its pejorative sense. In other words, when exoticism in the genre novel industry is criticized, the point is not that an adaptation of an exotic topic itself is inherently bad but that this adaptation is determined by the logic of profit, merely exploiting and pandering to the spectator’s voyeuristic pleasure. Here in this passage the exact problem of exoticism seems to be reproduced. There are other descriptive passages of looters (especially the one about cannibalism 110-11), but they are similar in their function—that is, the narrator describes violence in the manner of graphically horrifying and thematically mythical. As a result, these scenes deprive the looters and their captives of any traces of subjectivity and complexity in that they are so completely assimilated to the present scrap economy that they even consume other human beings.

It is in this respect that the father’s dichotomous logic of good vs. bad has to be
revisited. While the father’s constant invocation of “good guys” connotes a moral judgment about human value, it should also be understood as the narrator’s (and *The Road’s*) return to the genre novel’s classic motif. In other words, the father’s moral stance partly comes from the structural effect that the narrator’s one-dimensional rendering of “bad guys” produces. To say that the father’s dichotomous logic of survival is imposed by the narrator’s return to generic dichotomy is to say that the father’s “personal” moral statements are, in fact, externally given, at least in part. However, this doesn’t simply mean that the father is also mythical and one-dimensional just like the looters.

The characterization of the father figure is much more complicated and it has to be grasped against the background of two different worlds that the father engages with throughout the narrative—the present barren and grey world and the past world that exists “rich in color” (21) in his dream and memory. Considering that there are only two thinking subjects in the novel, the contrast between boy and father is unmistakable: the boy is literally post-apocalyptic and the father’s life spans before and after the apocalypse. Accordingly, the father’s consciousness is split between the strong will to survival and the melancholic reminiscence of the past. This split consciousness is found throughout the entire narrative. At one moment in the novel he ponders on the relationship between language and its referent:

... He tried to think of something to say but he could not. He’d had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (88-89)
The father deeply deplores the lost world of color. Language lost its signifying ground as its referents were swept away. While the father’s parsing of language and reality invariably invokes the dismal reality of the present, the tragic nostalgia also reveals itself through the act of remembering. In this sense, the father’s memory and the way he views the current world cannot be separated from each other. The present dismal landscape leads him to his memory of the past; once the richness of the past is recalled, it inevitably calls him back to the hopelessness of the present. In the father’s mind, in other words, the two temporally different worlds are intertwined with each other. What determines the nature of the father’s past is its presentness. Thus, when the father defines his present by saying that there are “no lists of things to be done” and “there is no later” (54), it simultaneously conjures up a certain image of the past; the sentences can be reread through the register of the past as “there were lists of things to be done” and as “there was later.” This haunting past thereby governs his present consciousness.

There are crucial moments where the past erupts into the father's present. Note, for example, the below passage where the father tries to bring the past to himself and his son.

He'd a deck of cards he found in a bureau drawer in a house and the cards were worn and spindled and the two of clubs were missing but still they played sometimes by firelight wrapped in their blankets. He tried to remember the rules of childhood games. Old Maid. Some version of Whist. He was sure he had them mostly wrong and he made up new games and gave them made up names. Abnormal Fescue or Catbarf. Sometimes the child would ask him questions about the world that for him was not even a memory. He thought hard how to answer. There is no past. What would you like? But he stopped making things up because those things were not true either and the telling made him feel bad. The child had his own fantasies. How things would be in the south. Other children. He tried to keep a rein on this but his heart was not in it. Whose would be? (53-54)

The passage locates two different fantasies and both of them inscribe family as a
central value. First, the narrator explains, through the perspective of the father, that the boy has a false hope for meeting other children in the south. But the father’s love for the boy prevents him from revealing what he believes is the truth: ostensibly that there will be none. Second, the father knows his act of playing card games comes out of a fantasy on his part (as it is implied in the sentence “the child had *his* own fantasies,” my emphasis). The fantasy is embedded in his childhood memory of family. As the father draws a picture of a “perfect day” with an uncle (13) or Christmas with sisters (25), his childhood was full of “the nights in their thousands to dream the dreams of a child's imaginings, worlds rich or fearful such as might offer themselves but never the one to be” (27).

While it is worth noting that the act of playing card games ultimately carves out the family bond between them, what is also interesting is that the father, though he is completely aware of the futility of his gesture (as the interrupting sentence “there is no past” implies), *does* try to teach card games to the boy. This contradictory gesture is repeated throughout the narrative. Specifically, this repetition is enacted through the father’s obsession with “aesthetic” objects “with value beyond use” (Hoberek 492) such as the quoits they used to play on the road or the flute he made for the boy. He also tells “old stories of courage and justice” (McCarthy 41, emphasis mine). Remarkable in these passages is that these “aesthetic” acts are always mediated by his memory of the past which, in turn, imbues immense irony to the very acts. Because “aesthetic” objects in this world are by definition useless as well as reminiscent of the past, the aesthetic act ties together the father’s memory of the past, the futility of the act of remembering, and the brutal reality of the present.
This complicated characterization of the father is, in fact, necessitated by the novel’s non-mimetic setting. Though McCarthy designs the novelistic world in a non-representational way, the representation of, say, the brutality of the post-apocalyptic world has to be performed either by narrator or a character. McCarthy’s choice is the father who has the ability to compare the pre-apocalyptic world and the post-apocalyptic world. The interesting complication here is that narration is always concomitant with the positioning of the narrating perspective. Interestingly, all the passages describing the father’s childhood memory are highly privatized so that they leave no trace of the social, political, or even economic status of his childhood. Instead, the primary links that connect the father’s past and present and thus that enable the representation of the present world are “aesthetic” objects. While on the one hand, these aesthetic objects are strongly associated with the father’s love for the boy, on the other hand, they function as a medium that expresses the father’s “human” sensibility in constructing a sharp contrast with non-aesthetic objects that belong, together with looters, to the scrap economy. As a result, the narrative position taken by the father is simply that of a good father: the tenacious return of the past by way of these “aesthetic” objects is what determines the father’s mode of life with his son. The unlikely mixture of discrepancy and inter-lacing between past and present, thought and act, dream and reality, then, fundamentally characterizes the paradoxical mode of the father’s position.

If paradox dominates the father’s mode of life, the boy is the figure in which the father's split sensibility ultimately finds its home. Where everything past has been destroyed or is soon to be destroyed, the boy, for the father, signifies the persistence of the past in the present. By constantly reminding him of his childhood, the boy actively
conjoins past with present. Just as the memories and dreams of the past are vital to the father’s survival as a human being, the boy is the anchor of his human subjectivity. “He knew only that the child was his warrant” (15). His frequent use of religious language can be partially explained in this perspective. Shortly after the scene in which he killed a marauder (the narration does not differentiate him and the marauder as both of them are confusingly and equally referred to as 'he' and 'the man'. 66), he said to the boy “You wanted to know what the bad guys looked like. Now you know. It may happen again. My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you” (77). While the boy’s immediate question “are we still good guys?” implies that the father and the marauder are not far from each other, the father’s missionary statement makes clear that the difference lies in the boy. In other words, just as the entire meaning of the father's existence relies on the boy, the meaning of “good” doesn't apply outside of the father-son circle in the father's mind. Unlike the boy who tries to find the referents of “good” in the outside world, for the father “good” is only found in the boy. Because the entire world is death and violence, the boy is the only one that “wasn't about death” and “was about beauty and goodness” for the father (129). The father’s religious language is paradoxical—it is an expression of absoluteness of the family value in a place where survival is untenable. Ironically, the very fact that the father is not able to see God’s presence is what gives the solemn religious tone to his voice. His entire devotion to the boy's life without any foreseeable hope makes his subjective position a religious one. From a slightly different perspective, the paradox-ridden language of the father originates from his narrative position in which he has to negotiate between the necessary toughness for survival and absolute moral superiority, between the representation of a
godless world and the representation of absolute goodness.

In relation to the overall religious tone of the father's voice, perhaps the most interesting aspect in the plot unfolding is the father-son conversation that repeatedly takes place through the narrative. Their conversations consist of short fragments and dry question-and-answers. Throughout the conversation the father maintains an instructive and assertive voice. Unlike his thought fragments where his pervasive skepticism is often narrated by the omniscient narrator, his talk carries no words of regret, no words of hesitation. Only strong fatherly authority dictates his conversation. But at the same time, the assertive and determined repetition of “we are carrying the fire” and “we are the good guys” also enacts an empty ritualism; at one moment, the father reveals the mechanism behind this ritual: “Evoke the forms. Where you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (74). The seemingly pure moral imperative of “carrying the fire” has to be also grasped as a ritual. Early in the novel, the father wakes to find a forest fire:

Everything was alight. As if the lost sun were returning at last. … A forest fire was making its way along the tinderbox ridges above them, flaring and shimmering against the overcast like the northern lights. Cold as it was he stood there a long time. The color of it moved something in him long forgotten. Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember. (31)

Like aesthetic objects, the fire brings past richness and present desolation at the same time. As Grace Hellyer comments on this passage, “the visual splendor of the fire serves as a simultaneous denial and reminder of loss and as a call to an ongoing labor of memory” (59). Considering the fire is the only object with “color” in the current world, it is no wonder that the fire combines the lost and splendid past and the undeniably grey reality in the father’s life. The fire thus ultimately functions as “a fragile allegorical
construction against an irreducible and final loss” (59). “Carrying the fire” is, just like his other aesthetic acts, a ritual that turns the father’s paradoxical double-consciousness into an act of survival. In this ritual, the irony of the fatherly authority lies in his decisive repetition of “fire” and “good guys” that reveals its empty religious ground precisely through the religious rhetoric itself.

4. Form and Content: the style and its historical content

The Road is a post-apocalyptic genre novel. But it tries to differentiate itself from the many other genre novels that mostly depend on exotic motifs. McCarthy produces a unique post-apocalyptic narrative world by challenging the representational impasse that is inherent to the pop genre. On the one hand, he invents a truly post-apocalyptic world by erasing every possible trace of the pre-apocalyptic world. On the other hand, he creates a complicated character whose pre-apocalyptic sensibility enables the representation of the post-apocalyptic world. While this experiment has to be understood as an artistic attempt to go beyond the conventional limits of the genre, his novel seems to be trapped by the backlash of the genre. The familiar motif of good and evil comes back and dominates the narrative structure and the restoration of family order, another genre convention, is still blatantly visible. Still, Hoberek’s argument that the core of McCarthy’s experiment is his dialectical embrace of a Faulknerian modernism and a Heminwayesque minimalism demands a close reading of The Road’s literary style.¹⁴

At first glance, there are many elements that can be found in a novel optimized for film adoption as well as for popular reading—something like Dan Brown's Da Vinci Code: the short passages, quick jumps to and from flashbacks, several action scenes,
graphic description, and fast-paced scene changes. However, even though *The Road* does adopt the film script writing style on the textual surface, it is also infused and punctuated with what only literary-writing can achieve.

“He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it.” (130)

The simile and metaphor employed in this passage are resistant to the adoption to film which is perhaps the most powerful form of the culture industry nowadays. Though sentence fragments such as “Darkness implacable” or “The crushing black vacuum of the universe” are abundant, they are also “literary” expressions. While critics like Kunsa characterize the novel as “pared down, elemental” (58) with “proliferation of sentence fragments, and brief, repetitive dialogue” (68), the overall stripped-down prose style is balanced with highly artistic expressions and literary techniques. In fact, it is not hard to find Greenbergian medium-specificity in the narrative. The noticeable number of flourishes with simile and metaphor (such as the coda passage) that usually follow the father’s gaze and contemplation cannot be translated onto the film screen, let alone the religious languages often employed by the father. Reading *The Road*’s style as “terse dialogue and spartan narrative, a style he inherited from another of his ancestors, Hemingway” (Kennedy 1), in other words, does not successfully characterize the dynamics of McCarthy’s style. But at the same time, while it would not be hard to trace a Faulknerian legacy, it seems also evident that *The Road* largely departs from McCarthy's previous Faulknerian signature. For example, in his earlier novel *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy describes the notorious Judge Holden:
Whatever his antecedents, he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go. Whoever would seek out his history through what unraveling of loins and ledgerbooks must stand at last darkened and dumb at the shore of a void without terminus or origin and whatever science he might bring to bear upon the dusty primal matter blowing down out of the millennia will discover no trace of ultimate atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing. (309-10)

Even though there are sentences in *The Road* that are long relative to its fragments, these are significantly and intuitively transformed from the above long-winded, opaque, sonorous, and baroque language of *Blood Meridian*. For Hoberek, *The Road*'s unique prose is a “stylistic dialectic” (492) of McCarthy's two great predecessors—Hemingway and Faulkner. Focusing on “the novel's brief moments of Faulknerian effusion that stand out from the badly denotative character of the rest of the language” (493), Hoberek argues that the above quoted sentence “Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it” best exemplifies the dialectic with its Faulknerian use of the noun “sorrow” as a verb. However, in Hoberek's account of the dialectic of “minimalism and maximalism,” “contemporaneity and historicity,” and Hemingway and Faulkner (492), what is problematic is that “the badly denotative” language does not belong to Hemingway anymore. As Madison Smartt Bell argues, “the Hemingway style was so nearly invisible that you could imitate it without getting caught.” (4) If Hemingway is identified with “his numerous detective fiction descendants” for “the hard-boiled, the stoic, the economically understated” (496) style of generic prose, then Hemingway is a dead metaphor. Put differently, Hemingway as a modernist and the Hemingwaysque style as popularized in genre fiction are two different concepts. This distinction is all the more crucial especially within the narrative space of *The Road*. For example, as the father and the boy are approaching the father's hometown, the narration shows two different narrative strategies in conjunction with each other.
By dusk of the day following they were at the city. The long concrete sweeps of the interstate exchanges like the ruins of a vast funhouse against the distant murk. He carried the revolver in his belt at the front and wore his parka unzipped. The mummified dead everywhere. The flesh cloven along the bones, the ligaments dried to tug and taut as wires. Shriveled and drawn like latterday bogfolk, their faces of boiled sheeting, the yellowed palings of their teeth. They were discalced to a man like pilgrims of some common order for all their shoes were long since stolen.

They went on. He kept constant watch behind him in the mirror. The only thing that moved in the streets was the blowing ash. They crossed the high concrete bridge over the river. A dock below. Small pleasureboats half sunken in the gray water. Tall stacks downriver dim in the soot. (24)

Remarkable in these back to back passages, as throughout the novel, is the abrupt switch in tone. The form of the passage is marked by frequent changes in focalization, counterpointed moves between action and description, a parallelism of landscape and simile, the quick invocation of a hard-boiled Western-movie scene away from and back to dismal reality, the approaching and distancing of the narrative gaze, graphic description immediately followed by mythic and sonorous tone, a contrast between the presentness of the atrocity with the implied eternity of the presentness. The passage with its rich artistic command expresses the modernist sensibility and aesthetics. This may be properly called the dialectic of Hemingway and Faulkner as long as Hemingway is understood as a modernist style rather than the evaporation of style. In the meantime, the latter passage is dry, basic, and “deadly denotative.” Given that the ample amount of passages are written in denotative style, including every dialogue scene, it will be safe to say that The Road's style is characterized by the constant vacillation of these two distinctively different moments. In other words, the linguistic innovation involved in The Road's narrative strategy is two-fold: first, a dialogic experiment within modernism that involves two great modernist predecessors in Hemingway-Faulkner, and second, a synthesis between the modernist aesthetic prose and the flat, dry, and denotative prose of
genre fiction.

The immediate question is, of course, why one needs this complex narrative strategy. And the answer lies in the representational impasse of the post-apocalyptic world. In other words, since the novel’s present world has to be narrated and described, McCarthy creates two narrators—the father and the omniscient third person narrator. With this division of labor, the father embodies the modernist linguistic sensibility and the narrator maintains the observatory/denotative distance. Thus if the narrator describes the grey and dark color of the world, the father translates it into “sightless and impenetrable” (15) nature. In this way, the narrator secures the necessary distance to “objectively” send the “factual” information to the reader. However, it has to be noted here that this division of labor is a formal one; even when the father functions as a main narrator, the narrator endorses the narrator either by describing the father action and thought. Thus the distance between the narrator and the father is formally maintained (especially in the father-son conversations), the narrator always endorses the father’s perspective. Look at one of the typical passages that constantly switch between the father’s contemplation and the narrator’s gaze.

He rose and stood tottering in that cold autistic dark with his arms outheld for balance while the vestibular calculations in his skull cranked out their reckonings. An old chronicle. To seek out the upright. No fall but preceded by a declination. He took great marching steps into the nothingness, counting them against his return. Eyes closed, arms oaring. Upright to what? Something nameless in the night, lode or matrix. To which he and the stars were common satellite. Like the great pendulum in its rotunda scribing through the long day movements of the universe of which you may say it knows nothing and yet know it must. (15)

The proximity between narrator-father cannot go unnoticed in this passage. Here the narrator and the father formally merge and diverge. If the narrator’s language gives a
sense of vividness and presentness, the father’s modernist language essentially belongs to the novel’s past. While expressions such as “old chronicle,” “nothingness,” or “upright to what” illustrate the father’s profound skepticism, the skepticism is carved out as the narrator follows the father’s action and thought. The father's sense-making out of the “nothingness” is possible because the language and expressions employed here are optimized to describe the father’s paradoxical inscription of the past into the present. The novel’s representational aesthetics, in other words, depend on the narrator’s “objective” endorsement of the father’s “subjective” dovetailing of the lost images and words onto the novel’s present. In this sense, the father is a modernist linguistic subject because his subject position is not possible in separation from the way that he narrates and contemplates past and present.

But the problem of this modernist language and aesthetics is of course that it does not belong to the novel’s present. The father’s language is the language of mourning. As a result, the representation of the post-apocalyptic world is made only negatively. The father character, in other words, represents the “representational impasse.” Everything that he searches for in the post-apocalyptic world—fire, good guys, aesthetic objects—folds back to that which belongs to his aesthetics. The condition of (im-)possibility of post-apocalyptic representation itself becomes the narrative content of the novel. The paradox in this extremely self-referential movement is that it makes the entire narrative a historical vacuum.

If the father's self-consoling monologue dominates the aesthetic mood of the entire narrative, it is also punctuated by “deadly detonative” sentences and dialogues throughout. In fact, the narrator constantly constructs the sense of the objectivity and
presentness of narrative events by employing the present tense, third person narration, and dry and flat prose style. The dry prose forms a delicate balance with the aesthetic language and together they compose the rhythm of the narrative. McCarthy constructs the narrative such that the father’s contemplative paragraphs are balanced with the narrator’s dry and descriptive ones. Even in one paragraph he often blends these two prose styles and thus enacts subtle switches in tone, length, content, and style.

However, while the “denotative” sentences are meant to be factual and descriptive of the protagonists’ action and landscape, a closer look at these sentences tells us that they are not simply denotative. For example, if we read one of the father-son dialogues where the characteristic of the dry prose style most clearly manifests, their conversation cannot be read literally.

Did you have any friends?
Yes. I did.
Lots of them?
Yes.
Do you remember them?
Yes. I remember them.
What happened to them?
They died.
All of them?
Yes. All of them.
Do you miss them?
Yes. I do.
Where are we going?
We're going south.
Okay. (59-60)

This dialogue consists of short, plain, children's language. The meaning of the dialogue appears simple and transparent. However, the reader learns that the word “friends” has a different resonance for the boy. The word “friends” is shrouded by death and the phrase “going south” is simply indicative of their moving direction for survival in
the father's mind. And it seems that, for the boy, those words mean what those words are supposed to linguistically mean because the meanings of “friends” and “going south” have not been culturally determined for the boy. But this is a misreading not because the words are not denotative for the boy (they are denotative) but because the boy’s denotative understanding of the words is imposed by the father and, more generally, by the narrative structure. For the dialogue as a whole is designed to emphasize the purity of the boy and thus to imbue the boy with a sense of quasi-deity. Throughout the novel, in fact, the father describes the boy as embodying a god-like innocence and goodness. Thus the denotative dialogue cannot be read separately from the father’s connotation. It is here that “South” acquires a symbolic meaning that many critics connect with the long literary tradition of America’s southern literature.¹⁵ And it is this denotative language that absolutizes the meaning of the “good”; in other places, the denotative language is also effectively used to describe the absolute brutality of looters. The marked discrepancy between two main characters in their dialogue, in other words, has to be understood not as a dialectical interaction between two subjects but as an imposition of the genre convention through the linguistic means.

Many critics see a future possibility stemming from the boy. Agreeing with Chabon’s reading of the boy as “the eventual rebirth of the world” (112), Künsa argues the boy “serves as an Adamic figure, a messiah not unlike Christ” (65).¹⁶ This reading is persuasive to a certain degree because there are several scenes where the difference between the father and the son is marked. For example, in one of the beginning scenes the boy expresses his reluctance to the father's invitation to enter his old house (McCarthy 25–26). While the old house is full of childhood memories for the father, the son has no
memory prior to apocalypse. “We should go, Papa, he said. Yes, the man said. But he didn't” (26). It is because the boy is “decidedly of the new world” (Kunsa 65). Likewise, the boy's hope to meet other friends and dogs has different reverberations from those of his father. If for the father the stories of dogs and friends essentially are a “fantasy (McCarthy 55)” that belongs to the past with no trace in the current world, the same old stories pose future possibility for the boy.

However, it should be noted that the reader is not allowed to access the boy's thought until the very end. The father-son dialogues are too fragmented to realistically represent the boy’s growth. All of the dialogues point to the boy’s innocence. Though they are denotative, their function is to collectively symbolize the boy’s abstract purity. In other words, the dialogues are concerted and coordinated for a single effect—to signify the boy’s growth. The story is told in third person limited omniscient narration, and the narrator frequently follows the father's eyes and represents his thoughts. The father's thoughts are transparently accessible through the narrator's explanation. When the narrator leaves the father and “objectively” describes landscapes and objects, the narrator implicitly endorses the father's view. For example, the grey and dark natural surrounding depicted by the omniscient narrator acquires its deathly meaning only for one who, like the father, experienced the prior world. The many scenes of Robinson-Crusoe-like enumeration also exemplify the close proximity between the father and the narrator. In an episode where the man swims out to an abandoned ship to salvage “anything that you might be able to use” (220), the narrator enumerates all the things in the ship one by one. The narrator's enumeration overlaps with the father's meticulous search while all the things and their names are unknown to the boy. Throughout the narrative the boy’s voice
is subdued as he accepts and learns from his father.

However, this is not to say that there is no such thing as the boy’s subjectivity. Rather, the point is that the boy’s growth is extremely limited and abstract due to the narrative imposition of a certain image on the boy. While in the narrative space, the boy’s growth is exemplified when his understanding of “good” is differentiated from that of his father. More specifically, the conception of “good guys” has different connotations for the boy and the father. For the father, the only index of “good guys” is the family. Since the family is the foremost important value he can “kill anyone who touches” the boy. (77) The safety and sanctity of family defines the meaning of “good.” Thus he asserts that “what good guys do. They keep trying. They don't give up” (137). Since “good” embodies the imperative to keep the boy alive by exposing him to and protecting him from outside danger, the meaning of “good” is foregrounded by the hostile environment. Outside the boundary of the family, in other words, “good” does not signify. Essentially, the father’s “good” is a signifier of lack outside their family bond—it is a linguistic ritual that formalizes the absolute absence of good in the barren world and the absolute presence of good in the family. As opposed to this, the boy’s differentiation of “good” is announced when the boy asks “Are we still good guys?” (77) after his father's accidental killing of a marauder. Here, the boy’s question points at two interrelated functions of language: universality and particularity. The boy is asking whether the universal meaning of good can be applied to their particular case. If the answer to the question of good for the father is already determined (the family is good and the past is good), the boy's question, with the father's past unavailable, seems to necessitate a future temporality. The distance between the father and the boy’s understandings of the world is
most visible when they encounter a thief who steals everything they have for survival. When the father leaves him naked on the road, the boy gets troubled and worried about the thief. In response to the father's “You're not the one who has to worry about everything,” the boy says “Yes, I am ... I am the one” (259).

This growth drama is touching, and one might be tempted to read a firm ethical stance into the boy’s growth. However, the boy’s “ethical” stance is one that is severely limited. For what the boy confirms is an abstract principle of “good.” Indeed, the drama of the boy’s growth takes place solely through reference to this abstract term. The fact that this growth comes out of the boy’s understanding of the linguistic function of “good,” devoid of any social interaction outside the family circle, is significant because the principle not only reproduces the good vs. bad dichotomy but also simplifies the boy as an embodiment of “good.” In this sense, if the father essentially imposes a mythic purity on the boy, his project is fulfilled with a little twist. In a place where there is no society and where there are only good vs. bad, the question of ethics and of subjectivity is empty. When the father dies, the narrative focus shifts to the boy in the last few pages and this sudden switch of narrative space from the father’s world to the boy's seems to demand a new reading practice.

He slept close to his father that night and held him but when he woke in the morning his father was cold and stiff. He sat there a long time weeping and then he got up and walked out through the woods to the road. When he came back he knelt beside his father and held his cold hand and said his name over and over again ... He [boy] cried for a long time. I'll talk to you every day, he whispered. And I won't forget. No matter what. Then he rose and turned and walked back out to the road. (281-82)

Note the subtle change in the way the narrator calls the father “his” father. Also his father's name is, though still not revealed, mentioned for the first time in the boy's act
of mourning. Just as all the names of things of the past reveal the immense sorrow to the father, the naming of his father records the loss to the past. Despite the boy’s resolute tone, however, this scene oddly enacts the triumph of the father’s love. The boy’s “I won’t forget” and “I’ll talk to you everyday” exactly copies the father’s ritualistic impulse to memorialize the past. By naming his father, in other words, the boy actively re-inscribes the family value that was his father’s.

If *The Road* is McCarthy’s aesthetic intervention to the ongoing pop genre practice, it is because the highly sophisticated and multi-layered linguistic experiment is something that cannot be seen through the genre’s linguistic conventions. Because the novel’s aesthetics comes from the language experiment, it runs the risk of being shared only among those who have same aesthetic sensibility. Or worse, the novel is likely to be read in spite of this experimental prose as a typical pop post-apocalyptic fiction. For the novel’s aesthetic language emerges as a diametrical opposite to the simplified good vs evil dynamic. When the father is “struck by the beauty of” the sextant he found in a ship (228), some might well read this passage as evidence of the father’s utopian gesture. But this reading ignores the ways in which this aesthetics comes into operation only against the background of the clichéd motif of good vs. evil. For in other places, the same aesthetics is invested in graphic representation of absolute evil; the pure animality of looters is also what makes this novel post-apocalyptic. Earlier in the novel the mother commits suicide because she will not “wait for it [killing and raping by the marauders] to happen” (56). Then, what the novel aestheticizes is not only the profound and complicated fatherly character but also the extreme violence of the post-apocalyptic world itself. Despite the novel’s aestheticism, or because of it, the violence and
cannibalism described in *The Road* does not differentiate itself from the typical genre convention. If many apocalyptic novels indulge in violence for the sole purpose of maximizing sales figures by exploiting post-apocalyptic fear, the aesthetics of *The Road* is at once the denial and exploitation of the capitalist logic.

Further, while the aesthetic form that the father brings into the narrative space creates an oppositional distance from the atrocity of the marauders, the old problem of the pop genre re-emerges because the “retrospective” aesthetics of the father preclude any vision of possible change. If we take seriously the pop genre’s logic of the dichotomy of good vs. bad, it is not hard to see that the good and the bad necessitate each other within the logic of the genre. They are not only not incompatible but co-operative. In other words, the aesthetic language of the father can go as far as to critique the replete post-apocalyptic violence, but at the same time, the “critical” distance is perpetuated by the dichotomous logic that the aesthetics subscribe to. Just as the evil is critically invoked through the modernist aesthetic languages, the father's childhood goodness is idealized against the background of the bleak reality. When past goodness and present hostility are irreconcilable the best that the aesthetics can do is to wait until “Goodness will find the little boy” (279) since “you cant take the chances [to meet a stranger]” (278). The sheer dependency on a contingent encounter with goodness is again folded back on itself through the religious language. And the self-referential goodness is, ultimately, an ideological signifier for family value.

5. **Synchronic Dialectics and Diachronic Dialectics**

Given that *The Road's* textual experiment is two-fold—a dialogue of Hemingway-
Faulkner and a stylistic innovation of the modernist aesthetics and denotative prose—, one can read the novel as an attempt to resolve the contradiction that structures our contemporary society's cultural and literary production. This contradiction, in fact, has been problematized in different ways with different terms such as tension vs. (mass-)communication (Allan Tate), avant-garde vs. kitsch (Clement Greenberg), serious vs. light (Adorno/Horkheimer), etc. Perhaps the way the contradiction appears to our contemporary literary space is in the form of the contradiction between democracy-populism axis and art-elitism axis where the pair of each axis indicates ideal-reality combination (e.g.: the ideal of democracy appears as populism). In this divided space, the aesthetic principle of “make it new”\(^ {18}\) in the art institution generates artworks only to be appreciated by elite groups while the market of mass-produced genre works is governed by the logic of capital—“homogenization of content and less risk taking” (Edward Herman and Robert McChesney 45). Apocalyptic genre fiction is, as an advance guard of the culture industry, the site where the problem of democracy-populism becomes glaringly evident, because it renders the reader as passive addict to formulaic exploitation of popular fear in its best-seller readership. Viewed in this way, McCarthy’s experiment seems to mark a new possibility for genre fiction since *The Road*’s stylistic aesthetic undeniably goes beyond the formula of mass production. Furthermore, by referencing the genre's own condition of (im-)possibility and by pushing the aesthetic innovation beyond clichéd modernism, it lays bare the structure of the contemporary literary dilemma. In so far as *The Road* problematizes modernist aesthetics as well as genre conventions, the novel effectively locates the representational impasse of each practice.

However, from a slightly different perspective, it can be also argued that
McCarthy's novel suggests a solution to a contradiction formulated synchronically. And in fact, a synchronic formulation of the cultural contradiction is a facile one, one that tends to hide/conceal its diachronic contradiction—namely, the historical development of capitalism. While the culture industry has been obsessed with identifying the ever-changing readers' attention, it has developed into its current form by expanding its own territory to the whole society as Adorno presciently indicated in 1944. Speaking about style which was once the crucial marker of high modernism, Adorno argues:

In the culture industry this imitation [of modernist style] finally becomes absolute. Having ceased to be anything but style, it reveals the latter's secret: obedience to the social hierarchy. Today aesthetic barbarity completes what has threatened the creations of the spirit [modernist works of art] since they were gathered together as culture and neutralized. To speak of culture was always contrary to culture. Culture as a common denominator already contains in embryo that schematization and process of cataloging and classification which bring culture within the sphere of administration. And it is precisely the industrialized, the consequent, subsumption which entirely accords with this notion of culture. By subordinating in the same way and to the same end all areas of intellectual creation, by occupying men's senses from the time they leave the factory in the evening to the time they clock in again the next morning with matter that bears the impress of the labor process they themselves have to sustain throughout the day, this subsumption mockingly satisfies the concept of a unified culture which the philosopher of personality contrasted with mass culture. (131)

Here the kind of subsumption that Adorno problematizes is what Marx calls the “real subsumption” as opposed to the formal subsumption—that is, the form of subsumption that generates its own content. Though the culture industry stands as the immediate antithesis of high (as opposed to vulgar), serious (as opposed to light), and “cultural” (as opposed to “industrial”) production, the very antithetical relation is generative of the culture industry. Art and commodity are constitutively antithetical. The reason why “To speak of culture was always contrary to culture” is then that, since what Bourdieu calls “the field of restricted production” is fundamentally conditioned by the commodity
market, the moment one speaks of “pure” art one is deliberately trying to look away from the culture industry and to forget the historical raison d'être of pure art. To advocate culture/art as a sanctified realm in the age of real subsumption, in other words, is an illusory repetition of the logic of culture industry. This antithetical formulation, however, is what we are already familiar with. Adorno's surprising point comes neither from the culture industry nor modernist aesthetics. Rather, it comes from the divide itself—expressed in the passage as “the latter's [modernism's] secret: obedience to social hierarchy” which he also calls social “suffering” in other places. In other words, what is remarkable in the subsumption of the culture industry is the forgetting of the historical contradiction that the synchronic cultural contradiction in appearance negatively embodies.

If we apply Adorno's insight to The Road's narrative experiment, then, what McCarthy's experiment aims at is precisely the two antithetical forms of the divide, rather than the “content” that the divide forgets. If apocalypse is already the culture industry's best-selling “form,” the proper question to ask is not so much how to overcome the formal limitation of the genre's representation of apocalypse as what causes the eschatological sentiment among people. Or more bluntly put, the question is what is already apocalyptic in our contemporary moment? Without tackling this issue, The Road may be simply consumed as another apocalypse fiction in the market.

As Mary Manjikian observes, the apocalyptic novel is “in essence, a product of privilege” (67) of the first world. It is a product of the culture industry that cannot be produced and consumed in the third world where the apocalyptic situation is in plain sight. In other words, what is consumed in the popular readership is the form of
apocalypse, not actual life in apocalyptic danger. The apocalyptic urgency in real peoples’ lives is displaced onto an exoticized setting. The cunning of the culture industry is that it builds conceptual apocalypse on the logic of postponement. The grave warning that, say, the atomic bomb will destroy the world, functions as a convenient setting. Consequently, the warning itself is not stressed, but the survival “game” is on the stage. In many post-apocalyptic novels with conventional plots, a search for a communal belief that could hold the post-catastrophic society together sets the field into which various ideological options enter. While the search for (or, the lack of) communal value testifies to our fragmented, individualized, decentered society, the search is re-contained as the restoration of private or public order in most cases. In short, genre fiction displaces our reality onto a pleasure of reading by postponing the question “why apocalypse now?” Ultimately, then, one can call the genre of U.S. Metropolitan apocalyptic literature a “conceptual apocalypse.” The Road’s aesthetic innovation is, despite its acute and painful self-reflection, built on the formal apocalypse. The urgency that the culture industry exploits is replaced with mythic narrative in The Road.

In this sense, the urgency of McCarthy's The Road is not the urgency of peoples’ lives but the urgency of literature-author. In it, socio-cultural indexes are subtracted to the zero point. And what is problematized in it is the modernist form on the one hand, and the genre form of apocalypse on the other hand. To be sure, one can legitimately read The Road as a critical sublation of modernist aesthetics as well as the culture industry's anti-aesthetic economism. However, it has to be indicated that The Road erases from its narrative edifice the minimal political content that most popular post-apocalyptic fictions maintain. While it is true that genre novels indulge in exoticism for the imagination of
post-apocalypse, the representation of the “post” also has the political function because the imagined apocalyptic future is a methodologically chosen way of diagnosing our contemporary era in a highly defamiliarized form. For the representation of the future is always the representation of the present as a fictionally annihilated past. But *The Road* departs from this minimal politicality. Instead, what replaces it is ultimately a mythic narrative.

In the novel’s ending, the narrator comes forward to the narrative space. And the narration's focus is shifted from the description of the boy’s life to a distant vision of history.

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (286-87)

The coda recaptures a moment when the father stands on a stone bridge “where once he'd watched trout swaying in the current, tracking their perfect shadows on the stone beneath” (30), but with a final twist. Since the father’s voice overlaps with the narrator here, the father's forlorn past comes back. The phrase “of a thing which could not be put back” reiterates the father's remorseful “there is no past” (55). But the father’s vision is succeeded by an indifferent tone of mythic vision, from whose perspective man is only a tiny portion of much larger universal history. Ultimately what looms large in this final blow is the narrator's (author's) mythic language that finally divorces itself from the father's language of lamentation. And the mythic coda, as it retroactively encloses the entire narrative space, forces the final unexpected after-effect—that is, there *has been* the
narrator's mythic enframing throughout the narrative.

The mythic enframing of the novel can be traced in various mythic motifs—such as the pilgrim's motif (3, 24, 181), frequent use of redemptive languages, and the motif of God. However, because all of these motifs are imbricated with the father's aesthetic vision of the world, it is not easy to separate the (author's) mythic from the (father's) aesthetic. Further, precisely because the mythic here cannot be understood as a thematic or figurative movement, it would be futile to try to find the mythic in a particularly thematized situation or place. In itself, the mythic does not have a content or reference. There is no particular mythic place for which or from which the father-son pilgrims take journey. Nor is a particular God that this literary altar is devoted to. The mythic, in a nutshell, is uninterested in particular human situations. Rather, what is mythic in *The Road* can be grasped only as a linguistic movement. In other words, the mythic is materialized in the tone, mood, rhythm, and invocation of the mythic language. The primary effect of the mythic, on the level of the textual surface, is, of course, the sublime tone that dominates the narrative space. However, a much more crucial effect that the mythic brings into the text is a callous realism that is crisscrossed with the characters' “human” perspective. Since the fundamental characteristic of the mythic narrative is its perspectival distance from human situations as is manifested in the coda, the mythic distance constantly undermines any textual movement to anchor a definitive meaning. Through the imbrication of the mythic and the human, each character's perceived reality is re-framed by the factual realism of the mythic. Both the father's sorrowful aesthetics as well as the boy's naive outlook are determined by the mythic realism. The father's modernist aesthetics stop short of any kind of modernist formal solution; the boy's
outlook for a future possibility is re-inscribed into purity and quasi-deity. This final
mythic enframing of *The Road* is, then, what ultimately replaces the modernist sublime—
the formal solution of the modernist.

And it is here that apocalypse stops being apocalypse. The sublime and mythic
atmosphere of *The Road* comes with the death of the modernist sublime. And along with
the death of the modernist sublime, the novel also turns away from the social and political
contradiction that the modernist tried to pierce through. If *The Road*’s excellence in its
literary and linguistic experiment comes from its opening of a new formal possibility
from the synchronic deadlock of modernism and culture industry, its achievement is at
the expense of any possible account for political apocalypse. Perhaps one may argue that
critiquing *The Road* for its deficiency of political content and of people's lives is
pointless, as it would amount to critiquing *The Road* for what it is not. However, isn't it
this absence of political and social content what *The Road* is—namely, the ideal of
market?

---

1 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (98).

2 As James Harold convincingly argues, genre fiction has its own standards which function as its *telos*. As
   “a genre not only supplies certain fixed character types, story schemes, and other standard features, it also
tells us at least something about what makes for success in that genre;” a whodunit novel with a too
obvious criminal would be “bad” genre fiction. Likewise, an apocalyptic fiction without shock, a mystery
without suspense, a science fiction with a commonsensical “scientific” motif, or a detective story without
clever clues, etc. would be considered a failure despite, say, its status as a good piece of writing with witty
conversation and neat description. The generic conventions or effects that are, in fact, optimized for profit
have undergirded genre fiction.

3 Of course, some of the genre novels are not at all simply dull. As Lev Grossman argues, Agatha Christie's
   “artless” opening of *Murder on the Oriental Express* requires “an extraordinary amount of art.” Agatha
Christie's prose may be an example of good writing and it contributes to the “goodness” of the fiction. But
the particular prose does not have much to say other than its neatness and service to the genre features.
Good writing may make a good genre novel. But the “goodness” here is entirely different from the kind of
literary movement one can see from, say, James Joyce's novels. If Joyce's “textuality” is Joyce's authorial
signature, one can hardly say the same thing about Agatha Christie's writing style. In fact, the “smoothness
and clarity” found in Agatha Christie is the dominant writing style in genre fiction, which is often dubbed
in the U.S., to no one's surprise, as “Hemingwaysque,” despite its being a mere euphemism in most cases.
For as long as a “Hemingwaysque” writing style is not concurrent with Hemingway-esque authority over the work of art, the stylistic features that are usually related to Hemingway—lucidity, objectivity, directness, and terseness—are simply part of the genre convention.

---

4 Hoberek explains the historical institutionalization of the “prejudice” (Hoberek 485) of genre fiction in the U.S. by quoting from Mark McGurl’s *Program Era*. According the McGurl, this period is characterized by the proliferation of the institutionalized creative-writing program where the great modern divide is largely re-stabilized on the institutional level. The creative-writing program, while it embraces the modernist ideal of authorial style, purges itself from the blame that the writing programs produce “a standardized aesthetic, a corporate literary style” by attributing the atrophy of creativity to “the machinemade quality of formulaic genre fiction” (McGurl 26). However, the “machine-made” quality of formulaic genre fiction cannot be attributed to the effect of the institutionalization of the creative writing program while it can be explained as a site of practice of the modern great divide. In other words, the formulaic banality of genre novel is determined by its commodity character, which can be hardly said as a “prejudice”—if “prejudice” implies a perspectival difference. (Regardless of the perspectival position, genre novel has been a “hot” commodity throughout the modern and postmodern era).

Mark McGurl also indicates, in an observatory manner, that there have been “many instances of what must be called meta-genre fiction, where a popular genre—romance, western, science fiction, fantasy and detective fiction—is both instantiated and ironized to the point of becoming dysfunctional in the production of its conventional pleasures” (217 qtd. in Hoberek 484). These experiments were meant to, McGurl adds, “reverse the ideological valence given to mass culture [by T.W. Adorno and other critics in 1950s].” From this particular [postmodern] position, he explains, “popular culture would now be understood [from this position] as a force of liberation from the strait-jacket properties of ‘official’ high culture … sitting there fat and happy on the college syllabus” (217).

5 See, for example, pages 30, 40, and 53 where the father brings up memories of wildlife and tress such as migratory birds, trout, mayapple, pipsisssewa and ginseng, in contradistinction with the deadly landscape of the novelistic reality.

6 Many critics including Wesley G. Morgan, Chris Walsh, and Andrew Hoberek argue that *The Road* takes place in the Southeast. The location is important for them because the novel is understood “not as Hobbesian throwbacks but as perverse extensions of regional tradition” (Hoberek 489). However, while the father does set south as their destination, the link between the novelistic south and the rich literary tradition of American south seems thin. In fact, the importance of the south in the novel does not lie in its geographical and cultural specificity but its invocation of survival possibility.

7 Jameson, *Political Unconscious* “Interpretation” (17-102).

8 Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. “the shamelessness of the rhetorical question “what do people want? lies in the fact that it appeals to the very people as thinking subjects whose subjectivity it specifically seeks to annul” (116).

9 Suvin’s “cognitive estrangement” is a two-fold conceptualization that registers two different subjectivities; while the “cognitive” part pairs with the embodiment of the readers’ collective longing, the “estrangement” is explained as the author’s creative intervention with the aesthetic form. (70-84)

10 For example, Phil Wegner argues, in his reading of Roland Emmerich's movie *Independence Day*, that the movie is largely re-contained under the nationalistic ideology of “U.S. global hegemony” though it embodies the collective longing for a radical change (160). The movie is ideological containment in that it redirects to the U.S. nationalism from a “fundamental sense of political alienation, the radical sense of otherness that too many feel when faced with the prospects of their own potential for action” and from “a widespread sense, at once cynical and despairing, of political paralysis, of a collective inability to do anything that might transform the social, cultural, and political landscape” (132, 149). Wegner’s reading tries to restore the erased subjectivity of the spectator by identifying the ideological premise of the movie.

11 Critics rightly focus on *The Road’s* language experiment. For example, Kunsa argues that “the proliferation of sentence fragments, and brief, repetitive dialogue” should be read as part of McCarthy’s
quest for “basic forms” of human relations including “love, hope, courage” as they are exemplified in the father-son relationship (68). Hoberek complicates Kunsa’s argument by indicating the frequent blending of Faulknerian flourish into the novel’s dominant minimalism. Linda Woodson also joins the discussion arguing that The Road’s language is best understood when mapped onto the postmodern linguistic philosophy. (Woodson “Mapping the Road in the Post-modernism” 87-99)

12 After the father hears the boy playing flute, he says “A formless music for the age to come. Or perhaps the last music on earth called up from out of the ashes of its ruin. … The man [father] thought he [boy] seemed some sad and solitary changeling child announcing the arrival of a traveling spectacle in shire and village who does not know that behind him the players have all been carried off by wolves” (77-78). The father associates the boy’s play with a long-lost fairy tale. As is typical, he brings the past and the present together to conjure up a highly melancholic mood.

13 Further, the father's religious language of being “appointed … by God” is sharply contrasted with his constant monologue that there is no god/hope. In the same vein, he tells the boy “old stories of courage and justice” (41, 268) though he is aware that “he could not enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own” (154). In fact, the most conspicuous characteristic of his language is paradox.

14 Hoberek’s main argument is that McCarthy’s stylistic experiment opens up a new possibility by combining the Faulknerian high literature and genre novel’s Hemingwayesque minimalism. He sees some scenes written in Faulknerian style as the re-inscription of the southeastern regional history and literary tradition. “Cormac McCarthy and the Aesthetics of Exhaustion,” American Literary History 23, no. 3 (2011): 483–99.

15 Many critics seem to agree that the protagonists are traveling from Kentucky and Tennessee, en route to the Atlantic Ocean. Morgan is particularly interested in mapping the novel’s geographical setting to match the actual locations in our current day. He argues that this journey overlaps with McCarthy’s “fictionally returning … to his own roots” in the southwest (10). Other critics suggest different locations for the story. For example, Weeks proposes that the journey takes place from the American southwest to California. Hoberek and Kunsa agree that the location is the southeast. For further discussion, see Morgan, Walsh, Woodson, and Weeks.

16 William Kennedy also agrees with these critics. But his reading uses a more nuanced term—“a designated but unsubstantiated messiah”—to describe the boy’s role in the novel.

17 Hoberek interprets the father’s enumeration as pointing to the novel’s investment in the possibility to make a new aesthetic world in a world of death: “what novel that contains as one of its central episodes a man swimming out to a ship to salvage supplies could fail to resonate with Robinson Crusoe’s narrative of isolation as an opportunity for remaking the social order?” However, the father’s aesthetic acts are oriented to the past rather than to the future possibility. Given that the novel’s strictly post-apocalyptic setting and the father’s hopelessness are an inseparable pair, reading “an opportunity for remaking the social order” seems far-fetched.

18 Ezra Pound’s dictum “make it new” expresses the spirit of modernism (In Canto 91).
Chapter 3. A Narrative Materialization of History: Zoe Wicomb’s David’s Story

1. Reading Through the “And”

“This is and is not David’s story” (1). In the very first line of the “preface” in Zoe Wicomb’s David Story (2001), the novel points out the complicated nature of its narrative structure. With this paradoxical sentence, it warns against a reading of the story as “either” David’s story “or” “not David’s story.” How do we account for this conjunctive “and” that conjoins the two incommensurables? From the beginning, David’s Story announces that its point of departure is a representational impasse in which at least two contradistinctive stories, moments, and forms should be narrated in an “and” way—that is, in a way in which the incompatibles together make a meaning.

As the reader proceeds with the “preface,” she realizes the “preface” is forwarded not by the author but by the unnamed female narrator who was hired as amanuensis for David’s autobiographical project. Thus, while the very existence of the “preface” is not very common in a novel form, the reader, by the time she finishes reading the preface, sees that the preface at once guides and disrupts any future reading of the narrative as “David’s story.” Though the narrator’s job as amanuensis is “simply recording” [David’s life story], the main focus of the “preface” is how unreliable David’s own account is. Indicating that David “was unwilling or unable” to address his life events and thus “distanced himself from his own story” the narrator informs us that David often made “flights into history” which are dotted with inaccuracy as he “made some basic errors with dates, miscalculating more than a hundred years.” Along with these warning messages, the narrator states, the actual passages produced by David himself are mere fragments—“a few introductory paragraphs to sections, some of surprising irony” (1).
But at the same time, the narrator also warns against a reading that would dismiss David’s account as mere misinformation. Calling him “conscientious and methodical” in his own way, the narrator writes:

David was simply unable/unwilling to disclose all. He believed it possible to negotiate a path between the necessary secrecy and a need to tell, a tension that caused agitation which in turn had to be concealed, but it drove him to view the story of his life as a continuous loop that never intersected itself … If there is such a thing as truth, he said, it has to be left to its own devices, find its own way, and my role was simply write down things as he told them. … my prattling, as he called it, about meaning in the margin, or absence as an aspect of writing, had nothing to do with his project … I am, in a sense, grateful for the gaps, the ready-made absences [in David’s own account], so that I do not have to invent them. … (2)

The narrator’s ad hoc justification of David’s “gaps” in his account signifies that he was “able/willing,” at least to a certain degree, to see David’s “tension” between the injunction against and imperative for the truth that eventually “was to be concealed.” The narrator’s point is, in other words, that since David had no other choice but to bypass his life events in order to tell his story—consciously and unconsciously, as the expression “unable/unwilling” implies—David’s impasse is most telling. Consequently, the narrator asks the reader to read David’s silence because the meaning of what David was able to articulate lies in the space of what is not articulated. Or, more accurately, the truth of David’s displaced account, as the sentence “David was simply unable/unwilling to disclose all (my emphasis)” suggests, lies in “some” account that he offered even though that account is itself misleading and displaced. In other words, because the meager amount of David’s own account in this book is enacted, in the first place, by his silence/silencing (inability/unwillingness) of what was never able to enter the narrative space of this book, the truth of David’s story is only accessible through a reading of the paradoxical unity between his negative act of silencing and his positive act
of telling. In this respect, the narrator here invites the reader to the task of reading the mediation of the restless negativity in David’s act of storytelling.

But at the same time, the narrator also undermines the validity of her own advice to the reader. The putative authority and guidance of the preface genre is significantly diminished when the unnamed narrator admits that she not only included “my occasional flights of fancy, my attempts at artistry,” but also “took liberties with the text and revised considerably some sections that he [David] had already approved” (3). As a result, the story is, the narrator adds, marked by a “fragmentary nature” rather than a coherent personal or familial history. Salient in the narrator’s preface is her insinuation of her own inability that is equally problematic as David’s being “unable/unwilling.” While the narrator draws the reader’s attention to David’s “flights of history,” “miscalculating” of historical data, and “fragments,” these indicators of David’s “inability” are respectively matched by her own “flights of fancy,” “failure to provide facts,” “[failure to] bridge gaps.” (2-3) Interestingly, the narrator also informs the reader of the qualitative difference between the unreliability of David’s account and her own unreliability: “I confessed to being unequal to the task [of negotiating between the necessary secrecy and a need to tell], to not understanding such a notion of telling or for that matter of truth, to having a weakness for patterns, for repetitions and intersections” (2, emphasis mine). Note that the modest word “unequal” underlines the difference from the word “unable/unwilling” she utilizes to describe David’s writing. The difference is, of course, that she is completely aware of her own unreliability and that she self-consciously mobilizes “flights of fancy.” Here she suggests that the reader heed attention to her “weakness” which she rephrases, in a moment, as “liberties”. The narrator, thus, just as she hints at the double-sidedness of
David’s writing for the reader, suggests the necessity of another reading strategy for the reading of her part of David’s Story. And the reading strategy will have to take into account not only her “liberties” inclined towards fancy (as opposed to history) and artistry (as opposed to facts) but also the ambiguities, ironies, and self-referentiality that her “Preface” as a whole already demonstrates.

Furthermore, as if her explanation of the parallax narrative perspectives—between the two equally unreliable subject positions—was not advisory enough, the narrator, agreeing with David’s vision of the current historical conjuncture, also emphasizes the tension and complementariness of the two incommensurable positions: “we will have to make do with mixtures of meaning, will have to rely on typographic devices like the slash for many more years” (3). As the “for many more years” highlights, though the narrator differentiates her own writing from that of David’s throughout the “preface”, she shares with David a sense of historical consciousness that the present situation necessitates the co-presence of the incommensurable. In fact, the novel’s present situation, as the narrative unfolds, turns out to be an extraordinarily tumultuous historical stage—1991 in South Africa, the transitional period to democracy at the time of the end of Apartheid—that is marked by the contradiction between the post-apartheid imperative of historicization (telling) and the postmodern suspicion of historical narrative (un-telling).

Zoe Wicomb, then, by setting up two different perspectives and fitting their conflictive accounts against each other, and by situating their perspectives at the heart of the historical contradiction, explores the possibility of narrating the historicity of a South African past and present in the wake of the post-apartheid landscape of fragmented historical accounts. Piercing through the historical contradiction, Wicomb’s literary
experiment not only incorporates a typically postmodern multiple narrative but also tries
to construct an ontological novelistic totality that cannot be subsumed by perspectival
difference. By letting David graft various historical facts onto his family history and by
allowing the narrator to disrupt David’s version of history through the invention of
various women's episodic narratives, Wicomb demonstrates the partiality/locality of each
of their accounts. At the same time, Wicomb also has the “truth” come into shape through
the conflict and co-operation between the narrator’s and David’s limited historical
accounts. What testifies to the limitedness of David’s and the narrator’s versions of
history is the figure of Dulcie, who might have changed the title of the novel into
“Dulcie’s Story” only “if it had been possible to give voice to a woman like Dulcie”
(Driver “Afterword” 218) who for David is “a scream echoing through my story (134)”
and for the narrator is “a protean subject that slithers hither and thither, out of reach,
repeating, replacing, transforming itself (35).” Fragmented and porous as Wicomb’s
fabrication is, it moves toward a complicated historical reality whose undeniable
materiality is anchored on Dulcie’s tortured body. The opaqueness of the tortured body,
within the narrative totality, does not stay as that which is not representable and thus
which ultimately blocks historical narrative; rather, it generates historical narrative by
binding the novel’s multiple narratives and testing the validity of each narrative.

From a slightly different perspective, at the heart of Wicomb’s formal experiment
lies the problem of the narration of history—the problem of narrating what has happened.
How can one narrate the historical past and present from the current perspective while the
very “current perspective” is not given? In other words, if traditionally believed truth and
its position is radically destabilized, if there is no more guarantee given to the discourses
that structured the modern historiography, if any “weighty” voice that endorsed David’s military experience is structurally distrusted and discarded, and also if the alternatively suggested discourse of national harmony is unequal to the task of remembering the past, if the perspective of multi-ethnic diversity is limited in testifying to people’s suffering, if the very promise of diversity renders Dulcie’s voice inaccessible, then what kind of historical topography is necessary for an adequate rendering of Dulcie’s as well as David’s story? These are the questions that Wicomb is grappling with in David’s Story.

2. David’s project of genealogy—a displaced historiography

David’s Story begins when David Dirske hires an unnamed writer to write his family history, in which his own lineage goes back, through his historical research, to Le Fleur. The socio-political transformation around the year of 1991 has a direct impact on David; he feels the loss of his identity as his life-long military experience and faith as a high ranking officer of MK (Um Khonto we Sizwe—Spear of the Nation) is displaced in the emerging historical situation. Though he repeatedly claims that the project of reconstructing his family history is “about [him]self” and thus based on his “private needs”—[his genealogy project is] “unlike the rest of his life, personal, a matter entirely unconnected with the Movement or with the way he relates to his comrades” (12), his project turns out to be an attempt to reposition himself within the emerging discourse of reconciliation by distancing himself from his wartime experience. For despite his claim for the private nature of his project it becomes clear that David’s interest in the “personal” project comes out of his sense of the “new historical present” of South Africa when “things have been difficult with all the tensions about Mandela’s release, about a new dispensation” (29). ² If symbols such as “Rainbow nation” and the workings of the TRC
(Truth and Reconciliation Committee) signal a promise for a harmonious and peaceful post-Apartheid integration of the variegated South African population after the long period of conflict and struggle, they pose not only discomfort but also threat for the ex-military combatants like David.³ For the “Rainbow nation” discourse declares the end of modern politics—a politics that was marked by a series of binaries such as black and white, rich and poor, war and peace, liberation and oppression. As the modern binary comes to an end, a new era is configured where the much anticipated liberation turns out to be much more tumultuous than expected. South African modernity is deeply embedded in the colonial history and the subsequent anti-colonial struggle whose legacy imprinted itself into every corner of the society in much the same way that it structured David’s MK experience. However, what emerges in the post-modernity of South Africa is, instead of the realization of the modern truth of liberation and freedom that provided meaning for David’s military experience, “topsy-turvy conditions [where] people can’t always tell right from wrong” (58). In other words, as the modern social consensus is displaced by the national building project of “reconciliation,” the long believed truth of anti-colonial and anti-separatist struggle loses its reference for justification in real life politics.

As Fiona McCann explains, even though the initial mood of this period is hope and excitement, uncertainty and disillusionment soon follow with political parties “negotiating a democracy amidst immense tensions and an escalation in violence” (213).⁴ M.J. Daymond, also pointing at the uncertainty and the post-apartheid violence, explains that “previously exiled revolutionary groupings re-established themselves in the country, rumours of counter-coups circulated and ordinary people were subjected to a decade of continuing terror as various factions either enforced or resisted change” (25).⁵ In other
words, the demise of modern politics and of its unifying goal of liberation entails a transformation in the very definition of “the political” itself in the public arena. If “the political” meant the struggle against the oppressive Apartheid regime in the previous era, “the political” acquires a new meaning as diverse parties and groups pursue their own political agenda and interest in an atmosphere of, as the novel describes it, “days of treachery and flux and things being all mixed up” (13).

The “New South Africa” discourse has its everyday life version in the words of David’s wife, Sally, who was also formally involved in the liberation movement.

Why should I not be able to cover my forehead with a fringe or have hair curling here, there, and she tugs brutally at the wisps in question. And it’s not about aping white people; they don’t straighten their hair. Straightened hair looks nothing like European hair; it looks only like straightened hair; it’s different. I’m sick of people with their so-called ethnic bushy heads. If freedom is about looking awful then I leave it to your revolutionaries like Comrade Dulcie. I’ll have none of it and I’ll have none of your lies. Liberate yourself and face up to being a Tupperware boy, light, multipurpose, adaptable. We’re brand new Tupperware people and should thank God for that. (28-29)

Here Sally’s version shows an interesting side of the “New South Africa” discourse. In her argument, the once ethnic marker is taken as a pure “difference” independent from the politico-historical sedimentation that used to determine the meaning of the word. The difference in question is, of course, individual difference as well as ethnic difference with the separatist code of apartheid subtracted. In other words, the colonial ethnic difference that structured the inequality of the modern South Africa gives way to the liberal language of individual humanism and the multicultural language of “neutral” ethnic difference, which in turn provides a logical ground for Sally’s claim for a fresh start. While Sally’s liberal language essentially embodies the logic of the TRC’s national building project, the problem with this new language is, due to its legal
and ideal nature, that it is not effective in dealings with historically structured inequality, which is often beyond the explanatory power of the legal/neutral terms. In other words, if the TRC’s mission of building the rainbow nation is based on the idea of reconciliation through the delivering of social justice to Apartheid victims, this idea betrays the historical contradiction of the current historical conjuncture in South Africa. On the one hand, it tries to build a unified national culture by acknowledging ethnic difference and by redressing the social injustice that was perpetrated precisely through the mobilization of the ethnic difference. On the other hand, it also attempts to construct a collective spiritual ground for a structural national transformation by employing the languages of liberal individualism whose legal frame not only makes it indifferent to racial and ethnic difference but also cooperative with racial discrimination. In short, the TRC’s mission conjoins two incommensurable obverses—writing the present harmony by addressing the modern problem whose legacy is blatantly visible in the present and re-writing modern injustice from the present postmodern/multicultural perspective, where past structural injustice is translated into an individual experience.

It is at this historical juncture, where the strong modern social consensus on the truth turns into the over-determination of diverse groupings and newly emerging uncertain values—that is, where the system of South African postmodern equivalence takes its place—that a South African modern man, David, starts his “post”-modern quest for his new identity. Thus, his “personal” project of “find[ing] himself” is a convenient excuse in this respect (121). The problem is that even he himself does not understand his own motivation: “I can’t explain [the motivation] because it’s not clear to me either; everything’s so confused” (29). While the narrator seems to be clearer about David’s
motivation as she conjectures “David was using the Griqua material to displace that of which he could not speak” (145), she, too, only partially locates his motivation through his obsession with his ethnic marker—“green eyes.” Accordingly, the feminist narrator’s “writing back” to David’s masculine account is focused on “steatopygia” as opposed to “green eyes” (more on this later). In fact, as the fragmentary narrative unfolds, the reader is to realize that the most profound motivation comes from David’s own wartime experience, especially his relationship with Dulcie Olifant as her comrade, lover, and torturer. When the modern “truth” melts down with the advent of the rainbow discourse, the modern binary ideology that somehow justified and maintained the coexistence of comradeship, romance, and torturing becomes also bankrupt. This meltdown ultimately leads David to a profound sense of crisis, which he re-directs to a “personal” project (by erasing his “public” military experience from his own account), which again deceptively develops into the genealogy project (by displacing his “personal” motivation onto an “ethnic” project). In this negative sense, David’s project is “personal.”

Still, it is true that his project of genealogy is based on his youthful experience prior to his military period.

But nowadays there is also more time to think, and turning an eye inward he finds a gash, a festering wound that surprises him, precisely because it is the turning inward that reveals a problem on the surface, something that had stared him in the eye all his life: his very own eyes are a green of sorts—hazel, slate-quarry, parkside, foliage, soft fern, whatever the colour chart may choose to call it, but greenish for God’s sake—and that, to his surprise, he finds distasteful, if not horrible.

It is, he supposes, unlike the rest of his life, personal, a matter entirely unconnected with the Movement or with the way he relates to his comrades. (12)

Note that the first sentence as well as the repeated word “surprise” imply David’s sudden and retroactively found obsession with the ethnic marker. And at the same time,
David does realize the ethnic marker has been problematic throughout his life, though he never “turned an eye inward” during the military service. His investigation of his ancestry is escape and confrontation at the same time. It is an escape from history since he is now trying desperately to look at something other than his life-long involvement with the anti-Apartheid movement and its political cause; it is a confrontation with history because his project of family history is based on his life-long—however muffled during the time of fighting—experience which itself stems from the colonial history of the country. In other words, David’s project is an immediate and displaced response, though he is unable/unwilling to admit it, to the changes that are setting in with the emergence of the new South Africa “where everything gets distorted, no one knows who he is (29).”

David’s genealogical pursuit of his family history is composed of two layers; on the one hand, he tries to gather factual information about “green eye[d] (39,52, 150,156-7)” Le Fleur, the turn of the 19th century Griqua chief who is known to found the settlement for the colored in Namaqualand9; on the other hand, once his lineage is traced back to Le Fleur, he tries to graft Le Fleur onto Georges Cuvier, the ‘father of biology’ who exhibited Sarah (Saartjie) Baartman’s large buttocks (called steatopygia) along with other “strange” animals in 1810 England where she was known as the “Hottentot Venus.” Again, David himself is not able to give a clear-cut explanation of why he wants to give an account of the historical figure, Le Fleur. However, in an early moment in the novel, bringing up his childhood memory about an encounter with a black homeless man, David reveals to the narrator a kind of symbolic moment of meaningful reciprocity; he and the black homeless man exchange a stone and a shell as gifts which shows “there is no need to keep one’s teeth covered,” despite his father’s teaching that “don’t ever let a kaffir [a
pejorative term referring to black people] see your teeth” as a “decent, respectable coloured [person].” He adds: he “believes that it was his father’s irrational rage [against “blacks”] that fired his interest in Le Fleur.” (23-24) As Aryn Bartley argues, this anecdote “will naturalize his support for cross-racial harmony (110).” Faced with the Rainbow discourse, Bartley explains, David “produces himself as a representation of the nation” (111). While Bartley’s analysis makes perfect sense, David’s obsession with Le Fleur is also stems from the ongoing marginalization of the colored in the new environment where black majority politics is gaining power. In other words, in terms of politics, David is chasing two rabbits at the same time—emulating the TRC’s reconciliation project and trying to restore ethnic power (by unconsciously emulating his father)—which can conflict with each other. Later when David finds his name on the hit list possibly because his search for ethnic identity is taken as a threat by his ANC comrades (64-65), he realizes that the previous version of his childhood memory was false. “Conscientious and methodical (2)” as he is, David “insists on the reader going through the tedious details of his own revision” (141) so that the reader can compare these two versions. The new version only shows that David and the black man were simply “two mute figures” without any interaction and reciprocity. This time, while David’s inaction in this version of childhood memory dramatizes his present terror at his name on the hit list, the very act of keeping the “misremembered event” and of adding a new version also shows that he both has to abandon and has not yet abandoned the genealogical project. (141) In the narrator’s words, he is “unable/unwilling” to be not conscientious.
If the first layer of David’s project reveals his ‘political’ intent to inscribe the emerging national discourse of Rainbow nation into his own family history, what propels the second layer of the project dating back to 18th century biologist Cuvier is embedded, at least ostensibly, in his “private” obsession with his “green eyes.” In fact, his fortuitous encounter in a hotel room with Cuvier and Baartman on one page in Buckland’s *Curiosities of Natural History*, which is apparently prepared for customers’ pastime by exploiting the image of Africa, “enraged him” in his own words; but soon he “found his interest deflected from outrage on Baartman’s behalf to fascination with Cuvier’s mind.” (32-33) Regarding this, the narrator points out that his obsession with “steatopygia” “has set the story on its course” (17).

He is anxious, having found the fancy name [of steatopygia], that it will not be understood simply as natural fat padding of the buttocks but rather might be read in white people’s pathological term. A pity, for he loves … finding one [a word] that captures precisely a meaning, which cuts down on explanations, on ambiguity and argument, on the struggle through forests of words and the attendant meandering of the mind. It is due to this *precision* that David has done so well in MK, the Movement’s military wing—has risen so fast, as they say also in the corporate business world. (17, emphasis mine)

Here David’s anxiety about and denial of reading the term “steatopygia” as the “white people’s pathological term” has to be read literally. In other words, on the conscious level, David as a colored person refuses the imperial ideology and its pathological gaze. Conversely, his conscious denial signals that David is not capable of understanding the ideological function of language that operates regardless, and in spite of, the subject’s denial. The reader is invited to see the mediation of the negativity in David’s account. In other words, while David cannot see/admit that he internalizes the pathological gaze that he has been fighting against in his military years, his anxiety also demonstrates that he somehow knows and represses the affinity of his own fascination
with steatopygia and the imperial pathology. Of course, this invitation of the reader’s active participation in meaning-making is mediated by the narrator. However, it is also worth noting that David’s “precision” facilitates the narrator’s self-conscious response to David. In other words, David’s unwillingness/inability to tell is the other side of his precision—that his act of telling is transparent and precise to the point to which even his unconscious repression is registered in his telling.

On the part of the narrator, who David calls later “a crackpot visionary and a proto-feminist (145),” the deflection in David mind “from outrage on Baartman’s behalf to fascination with Cuvier’s mind” is not only affirmative of the imperial discourse but also thoroughly masculine. When she says “steatopygia … has set the story on its course” she not only indicates David’s hidden motivation but also declares her self-conscious writing-back to David’s account. Thus the narrator, who is also steatopygous, implies to the reader that David is inspired by his wife Sally’s steatopygous buttock that “[offers] warmth and well-being that brings a sleep smile to his lips” (16). Plus, right after the above quote, the narrator suddenly switches the topic and inserts a fragment of Dulcie, another steatopygous woman, whose buttock is marked by scars from brutal torture (19) possibly perpetrated by David himself.

Since David’s story is part and parcel of colonial and masculine discourse where “steatopygia” is the defining character of Khoisan women natives, the narrator does indicate the irrelevance of Cuvier and David’s genealogical project. She, notwithstanding, agrees with David’s “fiction” to create “the European origins of the Griqua chief” (35), allowing David to invent a story of Madame la Fleur as Cuvier’s housekeeper. Though the narrator indicates a century’s gap between Madame la Fleur
and Cuvier’s lifetime she is, at this moment, faithful to her job as amanuensis and includes Cuvier in Le Fleur’s family history. And through this grafting, Eduard la Fleur, the son of Madame la Fleur and Le Fleur’s ancestor, figures out as Cuvier’s illegitimate son, implicated by Eduard’s “green eyes” (37) just as David finds resemblance with Le Fleur in their “green eyes.” In other words, the thread that weaves David’s genealogy is “green eyes,” which he constantly emphasizes throughout his genealogy, which, as it turns out, the narrator thoroughly re-writes by juxtaposing the green eyes with steatopygia. The reason behind David’s absurd and desperate emphasis is, though complicated, that he wants to find a vision of harmony through green eyes, a “private” version of the Rainbow South Africa where his colored identity finds a stable and meaningful place.

The culmination of David’s attempt to graft his family history to the history of the colored takes place when he accounts for the immaculate inception between Le Fleur and Antjie who is David’s great-great-grandmother and Le Fleur’s lover. Again, the narrator points out that David’s mythical account of her pregnancy through “the miracle of the [Le Fleur’s green] eyes that had penetrated her body” and filled “her womb” (156-57) lacks credibility, calling his story a “mumbo jumbo” (158) but agrees, notwithstanding, to record this mythical story. However, contrary to his vision for this miraculous harmony, the factual fragments he excavates prove that Le Fleur’s political project was far from a non-exclusionary politics. What David ultimately finds is that Le Fleur ended up building Griqua nationalism by excluding other ethnic groups in the 19th and early 20th century. In a near reversal of Sarah Gertrude Millin’s fictional account of colored people as “degenerated” from the pure [European] blood in her novel God’s Step-Children, Le
Fleur’s historical project was to deliver Griqua people from the degeneration caused by the infusion of European blood; the founder of the Griqua community tried to define the purity of the Griqua blood of the native Khoisan people by rendering “his own European ancestry … by now so thin, so negligible” (88) and at the same time, by distancing the Griqua from “savage native”—“we are no cousins of Xhosas; we are a pure Griqua people with our own traditions” (94). It is at this moment that the narrator forces David to admit that Le Fleur’s project turns out to be a “sellout” (150) that serves as a separatist model for the Apartheid regime.

When his genealogical project collapses, David raises the problem of truthfulness of memory, complicating the two versions of his childhood memory. Recalling his visit to the city of Glasgow in the eighties, he brings up his memory of John Glassford’s painting of his family circa 1767. When he was looking at the painting, he saw “a black man take shape” out of the dark background of the painting. That “the man, who was not there a moment ago, looks directly at him” turns out to be a true vision when he read the plaque that informs the painting “included a black slave on the left hand, which has since been painted over.” (191-93) Further, David also insists that the face of the bald-headed black man is exactly same as the bald-head waiter he met during his genealogical search. Again, the narrator dismisses David’s account as “the madness of his vision” and “false memory” (194), adding it is likely that he “simply forgot that [he’d] read the inscription [of the plaque] earlier” (193). The narrator interpretation is correct but it misses the point. For what David dramatizes through this palimpsest—“an artifact that has been inscribed multiple times, with older layers of inscription only partially erased (Graham 138)”14—is that he knows that he cannot repress what he wants to repress. Compared to the other two
versions of his childhood memory, there is a remarkable difference between the black man’s posture of “directly look[ing] at him (David’s Story 192)” and the first version’s reciprocity (23) and the 2nd version’s “two mute figures” (141). While the last version is one that is spatially removed from South Africa to England, it magically returns in the face of the waiter in David’s everyday life. This is also the moment that David painfully admits the futility of his desperate attempt to run away from the truth of his life.

This reading of David’s own story leads us to see his suffering. His account consists of a series of displacements emerging in his constant efforts to circumvent his military experience. And at the same time these displacements are the results of his desperate negotiation with the changed world of new South Africa. He begins his genealogy project to find his self in a new world; the destination is a painful schizophrenia where what cannot be told erupts through and throughout his porous and fragmentary construction of his genealogy, which in turn displaces him from his past world as well as the present world. Of course, Wicomb’s point does not lie in justifying David’s masculine and linear thinking by revealing his psychological suffering. Nor is her point to simply accuse people like David of the act of brutality. By revealing the historical nature of David’s personal narrative, the novel narrates the historical tragedy in quite a different way from the TRC’s quasi-historiographical premise—that is, the assumption that individual testimonies could lead to the national healing. Specifically, the novel calls attention to what might be called the pitfalls of the genealogical project. While the novel debunks the simplistic assumption that a linear and objective narrativization of history is possible, it also calls attention to the present political and ideological motivation that is always already inherent to any genealogical project.
Precisely because genealogy is a historiographical science of “history of the present,” Wicomb’s problematization of the political quality of the present subject position has far-reaching resonance. Because the starting point of David’s genealogical project is his “green eyes,” his project is never able to leave the fixed gaze of green eyes. Thus while the project functions as an “exercise in avoidance” (33) of his real problem, on the one hand, it ends up re-inscribing the ideological underpinnings that are attached to “green eyes” on the other—namely, the fundamental Apartheid ideology of divide, which, in fact, folds back to the starting point of his project. At this ideological level, whether what the green eyes symbolize—the coloured—is good or bad doesn’t really matter. What matters is that the Apartheid version of difference is the difference of essentialism and that David’s genealogy project is also based on essentialism. Maybe the difference between the former and the latter is that the latter is not only a case of the difference of essentialism but also of the essentialism of difference. In other words, David’s act of genealogy, due to its subjective position and the partiality that it entails, repeats the ideological premise of the subject position. Further, in the course of genealogical construction, the subject not only confirms but also essentializes (or reifies) what it brings in in the first place. However, the political quality of, in David’s case, the colored identity is not to be found in-and-of-itself but in a larger historical and social dynamics. Politics, strictly speaking, starts not merely when a subject raises a voice but when the voice breaks out of its partiality and figures as a request for social justice. Precisely in this context of social justice, Wicomb launches a critique of the now popularized hybridity—particularly through the critique of Homi Bhabha—as the purification and/or essentialization of hybrid identity. In her article “Shame and Identity: the Case of the
Colored in South Africa,” Wicomb writes:

Theoretically, the situation [that the exclusive identity politics of the coloured] can be cast in terms of the diverging interests of postmodernism and postcoloniality, or it may indicate the need to revise popular definitions of the latter to include the coexistence of oppositional and complicit forms. However, in practice such an absorption into a single category would gloss over the real threat to the task of establishing democracy, at least in the Cape. (94) 

Wicomb is concerned about the Balkanization of the identity politics that has become one of the most prevalent and serious problems of contemporary society. The implication here is that difference, if it becomes introspective and thus reified/essentialized into an identity, risks being degenerated into a vulgarized multiculturalism. About a half century ago, Frantz Fanon, in terms of class, expressed a similar concern at the time of the independence of Algeria. Rejecting any form of fixed conceptualization of national consciousness, he asserts:

The living expression of the nation is the moving consciousness of the whole of the people; it is the coherent, enlightened action of men and women. The collective building up of a destiny is the assumption of responsibility on the historical scale. Otherwise there is anarchy, repression, and the resurgence of tribal parties and federalism. (204-5) 

3. The narrator’s Project of Subversion—a Re-placed historiography, and the emergence of a new realist form

Throughout the entire narrative, the narrator constantly reminds the reader that David’s historical investigation is just as fictional as his mobilization of facts. In the narrator’s words, David is full of “half baked ideas” and “troubled mind” (30). The strategy that the narrator takes to show the faultiness of David’s account is remarkable. Instead of simply positioning her as a narrator in the word’s conventional sense, she pushes her position as “amaniensis” to the extreme. She not only “records” David’s
fragmented accounts but also “records” her own reaction to his account, their conversation, her own “flights of fancy” and “attempts at artistry” (3). This strategic choice comes from the impossibility of the job of amanuensis. Just as David is ‘unable/unwilling’ to tell his stories, the narrator is “unable/unwilling” to stay in her role as an amanuensis. The narrator’s inability/unwillingness to “simply record” leads her to an active writing and re-writing, utilizing David’s silence. Asserting the futility of adequate beginning for “this mixed-up tale” (8), she even leaves out what David thought was an adequate beginning of his genealogy—the story of Eva/Krotoa (the first translator, interpreter, ambassador, trading agent for Dutch colonizers and Khoisans) or Sarah Baartman. Showing the version of David’s linear historiography cannot be launched without a subject position that essentializes the masculine perspective that in turn inevitably either imposes silence to women or erases women from its narrative surface, she launches her feminist writing which David complains as “a story of women” and “not a proper history at all” (199). As many critics argue, the narrator’s feminist strategy of “writing back” 18 is performed through her recapturing of David’s story and through her reinterpretation of women’s bodies.19 Specifically, she performs this project not by simply denying or dismissing David’s account but by subverting the pathological male gaze on the one hand and by imaginatively representing silenced female voices. 

For example, she invents a story about Rachael Susanna Kok, Andrew Le Fleur’s wife by imagining her as a transcriber of her husband’s sermons, speeches, and other political writings. The narrator dramatizes her own position by inventing Le Fleur’s reticence on “his own clandestine activities” that are “too complicated for women” (53). Once the narrator invents Le Fluer’s private life by modeling him on David, she exerts
her liberty as a narrator for “flights of fancy” (3). In her imagination, “the history book” Rachael produced was written “in the strange language” of “a recipe,” rendering Le Fleur’s reading in a manner of “intoning like a preacher” nonsensical because “a person should be prepared to throw in an inspired pinch of nutmeg, to do without a second egg, to mix the wrong way round and hope for the best” (57). Later in the novel, when Le Fleur came up with the idea of “absolute separation” as “the solution for God’s step-children [the colored]” (161), Rachael’s “body resisted. She could no longer be his secretary; her wrists seized up in the very presence of a pen, and the smell of ink made her sneeze uncontrollably, scattering the great man’s reformed thoughts hither and thither” (162). And Rachel, the narrator adds, “struggled to manoeuver the bounteous behind in which she stored her sadness, so that in those days of silence it had grown quite unmanageable” (163). Clearly, this narrativization of Rachael’s episode refers to the narrator’s job as an amanuensis as it problematizes the impossibility of “objective” writing, of “simply” recording, and of “keeping silent” (162).

However, as the narrative goes on, David himself produces the “historical” fragments without the help of the narrator. David’s “historical” fragments begin when his genealogy moves from Le Fleur and his wife Rachael (and stories prior to this historical point) to Le Fleur and his lover Antjie (David’s great-great-grandmother). Claiming the authority from his great-grandmother Ouma Ragal’s “disconnected anecdotes about old Griquas (95),” David fabricates a mythical story of Ouma Ragal’s “irregularity of her birth” suggesting his connection to Le Fleur through Antjie. Faced with the Ouma Ragal’s “historical” reconstruction of her memory and its assumed authority, the narrator’s voice is weakened to that of amanuensis. Still, she decides to record her own
response: “the pity that it would seem to support the colonial assumption that concupiscence and steatopygia are necessarily linked” (96). Thus when David comes up with a story of “Rain Sisters” where Le Fluer “saw in a flash that the women blessed with the most bountiful behinds, the queens of steatopygia, were the chosen Brides of Christ— that they would be the ones to carry water to the promised land....[They] had been shaped by God into perfect vessels for collecting and carrying back radical moisture from the rain-soaked Cape peninsula with which to temper the radical heat of Namaqualand (153)” the narrator immediately retorts “was it one of Ouma Ragal’s stories?” and points out “the Chief’s confused [meaning: simply inverted] adoption of a native voice that was in fact produced by a European” (159). The narrator expresses her suspicion over Ouma Ragal’s story-telling:

Ouma Ragal’s stories may not have been as reliable as he thinks. In her cooking shelter, with the boy tugging at her patchwork skirt, she bent over the blackened pots of slow-cooking mealies and beans packed on a marrowbone, which indelibly flavoured the story in the child’s memory. And so, Ouma, and so? He called impatiently, for sometimes she would remember a new detail. Thus David ought to have seen how truth, far from being ready-made, takes time to be born, slowly takes shape in the very act of repetition, of telling again and again about the miracles performed by the Chief [Le Fleur], seasoned and smoked in Ouma’s cooking shelter to last forever—stories that made that much more sense than the remaining fragments of the old man’s own text. Which, as I pointed out to David, only goes to show that people cannot be relied on to tell their own stories. (103)

With a kind of power struggle for the narrative authority going on between David and the narrator, the passage voiced by the narrator unwittingly draws the reader’s attention to David’s act of telling/re-telling and to David’s motivation for telling/un-telling. While her intention is to discredit David’s and Ouma Ragal’s narrative authority, the narrator also reveals her own attitude towards “truth-telling.” In fact, she radically denies the possibility of truth-telling and, thereby of the narrativization of history. For
her, the narrativization of history always involves “seasoning” of the story on the part of
the narrating subject. Further, she points out that the role of “seasoning” lies in the
narrative attempt to make coherence from fragments, which unwittingly tells the reader
Wicomb’s narrative strategy: fragments can be closer to truth than “seasoned” and
“smoked” versions of truth. While the narrator’s deep suspicion about truth-telling helps
the reader to grasp the aesthetic form of the entire narrative, the problem is that the
narrator’s critique of truth also applies to her own narrative because she, just like David,
eds, misrepresents, and “seasons”—in short, she is unreliable. The problem, in other
words, is not her feminism per se but the very limitedness of her subject position as a
narrator, from which the seasoning is inevitable.

Perhaps the most blunt description of the narrator’s unreliability is expressed
when David accuses her of naïve idealism while justifying his own complicity in wartime
brutality.

What’s wrong with military values? See how far it’s brought us all, including the
likes of you, who believe in keeping your hands clean at all costs, who reach for
lace handkerchiefs at the thought of bloodshed, and choose not to notice that that
fine thing, freedom, is rudely shoved through by rough guys in khaki. (79)

Oh yes, he explains, by making us insecure about our own members so that we
remain suspicious, incriminate the innocent, and do terrible things to our own
people. Keeping your hands clean is a luxury that no revolutionary can afford;
there’s corruption in every institution. It’s only you arty types who think of such
problems as something special, something freakish that can bring about a climax
in a story. Stick to the real world and you’ll find the buzz of bluebottles
deafening” (196).

While David’s social vision is fundamentally limited by his military experience,
the narrator’s social vision is also limited by her own intellectual presuppositions. The
phrases like “keeping your hands clean” and “arty types” shows the crucial difference of
their positions. If David is close enough to the war experience to internalize the inhumanity of war (though he does try to unconsciously “keep his hands clean” as we saw earlier), the narrator is far enough removed to think about the war abstractly and to judge David in a “rational” way. As Wicomb explains about the characterization of the narrator, the narrator is “not to be admired,” a “bourgeois girl … full of European crap [from David’s perspective],” “unreliable”, and “deliberately misrepresenting things” (“Zoe Wicomb in Conversation with Hein Willemse” 148-149).20 While one of the crucial functions of the narrator is to clearly show the absurdity and paradox in David’s account and genealogy and thus to let David “[invite] the reader to perform a task he does not value” (David’s Story 140), David also performs a similar narrative function. What David has and the narrator does not have is his close proximity to historical events during as well as after Apartheid. The point of David’s absurdity is precisely that he is too much involved in historical changes to critically see the changes. In this sense, David ironizes the narrator. As the tension between David and the narrator escalates here, she responds to David’s critique of her pacifism by saying “military values that go against the very notion of freedom for which you originally set out to fight” (80). As is typical to her character, the narrator’s reaction is not only completely reasonable but also abstract, ideal, and unsympathetic (or, “broadly sympathetic” (2) in David’s words). The narrator effectively shows to the reader that David’s account, despite his own propensity towards facts (such as newspaper clips and Le Fleur’s own writing fragments) and truth, “cannot be relied on” as truth (103); David’s job is to indicate the limitedness of her representation, especially of Dulcie, despite the political legitimacy of the narrator’s position.
It is hard to pin down the narrator’s position since her writing is a mixture of political idealism about war and freedom, a self-conscious and self-referential reflection as anamenuensis/narrator, a skeptical attitude towards truth, rational thinking, a vast knowledge of modern and contemporary literature, an acute feminist consciousness, an intellectual curiosity, and an aesthetic sensibility. Still, one of the most noticeable points of contrast with David is her political textualism—a belief in linguistic and textual practice as an efficient political means. Early in the novel, the narrator expresses her belief in the power of textuality by alluding to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. After she agrees with David to “lift” Madame la Fleur “out of her period” and to “graft” her onto Cuvier’s life despite the century’s gap, the narrator records their conversation.

But what, he asks, if a reader should try to find meaning in the historical disjuncture?

Nonsense, I say, it’s clearly an error. I begin to tell him of the misrecorded *Come in* uttered by James Joyce in answer to a knock on the door, and included in the text by his scribe, the young Beckett; and then, uncharacteristically, I shriek as I remember. Your Day—Soweto Day, the sixteenth of June—that’s also Joyce’s Bloomsday, I gabble excitedly, Day of Revolution of the Word. Imagine, black children revolting against Afrikaans, the language of oppressors, on the very anniversary of the day that Leopold Bloom started with a hearty breakfast. (35)

David’s question, which is immediately dismissed by the narrator as “nonsense,” is, in fact, a correct question. For what the reader will be asked to do is exactly to see the meaning in the nonsensical “historical disjuncture.” (The historical disjuncture in David’s account, remarkably, provides the key to understanding David for the reader.) Interestingly, the narrator also re-enacts David’s “historical disjuncture” when she connects Soweto Day and Joyce’s Bloomsday in her imagination. Of course, what facilitates her connecting two different historico-linguistic events is her identification with Samuel Beckett as Joyce’s anamenuensis. But her central concern is that both events
refer to the power of the medium of language in social life. The Joycean revolution and the Soweto revolution point to, for the narrator, the liberatory potential of language and textual practice so that these events signify linguistic liberation respectively from the traditional frame of language and from the ideological vehicle of the oppressive regime. Thus, while Joyce’s “come in” is a signal to the form of “stream of consciousness” and temporal disjuncture in his novel *Finnegan’s Wake*, the narrator takes it as an invitation to Joycean linguistic revolution where imagination or textual movement is anterior to, or at least central to, access to the historical event. In other words, in the narrator’s account, the difference between David’s “historical disjuncture” and her own is that, while the former is a factual error or a simple miscalculation, the latter is the self-conscious act that brings in a new reality, or at least makes one see what is not visible under the previously limiting grammar of language.

The narrator’s political textualism is well demonstrated in the way in which she weaves different/disparate spatio-temporal settings (such as present-day Cape Town, 1922 Beeswater, 1917 Kokstad, and 18th century Europe) by the common thread of women’s experience of silence. As the narrator ‘re-writes’ or ‘writes back to’ David’s genealogy, various women’s voices, which would have been only in the margin of David’s version of the story, come alive and connect with each other. Through this fictional account and the invention of episodes, the author sheds new light on steatopygia that cannot be seen from the pathological male gaze. As steatopygia acquires a new symbolic meaning of suffering and solidarity, women’s silence, which was ideologically imposed by the male gaze, is also given a new function—telling, testifying, and revealing. In this sense, as Meg Samuelson argues, “speaking through silence is not
equivalent to being mute” (120). The narrator would say that, strictly speaking, there is no silence just as there is no amanuensis because silence is a form of speaking just as transcribing is a form of writing. If David’s version of the narrative centers on an attempt to construct a linear genealogy and, thus, internalizes the masculine and “modern” totalizing gaze of historiography, the narrator’s version refuses the hero-centered linearity and tries to excavate the everyday life of silenced women by constellating the episodic narratives of women around David’s version of history. In this sense, the narrator’s narrativization of women’s episodes aims at a counter-genealogy of South Africa. Just as David’s “personal” project cannot be severed from the collective history of the colored as well as a colonial masculine discourse, the narrator also necessarily represents and narrates the collective female voice in problematizing what David is never able to question.

However, the formal problem persists in the narrator’s liberatory textualization. For precisely because the fundamental thrust of David’s Story is a representation of history, the narrator’s symbolic and imagined liberation is problematic. In other words, though the narrator’s version of genealogy is subversive, this subversion is not only merely aesthetic but also dependent upon the narrator’s subjective position. Her version, in short, is fictional and unreliable as she shares the formal premise of history with David. In David’s words, her account is “not a proper history at all” (199)—this time, not in the sense that it is not masculine, but in the sense that it is fictional. Her concept of truth as “shap[ing] in the very act of repetition, of telling again and again” folds back to her own narrativization. In fact, Wicomb frequently makes the narrator’s critique of David unwittingly point to her own narrative. In one notable moment, the narrator
expresses her distrust in memory.

Fashionable nonsense, I say, but no, he is suspicious of the ways in which … it [memory] will burst forth to speak of another time, an original moment that in turn will prove to be not the original after all, as promiscuous memory, spiraling into the past, mates with new discourses to produce further moments of terrible surprise. Is one to believe that terror lies dormant in all the shapes and sounds and smells of our everyday encounter, that memories lie cravenly hidden one within another? Surely memory is not to be trusted. (195)

The narrator’s point is clear. Truth is not accessible through memory. If memory is a form of telling, this telling inevitably brings with it the present position of the subject of memory. Thus, the previous memory is overridden by the new memory and this process of overriding is infinite by definition. But it again disrupts the ground for her own textual memorialization of David’s female ancestors. While Wicomb’s point is that social memory is a political act which is itself telling a certain truth, the narrator’s logic is merely rational. As a result, the narrator’s skepticism at once powerfully “deconstructs” David’s narrative and fundamentally erodes the validity of her own narrative. In this sense, David and the narrator are both unreliable and unequal to the task of the representation of history. On the part of David, facts and historical writings are gathered and reoriented for his own purpose; on the part of the narrator, her own imagination imbues meaning to history by alluding to and grafting an atemporal historical situation onto writers such as Toni Morrison, Sarah Gertrude Millin, Laurence Sterne, Eugene Marais, and others. If David produces a faction by psychologizing history, the narrator produces metafiction by aestheticizing history.

To conceptualize the parallel relationship between David and the narrator, David is an undeniably modern man (in terms of South African modernity) whose writing ends up with a postmodern form of faction due to the restless negativity inherent to his
writing/memory; while the narrator is a feminist figure who embodies the postmodern suspicion of truth and of its historical representation, as her aestheticization of history through various modern texts eloquently demonstrates. It is here in this form of David’s Story that the political question of historical representation of post-apartheid South Africa arises. For the formal principle of fragmentariness of David’s Story comes not merely from the scarcity of historical material, the narrator’s utilization of intertextuality, or even the interplay of fact and fiction, but from the very impossibility of narrating history. The engine of David’s Story’s fragmentariness is, in other words, the co-presence of the two incommensurable narrative axes. Both the narrator and David are willing to represent the historical present in their own ways, but the more they try the more blatant their positional difference becomes. Though the entire story is ultimately written by the narrator and she thus seems to have the upper hand over David, this narrative structure does not (only) entail something like David’s ungrounded masculine vision vs. the narrator’s correct storytelling. The form of the novel does not allow the reader to simply discard one in favor of the other. For David can also be argued to have the upper hand in terms of experience. Accordingly, the narrator’s utilization of her vast literary knowledge proliferates only in the form of commentary. For example, while the narrator produces many different representations of Dulcie by alluding to other literary texts, none of the representational pieces is rendered as truthful by David. At the end of the day, David is the one who knows who Dulcie is. Thus, the novel form, by pitting two different subject positions against each other, leads the reader to read both of the narratives, to see the partialities that govern each of them, to compare them, and ultimately to see what is beyond each narrative.
The form of *David's Story* is realism. It is realism not in the sense that it faithfully represents outside reality, but in the sense that Wicomb’s characterization is so thorough that both characters are real enough to show their own complexity and positional limitation. Through them, their own experienced reality is represented in such a way that each figure’s world is completely different from the other, as the narrator’s question unmistakably shows—“what are we meant to do with these different worlds?” (196). Further, the characters also show the illusory and partial reality of their worlds—in Lukacs’ words, “the fundamental dissonance of existence”—with its ambiguities and absurdity, its openness and embeddedness in ideology, and its presentness and historicity (*Theory of the novel* 61). All these elements—in short, the elements of fragmentariness—are partial and real representations of the current South Africa. It is in this sense of realism that Daymond’s argument is understood: “Wicomb’s staging of writing should not be understood as primarily philosophical and general in intent because … it so clearly serves certain specifics of time and place which should be kept paramount as we consider both textuality and interpretation” (26).

In her interview with Eva Hunter, Wicomb answers Hunter’s question about realism’s representation of South African society through a coherent narrative:

I don’t think it’s my business to impose order although the realist form which I’m stuck with [usually tries to represent South Africa’s life in a coherent way]; But it’s not what I’m after, precisely because there isn’t order, there’s conflict and that not only in the South African situation. If I am grasping around for something fixed and orderly, the gaps *between* the stories at the same time undermine coherence. I think it’s important to have chaos on the page, an alternative to the camouflage of coherence that socio-political structures are about. (“Zoe Wicomb, interview with Eva Hunter” 92)

The fragmentariness of *David’s Story* is Wicomb’s aesthetic *and* political choice. Here the surprising part is not her endorsement of realism but the way in which Wicomb
sees reality itself. For her, reality is always experienced through the “camouflage of coherence” of “socio-political structures.” The reality of the world, in other words, because the very discourse that organizes and visualizes “socio-political structures” blocks people from seeing the reality’s constituent fissures, gaps, and differences, has to be represented through fragments. Wicomb’s fragmentary realism is a response to the “coherent whole” of the discursive representation that displaces fragmentary reality onto a flattened discursive space. The realist movement in Wicomb’s “chaos on the page,” in other words, is not a simple fragmentary reproduction of fragmentary reality, but a representation of fragmentariness of reality, a representational aspiration towards the true social totality as opposed to the ideologically or discursively formulated coherence. In the article “Why I Write” Wicomb defines her realism by invoking Brechian defamiliarization (Verfremdung) in a feminist context.

The consecration of women as virgins or mothers or other fetishization of woman which at the same time allows women as human beings to be treated with contempt. The oppositional is also, of course, to be found right there in the business of writing: the intensely private which through the very act of committing it to language becomes intensely social: the known which in our attempts to represent in language, turns out to be about what we had not known, what we discover. (574)

Wicomb’s application of realism to social discourse—in this case, the discourse about womanhood—is what distinguishes her realism from the previous practices of realism. If 19th century realism is an attempt to show the whole of social life in a society where social life’s fragmentariness keeps one from seeing a historical totality, and if 20th century realism is largely engaged in realism’s documentary politics under the oppressive regime where adequate representation itself is severely censored and suppressed, Wicomb’s realism targets the seamless operations of discourses that suppresses our very
fragmentary reality under the discursive “reality,” or better, discursive virtuality. If postcolonial literary tradition is to re-write the official history in order to write what cannot be written within the imperial ideological apparatus, Wicomb’s realism inherits that tradition by moving postcolonial representational politics into the contemporary South African everyday life. Wicomb, in other words, at once explores the rich political possibilities of the deeply-rooted anti-apartheid realist tradition and readily responds to the changing post-apartheid socio-political environment by writing-back/writing-with the realist tradition and modernist cannons in a postmodern realist form.  

4. Wicomb’s narrative project—Representing the Unrepresentable

The novel’s formal kernel of fragmentariness is most visibly demonstrated in the narrator’s persistent attempt to represent Dulcie. All of her narrative representations on Dulcie are fragments; they are not connected with each other and sometimes they are even contradictory. And yet, all of the fictional accounts of Dulcie are based on the narrator’s “art of inferencing” (78, 134, 135) David’s “somewhat opaque” (135) account of Dulcie, implying that narrator’s logic is referential, and therefore not entirely false. For example, when the narrator asks David the taboo question if Dulcie was at the Quatro camp (where the dissidents of Apartheid were detained and interrogated in the 80s and David presumably acquires his tinnitus as a mark of torture) David’s bodily response is telling.  

His voice drops to a tortured whisper and I am glad that I cannot see his face in the dark: It’s here in close-up, before my very eyes, the screen full-bleed with Dulcie. Who? Is it you put it in my head? The terrible things happening to Dulcie? It’s here, in close-up—and he stumbles to his feet with a horrible cry, knocking me over as he charges out. (201)
David’s emotional shock confirms his earlier confession that “Dulcie is a kind of scream echoing through my story” (134), suggesting his own complicity in the “terrible things happening to Dulcie.” In the subsequent pages, the narrator diverts from her usual interrogative tactic of gathering “disconnected images, snippets of Dulcie … [and] as best I can, invent, and hope that David’s response will reveal something” (80 my emphasis). When the narrator starts talking about the parable of Bronwyn the Brown Witch which is supposed to have nothing to do with Dulcie, David interrupts the narrator: “you must know about such things, about how things happen, how they twist and turn and become something else, what such things really mean …. She’s grown too big for her boots and they’ve had enough of her. She must give up her power. …. She knows too much…” (204). While David’s immediate response is facilitated by the parable’s ambiguous ending where “one day her friends, the sticks in the forest, …, lay themselves down on top of each other until they are a mighty woodpile. There is no way out. Bronwyn the Witch must die on the stake” (203), his abrupt confession also tells the narrator (and the reader) that the parable’s source of ambiguity—that is, the witch is destined to die by and with her stick friends, so nobody is held responsible—does not apply to Dulcie’s case. If the moral ambiguity implied in the parable discharges the witch’s friends from the guilt of killing, David’s response asserts that Dulcie’s friends and himself cannot be absolved. And at the same time, David also inadvertently points out that Dulcie cannot be cast as an innocent and powerless victim. Implying Dulcie’s strong refusal to “give up her power,” David rejects the parable’s moral reductionism.

The hide and seek, or the narrator’s inferencing and David’s haphazard response constantly marks the narrative rhythm and tension that structures *David’s Story*. That is to
say, though all the fragments about Dulcie are scattered throughout the narrative, the fragmentariness of the fragments inversely carves out the realist form of David’s Story, where two individuals and their worlds continuously collide, pile up, and collaborate towards a representation of Dulcie. Wicomb’s narrative innovation lies in plotting David and the narrator in such a way that each of their personal contradictions dovetails each other; David’s contradiction lies in his inability to repress the haunting presence of Dulcie and, this in turn evolves into the narrator’s contradictory inability to textualize Dulcie despite the persistent presence of Dulcie in David’s account.

The textualism in the narrator’s representation of Dulcie is clearly expressed earlier in the novel: “Dulcie, a protean subject that slithers hither and thither, out of reach, repeating, replacing, transforming itself …” (35). At this stage of the novel, Dulcie is described by the narrator as an object of textual representation rather than as a person with flesh and soul: “Dulcie is surrounded by a mystique that I am determined to crush with facts … necessary details from which to patch together a character who can be inserted at suitable points into the story” (78). Later, she tries to imagine Dulcie by fitting Dulcie into the well-known binary categorization of women as woman warrior and domestic angel. She introduces Dulcie by describing her as a mixture of these two images of feminine grace and military valor. Further, contrasting the domesticity of David’s wife and formal comrade, Sally, with Dulcie, the narrator confirms the usefulness of the categorization. While Sally takes to the process of re-domestication after the end of war and becomes “an emaciated scarecrow of a woman with uneven, vegetal tufts of hair and liverish spots on her brown skin” (14), Dulcie is imagined by the narrator as remaining a “revolutionary” (29), a class of people who “do both” (32), e.g., have femininity and
militaristic fortitude, in post-Apartheid South Africa. Thus the narrator represents Dulcie as a “female guerrilla” “who takes that kind of thing seriously—protocol and hierarchy, the saluting and standing to attention, the barking of orders, the uniform … [and] dabs perfume on her pulse points before target practice” “in her double life” (78-79, emphasis mine). In response to this romanticization, David insists that Dulcie’s femininity is “wiped out by our common goal” of liberation and she is “not feminine, not like a woman at all” (78). Invoking the narrator’s early mention of Joycean linguistic revolution, he adds:

Fine people just prefer to believe such nonsense as the Cry Freedom vision of schoolkids bursting into spontaneous rebellion over the Afrikaans language. Get real, old girl, without a military movement orchestrating the whole thing there would not and could not have been a Soweto ’76. Brilliant, isn’t it, how your arty lot just love these lies about irrepressible human nature and the spirit of freedom bubbling in the veins of the youth. (79-80)

Here David’s scorn points at the abstractness of the narrator’s liberal idea which premises her “arty” representation. While David’s response has to be read as a justification of military values and his own complicity with those values, its unintended force is to cast the narrator’s representation of revolt as utterly insensitive to the reality of war. The narrator responds in kind to this disdainful remark: “as with the preservation of all prejudices, he will no doubt go on clocking exceptions rather than question the stereotype and its rules” (80). Again, the narrator intends to remind the reader of David’s unreliability, but unintentionally reinscribes David’s warning that the reader should be attentive to the narrator’s own prejudices.

The problem of the narrator’s representation here is not that she pursues “meaning in the margin,” or that she attempts to read David’s silence on Dulcie as an aspect of writing. Rather, the issue at stake here is that she tries to use socially established
discourses to pin down the meaning of Dulcie. As Meg Samuelson, quoting Jacklyn Cock, argues, “the role of women in militarization has been largely obscured by two competing perspectives—those of sexism and feminism. Both analyses exclude women from war on the grounds that they are bearers of ‘special qualities.’ … The outcome of both positions is that war is understood as a totally male affair.” In fact, any of the languages that the narrator exploits at this point—exaggerated feminism, military sexism, liberal ideology, and aestheticism—turns out to be inadequate for the representation of Dulcie. The same problem applies to David; his wartime discourse as well as the new diversity discourse cannot represent Dulcie. The problem is, in a nutshell, that none of the available discourses can represent Dulcie.

Faced with David’s harsh reaction and the representational impasse, the narrator painfully tries to find words with which to write Dulcie. She even declares that Dulcie is “a decoy” that “does not exist in the real world” (124). The turning point in her representation takes place when David gives her a sheaf of paper, on the last page of which David has sketched Baartman:

Although I have made numerous inferences from that last page, I do not quite know how to represent it. It is a mess of scribbles and scoring out and doodling of peculiar figures that cannot be reproduced here. I know that it is his attempt at writing about Dulcie, because her name is written several times and struck out. Then there are beginnings scattered all over, and at various angles that ignore the rectangularity of the paper, as if by not staring at the top or not following the shape of the page he could fool himself that it is not a beginning. (135)

Later, as if demonstrating her own unreliability, the narrator confesses: “I ought to explain that there is another page, one without words”:

There are the dismembered shapes of a body: an asexual torso, like a dressmaker’s dummy; arms bent the wrong way at the elbows; legs; swollen feet; hands like claws. / There is a head, an upside-down smiling head, which
admittedly does not resemble her, except for the outline of bushy hair. / I have no doubt that it is Dulcie who lies mutilated on the page. (205)

In the latter half of the narrative, the narrator’s representation of Dulcie shows a remarkable difference from the first few writings on Dulcie. If the narrator tries to appropriate Dulcie to fit her into the established discourses of feminism and liberalism, now she focuses on Dulcie’s body. If the earlier representational attempt is marked by her role of a “proxy” to voice the meaning of Dulcie’s experience, the latter attempt is characterized by her representation of silence as silence, which leads the reader not so much to a clear meaning or answer as to a question. The few fragments focusing on Dulcie’s body are presumably closer to “real” Dulcie that the others: the proximity of these fragments to “truth” is signaled by the absence of David’s immediate retort.

In fact, these “close to truth” fragments are the narrator’s translation of the last two pages of David’s writing. She creates a powerful reconstruction of Dulcie’s torture by filling the margin of David’s drawing of Dulcie with vivid details. In this, the narrator represents Dulcie as a silence. More accurately, the narrator translates David’s last page on which “Dulcie lies mutilated” into a metonymic representation. Here the narrator’s representational strategy is remarkable. For she not only lets Dulcie’s body testify to the torture but she does it by inverting David’s gaze. Precisely because the narrator is not able to ‘write up’ a coherent story, she realizes her ability to “write down” by importing “the gaze of others” (178). The choice of recipe book language turns out to be an efficient way of “writing down” Dulcie’s body because it “brings a sense of clarity, as if the mind, too, is being held under a blindingly bright light, and clarity is conferred” by this gaze (178). In the reconstruction of the nightmarish moment in Dulcie’s life, the narrator describes the torture by mobilizing “the vocabulary of recipe books” such as “tenderize,
baste, sear, seal, sizzle, score, chop” “which is done to food, to [the] flesh” of Dulcie. After the night visits, Dulcie sees “macerated flesh...marinated in pain” separate from herself (180). The perpetrators are depicted as “night visitors,” who are “friends and foe,” strongly suggesting at David’s re-inscription of personal love for Dulcie into the military code would be a torturous experience for her, let alone his own complicity in the actual torture. Situating the torture scene in post-Apartheid South Africa (178-79), the narrator also maximizes the ambiguity and absurdity inherent in David’s drawing and, by way of him, in the New South Africa.

She does not know why or how, but notes nevertheless: that this pretence of a relationship coincides with the visits by night; that the coincidence carries a meaning that she has not fathomed; that one is a recursion, a variant of the other: the silence, the torture, the ambiguity; and that in such recursions—for if on the edge of a new era, freedom should announce itself as a variant of the old—lies the thought of madness madness madness (184).

As the narrator writes, Dulcie’s fight for freedom is fulfilled with a terrible vengeance. And perhaps this is the moment where the feminist narrator’s radical suspicion of truth overlaps Wicomb’s profound critique of social discourse. However, the narrator’s version also shows some positional limits. In these fragments about Dulcie’s torture, she brutalizes the scene by describing the “night visits” as unfathomable “pure terror”: “On the first visit, one of them, the wiry one who seems in charge, spoke: Not rape, that will teach her nothing, leave nothing; rape’s too good for her kind, waving the electrodes as another took off her nightclothes” (178). The effect of this excess of violence is to essentially depict David as a victimizer. And the narrator is right: David is a victimizer. But the point is that if David’s drawing is an expression of his suffering, the narrator’s version is indifferent to David’s suffering. Further, as opposed to the brutalization, the narrator mythologizes Dulcie—a woman of “supernatural powers” with
her “legendary strength, her agility, her incredible marksmanship, her invincibility” (180).
The narrator’s own writing, in other words, binarizes the powerful ambiguity that she constructs. For while the power of these fragments comes from the metonymic or fragmentary representation of Dulcie’s body and the questions they pose, her ‘explanation’ through a unified image either of Dulcie or of “visitors” dilutes the intense questioning.

The positional difference between the narrator and David is re-affirmed when the narrator proposes adapting “passive voice” “or, better still, middle voice” to represent Dulcie. Interestingly, David burst into anger at this proposal: “I know at least what the passive voice is … I have certainly underestimated the extent to which your head is filled with middle-class, liberal bullshit” (197). David’s association of middle voice with middle-class is almost funny. And the narrator attributes David’s anger to his ignorance of French letters. As Meg Samuelson explains, the narrator’s intention is to negotiate Dulcie’s passive as well as active voices—that is, “Dulcie confounds categories: she is active subject—a powerful MK commander—who is subject to violence inflicted on her passive form” (840). But for David, Dulcie is not captured by “middle voice” or its suggested “ambiguity” because what Dulcie embodies is her undeniable presence in his everyday life—“before my very eyes, the screen full-bleed with Dulcie” (201). In other words, what matters for David is not Dulcie’s ambiguity but the dazzlingly clear materiality of her tortured body, as the scream is also inscribed in his tinnitus.

The fragments about Dulcie and other fragments in David’s Story are unreliable. All of them are invariably marked by David’s and the narrator’s relative subject positions. This formal characteristic, however, does not make the novel simply another example of
postmodern relativism. For all the fragments are to be recaptured as a constant endeavor to represent historical reality; and this is done through Wicomb’s insurmountable characterization of the two characters. By weaving their constant attempts and failures, Wicomb not only makes the two complicated characters alive, but also guides them toward representing the unrepresentable Dulcie. If Dulcie is unrepresentable, it is precisely because our established discourses fundamentally lack the language to represent her suffering and the historical meaning of the suffering. This impossible representation, however, is made possible through the realist form where the ambiguity, representational impasses, and inexpressible suffering are represented through fragments. And in this sense, Dulcie’s unrepresentability cannot be reduced or essentialized into a representational aporia per se. For the kind of unrepresentibility in question also not some abstract or conceptual one but historical and concrete one—one that arises from South Africa’s historical present. This concrete unrepresentability is what gives her tortured body an undeniable materiality. This materiality is cannot be denied by David; it cannot be simply aestheticized or textualized by the narrator. Only by going through the limited positions of the characters and by gathering the scattered and fragmented bits of truth, the reader finds herself in the process of moving beyond the “subjective” truths and toward a social totality.

If the various historiographies forwarded by David and the narrator are exposed to the postmodern risk of becoming merely another “fictional” discourse or “individual” fragment among various contending post-Apartheid and post-modern discourses, the materiality of Dulcie’s body is that in which their historiographies are anchored. David’s and the narrator’s stories have their local validity conferred from their respective vantage
points and thus have their own explanatory power for either the wartime experience of South African modernity or women’s collective suffering and silence; but the truth of their respective stories reveals itself when their parallel discourses crisscross on Dulcie’s body. Upon Dulcie’s silenced body, David’s attempt to write a masculine genealogy is read as a sad gesture of a wartime victim who desperately tries to find the meaning of his life; the narrator’s attempt to write women’s history is read as her conscientious effort to understand David’s and Dulcie’s suffering. If “green eyes” and “steatopigya” are their metonymic code-words for their search for meaning, the entire novel aspires towards South Africa’s historical totality by connecting their fragmentary and fragmented narratives through the materiality of Dulcie’s body. The kind of totality in question here is, of course, not a closed one. Rather, the totality in question here is one that is marked by its fragmentariness.

The unrepresentability of Dulcie is historical through and through and, thus, is not that which remains unrepresentable in itself. Her unrepresentability testifies to the failure of the established discourses and re-enacts/renews historical representation beyond a reified representation. In this sense, Dulcie’s unrepresentability refuses any partial or local approaches, instead emphasizing their own locality; and thus facilitates the shift from multiple monologic histories to historical totality with multi-layered narratives, or the shift from difference to dialectics. In this dialectical movement, David’s story is a story of David’s silence and suffering as well as a story of the silence and suffering of Dulcie and many others who live in the age where too many representations of history fails to represent the suffering of people. This is what David’s Story is meant to be: ‘This is and is not David’s story’ (1).
neocolonial subordination. of enlightenment, progress and reason corresponds respectively on the bourgeoisie's peculiar distinction of the material and the spiritual domains. David was/is committed to. according their interest. In other words, the passage emblematically shows the end of modern politics that from a common goal of liberation (with different means) to different political agendas each group develops. of the very definition of "the political" in the practical political arena because it not only highlights the political tumultuousness of that time but also implies the transformation dominating political mood of the Coloured Identity in Zoe Wicomb's betrayal of the possibilities for real transformation, real reconciliation, and real national uni. against those on the outside. somewhat candy and implementation. As a result, true reconciliation has been foregone in place of a simplified and one of the most helpful guides. Defining David's Story as a “quintessentially South African novel” (218), Driver provides insightful in-depth analysis as well as region-specific information to guide international readers. She also points out the novel’s narrative form: “the novel uses a first-person frame narrator to foreground acts of representation and mediation, and adds other angles of narration (David’s, Dulcie’s, and a neutral voice) to unsettle any authoritative access to truth” (217). However, while David’s voice is clearly heard in the novel, it has to be assumed that all the fragments about Dulcie as well as the neutral-sounding voice (such as description of Sally’s life) are written by the narrator. The fact that the “preface” is written by the narrator is crucial in reading the entire narrative because it is directly involved in the question of how to read the narrator’s authority on the part of the reader. While she is the narrator throughout the entire narrative and thus necessarily has the authority, her account has to be critically read because her account is fundamentally characterized by her unreliability. If the novel “unsettle[s] any authoritative access to truth” as Driver argues, it is because the partiality of the narrator’s voice itself is inscribed in the novel form.

The more direct reason for David’s sense of crisis comes, as the reader learns later in the novel, from the changed status of ANC and its military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe. As the novel unfolds, it is revealed that David is deeply involved in the ANC’s secret project of “how to maintain an army while officially dismantling it [Umkhonto we Sizwe]” (108). While this clandestine task gives him a sense of chaos that motivates his genealogical project, he “mutters about personal and professional lives running along quite separately” (79). Still, he also points out the displaced nature of the clandestine task in the New South Africa: “Such lives that have always, necessarily, been wrapped in secrecy can’t be unwrapped at this stage” (79).

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who headed “the Truth and Reconciliation Committee,” presented the idea of “rainbow nation” to project the new democratic order of post-apartheid South Africa. As the term “rainbow nation” clearly demarcates, the core idea is the construction of a renewed national identity based upon the peaceful co-presence of the nation’s different ethnicities. While the idea was forwarded and welcomed as a post-apartheid national building project, it also invited much critique. For example, Jeremy Cronin argues in his TRC report “identity formation as well as the myth of the ‘rainbow nation’ and its performative intention have served to discursively create a national identity that has been top-down in its constitution and implementation. As a result, true reconciliation has been foregone in place of a simplified and somewhat candy-coated myth of peace that has served to reconcile those on the inside whilst pitting them against those on the outside. Allowing ourselves to sink into a smug rainbowism will prove to be a terrible betrayal of the possibilities for real transformation, real reconciliation, and real national unity that are still at play in our contemporary South African reality (20)”

See Fiona McCann, “‘The Truth lies in Black and White.’ The Language of Truth and the Search for Coloured Identity in Zoe Wicomb’s David’s Story.” Many other critics also indicate the instability and uncertainty as the crucial mark of this transitional period, which is imported to the novel to designate the dominating political mood of the David’s Story’s narrative space.

This passage seems crucial to the understanding of the psychological crisis that David goes through because it not only highlights the political tumultuousness of that time but also implies the transformation of the very definition of “the political” in the practical political arena—the transformation of the political from a common goal of liberation (with different means) to different political agendas each group develops according their interest. In other words, the passage emblematically shows the end of modern politics that David was/is committed to.

This statement is not meant to romanticize the anti-colonial struggle largely led by national bourgeoisie. The totalitarian/unifying discourse of national bourgeoisie during the colonial and post-colonial struggle is a well-known fact. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. “Who Claims Alterity?” Partha Chaterjee also provides insightful critique of the ideology of Indian national bourgeoisie. The ideological operation pivots on the bourgeoisie’s peculiar distinction of the material and the spiritual domains, each of which corresponds respectively to the superiority of the West and the cultural identity of the nation. These are in turn connected with respectively male/public and female/private domains. By following the colonial legacy of enlightenment, progress and reason of the West, the national bourgeoisie readily embraces the neocolonial subordination. (The Nation and its Fragments 263) The subaltern group’s major contribution to

1 Dorothy Driver’s extensive afterword (2000, the publication year of David’s Story is 2001) still remains 2 The more direct reason for David’s sense of crisis comes, as the reader learns later in the novel, from the 3 Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who headed “the Truth and Reconciliation Committee,” presented the idea of 4 See Fiona McCann, “‘The Truth lies in Black and White.’ The Language of Truth and the Search for 5 This passage seems crucial to the understanding of the psychological crisis that David goes through 6 This statement is not meant to romanticize the anti-colonial struggle largely led by national bourgeoisie.
postcolonial studies was to raise issues related to the marginalized groups under the colonial and postcolonial struggles that are largely led by the hegemonic leadership of nationalist bourgeoisie.

7 Of course, the position taken by TRC is that of individual human rights with the prospect to lead to the formation of national equality and democracy. According to the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995, the Commission aims at delivering a new national culture “on the recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence for all South Africans” by reforming “a deeply divided society characterized by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice.” However, though the TRC’s aim is to form a national bond through a healing process of officially acknowledging the wartime victims of the Apartheid regime, the TRC is not effective, as Fiona C. Ross convincingly explains, in dealing with the wartime brutality perpetrated by the ANC (African National Congress) and especially the women victims of sexual violence. She indicates that most women at the hearings testified to their male relatives’ suffering while keeping silent or gave indirect testimonies about their own experience. See Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, No. 34 of 1995 (July 26, 1995), available at http://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/acts/1995-034.pdf and Fiona Ross, Bearing Witness: Women and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa (especially chapter 1. “Making the Subject” 8-26).

From a slightly different perspective, Mahmood Mamdani also critiques the premise on which the TRC stands. Mamdani points out that “it [the TRC] was so preoccupied with a highly individualized notion of truth and responsibility that it failed both to focus on Apartheid as a form of power and to underline the victimhood of the vast majority of South Africans” (182).

8 Sally’s retort to David also implies the affinity between the liberal language with its individual underpinnings the ANC publically adapts for the nation building project and the neoliberalism that has been rapidly growing in the country. According to John Saul, “South Africa’s dramatic transition to a democratic dispensation … has been twined with a simultaneous transition towards an ever more sweeping neoliberal socioeconomic dispensation that has negotiated in practice a great deal of the country’s democratic advance” (4). Agreeing with Saul, Andreasson also points out the neoliberalization was the ANC’s politico-economic choice. “The 1990s saw the abandonment of the ANC’s ostensibly socialist stance and its gradual embrace of neoliberal free market principles. … Acting on neo-liberal preferences regardless of an at least rhetorical commitment by the ANC to lead on major socio-economic transformation meant that plans for redistribution and structural transformation of society had to be deferred, thereby preserving a most unequal status quo for at least the medium term” (161-163).

Many scholars have also indicated the affinity between liberalism and racism. For example, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva indicates the U.S. racist structure is rhetorically and philosophically supported by liberalist concept and language: “by framing race-related issues in the language of liberalism, whites can appear ‘reasonable’ and even ‘moral,’ while opposing almost all practical approaches to deal with de facto racial inequality” (28).

9 The origin of Griqua is traced back to one of South Africa’s earliest indigenous ethnic group, Kohoisan people, which consists of the Khoi and the San respectively known as Hottentots and Bushmen. With the advent of Dutch and British colonists in the late 18th and early 19th century, they moved from the Cape of Good Hope to the current location of Griqua land (which ranges from Kokstad, Beeswater, Touwsrivier, Krantzhoek, to Kliprand, all of which appear in the novel). Though the population is marked by the influx of former slaves, whites, and people of mixed racial origins, they declared themselves as “a Griqua people,” demanding their independence from the colonial government in late 19th century. While David’s Story utilizes this historical fact along with many historical figures such as the European settler, Adam Kok I and his offspring, and their political heir Le Fleur (who led the Griqua independence movement), this factual history only briefly mentions women such as Lady Kok and Rachel Susanna Kok. This scant information on women’s roles in history gives the narrator the relative liberty to create stories about those women. (Driver 219-29)

10 See Aryn Bartley, “The Violence of the Present: David’s Story and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.” Indicating that the TRC’s hearing was a major historical event in post-apartheid South Africa, Bartley argues, in spite of the TRC’s historical achievement, it exposed many problems in its “theoretical and philosophical grounds” (118). Wincomb’s narrative, he argues, “is not only framed by the
TRC, but is a direct engagement with its assumptions about narrativity, national healing, and the safety or dangers of storytelling” (108).

11 See Kerry Bystrom, “The DNA of the Democratic South Africa: Ancestral Maps, Family Tress, Genealogical Fictions.” Bystrom reads Wicomb’s novel as a “sharp critique of the narratives of both ‘melanisation’ and ‘Coloured’ nationalism (230),” emphasizing the growing tension between the ANC’s black majority politics and the Coloured.

Wicomb also mentioned this tension as an important political issue in post-Apartheid South Africa in her article “Shame and Identity: the Case of the Coloured in South Africa” in Writing South Africa (91-107). Commenting on the “shameful” vote in the Cape for the National Party, she asserts the necessity of dealing with “the question of regionalism and ethnicity, the way in which coloured activists considered themselves to be marginalized since the dismantling of the UDM [United Democratic Movement]. [The ANC’s] party line, ‘the main content of our national liberation struggles is the liberation of the African majority. The African majority is the most reliable source for the completion of the tasks of national liberation’, thus fails to take into account the reality of regionalism, that the majority in the Cape are in fact coloured” (99).

12 In her “‘Amanuensis’ and ‘Steatopygia’: The Complexity of ‘Telling the Tale’ in Zoe Wicomb’s David’s Story” Minesh Dass focuses on the meaning and strategy of the narrator’s writing-back through the two important motifs—amanuensis and steatopygia—in the novel. In Dass’ reading, the narrator’s position embodies the author’s view. However, part of this chapter’s argument is that the author’s position and the narrator’s position are not interchangeable. While the unreliability of the narrator is, as Dass implies, the other side of her liberty to produce a counter-genealogy, the question of unreliability still remains. And Wicomb’s characterization of the narrator as unreliable has to be explained in terms of narrative form.

13 Dorothy Driver suggests that David possibly participated in the torture and rape of Dulcie. Referring to the following passage, she strongly implies David’s complicity in the brutal act (Afterword 205).

“Once, only once, did David come close enough to place his hands on her shoulders. His fingertips pressed precisely into the wounds under her shirt, plunged intimately into her flesh, caressed every cavity, every organ, her lungs, liver, kidneys, her broken heart, with a lick of fire. She would not have been surprised to see those hands withdraw dripping with blood” (199).

Along with this passage, David’s drawing of Dulcie as “dismembered shapes of a body” strongly suggests his participation in the torture (205). While it is also possible that David didn’t torture and rape Dulcie, at least it cannot be denied that he feels guilty of and complicity in Dulcie’s tragedy.

14 Shane Graham reads David’s Story as a revealing process of trauma whose status of “erased presence” requires the palimpsest representational strategy. In a similar way, Kenneth Harrow reads Dulcie as a mark that the ideological attempt to obliterate her presence leaves. See Shane Grapham, “‘This Text Deletes Itself’: Traumatic Memory and Space-Time in Wicomb’s David’s Story”; Kenneth Harrow, “The Marks Left on the Surface: Zoë Wicomb’s David’s Story.”

15 Gagiano comments on David’s Story in the same vein, pointing out Wicomb's “simultaneous rejection of essentialising narratives that claim a separate Coloured or Griqua identity, and her dissatisfaction, in ‘new’ South African national narratives, with the erasure, or the failure to recognise, the presence and the contribution of Coloured South Africans to this society” (817). Thus the novel “counter[s] essentialist or condescending notions of a distinct Coloured, Griqua, South African black or unproblematically inclusive South African nationalism or identity” (818).

16 The term Balkanization is popularized by Stjepan Mestrovic. As he explains in his book The Balkanization of the West: The Confluence of Postmodernism and Postcommunism, the term has a strong geopolitical connotation where extreme or essentialized identities lead to the fragmentation of the region. While Mestrovic’s model is Balkan Peninsula, he also explains it in a global context where global ascendency of multiculturalism (which he often equates with postmodernism) unwittingly supports the deterioration of national culture and of culture in general, which ironically turns multicultural tolerance into intolerance in the face of inadmissible difference (1-27).

17 Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth.
A feminist reading of *David's Story* is rightly common. For example, focusing on Dulcie, Christa Baiada in her “On Women, Bodies, and Nation: Feminist Critique and Revision in Zoe Wicomb’s *David’s Story*” argues that Dulcie’s body with its traces of torture represents the female subjectivity destroyed in the name of liberation. Ultimately Dulcie’s story recasts the relationship between nation and women, suggesting a possibility for future politics. Also, Minesh Dass focuses on the way in which the pathological perversion of white people inherent to the language of steatopygia renders the female body a silent and exotic flesh, thus defining women as amanuenses. She argues that the author/narrator’s resistance lies in deconstructing the imposed colonial gaze and its narrative surrounding steatopygia. Meg Samuelson also contributes to the scholarship of feminist reading of the novel. In “The Disfigured Body of the Female Guerrilla: (De)Militarization, Sexual Violence, and Redomestification in Zoe Wicomb’s *David’s Story*,” by examining the way in which the war zone produces the bifurcated notions of woman warrior and nurturing woman, she convincingly argues the disfigured body in David’s Story “delegitimizes female militancy and, by extension, given the foundational national myth of the heroic antiapartheid guerrilla, deauthorizes female citizenship in the liberated state” (853).

In “Zoe Wicomb in Conversation with Hein Willemse,” Wicomb says the narrator’s main function is “that she ironizes David’s obsessions.” In other words, the narrator has to be understood in the way in which she responds, reacts, and cooperates with David. While it does seem that the narrator and Wicomb share a feminist stance, Wicomb also, in another context, strongly responds to the assumption that “black women are supposed to write autobiography—whether they write in the third person or not, they’re always received as if it’s autobiographical, almost as if we’re incapable of artifice, incapable of fictionalizing” (93). Further, she argues that while the tradition of truth-telling and of narratives of authentic experience has the benefit of “being freed at times,” it also leads to the decimation of artifice, which is “far more the case with women’s writing.” Eventually, the reification of this tradition constructs a stereotypical image that “women … have something to complain about, they’re going to tell us about their authentic grievance, and that’s where its value lies” (94). See “Wicomb interview with Eva Hunter” in *Between the Lines II* (79-96).

Richard Ellmann, in his biography of James Joyce, explains this event of “come in” based on his 1954 interview with Samuel Beckett who served as Joyce’s amanuensis. “Once or twice he dictated a bit of *Finnegan’s Wake* to Beckett, though dictation did not work very well for him; in the middle of one such session there was a knock at the door which Beckett couldn’t hear. Joyce said, ‘Come in,’ and Beckett wrote it down. Afterwards he read back what he had written and Joyce said, ‘What’s that ‘Come in’? ’ ‘Yes, you said that,’ said Beckett. Joyce thought for a moment, then said, ‘Let it stand’. He was quite willing to accept coincidence as his collaborator. Beckett was fascinated and thwarted by Joyce’s singular method.” (649)

In “Zoe Wicomb’s Home Truths,” Derek Attridge indicates *David’s Story* “derives most of the technical resources it exploits from modernist tradition as it powerfully ‘conveys new uncertainies we associate with early 20th century innovations of modernism and their long heritage’” (160). Here he is referring to James Joyce. He also acknowledges Wicomb’s novel will be labeled postmodern as the novel is “not simply a modernist cliche implying the fallibility of all communication and the slipperiness of all language, however; it is a direct product of the ambiguities and conflicts of the historical time and place” (161). This implies that Attridge’s reluctance to use postmodernism as a generic descriptor for *David’s Story* comes from postmodernist’s typical and simplistic denial or dismissal of “historical time and place”. For his understanding of modernism, see Derek Attridge, *Joyce Effects: On Language, Theory, and History*, especially Chapter 1 “Deconstructive Criticism of Joyce” (22-29) and Chapter 4 “The Postmodernity of Joyce: Chance, Coincidence, and the Reader” (117-125).

While South Africa’s literary history testifies to the prevalence of realism in prose fiction with its emphasis on social responsibility especially in the 70s and 80s, there is an ongoing debate about the postcoloniality/postmodernity of especially post-apartheid literary production. For example, Lweis Nkosi insists “that in South Africa there exists an unhealed . . . split between black and white writing, between on the one side an urgent need to document and bear witness and on the other side the capacity to go on furlough, to loiter, and to experiment” (“Postmodernism and Black Writing in South Africa” 75). This
statement invited many responses including J.M. Coetzee, David Atwell, Nadine Gordimer, David Green, Louise Bethlehem, to name a few. Bethlehem indicated that the TRC’s official adaptation of what she calls “the rhetoric of urgency” (the realist tradition in South Africa, which she criticizes as trapped in mimetic premise) makes it a social spectacle and ultimately makes the “trope of truth” a version of reconciliation discourse. For further reading, see Bethlehem, Louise (2006) Skin Tight. Apartheid Literary Culture and its Aftermath; J.M. Coetzee “Literature and Crisis: One Hundred Years of Afrikaans Literature and Afrikaner Nationalism”; Nadine Gordimer, “The Idea of Gardening”; David Atwell, J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing; Emily Davis, “New Directions in Post-Apartheid South African Fiction and Scholarship.”

24 For more information on Quatro Camp, Todd Cleveland, “Will Still Want the Truth: The ANC’s Angloan Detention Camps and Postapartheid Memory.”

25 Both Meg Samuelson and Graham critically appropriate LaCapra’s theorization of the middle voice. LaCapra suggests the middle voice as a possibly effective linguistic mode of representation of trauma: The middle voice would thus be the ‘in between’ voice of undecidability and the unavailability or radical ambivalence of clear-cut positions” (20). He argues that the middle voice seen in stylistic iterations like free indirect discourse has a potential to approach “one’s most tangled and difficult relations of proximity and distance with regard to the other” (29). But he does warn that it can obliterate the distinction between the victim and the victimizer as well. See Dominick LaCapra, Writing History, Writing Trauma; Shane Graham “‘This Text Deletes Itself’: Traumatic Memory and Space-Time in Wicomb’s David’s Story.”
1. Political Art?

In an interview with a film critic, Kim Young-Jin, right before the wide-market release of the film Secret Sunshine (Korean title: Mil-yang, 2007), Director Lee Chang-Dong raises an interesting political and aesthetic question by revealing his ambition to produce a film “just ordinary and normal. There is nothing more to it” (Lee Chang-dong 4). He says that he wanted to fill the move with “just plain looking shots,” adding: “I went for normality in this film. And I think the nature of film should be normal. I regret I couldn’t find a way to make things even simpler” (4-5). While the issue of “normality” itself begs questions regarding the political perspective that chooses a site for the representation of normality, the implied refusal of the spectacle also poses interesting political and aesthetic issues. For a movie without spectacle is hardly likely to succeed in today’s film market where spectacle is an undeniable virtue. However, given that Lee’s previous career as a novelist is, Oh Saeng-keun writes, marked by his “investigation of the life and truth of ordinary people who stand either in proximity to, or in the margin of, those [important Korean socio-political] events in the 80s” “rather than representing [people directly involved in] those events and situations” (273, my translation), his interest in “ordinary and normal” is not surprising. In fact, his short story collection, There’s a Lot of Shit in Nok-cheon (1992), prefigures the thematic concern with ordinariness which would consistently appear in his later movies in 90s and 2000s; the collection shows “his tenacious pursuit of and profound insight in the complicated interlacing of people’s life and social contradiction” “without depending on schematic
and typified storylines, which is often the case with works motivated by serious political events” (Oh Saneng-keun 273, my translation). In his later movies (Green Fish [Cho-log-mul-go-gi] 1996, Peppermint Candy [Bak-ha-sa-tang] 1999, Oasis [Oasiseu] 2002), though Lee often borrows melodrama motifs, he maintains his principle of ordinariness, on strict guard against conventional emotional spectacles. Discussing his movie Oasis, Lee said “Tears are physiological. Tears might mean that a film was moving, but once the viewer leaves the theatre, those tears no longer mean anything” (Lee Chang-dong 9). In this sense, his emphasis on “normality” implies a profound defamiliarization of the spectacular commodity’s prevalent and vulgar logic of defamiliarization which usually appears in forms of exoticism and escapism that are devoid of, or masquerading as, critical consciousness.  

Of course, Lee’s project of representing normality does not simply mean representing ordinary life as it is, not only because this task is in itself impossible, but because any “normality” in film cannot be reached without an appropriate cinematic technique and the director’s firm direction and grasp in the process of film making. In fact, his film self-consciously utilizes two mutually opposing forms of melodrama and realism to allegorically represent the conflicted “normality” of the present Korean society. While a necessary amount of melodramatic tension is maintained throughout the film, neither excessive affective investment nor emotional spectacle is offered to the audience. In its stead, the operations of the realist form constantly break the boundary between melodramatic reality and outside reality. Amateur actors cast for their real life jobs are carefully coordinated to perform their dramatic reality and professional actors are
directed toward “ordinary” performance. As a result, *Secret Sunshine* demands that its audience experience the unsettled and comparative spectatorship for normal life in Korea.

By all means, there is no rule that an exceptional, and in a movie context, a spectacular, situation cannot be a norm. There are many artworks that mobilize exceptional situations to indicate the very exceptionality is the flipside of the normal. What is important is that the emphasis is not on the exceptionality itself but on the normalcy of the exceptional. *Secret Sunshine* also has two extraordinary events/moments—the abduction and murder of the main character, Shin-Ae’s son and the perpetrator’s later confession that he had been forgiven by God prior to, and regardless of, Shin-Ae’s intent of forgiving him. These events, as this chapter will argue, are narrative devices to carve out the “normality” of contemporary South Korea; in terms of technique and form, the scenes of these exceptional events are designed to convey nothing spectacular within the cinematic space. In its stead, the camera follows Shin-Ae’s everyday life and records her endurance of the life after the loss of the chance to forgive. This world where the possibility of forgiveness is replaced by endurance, Lee explains, is the “just ordinary and normal” picture of the present South Korea: “I think Shin-Ae is an ordinary woman. What I mean by ordinary woman is—she has to watch the possibility to realize and achieve her desire half-defeated, and thus inscribe in her body the repeated betrayals and wounds coming from the simple fact that she lives in Korea” (“Interview with Huh Moon-yeong”).

If *Secret Sunshine*’s political ambition is to represent the normality in the South Korean present by problematizing forgiveness, Artur Żmijewski’s work, for example, seems to be obliquely opposed to Lee’s project while both of them can be categorized as
political art. Certainly, there are a series of affinities between the works of these two authors. Both of them use documentary form to politicize their content so that the spectators are provided with a “second” chance to look at what a commercial view cannot make visible. And both of them utilize the narrative (or semi-narrative in case of Żmijewski) form to demarcate respectively the cinematic space and the space of performance recorded by video; this narrative space is in turn complicated by their frequent employment of non-professional actors whose almost professional performance ruptures the narrative space by bringing in everyday life. However, if Lee’s project aims, as the word “normality” implies, at a construction of a cinematic reality that is not subject to merely subjective and partial judgment, Żmijewski’s project is characterized by its refusal of any subjective and emotional identification.

If there is a word that can describe Żmijewski’s entire career, it would be provocativeness. His 1988 video work An Eye for an Eye turns its focus to people with physical disabilities in order to show an oddly utopian vision in which a male couple display a harmonious and mechanical bodily movement, whistling a happy tune while sometimes directly contacting the spectator’s eyes. In 2001, another video work The Singing Lesson 1 (which has its sequel The Singing Lesson 2 made in 2014) shows a group of deaf and near-deaf students singing the Kyrie in a Warsaw church. While the physical otherness of human beings is central to this work, his other works are also fueled by otherness. His 1999 video work Berek (The Game of Tag), as with his other video works such as 80064 (2004) and Them (2007), examine highly polemical and political sites charged with immense historical memory. In it, the spectators watch a group of naked people playing a game of tag throughout the running time until the very end when
a caption informs: “The film was shot in two different locations: in the basement of a private home and in a gas chamber of one of the former concentration camps.” As Anthony Downey argues, Żmijewski’s artwork raises a number of issues including “the thorny subject of ethics in so called interventionist or collaborative art and the provocations of memory and its potentiality in the catharsis of commemoration” (117). Żmijewski’s political aesthetics invoke the memory of bare life in history so that the utter otherness that stands outside the law is mourned and commemorated. However, the essence of the politico-aesthetic power of Żmijewski’s work lies less in its historical content itself than in the provocative form of documentary restaging and re-enactment of the content. For example, the nudity that penetrates Żmijewski’s Berek has two separate functions that together form a circular logic in its representational aesthetics. The first function of nudity is, of course, the invocation of the bare life of Auschwitz. In it, the historical terror and the unbearable vulnerability of human life are registered through the sheer physicality. The fragile physical body and its movement are the medium through which the critique of the historical brutality is performed. The second and more complicated function of nudity is that of innocence mixed with over-performance/theatricality. Here performers are absorbed in their childlike and simplistic game in the small Nazi gas chamber where the presence of the camera (thus the presence of the spectator) is imposing itself. Thus the symbolic freedom of nudity in which they are so immersed is a paradoxically staged one just as the innocence of their play is an enacted one. What this means is that the second function of nudity is itself marked by the paradoxical fact that the utopian element (for example, freedom) arises in spite of, and because of, the unfreedom that the presence of the camera imposes. In the same vein, the
documentary-style camera movement also gives the strong impression of “documenting” an act of “restrained” freedom. Further, the nudity is a non-pornographic one—in the strong sense of “non”—that is, the nudity is not pornographic insofar as it enacts pornography and then re-enacts the deletion of pornography to the spectator. The innocence, in other words, is foregrounded by the absence of pornography. In short, the innocence of bodily movement emerges precisely through the game of invocation followed by revocation, invitation immediately overridden by obliteration. The crucial point is that the two functions of the nudity take place at the same time. Thus, the nudity is a re-doubled nudity where the historical horror is re-enacted into an act of its restrained other (freedom) and the vulnerability of the body is restaged into childlike innocence. This paradoxical co-presence of brutality and innocence, claustrophobic terror and claustrophilic pleasure, deathly silence and cacophonic performance, and the burden of representation and excessive representation, dictates the rhythm of Berek. As the two circular and paradoxical functions of nudity form the identity of the work, its identity lies in the zone of indistinction in its overtly utopian, thus non-Agambenian, sense of the term. Here, while Żmijewski’s political artwork may be effective in ridiculing the politically correct and clichéd commemoration of the Holocaust, the shocking effect comes less from the historical re-enactment of the meaning of the Holocaust in our present, than from the sadomasochistic re-enactment of the Holocaust. Because the indistinguishability between downtrodden victims and happy performers makes the psychological paradox manifest and because the identity of the historical Other and its psychological other renders the artwork as an embodiment of “otherness,” what the spectators watch is a psychological otherness in which the naked people’s gaze at the
camera/spectator interrogates and ridicules any pre-conceived knowledge about the historical event. The problem is that the circulation between the two nudities is enabled by a kind of contingency—that is, if the brutality of Holocaust can be represented through nudity and thus this choice has a plausible historical ground, the link between this historical nudity and the second and provocative nudity is arbitrary. In other words, though the two functions of nudity completely overlap with each other in the “formal” representation of the author’s political aesthetics, the two nudities are two different kinds. The representation of the historical brutality doesn’t necessarily have to be in the form of other-ized utopian nudity. The connecting formal logic of otherness ultimately governs the entire artwork. And this overarching otherness is the author’s aesthetic and political judgment. The fact that the representation of the historical brutality through the nudity is determined by the author’s choice is precisely why Żmijewski’s political artwork loses much of its political power and becomes liable to spectators’ “taste.”

Both Lee’s and Żmijewski’s artworks raise a serious question: what is political art? This question is definitely a vexing one in the contemporary era. For the commonsensical answer would be either too much or too little depending on how one defines and understands “political.” For someone like Żmijewski, who was the main curator of 2012 Berlin Biennale for contemporary art, titled Forget Fear, the current art world is marked by “zero politics” (“Forget Fear: a Forward by Żmijewski”). It lingers in the state of “[postmodern] autonomy” where art “serves no purpose” and “is protected by an immunity” [of aesthetic freedom] because most artworks are transformed into “speculation” and “reflection” rather than directly acting/working on and “performatively creating” reality. His contention that current art practice has become “the décor for a
neoliberal system” as it attempts “to aestheticize human problems … by turning them into a formal spectacle,” of course, aims to define political art. As the ongoing dissociation of art and life is central to his conceptualization of contemporary art, art objects and installations that are severed from human contexts particularly demonstrate their “aversion to direct politics” for him while contextual or ethnographic artworks that directly touch on ethical and political problems and problematics are privileged. In distinction, “all art is political” is another contemporary formulation of political art, which, conceptualizes the political nature of art in a different sense than Zmijewski’s. This phrase is perhaps a more common expression that explains the plurality of the postmodern art world. The idea is not that every artwork raises a political voice but that every seeing is a way of seeing⁷ and thus there is no politically neutral voice. Consequently, every artwork is politically charged whether it is badly ideological or not. While this logic of “all art is political” initially looks sustainable, the problem lies not in its negative distancing from badly ideological forces such as the oppressive patriarchy or the totalizing attempt to evaluate variously different artworks under a unifying and unified criterion, but in its positive and positivistic endorsement of each and every artwork’s singular aesthetics/politics.

These two responses to the idea of political art are disparate not merely in their diagnosis of the current status of “political art” but also in their respective approaches to the notion of “political.” In fact, this vacillation between too much political and too little political where nothing bridges the gap except for the perspectival and notional difference dramatizes the current state of “political art” in our society. In other words, the “all or nothing” attitudes themselves are the symptom of the post-modern response to the
formidable advancement of economics whose efficacy corresponds with the waning of what is traditionally designated as politics. In themselves, both of these attitudes are apocalyptic precisely because their logic is based either on the idea that current art production is thoroughly de-politicized—a death sentence that essentially denies and erases any political trace and possibility in favor of what Zmijewski calls artists’ “individual politics of survival” in the institutional complex of art-market/valorizing discourse/fundraising—or on the self-insulated complacency where the political is diluted and universalized to the point at which a genuinely political question is not raised and thus the “democratic” soil for current various political practice is taken for granted as the horizon of any political thought—a death sentence that forecloses the attempt to historicize the condition of possibilities for contemporary art practice.

To describe the same problem differently, the crisis of political art is embedded in the historical development of late capitalism where capital saturates the “semi-autonomy of the cultural sphere” as well as the political area. As the “critical distance” that used to secure a minimal differentiation of the critical subject from its targeted event or phenomenon, is eroded by economic globalization, the political and the cultural collapse with the economic. As a result, “our now postmodern bodies are bereft of spatial coordinates and practically (let alone theoretically) incapable of distanation” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 48-49). Thus the disappearance of the “semi-autonomy” of the cultural and the political by “the massive Being of capital” entails a lamentation over the loss of political art; but at the same time it allows a counteractive realization that “a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life—from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of
the psyche itself—can be said to have become “cultural” in some original and yet untheorized sense” (48). And of course, the problem of the above mentioned all or nothing attitude is that it is an immediate response to this penetration of the globe by the multinational capitalism; the term “political” necessarily involves a sense of mediation—a mediation of community and communal values and normativity in the wake of spectacular territorialization by the economic. Without a prior problematization of “the massive Being of capital” and of the way the cultural and the political are reconfigured in their relation with capital, in other words, any attempt to practice and theorize political art would risk its immediate subsumption by the logic and the movement of capital.

Historically, the contemporary era is a peculiar one in which the “political” is one of the most common words in the society. From the feminist slogan “the personal is political” (meaning what has been traditionally coded as the “private” realm should not be sanctioned in favor of the male-dominated “public” politics”) to now already commonsensical biopolitics, the “political” penetrates every corner of our socio-cultural lives. This phenomenon of the spread of the political over the entire globe is, in fact, a significant achievement of the various social and political movements in the 70s and 80s. The political struggles against the historical problems that ensued from, and attempted to perpetuate, the dominant binary codes were effective in their strategies of deconstruction in the fields of, for example, patriarchal social structure, vicious racial discrimination, colonial and neocolonial domination. The political challenges soon made their way onto other areas than the initially defined “political” arenas such as gender, race, class, and state; terms such as sexuality, environment, ethnicity, minority, animal rights, urbanity, peace, disability, consumerism, etc. exemplify the expansion of the political in the
subsequent era. The proliferation of politics, however, is concomitant with what Stjepan Mestrovic aptly calls “Balkanization of the west” where each identity group’s political agenda became largely confined to their own interest, welfare, and survival just as the once maintained social cohesion loosened on the newly emerged soil of postmodernity. By the 90s, as the Balkanization of the political arena was accentuated, identity politics was firmly established and any approach to the society as a whole was rendered as “totalitarian”. Social consensus about the definition of “the political” disappeared and the void is now filled either with heterogeneous and particularized political claims or with homogenizing mass media saturation. This reification process of social movements renders the political either as extremely broad—an uncritical and fetishized embrace of difference to the point of non-relational, non-communicative, self-valorizing multiplicity—or as extremely narrow—an immediate and radical revolt against the structural subsumption of the political into the economic spectacle to the point of the apocalyptic confession of political incapacity which is expressed in the obsession with provocativeness or shock value.

It is this “either/or” attitude that poses the renewed urgency of political art. The starting point of political art, in other words, lies not in the immediate reaction to the ongoing economization of the world, but in how to renew and reformulate the sense of the political in the face of “the massive Being of capital.” This task requires a historicization of our own social milieu in order to ask what the most urgent and relevant issues in our communal life are. For the political is always determined according to the innermost social concerns that inevitably enclose the life of all the constituents in a historical conjuncture. This approach does not mean a wholesale jettisoning of identity
politics; while the pursuit for a political representation of our society (rather than a sectarian identity) does not deny that local identities “can be a vital motivation in our political lives, one that sustains us in struggle and makes political action possible” (Susan Bickford 119-20), it has to be pointed out that identity politics, as long as it is informed by its positivistic identity components rather than by its non-identity within the whole social body, stays partial and fragmented. The political challenge in our times seems, in other words, to be the attempt to transcend partiality and fragmentation, or put differently, the attempt to demonstrate partiality as partiality.

This problem of partiality in contemporary politics, however, is but another version of the problem that has long haunted the aesthetic realm ever since the economic-political-cultural triangular relationship was set up in modern times. When Adorno, commenting on Sartre’s *What is Literature?*, argues that “the principle of commitment thus slides towards the proclivities of the author, in keeping with the extreme subjectivism of Sartre’s philosophy, which for all its materialist undertones, still echoes German speculative idealism. In his literary theory the work of art becomes an appeal to subjects, because it is itself nothing other than a declaration by a subject of his own choice or failure to choose,” his point is not that Sartre’s literature of engagement is not political (“Commitment” 181). Adorno’s point is that Sartre’s political art is merely political—to the point at which it appeals to subjects who have already identified themselves with the political agenda. Because “thoughts can never be much more than one of the materials for art (182)” and because an artwork is “inherently collective objectivity,” what true political art engages is “not … choice, but … substance” (181).
As for the substance, it could be anything. Whatever the artistic substance is, it is ultimately engaged with the empirical not because the artistic substance is not to be differentiated from the empirical but because “the distance [works of art] maintain from empirical reality is in itself partly mediated by that reality. … There is no material content, no formal category of artistic creation, however mysteriously transmitted and itself unaware of the process, which did not originate in the empirical reality from which it breaks free” (190). Here the distance between the artwork and reality does not arise from the difference in subject matter. Rather, the distance takes place by way of the artistic form that “breaks free” the substance from the mode of experience imposed by the dominant ideology. This defamiliarization (Verfremdung) by way of the form is all the more crucial in the present politico-cultural practice. 12 For as the society of the spectacle sets in, the culture of spectacle utilizes whatever is available—experience, fantasy, tradition, high-art, affect, sounds, sights, suffering, and even political claims—for the workings of capital. And it is against this context of the society of the spectacle that Lee Chang-Dong’s Secret Sunshine has to be read.

2. *Secret Sunshine*’s first moment/movement: (melo-)drama

“There is also this kind of love.” Secret Sunshine’s advertisement introduces the movie as a melodrama.13 This commercial strategy seems to work very well for the movie’s popular success, as melodrama is one of the most familiar genres in the Korean culture.1415 Certainly, Secret Sunshine is not a typical melodrama as it does not follow the conventions of the melodrama genre. If melodrama is defined as its “anti-realistic elements of sensation, exaggeration, excitement, and emotion”16 Secret Sunshine’s realistic frame certainly makes it far from neatly suited to the genre. Still, Secret
Secret Sunshine, especially its narrative movement, incorporates many elements from the melodrama genre. The entire narrative unfolds in the interaction between two main characters—Shin-Ae and Jong-Chan. Further, if we focus on their relationship, the narrative follows the genre convention of drama as the plot can be divided into their mutual encounter, the development of their relationship, conflict, and reconciliation. This romance narrative, or pseudo-romance narrative (since their relationship never develops into a typical love relationship), pivots on Shin-Ae’s tumultuous psychological journey in the face of the abduction and the subsequent death of her son. Shin-Ae’s relationship with Jong-Chan is marked by nuanced changes as the abduction and its tragic consequence affect her life in small town Mil-yang. The movie begins with Shin-Ae’s relocation from Seoul to Mil-yang, her late husband’s hometown, where she tries to adapt to her new surroundings. In the beginning of the movie, Jong-Chan, who runs a small local car repair shop with his friends, is attracted to Shin-Ae but their relationship remains as that of acquaintance. In the second part which spans from the abduction and the death of Shin-Ae’s son to now born-again Shin-Ae’s decision to visit the prison to forgive the perpetrator, Jong-Chan’s one-sided love is brought out to the narrative surface; though Jong-Chan constantly visits and gives help to her in order to win her over—he even becomes a regular church member after she accepts Christianity—she doesn’t open herself to him. The last part of the film is devoted to Shin-Ae’s frustration and breakdown after the perpetrator’s assertion that he had been forgiven by God; in this period, Shin-Ae starts opening her mind and her relationship with Jong-Chan develops into more like an intimate friendship. While this plot summary cannot efficiently capture the complicated details of narrative events, Secret Sunshine’s narrative affinity with the genre of drama—
especially the closure between the two characters at the end of the movie—makes the cinematic space essentially a self-sufficient narrative whose (melo-)dramatic structure asserts its own cinematic reality distinguished from the outside reality.

What is worth noting in discussing the melodramatic elements of the movie is that the plot takes on a typical motif for a thriller movie—abduction. However, unlike the thriller genre, *Secret Sunshine* does not depend on the aesthetics of violence and suspense. Even though abduction is the core event in this movie, the details surrounding the abduction are never described. There is no narrative device and/or cinematographic arrangement that try to maximize the suspense and tension that usually accompany abduction. For example, in the scene where Shin-Ae receives the ransom call, the slow zoom-in camera movement focuses only on her frustration as the perpetrator’s voice is completely muted. In fact, the focus on Shin-Ae in this scene that excludes the otherwise expected feeling of suspense and thrill epitomizes the entire narrative strategy of the movie. Instead of adopting thriller conventions that usually provide the pleasure of “cool” violence in the wake of crime-solving, *Secret Sunshine* is largely focused on its characters’ *story*, sidestepping the abduction event. In the beginning part of the film, Shin-Ae tries very hard to create a certain image of herself in this small town. Though all she has is only about $4,000, she gets help from Jong-Chan’s local acquaintances to feign interest in expensive properties. Pretending to be an elite pianist, she also opens a small after-school piano institution, while the real purpose is to earn a living. Jong-Chan, at one moment, forges a certificate of a piano *concours* award for her; while she calls Jong-Chang a vulgar snob, she displays the certificate on the wall of her institution. Her effort to construct the image of a wealthy and elite person from Seoul, the capital of South
Korea, turns out to be very successful as it motivates another after-school teacher who teaches public speech to Shin-Ae’s son in his private institution to abduct him. The frustration on her face when she gets the ransom call, then, is understood not merely as the effect of the typical ransom call as in a thriller movie, but as a much more complicated motherly expression intermingled with her personal history. This narrative strategy that reconstructs the thriller motif by shifting its focus from the abduction itself to the victim’s personal and interpersonal narrative involves a kind of space-time switchover. If a typical thriller movie (like *Taken* and its sequels 2008, 2012, 2015) depends on space for its aesthetic effects, *Secret Sunshine*’s drama converts the thriller’s impulse into a temporal narrative.

Furthermore, *Secret Sunshine*’s adaptation of the melodrama form also implies its turn away from the grand “political” voices frequently heard in the thriller genre. Nearly all thriller movies utilize political discourses at the background of their plot. Main characters’ heroic fight against state violence, corporate interest, anti-democratic fascist ideology, imperial expansion, etc. has become an essential element for their commercial success. However, the role of the politically correct discourse as a *setting* in a movie only trivializes the political agenda of the movie because it often functions either as a mere justification of the hero’s violence and masculine valor or as a device to reaffirm the restoration of the current order.17 What *Secret Sunshine* does in these terms then, is radically refuse the slippage of any abstract political discourses into cinematic space. For example, Jong-Chan replies to Shin-Ae’s request to introduce Mil-yang by saying “Mil-yang is a HanNaRa Party (then the dominant and right-wing political party in South Korea) town.” But later Jong-Chan repeatedly says “there’s nothing strange/abnormal
about Mil-yang. It’s just like anywhere else” implying the population’s political sentiment does not play a significant role in the everyday life of the town’s people. In fact, there is no conspicuous political agenda in the movie even though Lee explains the motivation for making *Secret Sunshine* comes from a strictly political idea.

It was in 1988 when the Parliamentary hearings into the Fifth Republic were taking place that I read Lee Cheong-Jun’s *An Insect Story* … While I was reading the story I instantly sensed ‘this is a story of Gwang-Ju.’ Though investigations and questions were made about the victims and perpetrators in the hearings, an attempt to make a consensus about the political reconciliation was also launched at the same time. I read *An Insect Story* as a story about Gwang-Ju even if there was no mention that hints at the Gwang-Ju Uprising. It was as if the short story asked this: Who can forgive before the victim forgives? And how genuine a perpetrator’s repentance is, and who is the one that knows whether it is true or not? (Huh Mun-Young, my translation) 18

Despite this political motivation, Lee frames the cinematic space by erasing any overt political traces. While the basic plot line and critical questioning of forgiveness of Lee Cheong-Jun’s short story still remains, Lee creates a new character, Jong-Chan, to incorporate the pseudo-romantic element on the one hand and to imbue the narrative with a strong sense of *ordinariness* on the other. Jong-Chan, in fact, is a character that is deeply ordinary, in that he is merely one of many neighbors of Shin-Ae notable only for his greater proximity to her. Lee’s characterization of him is very subtle; while he is constantly around Shin-Ae and many of the narrative events take place between Shin-Ae and him, he is no better than the other neighbors in terms of comprehending Shin-Ae. In the beginning part of the movie, Jong-Chan and Shin-Ae become close to each other; but Shin-Ae maintains the relationship on the bases of business and self-interest. Shin-Ae uses his local connection to pretend to search for land for investment while Jong-Chan remains a good-intentioned but meddlesome bachelor for her. Later as the narrative becomes more focused on Shin-Ae’s frustration at her son’s abduction and death, Jong-
Chan disappears from the narrative surface. But Jong-Chan soon reappears at the police station scene where the murderer is brought in. While Shin-Ae simply turns away, though, as she later explains, she “wanted to tear him in pieces,” Jong-Chan’s response is that of ordinary person—he yells at the murderer and gestures to attack him. Though Shin-Ae’s psychological complexity comes from the consciousness of her own complicity in the death of her son (more about this later), Jong-Chan, a simple-minded and obtuse person, does not comprehend her pain. His reaction to the murderer is completely ordinary and expectable, and so are his other actions and words.

A pivotal moment in their relationship (but the word pivotal only applies to Jong-Chan as their relationship stays more or less same for Shin-Ae) occurs when Shin-Ae abruptly visits, together with Jong-Chan, a special church prayer meeting for “wounded souls.” In this scene, the camera work remarkably captures the subtle change in their relationship. The scene starts with a long take where Jong-Chan and Shin-Ae hesitantly proceed to enter the prayer room. Then the camera switches its focus into medium close-up of the crowd in the meeting, and especially their facial expressions: serious, immersed, eyes closed, some softly sobbing, others expressing their feelings with gestures, some singing, others praying. Then the camera pans to a medium shot where Shin-Ae’s unstable and skeptical state of mind is curiously juxtaposed with Jong-Chan’s more or less detached and observational attitude. When the camera lens moves to the back of the room to a distant shot, both Shin-Ae and Jong-Chan and the crowd are seen from a back corner and Shin-Ae’s loud cry of suffering and grief is heard on the soundtrack mixed with the preacher’s voice. Finally a medium shot comes back focalizing Shin-Ae’s howling with pain and Jong-Chan’s awkward, watchful, sympathetic, and concerned face.
Here, the scene, consisting of five sequences, shows the entire process of Shin-Ae’s religious conversion (from hesitant to converted) and the subtle change in Jong-Chan’s feelings towards Shin-Ae.

At the same time, the camera movement commends the crucial and critical distance between the spectators and Shin-Ae. First, the changes in focal points between the Shin-Ae and Jong-Chan and the crowd sharply distinguish the couple from the crowd by juxtaposing the couple’s hesitant manner and the religious fervor of the crowd; this distinction also marks the difference between this religious space and the everyday life space that Shin-Ae and Jong-Chan initially belong to (before the conversion). Later, the camera movement deliberately repeats close-up shots of the couple and distant shots of the crowd. These switches between zoom-in and zoom-out effectively prevent the spectators from completely getting absorbed in Shin-Ae’s emotional state, invoking the peculiarity of this religious space; but the switches also produce a kind of identity, through the sequential successiveness, between the shots, implying that the religious sincerity is ultimately shared by Shin-Ae and the crowd. Further, as the two medium close-ups of Shin-Ae and Jong-Chan are mediated by the distant shot where the soundtrack marks the Shin-Ae’s cry, the spectators can “see” the entire process of Shin-Ae’s conversion without necessarily identifying with Shin-Ae’s emotional change. What is remarkable is that Jong-Chan’s awkwardness in this religious setting never fades. Throughout these cuts Shin-Ae never appears alone; Jong-Chan’s presence and his awkward gaze constantly carves out a “second” and “ordinary” perspectival space within the frame for the spectators. As a result, the spectators are required to see (and possibly sympathize with) Shin-Ae’s emotional change and her suffering while their affective
identification is constantly disrupted. This construction of identity between identity and
difference—i.e., the spectators’ distant/critical understanding/sympathizing with Shin-Ae
and Jong-Chan) is the key to the dramatic structure of the narrative. For if the distance is
too wide, then the “melodrama” fails to register in the spectator’s mind and if the distance
collapses, then the melodrama becomes typical rather than normal, and thus exceptional
rather than ordinary. 19

Figure 1. Jong-Chan’s “ordinary” gaze at Shin-Ae’s conversion

After this moment, Jong-Chan is more active while Shin-Ae still dismisses him.

Jong-Chan even goes to church, following Shin-Ae. But Jong-Chan never loses his
characteristic good-intentioned, meddling, bragging, and snobbish attitude. For example,
while Jong-Chan actively joins various church gatherings including “street mission” and
various prayer meetings (in fact, he goes wherever Shin-Ae goes), the manner of his
talking at the church parking lot scene reveals he is not sincere. He uses vulgar language
at a badly parked car and the driver who showed up soon happened to be one of his
acquaintances; then he immediately stopped accusing him and greeted him. The obvious
connotation of this scene is that he is not sincere in his belief in Christianity, since his
language choices are far different from those of the churchgoers in the movie. This scene
also implies, however, that he is very sincere and tenacious at least in his feelings for Shin-Ae.

The characterization of Jong-Chan as a meddling and caring person is crucial in the (melo-) dramatic narrative structure. For because Jong-Chan shares this characteristic with many other small town dwellers, the narrative tension between Shin-Ae and Jong-Chan seamlessly expands into the tension between Shin-Ae and her neighbors, which enables the spectator to see the overall dramatic tension happening not only on the personal level between two individuals but also on the societal level between Shin-Ae and the “ordinary” community of neighbors. Jong-Chan’s frequent, though always temporary, disappearance from the narrative surface is hardly surprising not because his role is a minor one but because his role is essentially assimilable with other local dwellers. For example, upon her arrival in Secret Sunshine, Shin-Ae was solicited by a zealous Christian who runs a small pharmacy with her husband. Mentioning Shin-Ae’s “tragic accident” (i.e. the death of her husband), the woman assumes that Shin-Ae needs healing through Christianity. The pharmacist’s intention is just as good as Jong-Chan’s kindness towards Shin-Ae. The problem is that for Shin-Ae, the pharmacist is simply too aggressive and Shin-Ae is dismissive. This tension between Shin-Ae and the pharmacist is, however, one that is maintained until almost the end of the film. People in this small town where “nothing goes unnoticed (there is no secret in this town),” as a businesswoman of a small clothing store says to Shin-Ae, like to interact with, or meddle in, Shin-Ae’s tragedy. But Shin-Ae is not easily comprehensible because her tragedy is not something that one can understand through a stereotypical image of a widow or of a mother struck by her son’s death. Except for the short period of her active insertion into
Christian community, Shin-Ae is seen “abnormal” by the townspeople. The short encounter with the businesswoman in a hairdresser’s visualizes this antagonistic (for Shin-Ae) and parallel (for Jong-Chan and other neighbors) relationship. As Shin-Ae overhears the woman gossiping about her being “abnormal” and bold enough to suggest a decoration change of the woman’s clothing shop at the very first encounter, the shot “serves the purpose of indicating Shin-Ae’s remove from the community” (Raymond).

![Shin-Ae at the Hairdresser’s](image)

Figure. 2. Shin-Ae at the Hairdresser’s

While Jong-Chan also shares the observational distance and incomprehensibility with the town’s people, what makes him one of the main characters is, besides his one-sided love, his personal proximity to Shin-Ae, which leads him to a gradual understanding of her. But the proximity between them is not just physical proximity but also a psychological one. For Jong-Chan’s snobbish personality is what Shin-Ae tries to hide about herself. Her decision to keep the forged certificate of a piano *concours* or her pretense of a wealthy, educated Seoul person blatantly show the snobbish side of her personality. Of course, Shin-Ae’s pretense also has to be understood as her survival strategy in Mil-yang. But the point is that while Shin-Ae’s exaggerated pretense comes from her own inarticulate social skills and unsophisticated schemes in dealing with her own situation (were she more adept, she would have either much more skillfully passed
as a Seoul person, or she would have chosen to live in a bigger city where keeping one’s personal life “secret” is taken as a social code of virtue), Jong-Chan’s snobbish and meddling character is transparently visible because of the inarticulate and ingenuous nature of his personality. The affinity and difference in their respective show-off manner is, in fact, constantly marked by the narrative *mise en abyme* that is powerfully en-acted by Jong-Chan. While the usual cinematic device for *mise en abyme* is the use of mirror and Lee Chang-Dong uses mirror a few times to imply the mutual reflexivity between mirrored objects, it is Jong-Chan’s subtle characterization that helps focalize and underscore the intensity of Shin-Ae’s complicated psychological and personal dynamic. When Shin-Ae confronts Jong-Chan in the churchyard by asking whether his belief is genuine, Jong-Chan responds with awkward silence, demonstrating his inarticulateness and implying his incomprehensibility of his own motivation. But as the narrative progresses, it turns out that Shin-Ae’s conversion is only temporary. Their affinity here is obvious. Deep down in her heart, Shin-Ae knows what she wants—to become different—but the means is not available for her. Thus she chooses what is socially available, which eventually fails. Whereas, Jong-Chan knows what he wants—to win her mind—but the socially acknowledged means available for him doesn’t work. As much as Jong-Chan mirrors Shin-Ae, their difference is also clear. Jong-Chan always embodies “ordinary” social vision; Shin-Ae is overwhelmed by her problem. Even when Shin-Ae is socially active, she is, psychologically, under the immense pressure of her problem and thus she is in no way in a position to pay attention to “others” like Jong-Chan.

When Jong-Chan accompanies Shin-Ae to the prison to forgive the murderer, Do-Seop, the camera work and editing highlight the complex visual dynamic through the
triangular relationship. The camera switches its focus 8 times, each reversing its previous focus; the odd number shots out of 16 shots show Do-Seop’s back along with Shin-Ae and Jong-Chan’s front and the even number shots focalize Do-Seop’s front, sometimes showing the couple’s back in the frame. And the two parties are separated by the prison window bars which also functions as *mise en abyme*. The first apparent effect of this cross cutting in editing is to confuse which subject is being punished. Since the prison bars divide each composition of the frame, this editing visually imposes the sense of incarceration on the primary object in the frame. This also ensue the pseudo-identification between Do-Seop and Shin-Ae; Do-Seop’s confession that he has also found God’s grace and peace of mind in him is the exact copy of Shin-Ae’s previous confession to the Christian community. But this mirroring is interrupted by Jong-Chan’s presence in Shin-Ae’s background. The camera contrasts Shin-Ae’s (and by extension, Do-Seop’s) emotional change with Jong-Chan’s serious face. Of course, Jong-Chan’s “serious” expression is awkwardly suited to this situation because he is not able to see the frustration on Shin-Ae’s face.

![Figure. 3. Shin-Ae and Jong-Chan’s prison visit](image-url)
According to Gregory Minissale, “the mise en abyme presents the opportunity to visualise thoughts as rising up inside themselves [inside the instance of each frame] to produce composite intensities which retain identity while negotiating self-division. The mise en abyme negotiates identity or sameness in difference as a series, and as such, appears as a visual experience of the serial form of consciousness.” (53) In other words, the mise en abyme of Do-Seop and Shin-Ae generates identity and difference between these two characters that intensifies each one’s acute consciousness. The visualization of Shin-Ae’s self through Do-Seop’s mirroring defamiliarizes and differentiates Shin-Ae’s self from itself. This serialization of Shin-Ae’s self through difference presents a visual formalization of distance that emerges through Shin-Ae’s “negotiation” or recognition of the radical split within her self. And at the same time, the distance between Shin-Ae and Do-Seop (a version of Shin-Ae’s self) is redoubled by Jong-Chan’s presence because Jong-Chan is also en abyme that constantly mirrors her “social” self. In fact, since Jong-Chan functions as the main mise en abyme throughout the narrative structure, Jong-Chan’s awkward presence in this scene brings in another uncanny effect. Because Jong-Chan sees Do-Seop while his vision is limited to Shin-Ae’s back, he has a perspectival privilege to see both of them which turns out to be only partial. What Jong-Chan’s
blocked vision signifies is, of course, a “normal” understanding of the situation, and thus incomprehensibility of Shin-Ae’s change. But this “normal” distance magnifies Shin-Ae’s pain. In other words, if Do-Seop presents an identity that creates a difference in Shin-Ae, Jong-Chan presents a difference that shows her identity. Consequently, then through the scene, as a whole, Lee as the director constructs something like a self-consciousness of the scene itself that presses the spectators to see between the characters mirroring, paralleling, approximating, distancing, merging, and diverging.

Ironically, the moment their relationship is put under serious crisis is when Shin-Ae tries to sexually seduce Jong-Chan. Devastated by the murderer’s confession, Shin-Ae is taken by the compulsive desire to destroy herself. In the course of a series of the anti-social and self-harming acts, Shin-Ae visits Jong-Chan after having initially stood him up. Contrary to her expectation, he gets mad at her sexual temptation and yells at Shin-Ae partly because it happens to be his birthday. This scene demonstrates the most conflictive moment in their relationship. When Shin-Ae ridicules his inarticulateness and lack of courage by mimicking his dialect and manner of speech, Jong-Chan reacts to the jibe by violently smashing things down, which reminds her of her childhood experience under a patriarchal and abusive father, as in the next scene her disconsolate and maniacal monologue on her way back home indicates. If this scene of conflict indicates a climax in the narrative structure, the subsequent ending part is, in a sense, an insipid one because Jong-Chan behaves as if nothing happened before. In the ending scene Shin-Ae and Jong-Chan’s pseudo-romance does seem to have a moment of closure; in the very last scene Jong-Chan holds a mirror for Shin-Ae while she is cutting her hair, implying that Shin-Ae finally opens her mind to Jong-Chan.
What happens in the conflict scene is a reversed mirroring between Shin-Ae and Jong-Chan. Shin-Ae, by mockingly imitating his vulgar manner, returns what Jong-Chan has been doing to himself. In this reversed mirroring or *mise en abyme*, Jong-Chan sees his own vulgarity and facileness in Shin-Ae. Conversely, Shin-Ae also realizes her own past in terms of patriarchal oppressiveness through Jong-Chan’s unexpected violence. In terms of narrative development, it would not be surprising if this conflict would terminate their relationship. However, there is the other side in the conflict. For Jong-Chan, for the first time in the narrative, shows his “serious” look where his genuine concern for her is also registered along with his rage. On the part of Shin-Ae, she shows her desperate abjectness unequipped by any social image she has tried to assume. Both show their bare lives to each other by “touching bottom.” In other words, the conflict also signals a closer proximity between them. This is why in the ending scene, while nothing has been solved in Shin-Ae’s life, the co-presence itself can be a closure, though not in a non-traditional sense. There is no romantic or dramatic solution in the ending. Rather, what Shin-Ae and Jong-Chan embrace is each other’s presence from which they see their own respective life with all its vulnerability and insolubility, along with their togetherness/ordinaryness.

Ultimately, *Secret Sunshine* has to be read as a melo-drama just as the advertisement introduces it—“there is also this kind of love.” But *Secret Sunshine* is a melodrama not because it is a love story but because it is a love *story*. As Shin-Ae and Jong-Chan tightly weave the narrative structure, a problem also emerges as to normality. If *Secret Sunshine* is essentially a story between Shin-Ae and Jong-Chan, how does one claim “normality” about this story of particular people? Part of the answer is Jong-Chan’s
characterization as an “ordinary” person, but this would not be a sufficient answer. And this is precisely when Lee’s directorially determined realism comes into play.

3. **Secret Sunshine’s Second and Third moments/movements: Realism and Allegory**

   While the dramaic narrative leads the spectator to see the movie as a story within the cinematic frame, the realist movement of the movie effectively dismantles the conventions of the genre of drama. Generally speaking, the most frequently used technique in the drama genre will be close-up frames since they entice the audience to identify with the main character’s emotional and psychological state in a transparent manner. But *Secret Sunshine* minimizes close-up shots. Though close-up shots are used in some occasions especially when Shin-Ae’s psychological and emotional turmoil has to be plausibly emphasized, close-up shots are, without exception, followed or interrupted by medium close-up shots, medium shots, and full shots. Further, in most close-up shots and medium close-up shots, Shin-Ae’s facial expressions are backgrounded by images of either moving objects (Figure. 7.) or something that disturbs the closed composition of the shots (Figure. 8.). The aforementioned frames used in Shin-Ae and Jong-Chan’s prison visit is also a case in point (Figure. 6.).

![Shin-Ae receiving the Ransom Call](image)

Figure 5. Shin-Ae receiving the Ransom Call
These close-up shots, however, are rarely used in the movie. The dominant portion of the shots consists of full shots (long shots) whose frames are porous enough to allow constant move in and out of the frames. Frames are always interrupted by that which is outside the frame. Characters almost always move in and out of the frames and even when characters do not interrupt camera frames, the frames constantly remind the spectator of outside of frames by cutting the edges of the frames with buildings, street signs, and other landscape markers. This out-of-the-frame movement constantly disturbs the spectator’s melodramatic identification with characters by invoking a critical distance between cinematic reality and outside reality. For example, the entire funeral scene is composed of long shots instead of extreme long shots; as a result, characters constantly stand on, enter, and walk out of the edge of the frames. The scene starts with a shot where Shin-Ae’s mother-in-law is wailing loudly at the coffin as Shin-Ae, with her arms folded, silently exits the door while, as usual, Jong-Chan’s gaze trails her. In the next long take, the camera fixes its focus on apathetic and motionless Shin-Ae. Then her mother-in-law and other relatives, crying loudly, entering the frame from left, pass Shin-Ae, when the camera starts following the mother-in-law, anticipating her action. As she turns back at Shin-Ae and starts criticizing tearless posture, Jong-Chan enters from left and stands next
to Shin-Ae and the camera focalizes Shin-Ae and her mother-in-law. As she stops accusing and slowly moves to the right direction, the camera pans to the mother-in-law, leaving Shin-Ae and Jong-Chan out of the frame. When the mother-in-law suddenly stops and comes back to Shin-Ae calling her ill-fated woman, the camera follows her mother-in-law again until Shin-Ae and Jong-Chan completely reappear within the frame. Finally Jong-Chan moves to the center of the focus and starts defending Shin-Ae to the mother-in-law as Shin-Ae is left out of the frame (Figure. 9.). Jong-Chan’s defense is again that of commonsense: “I realize your heart is broken at the loss. I completely understand you, but … . Given this situation, isn’t it that the mother is suffering more than anyone else? (translation modified from the subtitle)” This long take ends with Jong-Chan at the center of the frame when the mother-in-law and other relatives leave the funeral (Figure. 10.). During this long take, passers-by constantly and stream in and out of the frame, some showing interest in the fuss, others pretending to ignore it. As a result of this dynamic camera movement, what the spectators see is not only Shin-Ae’s inarticulateness and Jong-Chan’s uninvited defense, but also the everyday life landscape at a funeral. In other words, the spectators are invited to compare Shin-Ae, Jong-Chan, the mother-in-law, and their own life (passers-by). Further, as Shin-Ae’s inarticulateness is immediately followed by the scene where her monologue “why did I do that?,” the spectators are provided with a second chance to globally see Shin-Ae’s agony by comparing Jong-Chan’s “ordinary” rhetoric with Shin-Ae’s profound lack of symbolic means to express her own feeling.
Figure 7. Example of Camera movement at the Funeral 1

Figure 8. Example of Camera movement at the Funeral 2 (Jong-Chan)

The porous camera movement in this scene is repeated throughout the movie. If the major effect of the rarely used close-up shots, with its affective appeal, ensures the necessary degree of emotional investment for dramatic unity, the dominant employment of in-and-out-of-the-frame movement, along with the compositional interference in the close-up shots, generates two mutually complementary effects. On the one hand, since the spectator is reminded of the dramatic unity and its openness to outside reality at the same time, the careful coordination of (melo-)dramatic form and the realist form reminds the spectators of the constructed nature of dramatic reality, and thus of their status as the spectator. That is, the spectator’s direct and immediate identification with dramatic characters is mediated by the frame’s constant invocation of their spectatorship.
(defamiliarization). On the other hand, since the realist frames in *Secret Sunshine* also emphasize the flow in and out of the frame, the comparative distance between cinematic events and the spectator’s everyday life also moves back toward the identification of Shin-Ae’s life events within the spectator’s everyday-life context. That is, instead of melodramatic identification and of affective collapse of distance, the spectators are encouraged to *critically* identify with Shin-Ae’s profound suffering (familiarization). This expansion of Brechtian alienation in the form of familiarization in de-familiarization takes place because the drama features of the movie are constantly re-framed through realist interventions.

While camera work is the most conspicuous realist feature in the film, there are other realist elements. Not only is the whole filming shot on the real location of Milyang—a small town where the gossip on a person from Seoul is indeed likely to circulate through the town’s people, the movie constantly emphasizes the porosity of the filmed world by casting many actors for the performance of their real life jobs. The minor characters function in two-fold ways; they are an essential part of the drama as they complete the setting of the narrative; and at the same time, each minor character has their own life story which is not exhausted within the drama narrative. For example, Jong-Chan lets the audience know that the abductor was suffering from a financial pressure. Though the perpetrator’s life story is not the focus of the movie, Jong-Chan’s revelation and the *mise-en-scene*, such as the small space of his afterschool program, entice the audience to consider the perpetrator’s mediocre life may lead to his motivation for abduction.
In terms of technique, the movie largely employs cinéma vérité techniques such as realistic lighting and synchronized sound recording. Frequently used long takes are aimed to indicate duration of time, which in turn contribute to the reality of the movie by invoking that the cinematic space exists not mainly due to the effects of computer graphic or editing. Of the many long takes, there are only two extreme long shots. The first extreme long distance shot is used to introduce the geographical background of the entire setting on the one hand and to highlight the persisting image of sky as opposed to the last scene’s image of ground. Thus it informs the physical and symbolic background to the spectator. The second and last long shot is used when Shin-Ae is accompanied by police officers for the on-the-spot inspection of the murder of her son. This scene begins with a full shot of a police car from which Shin-Ae moves towards the camera to a brief close-up, followed by a panning camera that trails her as she slowly moves away from the camera down the riverbank with a policeman to confirm her son’s body. By the time when she reaches the spot, the extreme long shot is established. The extreme long shot distances the spectator from Shin-Ae’s emotional disintegration, while it actually encourages the spectator to imagine Shin-Ae’s distress possibly in the spectator’s life context. However, what makes this scene really interesting is the use of a non-diegetic music. In fact, there are only a few occasions of scenes with music probably because non-diegetic music offsets the desired effects of the realist form. And this is what is happening in this scene, but with a variation. The music begins when Shin-Ae passes the camera with its sorrowful and solemn tone. As its grave minor tone becomes more clearly audible on the track, it overlaps with the voice of policeman guiding Shin-Ae. The music soon overwhelms the policeman’s voice making it hardly distinctive, soliciting the
spectator’s attention to Shin-Ae’s emotional state. When the voice is completely
unhearable under the volume of the music, the minor tone suddenly begins blending with
the rhythmical and lilting tone of tango. After that, the music remains the mix of major
and minor tones until it comes to a tango-style sudden end. This brings an uncanny effect;
while the primary effect of the mixed tone of music is, again, to invoke both
identification and differentiation for the spectator—that is—it works just like the extreme
long shot works on the spectator, the music functions here in the completely opposite
direction to realism. If realism is, generally speaking, premised upon the notion of
documenting real life, telling the truth, and thus of “objective” representation, the music
here signifies the power of editing, of manipulating the meaning of the realistically
recorded scene. In other words, if realism operates as if the camera lens was internal to
the recorded event, the music relates to the event by imposing a certain meaning
externally. This problematization of realism is, in fact, found especially in the symbolic
representation of the sky and the ground. As Adrian Danks argues, the sky, along with the
ground, is “the recurring motif” that appears in both of the two extreme long shots—the
sky in the introductory scene and the ground in this scene. The use of the non-diegetic
music also has a symbolic function that seemingly undermines the realist achievement in
the movie.
However, it should not be overlooked that Lee’s problematization of realism is already manifest in his “out-of-the-frame” movement. For the “out-of-the-frame” movement not only blurs the boundary between the cinematic world and the outside world but it also re-establishes the boundary. In other words, it invokes the outside reality insofar as it re-inscribes the distinctiveness between the two worlds. While it is true that realism in Lee Chang-Dong’s movie constantly stresses the everyday-life of the cinematic events, this realist intervention, given that the dramatic as well as symbolic elements constantly reiterate the narrative boundary, does not, and can not, mean the truthfulness of cinematic representation. In short, Secret Sunshine’s realistic representation is not designed to “document” what is happening in people’s everyday life. What this means is that the cinematic entanglement of realism and drama form, in Lee’s movie, is a name of a particular form, neither a transparent or seamless representation of “outside,” nor a simple creation of an affective narrative world. Further, Lee’s creative incorporation of the cinematic realism into a form directly leads us to the age-old debate about the nature and function of documentary and cinematic realism as a political form of art.

If the genre of documentary was a powerful artistic vehicle to convey the truth in modern society, we all are familiar with the limits and the counter-effects of the genre. In a society where multiple, in many cases mutually opposing, political discourses obtain their own respective truth, the project of unconcealing “the” truth of the society cannot be maintained. Two diametrically opposing documentaries can be easily produced on one event. Further, with reality TV shows, sitcoms with reality settings, movies “based on
true stories,” and even thrillers and horror movies that take advantage of documentary filming technique, the truth function of the documentary genre has become an ossified form where the political content is easily evaporated. Because of the now commonsensical postmodern system of equivalence where too many political discourses compete as if all the political slogans and images form the society of the spectacle in the manner of commodity consumption, the problem of postmodern political art cannot be visited in the same manner as the way in which the modernist political art was formulated. Interestingly, as Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl write, ongoing globalization has produced “a shared desire to ‘touch the real’ and to create arenas of debate within an increasingly privatized and fragmented global environment” (14) And at the same time, due to the acceleration of the neoliberal spread of the market logic matched by cuts in state funding, “experimental documentary production has again been increasingly pushed into the art field” (14), which eventually makes the documentary experiment “one of the most significant tendencies within art during the last two decades” (11). The dissemination of documentary in the contemporary art economy, ironically, comes with the failure of its promise for truth. Instead of emanating certainty, authority, and transparency, documentary becomes a site of a series of aporias.

[Documentary’s] uncertainty has also made documentary practices one of the most informative forms of contemporary art. The documentary’s ambivalent nature, hovering between art and non-art, has contributed to creating new zones of entanglement between the aesthetic and the ethic, between artifice and authenticity, between fiction and fact, between documentary power and documentary potential, and between art and its social, political, and economic conditions. (16)

Of course, the source of this ambiguity of documentary is indexicality. Addressing the fossil of a trilobite as the model of photography, Walter Benn Michaels
explains the ontological problem that has constantly haunted the aesthetics of
photography and, by extension, of documentary.

There is an important sense in which the question about the painting—is it a
painting or an object?—has become the question about the photograph, not so
much because the photograph can somehow be taken as the object it is a
photograph of ... but because it cannot simply be taken as a picture of the object it
is a photograph of. That is the point ... of the fossil. We do not experience the
fossil as a trilobite, but we do not experience it as the picture of a trilobite either.
And if we understand photographs on the model of fossil, we cannot take for
granted their status as works of art. To put it that way, however, is to refuse both
the indexophobic and the indexophilic, to refuse the idea that because indexicality
is a false issue photographs can of course be works of art and to refuse also the
idea that because photographs are essentially indexical they cannot be works of
art. (“Photography and Fossils” 443)

Michaels’ point is that indexicality is the medium of photography. It is the
indexicality that makes the photography stand on the borderline of art and non-art, fiction
and fact, uncertainty and transparency, and representation and referent. But at the same
time, that indexicality is the medium of photography does not necessarily mean that
whatever it does will be subsumed under the medium in a Greenbergian fashion. Rather,
it means that whatever it does it has to deal with the problem of indexicality that is
inherent to the genre. This burden of indexicality is, in terms of documentary, that which
grounds and limits the political potential. For indexicality not only empowers
documentary production with its undeniable evidentiary function but also makes it
myopic to the physical object within the documentary frame. In other words, while
documentary often captures what is refractory to other mediums such as subtle changes in
facial and bodily expression and site-specific phenomenon that are often replete with
abundant details, spatial depth, and paradoxical/ironical binds, it often succumbs to
partiality due to its myopic paranoia onto the documentary object, which immediately
raises the question about the presence and perspective of the recording subject. Further,
this burden of indexicality very often makes documentary production dependent upon affective appeal, unwittingly participating the spectacle of commodity economy so that “the so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people … contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it” (Adorno “Commitment” 189). This is not to say that, for example, Yael Hersonski’s 2010 documentary A Film Unfinished is not political or anti-political. On the contrary, the documentary demonstrates an acute political consciousness about the Holocaust atrocity in the post-survivor era. Still, in spite of all the superb merits of the documentary experiment, A Film Unfinished’s central appeal to the ghetto survivors’ affective reaction seems to limit the spectators from seeing what caused the pain. In other words, while there is nothing wrong with capturing a painful “piece of real,” if this scene of pain is not connected to a question about the cause of it—be it a particular capitalist mode of production or a certain historical contradiction of a nation-state—the politicality of the documentary runs the risk of being simply entertaining, consumed and forgotten. If the politicality on table now is that which should be able to make a continuous impact on the spectator, and if the politicality is not to be subject to the spectator’s subjective opinion or interpretation, then the question arising from a documentary should be found within the documentary structure. Of course, this “structure” always refers to an aesthetic form. In short, the framed reality (indexicality) becomes aesthetic and political when the author creates a form. In this precise sense of the form, Secret Sunshine’s form has to be understood.

The realist movement/moment of Secret Sunshine, in other words, cannot be read as a simple return of the classical documentary aesthetics. Rather, the secret of Lee ChangDong’s form lies in the crisscross between the dramatic unity and the grammar of
realism, between the aesthetic desire to enclose the cinematic events within the frame and the documentary impetus to go outside the frame. In fact, it is this genre-crossing formal constitution that makes *Secret Sunshine* an original experiment. And the principle of the experiment is communication. It is not only because the two forms communicate with each other, but also because the entire structure of *Mirang* is designed to communicate with the spectator. In terms of the grammar of drama, the spectator is informed of the suffering of Shin-Ae without affectively identifying with her primarily because the mediation of Jong-Chan’s ordinary perspective constantly asks the spectator to think her suffering instead of feeling it. The realist grammar, while it does not claim a seamless continuity with the outside world, constantly invokes the outside world through its indexicality and entices the spectator to compare the inside and the outside. The form of *Secret Sunshine*, in other words, with its refusal to be confined in the affective space of drama, to simply “reflect” outside reality, to merely utilize documentary filming as a tool to maximize a genre effect as is the case of “a documentary horror movie,” and to even raise a voice for a political truth, tries to construct an allegorical cinematic space that communicates with the spectators’ life. And this is the third movement of allegory that comes into operation through the communication of the two genre grammars.

The most crucial feature of *Secret Sunshine*’s allegorical movement comes with the realization of historicity of our everyday life. More accurately, the allegory pivots on the everyday-life-ness of Shin-Ae’s suffering. For example, ShinAe’s self-image construction exactly captures the historically sedimented South Korea’s socio-cultural problems. The concentration of wealth, the asymmetrical development between periphery and Seoul, the distorted stereotypical image of a single mom that SinAe tries to
circumvent, the mis-construed image of “elite” education in the areas of art. All these social problems play a significant role in ShinAe’s struggle to survive in Mil-yang just as Mil-yang’s townspeople are conscious of these problems. Shin-Ae’s survival strategy in Mil-yang exactly starts by exploiting these social problems; by constructing a certain self-image, Shin-Ae reveals the social fear of being uneducated, being unsuccessful, living in a periphery, living as a widow, and most importantly being poor. In the aforementioned scene of the hairdresser’s where the local women gossiping about the new “Seoul” person, the sharp compositional divide between Shin-Ae and the local women (Figure. 4.) symbolizes their difference. But again the dividing line turns out to be part of the large wall mirror on which both Shin-Ae and the women are reflected.

Woman1: (to the hairdresser) You curled my hair too much! I wanted a Kang-Nam (the richest village in Seoul) style.
Woman 2: (to Woman 1) How should I do mine?
Woman 3 (the business woman of a small clothing shop): The interior is nicely done out, this place.
Woman 1: Money talks, you know. How much did it cost?
Woman 3: The word “interiors” makes me feel ill. You know the woman who runs the Jun piano school, the new one, around here?
Woman 2: The one from Seoul, you mean?
Woman 3: You know what? A few days ago, she just showed up in my store and said I should redo the interior of my store, saying I’d go broke if I didn’t.
Woman 1: On the first meeting?
Woman 3: Yes, the first time!
Woman 2: How odd!
Woman 3: By the way, though she is nice looking, I think she is a bit abnormal. Something odd about her. (translation modified from the script)

The content of this trivial and “ordinary” gossip among the women is, in fact, what Shin-Ae tries to deal with—money and the concentration of wealth and culture in
Seoul. In other words, Shin-Ae and the local women share the exactly same problems that are not merely personal but social. In the next scene, Shin-Ae and the business woman exchange a brief and strained greeting, seeing each other reflected on the mirror. The mirroring of each other this time is a sign of their shared identity as ordinary people in South Korea. In other words, while the characterization of Shin-Ae as a woman of vanity prevents the audience from identifying with her, the historicity that overdetermines and displaces Shin-Ae’s struggle in her new surroundings leads the spectator to see the South Korea’s historical present and to critically sympathize with her. Further, though Shin-Ae’s feigning to be a rich person is her own decision, which ironically turns out to be the direct motivation for the abduction, this image of Bok-Bu-In (a Korean word whose literally meaning “real estate wife”) is also a historical construction. Bok-Bu-In phenomenon has long been considered as a serious social problem that accelerates the concentration of wealth on the rich as their investment only benefits them, pushing the local people to move out of their hometown either to find a cheaper rent or to find a new job.  

And precisely because what makes Shin-Ae a peculiarly normal person is the double-binding historicity that at once pushes her to feign the identity of a rich person and thwarts her attempt through the tragic death of her son, Shin-Ae’s prison visit is problematic. When Shin-Ae shares with the Christian community her intention to forgive the perpetrator, quoting a Bible scripture that “love your enemies,” it cannot be literally understood because the immediate motivation comes from her brief encounter with the perpetrator’s daughter on the street. In this scene, Shin-Ae simply watches the girl being severely beaten on her head by two boys, and drives away, ignoring her desperate and
tearful eyes toward Shin-Ae. Since the perpetrator’s daughter is a strong reminder of both
Shin-Ae’s dead son and the perpetrator, Shin-Ae’s attitude indicates that, as Raymond
analyzes, “Shin-Ae is both compelled by the scene and repulsed by her own attraction to
the violence inflicted on the girl.” Then this scene stages an ostracism of the girl by her
peers in which Shin-Ae psychologically participates, while it also rehearses the
psychological ostracism of Shin-Ae as a poor single mom in Mil-yang town prior to her
conversion and inclusion into the Christian community. Further, this scene also recalls a
previous scene of their first encounter in the perpetrator’s car where, it is strongly
implied, her father’s harsh discipline is responsible, at least partly, for her aberrance. As
it turns out, Shin-Ae also has an experience of abuse by her father who “locked me in the
bathroom for crying” “always hitting my head with a spoon” and “wouldn’t let me [do
what I wanted to do].” Ultimately, what this scene demonstrates is the obvious and
obverse side of the possibility of forgiveness—that is, the impossibility of forgetfulness.
This is why Shin-Ae’s intent for forgiveness is as much question-begging as the
perpetrator’s forgiveness. The dialogue in the prison visit scene is shocking and uncanny
as Shin-Ae enters into an “inter-faith” conversation with the perpetrator:

Shin-Ae: The reason I’ve come here […] is to spread God’s grace and love. I
never knew such
    things. I couldn’t believe in God. I couldn’t see Him, so I didn’t believe.
    But […]
    through my Jun, I learned of God’s love. I found peace and a new life.
    I’m so thankful
    […] so happy to feel God’s love and grace. That’s why I came. To
    spread His love.
    Do-Seop: Thank you. I truly thank you. Hearing from you about our Lord makes
    me truly
    thankful. I too have gained faith. Since I came here, I have accepted
    God in my heart.
    The Lord has reached out to this sinner.
    Shin-Ae: Is that so? It’s good that you have found God.
Do-Seop: Yes, I am so grateful. God reached out to a sinner like me. He made me kneel to repent my sins. And God has absolved me of them.

Shin-Ae: God […] has forgiven your sins?

Do-Seop: Yes, after I repented in tears […]. And I have found inner peace. I pray as soon as I wake. I am so thankful every day. My repentance and absolution have brought me peace. Now I start and end each day with prayer. I always pray for you, Mrs. Lee. I’ll pray for you until I die. Seeing you here today tells me that God had heard my prayers.

The perpetrator’s confession immediately brings back Shin-Ae’s own previous confession and thus clearly shows the complicated nature of her own confession. It raises not only ethical questions of the nature of forgiveness, the subject of forgiveness, and the (im-)possibility of forgiveness, but also the question of un-forgetfulness of Shin-Ae’s personal history and its embeddedness in the modern Korean history. Shin-Ae’s interpretation of the perpetrator’s response is, as is typical of Shin-Ae’s responses generally, a psychologically displaced one. Just as Shin-Ae comes up with the land speculation scheme after the loss of her husband and later with the forgiveness plan after the loss of her child, this time she tries to confront the issue of subject of forgiveness after the loss of her voice: later, she says to the Christian community “he says God has forgiven him. … If he has been absolved, how can I forgive him again?” Again as is typical of Shin-Ae’s response, her response leads the spectator to see that her displaced response is ultimately essential one. Schematically speaking, just as the land speculation (money) turns out to be at the very core of the social problem that caused the death of her son and just as the religious forgiveness is at the very core of her unforgetfulness in her social world, the attempt to regain her personal voice is at the core of the problem of the
construction of *historical* subjectivity. For she knows, though only instinctively and not logically, that the problem is neither about forgiveness *per se* nor about her personal voice, but about the social and historical question—what can a normal person do, faced with an insurmountable historical force such as structural rendering of women inferior to men (in her private space) and historically determined Christian doctrine (in her social world)?

From this point, ShinAe shows a series of deviations such as shoplifting a CD from a music store, causing a disturbance in an outdoor church gathering by loudly playing the stolen CD song “It’s All Lies” through the PA system, throwing a stone to break the window in the time of an all-night prayer church meeting for Shin-Ae, trying to seduce a senior church member to have a sexual relationship (which she exactly repeats to Jong-Chan), and attempting suicide. What is remarkable in her deviant behavior is her urge to take revenge on Christianity and the God that, in a sense, seduced her to believe in what is impossible in the first place. The last twenty minutes, in other words, focalizes and documents Shin-Ae’s suffering, problematizing the Christianity as it is described in the movie. But at the same time, what is equally remarkable is the movement of the camera that vividly documents the seriousness and genuineness of the Christian community that Shin-Ae attacks. As a result, none of her revengeful act is successful, as usual. Some people in the outdoor church gathering were initially disturbed by the song “It’s All Lies,” but a majority of them even more concentrate on their prayer. The senior church member, though he temporarily yields to Shin-Ae’s temptation, eventually refuses her, saying “I feel God is watching us.” When she repeats the seduction to Jong-Chan, he gets extremely angry at her. In other words, the camera lens in this part is on the
undiminished absorption Shin-Ae as well as the Christian community show in their respective acts. Of course, Shin-Ae’s psychological deviancy cannot go unnoticed. She even experiences the illusion of the perpetrator’s ransom call at night. She is completely wrapped up in her own distress, to the point of insanity, which tells the spectator the genuineness of her deviancy. But at the same time, this “wrapped-up-ness” equally applies to those who Shin-Ae considers her adversary. For example, the outdoor gathering scene has many cuts highlighting many participants’ absorption in their own prayer. The church members of all-night prayer for Shin-Ae are also genuinely concerned with Shin-Ae’s spiritual life. Perhaps for Shin-Ae they are not genuine. Or, Shin-Ae desperately tries to believe that they are hypocritical and not genuine in their belief. In a crane shot when Shin-Ae is on the verge of success in her temptation of the senior church member, she looks up to sky/God (technically she is looking at the camera and thus directly engaging with the spectator) and tauntingly says “Can you see?” But as she realizes her failure, her triumphant tone is immediately aborted and her vomiting follows. The series of juxtapositions prevents Shin-Ae’s suffering from dominating the frame. Instead, what the spectators see is two completely different genuine responses to the Christianity that is, again, genuinely serious in its mission of consoling people’s suffering.

The seemingly pointless repetition of the juxtaposition between Shin-Ae and the religious community has a crucial point. It first demonstrates that neither Shin-Ae nor the Christian community is responsible for Shin-Ae’s tragic fall from forgiveness to unforgetfulness. The members of church community are, mistakenly, held responsible by Shin-Ae. As “normal” individuals, but they didn’t do anything wrong. Which is to say
that the point of the repetition of the act of revenge that always leads to the same failure is to delineate the particular form of Christianity and its discursive apparatus.

Figure. 10. Outside Church Prayer meeting

Figure. 11. Shin-Ae Looking at the Church Members Prayer Gathering for her

The particular form of church in question here is one that is very much invested mainly in individual suffering. All the churches and their gatherings in *Secret Sunshine* are keenly attentive to individuals’ suffering. In an attempt to actively deal with personal suffering, a series of concepts are highlighted such as evangelical mission, consolation, forgiveness, sin, repentance, grace, etc. Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with these Christian doctrines. On the contrary, they are an indispensable part of the normal life as *Secret Sunshine* shows, which also points to the prevalence of suffering in people’s everyday life. In a sense, Christianity is actively involved in the social world with its
active embrace of suffering. What is *politically* problematic with this Christianity, as it appears in the movie, is its indifference to what caused the individual suffering. In other words, precisely because it focuses on the suffering *per se*, the Christianity unwittingly and taciturnly endorses what causes the problem by averting its eyes from it. The mobilization and emphasis of forgiveness as a crucial religious discourse cannot be otherwise than a *political choice* because there are many other possible engaging concepts and biblical interpretations throughout the history of Christianity. As Ray Chow puts it, the logic of “the progressivist Christian evangelism” in *Secret Sunshine* lies in the idea that “God’s secret is to be found precisely in the open, flexible networks of circulation—of spreading, verbalizing, and physical performing to and by all and sundry” (229). The problem of this particular Christianity, to put it differently, is that it spatializes individuals’ suffering by leveling out their differences and by vulgarizing forgiveness. When “forgiveness is readily available” (228), the perpetrator’s forgiveness and Shin-Ae’s forgiveness are not distinguishable from each other within the simplified logic where “no one is considered lowly or inferior because everyone is God’s beloved lamb” (229). Forgiveness without social justice essentially makes the perpetrator as well as Shin-Ae “simply consumers of a worldwide web of evangelically disseminated Christian messages” (236). Of course, this is not to say that all are not equal. All are equal and all are equally eligible to ask for forgiveness in Christianity and out. But that all are equal is meaningful when one tries to address inequality. The ethical principle that all are equally eligible to ask for forgiveness cannot be used as an excuse for a nullification of political relevance.
The scandal of the forgiveness in *Secret Sunshine*, in short, lies in its apocalyptic nature. Once personal suffering is rendered as the final point in an individual’s life, the next move is consolation, spiritual redemption, and forgiveness. As Shin-Ae’s prison visit shows, however, forgiveness in one’s social life inevitably invites a series of impasses about who, how, what, and whom. Is she entitled to forgive the perpetrator? If God forgives him regardless of, and prior to, her act of forgiveness, what is the meaning of her act? How does one get forgiveness? Can she forgive herself? Is South Korea’s historical problem something that one can forgive, or even forget? These questions are truly aporetic. For these questions, however they are answered, do not change the historical problems. Whether Shin-Ae forgives or not, what caused her tragedy persists. And by extension, every “ordinary” person is also vulnerable to the historical causes of social problems. This is why the last twenty minutes cannot be viewed as a search for a “real” forgiveness, but endurance. Shin-Ae’s desperate deviancy is her last resort to endure.

After the failed attempt for suicide, Shin-Ae cries “help me … please help me”. Shin-Ae is suffering. Shin-Ae is suffering from the loss of her child, from her own complicity in the death of her son, from her lost voice muted by God, from the betrayal by and from her own belief, and from the unsolvable question of forgiveness. But emotional identification with Shin-Ae, though this is not unimportant, will not save her. And herein lies the meaning of Lee Chang-Dong’s political aesthetics of allegory. Throughout the movie, Lee constantly endeavors to demand that spectators see their own “normal” life differently. Lee constructs a micro society of *Secret Sunshine*/Mil-yang where the interconnectedness of people living in a society is visible in that the “normal” people are surrounded by the Korean version of speculative capitalism, the affinity of crime and
poverty, the uneven geographical development in South Korea, the distorted academic elitism, and the historically specific Christian way of dealing with social suffering. In the course of this cinematic construction, Lee constantly rejects fragmented views and single-sided perspectives in his film’s formal as well as narrative structure. In Lee’s allegorical world, history hurts and it is not something that one can escape. In a sense, normal people are all possible victims of history. But they are also the collective agency of endurance. One may find an example of this when the businesswoman who gossiped about Shin-Ae earlier comes out to thank Shin-Ae, saying that she took Shin-Ae’s advice to change the interior and has been making more money. They exchange supporting laughs with each other. Though this scene does not serve as a signal of solution or resolution of Shin-Ae’s psychological conflict, it does show the solidarity between them. However, the solidarity is not to be found only in this scene—indeed by and large the ordinary people, including the members of the Christian community, have been, despite their down-to-earth and often vulgar attitude, nice to her. In the last scene, as Jong-Chan is holding a mirror for Shin-Ae’s haircut, the camera pans away from them to a still cut of ground where dirt, some locks of her hair, and deserted household goods get “secret sunshine,” signifying the persistence of normal neighbors in the historically determined everyday-life-ness.

4. Conclusion

There is no universal form of political art. The documentary form or realist genre was essentially political art when there was a social consensus about the truth that the art form was supposed to communicate to viewers. In the contemporary society of the system of equivalence, however, any artwork with an overt political message or an immediate political image runs the risk of falling into a merely subjective art. The
partiality of a subjective art, despite its good political intent, unwittingly and sometimes actively, joins the spectacular market of political commodities just as the single-sidedness of the Christianity in *Secret Sunshine* is, with its otherwise graceful mission, not only indifferent to but also unwittingly cooperative with what caused Shin-Ae’s tragedy. Chang-Dong Lee’s answer to this postmodern challenge is the Brechtian form. His realism neither tries to re-present (in the sense of reflection) outside reality, nor attempts to articulate a political message/discourse. Rather, his realism is concerned with communication. Ultimately, all of the formal realistic devices and contents of his film move towards the allegorical construction of a dramatic event. In *Secret Sunshine*, the realistic-dramatic representation of an individual event as thoroughly historical is the key to his allegory. In this allegorical sense, his art is political. It is political because the allegorical movement enables the audience to see the historicity of current Korean Society in their everyday lives. Shin-Ae’s dramatic suffering is what everyone in the society is exposed to. While both allegory and realism have been exorcised for a long time due to their supposedly overt political and ideological overtones, *Secret Sunshine* shows one political possibility of allegory in our age of real subsumption. *Secret Sunshine*’s allegory takes place when the critical distance between audience and drama is reframed into a communicational realism. This unity in disunity between audience and drama, inside and outside, and dramatic narrative and historical reality, is the place for political allegory.

---

1 See Young-jin Kim, *Lee Chang-dong* (Seoul: Korean Film Council, 2007): 2

2 Many critics have pointed out Lee’s pursuit of Auteurism throughout his film career. Given the dominant trend of blockbuster spectacle movies and commercialized genre narratives in Korea, the commercial
success of Lee’s movies is an exceptional case. All of Lee’s films (Green Fish [Cho-log-mul-go-gi] 1996, Peppermint Candy [Bak-ha-sa-tang] 1999, Oasis [Oasiseu] 2002, Secret Sunshine [Mil-yang] 2007), with the exception of the most recent (Poetry [Si] 2010) were commercially successful. Lee effectively utilizes genre motifs such as gangster and film noir for Green Fish, and melodrama for Peppermint Candy, Oasis, and Secret Sunshine. But considering his movies are not exactly faithful to genre conventions, his mobilization of genre motifs seems only partly responsible for the attraction of large audience. Rather, it is likely that the popularity of his films comes, at least partly, from the relevance of the filmic issue with our present social situation. In fact, all of his movies show a magnificent filmic representation of Korea’s historical problems through specific geopolitical locales in Korea. For example, the narrative of Green Fish starts when a large-scale urban development begins to transform a small agricultural metropolitan area, Il-San, into a satellite town of Seoul, which eventually leads Mak-dong (the main character) to the gangster world. Through a non-conventional gangster’s struggle and failure to survive, the audience are asked to critically engage with South Korea’s recent past and present (Seoul’s expansion through the development of satellite cities is an on-going issue, which always leads to the recurring problem of speculative land investment and the polarization of wealth). Just as Green Fish describes an ordinary person’s tragic life during rapid development in Korea. Oasis problematizes society’s gaze on the disabled through a love story between a sociopath with slight mental disability and a girl with severe cerebral palsy. Peppermint Candy weaves its protagonist’s life journey with Korea’s tumultuous 80s and 90s history as the protagonist’s occupational change from soldier, policeman, to furniture-shop owner is entangled with the Kwang-ju uprising, the democratization movement, economic growth, and the IMF crisis. In all of these films, the protagonists are ordinary people in the sense that they are neither heroes nor anti-heroes. To underline Lee’s “political” engagement in these films, he also served as the Minister of Culture and Tourism from 2003-4. This brief introduction to his career already makes it clear that his announcement of “normality” cannot be taken lightly. For Lee’s auteurism, see Kim Young-jin, “A Study of the Authorship In Recent Korean Cinema”; Moon Jae-cheol, “A Study on the Function of auteur(ism) in Korean Cinema.” For Lee’s political engagement, Ju Jin-Suk, “Films of Lee Chang-Dong as Reflexive Project for Modern Korean Society; Lee Hyun-Seung and Song Jeang-Ah, “Lee Chang Dong: Film-making as a ‘Repetition’ Creating Ethics.”

3 In an interview with the film critic Huh Moon-yeong, Lee explains what he wanted from the two main professional actors. “A commercial movie would take advantage of Song Kang-ho (Jong-Chan)’s and Jeon Do-yeon (Shin-Ae)’s aura because their respective aura is great. The audience wants to see the character in the movie but they also want to see actor’s aura. Actor’s aura is, in fact, a kind of entertainment. That should not be the case for my film. First of all, they have very strong images as actors. Thus they must have been troubled by that—how to take off that aura. I was stressed about that, which I think would be a lot of pressure for them. That’s why actor is a difficult job. To be asked to take off their aura as an actor—that would be like being asked to take off invisible clothes.” Here Lee’s point is that the professional actors should act as if they acted their ordinary life. Later in this interview, he informs that almost all the actors and extras were casted in and around Mil-yang. They were casted because they have “looks and gestures that a performance could never release”

4 The title 80064 was the number given to Józef Tarnawa, a survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp. In the film work, the camera recorded Tarnawa, who was persuaded by Żmijewski, having the faded number renewed in a tattoo parlor. In his critically acclaimed Them, Żmijewski gathered four groups who were completely disparate in their opinions—a group of elderly Catholic women, a group of activists committed to socialism, members of the All-Polish youth (nationalist) and a Jewish youth group and recorded the process in which each group visually represented their respective ideological and political agenda and acted as the representative of each agenda. As the Balkanization escalated, politically correct discussion and conversation at the beginning of this group experiment gives way to violence, threat, and disintegration.

5 See Anthony Downey, “‘Zones of Indistinction’: Giorgio Agamben’s ‘Bare Life’ and the Politics of Aesthetics”.

6 For example, in Them, Żmijewski’s “subjective” intervention cannot go unnoticed. In each of the interval of the series of workshops, Żmijewski suggests specific directions. Each participant group is given t-shirts
with an image printing which they painted for a visual representation of the group’s political agenda in the previous workshop. Once each of the four groups was marked by its t-shirts, Żmijewski also encouraged them to “change it [other group’s visual representation]. You can re-edit it, rewrite it, draw it again, destroy it, or add something.”


8 The conceptual distinction between traditional politics and more broad politics is presented by Paul Ricoeur as he distinguishes the political (le politique) and politics (la politique). This distinction was later taken by various thinkers of political foundation such as Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarte, Alain Badiou, and Ernesto Laclau. (Oliver Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, 35- 60) For Nancy and Lacoue-Labarte, the slogan “re-treat of the political” well summarizes the two-fold projects of their agenda; it aims at the deconstruction of politics and the rejuvenation of the political; while the deconstruction targets the “totalitarianization” of politics in the regimes of western liberal democracy where “everything is political” blocks genuine political thinking, the rejuvenation means going back to “everything is political” as a radical ground for political questioning. (Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarte, Retreating the Political. 87-95) “The political,” in this sense, far from being restricted to the realms of institutional politics, is a way of thinking of the conditions of possibility of politics as such. If this distinction is applied to the notion of contradiction, it is clear that the current contradiction is not so much a logical impasse or incompatibility as a challenge that demands the re-treat or re-thinking of ongoing political practice. In other words, what was submitted as two incompatible objective situations or a binary of logical paradoxes turns out to be one essential demand for the reconfiguration of politics on the side of the subject—a two-fold demand for the reconfiguration of current politics and for the re-grounding of political fundamentals. Further, this two-fold demand is thoroughly historical as the demand is a response to the ongoing apocalyptic sense of frustration that takes place as a kind of end point of “modern” politics in the face of globalization. While conventional politics is unable to deal with problems of globalization due to their newness (unprecedented in its scale) and oldness (structural), the “spatial” disagreement between global and national and the “temporal” disagreement between apocalypse and the persistence of modernity are, in fact, an agreement for the urgency of re-thinking politics.

9 For Stjepan Mestrovic, postmodernity signifies the disintegration of the cultural and political values that used to mediate economic and sociological activities. As the term “confluence” in the title of his book The Balkanization of the West: The Confluence of Postmodernism and Postcommunism implies, western postmodernity and the collapse of eastern European communism, he argues, affect each other drawing them to a global Balkanization (1-27).

10 For example, Frazer Ward critiques the ongoing practice of identity politics from a neo-Habermasian perspective. “Given on the one hand the contemporary dominance of mass media, and on the other, the balkanization of identity politics and its tendency to degenerate into a field of clashing particularized claims, a tendency that has not served museums well in the current ‘cultural wars,’ in which not only the museum but also art itself have been able to be characterized as the preserves of ‘special interests,’ a necessarily modified Habermasian scheme demands attention” (“The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity” 75). Or see H. E. Baber “Dilemmas of Multiculturalism: An Introduction” where Baber summarizes critiques of identity politics. Interestingly, part of his argument is that liberalism and identity politics (multiculturalism) are mutually inclusive and exclusive, a paradox which forms the historical dilemma of our times (3-16).

11 Wendy Brown in her book State of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity observes the process in which identity politics became technologies of state governance when the categories of identity became the part of the liberal administrative discourse and thus they were utilized for the state regulation of the population. For her, politics of identity revolves around the “wounded attachments” which compulsively recur/remain as the source of the politics that limits political practice to blaming rather than changing the political geography. (52-76) Also see Todd Gitlin, “The Rise of ‘Identity Politics’: An examination and critique” or The Twilight of Common Dreams: why America is wracked by culture wars; Marion Tapper, “Ressentiment and Power” in Nietzsche, Feminism, and Political (130-143).
The year 1987 was the year that marked the watershed line in the history of democratization in South Korean modern history. The democratization in its practical sense was made in this year. A nation-wide uprising (the June Democratic Uprising) in 1987 ended authoritarian rule and prompted the first direct election since 1972 when dictator Park Cheong-Hee repealed the direct election. The dictatorship that
lasted over 30 years before 1987 originated in the Korean War and the subsequent emergence of the authoritarian regimes whose slogan was “strong state.” The modernization of the Korean economy on the one hand and anti-communist national solidarity on the other hand motivated the fortification of the dictatorship. However, the more the dictatorship extended, the more violent and wide the democratization movement became. The successful economic development of 1970s especially along with increased state censorship, lead to two polarized responses to the dictatorship and also contributed to the continuous irritation of democratic movements. The recurring massive “revolts” punctuated the modern Korean history; examples include the April 19th Revolution in 1960, the Bu-San/Ma-San Resistance in 1979, the Gwang-Ju Popular Uprising in 1980, and the June Democratic Uprising in 1987. This is especially apparent in 1980, when neo-military forces seized the power after a short period of political vacuum ensuing from the assassination of dictator Park Cheong-Hee. The short period prior to the Fifth Republic, which was called the ‘Spring of Seoul’ due to the growing outlook towards the transition to democracy, was followed by a military coup d’état that established the Fifth Republic. The Gwang-Ju Uprising that Lee Chang-Dong mentioned took place as a violent resistance against the regime, which declared the state of emergency right after its constitution and brutally quelled the uprising citizens. For further reading, see Choi Jang-Jip, Structure and Change of Contemporary South Korean Politics and Democracy after Democratization.

While Shin-Ae’s cry of conversion is magnificently acted by the actress, Jeon Do-Yeon, so that it almost imposes an emotional identification on the spectator, Jong-Chan’s non-charismatic and subtle acting, supported by the camera work, helps to re-direct the otherwise affective excess to critical distance. Jeon Do-Yeon won the Prix d’interprétation féminine du Festival de Cannes (Best Actress) at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival. The film also won the award for Best Film at the Asian Film Awards and at the Asia Pacific Screen Awards.

The literal translation of the Korean idiom is “it [Mil-yang town] is small as one’s palm.” In Korean language, Palm is a usual metaphor used to mean that everything is clearly visible as if one saw her own palm.

Lee Hyun-Seung and Song Jeang-Ah argue that Jong-Chan plays a Mise en abyme role in which he transparently reflects Shin-Ae’s desire. They partly draw their argument on Mise en abyme from Jeong Hyuk-Hyun’s “Secret Sunshine, the thorn in her throat”; specifically they quoted from Jeong’s Lacanian reading: “Speakers vacillate on the axis of Jong-Chan between Shin-Ae’s self a and Shin-Ae’s the other a’ and they recognize the complexity inherent in the re-doubling of Shin-Ae’s self had it not been for Jong-Chan” (Jeong 92, my translation). Here Shin-Ae’s the other a’ is the ideal image she tries to construct in Mil-yang. But the image that Shin-Ae tries to build is not only an “ideal” image but also a false image that the society imposes on Shin-Ae. In a sense, the “ideal” image is never ideal for Shin-Ae precisely because she is aware of the falsity of that image. Shin-Ae’s dismissal of Jong-Chan shows the ambiguity and falsity of this “ideal” image; the re-doubling in question seems not so much between ideal self (the other) and her real self as between the double-binding social situation that makes her abject and that forces her to deny her abject situation and her will and attempt to overcome the situation while any means for success in that goal is socially unavailable.

The literal translation of Mise en abyme is “placed into the abyss/center.” It usually means “a picture within a picture,” “self-image on a mirror,” “a frame within a frame” and “an story within a story.” Craig Owens defines “en abyme” as “any fragment of a text that reproduces in miniature the structure of the text in its entirety” (75). While Owens’ approach is technical and textual and thus focused on “en abyme” itself, Gregory Minissale’s approach emphasizes the author’s act of “placing” and thus her “consciousness” involved in the act. Thus the mise en abyme, for him, is “a process of representation within representation which points to the mise en abyme of consciousness that produces it, and is engaged with it in the art experience.” Accordingly, it “is not simply to be found in the text, author or reader, but in the cooperation of all those in the field of consciousness” (49).

According to Marc Raymond, the Average Shot Length (ASL) of Secret Sunshine is 20.6 seconds, which is, compared to current mainstream filmmaking’s tendency for minimalist approach (for example, the ASL of the 2006 film Brick by Rian Johnson is 4.5 seconds), relatively long. He convincingly argues that Lee’s long takes should be understood as an extension of Bazinian realism whose goal is “to bring the spectator
‘into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality. Therefore, it is correct to say that independently of the contents of the image, its (the long take, deep space) structure is more realistic’” (35). Interestingly, Bazin’s argument is about a “dialectic progress” (38) of image/montage and realist mode of filming. Explaining montage (including that of Eisenstein) as “the creation of a sense or meaning not proper to images themselves but derived from their juxtaposition,” he argues that the cinematic meaning comes out of editing in case of montage. This limitation was overcome with the advent of technology that enables realism which “makes it[montage] an integral part” [of realism]. (35) See Marc Raymond and also Andre Bazin, “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema” in What is Cinema?


25 In A Film Unfinished, Hersonski reframes footage produced in 1942 (found in 1954) for Nazi propaganda with outtake footage found in 1998, bringing to light the 1942 “documentary” footage was thoroughly staged by the Nazis. The original documentary was intended, it is revealed now through Hersonski’s editing, for German spectators, to provide the “documentary” evidence of the corrupt and decadent Jewish bourgeoisie that presumably caused the abject life in Warsaw ghetto. A Film Unfinished is also a documentary that records several ghetto survivors watching the rescreening of the entire 1942 footage for the first time. Upon this interlacing of three different viewpoints—the original footage, later found outtake footage, the current spectatorship of the survivors, Hersonski also incorporates the spoken excerpts of the diaries of the ghetto survivors, the use of slow motions and non-diegetic music, the inclusion of Willy West’s (one of the cameramen in the Nazis 1942 documentary project) court testimony which is re-enacted by a well-known actor, Rüdiger Vogler, in a way in which they “usurp the earlier film’s authority (141).” In terms of composition of frames, her visual rewriting of and commenting on “German propaganda and a lengthy history of Holocaust films” such as Dieter Hildebrandt’s The Yellow Star (1981), Erwin Leiser’s Mein Kampf (1960) and many others makes A Film Unfinished “best understood in context of other films (157)” See Brad Prager, “The Warsaw Ghetto, Seen from the Screening Room: The Images That Dominate A Film Unfinished.”

26 Okwui Enwezor also asserts the relevance of documentary in his article “Documentary/Vérité: Bio-Politics, Human Rights, and the Figure of ‘Truth’ in Contemporary Art.” He seems to side with a direct representation and engagement with social issues. According to him, since the modern divide between aesthetics and politics has been so firmly regulated that “[Greenbergian] abstraction’s interiorization of artistic vision as a uniquely and internally coherent world,” “purges the external world from the space of art,” resulting in the proliferation, in art galleries and museums, of “commodity objects” that come into being by “pushing the concept of abstraction more in the direction of the opacity evident in recent abstract art’s artful contentlessness” (64). As a result, the dominant way to read “the disfigured tradition of the documentary” “converges with a surprisingly conservative notion of the disinterestedness of art in its relations with social life (63).” Enwezor finds the contemporary thrust for documentary production in the sites of Agambenian bare life which he also translates into Levinasian ‘being-for-the-other.’ Clement Greenberg is a usual target for defenders of documentary as he notoriously describes the intrinsic inability of the photograph to “transcend its almost inevitable function as document and act as a work of art as well” (60). See Clement Greenberg, The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949.

27 The word BokBuIn was coined in 1970s when the modernization and economic development of Korea was at its peak. These well-educated and rich housewives of high-ranking husbands are known to come from Kang-Nam, otherwise known as the “Manhattan” or “Beverly Hills” of Seoul. But the development of Kang-Nam area itself was the starting point of the recent history of land speculation in Korea. In early 1960s, Kang-Nam (literally river south) was underdeveloped area while most of the wealth of Seoul was concentrated in the north area of Han river. As soon as the development of KangNam centering on mass construction of large-scale apartments was decided, it turned out that land speculation was the most profitable business. The BokBuIn phenomenon was severely criticized in the 70s and 80s despite its rapid spread; but the term BokBuIn becomes obsolete in 1990s when land speculation is considered a wise (woman’s business as the new term “Jae(wealth)-Tech” (meaning financial technology or investment skill)
that replaces BokBuIn becomes a new norm especially in Seoul. But without doubt, Jae-Tech is rich person’s business the image of which is still haunting the local economy of many small towns like Mil-
yang.

Ray Chow sees the Christianity described in *Secret Sunshine* as a form of “Progressivist Christian evangelism” (229). While this chapter generally agrees with her view, a more extensive sociological research is necessary to determine the exact nature of Korean evangelism, let alone the Christianity described in *Secret Sunshine*. Still, while it is more than possible that *Secret Sunshine*’s described Christianity does not represent the various aspects and dynamics of the current Korean Evangelical Christianity, *Secret Sunshine*’s point is not to critique Korean Christianity in a wholesale manner. Rather, the movie’s focus is on a particular form of Christianity—that is, a Christianity that is very much invested in the affective economy of suffering.
Works Cited


Cleveland, Todd. "“We Still Want the Truth”: The ANC's Angolan Detention Camps and Post-Apartheid Memory." Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East 25.1 (2005): 63-77. Web.


Raymond, Marc ““It’s better not to lie, but it’s hard to stimulate the audience otherwise”: realism and melodrama in Lee Chang-Dong’s Secret Sunshine.” Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media 52 (Summer 2010). Web.


Samuelson, Meg. "The Disfigured Body of the Female Guerrilla: (De)Militarization,


Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature.* Oxford: Oxford University Press,
Wolfe, Katharine “From Aesthetic to Politics: Ranciere, Kant and Deleuze.” 


