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Table of Contents

List of Figures

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that representations of economic experience as epitomized by heightened states of feeling—the despair following a bad day at the stock market, the panic set off by reports of an impending bubble, the excitement around rapid gains in a company's valuation—tell only part of the story of economic feeling in the US and UK after 1973. Such inflationary narratives of economic behavior, which posit the drastic highs and lows of avid *participation*, fail to account for the lurking forms of non-participation that haunt the period. Guided by affect theory's turn to what Lauren Berlant calls "reticent action," "Letdown Aesthetics: Economic Withdrawal in the Long Downturn, 1970 to the Present" argues for the undertheorized centrality of withdrawal and withholding to 20th and 21st century notions of economic life and citizenship. Turning to scenes of not working, not investing, and not consuming, along with the genres that house them in literature, film, and television, I argue that critical focus on intensified states like runaway speculation and entrepreneurial hyperactivity cannot, on their own, account for the present's affective structures. The aesthetic and practical strategies of withholding that become manifest in slacking on the job, declining to invest in one's home, and turning away from commodities believed to degrade sociality capture the vast fallout of financialization, precarious employment, and overconsumption that characterize capitalistic development in the latter half of the 20th century to the present. By centering scenes of economic withdrawal, which emerge in conjunction with the transition from relative postwar prosperity in western industrialized economies to a crisis in profitability that continues into the present day, "Letdown Aesthetics" foregrounds both the seething discontent and minor pleasures of opting out precisely when one is expected to buy in. My case studies build new readings of convergences of affective and economic activity to offer a more nuanced account of the evolving connections between feeling and economic value that continue to shape contemporary life under capitalism.

Letdown Aesthetics opens with the question of changing attitudes about compulsory (but increasingly insecure) work, focusing on through those who aren't doing said work properly. Chapter One, "Suspense, Suspension, and Slackers in the Office," follows historical transformations in white-collar worker unease with office life in order to understand what it has meant—historically, socially, affective—to work in the office. *Suspense* is this chapter's term for aesthetic and existential states of suspension that surface in recent office novels such as Ed Park's *Personal Days*, Ling Ma's *Severance*, and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, in which the office becomes a space of uncertainty and precarity rather than drudgery. I argue that suspense and its new, deflated form in these novels, arises in response to the relatively fresh precarity that affects white-collar work as postwar prosperity begins to run out in the US. It is thus historically and aesthetically distinct from the anxieties that characterized midcentury studies of the "new middle class" and the sixties' critique of the office as conformist, authoritarian, and deindividualizing—a place, in effect, where the nerve-wracking but also vitalizing effects of suspense could not be found. As the long downturn progresses, the exemplary figure in workplace narratives becomes not the discontented worker who feels trapped at their job, but the simultaneously bored and anxious slacker who spends their time at work trying to make sense of their wildly unstable environment. This chapter is ultimately interested in the role suspense plays in *creating* slackers: by creating the conditions for withdrawal, suspense upends the structures of

expectation that allow business to go on as usual, rendering processes of valuation—of determining what has or does not have value—volatile again.

Chapter Two takes up divestment and investment as two sides of the coin that is financialization, focusing on the ones who do not embrace but ignore "sound" investment advice. "Minor Humor and Affective Investment/Divestment" reads the often understated act of divestment—withdrawing resources in order to redistribute them to other, more potentially profitable realms—as something other than the mere cancellation of bonds between investor and investee. While divestment is officially framed as the quiet, uneventful dissolution of social and financial relations no longer considered beneficial, this chapter thinks about the affective shadow economy that emerges among those who have been designated as not worth investing in, particularly in a period in which investment has become the parlance of care and provision. It examines low-key acts of self-divestment that respond to divestment by counterintuitively withdrawing affective resources from an already dire situation. Turning to two Mike Leigh films about British housing in the 80s, I hone in on characters who fail to invest in public housing made newly available for private purchase, even as this investment is being incentivized (particularly for white families) by Thatcher's "Right to Buy" scheme. Marginally included in these state-sponsored calculations of growing one's wealth, Leigh's white working-class characters nonetheless fail to take up the offer. I analyze these acts under the rubric of "humoring" as modes of non-committalness, as suggested by humoring in its vernacular sense of indulgence, but also by drawing on Freud's theory of humor as a mode of affective deflation best characterized by the response it withholds and the circumstances it alleviates. A counterintuitive response to situations of economic degradation—which might more intuitively trigger reactions of panic, outrage, disappointment, or even compensatory investment—humor surprises and frustrates with its commitment to minimal commitment.

The final chapter, "Lonely Consumption and the Aesthetics of Sincerity," turns to practices of consumption in the wake of the so-called "death of irony." Looking at film and TV work by Jaren Hess and Michel Gondry, as well as cultural criticism from Robert Putnam and David Foster Wallace, I attend to sincerity aesthetics in the contemporary, sometimes gathered under the amorphous category of a "new" sincerity," as a form of consumption, offering strategies for bringing things and people close. While these forms try to transcend the contingencies of commodified mediation, they merely end up revising them. Placing the contemporary turn to sincerity within the context of a distinctly postmodern concern with loneliness, I theorize loneliness less as the apprehension of missing relation with other human beings than a loss of faith in the ability of consumer culture to mediate relation at all. Examining two forms of sincere aesthetics in particular, the aesthetics of closed circulation and the aesthetics of conflation, the chapter explores sincerity through its experiments in spatializing sociality, whether these experiments involve cordoning off space, as with do-it-yourself objects and the fantasy of circuits of closed circulation, or collapsing previously separated spaces, as with tactics of direct address, and playing with what is diegetic, in talk shows and children's shows. Ultimately, I conclude that the sociality sincerity imagines as a salve to loneliness is an insular one: rather than recuperating a lost or previously undiscovered form of utopian communality, "New Sincerity" texts stylize forms of sheltered relation that rely on a fantasy and aesthetics of restricted circulation. Contemporary sincerity cannot be understood, then, without considering the possibilities that fall out in its particular vision of a world re-sensitized and re-enchanted.

INTRODUCTION:
Economic Feeling in Times of Crisis

> *"A growing body of evidence demonstrates that in some contexts and for identifiable reasons, people make choices that are not in their best interest, even when the stakes are high."*[1]
>
> *"The creeping suspicion is that the economy is best understood as a division of the affective arts."*[2]

I. The Convenience of Economic "Irrationality"

In times of market crisis, a little economic irrationality can go a long way. If questions like "how did things get so out of hand?"[3] and "why didn't anyone see this coming?" seem to demand a response in a similarly dramatic key, they find an answer of sorts in stories of imprudent consumers and "ordinary" investors failing to read the signs of imminent collapse. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, as countless lost their savings and homes and the global economy went into freefall, some economists traced responsibility back to the impulsiveness of American consumers: in the news cycle, terms like "irrational exuberance" made their requisite appearance. Underlying these formulations was a wish: suppose the explanation for economic volatility lay not in the overextended mechanisms of credit provision and financialization necessitated by an economy experiencing sustained stagnation of growth since the 1970s, but rather in the choices of misguided consumers who had goaded one another on in a cacophony of misprision, oblivious to the better judgment of the market? What if it were not a matter of finally

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[1] Cass R. Sunstein, "The Storrs Lectures: Behavioral Economics and Paternalism," *The Yale Law Journal* Vol. 122 Iss. 7 (November 2012), 2.
[2] Brian Massumi, *The Power at the End of the Economy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 2.
[3] Ben Bernanke begins his memoir about heading the Fed in the midst of the 2008 financial crisis with a scene of George W. Bush asking him "How did we get to this point?" "The question," Bernanke assures his readers, "was rhetorical"—which is the problem.

reckoning with the destructiveness of capital, but of finding the right models for human error and "irrationality," for the susceptibility to feeling?

These theories of financial meltdown offer what might be termed a theory of economic feeling—a theory, that is, of feeling that lodges, moves through, and animates subjects in an economic system. The appeal to atomized, though synchronized, feeling in the midst of a global financial crisis signals a mobilizing of the affective that apprehends systemic crisis as the outcome of individual error. As an ideological formation, economic irrationality becomes a way to think about crisis (and, more importantly, dysfunction) that automatically locates volatility solely in individuals' susceptibility to moods and bias. Such sleight of hand is interesting not least for the way in which it demonstrates that economists are perfectly capable of being affect theorists of a particular type. Far from needing to be apprised of the critical importance of feeling, economists often *do* seek to factor in "noneconomic" considerations like aversion to risk and susceptibility to temptation or panic—things that do not only involve processing data but bring in the vicissitudes of sensation and emotion—in an attempt to nudge their models closer to economic reality. The affective is afforded particularly prominent explanatory power in fields like behavioral economics, where study of economic decisions is informed by psychological and sociological insight. Regina Gagnier, too, writes about how earlier shifts in economic thought have incited attentiveness to things like desire and "insatiability," itself a cultural-economic invention informed by the prospect of *subjective* valuation.[4] Unsurprisingly, this use of feeling rarely happens in good faith: Annie McClanahan points out that affect in the "so-called affective approach to choice" becomes little more than a "foil" for economic reason, defined by its lack

[4] Gagnier's focus is on the marginal revolution, associated with thinkers like Carl Menger and Stanley Jevons.

rather than any radical capacity for structuring analysis.[5] Both as the basis for rationality and as the origin of irrationality, feeling as an economic concept provides a testing ground for how accurate forecasting instruments can be, and serves as a ready scapegoat for the sudden and supposedly unforeseen subversion of economic systems otherwise thought to be self-regulating. How better to explain egregious failures in modeling and forecasting than to appeal to that which falls outside the realm of rational calculation altogether? Far from indicating mere noise in an otherwise efficient system, the unruliness of affect becomes a central confounding factor for behavioral economists: feelings like panic, over- and under-confidence can end up having outsized effects, becoming important, if unpredictable, drivers of market trends. The consequences of this susceptibility to feeling can supposedly range anywhere from mundane manipulation—being influenced by airport vending machines selling flight insurance right before the flight[6]—to the catastrophic.

If, in the free-market version of the social, the aggregation of "little-handed decisions" made in self-interest can generate "mutually beneficial multiplier effects" and a " 'spontaneous synthesis' of what's best for all,"[7] the reverse, it seems, might also be true: poor decisions made at the level of the individual can quickly snowball into systemic crises. George Akerlof's and Robert J. Shiller's *Animal Spirits: How Human Psychology Drives the Economy, and Why It Matters for Global Capitalism*, which joined the industry of financial and policy advice generated directly in response to the 2008 financial crisis, makes this point by drawing on the

[5] Annie McClanahan, *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First Century Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 27.
[6] Robert Shiller this example uses to explain the implications of Kahneman and Tversky's "prospect theory" in the Open Yale Courses series.
[7] Brian Massumi, *The Power at the End of the Economy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 3.

Keynesian notion of "animal spirits." For them, or psychologists like Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky whose work is heavily cited in behavioral economics, "behavior" is confined to a very specific set of phenomena—observable (and exemplary) human action, framed as "choice." Analyses of economic irrationality are no exception: the affective topics have changed, but not the presuppositions. The innovation of accounting "variations in individual feelings, impressions, and passions,"[8] "thought patterns," "changing confidence, temptations, envy, resentment, and illusions"[9] ultimately lead back to *homo economicus*–this time with battery pack included.

Economic crisis understood as the aggregate effect of faulty, feeling-addled individual decision-making also provides the context for approaches such as Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein's in *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness,* which seeks to directly target the behavior in question. Thaler and Sunstein propose a philosophy they call "libertarian paternalism"[10]: "when we use the term libertarian to modify the word paternalism, we simply mean liberty-preserving"; "the paternalistic aspect lies in the claim that it is legitimate for choice architects to try to influence people's behavior in order to make their lives longer, healthier, and better."[11] This combination of freedom preservation and "because it's good for you" care informs their theorization of "nudges," suggestions for more optimized, more individually and socially beneficial choices that would operate through the affective power of suggestion. "Putting the fruit at eye level counts as a nudge. Banning junk food does not."[12] Such

[8] George Akerlof and Robert J. Shiller, *Animal Spirits: How Human Psychology Drives the Economy, and Why It Matters for Global Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1.
[9] Akerlof and Shiller, 14.
[10] Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 5.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Thaler and Sunstein, 6.

an approach is in keeping with nudge theory's fundamental investment in the self-governing individual of liberalism: the understated nature of the nudges, designed to be "weak, soft, and nonintrusive," would recommend rather than coerce. Eat this, buy that, save more, pee here.[13] Most importantly, choice architects and policy makers would ultimately defer to the individual's own judgment, seeking to influence choices in a way "that will make choosers better off, *as judged by themselves."*[14]

The interlocking tonalities of crisis and mildness seem to get at what is so disorienting about contemporary economic discourse's insistence on irrationality, which preserves so much of the existing understanding of economic organization even as it melodramatically stages the stakes of systemic transformation.[15] If the effect of "animal spirits" are as disruptive of the economic system as Shiller says, if "temptation" or "confidence" can, in effect, bring an entire system to its knees, then surely more drastic measures are needed. And if ameliorative attempts to suggestively govern individual choice don't take, what then? Even the most cunning nudges designed to look out for a consumer's best interests are haunted by the prospect of those who, despite paternal nudges or portentous warnings, refuse to see good sense. Or those who, if asked to judge for themselves, would not align with the experts in their definition of what constituted the "better" choice. [16]

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[13] Christopher Ingraham, "What's a urinal fly, and what does it have to do with winning a Nobel Prize?," *The Washington Post*, October 9, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/10/09/whats-a-urinal-fly-and-what-does-it-have-to-with-winning-a-nobel-prize/

[14] Ibid., 5. (my italics)

[15] Here I am borrowing from Berlant's definition of the melodramatic as "gestural inflation." (Berlaant, "Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*")

[16] Shiller's work in behavioral finance noticeably lacks an account of the systemic. In an essay on the shortcomings of the efficient markets theory, which posits that price is the index of accurate analysis of "genuine" data, Shiller focuses on the inaccuracy of forecasting mechanisms in relation to relatively stable markets, while having no language for the volatility of financial

From a cultural critic's perspective, then, the unruliness of affect is something these economists note but don't know what to do with. Despite inclusion in the economist's toolbox, affect's complex modes of amplification, feedback, contagion are not used to offer much in the way of narrativizing or historicizing. Much has been said about the one-dimensionality and crudeness of the economically modeled subject: McClanahan describes the "psychologically thin" subject of economic behavioralism;[17] Philip Mirowski rolls his eyes the "cognitively thin and emotionally deprived agent of neoclassical rationality"[18]; Jane Elliott notes that in modeling its subjects, microeconomics strips away the "specific elements of their lives that do not allow recoding in register of interest," leaving its subjects "devoid of experiential and affective specificity."[19]

The consensus that a purely economic approach provides an unsatisfactory account of affective life, however, leaves us with more questions than answers. When using affect as an

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instruments themselves. For Shiller, it is always a question of synchrony rather than collectivity. How do we, or enough of us, come to feel the "same" thing at the "same" time such that it registers in the market? Careful, at least rhetorically, to avoid pinning the destabilization of modern markets entirely on individuals, Shiller does nonetheless return to the individual's susceptibility to circulating narratives: "bubbles are not, to my mind, about the craziness of investors. They are rather about how investors are buffeted *en masse* from one superficially plausible theory about conventional valuation to another." His more recent work has been on the means of this collective persuasion, taking up a thread that has been there throughout his work—interest in the media's role in determining prices, and the "contagion" what he calls "narrative." Robert J. Shiller, "Speculative Asset Prices" (Nobel Prize in Economics Lecture, December 8, 2013)

[17] Ibid.

[18] Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London: Verso, 2014), 257.

[19] Jane Elliott, *The Microeconomic Mode: Political Subjectivity in Contemporary Popular Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 25. This affective stripping down corresponds, in Elliott, to a stripping down of environment and situations—protagonists find themselves in life or death situations and post-apocalyptic worlds. In a review of the book, McClanahan points out problems with the way Elliott historicizes microeconomics, as well as the way she characterizes the microoeconomics ideology of choice.

analytic, what ambitions do you have for its explanatory power? What *can* affect account for, and what can it not? And if, as critiques of mainstream economics' reliance on reductive individualism have pointed out, the conflation of individual and collective feeling amounts to a category error,[20] how do we move between the two? Then there is the problem of sampling. The types of feelings invoked in these analyses tend to be associated with the disastrous, the calamitous, the dangerously exaggerated: crises of confidence, bursts of overconfidence. It is not difficult to imagine how theories of economic feeling that organized themselves around booms and busts might lend themselves to melodramatic framing. The deliberate redundancy of a phrase like "irrational exuberance"—since when has "exuberance" not *already* connoted irrationality? —feels doubly primed to conjure images of people in over their heads. (When Alan Greenspan used "irrational exuberance" on television in 1995, the term itself was apparently enough to send the stock market—briefly—into a downward spiral.) The story of people losing their minds over arbitrarily and unstably hyped-up commodities in "frenzies" of high-stakes guesswork and projection has been told periodically through history—the object may mutate, but the language of heightened affective states remains.[21]

But what Massumi calls the "affective commotion" of the market need not hew to these select—and, in many ways, exceptional—moods. Nor can the ideology of choice guarantee that the motivations behind economic activity will be legible across all cases. Take the Gamestop stock fiasco, for instance. When Gamestop shares took off in January of 2021, unexpectedly

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[20] Brian Massumi, *The Power At the End of the Economy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

[21] Economic irrationality's convenient promotion in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis was, in some ways, reminiscent of descriptions of [financial crashes] from earlier centuries. When, people in the 17th century Dutch Republic could be found selling their homes for a handful of exotic tulip bulbs, Charles Mackay described the scene as one of speculative "mania," "frenzy," "unmerited encomia."

threatening investment firms who had confidently shorted GME stock with the prospect of potentially infinite loss,[22] the phrase "irrational exuberance" made the rounds once more. Investment bankers and financial analysts warned that these bets against Wall Street could dangerously volatize the market—some chastised the self-proclaimed "diamond hands," who refused to sell regardless of violent fluctuations in GME price, for playing a game they didn't understand. It is not difficult to hear echoes of Mackay's description of tulipomania in references to the Gamestop "mania" and "buying frenzy." The experts' panic was understandable, perhaps: ordinary investors had taken on "smart money" and come out on top, at least for the time being. The disciplinary function of invoking economic irrationality became clear: mainstream reporting and financial expertise was being used to intimidate investors who weren't playing by the rules. Trading platforms like Robinhood, Charles Schwab, TD Ameritrade, and Interactive Brokers moved to curb trade in GME stock (and other stock like AMC, which some had suggested would be the next runaway stock), closing down trading for the day early or simply preventing purchases. The financial sector had no interest in the gentle paternalism of nudges, it seemed.

What commentators on the Gamestop "frenzy" did not leave room for, however, was the possibility that other motivations—other than solely wanting to make profit—and other responses—other than recklessness and exuberance—suffused the scene. Unfolding in the wake of a burst housing bubble that had been created in large part by unscrupulous dealings at the level of banks and credit rating agencies, the Gamestop episode stirred up other feelings about the role of American banking in the global economy. An "open letter" in the popular "Wall Street Beats" Reddit thread includes the bracing invocation: "To Melvin Capital: you stand for everything I hated during that time." The writer unfolds their financial "reasoning" thus:

[22] The risk of bottomless loss is inherent to the short position.

> Your continued existence is a sharp reminder that the ones in charge of so much hardship during the '08 crisis were not punished. And your blatant disregard for the law, made obvious months ago through your (for the Melvin lawyers out there: alleged) illegal naked short selling and more recently market manipulation after hours shows that you haven't learned a single thing since '08. And why would you? Your ilk were bailed out and rewarded for terrible and illegal financial decisions that negatively changed the lives of millions. I bought shares [of GameStop Corporation] a few days ago. I dumped my savings into GME [GameStop Corporation], paid my rent for this month with my credit card, and dumped my rent money into more GME (which for the people here at WSB, I would not recommend). And I'm holding. This is personal for me, and millions of others. You can drop the price of GME after hours $120, I'm not going anywhere. You can pay for thousands of reddit boots, I'm holding. You can get every mainstream media outlet to demonize us, I don't care. I'm making this as painful as I can for you.[23]

Apostrophizing its institutional addressee to uncanny effect, the letter's defiant tone and direct address ("you") point to an affectively-laden relation with that which could not possibly respond in kind— a manifestation of feeling that does not exist between persons, even figurative persons, even as it borrows from the lexicon of the interpersonal. "This is personal for me" is not a factual statement but a promissory one, with all the seriousness a promise entails: not this is personal but I am *making* this personal. What might otherwise be considered merely transactional becomes, here, affectively loaded, but not in the ways the "financial strategy" columnists at the New York Times had been suggesting. That "holding" is not an idiosyncrasy is, too, part of the point: the writer invokes an invisible collective, networked through injury caused by the financial system, knowledge of this very system, and a structure of feeling that escapes rational economic accounting. Mixed in with this sense of collective feeling is also the sense of the unevenness of its distribution—this letter is not meant to be a piece of financial advice, I am feeling this but you may not. Going all in represented, at once, a collectively-informed and deeply personal decision.

[23] Ssauron. (2021, January 27). An Open Letter to Melvin Capital, CNBC, Boomers, and WSB. [Online forum]. Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/wallstreetbets/comments/l6omry/an_open_letter_to_melvin_capital_cnbc_boomers_and/

The letter resonated with other letters and comments and stories that popped up in the thread and elsewhere throughout the week. The message to those who believed Gamestop investors were operating under mere delusion was clear: not everyone plays the game for the same reasons. The proliferation of testimonials, many of which referenced personal experience of the fallout of 2008, made clear that there were those who participated in the short squeeze precisely *while* bearing in mind the effect it would have on Wall Street investors. This was certainly not the hapless, easily swayed "ordinary investor" of Shiller's description. Instead, this was overvaluation both at its most calculated and at its most irreverent—lay investors remained, at least on these forums, undaunted by forecasts of the stock's (or even the system's) imminent collapse not only because they no longer trusted the establishment, but also because undermining the system was precisely the point. Not straightforwardly or devastatingly causal in the way some experts warned it would be, the Gamestop short squeeze was not entirely lacking in efficacy either. While Gamestop investors and their combination of retribution, justice, greed, excitement, reverence did not trigger economic collapse, their actions did catch the financial establishment off guard. The gesture of squeezing, of increasing pressure without necessarily puncturing or otherwise damaging, is an application of force that can leave marks and aftersensations, bruising or deflation depending on whether the thing being squeezed is filled with blood or hot air. This middle range of agency,[24] not grandiose but not negligible either, exceeded attempts to map, influence, or control it.

Ultimately, the amateur Gamestop investors exposed the hypocrisy of Wall Street but offered few alternatives to the logics of rampant speculation.[25] Nevertheless, the questions the

[24] I borrow this from Eve Sedgwick.
[25] As a critique of financial institutions, the Gamestop case has its limits. The choice to invest in Gamestop was based on market research (leadership of the company had recently changed, there

Gamestop episode raised about feeling and the role feelings play in economic activity remain long after public focus had moved on. What exactly would it mean to talk about economic feelings? To what end would one track or describe or theorize those feelings?

This dissertation serves as a corrective to economic discourse that focus on booms and busts to the exclusion of what happens in between these moments. Bubbles burst suddenly, but the most of the time, collective prosperity—a suspect term in itself—deflates more gradually. I argue that representations of economic experience as epitomized by heightened states of feeling—the despair following a bad day at the stock market, the panic set off by reports of an impending bubble, the excitement around rapid gains in a company's valuation—tell only part of the story of economic feeling in the US and UK after 1973. Such inflationary narratives of economic behavior, which posit the drastic highs and lows of avid participation, fail to account for the lurking forms of non-participation that haunt the period. Guided by affect theory's turn to what Lauren Berlant calls "reticent action," "Letdown Aesthetics: Economic Withdrawal from 1970 to the Present" argues for the undertheorized centrality of withdrawal and withholding to 20th and 21st century notions of economic life and citizenship. Turning to scenes of not working, not investing, and not consuming, along with the genres that house them in literature, film, and television, I argue that critical focus on intensified states like runaway speculation and entrepreneurial hyperactivity cannot, on their own, account for the present's tangle of affective

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were indications that the company's business model was undergoing much-needed renovation), projections of possible earnings (because the stocks were initially so cheap, there was potential for massive earnings), and calculations of ratios of risk to reward. When it came time to assess the damage claimed on both sides, the focus inevitably returned to the question of whether there had been market manipulation. Politicians from both sides spoke in defense of the independent traders' rights to market "access," concerned primarily with the violation of unfettered, equally accessible free market, or at least to the fantasy of equal access. The possibility of—and potential fallout from—"market manipulation" was presented as the most dangerous aspect of this episode.

structures. The aesthetic and practical strategies of withholding at play in slacking on the job, declining to invest in one's home, and turning away from commodities believed to degrade sociality capture the vast fallout of financialization, precarious employment, and overconsumption that characterize capitalistic development in the latter half of the 20th century to the present. By centering scenes of economic withdrawal, which emerge in conjunction with the transition from relative postwar prosperity in western industrialized economies to a crisis in profitability that continues into the present day, "Letdown Aesthetics" foregrounds both the seething discontent and minor pleasures of opting out precisely when one is expected to buy in.

As I will discuss, I am interested in scenes that remain illegible in terms of action or choice—recessive action. One way to get away from the affective logics of the "purely" economic accounts I have been drawing from would be to get away from the rigid architecture of choice and personal sovereignty, as well as the unproblematic exemplarity they presume. Drawing from important work in affect theory on "recessive" and "reticent" action, this project is interested in how people move through environments that promise them security but fail to deliver, and in turn cast them as inconvenient, obstructive, and dispensable. The insistence on economic irrationality as the secret cousin to rational, observable economic behavior indicates a failure to grapple with feelings that are less about instant and overblown reaction, and more about apprehension and processing. To draw an example from one of the chapters that follows: a person's failure to work towards buying one's house as an investment during the time of government-subsidized housing purchase schemes would most likely register as an act of irrationality for some, an act of prudence for others. But the reduction of that situation to the choice to buy or not to buy, and the rubrics "rational" and "irrational," leaves out all manner of responses, forms of attachment and affective management that permeate the scene of divestment

masquerading as investment in that period. I have learned this mode of attending to the environment and scenic aspects of affective situations from Lauren Berlant's work, which I will be citing extensively throughout this project.

Irrationality would be too convenient an explanation for the scenes I look at: scenes of not working when there is already less work to be had, not investing when citizens are being asked to take more and more control over their own investments, attaching to commodities that do not seem to carry market value but might bring you friends. This dissertation is interested in kinds of economic feeling that are irreducible to sanitized logics of gain and loss, growth or stagnation, and that don't have to do with going all in but rather involve withdrawal, recession, withholding. Economic irrationality is infinitely more interesting and complex than its description as misguided choice would suggest. My case studies build new readings of convergences of affective and economic activity to offer a more nuanced account of the evolving connections between feeling and economic value that continue to shape contemporary life under capitalism. In attending to different methods for apprehending, describing, and contextualizing economic feeling, this project is trying to understand something about economic citizenship—the sense of belonging or not belonging to a system that nonetheless impacts your survival and flourishing. In the rest of this introduction, I will sketch out three methodological problems and animating questions that this dissertation grapples with.

II. From "Market Volatility" to Actual Crisis: The Problem of Structure

In the behavioralist schematic I have been tracing, economic irrationality is treated as entirely scalable, transposable from individual consumer choices (about which stocks to buy, when to enter the market and when to hold off) to massive blowouts like a financial meltdown.

This is because, as we have discussed, behavioralist discourse is organized by choice. The focus on mapping and engineering choice misses just how *much* of capitalism is not about choice, even at a systemic level. Historians of capitalist formations have repeatedly noted the way in which capitalism requires nonstop fixing,[26] and, as we will see, the question of whether capitalism can even sustain itself has been around for a long time. Even fields that are founded on the exclusion of this question must deal with it by way of denial. Microeconomic fixation on individual choice cannot but be impacted by more systemic questions of that system's health: hence the endless return to the central question of economic "irrationality," the field's way of grappling with systemic crisis. The emphasis on choice, and the equation of freedom with freedom of choice, relies on the presumption of a healthy system within which this capacity to choose would remain protected.

In order to have different conception of economic subjectivity, then, we need to have a way of talking about the economic in terms of systemic crisis, beyond individual error and beyond the paradigm of choice. Nowhere has the system's operation under its own coercion become clearer than in the last half century: as historians like Robert Brenner and literary critics like Leigh Claire la Berge as well as Colleen Lye, and Kent Puckett, C.D. Blanton have observed, the turbulence of the global economy has only intensified since the 1970s, while jobless recoveries, job insecurity and casualization, and wage stagnation are on the rise. Declining rates of economic growth and increasing volatility have led even mainstream

[26] See, for instance, David Harvey on capitalism's spatial fixes and flexible accumulation as a "fix", Annie McClanahan and Robert Brenner (among others) financialization as a stopgap for crisis in profitability and credit provision as a fix for stagnated wages and soaring unemployment, Quinn Slobodian on right wing populism as the incarnation of "fixes capitalism needs to survive."

economists to begin musing about "secular stagnation."[27] The objects of economic study have changed accordingly: McClanahan notes that behavioral economics' emergence in the 1980s coincides with a period in which "extreme market volatility began to cause economists to doubt the rationality of *homo economicus*."[28] The set pieces of the behavioralists' analysis are thus the types of "excess volatility" that a neoclassical approach could not, on its own, explain—how to account for these phenomena while keeping economics as we know it intact became the field's bread and butter. The historical reason behind behavioralism's preoccupation with market volatility, then, is more telling than the explanations that behaviorialism generates: systemic crisis is a central touchstone in the development the field that gave us "irrational exuberance."[29]

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[27] Sarah Brouillette, Joshua Clover, and Annie McClanahan, "Introduction: Late, Autumnal, Immiserating, Terminal," *Theory & Event*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (April 2019), 325. The writers note how unusual it is for mainstream economist to even talk about stagnation, a sign that things are truly dire.

[28] McClanahan, *Dead Pledges*, 25.

[29] I deeply sympathize with Lye, Blanton, and Puckett's impulse to figure myriad of historical forces at work in the present as this endless, super condensed recitation:

> … the postwar internationalization of markets in response to labor's consolidation of power and/or falling rates of profitability; the ''intensification of inter-capitalist competition [that] was itself the manifestation of the introduction of lower-cost, lower price goods into the world market, especially in manufacturing''[29]; increased lateral competition spurred by the emergence of so-called developing economies vying with and in ''first world'' markets; the waning of European and American hegemony after decolonization and decades of proxy war; the renegotiation of international currency standards and onset of floating exchange rates following the collapse of the Bretton Woods Agreement and the American abandonment of the gold standard in 1971; the displacement of an older Keynesian policy consensus with the monetarist, supply-side, and deregulatory regimes of the Thatcher-Reagan era; the neoliberal embrace of privatization strategies across the globe, under new political orthodoxies loyal to the market rather than the state; the accumulated shocks, accelerations, slowdowns, inflated and punctured bubbles of a world market increasingly at the mercy of technological advance and scarce natural resources; the ''autumnal'' decline from robust periods of European and then American hegemony into a decadent new Belle Epoque sustained by financial extraction, itself the harbinger of a next long economic cycle. And so on.[29]

"Crisis" is, addition to its more colloquial use, an economic concept. It refers to the periodic failure towards which economic systems are *internally* inclined, by virtue of their own principles of operation.[30] For theorists and historians of capitalism, crisis signals a breakdown whose causes lie in the system itself. As is to be expected, heterodox versions of crisis theory that capitalism's internal contradictions have met with an uneven reception in the field at large. The reluctance of mainstream economics to entertain what Brouillette, Clover, and McClanahan call "revolutionary theories of crisis" arises in part due to the inextricability of the economy with the affective: it matters just as much how the subjects of an economy feel about the economy, and the news that "capitalism [has been] tending towards collapse"—and violent collapse at that—could in and of itself have destabilizing effects.[31] Instead, mainstream economists, if they are to acknowledge a slowdown in growth, prefer a "zombie capitalism," characterized by a "no-growth economic system [that] neither falls nor is replaced" and "whose enervation might not end in violence."[32]

And yet, as Anwar Shaikh observes, the question is less why crises happen and more why they aren't happening all the time. Given capitalist society's contradiction between necessary

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Blanton, C.D., Colleen Lye, and Kent Puckett, "Introduction (Special Issue: Financialization and the Culture Industry)," Representations Vol. 126 Iss. 1 (Spring 2014), 1-2.

[30] Anwar Shaikh, "An Introduction to the History of Crisis Theories," *U.S. Capitalism in Crisis* (New York: Union for Radical Political Economics, 1978).

[31] Brouillette, Clover, and McClanahan, 325. The writers provide a useful laundry list of various ways Marxist cultural critics have described the crisis in contemporary capitalism: the "lateness of late capitalism" (Ernst Mandel and Fredric Jameson), crisis in capitalism's spatial dimensions and rise of new imperialism (David Harvey), historical consistency with which each political hegemon confronts the economic "signs of autumn" (Giovanni Arrighi and Fernand Braudel); "long downturn…over production driven by inter-nation competition leading to ever-narrower profits" (Robert Brenner), *wertkritik* "value form's inherent tendency towards terminal crisis" (Robert Kurz), reproductive crisis (Marxist-feminist social reproduction theory), rising global surplus population and immiseration which attends late-stage capitalism.

[32] Ibid.

cooperation and inevitable antagonism, its coordination of a vast number of different productive activities, "the truly difficult question about such a society is not why it ever breaks down, but why it continues to function."[33] Equilibrium is less likely than disequilibrium; organization less probable than disorganization. Crisis is endemic, encoded into capitalism's DNA. The question of "how and why the system periodically becomes unhealthy"[34] is thus as much a test of ideological convictions regarding capitalism's ability to reproduce itself as it is an object of actual inquiry. Shaikh sorts theorists of capitalist reproduction into three categories: those who believe that capitalism is capable of automatic self-reproduction, those who argue that the capitalist system is incapable of self-expansion and thus ultimately regulated in its reproduction by forces outside of it (an external source of demand), and those who argue that the system's limits are inherent to and the capitalist system's growth leads to its own demise.[35] As Shaikh's title indicates, these theories of capitalist reproduction necessarily double as theories of capitalist crisis—why it happens, when it happen, and what it means when it does. Shaikh's essay spends a considerable amount of time discussing Marx's controversial "law" of the "tendency of the rate of profit to fall," a theory of capitalist crisis fundamentally based in the labor theory of value. The "law" states that increasing rates of profitability in fact eventually lead to a decline in this profitability. As profitability increases, a change in the organic composition of labor (the gradual replacement of living labor with dead labor by phasing out workers for machines) leads, paradoxically, to a falling rate of profit. In seeking to improve the productivity of labor, firms end up eliminating the worker, whose labor is the only possible source of surplus value.

[33] Shaikh, 219.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.

Though regarded by many as a historical artifact rather than a living theory of economic crisis, Marx's TRPF has found an afterlife for its intuition that crisis in capitalist systems is utterly unexceptional. The notion that crisis is inevitable and even, to some degree, predictable in its historical recurrence, sets theories of the global downturn or the crisis in profitability apart from accounts of excess market volatility that we encountered in the first section. Robert Brenner's *The Economics of Global Turbulence* paints a picture of an unsalvageable system that has come up against unsurpassable limits, even by own standards: writing during a period of economic recovery, Brenner nonetheless opens the book with the startling statistic that "the average rate of unemployment in the leading capitalist economies [today]…is as high as the average during the Great Depression decade of the 1930s." Brenner tracks a steady and sustained decline in "firms' ability to derive surpluses from their plant, equipment, and software" since the late 1960s. Brenner's interest in profitability is large part an interest in submitting the system to its own measures: as a measure not only of the capacity to generate return on an investment, but of a system's "vulnerability to economic shocks," profitability is a crucial indicator of a capitalist system's health *by that system's own metric.* Giovanni Arrighi's *The Long Twentieth Century* advances an account of capitalist devolution that extends farther in both time and space, tracing "four long centuries" which have each gone through three stages: trade, industrial expansion, and finally, financialization, with its attendant symptoms of capital flight and financial volatility.[36] Fredric Jameson, and more recently, Joshua Clover, have both drawn from Arrighi's *longue dureé* account in their account of financialization's effect on cultural forms. In place of the language of volatility and unpredictability (and shortsighted "trends"), Clover notes, Arrighi

[36] Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origin of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994).

supplies a more portentous language of stages, seasons, and a "recurrent tendency." "Arrighi shows us that this contemporary knowledge of ours," Jameson writes, "only replicates the bitter experience of the dead."[37]

Of course, to see the pattern one would have to be standing far back enough to get the scale right, a perspective not typically available in the day to day to those who experience capitalism not as an object of study, but "merely" the frame of everyday life. "Crisis is the new normal"[38]—but what does that mean for the normal? Caught up in the experience of layoffs, gentrification, and commodification, the characters in my case studies are not usually standing at the proper vantage point to see these crises in their true historical proportions. Instead, their experience is associated with the intensity and locality of the present moment, as you find out whether you or your colleague has been laid off, for instance. The turn away from "excess volatility" as periodic occurrence to the long downturn as signal of widespread, systemic entropy brings up methodological questions about how to read structure, and what it means for a theoretical account of affective experience to also have a structural ambition. I often return to Berlant on "crisis rhetoric" and the continuation of ordinariness *in* crisis:

> Yet since catastrophe means change, crisis rhetoric belies the constitutive point that slow death—or the structurally induced attrition of persons keyed to their membership in certain populations—is neither a state of exception nor the opposite, mere banality, but a domain where an upsetting scene of living is revealed to be interwoven with ordinary life after all, like ants discovered scurrying under a thoughtlessly lifted rock. The very out-of-scaleness of the sensationalist rhetoric around crisis within the ordinary measures the structural intractability of a problem the world can live with, which just looks like crisis and catastrophe when attached to freshly exemplary bodies.[39]

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[37] Fredric Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 24, No. 1 (Autumn 1997), 251.
[38] Massumi, 5.
[39] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 102.

The problem, then, is one not only of correctly extrapolating global forces at work from a local instance, but of striking a balance between sensing that something urgent or collectively destabilizing is unfolding, and recognizing the ways in which that newly extractive, exploitative, desecrating change that is being experienced as unprecedented and horrifying in its novelty remains entirely continuous with the world that came "before." Hence Berlant's interest in the ordinariness of crisis, and Jameson's and Clover's investment, articulated through Arrighi, in the cyclical nature of history under capitalism. Recognizing the unexceptionality of crisis allows one to avoid the trap of positing a distinct before and after, in the search for critical tools adequate to the task of explication and transformation. Even in times of felt destabilization, it is possible to talk about the transitional structures that organize our sense of disorganization for better or for worse, as Berlant reminds us: "For crisis times are not without structure. This is a mistaken notion of structure, confusing a rise in the intensities and awareness of the multiplicity of forces bearing down on the present as a failure of principles of consistency."[40] Neither a "state of exception" nor "mere banality," systemic crisis calls for other, less "all or nothing" frequencies of attention.

"Crisis ordinariness" and Arrighi's "spiral" would seem to represent different takes on what to do with the interpretive problem of unexceptional crisis: what Jameson celebrates in Arrighi's account of the repeating stages capitalist expansion, which reliably "end" in the "terminal" crisis of financialization, would seem to exemplify the very intractability Berlant is determined to loosen. Yet, as Clover points out, Arrighi's own conception of the history he has been tracking was that it was not one of endless repetition of the same, but the casting of an ever-

[40] Lauren Berlant's Environment and Planning D: Society and Space lecture, given at the American Association of Geographers annual meeting in Chicago on 24 April 2015 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PU4AzjY9rjI

widening net. Each time, more resources, more people, a wider network of social relations, would be drawn—in foreseen and unforeseen ways— into the next stage of capitalist development, making the inevitable fallout all the more devastating. That vast historical and geographic reach of Arrighi's world-systems approach allows Clover to frame the "ideological blindness" and incapacity for "historical thought" of stock market forecasters by contrast. Writing on the nature of "prediction" under financialization—what counts as prediction, what is it understood to be for—Clover points out that while many of the heterodox economists he cites could be said to have seen the crash coming, their work would not have registered as such for the general populace. The reason for this is, very simply, that people *count* on a strategically short-sighted futurity when thinking about markets. "When we talk casually about 'who predicted the crisis,' we habitually don't mean those who understood the mechanisms, who had an analytic method that might help us understand the future that crashes in upon us." He goes on: "We mean stock pickers, more or less. We mean those whose insights could direct us when to get in and when to get out."[41] As fixated as the industry is on forecasting, it cannot accommodate foresight of a longer dureé because that would defeat the purpose of leveraging changes in price across small increments of time for profit.

In any case, I am less interested in assessing the accuracies of these theories of capitalist crisis than in exploring the affective imaginaries that theories of economic crisis and downturn extend, or don't. The chapters that follow spend less time determining the historical causes behind a particular scene of divestment, precarity, or alienation—there are skilled historians who are already doing this work—than asking "what does this theory of structural transformation mean for local and intimate experience"? How, for instance, does the waning economic status of

[41] Joshua Clover, "Autumn of the Empire," *Los Angeles Review of Books* (July 18, 2011).

western nations register in the lives of their inhabitants and citizenry? What does it look like to be asked or required to participate in risky speculation in the midst a global trend towards financialization? The rhetorical move to talk about the contemporary economic situation in terms of negativity—financialization as a move away from productive capital to "fictitious" capital and move towards greater degrees of abstraction, post- or de-industrialization and the post-Fordist labor as consisting more and more of "immaterial" labor and deregulation—nonetheless must generate an account of what is left in the wake of abstract, deregulation, or deindustrialization. What happens when the postwar boom runs out and leaves people formerly included in its purview in the lurch? What happens when structural analysis reveals the way in which the institutions that are supposed to provide for its citizens—never for everyone, but for some of them—are themselves compromised, unable to hold water? So many of the critics I cite in this dissertation are doing this work of attending to the lived experiences of economic subjects, and my hope is to follow in their steps.

I would like to end this section on the problem of structure by thinking about the particular implications of "structure" for affect theory as a method. While studying feeling as irreducible to psychological or subjective disposition is an investment common among those who study affect, what is particularly useful about structure as a concept-metaphor is the way it foregrounds the *organization* of affective knowledge—why and under what circumstances we turn to feeling for information; how we categorize feelings; what we understand to be feeling's evidentiary reliability, its efficacy as a particular genre of information. What do we think we mean when we "know" something because we "feel" it, as though the two terms were as readily equated as that? One tendency among those invested in reclaiming affect for ethics has been to

assume feeling's intelligent design and thus to place value in feeling for its direct *proximity* to thought: for Martha Nussbaum, for instance, political emotions are characterized by their bifurcation between stabilizing emotion (love) and that which threatens this aspirational stability, fear.[42] But, as critics like Berlant, Wendy Brown, Saidiya Hartman, and Jack Halberstam have explored, a politics built solely on the phenomenality of a feeling—particularly the phenomenality of painful feeling—comes with its own caveats. For one, the project of feeling one's way through politics or feeling *in lieu* of politics presumes a (clarity) at the register of feeling that protects oneself from figuring out how these impressions fit into the social, or what they tell one about the position one occupies in that social structure.

In a text that has been central to my thinking, Berlant links affect and structure to make the point that any given form of attachment, while characterized by distinctive styles investment in one's own or the world's continuity, "might *feel* any number of ways, from the romantic to the fatalistic to the numb to the nothing."[43] This delamination of structure from the immediate experience of feeling is crucial. Berlant discusses our expectations for feeling to produce transparency through immediacy as a consequence of our training in the sentimental tradition, sentimentality here indicating not only a relation to other people but a relation to the endeavor of feeling itself.[44] For Berlant, sentimentality invests in the disambiguating force of feeling, feeling's capacity to step in where other kinds of information fail to provide a protocol for action. Traumatic exemplarity has knack for generating confidence about in addition to producing the

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[42] Martha Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).
[43] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 13.
[44] Lauren Berlant, "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics" from *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999) ed. by Austin Sarat and Thomas R Kearns.

means by which to eradicate the provenance of this pain.[45] Feeling in these cases—pain in Berlant, woundedness in Wendy Brown—register less as information than as dogma, carrying the key to good politics like a trade secret: Berlant and Brown critique the notion that familiarizing yourself with the contours of bad feeling in a way that reinforces its self-evidence will be politically informative in any way. The definition of politics as the recognition and reparation of bad feeling begins to unravel, however, the moment the ostensible clarity of pain's structure is understood as anything other than perfect indexicality. Faith in feeling's clarifying ability, in its capacity to produce what Berlant calls a "subject of true feeling," misses ways in which processing affective information poses an epistemological problem for political ambition rather than merely generating compelling scenes of its fulfillment.

This project grows out of work by theorists who are interested in the ways social form and aesthetic form cannot but be thought together: the writers I have learned from draw omnivorously from literary, art historical, and cinematic vocabularies' robust taxonomies of aesthetic form to think about the aesthetics of social form. Such approaches are a crucial counterpoint to recent studies that have addressed the thorniness of reading for affective form by way of a turn to formalism—that is, by way of sequestering form to the aesthetic. Eugenie Brinkema's book *The Form of the Affects*, which prescribes for the apparently form-neglecting affective turn a "return" to form, recommends formalist readings of films and philosophical texts as a corrective to overly corporeal (and thus, in her terms, reductively subjective) accounts of affect. For Brinkema, affects register in texts *rather than* in bodies—as light, color, saturation, line, and rhythm.[46] At work here is an assumption that form is something inherently yoked to the

[45] Berlant, "Subject of True Feeling," 54.
[46] Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), xv-xvi.

aesthetic, narrowly defined: it is telling that *The Forms of the Affects* cites a particular Deleuzian tradition in its introduction of the genealogy of affective hermeneutics it is positioning itself against, while ignoring the way in which numerous queer and Marxist theorist-historians have also thought rigorously about form and affect. Consideration of "form" need not be circumscribed to the study of camera movement or photographic technique, nor does the de-personalization of feeling require a supersession of the embodied. Rather, form can refer to the ways in which affective information, embodied and disembodied, are organized and circulated. In Williams' terms, structure gathers seemingly disparate affective epiphenomenon into "a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension."[47]

The hope is that the sort of disorientation that comes with affective *structure*'s recombinatorial possibilities is enough to estrange us from our "own" feelings even as they move through us: it might very well be the case that one ignores or misconstrues an affect's structural dimension—its relation to others in the set, the organizing principle of that set—*while* saturated by the affect itself. The phenomenality of a feeling is only one dimension of that feeling. Reading for the structural in the affective—that is, acknowledging the inherent symptomaticity of a feeling's phenomenality— raises the unsettling possibility that a feeling might not be saying the thing it has personally or culturally been experienced to be saying, that it might be a less accurate (read: less direct and less reliable) indicator than previously advertised. This is different from saying that feeling constitutes a debased form of knowing in need of recalibration by more rational means—what it makes possible is a way of studying emotions that does not presume their diagnostic transparency or posit consensus about the shape affective structures can take. Thinking about feeling beyond the idiom of possession *requires* formalism—that is, thinking

[47] Williams, 132.

about how a shared structure of feeling choreographs beyond local instance, across bodies and contexts. It is this notion of affect, borrowed from the critics I have cited here, that I want to use to think about deflation as affective form.

III. On the Difficulty of Opting Out: The Problem of Recessiveness

Recessive feeling demonstrates just how tricky reading affect can be: what appears to be static absence is in fact processual, alive, changing. With recessiveness, causality become more difficult to work out: because things are in the process of being sensed, episodes that seem to present a lack of response might in fact be otherwise. What is actually being withheld, then, is not response but clear trajectories of cause and effect—or, in the parlance of behavioral economics, whether the subjects in question chose this or that under the particular conditions. Theorists of recessiveness understand affect not just, or even predominantly, as a way of approaching aa subject's action (choice, agency, decision-making, discernment), but as a theory of sensitivity, responsivity and apprehension that is interested in dilation.[48]

The conceptual slipperiness that comes with affective states that are identified with missing or reduced feeling has been registered in contemporary affect theory. States of affective opacity have captured the imagination of affect theorists interested in upending received notions of the form feeling can take. The theoretically challenging but experientially mundane problem of being faced with instances of compromised or unevenly distributed sensibility thus raises the question of affect's epistemological value in reverse: not just how to know through feeling but how to hold off on knowing through feeling. Presenting a unique conundrum for hermeneutics of

[48] Lauren Berlant, "Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin,*" *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 28 (March 2015): 195.

affect that look for visible signs of reception, styles of affectivity characterized by what they keep at bay pose the problem of how to interpret scenes of feeling in which feeling seems to be so enigmatic so as to resist being read at all. Approaches to scenes of enigmatic feeling have largely taken two approaches: querying expression and querying sensibility. Scholars working on practices and aesthetics of inexpressivity—a style of emotionality characterized by inscrutability, deadpan, blankness—have traced the considerable limits to expressivity's outsized influence over modes of affective reading, reading scenes of withholding and reticence for alternative notions of affect's sociality. Tina Post, Sunny Xiang, Vivian Huang have recently done crucial historical and theoretical work on racialized forms of inscrutability: Xiang has historicized the trope of "Oriental" moral inscrutability in the context of Cold War and post-Cold War geopolitics and its manifestation in literary texts as "Asian" narrative unreliability[49]; Post has written on deadpan as a style of black performativity traceable in a wide range of cultural and artistic practices, from 20th century black minstrelsy to 19th century portraiture to contemporary sculpture.[50] Wendy Lee has located insensibility in figures like the prude in Romantic literature.[51]

The two contemporary critics who have been most instrumental to my understanding of recession are Lauren Berlant and Anne-Lise François. François's writing on "recessive" action and "subtracted response" that seems incommensurate to the demands—and opportunities—of a

[49] Sunny Xiang, "The Korean Voice of American Empire: The Democratic Spokesman and the Model Minority Narrator," *Journal of Asian American Studies*, Vol.17 No. 3 October 2014: 273-304. She writes: "For me, neutral is a subset of the weak affects through which critics have sought to make sense of late capitalism. But, unlike the ugly, cruel, cool, and ordinary, neutral names the distinctly post-Cold War and post-racial affect of "Asian."
[50] Tina Post, "Williams, Walker, and Shine: Blackbody and Blackface, or the Importance of Being Surface," *TDR: The Drama Review*, Vol. 59 No. 4, Winter (2015): 83-100.
[51] Wendy Lee, *Failures of Feeling: Insensibility and the Novel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

pressurized present has been, somewhat ironically, instrumental to this project. Turning to moments of unconsummation and unremarkable revelation, Francois conceives of recessive action as that which "contests the ideology of improvement"—the felt imperative to turn a profit in any situation—by turning instead to self-fulfilling acts of revelation (of unrequited love, untruth) that are completed in their very enactment and that require no follow-up. Berlant's writing on "reticent action" and "structures of unfeeling" has, in turn, trained me to see that what may register as a style of underperformance, is ultimately a mode of apprehension. What does reaction or activity look like when you are still in the process of registering what has happened?

When I say "letdown," I am most immediately describing a structure of feeling that attends the aesthetics and economics of foiled or deflated expectation. While the loss of expectation's structuration entails losing purchase on a situation, the affective situation on the ground may take many forms. The structure of feeling might include any number of feelings, from disappointment, to resentment, to disorientation, to relief. My use of *expectation* rather than *fantasy* is intended to indicate the fact that many of the figures in this project, despite their vulnerability, nevertheless often hold a larger stake in the capitalist order as a result of their education, race, or cultural and social capital. The compensatory logics of capital and neoliberalism—invest in yourself as you would a business, invest here and reap the rewards later, and so on—work better for them than they do for some other who have been marginalized by the same logics of accumulation. In this dissertation, then, the letdown as an affective and aesthetic principle is closely associated with instances of what I call "fresh" precarity. Economic precarity is by no means a new phenomenon: for as long as there has been the imperative to make a living, there has been grave uncertainty for large swathes of the population about where that living will come from. Annie McClanahan writes about the convenient timing of "neoliberal" as a common-

sense term, which coincides not with neoliberalism's inception as body of thought in the 1940s (when the meetings of the Mont Pèlerin Society took place), but instead with its uptake as a rhetorical salve to the economic downturn of the 1970s.[52] In McClanahan's account, what occasions the rise of neoliberalism and its critiques is not, as Wendy Brown suggests, the "wholesale becoming-economic of the formerly non- economic," but rather the "introduction of economic exigencies" into the lives of people for whom those distinctions were once more sustainable.[53] She is joined in this critique of critiques of neoliberalism by Sarah Brouillette, who suggests that the word "neoliberal" tends to "signal the introduction . . of conditions from which one might have thought a certain level of education and privilege served as protection."[54] The feeling of being newly vulnerable to market forces, the feeling of being newly superfluous to the labor market: this is what I mean by fresh precarity. "Fresh" not because vulnerability to wage stagnation, rising prices, a collapsing labor market and the prospect of under- or unemployment is in any way novel, but because economic insecurity has, as McClanahan argues, only recently become associated with a certain demographic in popular imagination. Crucial here is the invocation of expectation as a structuring relation to one's security or aspiration—that one might have expected this gives the experience of finding it has fallen through a particular affective shade.

Because these historical transitions register as loss rather than as more of the same, the question of who was in a position to have *that* expectation in the first place is an unavoidable one

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[52] Annie McClanahan, "Serious Crises: Rethinking the Neoliberal Subject," *boundary 2* Vol. 46 No. 1 (2019), 103-132.
[53] Annie McClanahan, "Serious Crises," 118.
[54] Sarah Brouillette, "Neoliberalism and the Demise of the Literary," in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Cultures*, eds. Rachel Greenwald Smith and Mitchum Huehls (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 278.

here. In order feel ambivalent about one's inclusion in the rapidly growing investment class, for instance, one needs to have been included, however marginally, in the first place. To simultaneously hate work and fear its end, one must occupy a position between security and insecurity. The particular erosion of aspiration and the belief in upward mobility that is in the background of this project has to do with the felt loss of one's historical inheritance rather than forms of painful and exhaustingly phanstasmatic projection that haunt those who are perpetually excluded from the social contract. It is a particular experience of structural transition whose strange combination of entitlement and loss I am still trying to grapple with.

The letdown is also *management* of thwarted expectation—how to let oneself down gently after having being let down. The freshness might make things more dramatic, inducing a sense of panic or injustice, but it might also spread things around, introduce new flavors of uncertainty that slow down or stretch out impact. No one can be sure what's happening, even if some of the loss has become apparent. Familiarizing oneself with precarity in its most recent forms, by encountering it as a mystery, an occasion for humor, or even an opportunity, might seem inappropriate or unwise given the situation. But this is the point: taking solace, pleasure, or just time and space, where you can find it—these are responses that do not adhere to rubrics of commensurability or adequacy. The letdown is not necessarily dramatic because it can also involve finding holding patterns that allow one to keep moving, or to stay in place without falling apart. If one detects in this turn to the letdown a subterranean echo of Fredric Jameson's unfortunately phrased "waning of affect," it might bear pointing out that I am trying to imagine ways in which affect's waning is itself an *affective* phenomenon. That waning might prove to be a kind of intensity is a theoretical gambit "Letdown Aesthetics" seizes, using it to revisit unresolved questions about using affect as a mode of capturing social life. Deflation as

attenuated sensitivity to a situation confounds the desire to reclaim emotion for cognition, which tends to value affective circuitry conditioned by some degree of attentiveness to a developing situation and delegates critical interest in proportion to that sensitivity. Insofar as affect theory has established the value of attending to processes by which feelings generate critical and political knowledge, this project attempts to put pressure on the kinds of affects we expect to do that work.

By the letdown and the deflationary, I mean both the situation of losing the structuration of expectation, and a set of aesthetic and social effects that work to create the feeling of lowered stakes in that situation. The question of what constitutes "lowered stakes" (what counts, how would you know?) is part of the definitional project of this dissertation, but it is worth noting the extent to which this question already seems to enjoy a curious degree of cultural consensus. That subjects of postmodernity are expected to have an intuitive understanding of where the deflationary lives—to know which genres belong to the deflationary and which don't, where to put pressure and where to hold off—speaks to a cultural and political unconscious around the operations of the deflationary. Where do these senses of deflation and the undeflatable come from, and how are they perpetuated? "Lowered stakes" thus indexes an affectively saturated situation whose *casualness* makes its status as a horizon of aesthetic and political expectation all the more difficult to parse. What is happening when a pointed situation dissipates into a humorous one, when an excuse is offered and we are told not to make too much of it, or when, in the ultimate deflationary narratorial gesture, everything that has transpired is revealed to have to been a dream? In each instance, the arithmetic of affective accumulation fails to add up: sometimes it feels like something has been missed or cancelled; other times, it feels like softening and diffusion, avoidance of near catastrophe. Rather than taking the self-evidence of

phenomena like the unserious, the easygoing, the casual, at its word, I want to consider the deflationary as a kind of relation to instantiating circumstance that attempts to bracket the performativity of those circumstances. Often associated with the silly or frivolous, the deflationary does not in fact fit any single affective profile, indicating a set of conventions that might carry any number of consequences for social and aesthetic form. Its premise can feel frivolous *or* rallying, its outcomes can be disappointing, amusing, comforting, relieving—what unites these divergent possibilities is a form of sociality that ultimately demonstrates the ways in shared languages of mattering or commensurate affective response remain elusive, even in zones of attenuated consequentiality or suspended judgment.

Another way to characterize the economic subjects in this dissertation would be to note that what is conspicuously missing in my constellation of economic subjects—office slackers, potential homeowners, investment holdouts and sincere consumers—are the striking workers of the sixties, the demonstrators in the anti-globalization movements of late nineties, or participants in the Occupy movement. The figures in this project are not agitators, though they are often puzzling or frustrating to deal with, and might introduce disruption on a smaller scale. Rather than take up an explicitly antagonistic relations to capital, they occupy the more ambivalent position of withdrawing without entirely leaving. That some of them want out is not a question, but these cases tend to track minor resistances, or sometimes just inertia. Opting out as an economic gesture engages the complexity of "withdrawal" or "withholding" in a field of activity as action and choice-oriented as the economic. Sianne Ngai's work on "ambivalent situations of suspended agency"[55] and the ambivalent states of noncathartic feeling that she beautifully taxonomizes in *Ugly Feelings* has been useful here. I have also been inspired by Tavia

[55] Ngai, 1.

Nyong'o's reading of Kalup Linzy's performances as something other than "[directly]accountable to its immediate context," raising the possibility that the "politics of aesthetics resides elsewhere than in their heroic adequacy to their current moment."[56] Nyong'o, drawing on Joan Copjec's reinterpretation of sublimation as a mechanism that detaches thought the "symbolic order that would clothe the body in the language of the institutions," proposes the sublimatory as a poetic practice that makes available space for inhabiting something other than pure accountability in the making of political art.[57] The suggestion that we approach aesthetic encounters as so many experiments in incommensurability—or, better yet, as attempts to get out of the game of commensurability altogether, introducing something else into the causal chain of the capacity to affect and be affected—is something this project hopes to take up.

Throughout the cultural forms I examine, some version of a deflationary, compensatory dynamic is present, alongside the anxiety-producing, depressing, numbing dynamics of coming apart. Humor in the midst of divestment, suspense in the wake of precarity, sincerity in the midst of alienation: the structure of "instead" haunts the grammar of each formulation. Much of my archive might be understood to belong in an archive of the unserious or insufficiently serious, a set of stylistic and epistemic practices associated with eased consumption, and thus affectively circumventing, of otherwise sensitive or unsettling material. Through a combination of genre theory, study of cultural history, and methods of yoking aesthetic and affective form used by affect theorists, this project will examine the terms of that supposedly eased relation by homing in on aesthetic encounters. Whereas Kantian schematism invokes a system of aesthetic judgment that ultimately translates into a moral one, such that the sense impressions produced by a given

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[56] Tavia Nyong'o, "Brown Punk," *TDR: The Drama Review* 54: 3 (T207) Fall 2010, 74. (my italics)
[57] Ibid.

object become associated with non-empirical concepts that exceed that object and underpin universalizable moral judgment, letdown aesthetics point to another, decidedly less transcendent outcome of aesthetic judgment. What emerges is a way to circle an object without allowing that encounter to settle: the deflationary capitalizes on its own highly contingent status, its insulation from any *a priori* condition that in turn allows indecisiveness and preservation by way of vagueness. In making the content of the judgment inutile, or less utile, the deflationary preserves the space of indecision and doublemindedness, and often saves participants from having to give up on the things they enjoy because renunciation remain unnecessary when no commitment is being made. (Strangely, this leniency can, in turn, become its own imperative.) Insofar as aesthetics involves the "managing and pacing of an encounter," as Berlant writes in *Cruel Optimism*, letdown aesthetics manage by lowering the stakes and pace by circling around rather than confronting head on, dilating the scene of critical encounter until it barely registers, or registers amidst numerous other kinds of affective noise.

Chapters

The dissertation opens by approaching the question of changing attitudes about compulsory (but increasingly insecure) work through those who aren't doing said work properly. Chapter One, "Suspense, Suspension, and Slackers in the Office," follows historical transformations in white-collar worker unease with office life in order to understand what it has meant—historically, socially, affective—to work in the office. *Suspense* is this chapter's term for aesthetic and existential states of suspension that surface in recent office novels such as Ed Park's *Personal Days*, Ling Ma's *Severance*, and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, in which the office becomes a space of uncertainty and precarity rather than drudgery. I argue that suspense

and its new, deflated form in these novels, arises in response to the relatively fresh precarity that affects white-collar work as postwar prosperity begins to run out in the US. It is thus historically and aesthetically distinct from the anxieties that characterized midcentury studies of the "new middle class" and the sixties' critique of the office as conformist, authoritarian, and deindividualizing—a place, in effect, where the nerve-wracking but also vitalizing effects of suspense could not be found. As the long downturn progresses, the exemplary figure in workplace narratives becomes not the discontented worker who feels trapped at their job, but the simultaneously bored and anxious slacker who spends their time at work trying to make sense of their wildly unstable environment. This chapter is ultimately interested in the role suspense plays in *creating* slackers: by creating the conditions for withdrawal, suspense upends the structures of expectation that allow business to go on as usual, rendering processes of valuation—of determining what has or does not have value—volatile again.

Chapter Two takes up divestment and investment as two sides of the coin that Randy Martin calls the "financialization of daily life," focusing on the ones who do not embrace but ignore "sound" investment advice. "Minor Humor and Affective Investment/Divestment" reads the oft-understated act of divestment—withdrawing resources in order to redistribute them to other, more potentially profitable realms—as something other than the mere cancellation of bonds between investor and investee. While divestment is officially framed as the quiet, uneventful dissolution of social and financial relations no longer considered beneficial, this chapter thinks about the affective shadow economy that emerges among those who have been designated as not worth investing in, particularly in a period in which investment has become the parlance of care and provision. It examines low-key acts of self-divestment that respond to divestment by counterintuitively withdrawing affective resources from an already dire situation.

Turning to two Mike Leigh films about British public housing in the 80s, I focus on characters who fail to invest in public housing made newly available for private purchase, even as this investment is being incentivized (particularly for white families) by Thatcher's "Right to Buy" scheme. Marginally included in these state-sponsored calculations of growing one's wealth, Leigh's white working-class characters nonetheless fail to take up the offer. I analyze these acts under the rubric of "humoring" as modes of non-committalness, as suggested by humoring in its vernacular sense of indulgence, but also by drawing on Freud's theory of humor as a mode of affective deflation best characterized by the response it withholds and the circumstances it alleviates. A counterintuitive response to situations of economic degradation—which might more intuitively trigger reactions of panic, outrage, disappointment, or even compensatory investment—humor surprises and frustrates with its commitment to minimal commitment.

The last chapter returns to the promises of the commodity. If post-industrialization suggests the supersession of older, more concrete forms of the commodity, we are nonetheless brought back, again and again, to the relations that emerge around and through commodification. The final chapter, "Lonely Consumption and the New Aesthetics of Sincerity," turns to practices of consumption that attempt to address what has been described as an "epidemic" of loneliness affect subject of post-industrial and consumerist society by offering a repaired relation to commodities that would be called "sincerity." Looking at film and TV work by Jaren Hess and Michel Gondry, as well as cultural criticism from Robert Putnam and David Foster Wallace, I attend to sincerity aesthetics in the contemporary, sometimes gathered under the amorphous category of a "new" sincerity," as a form of consumption that promises to reverse engineer sociality from commodities, offering strategies for bringing things and people close. While these forms try to transcend the contingencies of commodified mediation, they merely end up revising

them. Placing the contemporary turn to sincerity within the context of a distinctly postmodern concern with loneliness, I theorize loneliness less as the apprehension of missing relation with other human beings than a loss of faith in the ability of consumer culture to mediate relation at all. Examining two forms of sincere aesthetics in particular, the aesthetics of closed circulation and the aesthetics of conflation, the chapter explores sincerity through its experiments in spatializing sociality, whether these experiments involve cordoning off space, as with do-it-yourself objects and the fantasy of circuits of closed circulation, or collapsing previously separated spaces, as with tactics of direct address, and playing with what is diegetic, in talk shows and children's shows. Ultimately, I conclude that the sociality sincerity imagines as a salve to loneliness is an insular one: rather than recuperating a lost or previously undiscovered form of utopian communality, "New Sincerity" texts stylize forms of sheltered relation that rely on a fantasy and aesthetics of restricted circulation. Contemporary sincerity cannot be understood, then, without considering the possibilities that fall out of its particular vision of a world re-sensitized and re-enchanted.

Chapter One
Suspense, Suspension, and the Office Novel

I. Bartleby Suspended

Bartleby's status as a literary and affective enigma has been well documented. For critics interested in representations of feeling, Herman Melville's 1853 short story about a copyist who increasingly shirks his duties at work has provided ample opportunity to analyze feeling worlds that elude the usual channels of reciprocity and communicativeness. Sianne Ngai describes "Bartlebyan aesthetics" as one of "affective illegibility"[1]; Branka Arsić refers to Bartleby's passivity as an "unheard of perplexity" that escapes the conventional form of a solvable "problem."[2] Wendy Lee has recently presented the Bartleby problem as a problem of "insensibility," his incapacity to be moved a snag in the "metaphysics of emotion" that otherwise governs how one person affects another:

> *The problem with Bartleby is not simply that he shows no feelings but that he fails to recognize the encounter that should produce them—the demands, in other words, that the motions of one body make on another. While the lawyer construes his clerk's sudden policy of inaction as proceeding from some inscrutable directive from within, it is hard to say what interiority would even mean if it no longer referred to a space of responsiveness where one negotiates, resists, or otherwise processes external objects.*[3]

Lee's subsequent citations of Adam Smith on sympathy indicate that by the "failure" of feeling, she really means the failure of sentimental projection. Framed as the failure of two individuals to make adequate contact through sympathetic give and take, the problem between Bartleby and the narrator becomes an interpersonal one—one of the ability or inability to discern and identify with

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[1] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 175.
[2] Branka Arsić, *Passive Constitutions, or, 7 ½ Times Bartleby* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 12.
[3] Wendy Lee, *Failures of Feeling: Insensibility and the Novel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 19-20.

another's interiority. Insensibility stops such identification in its tracks, "spoil(ing) the entire mechanism of sympathy"[4] by offering nothing for the would-be sympathizer to latch onto. Bartleby emerges in Lee's account as a kind of affective black hole, structuring via his negativity, or what Lee calls his immovability.

Yet, Bartleby's preferences are not entirely inscrutable to the attorney: before recounting Bartleby's first transgression, the narrator acknowledges that the copyist's work—to not only copy documents, but to check these copies—is a "dull, wearisome, and lethargic affair," even an "intolerable" one.[5] The same goes for the "Bartlebyan predicament of suspended agency,"[6] which, rather than signaling a singular eccentricity, might be read as exemplifying the circumscribed social agency that comes with particular labor relation. Nikil Saval suggests that Bartleby is legible as presenting "the only kind of resistance a clerk could offer: passive resistance."[7] In tracing the history of the white-collar workplace, Saval positions clerks in nineteenth century "counting-houses" as precursors to office workers of the postwar era. These clerks' relations to their bosses were often characterized by an investment in their employers' business that proceeded from (hopes of promotion, advancement in employment). Why Bartleby takes up residence in the office rather than rent separate living quarters, why he would rather not do wearisome work, might come across as less existentially baffling if we were not so committed to Bartleby's illegibility from the get-go.

It is possible, in other words, to overstate Bartleby's mysteriousness at the expense of attending to what might be generic about his situation**.** If the intensity of speculation around

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[4] Lee, 3.
[5] Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street," in *Melville's Short Novels (A Norton Critical Edition)*, ed. Dan McCall (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 10.
[6] Ngai, 33.
[7] Nikil Saval, *Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace* (New York: Doubleday, 2014),

Bartleby's motives, both within and without the text, stems from an assumption that his responses are somehow idiosyncratic, I follow critics who look instead to the ghostly Bartleby's exemplarity. The insensible's baffling "blank, nonstick surface"[8] is, after all, that of a worker who, by virtue of refusing to work in the office, becomes illegible only through the narrow contract through which he is permitted to inhabit that space. What shifts when we think of Bartleby less in terms of affective illegibility and more in terms of how his situation plays out regardless of individual motive? What would it look like to understand Bartleby as a type, and his withdrawal as thoroughly imbricated in the scene of labor he withdraws from? In transferring my focus from Bartleby's motives to the scene of employment that both he and attorney are embedded in, I follow Lee's point that Bartleby's withdrawal introduces affective fraughtness while applying slightly different pressure points. Read against the grain of the attorney's own sentimentalist leanings, "Bartleby" presents an encounter not between benefactor and charity case, but between an individual and structure, worker and work. In this context, not doing work becomes a kind of responsiveness that brings into relief what is expected to happen in that space and what happens when that stops.

Putting aside Bartleby's immovability as an all-consuming riddle allows us to focus on the narrator's obstinate incomprehension, his taking for granted that business will proceed as usual and his response when it doesn't. As Jenny Odell quips in her treatise on "doing nothing," "my favorite parts of 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' are the lawyer's reactions."[9] "Bartleby" is a managerial fable about the experience of managing an incorrigible worker, one who is both inefficient in the workplace but attached enough to the office not to vacate it. The narrator's

[8] Lee, 4.
[9] Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (New York: Melville House, 2020), 69.

demands not only for productivity, but for willing cheerfulness besides (he notes that would have been happy with Bartleby's initial industriousness if not for the scrivener's glumness) evidence this. Caleb Smith traces these imperatives to feel a certain way about work to notions of labor in nineteenth-century reformist discourse, which emphasized "the affective element of labor relations" among prisoners being reformed: "the prisoner had not only to do his work; he had to embrace it as a life-saving gift of love from his keepers."[10]

Bartleby's fate can be traced to structural rather than merely interpersonal forces—factors that are in place whether or not an employer is able to sympathize with an employee. It is ultimately "necessities connected with (his) business" and a concern for his professional reputation that drive the attorney to turn Bartleby out—and, when Bartleby does not leave, to abandon the premises. "At last I was made aware that all through the circle of my professional acquaintance, a whisper of wonder was running round, having reference to the strange creature I kept at my office. This worried me very much."[11] Bartleby is bad for business—his conduct, otherwise harmless and relatively unobtrusive (for a while, the attorney is able to pretend Bartleby is simply not there) makes the office no longer a workplace, and so the workplace must move elsewhere, leaving Bartleby to the tender mercies of the carceral state. That Bartleby's inaction is inevitably punished belies the supposed impotence of his passivity—passivity is a crime in place of compulsory work.

Like many of the critics I turn to throughout this chapter, I am interested in tracking shifts in what Weber has termed "the spirit of capitalism." For sociologists Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski, cultural investment in management, not to mention management's capacity to justify

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[10] Caleb Smith, *The Prison and the American Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 68.
[11] Melville, 27.

the workplace to those who worked in it, provides an important index of new iterations of this Weberian "spirit": Chiapello and Boltanski see in management literature a particularly striking example of contemporary capitalism's moral voice, precisely because management manuals "cannot stop at economic motives," but must demonstrate how "personal aspirations to security and autonomy" plug into the "common good."[12] It is from this ever-shifting set of "normative" aims that the moral case against slacking—slackers as indexing a lack motivation or sense of responsibility, and thus posing a threat to culturally valorized notions of a work ethic—draws its force. To focus on the "spirit" of capitalism is to focus on the set of beliefs and habits that make the coercive nature of work (make a living or starve) feel, against all odds, not only inevitable but even natural. Expectation is effectively no different from actual conscription—whether one is or is not employed, the expectation that one must work to survive operates with the force of fact. This facticity persists even as employment grows increasingly precarious, casualized, and scarce: Jasper Bernes has recently traced the conflation of occupation and moral character in the age of deindustrialization, when former paradigms of character-building in relation to occupation have given way as a result of freshly precarious forms of employment, yet retain their cultural valence.[13]

This chapter traces life in the office as a site of alternately waxing and waning cultural speculation and imagination. It inherits a sense of the office as a site of tedium even as it admits it is a place of shelter—the place one stays in because to leave would be worse than being stuck

[12] Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso Books, 2005), 58.
[13] Jasper Bernes, "Character, Genre, Labor: The Office Novel After Deindustrialization," *Post45* Issue 1: Deindustrialization and the New Cultures of Work (January 2019) https://post45.org/2019/01/character-genre-labor-the-office-novel-after-deindustrialization/

in it. In my readings, the office emerges as more than a physical space—it is a form of social organization, a form of life, a kind of organism. I am particularly interested in figures like Bartleby who provide models for off slacking in this space/environment—figures who modulate participation not by avoiding the work space or schedule altogether, but by reducing (redistributing?) participation while in that time and space. Rather than taking up Richard Linklater's or Kevin Smith's more recognizable slackers, I am interested in representations of slacking on the job where "the job," with its attendant baggage of job (in)security, ongoing evaluation, working *for* someone (not to mention office gossip), is still a primary concern. By not extricating themselves or turning to other ways of making a living, but remaining in some fashion attached to their conscription, these slackers raise the question of what it would look like to detach from work when one doesn't necessarily want to or feel prepared to. Originally a term for someone who refuses to enlist—a draft-dodger—"slacker" has since taken on a broader valence.[14] The term's military provenance nonetheless remains salient: the declining of activity that has been deemed compulsory—be it military service or, in this more contemporary iteration, entering in the workforce—explains the moral outrage slacking's habitus can incur, as well as the disorientation it can introduce. Using time and space designated for work to do things that do not directly contribute to the completion of that work tends to bring into focus other, less directly productive affects always already present in the workplace.

That Bartleby stops working but does leave the office until he is forced out makes his position more complicated than that of "point-blank refusal."[15] Critics like Deleuze, Agamben,

[14] "Slacker" famously used in the Sacco and Vanzetti trial—the prosecution cited their refusal to enlist for military service as indication of moral character. For the military use, see also "slacker raids" and "slacker lists."
[15] Lee, 19.

and Arsić have noted the way in which Bartleby's language turns the ambiguity of his position into a grammar. The lack of a clear referent in "I would prefer not to" suspends Bartleby's responses between affirmation and negation: he "does not refuse, but neither does he accept; he advances and then withdraws into this advance, barely exposing himself in a nimble retreat from speech."[16] As Deleuze points out, Bartleby's response straddles the utterly predictable and chaotically volatile: his catchphrase becomes a "formula" whose radical potentiality suspends any attempts to interpretively contain it. This suspension is echoed in Bartleby's mode of inhabiting the office space as well. The attorney vividly describes holding papers out to Bartleby only to be left hanging: "In my haste and natural expectancy of instant compliance, I sat with my head bent over the original on my desk, and my right hand sideways, and somewhat nervously extended with the copy, so that immediately upon emerging from his retreat, Bartleby might snatch it and proceed to business without the least delay." [17]

And again:

> "The copies, the copies," said I hurriedly. "We are going to examine them. There"—and I held towards him the fourth quadruplicate.
>
> "I would prefer not to," he said, and gently disappeared behind the screen.[18]

This recurring image of papers left dangling in midair, held out but not retrieved, leads me to wonder whether, instead of Lee's (failed) collision of bodies, it would be more useful to think about Bartleby as a scene of bodies in suspension. Such an image invokes what Mark Seltzer calls the "suspension of bodies" in his account of suspense fiction. But whereas Seltzer's

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[16] Gilles Deleuze, "Bartleby; or, the Formula" in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998), 72.
[17] Melville, 11.
[18] Ibid.

suspension holds bodies in place "the name of some superior form"[19]—Seltzer has in mind the intricately choreographed plots of suspense writers like Patricia Highsmith—the bodies in Melville's tale are less deliberate, less nimble in their movements. Suspension here occurs not in the name of a higher form, but surfaces when a hiccup emerges in a usually seamless progression. The narrator ends by conjuring the Dead Letter Office and the cartloads of undelivered mail he imagines Bartleby sifting through, leaving us with the image of suspended papers in another context.

Suspense is this chapter's way of getting at a mode of suspension in recent office novels, in which the office itself is increasingly depicted as a space of uncertainty and precarity rather than drudgery. The species of suspense I am talking about is not the adrenaline-inducing type we associate with the suspense novel, but one characterized by stalling, letdown, protraction, disorientation. I argue that this particular kind of suspense is related to forms of relatively fresh precarity that affect white-collar work when postwar prosperity begins to run out. This feeling of suspense is, for me, historically and aesthetically distinct from the anxieties and resentment that characterized the midcentury critique of the office as conformist, authoritarian, and deindividualizing—a place where suspense was missing. As the long downturn progresses, the exemplary figure of workplace narratives becomes not the discontented worker who feels trapped at their job, but the bored, anxious slacker who spends their time at work trying to make sense of their wildly unstable environment. Throughout this chapter, a question I will return to is: what do slackers and suspense have to do with each other? One way to approach this would be to say that slacking is itself a suspenseful activity—not working in a space dedicated to that purpose raises the question of when or whether one will be found out, and whether there will be

[19] Mark Seltzer, *The Official World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 12.

consequences. In this sense, slacking creates suspense. But this chapter is ultimately interested in the role suspense plays in *creating* slackers: in introducing precarity or uncertainty to a scene, suspense upends the usual structures of expectation that govern action and decision-making. If it doesn't matter anymore, if it can be *this* easily be taken away, what is the point of working? Suspense creates slackers by creating the conditions for withdrawal: uncertainty can elicit any number of responses, among them a reevaluation of how one sees work. Suspense-induced slacking thus renders processes of valuation volatile again. In foregrounding implicit rules of valuation—the difference between sanctioned use of work space and time and unsanctioned use, between what you are being paid for and what you are not—in order to flout them, slacking becomes a bracing negotiation of what is useful or has value in the first place. Finally, this chapter will think about this suspense in the office as differentially distributed, and what it means—historically, socially, affective—to work in an office in the first place.

II. The Rise of the Office

For a while in the history of worker discontent in US, the predominant critique of office life took the office to be a place devoid of suspense: a place where everything was known in advance, and where the greatest threat to an office worker was the problem of (routinization, conformity and loss of autonomy) that spelled the end of American individuality. Writing in 1951, C. Wright Mills warns: "The decline of the free entrepreneur and the rise of the dependent employee on the American scene has paralleled the decline of the independent individual and the rise of the little man in the American mind."[20]

[20] C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), xii.

In fact, this focus on alienation marked a somewhat counterintuitive result of postwar prosperity, a "virtuous" cycle of capitalism in industrialized countries characterized by a period of increasing wages *and* profit, and that necessitated an expanded workforce not only in manufacturing but in middle-class, white-collar jobs. In 1956, white collar workers outpaced their blue-collar counterparts as the largest contingent of the nonagricultural workforce.[21] The unprecedented expansion in white collar jobs meant that a considerable swathe of the American workforce, no longer involved in manipulating "things" or the "hardness of material," handled "people and symbols" instead.[22] For Mills, the "new middle class" would come to be defined by this role in coordinating the production and distribution of goods rather than in producing goods themselves. (Several decades later, Michael Hardt and Antoni Negri would reframe this shift as a turn to "affective" or "immaterial" labor, though, as critics have duly noted, this categorization overlooks the resolutely material and physically exhausting nature of many service jobs, as well as the continued importance of manufacturing—albeit displaced to locations where costs are cheaper—to contemporary economies.)

As evidenced by Millls' observation above, this transformation in the American workforce was met with apprehension/ambivalence. As Bernes has most recently noted, the relative strength of the American postwar economy both necessitated and enabled a "compromise" between capital and labor, in which workers in all sectors would "relinquish control over the conditions of labor in exchange for a larger share of the proceeds."[23] Postwar prosperity for white-collar workers "meant an erosion of control and deteriorating working

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[21] Andrew Hoberek, *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White Collar Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 7.
[22] Mills, 65.
[23] Jasper Bernes, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 4.

conditions,"[24] a process Andrew Hoborek calls the "proletarianization of mental labor."[25] Reports on working conditions in the US went as far as to posit the conflation of the auto industry and assembly line, "the locus classicus of dissatisfying work," with white-collar (even managerial) positions, "where work is segmented and authoritarian" and thus "essentially a factory." "For a growing number of jobs, there is little to distinguish them…computer keypunch operations and typing pools share much in common with the automobile assembly-line."[26] What's more, this "proletarianization" was juxtaposed with a decline in ownership among the white middle class, whose stake in private property diminishes in the postwar period as corporations increasingly buy up and consolidate smaller businesses.

Bernes argues that rather than a "decline" of the middle class in this period, it would be more accurate to identify a polarization: while some contingents of the postwar white-collar middle class ("executives, directors, and professionals") continued to enjoy a fair amount of power, other parts ("clerical workers and certain lower-rank managers and technicians") experienced a steady erosion of autonomy and privilege.[27] What nonetheless emerges in this period for both "tracks," however, is a growing understanding of activity previously associated with creative or financial autonomy (entrepreneurial, intellectual and artistic activity) in terms of conscription. This reconceptualization of work as *employment* among middle class elicited a range of critical and aesthetic reactions, from lingering nostalgia for the "individualism" and "autonomy" of the middle class' property-owning days to critiques of this older version of the

[24] Bernes, 5.
[25] Hoberek, 116. Mills was already referring to loss of control in the white-collar workplace and dominance of bureaucracy that destroyed any opportunity to "develop and use individual rationality." (Mills, 8)
[26] Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, *Work in America*, 31.
[27] Bernes, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*, 81.

bourgeoisie.[28] Such displacement of "capital" by "income" explains why contemporaneous accounts foreground the problem of dependency as their primary complaint about what work was becoming. In his exploration of midcentury corporate culture, *Fortune* editor William Whyte bemoans the "beneficence" of "organization life," which makes the organization difficult to resist or extricate oneself from. For Whyte, the emergence of a "social ethic" in place of the protestant ethic made organization men overly concerned with social opinion, particularly the opinion of their colleagues and immediate superiors at work; David Riesman likewise warns in *The Lonely Crowd*, his study of the American character in flux, of a collective shift from inner-directed, "self-motivated" attitudes to other-directed ones that made the individual reliant on the approval of others.

A history of discontent in the office would need to account for the fact that, for a particular, white and male working subject, the critique of office work as tedious or unfulfilling or deindividuating—as something that, due to its relative security and thus predictability, needed to be resisted—stemmed not only from the nature of the work, but from a sense of having missed out on one's historical inheritance.[29] As Mills puts it, "negatively, the transformation of the middle class is a shift from property to no-property."[30] Whereas "the nature and well-being of the old middle class" could be identified "in the condition of entrepreneurial property," the condition of the new middle class would be identified with "the economics and sociology of

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[28] Hoborek, 17.

[29] Other critics have approached this question of thwarted expectations on historical scale from other angles, including expected returns on education. Both Wendy Brown and Annie McClanahan have written on the diminishing returns of higher education, though from different perspectives: for Brown, this is sign of an erosion in public investment characteristic of the neoliberalized order, for McClanahan, even the peak of public funding for higher education was merely one stage in ongoing process of cultivating a workforce suitable to economy's needs (at the time of things like GI Bill, the US needed a larger workforce; now, not so much)

[30] Mills, 65.

occupations."[31] Within this history, the rise of the office and of office work become inextricable from the loss of private property that defined the postwar trajectory of the American middle class: instead of owning a business, you got a desk. The office comes to embody these feelings discontentment, resentment, and loss.

The mystery of why workers didn't like showing up to work became the subject of such studies as the 1973 special report commissioned by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, which found troubling signs of a declining work ethic despite "general improvements in physical conditions and monetary rewards for work."[32] Even as the modern workplace had ostensibly become a veritable "Elysian field" (especially when compared to "the lot of workers in the Industrial Revolution") the survey reports, "adequate and equitable pay, reasonable security, safety, comfort and convenience on the job do not ensure workers against the blues."[33] Citing Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs and in particular his notion of the need for "self-actualization," which followed physiological needs and needs for security in the hierarchy, *Work in America* argues that "it may be argued that the very success of industry and organized labor in meeting the basic needs of workers has unintentionally spurred demands for esteemable and fulfilling jobs."[34] The vicissitudes of workers' "changing needs, aspirations, and values," the

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[31] Ibid.

[32] Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, *Work in America: Report of a Special Task Force to the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1973), pp i-178.
The report cites the following as evidence of dramatic change in attitudes toward work: the growth in the number of communes, an increase in instances of adolescents panhandling, a shift to 4-day workweeks, ("welfare caseloads increasing, retirement occurring at ever earlier ages"). "More malignant signs" include "reduced productivity" and "doubling of man-days per year lost from work through strikes."

[33] Ibid., 30.

[34] Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, *Work in America*, 10.

report seems to suggest, makes their discontentment impossible to anticipate or assuage, posing a serious threat to American productivity.[35]

Dissatisfaction at work is here understood as a matter of fulfillment rather than mere survival, a "qualitative" critique (to be distinguished from the large quantitative demands for better wages)[36] that abounds in popular cultural representations of work even in the decades after Mills, Whyte, and Riesman wrote their accounts. Thus, Tyler's famous monologue in *Fight Club*, understood to capture the ethos behind Fight Club's runaway popularity, makes reference to the twin anxieties of growing dependence and "squandered" potential.

> *Goddam it, an entire generation pumping gas, waiting tables, slaves with white collars. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate and buying shit we don't need. We're the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no great war, no great depression. Our Great War's a spiritual war. Our Great Depression's our lives. We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars. But we won't. And we're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off.*[37]

This theme of seething anger is a common fixture in workplace comedies, which feature a consistent concern with the desire to get even with superiors and employers. Sometimes this desire revenge is directed at particular individuals—simmering resentment becomes couched in the exaggerated, often absurd idiom of the personal vendetta: the 2011 comedy *Horrible Bosses* for instance, follows a group of friends' fumbled attempts to kill their bosses (trading targets

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[35] Ibid.
[36] The qualitative versus quantitative distinction is from Chiapello and Boltanski.
[37] *Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher (1999; Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2000), DVD. Ironically, in their revolt against corporate life and its stultifying effects, the characters of *Fight Club* end up reprising structures of the office and corporate management. Tyler refers explicitly to "franchising" Fight Club, and the abandoned house in which he/the unnamed narrator squats eventually becomes the headquarters for a multi-state operation. Their basement becomes filled with busy underlings answering phones, sorting files into different marked folders, breaking out every now and then in the company chant "The first rule of Project Mayhem is…."

Patricia Highsmith style). That the friends do not question one another's desires to kill their respective bosses is telling: that one would want to is taken for granted. The film's mode is exaggeration rather than science fictional: we are not meant to be estranged by their vindictiveness but merely amused at the degree of incompetence and the comedy of errors that ensues. The prominence of rhetorical questions in the film's promotional material, designed to activate immediate recognition in its equally resentful would-be viewers, or at least in viewers that would recognize the motivation being gestured to, speaks to this self-evidence: the question, tongue-in-cheek as it is, is not why you would want to be rid of your boss, but how you would go about it.

Fig. 1.1: Promotional material for *Horrible Bosses* (2011)

Fig. 1.2: Copier scene from *Office Space* (1999)

At times, worker vengeance finds its object in the institution itself. In Mike Judge's *Office Space* (1999), Peter and his co-conspirators ultimately decide to steal money from the company, using a program that manipulates Initech's accounting system into diverting a "fraction of a penny" from every transaction into a separate bank account. When his girlfriend suggests that stealing money from the company might be wrong, Peter indignantly retorts that "Initech is wrong." Returning to the workplace becomes a means of exacting revenge on a corporation that has screwed you over: former and current disgruntled employees go to work in order to expose a company's shady dealings or unethical business practices. In a famous and oft-memefied scene, the three friends also unleash a vicious attack on an object that has come to metonymize their oppressive environment: the constantly malfunctioning printer. The scene, accompanied by Geto Boys' "Still," marks only one of several instances in which the film makes suspect use of a hip-hop track to signal the roiling ressentiment of the firm's largely white employees.[38] Mike White's series *Enlightened* (2011), too, features an exploration of worker

[38] For more on this, see Bryan J. McCann, "Proletarian Blackface: Appropriation and Class Struggle in Mike Judge's Office Space," *Communication, Culture and Critique* Vol. 9, Issue 3 (September 2016), pp. 362-378.

discontent, following Amy Jelllicoe who, after a demotion to the basement and a wellness retreat that has made her curious about political action, eventually works with several equally disgruntled coworkers to dig up damaging information about their company to leak information to the press. Here, the thrill of conspiratorial activities of investigation and sabotage recuperates the office to some extent: the office goes from being a site of drudgery and surveillance to being one of access and potential exposure and insurrection.

Wanting to be free from work means wanting to be free from drudgery, but also free from the uncertainty that haunts the office. Writing on the increasingly tenuous nature of knowledge work, Alan Liu observes that we are "on the scene of the abiding suspense of the contemporary middle class," whose increasingly "structurally contradictory" position is caught between allure of an order that still promised, at least, people in that position upward mobility, and the reality of "staking one's authority not on the self-owned property, business, good, or money of the predecessor entrepreneurial classes of the nineteenth century, but on an existentially anxious property of 'knowledge' that had to be re-earned from scratch by one's children." [39] The office comedy is thus never far from being a layoff comedy: *The Office* (UK) opens with a meeting on redundancy, *Office Spaces'* characters are spurred into action when management brings in a review team to "clarify" what each employee does, effectively asking employees to re-interview for their jobs. Unable to argue convincingly for their indispensability, the characters gather to daydream about coming up with a "really great idea" ("like the pet rock") that would free them from having to work ever again. Wishing for financial independence, whether in the form of

[39] Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 19.

entrepreneurial success or just a payout, is the flipside the vengeance and roiling resentment that characterizes these objects.

When suspense does return to the office, it is through the cracks appearing in job security. What's more, this suspense *creates* slackers. While the existential suspense that comes with being employees of varying degrees of contingency—everyone is replaceable, and thus susceptible to uncertainty of whether you will get to keep your job—can intensify one's commitment to competition, demonstrating one's worth, and being the one that stays, it can just as powerfully create slackers no longer entirely tethered to the logic of sink or swim, especially when the logic of valuation is felt to be opaque. The characters' withdrawal from work stems in large part, then, from the perceived falling through of the compromise between labor and capital—the harder I work, the better my stake will be. The hollowing out of this promise, forged in the bygone era of postwar abundance, sets off seismic shifts in the affective ecology of the office. In the wake of work's consistent devaluation, casualization, and precaritization, it becomes harder and harder for those previously included in this compromise to believe work is the point, and thus harder to prioritize its execution.[40]

[40] Jill Sprecher's 1997 *Clockwatchers* turns the experience of being suspension into an occasion for thinking about gendered temp work. *Clockwatchers* follows a group of women who work as temps in a credit office and bond over their shared second-classness in the office. Margaret is particularly bold in her flouting of office hierarchy and her irreverent approach to the job. But even as Margaret assures newcomer Iris that the "hardest part of the job is trying to look busy when there is nothing to do," encourages the timid Iris to take busywork she is given less seriously, and vocally criticizes management's treatment of them, she also aspires to secure a letter of recommendation from one of her supervisors that will allow her to obtain a permanent position somewhere. When the women are overlooked for a permanent secretarial position within the company and also suspected of stealing items from the more permanent employees' offices, Margaret leads them in planning to go on strike for a day. While all the women but Margaret end up losing nerve and showing up to work anyway, the suspendedness of their situation as temps and the gendered devaluation of their work does lead them to at least contemplate not showing up—slacking collectively— in order to affirm their value.

While the office and white-collar labor have become ciphers for postindustrial labor more generally, it worth asking how generalizable experiences in these spaces really are. Bernes suggests that rather than looking to the white collar background of the writers themselves for an explanation of the office novel's generic dominance, it might be more productive to examine "relationship between the social division of labor and the system of genre, where the latter is understood as a division of labor particular to the aesthetic universe."[41] Whereas mediums shaped by in-person experience such as conceptual art are better suited to modeling the in-person labor of service work and the production of commodities that are consumed in the course of the transaction, office work in the more traditional sense is novelistic. Bernes' notion of a "division of labor particular to the aesthetic universe" allows us to think about the social function of office narratives without reducing it to a particular writer's biography or overgeneralizing it as the form for all kinds of postindustrial labor. It allows us to ask: while not an exhaustive stand-in for all kinds of postindustrial work, what is office work a good measure for? What aspect of capitalism does it tell us about, and, in turn, what might its decline indicate?

III. Slackers Bring Suspense to the Office, Kind of

What happens to the deep ambivalence about office life when, in the wake of the crisis of profitability that takes hold beginning in the 60s and 70s,[42] even the meager balm of employment can no longer be taken for granted by the once securely, if unhappily, employed? As long downturn dragged on, punctuated by ever more acute cycles of recession followed by "jobless

[41] Bernes, "Character, Genre, Labor: The Office Novel After Deindustrialization," 4.
[42] Brenner dates the beginning of the long downturn to 1965 (before the 1973 oil crisis), when Japanese and German manufacturers found ways to cut production costs so drastically that US manufacturing was hit by rapidly falling profitability. Unable to compete or recoup losses, US eventually forced devaluation of the dollar that had global effects.

recoveries," work as conscription takes on different valence—the "beneficence" of organization life that Whyte describes as both blessing and curse became itself less and less reliable.[43]

In the office novels I focus on in the rest of this chapter, suspense becomes a strangely deflated affair. Written in a historical moment during which the office is being transformed by a sense of its creeping obviation (is an office still an office if there are no employees in it?), these novels take an approach to office life that foregrounds this atmosphere of uncertainty. Whereas revenge-oriented office narratives tend to treat knowledge and plan-making—sometimes underbaked or absurd plans, but plans nonetheless—as something that affords some degree of agency to the otherwise powerless worker, the novels I consider do not share this epistemological confidence.

Personal Days follows a group of coworkers who spend much of their time in the office speculating about an ostensibly endless series of layoffs at their firm and who will be next. For most of Ed Park's 2008 novel, there is little reason to suspect that anything too far out of the late capitalist ordinary is going on: precarious employment and disposable employees are, as in our world, predictable casualties of an economic order given over to downsizing and austerity in response to diminishing returns. Rather than working, the characters spend much of their time gossiping and theorizing. It doesn't help that they find mysterious notes they discover around the

[43] Sarah Brouillette, Joshua Clover, and Annie McClanahan on the resurgence of the term "secular stagnation" in mainstream economics ("Introduction: Late, Autumnal, Immiserating, Terminal"). McClanahan on the rhetoric of organicism subtending discourse of economic growth/stagnation ("Life Expectancies: Mortality, Exhaustion, and Economic Stagnation"). Giovanni Arrighi on world historical cycles of (boom and bust?) in *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of our Times*. Robert Brenner on the "long downturn" *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn*, 1945-2005. For literary takes on these economic phenomena, see Dan Sinykin, *American Literature and the Long Downturn: Neoliberal Apocalypse* and Mcclanahan, *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First-Century Culture,* among others.

office that remain unintelligible but seem to promise clues about their predicament. The group continues their theorizing, amateur detectives in the making, until they are eventually picked off one by one.

Having supplied a number of theories about the layoffs, the novel concludes with a reveal we're not prepared for. The final chapter discloses that the employee layoffs at the plot's center are not the deliberated choices of a company looking to streamline operations, as many of the characters have assumed, but something else entirely. Not only does the mysterious new addition to their staff, Grimes, turn out to be a corporate spy who has installed himself in the office to select his colleagues for firing, but Grimes has in fact been impersonating the real "restructuring" consultant. To make matters murkier, the revelation takes the form of a love letter-cum-investigative report, written by the last remaining employee to a crush who used to work at the company. The information is thus given in a disorienting, meandering, even distracted way, crucial developments mixed in with anecdote and reminiscing. Throughout, Jonah grapples with the problem of ordering—doubling back to restart his story, interrupting himself to cut short supposedly redundant information, getting ahead of himself in the narrative. Written while Jonah is suspended in a malfunctioning elevator (and on a computer whose screen has gone blank so he must remember the last word he typed or lose his place), the email is run through with apologies for the missive's form ("this scattershot, parentheses-prone, train-of-thought-jumping manner"[44]). Jonah's sensationalist narrative teasing—"the story of Grime, which was weirder than any of you thought"—is subsequently deflated by the fact that everything has come too late: "not a day goes by when I don't dream up an alternate sequence of events, one in which I can look into the future…and instantly comprehend how all the pieces will interlock, letting me

[44] Ed Park, *Personal Days* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008), 201.

sound the alarm earlier so that everyone is saved…"[45] This desire for a moment of synthesis, clarity—the desire to replay for his reader "the whole sparkling chain of events"—comes too late, as all of his coworkers have already been let go and he is no longer on speaking terms with Pru.

The result is that, while revelatory in its content, the last chapter is anticlimactic in its delivery. Breakthroughs are relayed as asides, set off by commas or encapsulated in parentheses—"(my big discovery, possibly the discovery of the century, is that nobody keeps track of personal days: before he was fired, Henry from HR sabotaged the program so that these babies get filed differently than vacation days, and basically never get tabulated, ever)"[46]—and the chapter opens with the indication that the message never reaches Pru, but was sent in error to a "Prune." If the unfolding of a conspiracy is typically associated with suspenseful expectation—a state of not knowing that promises, imminently, to resolve into a state of knowing, for better or for worse—that process feels remarkably roundabout here. Suspense and expectation take weird turns in *Personal Days*. Revelation becomes the language of futureless romantic confession rather than action—Jonah's discoveries are revealed belatedly; everything is already resolved before it is put down on paper. Rather than anticipation, the reader may just as likely feel confusion and a sense of being slightly underwhelmed: everything has been resolved before we understand the nature of the problem.

Then there is the nature of the revelation itself: the firings that have propelled the plot up to now turn out not to be the carefully calculated moves of higher ups, but the deranged decisions of a vengeful member of the surplus population. As Jonah explains in a detailed if nonlinear

[45] Park, 196.
[46] Park, 213.

account, Grimes installed himself as "Chief Restructuring Officer" after himself being laid off during a similar downsizing phase in his previous company.[47] That the restructuring happens *not* in the interest of economic rationality—in the interest, that is, of efficiency and cost-cutting—but in service of a personal vendetta, empties out the enlightenment that we do receive. The miscalibration of expectation that leads the group to misunderstand the kind of knowledge that is needed and to miscalculate the kind of information that matters is literalized in the mystery of the "Jason" memo. Early on the novel, one of the characters discovers a disk in their supervisor's desk labelled "plans for world-domination" and bearing "Jason," a name none of them recognize. Later, "Jason" reappears on a mysterious post-it, this time with the inscriptions "FM/AM" and "DJ" underneath. The group of coworkers returns to the notes periodically but gets nowhere with them. Yet it is while absorbed in the mundane task of catching up on his electricity bills that Jonah finally decodes the meaning of "Jason":

> …I noticed on the bill the small bar graph that shows kilowatt-hours per month, and the first five letters along the bottom were J, A, S, O, N, for July, August, September, October, and November—and I had a eureka moment, as the blood left my face: I flashed back to that mysterious, anxiety-stirring Post-It that Laars saw on the Sprout's desk, the famous note that ran JASON—DJ, FM/AM? and was signed –J, and realized that it hadn't been a cryptic message from some unknown J still among us, but just the Sprout's idle scratchings, punctuating the initials for the remaining months (DJ= December, January) with no reason beyond simple distraction…[48]

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[47] "and once I sniffed out the company he used to work for, a midtown outfit no longer in existence, it only took a few minutes of online searching to discover that it had been the real Gordon Knott, a silver-haired CRO (living in splendid contentment in Greenwich) who'd filleted Percy's former employer in ingenious ways, turning it around by bleeding it dry, getting rid of Percy's whole team (a year later, after Knott had split, the company would suddenly and utterly disappear); after Bellevue, Percy—or Grime, or whatever you want to call him—essentially lived on the road, in his SUV, eluding his family, working through his savings, until he decided to infiltrate our office, concocting an accent, impersonating the very villain, the maverick CRO, who had deleted his previous life…" (Park, 236-237)

[48] Park, 210-211.

The "eureka moment" is undercut by the fact that the riddle's operative logic is not sublimely complex but depressingly pragmatic: the letters correspond to the months, increases in firings correspond to increases in electricity bills. There is no nefarious master plan, just the stunning banality of the mundane.

The feeling of not having full powers of anticipation, or of having to cultivate these powers of anticipation in an environment that is so fully out of one's control that one mostly experiences it through rumor and belated revelation, is central to office novels in the postindustrial era. If suspense builds a structure of expectation in order to delay but ultimately fulfill it, deflationary suspense does not provide closure, or fulfillment, in the same way. *Personal Days'* failure to attribute a source of transcendent knowledge—no one knows anything for sure, everything is speculation and hearsay—continues into the last section even though, for all intents and purposes, we have been given answers. Jonah's email, while formally distinct from the rest of the *Personal Days*—it is narrated in first person singular, and is even set apart by typeface—is in many ways consistent with the piecemeal way information is collected throughout novel. Even as he finally finds himself in a position to fill his colleagues' gaps in knowledge, Jonah plays the role of an unreliable narrator who is aware of his own unreliability. This unreliability is not separable perhaps from his unreliability as a worker, which is in turn tied to the unreliability of the office environment he is embedded in but might be removed from at any point.[49] The layoffs incite Jonah to become an amateur detective at the expense of doing his work—he takes personal days to spy on suspects and works undercover as a janitor in order to gain Grimes' confidence. In this sense, suspense is not only the suspense of revelation, but suspense of whether one will carry out what is expected of them, and what happens after that.

[49] Thanks to Cheng Chai Chiang for pointing this out to me.

Grimes' exposure does not stabilize this environment, but rather causes it to implode: his impersonation reveals the utter absence lack of transcendent reasoning in the workplace, the substitutability of anyone's logic as long as quotas are being met (and even then, there is no understanding of where those quotas are coming from). Far from operating under highly coordinated scrutiny, the employees in *Personal Days* have been forgotten and abandoned by upper management. If the rest of the novel has given the impression of building towards the solving of the mystery, this last chapter leaves us unsure what any of it amounts to. Park's playfulness around the conventions of expectation, which I am characterizing as the invocation and deflation of suspense, raises questions about what it means for information to "matter." Deflated suspense foregrounds how even when knowledge that has been withheld is uncovered, expectations for that knowledge will do might be disappointed.

To understand the unusual quality of *Personal Days*' structure of suspense, it might be helpful to establish how suspense works more generally. As a narrative strategy, suspense involves the strategic withholding and doling out of knowledge and action in order to generate a feeling of excitement and anticipation: there is a sense that crucial information is missing coupled with the expectation that it will soon be revealed. Suspense thus revolves around an imminent revelation that will change something—that will have an effect on the situation at hand. This last bit is crucial: suspense involves implicit calculations of how efficacious information is, and what will have an effect and what will not. Cliffhangers don't just happen anywhere—they happen when a major change is about to take place, when it is a matter of life and death, when a major discovery is about to made, when the outcome of a high stakes wager are about to be revealed. In addition to being adrenaline-pumping, then, suspense provides

training in identifying turning points: what kinds of knowledge are more efficacious and thus afforded heightened moments of revelation?

Theories of suspense are divided on how genuine the feelings of not knowing, of doubt, can be given the formulaicness of its narrative protocols. For Caroline Levine, suspense offers the genuine possibility of surprise. Writing on suspense in Victorian realism, Levine describes the experience of being in suspense as "rigorous political and epistemological training, a way to foster energetic skepticism and uncertainty rather than closure and complacency."[50] Suspense in fiction is here akin to the suspense of scientific experimentation: by inhabiting the pause between generating a hypothesis and finding out the outcome of an experiment, we are able to experience the pleasure of this pause, which is "at least in part, an excitement about the fact that the world may defy convention, resist authority, elude familiar representations."[51] "Suspenseful narratives teach us to take pleasure in the activity of stopping to doubt our most entrenched beliefs, waiting for the world to reveal its surprises, its full unyielding otherness."[52]

Levine's focus on the checking of subjective instincts against objective information from the "real" world does not account for the ultimately affective basis on which this empiricism operates; the question of what constitutes confirmation or contradiction in this "experimental" setup remains up for grabs. Other critics have expressed more suspicion about suspense, seeing in it a way to keep readers passive while offering them the semblance of subversion. Suspense becomes an instrument of mollification: Levine cites DA Miller and Barthes, for whom keeping readers in suspense "emerges as a literary instrument of social control."[53] Suspense in these

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[50] Caroline Levine, *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense: Victorian Realism and Narrative Doubt* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 2.
[51] Levine, 10.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Levine, 1.

accounts lures readers into docility, suspending in order to allow the reader to feel pleasure of certainty's return. For these critics, suspense is little more than a narrative feint, a way of returning your pleasure to you by threatening to take away epistemological certainty without ever really relinquishing it.

Mark Seltzer, drawing from systems theory and Cold War novelists, sees in suspense a relation to information that emerges specifically in the "self-inciting, self-legislating, and self-depicting form of life" that reaches its peak the postwar social landscape.[54] Because the globalized world has become increasingly interested in observing and accounting for conditions of own existence, it places greater pressure on thorough reporting (the "official" report) while proliferating these descriptive possibilities, such that "continuous auto-description," far from establishing the "true" version of events, generates multiple, ever-shifting accounts of the truth depending on the situation. There are no facts, just the world describing—and thus generating—itself at any given moment. Seltzer is interested in "suspendedness and its practices" as a mode of apprehending of this modern social order in "sensuous terms"[55]: for him, suspendedness/suspense serves as the "primary aesthetic category" of "the official world."[56]

Like Seltzer, I am interested in suspense as an aesthetic effect that is tied to a state of suspension. This is a conception of suspense as being about positionality and the precariousness of this positioning, which for Seltzer is held in place by anxious self-reporting undertaken by a world newly obsessed with watching itself but for us has more to do with what economic historians have described as the decline of postwar prosperity and the transition into a permanent crisis of profitability. The disarmed powers of premonition are thus indicative of conditions of

[54] Seltzer, 3.
[55] Seltzer, 11.
[56] Ibid.

precarity. *Personal Days*, and office novels like it, mark a shift away from the representation of office life as drudgery and lacking in suspense to one in which being part of an organization does not preclude uncertainty but intensifies it. Even before Jonah's final revelation, the workplace is already a place of mismanagement, chaotic inefficiency, and anxious boredom. Rather than depicting its characters as being trapped at work, unable to leave the place of continued alienation, professional stagnation and interpersonal toxicity, *Personal Days*' office imagination heightens the precarity of that place, the sense that the place of confinement is also the place no one can afford to leave. The intuition that, as an employee, one is not being given the whole story—by one's bosses, by the people one works with—makes for an atmosphere of unease that characterizes the novel's particular form of suspense.

One indication of how different this version office life is might be apprehended through Park's introduction of sublimity, in the form of wildness or vastness, to the office space. If earlier accounts depict the office as socially, architecturally, aesthetically uniform and mind-numbingly predicable (the familiar scene of cubicles might be the popular face of this critique), such accounts are now shot through with registers of the epic, of the massive and unknowable**.** The office becomes an untraversable expanse: when one of the employees is reassigned to a different floor, her coworkers rarely visit her in what they term "Siberia." When they finally do make the journey, after Jill has been fired, the groups encounter an alien landscape even though they are still in the same building. "Turning the corner, they stepped into a flood of light, a change in atmosphere. Siberia had its own weather."[57] Fired coworkers leave traces behind in the form of epics: the group discovers that Jill has left behind a tome of self-help phrases copied from an extensive library—while the fragments are in themselves corny, the magnitude of

[57] Park, 110.

sources is awe-inspiring. The group names it the *Jilliad*, evoking the resurrection of the epic as a compilation of platitudes and management-speak. Jonah reminds Pru in his letter that she had once mused that "the office generates at least one book, no, one novel every day, in the form of correspondence and memos…but no one has the mind to understand it, no one has the eyes to take it all in, these potential epics, *War and Peace* lying in between the lines…"[58] The tone of these episodes—halfway between satire and wonder—brings the office into the domain of, framing it in terms that would likely have scandalized the likes of William Whyte.

It is worth asking what effect suspense has on our relation to the characters who are themselves embroiled in suspense and whose experiences of ongoing uncertainty structure the narrative. For Noël Carroll, suspense instills a relation to characters that depends heavily on finding someone to identify with. Asking why revisiting suspenseful material can still yield suspense, even when the outcome is already known, Carroll suggests that suspense is actually about something other than not knowing. Insofar as suspenseful anticipation can only be felt if the audience cares about the outcome of an unresolved situation, the question of what makes something suspenseful boils down to how the audience feels about the people involved.[59] For Carroll, the outcome is made to matter because the audience is presented with a virtuous *character* to whom we can attach this concern. The fate of this virtuous character becomes synonymous with the "morally correct" outcome that the audience desires.

Moralism aside, Carroll's point that what makes something suspenseful is ultimately the level of investment one feels in a particular outcome, and how that outcome affects a particular

[58] Park, 241.
[59] Noël Carroll, "The Paradox of Suspense," in *Suspense: Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses, and Empirical Explorations,* eds. Peter Vorderer, Hans Jurgen Wulff, and Mike Friedrichsen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 78.

person or group of people, feels right. Yet, his logic hits a snag when applied to the office novel: it is often the case in these novels that a protagonist, much less a virtuous one, would be difficult to identify. Bernes writes that the office novel exemplifies a "weakening of the novel form and the 'waning of protagonicity' that Fredric Jameson argues begins with realism and is finally completed in our period."[60] "In the post-industrial world…protagonism no longer exists. We have, instead, majorly minor characters."[61] Mark McGurl notes that David Foster Wallace's posthumously published novel on the IRS *The Pale King* (2011) has "no protagonist, resolving the competitive struggle for dominance Alex Woloch described as typical of the classical realist 'character system.'"[62] This instance of "disappearing into the system" is offered by Wallace as a "kind of ideal institutional being," a kind of shelter in the "safe space between interiority and exteriority."[63] Sometimes this assemblage of under-differentiated characters even speaks in the same voice: Ngai describes the "strikingly homogenous free indirect discourse" that runs through Helen DeWitt's workplace satire *Lightning Rods* (2011), a "style and tone of narration [that] stays remarkably consistent regardless of which particular character's subjectivity inflects it."[64]

Thus, the question of what constitutes a character, much less a protagonist, is troubled by these novels, which would, following Carroll's account, would also affect the reader's experience of suspense. How does suspense work with "majorly minor" characters if suspense is typically based on the strength of one's identification? Rather than the identification in Carroll's account, the kind of attention these minor characters solicit might be better described as

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[60] Bernes, "Character, Genre, Labor: The Office Novel After Deindustrialization," 5.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Mark McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program," *boundary 2* 41: 3 (2014), 47.
[63] Ibid, 37.
[64] Sianne Ngai, "Theory of the Gimmick," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017), 502.

curiosity. As a mode of epistemological desire, curiosity is less picky or exclusively tied to its objects, and can be easily transferred or distributed. What Bernes calls "major minorness," then, is less about occluded information than about the pacing and doling out of background information to evoke this curiosity. In these office novels, there is no shortage of personal information about characters. Throughout the novel, we are privy to the various details about the personal histories and idiosyncrasies of the group's current and former members: Crease is very attached to a stack of vividly colored post-its from Japan that he inherited after a coworker was let go, Pru used to be in grad school, Jules is writing a novel using voice recognition software. Even in the case of Grimes, one's nosiness finds some satisfaction. Over the course of Jonah's letter, in what might be characterized as an uncanny rhyme with the ending of Bartleby and the attorney's speculation about Bartleby's provenance, Jonah presents his reader with an account of Grimes' shadowy origins. At the same time that we learn that Grimes is impostor, we get an improbably detailed account of his real back story: "[O]n that day, three years ago, when he lost his job, it touched a nerve, indeed his entire nervous system, and Davis snapped, walking out on his wife and kids in New Jersey, never to return…"[65]

While not protagonists proper, the individuals we encounter incite curiosity about their motivation and origins. This characterological curiosity—curiosity about how characters, whom we sometimes meet fleetingly, got to where they are—feels, in part, forensic: characterized by the sense that there might be something exemplary or importantly explanatory in their provenances and fates. *Then We Came to the End* deals in the pleasures and curiosities of majorly minor characters. Much of it might be described as a document of office gossip, organized by the employees' trading of stories about one another. The novel begins in the midst

[65] Park, 236.

of a series of layoffs, with a gossip session about a colleague who has recently been laid off from the ad agency: "Right there and then we had to stop Benny from telling us the story of Tom's final hour so he could first tell us the story of the aluminum bat. Benny was shocked we had never heard that story; he was sure we had. No, we never had…This was always how these conversations went. So Benny told us the story of Tom and the bat and then he told us the story of Tom's final hour. Both were good stories and together they killed a good hour. Some of us loved killing an hour of the company's time and others felt guilty for it afterward."[66] Rather than working to tether audience to the fate of a particular character, identification happens between characters who share a generalized sense of anxiety and feeling of exposure—no one feels safe, everyone feeling their own susceptibility to the same fate, not exception enough to be safe from being next. Rehearsing stories about people who have left and what happened to them in preparation for their own termination becomes a way to pass the time and manage anxiety.

The question of how people get to where they are is an animating one, too, in *The Pale King*. A running thread through the otherwise fragmented novel is the collecting of testimonials from agents describing how they got where they are as part a public relations initiative designed to "humanize" the Service. In one of the longest sections of the novel, a character named Chris Fogle recounts his transformation from unemployed "wastoid" to dedicated IRS employee. A reformed slacker, Fogle narrates the story of his recruitment into the IRS not only with the utmost earnestness, but with overwhelming attention to detail: like Jonah, he has a filtering problem. In subsequent chapters, Fogle is referred to derivatively as the "irrelevant" Chris Fogle.[67] Designated a waste of space by the character named David Foster Wallace, Fogle is

[66] Joshua Ferris, *Then We Came to the End* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007), 16.
[67] David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011), 259.

described as having a tendency to give too much information. Yet his section is also privileged in the sense of being afforded the most space in the novel. Without a clear protagonist, the novel is dispersed across multiple perspectives: McGurl understands this structure, in which characters say things that contradict one another and the novel does not come down on either side, as a matter of "serial self-expression, of everyone 'finding his voice' and having his or her say in turn,"[68] This structure is different from the kind of wrestling for narrative primacy that Woloch describes in *One and the Many*: rather than staging an implicit conflict over whose story should take precedence, and who is merely being used to flesh out another person's story, Wallace's testimonials take as their grounds of contestation what should go in a shared record of institutional life.

Suspense concerns differentials in power and epistemological positionality: who knows what when, and who can act when—precisely when the "when" matters. Its structure of anticipation is tied to a sense of being the last to know, or the possibility of finding out too late (to change anything about the situation). It thus depends on the one in suspense not being in the know—the reader rather than the composer of the note, the one waiting to receive news about the next layoff rather than the one making the decisions about cuts. It is not a surprise, then, that these novels tend to align with the perspectives of those with the least power in these situations—those lower down in the institutional hierarchy, for whom uncertainty is most pronounced: Wallace's "wigglers" (low-ranking IRS agents responsible for the most tedious work, including examining tax returns), Park's and Ferris' anxious employees who must wait for word of the next firing. Suspense's cataphoric structure—its reference to that information that

[68] McGurl, 47.

has only been "indicated but not exposed"[69]—might then be said to mirror the epistemological state these characters find themselves in. Cataphora only experienced as uncertainty if you don't know what is coming next—if you only have half of the puzzle. Because the characters are not epistemologically privileged, any chance they have at accessing the greater design can only be done through distraction—gathering in corners of the office to share information, some of it accurate, some of it not; gossiping and trading notes in cubicles. Serious pattern tracking becomes inevitably mixed in with gossip about other things—romantic jealousies, envy about the success of former coworkers, salacious interest in how someone else's life is falling apart. The chain of information stretches so long, is obscured by so many layers of remove and mediation, that reconstructing any of it becomes a collective grasping in the dark.

IV. The Post-Apocalyptic Office—On Not Being Able to Leave

Anti-work philosophies have the generalizing, all-encompassing quality of conspiracy theories: they do not shy away from condemning work wholesale. "The problems with work today," Kathi Weeks writes, "are not limited to the travails of any one group." Instead, Weeks is interested in the very premise of having to make a living at all. The real mystery, is not "that we are required to work or that we are expected to devote so much time and energy to its pursuit, but rather than there is not more active resistance to this state of affairs."[70] The consensus that survival must be contingent on selling one's labor, or on it being recognizable as sell-able in the first place, has obviously destructive consequences. Why then, Weeks wonders, *aren't* slackers

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[69] Hans J. Wulff, "Suspense and the Influence of Cataphora on Viewers' Expectations," in in *Suspense: Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses, and Empirical Explorations,* eds. Peter Vorderer, Hans Jurgen Wulff, and Mike Friedrichsen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 3.
[70] Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

more common? She suggests that the "question of work's meaning and value,"[71] governed by the "institution of private property that secures privacy of employment relation alongside the marriage relation," has been so atomized (divided according kind of work you do, who you work for) that it is difficult to recognize this as a collective question. Such privatization explains not only the resignation to the conditions of one's own working conditions, but also the tendency of a certain forms of labor critique to reproduce the basic premises of work, by, for instance, focusing on improving working conditions or expanding the range of compensated labor. Even feminist critiques of work have at times ended up producinng their own version of a "work ethic," whether by turning to waged work as "an alternative to feminine domesticity or through efforts to gain recognition for modes of unwaged labor as socially necessary labor."[72] "The question is," Weeks writes, "how to struggle against both labor's misrecognition and devaluation on the one hand, and its metaphysics and moralism on the other hand."[73]

For some, the answer lies in leaving: under the regime of compulsory work, slacking becomes an aspiration and plan of action. Autonomist theorists like Paolo Virno who write of "engaged withdrawal," or what David Graeber calls "mass defection," might be understood as theorizing the possibility of slacking on a mass scale. These theories are interested in withdrawal and defection not least for the conceptual upheaval they seem to promise: what happens if we refuse to accept the premise of work and its necessity all together? What would happen if everyone didn't show up one day? "Nothing," Virno writes in "Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus," "is less passive than flight. The 'exit' modifies the conditions within which the conflict takes place, rather than presupposes it as an irremovable horizon; it

[71] Weeks, 13.
[72] Weeks, 25.
[73] Ibid.

changes the context within which a problem arises, rather than deals with the problem by choosing one or another of the alternative solutions already on offer."[74] Graeber, in turn, extols the "tearing down of conceptual walls" as part of defection's intellectual function.

A popular contemporary inheritor of this autonomist/anti-work fascination with withdrawal and accomplishing "nothing" might be Jenny Odell's 2019 *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. Part self-help book, part an artist's meditation on creating art in present economy, Odell's meditation on doing nothing seeks to make sense of why particular activities are considered slacking in the first place with a focus on ways of "disengaging" from the attention economy. Odell finds that unproductive activity—the "doing nothing" in the title—is only unproductive from the perspective a capitalist productivity" that "privileges novelty and growth over the cyclical and regenerative." [75] In looking for "antidotes to the rhetoric of growth," Odell is not interested simply in a retreat from society, but in how such a retreat might become the basis for innovative social engineering. She thus juxtaposes studies of communal living with accounts of failed utopian experiments. Withdrawal can have any number of outcomes, including what Odell describes as a turn toward to the "apolitical" that simply ends up reproducing structures of exclusion. (In a particularly memorable episode, Odell describes the tech industry's version of withdrawal, which takes the form of "unplugging summer camps.")

This is to say that slacking as a social objective or site of collective imagining, while appealing for many theorists, nonetheless remains difficult to activate. Here, I turn to post-

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[74] (I need more time to work this out, but Virno follows this with a shoutout to 19th century factory workers in North America, who left the factories to "colonize low-cost land." Really raises question of who is the "we" Virno is addressing and what is the fallout of leaving if you are leaving to go somewhere else)

[75] Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (New York: Melville House, 2020), xi.

apocalyptic novels, in which "exodus" from the office, even after the world as we know it has ended, is easier said than done. Even after the infrastructure for salaried work and systems of valuation disappears, these texts suggest that there is no guarantee that attachment to it would be severed. Ling Ma's zombie novel *Severance* (2018), for instance, presents a scenario in which work is the thing that survives capitalism's demise. If assessment in *Personal Days* turns out to be completely arbitrary, valuation in these post-apocalyptic settings is being radically overhauled in these texts in the wake of global catastrophe. Joining a host of post-apocalyptic novels written in the last decade—including Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011) and Ben Marcus' *The Flame Alphabet* (2012)—that feature work as central aspects of life even after the collapse of recognizable systems by which this work would be measured or assigned value.

Severance begins in the aftermath of such a collapse: "After the End came the Beginning."[76] But, as we quickly learn, Candace has joined this new world order belatedly: "The truth is, I was not there at the Beginning. I was not there for any of the Googlings or the Walmart stalking or the feastings or the spontaneous mass tattooings. I was the last one out of New York, the last one of the group to join."[77] Candace's belatedness has much to do with her attachment to the old world, in which she is a model employee. An expert on novelty Bible production, Candace developed a knack for "disassembling" her product "down to its varied, assorted offal: paper stock, ribbon market, endsheets, mull lining, and cover."[78] Working at a company, Specter, that specializes in the logistics for the publishing industry and often partners with suppliers in China, Candace often finds herself negotiating the convergence of the macro (global supply chains) and the micro (calculations about how much material to order). Her talent for breaking

[76] Ling Ma, *Severance: A Novel (*New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 3.
[77] Ma, 7.
[78] Ma, 23.

things down into their constituent parts—even something as famously irreducible as the Bible—speaks to a brisk efficiency that seems to be lacking in every other part of her life. In her relationships, Candace tends to be uncertain, vague even. She has a tendency to leave things up in the air: ghosting her boyfriend after he halfheartedly asks her to leave the city with him; delaying informing him that she is pregnant with his child; falling out of touch with her remaining family in China after her parents pass away.

While Candace is aware of her own position within the global supply chain that relocates jobs in perpetual search of lower production costs, she does little with this information.[79] Instead, she pours herself into becoming a more efficient coordinator of supply chains. This ethos continues even after these chains begin to shut down as mysterious fever begins to take hold. As its executives flee the city, Specter offers Candace an exorbitant amount of money to stay behind to keep things running. That the demand for productivity does not end with the onset of a global pandemic says something about the contemporary workplace, especially as this halfhearted gesture of business as usual involves the more "disposable" members of the staff. While her coworkers, finally resigned to the impossibility of returning to pre-pandemic life, begin to leave as well, Candace elects instead to move into the office and continues checking her email, writing reports to headquarters, monitoring the few shipments that are left. "I owed it to the client…I

[79]"What I knew about overseas labor came from a college Economics class. First, the U.S. manufacturing jobs went to Mexico, to the maquiladoras that staffed laborers willing to work for cheaper rates than Americans. Duty-free, tariff-free. This was the 1980s and 1990s. Later a portion of these jobs went to suppliers in China, which offered cheaper labor rates, even cheap enough to offset the shipping costs that coincided with a rise in oil prices. And after this, in a few years, the jobs will go elsewhere, to India or some other country willing to offer even cheaper rates, to produce iPods, Happy Meal toys, skateboards, American flags, sneakers, air conditioners. The American business will come to visit these countries and tour their factories, inspect their manufacturing processes, sample their cuisines, while staying at their nicest hotels built to cater to them.

I was part of this." (85)

owed it to Spectra. I owed it to my contract. I was just doing my job."[80] "Severance" thus refers to a form of pay that does not explicitly surfaces in the novel: Candace is never officially offered a severance package, but instead receives a bonus to stay on and manage the office in the wake of its mass abandonment. Whereas a severance package offers, in financial terms, closure, Candace's interpretation of the payment as a retention fee refuses to accept the termination of her relation to the company, but keeps it open, suspended. In order for the payoff to count as severance, Candace would need to decide to take it as such—a decision she puts off for as long as possible.

It is unclear if Candace is aware of the extent of her own obliviousness, evident in her skepticism that the pandemic will continue to worsen, her continual surprise at the news that yet another acquaintance or yet another family member of a friend has contracted the disease, and most obviously her attachment to her work and her salary in a world where such metrics no longer matter. Her willingness to work cannot change the fact that there is no work to be had. Projects had "dried up by the second week." No one is placing new orders for novelty bibles, and their Chinese suppliers have largely been shut down by the fever. "It was all getting pretty boring." And so, Candace begins slacking, ever so slightly in the beginning, even as she stays on the company dollar. She takes up photography again, documenting the abandoned city, sometimes taking photos on request. Her previous interest/experience photographing cities in the Rust Belt comes in handy—though pandemic-stricken New York is not a casualty of deindustrialization, the photographs become a way of bearing witness to and recording the rapid and violent withdrawal of a previously hegemonic structures of valuation, of what matters and what doesn't, what is worth protecting and what isn't.

[80] Ma, 235.

One way to understand Candace's practice of, not to mention her desire for, constancy, which manifests in her an attachment to the office, would be that it forestalls suspense—because her actions are routinized, there is no question of what comes next. Critics like Claire Gullander-Drolet and Amy R. Wong have written about *Severance*'s interest in the durability of work's pleasures of work. If the zombie supplies a ready metaphor for an alienated, endlessly exploitable work force, what distinguishes Candace from the infected in the novel might be her capacity to experience this repetition as repetition. Writing on the centrality of work to imaginations of the end of the world, Theodore Martin spots an "occupational aesthetic" at the core of the post-apocalyptic novel. "This is an aesthetic concerned with work not as a mode of self-expression but as a temporal regime—the time-consuming, non-narrative grind of work. After the end of the world, it no longer matters what you do and what you do certainly no longer reflects who you are; it matters only that you find something to do, over and over and over again, in order to survive."[81] For Martin, the persistence of office work past the end of the world speaks to the continued utility of work's rhythms, its way of structuring time, which persist even after the dissolution of its conditions of valuation. The "spirit" of capitalism—its habits, its logics of outsourcing and division, its obfuscatory tricks—survives the immediate demise of its material conditions precisely because they exist at the register of the "spiritual" and embodied.

Of course, managing suspense is not as easily managed as having a routine and sticking to it. The little things are taken care of, but beyond that decisions about how long to stay, when to leave. If the effect of the Shen Fever it to render any distinction between work and more spontaneous activities moot—those affected by Shen Fever repeat any action as though they

[81] Theodore Martin, "Work and Plague" from *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 164.

have, compulsion without a pulse—it also fundamentally confuses what counts as soulless repetition and what counts as something more meditative. At multiple moments in the novel, it becomes unclear whether someone is fevered or simply going about their day. Candace (and the novel's) recessiveness, which Gullander-Drolet describes as an "untranslatable affect" and Dora Zhang calls "mutedness," [82] is less immobile than they initially might seem. As the work disappears and her reasons for being in the office shift, the holding patterns Candace has established to give way to more exploratory even as she continues to reside in the office. This affective suspension—putting off decision, waiting in the interim while performing what look like routinized tasks, becomes a matter of meditation, a way of biding one's time while deciding what to do/collecting enough reasons to leave. Conversely, what seems like deliberate, motivated plan-making can in fact turn out to be routinized behavior: she discovers Bob, her captor, has been infected while he is doing his patrol.[83] Suspense in *Severance* is thus tied to the possibility that one's routines might turn out to be the thing that marks your destruction, not to mention an uncertainty about whether you would be able to recognize in others or yourself before it was too late.

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[82] Claire Gullander-Drolet, "Imperialist Nostalgia and Untranslatable Affect in Ling Ma's *Severance*," *Science Fiction Studies* Vol. 48 No. 1 (March 2021), pp. 94-108. Dora Zhang, "Staying Alive," *Post45* (Contemporaries) *Severance* (October 2020), https://post45.org/2020/10/staying-alive/

[83] As with many of these novels, collective imagination in *Severance* feels wanting. In Ma, a suspicion of post-apocalyptic collectivity comes down to pessimism about the possibility of new forms of organization under conditions of bare survival. Notably, the Occupy movement comes to an underwhelming halt in the novel's version of recent history when the protestors contract Shen Fever. After joining a clan after living on her own in an abandoned New York, Candace ends up being held hostage when the leader discovers she is with child. The novel thus seems to consistently stage the limitation of the social imaginary in times of duress, depicting a tendency to return to narrow notions of social reproduction based on authoritarianism and literal reproduction.

Like *Severance*, Colson Whitehead's 2011 novel *Zone One* offers a sort of eschatology of the office, though less in the context of abandonment and more in the context of wishful construction. Set in the aftermath of a zombie apocalypse, the novel jumps between Mark Spitz's past as an average white-collar worker and his present as a deputized civilian "sweeper" who clears abandoned buildings in post-apocalyptic Manhattan as part of an operation to make the city habitable again. One way to imagine survival in the novel is to imagine it through the survival—and revitalization—of the office: a primary site of the de facto government's mission to resettle post-apocalyptic New York City, the office brings with it hopes of revitalization. The world of *Zone One* may be overrun by zombies, plagued by serious crop shortages and grappling with a decimated population, but the abundance of workspaces and the commitment to clearing them for future use becomes a source of optimism, a way of looking forward to the "remade world."

Though Mark Spitz initially hesitates to buy into the "pheenie optimism" of the triumphalist resettlement project "American Phoenix"—he has trained himself not to be distracted by thoughts of future— his job participates in the objectives of this (re)settler ethos nonetheless. He also harbors nostalgia for the days when he dreamed of living and working in the city as a lawyer: when his unit is assigned to clear an abandoned law firm, he pauses work to allow himself a small flight of fancy. While perusing the space, whose "hypermodern and toylike" furniture and "empty ergonomic chairs posed like amiable spiders" form "dioramas of productivity" despite the space being empty of human life, Mark Spitz begins imagining himself sitting at one of the desks in the firm's heyday, "wearing the suspenders and cuff links of his tribe, releasing wisps of unctuous cologne whenever he moved his body. Bring me the file,

please."[84] Mark Spitz's game of pretend, involving this seamless transition from zombie hunter to high-powered attorney, transfers him into an alternate present in which he has successfully climbed the ladder of corporate promotion. The office's appearance of having been untouched by the apocalypse raging outside, of being perfectly suspended in time, impresses him:

> For all that has transpired outside this building in the great unraveling, the pure industry of this place still persisted. Insisting on itself. He felt in his skin even though the people were gone and all the soft stuff was dead. Moldering lumps shot out tendrils in the common-area fridges, and the vicinities of the dry water-coolers were devoid of shit-shooting idlers, but the ferns and yuccas were still green because they were plastic, the awards and citations remained secure on the walls, and the portraits of the bigwigs preserved one afternoon's calculated poses. These things remained.[85]

The imperviousness of the space presents the office as a sanctuary that opens, however briefly, a space for reverie and dreaming safe from the carnage and plague that defines survival and de-plaguing work. But Mark Spitz does not daydream for long: like Candace, he bears an attachment to industriousness, and is wary of being perceived as slacking off. "Mark Spitz got in gear. Gary was close and he wanted to look busy in order to head off any wisecracks about his work ethic."[86]

In invading office spaces to clear them of the infected, the sweepers eliminate former employees who have been "turned" and are thus no longer of use in order to replace them. There is a way in which Mark Spitz and his team effectively become the new, if temporary, staff of these offices, performing tasks that would have been performed by the people who used to work there: Mark Spitz checks IDs (in an attempt to identify who the zombies once were), takes inventory of the items in storage. This return to the space and rhythms of the office offers a brief

[84] Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (New York: Anchor Books, 2011), 13-14.
[85] Ibid, 14.
[86] Ibid, 15.

respite—a return to the mundanely bureaucratic tasks of checking and counting that characterized a world that no longer exists.

In *Zone One*, the office becomes an object both for nostalgia and for optimism about the future. As it turns out, however, being a faux-office worker has familiar downsides. During novel's denouement, Mark Spitz discovers that he has been not been given access to the office building that matters. Returning to headquarters after his friend Gary has just been bitten by a harmless "straggler" turned ravenous "skel," Mark Spitz is met with a scene of chaos, and is told too late what is happening. The wall that has kept the zombies at bay outside the zone is, as it turns out, on the verge of collapse. Mark Spitz goes to the roof of the bank building the military has converted into a fort, where he is met with a scene of the undead sublime: an "ocean," "an abhorrent parade that writhed and palsied up Broadway." "All the misery of the world channeled through this concrete canyon…"[87] From the vantage point of the roof of this office building, he realizes the flimsiness of their makeshift barrier: "(His) idea of what lay beyond the Zone, the portrait created by the incessant gunfire, was dwarfed by the spectacle before him. The wall had kept this reality from him. It would not hold, it was obvious."[88] Carefully kept in dark about the likelihood of the resettlement effort's success, Mark Spitz his fellow sweepers have fallen prey to another workplace hierarchy, performing low-level, devalued tasks assumed to be less demanding, while being left oblivious to the imminent danger of this work all along.

If we began this story with midcentury white-collar workers' dissatisfaction at being trapped in the office, we have ended up in a different place, with racialized subjects who stay at the office long after everyone else has left. What are we to make of the rather idiosyncratic style

[87] Whitehead, 304.
[88] Ibid.

of racialization that appears in both *Zone One* and *Personal Days*—the narrative gimmick of withholding the race of a central character for most of the novel? *Zone One* does not reveal Mark Spitz's race until the final chapter, and even then it is through an offhanded comment about the "black-people-can't-swim thing." As in *Personal Days*, which counts Jonah's race among the information that is revealed in the final chapter, Blackness in *Zone One* surfaces to upend what has been assumed to be a postracial (if also postapocalyptic) order/history successfully laid to rest. For Jessica Hurley, *Zone One*'s "late-in-the-game revelation of blackness" is both a narrative turn we could not have anticipated and a twist we should have seen coming: insofar as the figure of the zombie is deeply racialized, from its origins in Haitian folklore about reanimated corpses made to work the fields—a clear allegorization of chattel slavery—to its afterlife in monster films, race has already arrived on the scene.[89] Colleen Lye has written on "unmarked character" in *Personal Days* and how this trope is nonetheless underwritten by "post-Fordist modes of racialization" that is defined, in part, by the decline of U.S. imperial hegemony and the "rise of Asia." She shares Hurley's sense that what is being troubled by this belated revelation of race is an ostensibly postracial world (and workplace). For Lye, Park's satiric approach deflates any semblance of corporate morality but ultimately fails to result in solidarity. At best, the novel's "we" narration captures a "flickering class consciousness" that "conveys the failure of group consciousness by accentuating the circumscribed perspective of the group on its objective circumstances and exaggerating, to intentionally discrediting effect, its capacities for confident self-knowledge."[90]

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[89] Jessica Hurley, "History is What Bites: Zombies, Race and the Limits of Biopower in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One," Extrapolation* Vol. 56 No. 3 (2015), 313.
[90] Colleen Lye, "Unmarked Character and the 'Rise of Asia': Ed Park's Personal Days," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* Vol. 1 No. 1 (Spring 2015), 240.

In *Zone One* and *Personal Days*, suspense becomes a technology not only for withholding the unfinished outcome of highly dangerous situations—a global pandemic, a zombie apocalypse—but also for withholding the racial information.[91] That race itself becomes an object of suspense shakes up our conceptions of character—what should be foregrounded when. It also resurfaces our earlier interest in the cataphoric structure of suspense, which makes reference to things that we don't have complete context for yet. Read in retrospect, Mark Spitz's studied averageness, his adaptability and knack for assimilative inconspicuousness, reveals itself as a survivalist impulse related to but not reducible to his race. Cataphora as a strategy for suspense—foreshadowing without not giving away, referencing without full context—takes on a new valence.

V. Conclusion: Prop 22/WeWork

Proposition 22, also known as the "Protect App-Based Drivers and Services Act," promises to defend the freedom of gig workers in California to work "as often or as little as they like."[92] Introduced as a response to Assembly Bill 5, which sought to reclassify independent contractors as employees, the ballot measure doubled down on the salutary and exceptional conditions of flexible work. At their core, the two documents disagreed on what was in the best interests of laborers in the gig economy: according to AB 5, companies like Uber and Lyft have used informal employment to circumvent payroll taxes and avoid providing benefits that would

[91] Thanks to Cheng Chai Chiang for this formulation.
[92] "Protect App-Based Drivers and Services Act," (A.G. No. 19-0026)

afford workers crucial security; according to Prop 22, attempts to regulate theses aspects of a business threaten the favorable conditions under which gig workers currently work.[93]

Uber, Lyft, and DoorDash's relentless campaigning in the months leading up the to the vote on Prop 22 intensified not only an ideological offensive, but a series of rhetorical maneuvers primed for promoting this ideology of work. One of the most striking differences between the two pieces of legislation lies in their understanding of work as a restrictive activity (or not). Where AB 5 deploys the language of taxation and benefits prominent in more traditional paradigms of salaried labor, Prop 22 conjures a world in which such regulation is unnecessary precisely because work is no longer experienced as a form of conscription. It does this by reimagining the interim: slots of time that fall between other, less fluid life activities. Unlike more traditional forms of employment, the proposition explained, "flexible work" takes place at the most convenient or necessary moments, even if these moments happen to be between other obligations. Thus Prop 22 promises to liberate those in-between times on behalf of parents seeking to work "while children are in school," or students looking to earn some income "in between classes." Such fantasies of being able to optimize increments of time otherwise wasted or left unprofitable is not new—Taylorization famously systematized workflows in order to ensure that no interstitial gesture made by a worker was wasted. Throughout the text of the proposition, one encounters a mantra of threefold permissiveness: freedom in "when, where, and how" one works.

[93] As it turns out, A.B. 5, while well-intentioned, was also poorly designed, painting the problem of the gig economy in overly broad strokes. Wiener writes, "[W]hen the bill went into effect…some freelancers, including journalists, photojournalists, composers, and musicians, found themselves out of work. Within a few months' time, exemptions were granted for freelancers in both journalism and the music industry; since then, more than a hundred other exemptions and limitations to A.B. 5 have been implemented. The law seems to have made a category error, addressing freelance jobs in general rather than gig-work jobs in particular."

Of course, buried in the text are also less liberatory economics of the interim. Notably, calculations of the drivers' base pay only factor in time "engaged"—that is, time spent performing each individual task but not the time between tasks. Drivers would not be considered at work while driving to and from ride requests, despite this taking up a significant part of their time as contractors. The hypocrisy of claiming to liberate in-between moments from unprofitability while neglecting the very in-between moments that happen on the job would be surprising if it weren't so predictable. Following the initiative's passing, drivers reported a decrease in pay; one estimate reported that what some drivers were earning came out to five to six dollars an hour,[94] rather than the "120 percent of minimum wage" the proposition had promised.[95]

Like some of the other "qualitative" critiques mentioned in this chapter, the discourse of flexible labor takes as its object of critique the model of work as conscription. Obviously, we cannot take this discourse at its word. Prop 22 evokes a coexistence of work and freedom from work that raises questions about the narrowing gap between work and not-work characterizing contemporary working life. Its utopian language around casualized labor suggests that understandings of work as conscription continue to evolve—and that while the language of guarantee and security (not to mention aspiration and opportunity) remains influential in how we talk about what we want from a job, what these ideals look in practice continue to be in flux.

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[94] Anna Wiener, "Gig Work on the Ballot in California," *The New Yorker*, Oct 22, 2020. https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-silicon-valley/gig-work-on-the-ballot-in-california (accessed Jun 10, 2021)

[95] Michael Sainato, "'I can't keep doing this': gig workers say pay has fallen after California's Prop 22," *The Guardian*, Feb 18, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/feb/18/uber-lyft-doordash-prop-22-drivers-california (accessed Jun 10, 2021)
"Protect app-Based Drivers and Services Act," 2

WeWork is not the product of a zombie apocalypse, but it does seem to come from an adjacent circle of late capitalist hell. To anyone remotely versed in the many critiques of neoliberalism generated in the past couple of decades, WeWork seems to encapsulate so much of what is wrong with our current economic order, from its rampant financialization (when the company became notorious in 2019 for its gross overvaluation and failed IPO, it emblematized just how wrong venture capital's protocols for assessing value could be), to its blatant capitalization of the casualization of labor (significant part of their clientele are the increasing contingent of freelancers that make up contemporary workforce) and the increasing cost of living (one of the selling points of early WeWork was apparently its seamless integration with a communal living initiative). Couched in disingenuous rhetorics of mutual care and consciousness-raising, the company is a poster child for what happens when utopian rhetoric meets capitalist opportunism.

Most interesting for our purposes is the centrality of office to this enterprise: WeWork's innovation was in large part the sublimation of the office into an ideal, a site for the revitalized imagination of social life. The workspace could be fun, it could be collaborative; it could be productive (Adam Neumann is reported to have said "WeWork means 'we never stop working'") and creative. (Such promises exemplify what Bernes has described as the incorporation of "artistic" critiques of work from the standpoint of participation and autonomy into post-Fordist restructuring designed to improve profitability and intensify labor.[96])

[96] Bernes, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*, 17.

WeWork promises less space (50 sq ft per member, compared to the average 250 sq ft office[97]) but more connection: famously or perhaps infamously, the WeWork founders worked to extend their influence beyond subleasing office space into communal living, education, and more. That the office can be successfully sold as a site of radical reimagining of 21st century sociality speaks again to the intensity and persistence of attachment to work that has been the specter haunting this chapter's interest in slacking without leaving. WeWork's unactualized dreams remain a harrowing view of what the office could become.

[97] Matthew Zeitlin, "Why WeWork went wrong," The Guardian, Dec 20, 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/dec/20/why-wework-went-wrong (accessed Jun 10, 2021)

Chapter Two
Minor Humor and the Affective Economies of Divestment and Investment

This chapter reads the often understated act of divestment—withdrawing resources in order to redistribute them to other, more potentially profitable realms—as something other than the mere cancellation of bonds between investor and investee.[1] If people and institutions looking to adjust to scarcity or maximize return on investment may seek to reduce their obligations when necessary, the perspective of those being cut off complicates this otherwise convenient take. While divestment is officially framed as the quiet dissolution of relations no longer considered beneficial, the analysis that follows insists that the withdrawal of investment constitutes its own kind of relationality.[2] Rather than terminating ties, divestment changes them, articulating new dynamics that are less readily accounted for in transactional terms.

What emerges in the wake of structural divestment is an affective shadow economy felt acutely by those who have been designated as not worth investing in. Dispossessed by a reshuffling that distributes cost to those least able to afford it while refusing to acknowledge this cost, the people from which the economy divests inhabit a relation to their world that calls for different interpretive tools, tools calibrated to understanding the social experience of divestment

[1] Writing on the historic shift in pension plans from "defined benefit" to "defined contribution" structure, Adam Harmes points to a "mass investment culture"—investment becomes just another consumer activity (things like mutual fund emerge that are designed to make investment activity—specifically stock market participation—more accessible to average consumer. Adam Harmes, "Mass Investment Culture," *New Left Review* 9 (May June 2001).

[2] Though focused on another period in the development of capitalism, Chris Taylor's astute theorization of neglect has been helpful in understanding that a "cancellation" of ties between state and its citizens is in reality never that, but continues to be a relation that is *actively* maintained. From *Empire of Neglect*: "'Neglect' was the name West Indian writers gave to a diffuse set of discursive and institutional practices that facilitated the divestment of economic, capital, political care, and popular concern from colonies that had once been considered the crown jewels of the British empire."

not only as an economic process, but as an affectively rich one as well. Surprisingly, this experience not only entails escalating scenes of desperation, but also features low-key acts of self-divestment that respond to divestment by, in turn, withdrawing affective resources from the already dire situation. In what follows, I will analyze these acts under the rubric of "humoring" as taking place in a mode of non-committal participation, as suggested by humoring in its vernacular sense of indulgence, but also by drawing on Freud's theory of humor as a mode of affective deflation. For Freud, humor indexes not the upping of tension but its dissolution: rather than the tendentious outing of unexpressed aggression by reproducing these tensions in comic miniature, it allows for alleviation in a situation, removing the need for loaded exchange altogether. This theory of deflationary humor foregrounds responses to the pressurized situation of divestment that do not reproduce the violence of structural divestment. A counterintuitive response to situations of economic degradation—which might more intuitively trigger reactions of panic, outrage, disappointment, or even compensatory investment[3]—humor surprises and frustrates with its commitment to minimal commitment. Best characterized by the circumstances it alleviates and the response it withholds, humor names the moment in which "one spares oneself the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise," "dismissing the possibility of such expressions with a jest."[4] In moments of duress, it can serve the crucial function of lessening a threat's psychic burden—without resolving the problem. I theorize humor as the significantly insignificant withdrawal from pressurized scenes of profit growth, using affective

[3] In the context of neoliberal divestment, scholars like Wendy Brown and Lisa Duggan have noted that structural divestment inevitably leads to greater investments (of money, time, energy) at lower levels of management or on the part of atomized individuals who are forced up to pick up the slack.
[4] Sigmund Freud, "Humor," *Int. J. Psycho-Anal*., 9: 1, (1928): 161.

and economic idioms in tandem to think about styles of navigating the fate of not being worth an investment.

To explore the sociality of economic disengagement, I turn to two films—Mike Leigh's *Meantime* (1983) and *High Hopes* (1988)— set in the decade of neoliberalism's ascendancy, a rise coinciding with large scale curtailment of state and popular support for social provision. The films are located in a social realist tradition: whereas aesthetic precursors like the postwar Italian neorealists of the 50s and 60s were concerned with social upheaval in the wake of the world wars, recent British social realists like Mike Leigh, along with Ken Loach, Lynne Ramsay and Andrea Arnold, have turned to social upheaval under neoliberal restructuring. This upheaval is, among other things, tied to the intensified imbrication of divestment and investment. As critics Randy Martin and Adam Harmes have noted, the popularization of individualized investment is the flipside of structural divestment: in the wake of a dismantled social safety net, the imperative to learn to grow one's own money and monitor the value of one's assets becomes all the more pressing.[5]

Social realist film captures this condition of simultaneously coerced and incentivized investment in the register of foreclosed choice and inevitability. Its plots tend to follow vulnerable individuals subsumed to schemes indifferent to their small, local-level machinations.[6]

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[5] Harmes, "Mass Investment Culture." Randy Martin, *Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

[6] Scholarship on Leigh and other social realists has tended to emphasize this interest in social modeling, so much so that a handful of critics have begun pushing for alternative approaches. These scholars argue for increased attention to the aesthetic techniques of these films. David Forrest asserts, for instance, that 'social realist' films should be considered part of the British arthouse movement rather than part of a separate, less artistically motivated tradition; Sean O' Sullivan criticizes scholarship on Leigh that has tended to "valorize content to the exclusion of form" (David Forrest, *Social Realism: Art, Nationhood and Politics*, 1. Sean O' Sullivan, "The Nature of Contrivance," 2.) Each is reacting to a tradition of criticism that has assumed the transparency of social realism.

For instance, Ken Loach's recent *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) and *Sorry We Missed You* (2019) make historical, social, economic circumstance manifest in characters' actions and reactions such that every action becomes a direct cipher for larger forces at work. *I, Daniel Blak*e, a bracing indictment of the bureaucracy claimants are forced to navigate in order to receive unemployment benefits, ends not with the titular character's minor victory against a system that is killing him, but with circumstances tragically beyond the character's control. After enduring a byzantine application process and being denied unemployment status despite his illness, Daniel dies of a heart attack moments before the hearing that would have granted him formal unemployment status. The poignancy of a near miss with an alternate outcome makes Loach's meaning here clear: the effects of state neglect, bureaucratic obstructionism, and delay cannot be redressed by individual acts of resistance or resilience. A reading so committed to inevitability—to demonstrating that the outcome of state neglect remains unchanged by local intervention—relies on the structure of determinism for its moral messaging. Even the films' light and relieving moments are overshadowed by a plot shaped by austerity. Talking about anything other than structural violence delivered from above feels like an exercise in futility: we already know how this will end in the world, however the plot resolves. In these imaginaries, inhabitants of a neoliberalized world left to their own devices struggle to navigate scenes of social and economic abandonment in which they do not seem to have a chance of coming out secure or even alive.

Divestment, in other words, leaves little room for thinking the agency of those exposed to it. Yet, the prominence of humor in Mike Leigh's work offers a way around this by bringing in a repertoire of gestures suspended somewhere between being trapped and having room to move: humor thrives on avoidance, sidestepping, changing the topic, distraction. In Leigh, the ostensibly serious tradition of social realist depiction teems with teasing and riffing, comedy

references, caricature and farce. Leigh's interest in humor, often noted by reviewers, troubles a conception of social realism that locates the genre's interest in *mapping* of social dynamics that are beyond revision. Instead, we observe the vicissitudes of constantly renegotiated, shifting relation, as characters dance around one around through awkward jabs and ambivalent jokes. Humor offers room to some maneuver within airless spaces of divestment, providing forms of affective management that release the subject humor, temporarily and minorly, from the twin pressures of investment and divestment. It does this by staging its own withdrawal in the form of affective non-committalness—humoring the rules of the game without buying into them, individuals turn instead to minor maneuvers, barely significant exchanges and gaffes that do not add up to much. *Meantime* and *High Hopes* follow characters' missed encounters with investment, tracking the ways in which they repeatedly miss the chance to convert crisis into opportunity. At the heart of these films, then, is a question about the affective and economic act of cutting one's losses, and the absurdity of refusing to do so.

I. humor, humoring

Discussions of funniness tend to use "humor" interchangeably with terms such as "joke," "laughter," and "comedy."[7] Such conflation misses the specificity of humor as a term. If the genericness of comedy serves somewhat to absolve audience of the task of explaining *why*

[7] Consider the synonymity of "humor" to "comedy" or "joke" in these two excepts, one taken from popular article and one from an academic work:
"In 1925, when *The New Yorker* made its début, it was a humor magazine. Today, with so much comedy available for free on the Internet, a weekly humor magazine doesn't sound like a very promising enterprise (the success of *The Onion* notwithstanding)..." (Joshua Rothman, "Humor in the New Yorker")
"…the difference being that a theory of humor is not humorous. A joke explained is a joke misunderstood." (Simon Critchley, *On Humor*, 1-2)

something is funny to them (allowing the reader, listener, or watcher to attribute it to some sort of comic intention—"this was *meant* to be funny"), humor offers no such deniability: instead humor, it is assumed, resides in the eye of the beholder. Whereas comedy denotes a more or less objective category, one associated with particular narrative structures and marketing categories, humor gestures toward something more amorphous—a sensibility attributable most directly to the subject who finds funniness. (Consider the convention of describing humor by attaching a racial or national descriptor.) Humor thus foregrounds questions of subjective judgment. Why did you find this funny, and not this? That it can be agreed with relatively little fuss that that a show is recognizably a comedy, or that someone is a comedian, in no way guarantees consensus about said text's or person's "sense" of humor.[8] The variability of such judgments from person to person and, more significantly, from group to group, stages with particular starkness the way in which "why" something is humorous is not inherent to the object itself. Without consensus about what form humor can or should take, humor's volatility comes to be ascribed to the highly idiosyncratic elements of personal taste and preference. Rather than the kind of "objective" feeling that Sianne Ngai, citing Mikel Dufrenne, calls tone—an affective quality that inheres in the text itself, rather than in human figures located inside (representations of people) or outside (readers, consumers) the object—humor names an affective quality that re-exposes the *subject* to aesthetic and moral scrutiny.

My intention here is not to define once and for all what makes something humorous, but merely to suggest that there are certain questions that are consistently embedded in discussions

[8] It is true that "humorist" is a professional designation for literary funny-people, but this label stems, it seems to me, from a desire to hold literary apart from more commodified popular culture, which is to say that consuming the work of a "humorist" already involves more implications about personal taste and sensibility than consuming comedy.

of humor. These questions, as I have mentioned, congregate around the subjects, or kinds of subjects, involved. Even in the medieval sense of "humor" as one of four types of fluid in the human body—different proportions of which led to different temperaments—humor is understood to diagnose something going on inside that then manifests outwardly as temperament. Whether in its medieval or its contemporary usage, humor as an interpretive framework demonstrates an interest in what can be extrapolated about a person's style of affective processing based on that person's behavior or demeanor. This is not to say that humor should be relegated to the confines of personal taste, but that its location at the messy convergence point between the structural and something more idiosyncratic (specific to a particular individual or group and difficult to make broadly accessible even through exegesis) makes it both inconvenient and indispensable to efforts to understand the social. The subjectiveness of humor reveals fissures in what might at first appear to be a seamlessly shared scene of historical experience. It enables identical forms—the same joke, the same situation, the same problem—to be experienced differently depending on where one is standing. The question is not whether someone has *a* sense of humor, but whether they have *your* sense, "our" sense. Humor cannot avoid the charge of partiality, even as it remains irreducible to the purely subjective.

Detangling humor from close cognates like comedy and laughter gives us language for the complicated forms of sociality underlying various kinds of unseriousness. This sociality is often routed through the clash, rather than alignment, of sensibilities: that one might discover humor where another sees none is part of the experience of humor. There is a sense that we encounter humor most viscerally when it is *not* shared, which is to say that the quintessential question about humor is not *Isn't this funny?* but rather *How could this possibly be funny to you?*

This kind of divisiveness makes an appearance in Freud's account of humor, which describes finding humor in the most hopeless of situations: on the day of one's execution. For Freud, humor has as much to do with idiosyncratic styles of *reacting less* as it does with styles of response. He is interested in ways to affectively divest from situations of peril that threaten to otherwise overwhelm the subject.

While *Jokes and the Unconscious*, published more than twenty years before, opens with witticisms gleaned from dinner parties and puns appearing in conversation, Freud's essay on humor begins with a man who is about to be hanged. Funniness in this second, more impressionistic work surfaces under different circumstances. "When, to take the crudest example, a criminal who was being led out to the gallows on a Monday remarked: "Well, the week's beginning nicely," he was producing the humor himself; the humorous process is completed in his own person and obviously affords him a certain sense of satisfaction."[9] What is ostensibly missing from the prisoner's response—what the response "spares" him—is also what makes it humorous. Humor is, in this telling, about the bypass: a structure of circumvention that allows one to meet with relative equanimity a situation otherwise poised to overwhelm them. Freud has such "disappointment of emotional expectancy" in mind when he finds *condescension* at the heart of humor: by condescension, he does not (exactly) mean a state of presumed superiority that operates more or less along class lines, but rather a negotiated relation to instantiating circumstances that allows the subject to feel the effects of these circumstances less intensely—to circumvent the "unkindness of real circumstances."[10] The language of reduction—"sparing"—is crucial here: circumvention happens through a process that does not offer release,

[9] Sigmund Freud, "Humor," *Int. J. Psycho-Anal*., 9: 1, (1928): 161.
[10] Freud, 163.

but defuses the need for dramatic catharsis in the first place. The humorous attitude is, when faced with the ungenerosity of reality, not resigned or despairing but defiant in its refusal to feel anything other than "satisfaction." Freud attributes this to a transfer of cathexis from ego to superego, enabling what was previously overwhelming to appear small and inconsequential once viewed from the perspective of the superego.[11] He detects in the humorous attitude both a denial of reality bordering on psychosis and proof of psychic resilience.[12] Unlike the joke, which Freud identifies with the freeing of energy otherwise bound up in repression, humor dispenses with the needed for loaded comedic exchange altogether, making "the release of affect superfluous."[13]

This language of superfluity and sparing points less to a disappearing act than to a redistributive one. Running beneath the brash language of "rebellion" and "triumph" is a subtler one of energetic "savings" and psychic "sparing"—an intricate calculus for reallocating affective resources in the face of situations that solicit or require response. Sparing itself becomes a feeling. When Freud describes the shift from ego to superego, one is struck by the kind of attention his "economic" approach enables—attention, that is, to differences in allocation. Whereas cathecting the middling and thus vulnerable-to-intimidation ego makes it difficult to ignore possible suffering, relocating these energies to the superego, "inflated" and "heir to the paternal agency," allows one to access a sense of "invincibility."[14] This notion of redistribution is contained most succinctly, perhaps, in the trope of condescension which, as an affective

[11] If condescension is about making someone feel small and thus malleable to another's expectations, humorous condescension finds ways to activate this malleability in oneself. "A person adopts a humorous attitude *towards himself* in order to ward off possible suffering." Freudian self-condescension asks what would it mean to diminish one's own anxieties in order to respond to crisis with something other than defeat.
[12] Freud, 161.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Freud, 164.

structure, provisions resources of attention and care based on decisions about what is and isn't worth one's investment, differentiating between situations that do and do not have a real claim on you. Condescension points to a repertoire of affective gestures that are about withholding, reserving, rationing response**.** Even in its obsolete meaning of a member of the aristocracy flouting social convention to associate with someone outside their own class, condescension refers to a meting out of attention, a resource of which there can only be, it is understood, a limited amount.

Freud's account of humor emphasizes the freedom this style of reduced responsivity affords—its pleasures are "liberating" and "elevating"—but his description of humor as psychic "sparing" raises more questions than it answers. Because the ego's "victorious assertion of…invulnerability" can only ever be a wishful one, humor's relation to the situation that occasions it is necessarily more complicated than one of transcendence. Insofar as humor's function is to say, Freud puts it, "Look! Here is the world which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children—just worth making a jest about!,"[15] the prisoner's jest nonetheless does little to address the actual fact of his powerlessness: the prisoner does not, it is safe to assume, pull off a last-minute escape. While Freud's reading envisions a somewhat easy reversibility of power dynamics (as long as I can find humor in this situation, I win) his very choice of scenario dramatizes the limits of that reading. Humor falls instead in the gray zone between having room to adjust and being crushed.

Here, then, is where I part company with Freud. For me, humor's effect is not one of transcending scenes of coercion but of negotiating within these scenes to manage one's exposure to that which threatens one's survival. Redistribution becomes the name of the game: whereas

[15] Freud, 166

Freud favors the posture of outright defiance and rebellion, the tropes of sparing and management peppered throughout the essay suggests that another dynamic might be at play. Humor might be more compellingly thought in terms of humor*ing*, which brings in more ambivalent acts of "indulgence or compliance," of provisionally "fitting" and "suiting" something in the meantime.[16] As a structure of remaining proximate to something or someone *without* feeling beholden to that person or thing, humoring's primary function is to allow something to continue while reserving the right to feel any number of ways about it. Humoring provides a fascinatingly noncommittal way of being in the room with something, of playing along just enough without endorsing or fully engaging what is unfolding. Hence humoring's flavoring with a smidge of reluctance: a willingness to "humor" someone preserves the claim of plausible deniability. "That wasn't what I wanted, that wasn't my idea, I don't necessarily agree—I was just in the room." In light of these adjustments, condescension, too, starts to look less like the triumph of affective autonomy and more like coping, of learning to make do with less. If appearing to cede control over the dynamic of the interaction by initiating contact for which there is no set take, condescension nonetheless seeks to retain some measure of control in a volatile interaction by preserving room for deniability, making the one doing the humoring affectively untouchable.

What does it mean to humor the prospect of one's death or destruction? If the opening example in Freud's essay is any indication, humor becomes most salient in situations when humorous condescension makes the least sense—when, that is, it is deployed by those least able to afford the consequences of that situation's unfolding. This is what makes its relative

[16] *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 20 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. Also available at http://www.oed.com/.

minorness intriguing: humor is a curious tool in the repertoire of someone who cannot afford the luxury of space or distance, for whom proximity is less a choice than a forced condition. As I have mentioned, minor humor does not reconfigure the world in any sustained or measurable way, nor does it bend a situation to its rules—Freud describes humoring as a parallel process that takes place within an individual and remains relatively separate while an external situation unfolds. This squares with more colloquial understandings of humor: to humor something is to feel equivocal at best; one laughs, jokes, quips in lieu of more reliable commentary or structured assessment that could provide instructions on where to go from there. Minor humor does not seek to provide a blueprint for future social organization, or carry out a sustained experiment in social engineering. But, as we will see in the readings of the films, it is precisely this dynamic of accommodation and remaining in proximity that more frequently emerges in spaces with limited room to move.

Rather than reading the unserious as a formula—one which adheres to more or less familiar narrative patterning (ends in marriage; comic resolution; setup/punchline)—or a physiological reaction—as that which produces laughter—humor registers in a minor, more elusive key. Humor has the useful effect of loosening the shape we expect unseriousness to take. No longer presented in the more or less recognizable structure of set-up followed by punch line, or in the professionalized space of stand-up, humor flashes up instead in more mundane forms, as the quip that barely registers in conversation unless you are paying attention, or the side-comment that can be taken up or not depending on the temperature of the room. It is also, as we will see, a mode of response that grapples imperfectly and often inadequately with what is happening, dispersing rather than consolidating narratives about what is going on and what to do

about it.[17] Taking a cue from affect theory's interest in "impersonal" feeling—collective, material feeling that is both intimately felt and historically exemplary—this chapter will think about the material conditions for the emergence of a particular kind of humor in these films.[18] If, as Lauren Berlant suggests, humorlessness can be read as the "effect of a structural condition," humor and humoring are likewise understood in this chapter as importantly precipitated by conditions of structural, economic change. Reframing humor as a response to economic restructuring gets at the social in a way that the Freud does not equip us for. Freud's essay sees in the deployment of humor a small-scale instance of resilience that does not extend beyond flipping a switch in the individual psyche. The closest Freud gets to the social is the insertion of an onlooker who experiences the prisoner's affective remediation "at long range." (Tellingly, the secondhand apprehension of humor does not produce an encounter but merely reproduces the prisoner's psychic processes in the observer—another, self-contained psyche.) Activating the sociality that remains largely implicit in Freud's conception of humor will thus require some imaginative reframing alongside a humoring of Freud's terms.

The challenge of finding middle ground between being stuck and having room to move brings to mind Kathleen Stewart's work on the inadequacy of "bottom-line arguments about 'bigger' structures and underlying causes" like "neoliberalism," which are insufficient when

[17] A useful example of this alternative conception of humor can be found in Berlant's account of *missing* humor. See "Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)." Berlant describes humorlessness as something that creates an ecology of accommodation and compliance ("micro-adjustments") around its own fixed attachment to the appearance of sovereignty. In Berlant's account, humor makes it presence felt as the absent lubricant for the social in these situations. My argument has learned much from their account, taking up the question of what is happening in the other position in this dynamic. Whereas humorlessness involves someone's "insistence that *their* version of a situation should rule the relational dynamic," humor*ing* takes up the affective management of a situation from the other end, from the perspective, that is, of those accommodating enough to be in same space as that which they feel obliged to humor.

[18] See Lauren Berlant's "Intuitionists" essay for exploration of how affect is historical.

faced with a shifting "reeling" present."[19] Causes collected under the shorthand of "neoliberalism" turn out to work less through the subordination of individual agency to forces beyond one's control than through a distillation of these forces into what Stewart calls "scenes of immanent force"—moments, gestures, and other "heterogenous and noncoherent" elements that are inextricable from the particular here and now of their unfolding.[20] Berlant writes movingly of a "less austere materialism" that, while attuned to structural problems that extend beyond and shape subjective experience, does not take these structures in their existing states to be "intractable." Instead, this materialism tracks a "continuously contemporary ordinariness, in which beings try to make do and to flourish in the awkward, riven, unequal, untimely, and interesting world of other beings, abstractions, and forces, and in which we therefore have a shot at transforming the dynamics and the costs of our negativity and appearance."[21] Rather than thinking about individuals as being puppeted by forces beyond their control, Stewart and Berlant ask us to consider points of modulation at which these seemingly inaccessible forces take on intimate, unpredictable, viscerally-felt form. Structures of exploitation, abandonment, and other forms of violence cannot be separated from the everyday acts of theorizing, adjusting, surviving, playing, and feeling that constitute an experience of them.[22]

Something shifts in the project of social capture once we acknowledge that one's relation to economic and political circumstances is often an oblique one—belated and indirect rather than

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[19] Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 4.
[20] Stewart, 1.
[21] Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 116.
[22] Elizabeth Povinelli on neoliberalism not as "unified thing" but as "uneven terrain of social maneuver": "What does seem clear is that neoliberalism is not a thing but a pragmatic concept—a tool—in a field of multiple maneuvers among those who support and benefit from it, those who support it and suffer from it, and those who oppose it and benefit from it nevertheless—each action changing if only slightly the field of maneuver itself." (*Economies of Abandonment*, 19)

deterministic, far from clear or settled in terms of cause or outcome—even as these circumstances undeniably shape our lives and the kinds of relation we have (to one another, to the state). Humor, and the deflationary register it carries with it, ask: what is missed in an account of collective life when economic pressures are understood to determine in advance the responses that are possible, rather than leaving room for surprise, ambivalence and ambiguity, *even* in the context of neglect?[23] Something as mundane as humor presents not an obstacle to capturing political ordinariness but a resource for thickening its apprehension. Minor humor is continuous with a number of quotidian responses, showing the continuity between a quip and a shrug, teasing and venting, joking and pestering, laughing and bawling. It is never clear if humor is the right response to be having, or if it is "enough" to change anything. Nor does humor serve as the lynchpin in a way that would stabilize an understanding of the work as a whole. Rather, humor surfaces fleetingly and opportunistically, generating momentary holding spaces without fully working through the questions it raises. Minor humor does not reconfigure the world, or bend a situation to its rules. But it does index the messy and often tenuous practice of holding open a space of affective response under conditions that would seek to dismiss it. As we will see, Leigh's characters respond to it in ways that reveal the affective ties, joys and pleasures that persist even in the absence of profitability or cost-effectiveness as justification.

II. The joys of not investing

[23] Also Anne-Lise Francois' thinking on the poetics of "lightened," "uncounted experience." I have also learned a lot from the work of affect theorists working on the ordinary like Ann Cvetkovich, who, along with Berlant and Stewart, (work that is wrestling with trauma as inflation and how to move beyond it—Francois and Caruth too), and will try to put theories of humor in conversation with what these scholars have taught me. (take it or leave it—leave it being an option. Terada)

In the previous section, I focused on Freud's account of humor as a redistribution of affective resources. In this section, I want to explore how humor's affective economy resonates in striking ways with the political economy of investment and disinvestment that emerges in neoliberal restructuring characterizing the second half of the 20th century. If strategies for modulating affective investment lie at the heart of humor, financial investment likewise introduces questions of allocation. While Freud's prisoner negotiates structural abandonment in the form of being left to his execution, the characters in the social realist films I look at face a different dilemma. Not at risk of execution, Mike Leigh's characters are instead facing the burden of surviving life under neoliberal restructuring and austerity measures masquerading as redistribution of opportunity.

Divestment is hard to miss in the 70s and 80s: David Harvey, Wendy Brown, Lisa Duggan, and Melinda Cooper have all written on neoliberalism's ascendance not only as a period of accelerated financialization and deregulation, but also as an era of massive restructuring in public spending. While American and British neoliberalism abroad took the form of IMF-mandated "adjustment" and what Aihwa Ong has cuttingly described as a "radicalized capitalist imperialism increasingly tied to lawlessness and military action," adjustments at home took the shape of funding cuts to social infrastructure established during the immediate postwar period.[24]

[24] Lest we fall into the trap of idealizing the good old days of governmental obligation, it is crucial to remember that such public investment came with its own entailments: the public programs associated with "national control of macroeconomic policy enabled by Bretton Woods; low unemployment, through Keynesian demand management; and the socialization of economic risk through New Deal and national insurance schemes" were only possible under conditions of relative postwar economic prosperity in US and UK. Sarah Brouillette's reminder that the postwar welfare state in the American context was in face a result of economic abundance rather than any sense of social obligation is illuminating. Arguing that "defending democratic institutions against neoliberal market conditions" (that is, arguing for a "reform of the current system—pushing for "good jobs" and a robust social safety net for all") is not sufficient, Brouillette points out that the "expansiveness" of the welfare state was possible due to America's

This restructuring was a response to the stagflation (a combination of inflation and wage stagnation) that plagued much of the Western world during the mid-seventies, a result of what multiple scholars have identified as crisis in capital accumulation.[25] As a result, there was a general shift in western economies away from Keyensian planned economies towards a monetarist approach, which prioritized shoring up the value of money over maintaining employment rates and funding public programs.[26] Cooper describes how the prioritization of inflation in this moment of crisis, rather than stagnated wages or unemployment, was a direct result of the kind of economic activity that would be most affected by uncontrolled inflation:

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postwar hegemony, "when its industrial capacity set the standard for the ratcheting up of global competition that characterized capitalism in its expansive phase." ("Neoliberalism and the Demise of the Literary," 277-278) Melinda Cooper, too, has written on suspect "guarantees" of Fordist family wage, a bygone standard of pay often held up as an ideal under contemporary conditions of underemployment/unemployment/gig economy. "As an instrument of redistribution, the standard Fordist wage actively policed the boundaries between women and men's work and white and black men's labor, and in its social-insurance dimensions, it was inseparable from the imperative of sexual normativity. The Fordist politics of class was itself a form of identity politics inasmuch as it established white, married masculinity as a point of access to full social protection." (*Family Values*, 23)

I am not interested in cultivating nostalgia for bygone eras of "governmental largesse," but rather in tracing shifts in dynamics of investment and divestment, and tracking *local* acts of divestment that enter into weird alchemy with these structural adjustments. As investment and divestment are obverse sides of a coin when financial, political, and affective resources are limited, understanding their connection rather than prising them apart will best serve an attempt to understand either.

[25] Harvey, 57. Also corresponds to what Giovanni Arrighi calls the "autumnal" stage of capitalist development. Jameson on Arrighi: "first the investment-seeking implantation of capital in a new region; then the productive development of that region in terms of industry and manufacture; and finally, a deterritorialization of the capital in heavy industry in order for it to seek its reproduction and multiplication in financial speculation—after which this same capital takes flight to a new region and the cycle begins again." From "The Brick and the Balloon: Architecture, Idealism, and Land Speculation," 32)

[26] Randy Martin on this turn to monetarism: "Unemployment remains a key trigger of government actions, but now as an anxiety that too few are out of work and increased demand will raise wages and foment inflation, which in turn discourages investment. This is in contrast to the Keynesian concern that when too many are out of work, aggregate demand is weakened and goods go unsold." (*Financialization of Daily Life*, 21) See also Palley, "From Keynesiansim to Neoliberalism: Shifting Paradigms in Economics"

investment. Because it threatened to devalue money itself, inflation presented a threat to the investment class in particular, whose worth was contained largely in financial assets.[27] Economists' and state officials' framing of inflation as an issue of moral urgency, one that threatened to erode public trust and unleash irresponsible consumer habits, thus papered over the fact that the politics of prioritizing inflation over unemployment in fact represented a form of class warfare.[28]

The terms of this warfare were complicated by a transformation of the so-called investment class. As financial speculation became increasingly accessible to the average consumer during the "long 80s," workers were recruited into a financializing neoliberal order even as this order transferred more and more risk to individual shareholders.[29] The chance to invest, to appreciate the value of one's assets by participating in the game of speculation and thus to lay claim to *future* value, created what Adam Harmes characterizes as "a growing link between the interest of workers and finance capital."[30] "Mass investment culture"—whether it involved buying stocks or purchasing a home—offered workers "the appearance of a stake in the neoliberal order," transforming them from "passive savers" into "active investors" and "vastly expand(ing) the constituency in favor of neoliberal macroeconomic policies and structures."[31] Personal investment lent macroeconomics a deceptively intuitive face: if the value of money held up, even increased, those who had it would also do well. The felt imperative to participate in the

[27] Cooper, 27-28.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Leigh Claire la Berge, *Scandals and Abstractions: Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
[30] Adam Harmes, "Mass Investment Culture," *New Left Review* 9 (May June 2001): 103. This culture is epitomized in Harmes by the rise of the mutual-fund industry and the privatization of pensions.
[31] Harmes, 105.

stock market, the housing market, or anything else that would allow one to capitalize on fluctuations in price is a historical marker of the way modes of private, individual investment become increasingly vernacular in this period.

While I spend some time setting up the pressurized scene of simultaneously incentivized and coerced investment, my interest ultimately lies with the *un*invested: those who do not, by choice or necessity or some combination of the two, participate in mass investment culture. Increasingly at stake in an age of investment are not only the ways in which denizens of a financializing world are invited to take up finance capital's interests as their own, but the ways in which one misses or passes on that solicitation. As investment logic takes hold, the failure to invest seems to require more justification than ever before: yet, the characters in Leigh's film never really offer any satisfactory explanation of their indifference to investment. These moments of refusal or evasion or distraction are not earthshattering or even particularly coherent, but they *are* pockets of nonalignment in a logic that has otherwise become hegemonic. The affective landscape of neoliberal restructuring cannot be extricated from these moments of nonalignment, nor can the function of humor in these instances be understood without understanding the broader cultures of investment and divestment against which such pleasure unfolds. It matters that when one character accuses another of being emotionally uninvested, the conversation takes place alongside numerous other conversations about literal investment, or that the financial and relational are discussed alongside one another. I describe what it meant to be invested at the end of the 20th century in order to explore what humor is doing in Leigh when it does appear.

It is clear from the start of *High Hopes* (1988) that domesticity offers no shelter from the political. If anything, shelter itself is politicized: the ever-present question of accommodation—where one will stay in the midst of widespread unemployment and gentrifying communities, how one shares that space with the people in one's proximity (visitors, neighbors, family)—becomes central to the characters' lived experience of political economy. Like many of Leigh's films, *High Hopes* features good and bad hosts: whereas some characters treat their homes as things to be shown off and protected, others use them to provide shelter for themselves and others. The film follows a couple sharing a flat in London who are just getting by but are surrounded by friends and family who are not. Shirley's and Cyril's spare room becomes a temporary refuge for all manner of displaced characters: a hapless stranger who comes to London for the first time in search of a job, an unemployed friend on the dole who bounces from guest room to guest room, even Cyril's aging mother.

The inextricability of the domestic from the economic becomes particularly salient in the case of Cyril's mother, Mrs. Bender, one of the few council tenants still remaining in a gentrifying housing estate.[32] The estate has largely been bought up by people looking to turn the houses for a profit: as Cyril observes, many of the houses on the street are no longer homes but "capital investment"— unoccupied for much of the week, they are more vehicles for real estate speculation than actual residences. The difference between living in a house and having one as an investment makes Mrs. Bender an outsider in her own neighborhood: her relatively old and unkempt house is taken as indication of her lack of interest in increasing the value of the property, an indifference troubling to those who have purchased properties nearby. After

[32] Several critics have made the point that, etymologically, economy contains the Greek word for home, "oikos."

accidentally locking herself out, Mrs. Bender is forced to take refuge in the living room of the well-to-do couple next door, the Boothe-Braines. The couple sees this as an opportunity to convince her, over a cup of tea, to sell her home and leave the estate.

> Lætitia: You could hardly justify having three bedrooms, though, could you?
>
> Mrs. Bender: It's my home.
>
> L: Yes, it is at the moment—I grant you that. Sugar?
>
> B: (silence)
>
> L: I'm not sure it wouldn't be better appreciated by a professional couple, or even a family. Biscuit?
>
> B: I've always lived there.
>
> L: Yes, that may be. But times change.
>
> B: (silence)
>
> L: I think you'll be the first to agree that you'd be better off buying yourself a nice little modern granny flat.
>
> B: Where would I get the money from?
>
> L: Well, if you were to put your house on the market, I think you'll find that you've been sitting on a gold mine. Do you have all your original features? Cornices, fireplaces?
>
> B: I've got fireplaces, yeah.
>
> L: Voila! Bring in the estate agents.
>
> B: Not my house.
>
> L: Ah, it belongs to a member of your family?
>
> B: Belongs to the council.
>
> L: Oh. Well, mercifully, you people do have the opportunity to purchase your council properties nowadays. I'd snap it up, if I were you. And then of course, one resells.

When asking Mrs. Bender to downsize and leave the estate, Laetitia has in mind the values of neighborhood with and without Mrs. Bender there. C.D. Blanton, Colleen Lye and

Kent Puckett refer to this juggling of potential but not yet realized value as "fictitious capital"—not, they explain, "capital per se but its anticipation at market price." Populating Mrs. Bender's home with hypothetical inhabitants more suited to the space—a professional couple, a family—Lætitia's one-sided interrogation amounts to a rhetorical home invasion, one that is intent on crowding Mrs. Bender out in order to replace her with someone more attuned to nuances of potential value. Condescension in *High Hopes* takes the form of impromptu training in the speculative economy: financially savvy characters impart, which varying degrees of reluctance, the secrets of recognizing, planning around, and cashing in on fictitious capital. In this world, Mrs. Bender's perceived ignorance of the fact that her home is a "gold mine" is of a piece with her failure to maintain the house and, by extension, the value of the neighborhood. Clearly, for Lætitia the most egregious mistake is to consider the home mere accommodation—to miss, that is, its value as an investment. Her qualification of present circumstances—"It is at the moment, I grant you that," "Yes, that might be. But times change"—in favor of a different future, one about which she has more insight than her interlocutor, reveals a strategic disregard for the status quo. For the investment-minded, the past or even the past-perfect (past continuing on into the present) is of no interest—all that matters is a potentially profitable future.

While the film features many characters dispensing financial advice, I am more interested in the fact that none of this advice is ever taken up. Each instance of financial advising is also an instance of such advice going ignored: despite badgering from in-laws and nosy neighbors with ulterior motives, Mrs. Bender, Cyril and Shirley do not take up the call to invest. Rather than allocating resources in pursuit of future return, Mrs. Bender appears content to leave things as they are. Her willingness to stay where she is presents an opposition between attachment and investment: whereas investment's rationale is future-oriented and risk-assuming, attachment does

not offer a corresponding language of growing value. Despite Laetitia's attempts to awaken in her interlocutor a sense of unrealized gain, Mrs. Bender's attachment to her house is a relation of maintenance, and thus of resources not easily withdrawn or transferred. Unwilling or unable to imagine her home with the level of liquidity that Laetitia recommends—easily converted into money, easily exchanged for another home—Mrs. Bender remains unmoved by the advice she is given. This willingness to have things remain as they are plays out not only in her living situation—she lives in the same house that she lived in with her now-deceased husband— but in the very conversation that unfolds between her and Lætitia. The scene, while not necessarily played for laughs, shows humoring in its other form: Mrs. Bender does not stop or interrupt the latter's questioning despite being noticeably uncomfortable. Instead, she stays with the back-and-forth—barely. Whereas a reading of her impassivity as apathy, intimidation, or simply incomprehension might assume she is not herself gathering and processing information, she is, as evidenced in the exchange above, asking questions of her own. "Where would I get the money from?" The point, however, is that she does nothing with this information. Laetitia's advice lays dormant, echoed by other characters in the course of the film, but ultimately fruitless. Collecting information without acting on it, Mrs. Bender's actions are a prime example of what we discussed in the previous section as humoring: she remains in proximity to without entirely being coincident.

Fig. 2.1 Mrs. Bender and the Boothe-Braines in *High Hopes* (1988)

In remaining impervious to financial advice, Mrs. Bender recedes from the scene of investment even as she is pressed to join it—a withdrawal that turns out to have historical resonances. Lætitia's reference to purchasing council property is one of the film's many allusions to the "Right to Buy" scheme, a policy introduced by the Thatcher administration in the Housing Act of 1980 that made previously public housing available for purchase at significantly discounted rates.[33] Right to Buy became a way for the state to generate revenue while offloading properties that had become a drain on the national treasury. (It would also mark the beginning of cuts to public housing that has continued into the present-day.[34]) Needless to say, Mrs. Bender was not the type of consumer the state had in mind when they introduced highly incentivized

[33] Discounts started at 33 per cent of market value for those with three years' tenancy and could reach a maximum of 50 per cent for longer-term residents.

[34] If earlier legislation pertaining to the sale of council homes had also banked on the transfer of private homes back into municipal management, the expectation being that some of the profit from council property sales would be reinvested into obtaining and building new council properties, the new legislation offered no such pretense. (Boughton, 567) Ebook) Government spending on council housing construction dropped 43 percent between 1980 and 1990, going from an annual budget of 2.13 billion pounds to one of 1.21 billion. (Boughton, 572)

house-buying policies to the public. Instead, the reforms Thatcher instituted counted on potential homeowners being highly motivated. David Harvey describes Right to Buy as a way to "build consent" around neoliberal reform by offering perks in the form of tax relief, reduced interest rates, and special mortgage loan programs—policies that were framed in terms of affective as well as financial amelioration. A 1974 announcement of the Conservative party's plans for housing reform describes the "misery" of people unable to find enough money to put down a deposit on a house, as well as the "disappointment" that met decisions by some councils not to release council properties for private purchase.[35] It presented the proposed reforms as a kind of affective redress, a chance for renters who had long desired to invest in property to access previously inaccessible opportunities for investment and to escape a cycle of misery and disappointment perpetuated by protectionist policies that withheld public property from the market. Right to Buy was welcomed by many council tenants, who were initially happy to accept the bait and switch given its promises of home ownership.

However, contrary to Laetitia's assessment of RTB as "mercy," a gesture of benevolence directed at those who would otherwise be barred from investing in a home, the selling of council properties represented a form of cynical opportunism, one that used homeownership as justification for thoroughgoing divestment. Social housing's restructuring in this period, its continual gutting under the auspices of promoting private investment, led to a rise in homelessness and a segregation of estates, forms of dispossession in which housing speculation played a part. Though RTB was initially presented as a way to increase homeownership among renters (a "gift to the lower classes"), it in fact led to properties in prime locations being sold to buyers who were betting on property prices to increase. As homes previously withheld from the

[35] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aM8lzqsRn64

private market entered it, they became increasingly thinkable as sites of *investment*—of fluctuating, changeable value, rather than as (traditionally) more or less fixed assets.

Writing on the "financialization of daily life," Randy Martin notes a curious reversal in notions of fiscal responsibility in an age of mass speculation: while "nearly extinct" notions of saving money rest "upon a mass psychology of deferred gratification, putting off the pleasure of expenditure today for a rewarding tomorrow," investment thinking looks not to deferral but to constant management as a source of future reward.[36] Whereas notions of saving money equate risk with potential loss, notions of investment see in it potential gain. In the "new psychology," "money is not to be left untouched, but constantly fondled, mined daily like a well-stocked refrigerator."[37] Such "constant fondling" entails risk: putting money back into circulation rather than saving it means that you can lose money more quickly and suddenly than if you had set it aside. Financial responsibility in the age of investment requires not minimizing risk but assuming the right kind. Never mind that the cost of losing one's investment is far graver for some: everyone, the story goes, risks something. Whereas being risk-averse is to passively consent "to have one's life managed by others, to be subject to their miscalculations, and therefore to be unaccountable to oneself," assuming the risk associated with investment amounts to "taking charge of one's (fortunes)."[38]

The difference between passive saving and agential investing—between relying on other people's calculations and taking charge of one's future by playing the market—means that those

[36] Martin, *Financialization of Daily Life,* 5-6.
[37] Martin, 5-6.
[38] Martin, 107. This is evidenced, in part, by the growing prominence of debt (rather than credit) in financial life: Annie McClanahan has argued that indebtedness, not entrepreneurialism, represents the exemplary experience of neoliberalism. Living on debt increasingly becomes a way for individuals and governments alike to forestall crisis by borrowing on the future, a strategy followed out of necessity rather than savvy financial planning. (see *Dead Pledges*)

who fail to invest stand accused of a novel kind of irresponsibility. Laetitia's problem with Mrs. Bender is not that she lives wastefully or fails to set aside savings—notably, very little is revealed about Mrs. Bender's financial situation apart from Laetitia's guesswork—but that she does not take up the risk and reward mode of investment. (That Laetitia assumes that Mrs. Bender would be able to purchase her house but is simply not doing so vastly underestimates what it would take for Mrs. Bender to purchase her home.)[39] As with Randy Martin's account of the risk-*managed* self, a particular kind of sparing becomes recoded as a kind of irresponsibility. Cyril is later similarly shamed for not investing, this time in a business opportunity. "You've got to speculate to accumulate," Cyril's unsavory brother-in-law Martin warns him, pointing out that he won't be able to work as a bike messenger for much longer and offering him a piece of "professional advice, free of charge": to start his own delivery business. Martin's advice is as banal as it is obnoxious, a parroting of entrepreneurial common sense that offers nonstop vigilance as an answer to structural precarity. Mrs. Bender and Cyril's failure to invest—in a home, in a business—presents a liability, one that prevents not only them but others around them from pursuing more lucrative options. (At one point, Cyril's sister alludes to the fact that Cyril prevented her from purchasing Mrs. Bender's home—an instance of his non-investment becoming an obstacle for those around him.) Not investing indicates a failure to transition from

[39] In the case of RTB, the charge of not being invested or not being invested enough came to be leveraged against tenants who did not or could not buy their council properties: Boughton observes that council properties became stratified, effectively if not officially separated between those for tenants who could afford to buy their council homes and those for tenants who could not. Residents who could not afford a mortgage were concentrated into estates that, accordingly, received less funding for renovation and were poorly managed. (Boughton, 583)

mere consumer to an agent of capital, from one who spends to one actively securing and even increasing value.[40]

III. Investment and Feeling

Crucially, massified investment presents not only financial questions, but affective ones as well. Whether it is hope for the unrealized value of an ongoing investment, anxiety about investments that can still be lost or have yet to yield profit, or regret over an investment gone wrong, investment injects a whole spectrum of feelings into everyday decision-making. That the

[40] The pressurized scene of everyday investment makes its way into many of Leigh's later films as well. *Career Girls* (1997) revolves around two friends who, after reuniting for the first time in six years, spend their time together looking at houses for sale; in *Happy-Go-Lucky* (2008), free-spirited Poppy is pressured by her sister, who has recently bought a house and gotten pregnant, to stop living life without a plan and start planning for buying a house and starting a family; *Another Year* (2010) follows a couple whose prudent financial and emotional investment—in a comfortable home, a secure marriage and a successful son—has allowed them to thrive in old age, unlike their less well-adjusted friends who suffer from loneliness, overwork, bad health among other things. That investment is reliably tied to the moralizing language of responsibility, and more often than not issued as a warning (invest or else), speaks to the coerciveness of its logic. Of course, even when the investing ethos is taken up, there can be no guarantee of pay-off. *Life is Sweet* (1990) explores the notion of failed investment, poking fun at attempts to invest that do not come to fruition. When Aubrey, an aspiring restaurateur, opens an ill-advised restaurant named "The Regret Rien," the meaning of the name—the absence of regret—itself becomes a comment on investment. As an aspiration, the desire to have "no regrets" speaks to the desire to have one's investment vindicated, to have one's risk-taking behavior bear fruit and no longer present a liability. The anxiety around the possibility of *someday* feeling regret, which is not the same thing as regret but a preemptive shadow version of it, is a sign of the insecurity such investment thinking breeds. Throughout *Life is Sweet*, characters make imprudent purchases and impulsive ventures in the name of the mining of unrealized potential. The father Tom buys a dilapidated food truck from his friend Patsy, whose reassurances that the dinky old truck represents "the future," a "catalyst for a revolution," draws on an enticing language of potentiality. "I paid more than ten quid for it, but it's an investment!" Tom assures his dismayed wife. Tom's imprudence turns out to be small potatoes compared to Aubrey's. When "The Regret Rien" draws no customers on opening night, we are hardly surprised. The restaurant's tacky décor, a combination of eye-popping kitsch and pretentious symbolism (there are empty birdcages strewn around the dining area), indicate an imagination unsuited to the business of value finding and predicting.

economic is also affective, and vice versa, is not a new observation: Sara Ahmed and Brian Massumi among others have discussed the convergence of economic and affective form.[41] Describing a stock market dip that does not improve despite forecasts of recovery, largely due to the public's loss of faith in government, Massumi points to affect's direct influence on the market as a sign of affect's capacity to generate material effects that nonetheless escape other, "actually existing, structured things."[42] That collective, "second-hand feelings" like the lack of confidence in political figures can have economic effects means that affect is "a real condition, an intrinsic variable of the late-capitalist system, as infrastructural as a factory."[43] While Massumi cites the factory as a figure for economic infrastructure, his case study suggests that *financial* structures have, if anything, linked the affective even more directly to value accumulation. Investment's reliance on a shifting ground of public sentiment complements the speculative nature of finance.[44] Trading on notions of monetary value largely "untethered from

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[41] Ahmed's use of "economic" is largely analogical. Take, for instance, this passage: "Indeed, insofar as psychoanalysis is a theory of the subject as lacking in the present, then it offers a theory of emotion as economy, as involving relationships of difference and displacement without positive value. That is, emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positive in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation. I am using 'the economic' to suggest that emotions circulate and are distributed across a social as well as psychic field. I am borrowing from the Marxian critique of the logic of capital (surplus value created through circulation)." ("Affective Economies," 120). Ahmed's language of analogy and borrowing ("I am borrowing from the Marxian") ("I am identifying a similar logic') suggests that while she is interested in the economic, she is interested in it largely for its form (circulation). I am interested in literal capital and the affects that attend it— that is, affects having to do with circulation of money. When I talk about humor's affective economy, I am interested in the way its operation requires circulation between people—invested and uninvested—but also in the ways that humor involves literal calculations of expenditure, investment, and sparing.

[42] Brian Massumi, "Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique* No. 31 Part II (Autumn 1995): 96. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1354446?seq=1

[43] Massumi,106.

[44] C.D. Blanton, Colleen Lye, and Kent Puckett, "Introduction" to "Financialization and the Culture Industry," *Representations* Vol. 126, Issue 1 (May 2014). https://online.ucpress.edu/representations/article-abstract/126/1/1/81623/Introduction?redirectedFrom=fulltext

the underlying real economy" makes the entire notion of investment more susceptible to affective fluctuation: property values are subject to changing perceptions of how desirable an area is to live in even if there is not yet any change to the property itself; financial panics and stock market crashes can be triggered by a generally felt sense that one's money is no longer secure (leading investors to withdraw funds at high enough rate that market crashes). In a particularly stark affective turn, discourse around new financial instruments has directly taken up the millennial language of acronymized feeling to talk about economic health or incentive: cryptocurrency enthusiasts regularly cite "FUD" ("fear, uncertainty, and doubt") as an all too literal threat to the value of a given cryptocurrency, and "FOMO" ("fear of missing out") as motivation for buying cryptocurrency in the first place.[45] The understanding that value is as dependent on affective fluctuation as it is on fluctuations in price—glimpsed in the stock market's obsession with itself as a confidence game (how to measure stockholder confidence) to Greenspan's famous description of participation in speculative bubbles as "irrational exuberance"—becomes all the more pronounced with the popularization of speculation.

The question of what affective relation one can have to seemingly intractable economic structures applies not only in the case of those whose interests align with capital, but also in the case of those who are marginalized by it. Dispossession at the hands of investment culture does not exclude one from being affectively entangled in its web—or, as it turns out, having some sort of influence on its operation. Historicizing contemporary cultures of debt—another aspect of the

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Blanton, Lye, and Puckett describe the curious nature of finance capital, which has become more abstracted from relatively concrete expressions of value like the commodity. They cite Marx's theory of "fictitious capital": ("illusory process by which monetary circulation seems to promise an accumulation of value untethered from the underlying real economy")

[45] Omis Malekan, "If Fund Managers Back Bitcoin," *New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/27/business/dealbook/fund-managers-bitcoin.html

financialized economy—leads Annie McClanahan to observe a shift in how borrowers nowadays feel about what has traditionally been a guilt-laden system. Because living on credit has become less and less a matter of prerogative and more a matter of survival in an era of austerity, debtors neither feel guilt for owing money nor morally obliged to return it. Fed up with a rigged system, they no longer experience indebtedness as an affective and psychic state of indebtedness, but understand it instead as a condition imposed by climbing costs of housing, health care, and education.[46] (McClanahan cites a shared expectation among her students that they will never fully pay off their student debt.) A self-described "vulgar" materialist, McClanahan returns to the economy as cause rather than mere effect: she is careful to note that whether or not one feels obliged to pay their debts, repayment is ultimately enforced by the state's powers to punish and seize assets. *Feeling* indifferent does not end the vicious cycle of debt. Having argued that the behavioral economy's language of "individual thought patterns" and "individual feelings" could not account for the complexities of the global financial system, McClanahan holds apart the structural and affective: by her reasoning, analysis of indebtedness should not be about the "intimate and subjective" experience of it *because* it is about economic exploitation.

Yet, insofar as financial obligations are, like all economic modes, forms of social relation sustained and shaped affectively, no longer feeling compelled by financial "obligations" can have material consequences. These effects do not cancel out the coerciveness of money-lending—McClanahan is right that whether or not a debtor believes in their debt, the lender can and will find ways of extracting payment—but the feelings *do* leave traces. Slightly reframed, McClanahan might be understood instead to be arguing not that the structural and affective are

[46] Annie McClanahan, *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First-Century Culture* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2017), 95.

mutually exclusive, but that the economists and novelists who turn to individual motivation (rhetoric of "greed") as explanation for large-scale financial upheaval like the 2008 crash—rather than structural problems like the lack of regulation of the financial industry or historical developments in practice of debt/credit—have gotten economic causality wrong: it is not that individual feelings of greed can account for economic collapse, but that feelings are, like any other economic indicator that is only encountered obliquely/is not exhaustive, part and parcel of the historical scene of economic activity. What some call "greed," if pursued and conceptualized socially and structurally, turns out to be as legitimate an indicator of economic conditions as the rate at which people are defaulting on their loans or the rate at which consumers are borrowing money. Shifts in how people feel their economic situation matter, and can happen even as the economic structure itself remains in full force. In the case of indebtedness, the debtor's indifference to repayment becomes a reflection of debt's own "indifference" to the borrower's predicament: debt is a "relation not of intimacy but of utter indifference, a relation that has no more concern for the particularity of the subject's moral life or existence than has the wage contract." Indifference to one's debt—to plan to be in debt forever—is, effectively, a way "to refuse to be in debt at all."[47] Indifference can apply as fully to notions of opportunity as it does to those of obligation. In the case of investment, contrarian economic feeling takes the form of a reluctance to participate in investment thinking, even as the landscape around them is being reshaped by it—a response that may be more powerful than investors are willing to admit. Concerted by highly contingent acts of guessing and based on the premise that financial promise can be translated into actual value at a future date, investment *presupposes* a willingness to

[47] Annie McClanahan, "Becoming Non-Economic: Human Capital Theory and Wendy Brown's Undoing the Demos," *Theory and Event* 20, no. 2 (April 2017): 518. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/655783/pdf

participate. It needs to draw buy-in prior to this value's actual materialization. Without investors, big or small, willing to put up money in advance, there would be no market: lack of buy-in effectively threatens the very social consensus that makes the game of guessing future value worth playing in the first place.

Like McClanahan's unmoved debtors, Leigh's unmoved non-investors remain in the vicinity of economic activity *while withholding their full participation*. Humor comes in when straightforward participation is refused but you nonetheless don't get to leave. It becomes one way of not taking seriously bypassed financial opportunities and unclaimed assets, dramatizing an "instead" against the backdrop of things one should be doing—investing, accumulating, allocating resources with an eye to future value. In this sense, humor's function would seem to lie in offering a way out of the mounting pressure exerted by commonsense about financial responsibility. Sharing a sense of humor, as Cyril and Shirley do, seems to index a sort of alternate value: their playful in-syncness stands in stark contrast to the missed jokes and general lack of humor that plague Valerie, Martin, and the Boothe-Braines. In the film, humor often takes the form of insideness, of exchanges that are only transparent to some people in the room. When Cyril calls Valerie's ostentatiously decorated living room "a bit noisy," only to have her explain that this is impossible as the room is soundproof (thus missing Cyril's sly criticism of her taste), the camera pans to emphasize Cyril and Shirley's surreptitious exchange of glances. The looks askance align us with those who get the better of their financial betters, if only in the most minor of ways. We take pleasure in Valerie's humiliation particularly because she is unaware of it.

Yet, humor's capacity to *reverse* power's hold is an overly optimistic account of what are ultimately situations with no escape: as we have noted, the ongoing dilemma in *High Hopes* is

that there cannot be a clean break between those who buy in and those who do not, even as they occupy different affective positions. What keeps uninvested and invested characters in close and often reluctant contact is the sheer impossibility of getting away from investment advice, whose persistence and ubiquity promise guidance in a world that punishes those who aren't playing. Leigh's uninvested characters are not able to completely insulate themselves from a world in which the advice *does* apply: it is true, after all, that Cyril and Shirley live more precariously than Valerie and Martin because they have not invested in a house but continue to pay rent, or that Mrs. Bender's deteriorating health means that she is increasingly unsuited to living alone and might need to downsize.

Cyril, Shirley and Mrs. Bender do not so much turn the tables on their relatives and neighbors as stay in the room without entirely conceding—they have little choice in the matter. When she has the exchange about selling her home with Laetitia, Mrs. Bender is locked out of her house and has nowhere else to go; Cyril and Shirley tolerate Valerie and her husband Martin obnoxiousness because they are guests in the latter's home. When Martin propositions Shirley, humoring makes yet another appearance: in response to Martin's attempts at flattery and insistence that she accompany him to the garden, Shirley humorously deflects—answering a question about whether she has done any modeling with the comment that she has not but she has done some yodeling. The exchange continues for some time, with Shirley dancing rhetorical and at times nonsensical circles around Martin without letting the conversation drop on her end. When Martin, disappointed, eventually accuses Shirley of being "cold," he underestimates the degree to which he *has* been humored. Neither Shirley nor Cyril, who has been listening uneasily in the other room, confront Martin about his predatory behavior: instead, it continues until he

wears himself out. Shirley wastes Martin's investment in her while leaving it up to him to end the interaction, dissipating his attentions without shutting him down directly.[48]

Shirley's knack for dissipation illustrates humor's actual function: rather than providing safety or transcendence, her wordplay and wit shift the register of Martin's advances so that they do not yield the return he hopes for. Humor works to disperse investment by not refusing it but not offering return on it either. Of course, in making this comparison, I am shuttling between different registers of investment: one, investment as act of commitment of funds to something anticipated to be profitable, two, investment as expenditure of time and energy in anticipation of a future, desired outcome that is not necessarily monetary or financial. That these two are inextricably linked in the film—that it is Martin's success as an entrepreneur that gives him the sense of control he so clearly has, that it is Shirley and Cyril's marginalization within the investment economy that make them seem vulnerable (to bullying and objectification)—is something the film returns over and over again. Not being of the investing class has real cost—cost that registers in formal ways in the film. Whereas the first half of the film shuttles between the relatively separate storylines of Cyril and Shirley, Mrs. Bender, Valerie, and the Boothe-Braines, this parallel structure eventually collapses around the increasingly vulnerable Mrs. Bender, whose worsening condition forces those in her vicinity to make contact in order to coordinate her care.

Humor, unlike investment, has little trouble accommodating lack of consensus or ambivalent participation. Not particularly uniform as a sensibility, it does not need to exist to the exclusion of other, seemingly contradictory feelings like annoyance, incomprehension, resentment, discontent. Humor arises not from transcendence, but from a messy and

[48] Thanks to Marissa Fenley for this formulation.

uncomfortable proximity in situations of historical flux. Take, for instance, an exchange in the second half of the film in which Cyril and Shirley discuss their divergent visions for the future. Shirley has made it clear that she would like to have children, dropping several hints that Cyril ignores. He eventually criticizes her for falling into the "bourgeois game" of family building and property ownership, which he sneeringly condenses as the desire for "a nice house, a couple of kids, a garden with a greenhouse." Asked what *he* wants, Cyril freezes up:

> Cyril: Can't say. It's too obvious. And complicated.
>
> Shirley: Go on.
>
> C: It sounds stupid. (long pause) I want everyone to have enough to eat.
>
> (Shirley chuckles)
>
> C: Told ya. Places to live, jobs.
>
> S: Don't we all?

What's funny—mildly and sadly perhaps, but funny nonetheless—about Cyril's admission is how close to a non sequitur it is. Wanting a family and wanting the world to no longer punish people for being poor seem such radically different uses of the word "want" that one might reasonably wonder if these two are talking about the same thing. Such incommensurateness is surely Cyril's point: it is possible to use "want" for something other than the privatized language of family or home, for something as wide-ranging as wanting something for "everyone." It is possible, in other words, to have desire at the level of the political. Yet, Cyril's pronouncement is, in the world of the film, an exercise in futility. From his perspective, these "high hopes" are not an occasion for energizing commitment, but signs of a continued attachment to a lost cause. Cyril's dream of a post-capitalist utopia is already taken for granted as an impossibility. His depressiveness, in this moment and throughout the film, is tied to a sense of

its (and his) inutility: "I'm a dead loss. Don't do nothing, sit here moaning. Don't know why you don't clear off." The simplicity but also utter defeatedness of Cyril's wish—his sense that he both is and is not asking for too much—makes saying it out loud a feel particularly vulnerable.

Once the promise of future return is relinquished, what can be worth spending time and energy on is suddenly radically up for grabs—and we get the sense that even Cyril is not entirely convinced of his own priorities. By his own account, his desire for a just world is not life- or value-bestowing but alienating, making him feel "cut off" and raising fears that he will end up "bitter." This is in large part because his relation to political idealism is a curiously backward-looking one. Unlike Suzi, whose undampened enthusiasm for socialist slogans annoys him to no end, Cyril thinks largely about political possibility in the past tense. At one point in the film, he visits Marx's grave with Shirley. Reading the inscription on Marx's headstone, which calls for efforts not simply to theorize the world but to change it, Cyril wonders aloud, "Thing is: change what?" Shirley's quip about the size of Marx's head—an attempt to breathe playfulness into Cyril's relation to the philosophy literally ossified before him—doesn't take. Cyril, for once, is not up for making fun but wishes to stay on topic.

Fig. 2.2 Shirley jokes about the size of Marx's head

Fig. 2.2, continued

Cyril's interest in what no longer works—socialism, families, himself—makes the positions he takes necessarily self-defeating. So resistant to investment-mindedness is he that he cannot even conceive of his own ideals as investments. His sentimental attachment to what *he perceives* as a lost cause resembles what Wendy Brown, citing Walter Benjamin, calls "left melancholia": an attachment to progressive ideals that, in the wake of the collapse of global Marxism, were largely understood to be lost or to have never fully materialized in the first place. Brown uses the language of misplaced investment to explain how lapsed revolutionaries continue to cathect ideals that have not yielded results. For her, left melancholia is a kind of infelicitous investment, one that attaches to the wrong things: one's "past political identity" or "long-held sentiments" rather than the actually existing world and the need to transform it. Such "narcissism" ends up eclipsing "any contemporary investment in political mobilization, alliance, or transformation."[49] Melancholia is, in this formulation, a form of investment that interferes

[49] Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholia," in *Without Guarantees: In Honor of Stuart Hall*, ed. Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg and Angela McRobbie (London: Verso, 2000), 22.

with more productive forms of planning and expenditure.[50] Whereas melancholia's "emotional economy" stalls the translation of dearly held beliefs into anything of actual value, proper investment finds a way to stay attuned to what is currently unfolding in order to turn these circumstances to one's economic or political advantage. My point is not to criticize Brown for her use of this language but simply to note that investment, even when used as a figure of speech, carries with it a certain logic. Whether invoked as a model of political change or a strategy for economic gain, investment-mindedness requires that one maximize return by cutting one's losses.

Failing to cut one's losses frustrates the logic of investment. If Cyril's intellectual and emotion stake in a particular image of a welfare state constitutes an investment, it is a sunken one, unable to be recovered or easily transferred at will in order to make good on the next opportunity. It is, in this sense, not a successful investment at all: investment relies on capacity to rapidly move money around and to sell and buy shares almost immediately, both in order to cash in on instantaneous shifts in price and to avoid loss (arbitrage) Once the prospect of future return can no longer be claimed as plan or motivation, an investment is just a wish.

But what are we to make of the fact that Cyril's hesitant and defeated pronouncement later in the film, a vocalization of the things he's feeling in the cemetery, is met with and deflated by, of all things, Shirley's chuckle? If Cyril's lament before Marx's grave is a textbook case of political melancholia, it is, importantly, not the image the film leaves us with. Instead, Shirley and Cyril's conversation in Highgate cemetery is followed by another exchange in which, as we

[50] Benjamin and Brown are, obviously, using Freud's terms when discussing melancholia. In Freud, melancholia is also form of investment disguised as divestment—*appearing* to withdraw from the world or any life-sustaining attachment, the melancholic has in fact turned inward in order to fixate on the lost object it has preserved there.

have seen, Cyril tries saying what he wants and is met with gentle laughter. Humor's appearance in this conversation about political idealism raises questions about what constitutes worthwhile political investment. Whereas the exchange in the cemetery shows an attempt at humor falling flat, failing to produce the capaciousness it was supposed to provide, the second features humor more favorably received. So what changes in the second exchange that allows humor to reenter the scene?

While the cemetery talk happens largely in the past tense and third person, Cyril speaks tentatively in first person the second time around. In saying "I" aloud and having his wish's combination of obviousness and complication chuckled at, something is felt to shift even as nothing materially changes. Trying out ideas aloud becomes an experiment in spending time and energy even when the thing being said aloud is a problem without a solution. Whereas in Freud's version "the humorous process is completed in (the prisoner's) own person," the kind of humor that emerges in *High Hopes* is a communal process. Humoring provides space for more tentative species of conferral: allowing something to be said aloud while withholding judgment turns it into material that can be riffed off of, said and then left in suspension, to be interacted with in ways that are not perfectly coincident.

Fig. 2.3 Shirley's chuckle.

If melancholy is characterized by continued investment in irrecoverable loss, noninvestment is characterized by the opposite—withdrawal, or, to use Freud's term, sparing. Rather than fixating on defeat or loss, sparing is about holding off, keeping a space open that is not governed by the investment's inevitably narrow logic. Melancholia invests in the wrong things; humor dispenses of investment altogether. For Brown, I imagine, neither is ideal—not investing is no more likely to produce results than is investing at a loss. But because humor is under no pressure to produce future return, it allows things to be said or done before they're really ready to be said or done. Half-formed sentiments and thoughts assume fleeting but shared form. What Freud calls humor's "narcissism,"[51] its solipsistic tendency to inhabit a fiction of its own making and to continue inhabit this fiction despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, assumes here a sort of magnetism that draws people briefly into its orbit. Rather than deluding its participants, humor allows them to inhabit that they could not otherwise under the auspices of investment. It allows inchoateness, uncertainty, conflictedness to be shared, even when it is difficult to articulate why these futile feelings should be compelling.

IV. Divestment and weak humor

In the previous section, we began to see how investment and its negative term might come to describe not only financial strategies, but forms of orientation towards time, value, and relation. Where Freud uses economic figuration to characterize humor's affective strategies, financial discourse in the era of mass investment uses the affective to track, predict, and explain economic phenomena. This final section will think more about the imbrication of humor's

[51] Brown also refers to melancholia's "narcissism," speaking to a more general concern that these modes are antisocial or insufficiently social.

affective dynamics with economic structures, particularly in the context of that economic structure known as the family. If Thatcher's infamous declaration that "there is no such thing as society; there are individual men and women" was nonetheless willing to make the implied concession that families were a part of this purportedly asocial ecology, what it left out was the possibility that family was itself a social formation, one permeated by economic and political forces. Leigh's *Meantime* (1984) will require thinking about self-divestment though the lens of a family that doesn't fulfill the standards of consolidated responsibility laid out by the architects of neoliberal reform. In the film, being in a family offers no protection from economic strife but becomes the primary staging ground for its myriad pressures.

Writing on neoliberal conceptions of familial "responsibility" in the American context, Melinda Cooper explains that this concept actually originates from poor law traditions in which the state, seeking to manage public relief, comes to regulate *everything*, "from domestic relations, to morality, to vagrancy."[52] Cooper notes that the appeal to familial responsibility that emerges in neoliberal discourse around public relief belies an exclusive focus on personal responsibility insofar as it demonstrates that "the individual responsibility of sustaining oneself through waged labor" could not be isolated from a "wider responsibility toward unwaged

[52] Cooper, 84. Cooper traces this mode of governmental enforcement back to Elizabethan "poor law": "The Poor Law is justly recognized as the first serious attempt to organize public relief on a national scale. It unambiguously acknowledged the vicissitudes of the labor market and the consequent need for some kind of permanent support structure, but it also placed strict conditions on the distribution of relief. Among these, the first to be enforced was that of family responsibility, the idea that relatives within certain degrees of kinship should be compelled to provide as much support as possible before the parish disbursed any funds. Thus, the text of the original 1601 act stipulated "that the father and grandfather, and the mother and grandmother, and the children of every poor, old, blind, lame and impotent person, or other poor per- son not able to work, being of a sufficient ability, shall, at their own charges, relieve and maintain every such poor person." (73)

dependents in the family."[53] Even as figures like Milton Friedman touted the virtues of personal responsibility, they could not avoid affirming the importance of familial obligations when confronted with the problem of "unwaged dependents."[54] Whereas neoconservatives advocated for the traditional family as a moral issue, neoliberals seized on it as an economic stopgap—"family" became the name for the structure that would reassume responsibility for those who had once been included in province of governmental provision. Cooper's reading of neoliberal ideology shows how a certain conception of family life—in which ties of kinship translate seamlessly into economic ones—became central to neoliberal justification for state divestment from public programs.

Meantime features a family that falls short of this ideal, thus making apparent rather than papering over the kinds of divestment that neoliberal thinkers were eager to justify. Centered on a family living on unemployment benefits—"on the dole"—in Thatcherite Britain, the made-for television feature is set in what feels like an interminable interim, following characters who have long since abandoned prospect of employment in an environment where there are no jobs to be had. The title evokes a sense of going nowhere: "meantime" names the kind of time that passes without counting for anything. The pointlessness of making plans, even for the immediate future, becomes a running gag in the film, as does the empty ritual of accounting for what one has been "up to" or where one has been when the answer is, invariably, nothing and nowhere. People

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[53] Cooper, 71. "An exclusive focus on free-market individualism obscures the recurrent elision between the personal and the familial in neoliberal discourse and thereby renders unintelligible its historical compatibility with various complexions of moral conservatism. Yes, neoliberals persistently exhort individuals to take responsibility for their own fate, and yet the imperative of *personal responsibility* slides ineluctably into that of *family responsibility* when it comes to managing the inevitable problems of economic dependence (the care of children, the disabled, the elderly, or the unwaged)."

[54] Cooper, 72.

bump into each other on eerily abandoned streets or in cluttered domestic interiors without plan. The mode of affectivity in the film is best described as a slow burn, gradual, largely imperceptible accumulation until something shifts, snaps—or almost snaps. When something does shift dramatically, it comes in stark contrast to the seemingly stagnated relations in the film—people already know how to skirt around one another, how to seethe without drawing too much attention, and how to tolerate long enough to get away. Leigh's characteristic observational camera enhances the sense of moving in slow, or at least tentative, motion: the pacing of scenes is unhurried, lingering in close-ups of character's faces before they've started speaking or long after they've finished.

"Meantime" refers to an entire range of experience that confounds calculations of return. If, as Leigh Claire La Berge writes, financial calculation in the form of investment subordinates the present to projections of future earnings,[55] "meantime" evokes an in-between that offers neither a future in which projected value has been realized nor a high-powered present filled with potential. The Pollocks' slowly crumbling apartment building becomes a testament to structural divestment. Their situation is more nebulous than financial crisis or ruin—rather, their precarity looks like continuing to exist in a world that has divested from them. Throughout the film, the Pollocks are barely tolerated by those they come into contact with: the dole officer, Mavis' upwardly mobile sister Barbara, even each other. *Meantime* opens with a show of hospitality being put on for people the hosts don't really want in the house—Mavis and her family have come for annual visit to Barbara's, and Barbara and her husband are making an inordinate fuss about setting up tea. Much of the scene shows the husband and wife insulating the house from

[55] La Berge, *Scandals and Abstractions: Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s*, 26-27.

their poorer relations' touch—putting down newspaper for their shoes, asking Mavis to stop touching things in kitchen, chiding Mark to get down from cabinet he sits on.

Such ambivalent acts of (in)hospitality, and the uneasy cohabitation of space they occasion, drive *Meantime*. Stuckness and inhospitality are two sides of the same coin—not required to be anywhere, the unnecessary characters of *Meantime* are also not particularly free to linger where they are. Characters meander into rooms— living rooms, bars, laundromats, and especially the dole office—in which they are only half-welcome and in which they frequently overstay their welcome. Reporting to the dole office for their stipend, Colin, Mark and Frank are continually reminded that their presence is an inconvenience. Collin takes up too much of the dole officer's time because he has forgotten his identification card, Frank's perceived impatience while in the line leads to a reprimand, and Mark's fanciful story about working as a police informant hired to "spy on dole officers"—a response to the ostensibly standard but tonally accusatory "have you done any work in the past two weeks?"—leads the woman behind the desk to accuse him of deliberately making her job more difficult. Such encounters raise the question: what happens when your subsistence is framed as question of indulgence (why is the dole called "the dole"—about distributing the minimum), by how much people and institutions that hold power are willing to let you "get away with"?

For proponents of familial responsibility, the Pollocks present a worst-case scenario. Whereas Barbara and John offer a model of the successfully entrepreneurial family unit—one that invests in a house, even renovates it to improve value of the property—families like the Pollocks are thorns in the side of administrations seeking to transfer responsibility to self-contained family units. The family in *Meantime* is presented not as a repository of greater responsibility but as a liability: they haven't finished paying off their washing machine; the

building manager gives them a lecture about leaving things too long before reporting them to management, conveniently shifting responsibility onto the family for not being effective stewards of the space. They do not, as Mark points out, "own" anything; attempts to increase claims to ownership, to *have* things, such as Mavis' regular attendance at weekly bingo games, have yielded no results.

Fig. 2.4 Mark and Coxy playing in *Meantime* (1983)

Along with having frustrating, devastating, life-sapping effects, neglect also incubates occasions for curious unseriousness. If the damage of neglect comes from things not working, or being available when needed or expected, the absurdity of neglect comes from all the things that are done instead of addressing the actual problem of provision. Divestment is itself a situation ripe for humor, though it takes a particular kind of sensibility to see it as such**.** Leigh has spoken in several interviews of being taken to task after the release of *Meantime* for "squandering" an opportunity to present working class as heroic agents of history. "*Hard Labor* and *Meantime* were criticized by some on the far left for not showing the barricades being manned, the

revolution being made, for not fighting back."[56] Given *Meantime's* interest in constituents of what Marx called the "surplus population," the group of people whose labor the labor market cannot absorb and who thus, by capitalist metrics of productivity, spend their time unproductively, the language of waste here is striking. The problem of socioeconomic superfluity produces a problem for representation: how to tell a story about having no place, when work and the prospect of belonging through one's labor (and thus one's contribution to an economy) is no longer available. Conventional markers of time and narrative progress no longer hold. Economic superfluity is thus complemented by the superfluousness of humor: just as there is no place for Mark, Frank, and Collin in the work force, there is no place for Mark's and Coxy's antics, or even Collin's quietly funny non sequiturs, which are uncalled for and do not follow logically. ("We have ants?" Colin asks after listening to an exchange about metaphorical insects between his parents and a building inspector.) Repeatedly told that knowing their place requires accepting they have none, many of the characters in *Meantime* weaponize their superfluity, taking up physical and affective space by flooding spaces reserved for politeness or efficiency or convenience with the unruly or illogical. In a narrative about aimlessness, humor substitutes slipperiness for direction.

Humor abounds, but comic relief is rare, which makes the question of how to read jest more difficult to answer. "Mark's not rude. You just don't appreciate his sense of humor," Barbara tries to explain to her husband, who makes no attempt to conceal his disdain for her side of the family. It is one of many exchanges in which how to read something ostensibly done in jest becomes radically up for grabs. Even Barbara, who disarticulates funniness from impoliteness in an attempt to defuse it and make Mark's goofing around more palatable to her

[56] Cited *in The Films of Mike Leigh: Embracing the World* (Raymond Carney), 179.

husband, misses that Mark's "sense of humor" is calibrated precisely to be disruptive. Provoking his well-to-do, homeowning uncle by asking about burglaries in the area, kissing a wall when asked to kiss his aunt goodbye, Mark thrives on the rhythms of bad timing and mis-coordination. No one laughs at these antics, just as no one laughs in the course of Barbara and Mark's banter, for the point is just to keep it going, sometimes half comprehendingly. This goes for the humor in the rest of the film: there are rarely punch-lines, only a series of missed encounters, misunderstandings, and absurdities. Comic interactions in *Meantime* turn on a dime: what begins as a shared moment of lighthearted play can mutate, at any moment, into a resentful jab or menacing interrogation. Funniness or references to funniness are not always in the spirit of fun or play—they are also frequently brought up resentfully, dismissively, and uncomprehendingly.

One of the film's most interesting deployments of humor happens halfway into the film. Barbara has come to an arrangement with Colin, ostensibly the more docile of her two nephews, to assist her in redecorating her house for a small wage. It is the first and only prospect of new employment, informal as it is, in the film. After Barbara leaves, the family excitedly discusses Colin's new job over dinner: Mark is unsupportive, but remains enigmatic as to why. The rest of the family accuses him of jealousy, leading Mark to leave the room without elaborating. "Who does he think he is?" Frank scoffs after his son's exit. "Ernie Wise?"

Fig. 2.5 The Pollocks discuss Barbara's offer.

One explanation for Mark's enigmatic "don't go" is that it is less a reaction to Barbara preferring Colin than a response informed by an abiding distrust of his aunt's motivations. In this sense, Mark is not driven by jealousy of his rather but rather an inchoate politics of envy. Writing on the politics of envy, Frances Ferguson contrasts envy with jealousy, noting that whereas jealousy demonstrates an "ability to identify an object of (one's) affection, to say whose love and loss makes (one) susceptible," envy is much more diffuse, centering "less on objects than on the nature of social relationship in general that it has seemed to present a particular challenge for modern governmental regimes."[57] This diffusiveness makes envy more social than jealousy: contrary to its reputation for divisiveness, envy's insistence on juxtaposition in fact facilitates social cohesion. By insisting that disparate socioeconomic positions nonetheless have a basis for comparison, such that differences in status and opportunity might be registered *as* differences, the envious subject continues to hold their envied counterparts close.[58] If Mavis and Frank have largely accepted Barbara's class mannerisms, Mark insists on drawing attention to

[57] Ferguson, "Envy Rising," 890
[58] Ferguson, 891

her pretension in an effort to make visible what Barbara would prefer be taken for granted (he jokes about her elocution classes for instance). What Mark leaves unsaid at dinner, but that his family registers, is an objection to the ongoing condescension encoded in his aunt's offer. He, in turn, is advocating a withholding of response—Mark wants Colin not to confront his aunt but simply not to go, availing himself of condescension in a way that would disrupt Barbara's.

As it turns out, Mark's intuition bears up. When Colin *does* show up but refuses to help Barbara paint, she is quick to turn on him, her provisional investment in him retracted without hesitation. Barbara's encouragement and disappointment are both languages of condescension, not only in the sense of infantilizing Colin ("you're not as daft as you look, are you?"), but in the sense of having cordoned off her nephews' situation as not pertaining to her own. Leigh has suggested that the arrangement Barbara offers Colin is intended to invoke the economic policies that came gained momentum under Thatcher, governmental schemes that were a meager palliative for a regime of austerity that far outstripped the capacity of a gutted welfare system to address it.[59] But while Leigh offers an allegorical reading of this incident, the dinner scene's use of humor also makes available a somewhat different approach. Frank conjures the comic as a way to invalidate Mark's misgivings, but his comparison of Mark to Ernie Wise is interesting for how *off* it is about Mark's style of engagement: an inaccuracy Frank is not oblivious but rather indifferent to. The British comic duo Morecambe and Wise's wacky song and dance routines are a far cry from Mark's pointed remarks and aggressive antics which, while also favoring the form of the back and forth, are more scathing, more mean, more angry than their analog.

Without being too pedantic about what seems more or less a throwaway comment by Frank, I want to suggest that the scene asks us to register the disjuncture between the mainstream

[59] (Mike Leigh criterion collection interview with Simon Cocker)

comedy being alluded to and whatever is happening the Pollock's living room. Mark is not really a comedian, he's something else, and Frank's halfhearted characterization of Mark as such registers the flimsiness of the comparison. The film does not mark this moment as particularly revelatory: Frank does not elaborate, nor is his comment taken up by the others (Mark isn't there to hear it, Mavis and Colin continue eating in silence). The half-formed thought, posed in the form of a question, hangs in the air. The mention of Wise thus operates along the same lines as a shrug: inexact, a shot in the dark, something expressed just to have something to express. The throwaway remark forfeits any attempt to make sense of what has happened, electing instead to consign it to a failed attempt at funniness. Ascribing a comic function to Mark's statements dismisses them, emptying them out by reducing them to an assessment of its entertainment value. The designation of something as comedy, or someone as comedian, cordons off an incident from further consideration. The comment seems to preclude its own analysis. What would be the point of thinking closely about something that is in itself a dismissal of further consideration?[60]

Yet, Frank's statement might also be seen as tapping into something weirder than mere dismissal, making apprehensible a different kind of response to Mark's general pattern of "not giving a straight answer." To refer to the "weakness" of Frank's analysis in this case is less an assessment of whether it holds up to scrutiny than an observation that it serves a very local purpose. For Sedgwick, weak theory falls into the reparative reading camp: whereas paranoid reading provides a strong theory that applies broad levels of generalization to local phenomena, weak reading holds a fewer number of cases and objects more closely and thus produces a theory

[60] The film's humorous citationality surfaces at another moment: Tommy Cooper is mentioned in scene with Colin and Coxy. Again, the analogy is imperfect: Coxy is a kind of prop comic, but not in the same way as Tommy Cooper (who plays a sort of magician type who produces things out of nowhere—Coxy is more a destroyer of things)

that (in Silvan Tomkin's words) "amounts to little better than a description of the phenomena it purports to explain."[61] The result is a mode of apprehension that remains largely restricted in its conclusions, settling for "local" and "loosely related" rather "conceptually elegant" or epistemologically consolidated. This is, I want to suggest, the effect of the film's deliberately inexact earmarking of humor. What humor can do in *Meantime* is dilate an incident until its edges feel permeable; what it cannot do is offer a totalizing theory of it. Another way to say this is that humor in *Meantime only* offers weak theories—formulations that are difficult to generalize from (need to stay close to instance). As characters tease, joke and banter, there does not emerges the sense that an understanding has been reached: meanings and feelings are nudged around without resolution.

In this sense, weak theory and description shape the ethos of the film. When Colin reluctantly reveals his shaved his head in the final climactic scene, a chilling allusion to the skinhead character Coxy, who has simultaneously bullied and befriended Colin throughout the film, Mark, typically never at a loss for words, is stunned into silence. When he does speak, it is to tease Collin in an uncharacteristically gentle way. Mark's halting formulation—"My brother's a skinhead. No, not a skinhead: Kojak"—is intriguing for its palimpsestic form: it inches towards better description even as that project is beset with impossibility. The skinhead association cannot be ignored—having served as an emotional punching bag for his family, Colin is drawn to Coxy's "hardness" and unpredictable outbursts even as he has witnessed the ugliness of Coxy's racism and experienced the threat of Coxy's volatility firsthand. But the implication of the final scene is that what has already transpired can in fact be nudged in another direction, and thus treated as not yet foreclosed. Even if Colin's head has already been shaved, it can be

[61] Cited in *Touching Feeling* (134)

reframed. Upon his brother's pronouncement of "Kojack," Colin repeats his refrain "don't call me that" but this time with a small smile—this appellation seems to sit more easily with him than the label that would pass from Coxy to him.

This seems to me to be an instance weak humor: not only does Mark's teasing not change much—Colin's head is still shaved, they're still living in a crumbling apartment without any prospect of employment—but it is weak in the Sedgwickian sense. "No, not a skinhead: Kojak," which is as much a judgment withdrawn as one offered (a take-back) doesn't come to any conclusions or generate a strong theory of what, by any other measure, would be a dire situation. The particular reference to "Kojak" never gets much mileage—there are no previous references to the baldheaded detective, and the reference is never taken up again—and so does not accrue much explanatory value in itself. Rather, Mark and Colin's exchange records its function as a placeholder. Like Frank's halfhearted comic reference, Mark's reframing of Colin's shaved head—not a skinhead, but *something else*— is part of a project of failed but continually moving description that runs throughout the film.

A conception of weakness as laterality—things held close but not hierarchized—offers a useful angle for thinking about the period's discourse of responsibility. "Weakness" poses a threat to the understanding of greater familial responsibility neoliberals were so eager to espouse—rather than a family "strengthened" in its traditional role as a structure of provision and inheritance, the family in *Meantime* is largely depicted in a state of sprawling laterality. Throughout the film, Mark insists on calling his parents by their first name. There is a sense of synchronicity rather than generational distance between parents and children—parents are no better equipped to make sense of what is happening than their children. In *Meantime*, Leigh's interest is precisely in families that are dysfunctional by neoliberal standards of familial

responsibility: families that threaten to break apart into individuals unbeholden to one another but never quite get there. Contrary to Thatcher's famous claim, the familial and the social are not mutually exclusive in these films—families themselves as incubators of rather than refuges from social division.

Humoring unfolds a non-deterministic relation—one that is ultimately inconclusive, and whose commitment to the noncommittal is disappointing for some. Deploying funniness could result from any number of feelings about a situation, and these feelings are often never clarified in the course of being experienced as humor. In the wake of structural divestment, humorous sociality becomes (for those divested from) about making sense of a world experienced through its withdrawal. The weird mixture of diminishment and obliqueness that I have been calling the deflationary troubles any ambitions of typological transparency precisely because it relies on the unruliness of affective experience, playing the apparent idiosyncrasy of response against what seem to be broader explanatory causes. As it turns out, this idiosyncrasy is tied to a collective condition. If sometimes mistaken for a missing response, humoring actually involves quick-footed navigation and reframing of a situation.

Chapter Three
Lonely Consumption and the Aesthetics of Sincerity

I. Sincerity Returns

That sincerity has an art at all would seem to contradict its common association with art*less*ness: reading for sincerity as an aesthetic practice puts one in the uncomfortable position of looking for signs of style in a sensibility typically identified with the lack of it. For its proponents, sincerity's artlessness offers the prospect of communication without aesthetic interference—without, that is, the kinds of artifice that might undermine the "congruence" between a "feeling and its avowal."[1] Those skeptical of sincerity's merits associate it, in turn, with transparently bad art, a proximity to sentimentalism that lays embarrassingly bare the work's ideological commitments.[2] Sincerity has no art or is bad at it—either way, there seems to be something insistently unaesthetic about it, its artlessness either a triumph over stylistic dissembling or a sign of aesthetic unsophistication associated with cloying sentimentality and obvious ideological scaffolding. Examining an instance of "moral life in the process of revising itself" in the supersession of sincerity by the ideal of "authenticity," Trilling suggests that to the adherents of authenticity in 20th century Western art, sincerity seems dictated by social need rather than artistic vision: whereas modernist experimentation marks the culmination of "two centuries of aesthetic theory and artistic practice which have been less and less willing to take account of the habitual preferences of the audience," sincere art is notable for its accommodating nature and retrograde eagerness to "please."[3] In Trilling's account, the charge of sincerity offers a

[1] Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 20.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Trilling, 97. This echoes Sartre's take on sincerity as a kind of bad faith—he finds the "public orientation" of sincerity suspect, preoccupied by the performance of a self rather than the authentic inhabitation of one.

para-aesthetic judgment, a valuation to the side of beauty that redeems missing or insufficient aesthetic value by turning to authorial intent rather than artistic merit.[4] If calling a work of art "sincere" absolves us from giving it "aesthetic or intellectual admiration," it at least establishes that the text was "at least conceived in innocence of heart."[5] Claiming a sincere provenance for a work—claiming something about the author's state of mind, or heart, during composition—means that sincerity is less read than read *for*: confirmation of its presence overturns the need for closer examination of the work's form.[6]

When Trilling describes a decline in sincerity's status as an organizing principle of moral life in the opening of *Sincerity and Authenticity*, citing its devaluation to what he calls a "mere intensive," he could not have foreseen that the transition from the 20th to the 21st century would see a resurgence in sincerity as a way to imagine something beyond (what was reportedly) an excessively cynical and ironic postmodernity. Loosely assembled under the appellation "New Sincerity," critical calls to re-discover the importance of being earnest signal a contemporary tendency to tout *the non-ironic and non-cynical* as a commensurate response to crisis, or simply as a more conscientious way to inhabit an unfolding historical present.[7] I am less interested in establishing the novelty of sincerity as a phenomenon than in investigating the questions this

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[4] Discussion with Chiang Cheng-Chai.
[5] Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 7.
[6] Such reading for sincere subjects might also be said to subtend the Romantic valorization of poetic spontaneity, which bases a rubric for poetic merit on a reader's sense of a writer's transparency about their state of mind at the time of writing. M. H. Abrams writes of sincerity as rubric replacing a scientific rationality, touting the "general romantic use of spontaneity, sincerity, and integral unity of thought and feeling as the essential criteria of poetry, in place of their neo-classic counterparts: judgment, truth, and the appropriateness with which diction is matched to the speaker, the subject matter, and the literary kind." Despite coming to different conclusions about sincerity's desirability in a text, both Trilling and Wordsworth take sincerity to be a psychological fact recorded in a work from its inception rather than a media effect consisting of an assemblage of stylistic moves and cultural contexts for these moves.
[7] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 63.

resurgence occasions.[8] This chapter argues, contrary to Trilling, that sincerity does register in formal ways in aesthetic objects—that sincerity does, in some sense, have an art. But it also borrows Trilling's logic that artlessness is not just a style of performance but a style of reading that troubles the boundaries between an aesthetic object and its world. In my case studies, sincerity emerges as an aesthetically mediated project of collectivity building that reverse-engineers social bonds from commodities. If the famous Marxian formulation posits the commodity form trades "real" social relation for the "fantastic form of a relation between things," this chapter plays with the notion that some version of the social (though not precisely the kind that Marx is talking about) might emerge under conditions of shared consumption, or what I call sincere consumption. What does this relation look like? What kinds of commodities are used to facilitate it?

Why commodities anyway? Despite the fact that this newer revision of moral life locates its intervention in the relation people bear to commodities and the relation people bear to one another through commodities, it is also deeply ambivalent about the kinds of objects it relies on. One way this ambivalence manifests is as a selectivity about what kind of commodities will be conducive to social rejuvenation. This ambivalence might perhaps be seen to register, however faintly and inchoately, the reverberations that anti-consumerist movements at the turn of the 21st century were responding to. If the anti-consumerism and alter-globalization movements in the US were, among other things, thinking about global supply chains and the far-reaching implications of American consumption, sincerity talk transposed these concerns about the damaging effects of consumption back into the language of the self, interpersonal and national. Many of the critics who identify loneliness as a problem that sincerity could be potential solution

[8] For claims about the novelty of this turn to sincerity, see work on "metamodernism."

are more concerned with rejuvenating civic life narrowly defined than in imagining an anti-capitalist politics.

In reading sincerity for its aesthetic project, I seek to restore theoretical density to a concept that seems to want otherwise. Sincerity, as much as its rhetorical deployments might say it is, is not exempt from aesthetic consideration. If irony has been described as a hegemonic affective formation of the 20th century, the various (and likely apocryphal) origins of "New Sincerity" are consistently made out to be minor and diffuse by contrast. In these circles, sincerity remains a concept in emergence, always just being happened upon, narrated impressionistically from those on the inside. Jesse Thorne, author of "A Manifesto for the New Sincerity," reports that New Sincerity began as a "a silly, philosophical movement" that he and some friends started in college.[9] As a musical term, "New Sincerity" began as a throwaway remark/off-handed comment picked up by a journalist.[10] Poetic "new sincerity" has lived much of its life on blogs (Joseph Massey's mock manifesto "Eat Shit and Die: A Manifesto for New Sincerity," for instance, was initially written as a blog post). For the cultural critic listening in, these impromptu invocations of a "new" sincerity, which invariably circulate first in a highly localized manner, offer a fantasy of incipience, a sense of have caught on before something has become common knowledge. As a part of its world-building aesthetics, sincerity *wants* to be taken for granted, wants to seem less abstract and calculated than it is, and this putative transparency makes it easy to overlook the strategies and content of its world-building.

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[9] Jesse Thorne, "A Manifesto for the New Sincerity," *Maximum Fun* blog. March 26, 2006. https://maximumfun.org/news/manifesto-for-new-sincerity/

[10] Such casualness applies to other new sincerity outcroppings in music and film as well: dolewave as "jokey, throwaway term" ("started out on a joke" on message boards); or mumblecore, which was first coined by sound engineer Eric Musanaga in a private conversation with Andrew Bujalski and only later taken up by critics.)

A conception of sincerity as a social practice comes in handy when describing a cultural phenomenon like New Sincerity: spanning any number of media and genres, and covering a vast stretch of cultural objects that often harbor contradicting aesthetic impulses, "New Sincerity" is a category built first and foremost on the premise of a shared sensibility. How, then, to reverse-engineer an aesthetic vocabulary for the intuition that certain texts are sincere? My objective will be to clarify some aspects of sincerity's aesthetics in order to begin understanding sincerity as a perceptual system that fabricates worlds rather than simply recovers them, and that bears a conflicted relation to the materials that mediate it. How are feelings of *im*mediacy in fact aesthetically mediated? The first half of the chapter contextualizes sincerity as a style of consumerism designed specifically to keep loneliness at bay, reading loneliness through David Foster Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." The second half hones in on a particular motif in New Sincerity texts, asking why a particular strain of sincerity has tended to make its claims through customized objects. Throughout, I return to the idea that invocations of sincerity contain a concerted effort to (re)define the social *as such*—as the cancellation of loneliness, to the exclusion of more ambivalent forms of relation—as much as they try to pretend that they do not.

II. Lonely People

Theories of sincerity assume all kinds of things about the social as an aspirational space of intersubjectivity and belonging, but their fantasies invariably depend on the things they are defined in opposition to. For Trilling, the dialectic is one between sincerity and "authenticity"—sincerity becomes a figure for a more public-facing sense of self that falls out of fashion as artists begin to prioritize "being true to oneself" as an end in itself rather than as means to greater social

accountability, and as internal consistency becomes increasingly important to conceptions of moral and aesthetic value. Sincerity's postmodern resurgence, too, is part of a larger ecology of feelings, characterized in one story by the predominance of what Paolo Virno calls the "bad sentiments" of postindustrial capitalism. Virno is interested in the toll endless performance can take the denizen of post-Fordist capitalist order, in which work no longer results in products separable from the act of production—the performance of production—itself. Writing from one version of the autonomist tradition, Virno explores a kind of activity he terms "virtuosity"—that is, labor without end product. The historical subject of this distinct mode of social reproduction— the "multitude"—is, in this account, characterized by ambivalent "emotional tonalities": among others, Virno nominates cynicism as a generalized condition, a consequence of historical circumstance rather than individual disposition or psychological tendency. Cynicism and virtuosity go hand in hand: the growing prominence and profitability of activity without an end product engenders a world that prioritizes adaptability over the cultivation of lasting attachments that would compromise such flexibility. Like irony, Virno's cynicism entails a sensitivity to the contingency of language and communication that is then generalized into a worldview. If irony involves the play of said and unsaid meanings, thus destabilizing the possibility of any stable meaning, cynicism troubles the prospect of stable meaning by abandoning the concept of equivalence altogether. Cynicism in this conception is an "emotional situation" characterized by "ways of being and feeling so pervasive that they end up being common to the most diverse contexts of experience (work, leisure, feelings, politics, etc)."[11]

This interest in feelings that inhere in historical situations rather than individuals is not unique to Virno; Peter Sloterdijk writes of a "universal" and "diffuse" cynicism that afflicts

[11] Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2003), 84.

subjects of late modernity and exhausts ideology critique by making critique so ubiquitous that everyone has no choice but to take recourse in indifference; Slavoj Žižek later takes up this formulation when nominating cynicism as the paradigmatic form of consumer ideology, a mode of thought that allows people to participate in capitalism while simultaneously disavowing these practices.[12] By these critics' account, such feelings of critical exhaustion inhere in the times themselves, as generational or even global attitude. Writing on postirony as not only a textual effect but as a social and political one, Lee Konstantinou suggests that postmodern irony finds its geopolitical corollary in the hypothesis of liberalism's permanent enthronement as world system at the end of Cold War, encapsulated in the "the end of history" thesis.[13] For Jedediah Purdy, "acquiescing" to neoliberalism's mix of market utopianism and market determinism would "mean accepting a picture of personality and social life that pivots on consumer-style choice and self-interested collaboration." The devaluation of social life outside these forms points to "apolitical time, barricaded with ancillary *mistrust*: of motives, movements, and historical possibility."

For all of these critics, a dependence on irony or a tendency towards cynicism is a product of our training as historical subjects. Whether they are talking about ubiquitous cynicism or an overdeveloped irony, these critics are concerned with the changing conditions of sociality under shifting conditions of production. While some seized on irony and cynicism as the terms for what ailed the American public in the latter half of the twentieth century, sociologists and public intellectuals in the second half of the 20th century also turned to another term to characterize modern alienation from public life: loneliness. Sociological works like David

[12] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2009), 24.
[13] Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 167.

Reisman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), Philip Slater's *Pursuit of Loneliness* (1975), or *Habits of the Heart* (1985) (by Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton) present loneliness as a national epidemic. As with the discussions of cynicism glossed above, these accounts of loneliness frame the affective at a collective rather than individual scale, as a common, distributed feeling of isolation and alienation. Robert Putnam's widely discussed *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (2000)* frames loneliness in terms of a decline in what Putnam describes as "generalized" reciprocity—that is, a decline in the faith that returns on social investment, even if not immediately apparent or even measurable, would come.[14] In Putnam's declensionist narrative, generalized reciprocity is the only kind of social trust solid enough to justify investing time, energy, money into maintaining public infrastructure, and it is fast vanishing. It maximizes the efficiency of transactions and bolsters public trust as well as between members of a community. For Putnam, what is most at stake are not individual cases of isolation but a shift in the very terms of sociality. Whether public facing or intimately constructed, diagnoses of contemporary loneliness published in the past fifty years have, more or less, taken for granted what relation is, and which forms of relation are worth saving and promoting.

At the heart of these meditations on loneliness is the question of what can be thought to reliably constitute sociality in the first place, what distinguishes "healthy" sociality from its failure. Putnam's study, which posits the social as the source of a kind of "capital" translatable into value, leaves little room for other kinds of relations that are not as clearly build on

[14] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 134-136; Nicholas Lemann, "Kicking in Groups" *The Atlantic*, April 1996. Accessed February 17, 2020. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1996/04/kicking-in-groups/376562/

reciprocity. What arguments like Putnam's do not leave room for is the possibility that loneliness, rather than signaling the disappearance of social bonds, could itself index a kind of sociality. Characterization of loneliness as sociality's failure reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of loneliness: loneliness is in fact an ideology of relation. Less about having been abandoned by the social than about wanting it to be different, loneliness dwells on the relations one expects, wants or is trained to want but does not have. In this sense, loneliness bears an indeterminate relation to the presence of other people. One might very well feel more lonely while in the midst of an interaction, or feel less lonely when on one's own. In a survey of loneliness' history as an anthropological object of study, Adrian Franklin describes loneliness's "paradoxical nature": whether one is lonely or not is based on the *felt* condition of lacking relation rather than any objective measure of solitude.[15] None of this is meant to discount loneliness as an affective market, but to note that a) loneliness, far from indicating a withdrawal from the social, is a feeling inherent to the experience of sociality and b) loneliness is necessarily a way of adjudicating what counts and doesn't count as relation: though it can manifest a radical desire for a common historically denied existence,[16] it can also manifest a sense that one should not have to feel the discomfort of what Lauren Berlant calls "all the ways we are apart."

An aesthetic demonstration of loneliness' nearsightedness when it comes to relation can be found in *Lost in Translation*, which sets loneliness against the context of globalization. In Sofia Coppola's 2003 film, flows of multinational capital have conspired to bring washed-up

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[15] "Thus, the earliest studies of loneliness began with the growing concern for the elderly people in the postwar period in relation to what is broadly understood as spatial anxieties over the decline of communities, the growth of New Towns and increasing rates of residential and employment spatial mobility." Franklin, Adrian S. "On Loneliness." *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 91, No. 4 (2009): 343-354.

[16] Joshua Chambers-Letson. After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life (New York: NYU Press, 2018), xv.

American actor, Bob Harris, to Tokyo to promote Japanese whiskey to a populace who recognizes him and his star power, but whom he clearly does not understand or care to know. This makes Bob, among other things, an ineffectual promoter. Unable to understand the instructions he is being given, and assuming he cannot be understood in turn, Bob is freed to fill the space with demands and complaints delivered casually and without expectation of fulfillment or retort. Bob's ironic defenses protect him but also dry him out—he is overwhelmed, confused, and lonely most of the time. In one photo shoot, the director suggests names of American celebrities to Bob, who then channels them in different poses. The scene highlights the disconnect between Bob's and the director's attitudes towards the exchange: the director, working with what is at hand, offers the names earnestly, as a kind of direction that might transcend the language barrier by condensing the "feel" the whiskey campaign is looking for into a personage; Bob assumes the poses reluctantly and self-consciously, alternately amused and exasperated by the director's taste ("Roger Moore? Didn't you get the Sean Connery one over here?") and embarrassed by his own fluency in this repertoire of clichés—his fluency, that is, in becoming a thing.

Fig. 3.1 Bob channeling Roger Moore and grimacing afterwards in *Lost In Translation* (2003)

Fig. 3.1, continued

Surrounded by people whose eagerness to extend hospitality only further confirms their inability to anticipate his needs, Bob wants to leave the city as soon as possible. But this is before he meets Charlotte, a recent Yale graduate who has followed her husband, a photographer following a band, to Tokyo and is staying in the same hotel as Bob. Bob and Charlotte run into each in a series of initially brief and serendipitous but increasingly sought out encounters, during which they bond over their common restlessness, literalized in their shared trouble with insomnia. Each comes from a context of disappointing relations: when Bob and Charlotte are apart, we see Bob on the phone with his wife, who sounds too busy for his shifting moods and general negligence (forgetting his son's birthday, leaving her to manage their children's lives), and we watch Charlotte try to communicate with her husband, who is too distracted by work listen to her. Bob's interactions with Charlotte teach him to open up to contact with those he previously assumed were inaccessible: they spend one night drinking and karaoke-ing with Charlotte's friends, a group of locals. But the film lingers on the bond that is emerging between the two lonely Americans who have found each other.

Ultimately, the film's use of scenes of incomprehension and anonymity set against Tokyo's vast cityscape emphasize Bob's and Charlotte's respective loneliness but also overlook

all the relations that unfold alongside this privileged one—relations, namely, with the exoticized and foreign others the film uses as backdrop. Loneliness in proximity to other people, and the puncturing of this feeling by making contact with someone *in particular*, motivates the film's recurring motifs of making eye contact in a crowded space, or private sharing jokes in the presence of (seemingly) uncomprehending others. The basis for Bob's and Charlotte's connection is left affectively unambiguous but vague on its particulars: it is not until their second to last night together that Bob even asks Charlotte where she is from, or that she asks him about his marriage and children. Their bond up to that point has been based less on knowledge of the one others' situation and more on the serendipity of feeling out of place in the same space and at the same time. To accept loneliness as the film's animating concern means we that we understand Bob and Charlotte are each seeking a particular kind of encounter: it's not that there isn't anyone, but that there isn't someone who *gets* them. *Lost in Translation* famously insists on finding the dyadic in the crowd: dyadic intimacy offers a brief respite from the globalized in which anonymity and intensified loneliness are ostensibly the default.

Fig. 3.2 Making contact in a crowd

Fig. 3.2, continued

Far from indicating a withdrawal from the social, loneliness is a feeling inherent to the experience of sociality, particularly sociality you don't want. Because it dismisses interactions almost as much as it seeks them, loneliness tends to be normative in its judgment, adjudicating what does and does not count as meaningful relation. Arising from an idealized communality, loneliness describes the feeling of not having the relation that you want or one that imparts value: people might feel, or be considered, lonely because they don't have relations legitimated by state-sanctioned modes of kinship, or don't seem to have ones can take the place of ones cherished but lost or other bear evidence of a full, well-lived life. The reasons for loneliness may abound, but none of them are that there is the absence of relation.

What if, rather than indexing failed or vanished social cohesion, loneliness unsettled or made unavailable any easy or clear distinction between relation and non-relation?[17] What if loneliness became an index of emerging social patterns that have not yet coalesced, rather than a

[17] Berlant, Lauren, and Lee Edelman. *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 26.
A good example of this latter version of loneliness might be Sofia Coppola's *Lost In Translation*, in which the sense that Bill Murray's character and Scarlett Johanssen's find one another in a sea of isolation largely overlooks the fact that there have been a series of relations are unfolding alongside this privileged one—relations, namely, with exoticized and foreign others

diagnosis of failed or vanished social cohesion? Kris Cohen has recently written on how media forms characteristic of a networked society have generated new forms of being alone *alongside others*—new forms, that is, of lonely sociality. For Cohen, conceptual art and new media offer ways to think about "group form" as existing somewhere between the modes of public and population.[18] Being "alone together" becomes the condition of the contemporary. By looking at what he calls "broken structures of reciprocity," Cohen experiments with ways in which "aloneness" and "loneliness" might be delaminated from each other, such that a shared encounter that is distributed across the internet might result in a "togetherness" that feels "like loneliness,"[19] or how a performer, despite speaking to an unresponsive audience, might be "alone but not necessarily lonely in the nonreciprocating interval" of an unanswered question.[20] Loneliness encodes a desire, but it can also occasion a detachment from a "structure of expectation" that demands reciprocation or a particular kind of reception. What emerges is the "deracination of speech, performance, protest, and love from reciprocity" and the "blocking" of "participatory, dialogic, cooperative, or relational aesthetics of encounter" in favor of something more ambivalent, distributed, and exploratory.

For our purposes, loneliness offers an exigent shorthand for the problems of defining and redefining relation that are inherent to navigating sociality as such. Such a problem would seem central to the New Sincerity, which often begins with the premise of damaged social life and the notion that people's capacity to make connections with one another has been compromised. Yet, the imbrication of sincerity with loneliness, in which sincerity works to both redress and sustain

[18] Kris Cohen, *Never Alone, Except for Now: Art, Networks, Populations* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
[19] Cohen, 115.
[20] Cohen, 58. (Cohen is analyzing Sharon Hayes' "love addresses" here.)

a particular notion of failed sociality, is rarely addressed in New Sincerity writing, which often takes the sensation of isolation to be a fact rather than a theory of postmodern experience. Documenting a shift in sincerity's cultural connotations "in the last third of the twentieth century," Kelly writes that sincerity in both Trilling and Wallace collects "an overriding concern…with the fragmentation of American social and institutional life" alongside a "wish to reconstitute social and communal bonds in the wake of that fragmentation."[21] Sincerity thus comes belatedly onto the scene, filled with "concern" for the damage sustained by institutional life and motivated by "wish to reconstitute." Yet, as we have come to see, positioning oneself in opposition to loneliness always means, paradoxically, inheriting its ideas of relationality.

The work of David Foster Wallace, a key text for theorization of New Sincerity, might help us further parse what some of these ideas are. One of Wallace's many works satirizing the absurdity of American consumerism, David Foster Wallace's 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" is often cited in New Sincerity criticism for its polemical promotion of "single-entendre values" in literary and cultural production. Irony, sincerity, and loneliness come together in this piece, whose complaint is right there in the title: "e unibus pluram" instead of "e pluribus unum," the fracturing of what was whole, rather than the consolidation of a single body politic out of many. While couching its critique in detailed observations about American television (and the novels influenced by its ubiquity), "E Unibus Pluram" does not try particularly hard to be a work of media theory. Instead, the essay presents a phenomenology of the TV-watch*ing*, a look at the contradictory attachments and forms of sociality/asociality occasioned by that popular and highly serialized medium. "Television, from the surface on down,

[21] Adam Kelly, "Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace." *Post45* 17 (2014): 14.

is about desire"[22]—a desire to observe the world without being implicated in it. Wallace frames this condition as one of loneliness:

> *The lonely, like the fictional, love one-way watching. For lonely people are usually lonely not because of hideous deformity or odor or obnoxiousness—in fact there exist today social and support groups for persons with precisely these features. Lonely people tend rather to be lonely because they decline to bear the emotional costs associated with being around other humans.*[23]

Lonely one-way watching preempts exposure by hiding behind stylized noncommitalness, "asides," "metafictional referencing," and "teasing." The pleasure of TV-viewing, then, is not merely the thrill of access, the satisfaction of a voyeuristic curiosity about the lives of others, but also the feeling of relief from being called out by one's embodiment or physical proximity to a situation. Attributing the loneliness of contemporary existence to an ironic spectatorship cultivated by television and picked up by novelists who came of age under its influence, Wallace sees in the addiction to television an unhealthy and uniquely contemporary preference for situations in which viewers are able to experience situations as though they had no obligation to them. Like Eve Sedgwick's paranoid reader, who, fearing the "bad" surprise felt to be capable of undoing one's sovereignty, scans the horizon of every encounter with anticipatory unease, Wallace's "lurkers" would rather watch situations unfold than become imbricated in them.

Aspirational loneliness that ends up backfiring: irony conceived as way to set oneself apart from the condition of being watched instead instills the persistent feeling of having to live to be watched. Such addiction to watching and being watched is isolating, Wallace tells us. If irony for other theorists of the form entails partnership, "recalling the pleasures of collaboration,

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[22] David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," T*he Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, No. 2 (1993): 152.
[23] Wallace, 152.

even collusion"[24] between ironist and interpreter, irony in Wallace invariably precipitates "loneliness"—retreat, ostensibly, from sociality as such. It does not take long for a reader to notice that the essay advances a rather idiosyncratic definition of irony: rather than referring to a rhetorical technique that consists of meaning something other than what one says, irony in "E Unibus Pluram" comes to name the affective consequences of a life lived exclusively through televisual lenses of detachment. For Wallace, the problem with irony as an orientation towards feeling is less that it incites dysphoric feeling (or, conversely, prurient pleasure at being able to see without being seen) than that it prevents the formation of identifiable feelings altogether, preempting states of heightened emotionality with "flatness," "numbness," and "cynicism." Not synonyms, flatness, numbness, and cynicism are treated here synonymously, each naming some obstacle to emotional transparency. Correspondingly, melodrama, sentimentality, and naiveté, often ciphers for heightened or unwarranted emotionality, become here vehicles of honest expressivity and renewed vulnerability. Abandoning finer distinctions between affective states and aesthetic traditions in favor of a stark opposition between feeling and unfeeling, Wallace places irony and sincerity on opposite ends of a spectrum of sensitivity.

In practice, irony's desensitization corresponds to a particularly disappointing kind of consumption: the essay explains that "enfeebling" consumption occurs when a critical mode has been around long enough to be reabsorbed back into the institutionalized and commercialized. Deflated from the predominant mode of protest and resistance to the go-to instrument for ad campaigns wishing to appeal to a viewer's sense of exceptionalism, irony in its newest iteration standardizes without uniting, reducing once-robust criticality to the one-size-fits-all approach of

[24] Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 2003), 52. David Halperin also notes in "Love's Irony" that irony is premised on a "community of understanding."

mass advertising.[25] Irony's new ethos of detachment allows this advertising to incorporate images of radical individualism designed to appeal to the lone viewer who desires above all, to be held separate from the crowd. People, Wallace laments, are no longer united by "common beliefs" but instead tenuously linked by "common images," a repository of cultural products and references that are consumed in tandem but do not a collective make.[26] For him, homogenously ironic consumption aimed at demonstrating (or generating) the individuality of its practitioners gives rise instead to a culture of loneliness cluttered by cultural forms that have outlived their usefulness but persist in a shared pop cultural consciousness. The shared content is there, but the form for collective apprehension is not. Television shows and novels, Wallace bemoans, feature little more than in-joke folded into in-joke, cultural ciphers whose successful decoding does nothing to make the decoded stand out—everyone is already versed in this language of frivolous, detailed reference—or bring people together.

It is in the context of this pessimism about the prospects of connection through shared consumption that Wallace turns in the final paragraph to the reparative energies of "single-entendre values." Single-entendreness becomes not only a form of insurance against misreading or multiple readings, but Where a shared condition of cynicism leaves its carriers feeling more isolated than before—nowhere in his account of the multitude's emotional tonalities does Virno mention a public forming out of these "ways of being and feeling," a cynical community—sincerity becomes the name for the desire for sociality at all. As with sentimentality's equation of modernity with an "education of the heart" (being in touch with one's feeling as moral education),[27] New Sincerity's pedagogy of affective rejuvenation—unlearning ingrained habits

[25] Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," 178.
[26] Wallace, 168.
[27] Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in*

of detachment while relearning habits of avowal, communicability around one's emotional life—takes seriously the notion of retraining sensitivity to feeling in order to become better stewards of it. Contrary to notions of sincerity as exclusively occurring in (or between) individuals, sincerity emerges as a project of remediating collective feeling. Sincerity aesthetics peddles the desire for shareable feeling, or at least the imperative to want shareable feeling—the point being not guaranteed legibility of those around you, but a certain attitude toward the endeavor of feeling that leaves open the possibility of being read.

That Wallace's single-entendreness relies on the starkness of loneliness to cohere its own visions of sociality suggests that sincerity inherits rather than escapes loneliness' aura. Wallace's diagnosis of loneliness is a very specific one, one that insists on a particular version of the social in order to make a case for television-watching's isolationism and sincerity's reparative effects. Writ large, this names the problem with much New Sincerity criticism: a tendency to take sincerity's theories of social form at their word, in order to shore up a literary-historical claim about an emergent sensibility, without parsing sincerity's assumptions about what constitutes sociality in the first place. That there are many textures of sociality, and that sincerity privileges a narrow section one of them, matters less to those for whom being in relation is an all-or-nothing game: Wallace's stance against television suggest we are either all atomized and doomed, or we are transparent to one another and confident in our mutual understanding. Some forms of relation feel smoother than others, and the real question is how far this smoothness extends, and who will be involved in its maintenance.

If "E Unibus Pluram" leaves us with a lonely populace let down by its consumption, its terms nonetheless implicitly raise the possibility of a lonely sociality. As we move from a lonely

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American Culture (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

conception of sociality to a sincere one, it will be important to keep in mind how closely the two actually hew. Commodification's capacity to hybridize isolation and belonging, is behind sincerity's lesson in learning to care about objects again. Rather than naming a disintegration of relation that comes with a thoroughly commodified sphere, loneliness marks the feeling of being caught between different modes of relation—a term, for instance, for the feeling that attends immersion in late capitalism while being nostalgic for relations that escape these circuits of consumption.[28] So what if a certain relation to commodities could also facilitate non-loneliness, rather than engender isolation as Wallace thinks, or as Bob Harris in *Lost in Translation* experiences? What if the performativity of sincerity as Van Alphen and Bal describe it is not tied to bodies, but to specialized commodities and relations that crystallized in and through these commodities? In the next section, we will think about sincerity as something that might inhere in the commodity form.

III. Designed to Be Deleted: Sincerity and Commodity Aesthetics

Hinge, its tagline would like you to know, is the dating app "designed to be deleted." Founded in 2012, the app reportedly entered a new phase of development after its founder Justin Mcleod came across a Vanity Fair piece on "the dating apocalypse" that criticized apps like Hinge and Tinder for keeping people lonely in order to ensure they would continue to use the

[28] It is hard not to hear in Wallace's argument—that being linked through shared patterns of consumption does not constitute sociality proper—a dismissal of some of the most exciting work/premises in cultural studies. For alternatives to Wallace's indiscriminate approach to television viewership, for instance, one could turn to Karen Tongson's work on the ways in which television fostered queer forms of "remote intimacy" (a term borrowed from Jennifer Terry) by belatedly creating collective intimacies out of "sometimes solitary practices of popular consumption and memory making." Karen Tongson, *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries*, (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 24.

product. Revamped with the intent of making online dating a "more sincere experience," Hinge joined a recent wave of dating apps built or rebuilt on the premise that the mores of modern romance—an "apocalyptic" landscape of "objectifying games"—were in desperate need of a reboot.[29] Its mission statement presents the problem thus: "In today's digital world, singles are so busy matching that they're not actually connecting, in person, where it counts. Hinge is on a mission to change that. So we built an app that's designed to be deleted."[30] Set against the backdrop of a *generally* lonely populace isolated by the convenient but ultimately impersonal technology of swiping, the app's romantic theorizing evokes a cosmology of emotional transparency—"a *world* without swiping"—within which sociality as much might be recuperated, for more than just lovers. Loneliness, it would seem, makes sincerists of us all. The hope here is that individual acts of affective risk-taking—publishing personal information, listing ones hopes, dreams, and preferences in exhaustive detail, meeting in person— will add up to a template for better sociality, one in which the need for algorithmic go-betweens (and other mediatory forms) will be overcome completely.[31]

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[29] Nancy Jo Sales, "Can Hinge Make Online Dating Less Apocalyptic By Losing the Swipe?" *Vanity Fair*, October 11, 2016. Accessed February 17, 2020. *https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2016/10/hinge-relaunch-swipe-dating-apocalypse*

[30] "What We Believe," Hinge.co, accessed February 17, 2020.

[31] The dream of transcending one's medium—of curating, that is, *more* than an in-app experience—might very well lie at the heart of a sincere commodity aesthetics. Before naiveté or delusion or quaintness, sincerity seems to me most closely related to ambition, a near incantatory relation to affective description that presupposes the power of such description to reinstate affective capacities atrophied by lack of use. In the case of Hinge, this secret wish to be outside mediation altogether can be seen in the app's inordinate preoccupation with users' lives beyond their phones. Justin McLeod has stated that one design principle of Hinge is to *limit* the amount of time users spend interacting with the product: rather than seeking to maximize "minutes in app"—a metric often tracked as an indicator of an app's success—by increasing the range of interactions that take place within the app, Mcleod insists that Hinge's vision of remediated romance seeks instead to set up interactions in "real life," hoping to eventually set up its users to bypass the app altogether. Again, it is the form the claim takes rather than its verifiability that intrigues me. "Real" becomes a kind of refrain for McLeod, whose paternalistic reminder that

The mission statement is subtended by the sense that re-learning tactics of avowal and transparency, could serve as a corrective to digitally-induced loneliness. Users urged to seek connection "where it counts" might hear an echo of another injunction often given to those unlucky in love— "put yourself out there." Both curious pieces of advice take for granted that worthwhile relationality is never where you currently are, but tied instead to a perpetually receding horizon of exposure and visibility. That an ostensibly pre-digital mode of connectivity is being midwifed, however, by the very algorithms that ushered in alienation in the first place remains a paradox in Hinge's program—one which may explain the app's principles of self-negation. Hinge's ideal world is one in which it ultimately cannot, will not need to, exist. One might call "designed to be deleted" the lynchpin of Hinge's reparative promises: without it, might as well be just another product-pushing gambit, but with it, the app could be said to be in service of a social project that extended beyond itself. Whereas competitors like Tinder position themselves at the culmination of an entire history of human courtship (see "The Invention of Together"), Hinge goes to considerable lengths to stage its product as something easily dispensed with, composed precisely to hasten its own obsolescence. Its advertisement campaign features an anthropomorphized Hinge app wordlessly enduring a series of gruesome accidents while romance blossoms between its human charges. As the furry creature is by turns set on fire, run over by a car, and crushed by a falling air conditioning unit, a voiceover assures viewers that "Hinge wants you to meet someone great…even it kills us" and that "Hinge is dying for people

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"real life is competing for your time, and I'd much rather you spend your time in real life" sounds like an honest admission of the app's limitations. Far from an exercise in corporate modesty, however, McLeod's fixation on real life indicates something of Hinge's overweening ambition, its drive to curate something more than an in-app experience—to transcend technological, aesthetic mediation altogether. To not only anticipate but to wish for your own supersession betrays an inordinate interest in what exists beyond your usual sphere of influence, an interest, that is, in the possibility of exerting non-diegetic influence.

to find each other." The glee with which the advertisement symbolically exterminates the thing it has been made to promote (and encourages its users to do the same, with lines like "fall in love and destroy this ad while you're at it") seems to index a deeply held ambivalence about its own status as a product. Hinge itself needs to be made to disappear, eventually, if its dreams of immediacy are to hold. How does one account for the lengths taken to illustrate this counterintuitive principle of negation at the heart of its professions of earnestness?

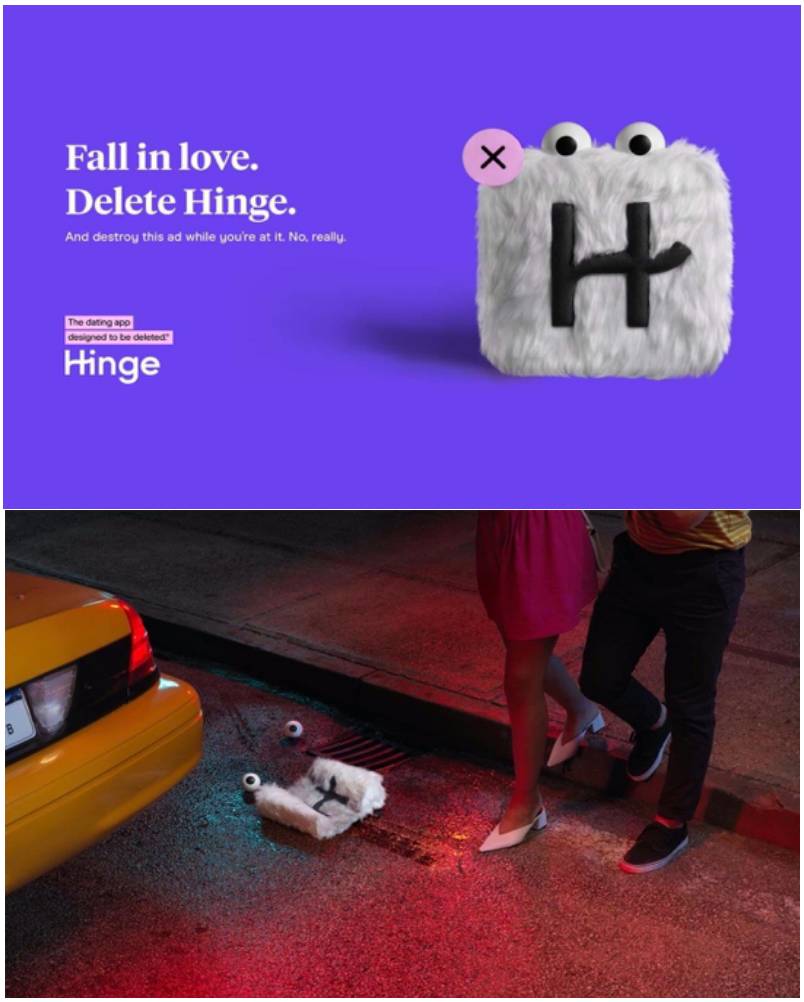

Figure 3.3 Hinge's death-wish and one of many deaths

The mantra of "designed to be deleted" exemplifies a particular convergence of sincerity aesthetics and commodity design. To be clear, I am not particularly moved or convinced by Hinge's claims, or others like it. But that my belief is beside the point *is* the point: it is possible

to recognize the aesthetics of sincerity without believing it. That observations about the structure of sincerity can be made with a serious indifference to how convincing these claims feel personally gets at something about sincerity's conventionalized form, which circulates in excess of individual or product-specific claims to it. Hinge banks on the cultural legibility of its claims, which, apart from any personal conviction "designed to be deleted" might incite, solicits recognition from those who have seen sincerity bottled and sold before.

"Designed to be deleted" names a self-cancelling mechanism that also becomes a brand. In its ambivalence about its own medium, Hinge is not alone: critics writing on sincerity have commented on sincerity texts' ambivalence about their own and other medium, noting that professions of sincerity are often accompanied by some gesture of cancelling out the very medium they are couched in. Such professions become obsessed with forms that don't work, that have been exhausted or compromised Writing on the emergence of sincerity as a cultural phenomenon in post-communist Russia, Ellen Rutten notes an anxiety about mediation that goes as far back as the early modern period, when printed manuscripts used fonts that approximated handwriting in an attempt to assuage doubts about a text's authenticity. In the twentieth century, sincerity becomes mode of countering ironic eclecticism. Jim Collins, in an essay often credited with introducing the term "New Sincerity" to film studies, characterizes sincerity as a pattern of "evasion" which forgoes a "media-saturated terrain of the present," characterized by "irony or eclecticism" and the "perpetual circulation and recirculation of signs," in order to recover a "lost purity" unavailable to more technologically savvy forms.[32] Others have commented on sincerity's relation to technology as well, noting that it is technologically regressive, preferring to

[32] Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity," in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies: Cultural Analysis of Contemporary Film*, ed. Jim Collins, Ava Preacher Collins, Hilary Radner (New York: Routledge, 1993), 257.

take on new problems with old methods: Jason Morris, for instance, has written on the "techno-shyness" of New Sincerity.[33]

It is no accident that, along with promising to rejuvenate sociality and insisting on its own transience as a tool, Hinge offers itself as a way to better, more satisfying consumption. If frustration with irony's (putative) hegemony at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twentieth-first century coincides with a pessimism about the possibilities of cultural consumption itself—with the sense that reading novels, watching films and television no longer afforded the possibilities of self-fashioning and connectivity promised in earlier moments of capitalism—sincerity promises to rejuvenate consumerism by offering a new class of commodity that would dispel the loneliness of disappointing consumption. Learning to care again, in the parlance of sincerity, means learning to care about products again. Rather than signaling an exit from the circuit of commodified feeling, as Hinge would have us believe, sincerity abides in it. Such a twist is necessitated by its own reasoning in which, having passionately argued for the inescapability of irony and having ascribed it to every aspect of social life, it finds itself in the strange position of having disqualified all subjects of postmodernity from playing any functional role in the business of getting back to sincerity. What emerges is a curious conclusion: at the moment of crisis in which these polemics against irony are being written, things rather than people are uniquely positioned to re-train consumers in a forgotten sincerity. That sincerity is being located in products grounds a purported revolution of feeling in the consumption of specialized objects: handmade, homemade, DIY. These designations share an investment in

[33] Ellen Rutten, *Sincerity After Communism: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 163.

customization, distinguishing between forms of consumption that isolate consumers and better kinds of consumption that alleviate loneliness.

What I am describing here is less the commodification of a previously uncommodified sincerity, then, than a postmodern discourse of sincerity always already formulated in terms of commodification. Such an understanding of sincerity as a particular style of consumerism can be seen, for instance, in the tendency of popular writing on sincerity to create lists of cultural products that are and are not sincere. Reaching for something to capture the structure of feeling they wish to elaborate, these writers frequently turn to commodity culture for examples: hence Jesse Thorn's description of New Sincerity as "more Hedwig than Rocky Horror, more Princess Bride than Last Unicorn, more Bruce Lee than Chuck Norris"[34] the deployment of proper nouns in the place of adjectives imbricates sincerity most directly with a culture of things rather than ideas (ideas encountered through things). Whereas the sincerity-irony dichotomy has largely been talked about in terms of interpersonal interaction, of connecting or failing to connect with other people, sincerity and irony are here re-envisioned through ways of making contact with things. By its own account, sincere consumerism prides itself on its discernment: it demands more of its objects, which, over and above being beautiful or cool, need to feel "real." It calling card is an insistence that its objects are not just commodities, but portents of an affective pedagogy more expansive and more organic than the sum of its materials. Lauren Berlant's work on intimate public spheres offers a useful framework for thinking about how collectives form around acts of consumption, and how a preference for a product or a world of products can be felt to evidence a shared worldview and "common historical experience."[35] Common to sincerity

[34] Thorne, " A Manifesto for the New Sincerity"
[35] Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, viii.

and the tradition of American sentimentalism Berlant reads is the capacity to make the commodity and the system it mediates feel intimate, to make it feel that it is meant for to oneself, even as it gestures as wider structures of belonging and affinity.[36]

Contemporary sincerity, in other words, is predominantly formulated in terms of consumption—feeling called to particular commodities, recognizing others who feel called to in the same way. In recognizing the problem of loneliness of as one of a thoroughly commodified social life, these forays into sincerity nonetheless does not abandon the commodity wholesale, but return to it. That they do not play out what could be an anti-consumerist tenor in their logic is interesting. The weird and intriguing thing about Hinge is that it asks users to trust the app to get them out of loneliness, even as it holds apps like it responsible the mess modern daters find themselves in. If the commodity form in Marx's famous formulation causes the "definite social relation between men" to take on "the fantastic form of a relation between things,"[37] sincere consumption asks if a social relation can be reverse-engineered in turn. Rather than asking its users to renounce digital mediation, Hinge asks them to have faith in what consumption, sincerely calibrated, can do. Likewise, the sincere imaginaries of the films that follow retain an attachment to the fantasy that shared acts of consumption might yield infrastructures for collectivization.

Unlike Berlant's account of sentimentality, however, sincere consumption offers little in the way of psychological depth or persuasiveness because its objects tend to prefer it that way: if the texts of *Female Complaint* grapple, albeit imperfectly, with personal and subjective effects of historical trauma, texts like *Napoleon Dynamite* and *Science of Sleep* do their best to circumvent

[36] Berlant, *The Female Complaint,* 24.
[37] Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 165.

the historical all together, or to make its glancing mentions as low stakes as possible. As we will see, race is, for the most part, treated as a punch line, a temporary flicker of transgressive pleasure in an otherwise "post-racial" landscape. The desire for relation that can go without saying, that can be communicated and ascertained through shared appreciation for things, appears again and again in these films. In order to provide an aesthetics of social cohere, these films leave many of their subjects somewhat caricatural, relocating attention to the commodities and the harmony that might be glimpsed in their consumption and *appreciation*, rather than in the interiority of subjects. The motif of characterological exaggeration enjoins us to look more intently and lovingly at the things that these characters make or surround themselves with.

An aesthetics of purported immediacy eventually reveals itself to be an aesthetics of deflated mediation: faced with the impossibility of achieving an unmediated world, sincerity art gives us a differently mediated one instead. Its gifts look simple—a self-effacing app, a homemade gift, a lo-fi record. There is a general effect of staging their objects' provisionality, so that what matters about the objects is the affect being transmitted through them, what they become a vessel for. An object's medium becomes a placeholder for world it would rather have, one that would render the medium obsolete—the point is not the thing itself, but the newly sincere world it presages and the affective conductivity that will get us there.

IV. "There's More Where That Came From": Jared Hess' Aesthetics of Close Circulation and Custom Commodities

Commodification's capacity to hybridize isolation and belonging is behind the promise of sincere consumption. What matters now will be finding those objects (and the relations they contain) that are capable remediating the isolating consumption Wallace so fears in television

watching. Implicit in this account is a question: what would it look like for sincerity to emerge in relation to things rather than people?[38] In what follows, I read a specific kind of commodity aesthetic—the customized commodity—as a recurring site for the imagination of sincerity, taking issue with Wallace's sense that sincerity portends a way out of commodification. I do this by looking at a collection of films fascinated precisely with the consuming of specialized objects associated with custom and do-it-yourself aesthetics. Invested in a vision of immediacy in which things pass directly from source to recipient without an intervening step of mass commodification, or a circuit in which the effects of mass commodification might be circumvented, DIY names the desire for people and things—and, by extension, people and people—to remain close. The optimism of "a more democratic design process," of "amateur design and production activity carried out more closely to the end user of the goods created" hinges on the notion of proximity.[39] In a world of increasingly outsourced and displaced labor, the performance of taking back making signals a desire to bring production and consumption full circle: to have these processes occupy and, crucially, remain in the same space. "Do-it-yourself" comes, in multiple mediums and multiple aesthetic movements, to signify limited circulation: not just of the object, but of the feelings attached to or incited by it. By reading sincerity art's

[38] There is, in fact, precedent for talking about sincerity as inhering in things themselves. Before "sincerity" was used for people, Trilling notes, "one spoke of sincere wine, not in a metaphorical sense, in the modern fashion of describing the taste of a wine by attributing some moral quality to it, but simply to mean that it had not been adulterated, or, as was once said, sophisticated" (*Sincerity and Authenticity*, 12). An apocryphal etymology that traces sincere back to "sine cera," or "without wax"—widely circulated enough that Trilling is compelled to mention it in his own account—conjures an object in its wholeness, uncontaminated by foreign substances. Trilling says "things," but "substances" might be more accurate: sincerity here pertains to the *stuff* things are made of, matter that can be formed into any number of objects and serves to link things that, while further down line of production, nonetheless bears evidence of its originary purity.
[39] Paul Atkinson, "Do It Yourself: Democracy and Design," *Journal of Design History* Vol. 19 No. 1 (Spring 2006), 1.

relation to the materials it works with, we might begin to delaminate our understanding of sincerity as a structure from metaphors of transparency that focus on expressivity exchanged between individuals—that is, the interpersonal minus the social. With a more material approach, tracking sincerity becomes less about corroborating individual intention than about tracking the kinds of affiliations that form around its aesthetics.

One way to gloss the place of DIY aesthetics in contemporary US culture would be to associate it with strategies for resisting easy commodification, finding in the hand- and home-made a productive insistence on localizing the conditions of production that leaves in a product evidence of its idiosyncratic and contingent assembling. The assumption implicit in "do-it-yourself"—that most things are, in fact, no longer made this way—singles out the act of using one's own hands as an agential gesture that resists outsourced production (and its attendant patterns of less conscientious consumption) and offers instead a community-oriented, coalition-building activity.[40] Motivated by "a powerful desire to take [neoliberal capitalism] apart in piecemeal ways," DIY captures a desire to return to realms which lie beyond the alienating effects of commodification—whether these spaces deploy feminist traditions of craft,[41] the re-masculinized suburban home,[42] the anti-consumerist punk scene,[43] or the rhetoric of

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[40] A particularly utopic take on DIY opens with the claim that it is "rooted firmly in a drive to bring people back into touch with the material world, in a nostalgia for lost skills and trades, and often in a desire for collective engagement, elements that are frequently in direct opposition to the flows of power within late capitalism." Aiello, Giorgia, Clovis Bergère, Lisa Daily, Linda Doyle, Stephen Duncombe, Catherine D'Ignazio, Jessica Foley et al. *DIY Utopia: Cultural Imagination and the Remaking of the Possible*. Lexington Books, 2016.

[41] Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

[42] For more on do-it-yourself in suburban households and the husband who works with tools at home as a figure of modernity, see Steven M Gelber. "Do-It-Yourself: Constructing, Repairing and Maintaining Domestic Masculinity." *American Quarterly* 49, No. 1 (1997): 66-112.

[43] The DIY ethos has a history of association with anti-consumerist punk scene and grassroots art/independent art collectives for whom the practice of making art with one's own (limited)

entrepreneurial freedom. While differing radically in ideology and political commitments, each of these accounts of DIY hinges on notions of the reparative possibilities of amateurism as a relation to one's medium.

It is also the case, however, that a do-it-yourself ethos can be traced to wholly commodifiable practices. Take, for instance, the proliferation of DIY language in makeover or life-hacking movements that advise viewers on reconstructing luxury or comfort at home, on a budget. In this sense, DIY claims to know the true price of things: *you're paying too much for that*. Caught between protocols of singularity and reproducibility, DIY aesthetics bear a conflicted relation to the aesthetics of originality. On one hand, the object was made by me, no one else could have made this same exact object; one the other, the accessibility of DIY solicits imitation: you, too, could do this at home! Andy Warhol's paint by numbers series, titled "Do-It-Yourself," usefully plays out this toggling between singular and reproducible. Featuring landscape paintings whose canvases are blown up versions of paint-by-numbers template, the series seemingly flattens artistic activity into the mechanical work of following mass-produced, step-by-step kits, available to and achievable by anyone. Though Jonathan Flatley characterizes the Do-It-Yourself paintings as an early exploration in what would become Warhol's thoroughgoing interest in mechanicity, what is more interesting to me is the way in which he is also able to read the work as also soliciting a kind of inconsistency in the imitation, such that even mechanized processes produced "mistakes," "images that were noticeably non-identical."[44] In the process of painting the Do-It-Yourself series, Warhol leaves numerous imperfections on the page idiosyncrasies in the coloring—brushstrokes that paint around numbers rather than over them, panels in the

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resources is a way of taking control of means of production—much has been written on lo-fi recordings and DIY zines as indexes of an alternative system of making and distributing.

[44] Jonathan Flatley, *Like Andy Warhol* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 101.

template left unfilled. If Warhol sought to eliminate traces of the "homemade" from his art in order to foreground a machine-like reproduction, the unevenness and missing strokes of an "inconsistent mimeticism nonetheless marks the piece's hand-madeness.

In the case of home makeovers or paint-by-numbers turned art, "do-it-yourself" refers not to the project of building a political or artistic movement from the ground up or finding forms of newly participatory artistic practice, but to cultures of consumption redeemed by their perceived alternativity to mass circulation. That this alternativity can be stylized in a way that renders it sensible—audible in the grainy sound of a lo-fi recording or visible in the apparent stitching of a homemade garment—is the principle behind DIY in its transformation from a protocol to an aesthetics. In this case, DIY is not about demystifying a process of production so much as offering another fantasy to buy into: if loneliness names the feeling of being abandoned by one's objects in a culture industry given over to empty self-referentiality, it is here countered by the prospect of objects kept in close circulation. With the fantasy of production and consumption brought close again comes the fantasy of things that are made *for* people. What we are tracking is less an aesthetic of production than of circulation—an indication of how many steps removed from the origin, how many levels of mediation have come already between me and this object I am receiving. The fantasy of intimate circulation within a protected space of niche, small-batch craft is fantasy of objects made affectively particular (and thus connective) once more.

How does the ideal of limited circulation becomes sensible—not just a fact of production but a matter of feeling, available for perception, attachment, and eventually stylization? For Sedgwick, the allure of any object, but in particular the handmade object, has something to do with the way it makes sensible the ambit of an object's circulation. Sedgwick writes that touching a thing often turns into an invitation to consider an object's encounters with tactility. A

consideration of textural materiality, or what she (borrowing from Renu Bora) calls "texxture," transforms any given object into a point of contact with the other hands it has (or will) come into contact with and thus turns the object being touched into an incitement to curiosity. Where did it come from, how did it come to be that way, what might it become?[45] Rather than simply naming a property of a material, texxture is about a kind of encounter with and relation to that material. To perceive texture "is always, immediately, and de facto to be immersed in a field of active narrative hypothesizing, testing, and re-understanding of how physical properties act and are acted upon over time."[46] This kind of activation can happen anywhere, with anything.

Texture becomes way to think about sincerity's materiality. The aesthetic we will track capitalizes on the desire to perceive texture, turning texturedness into a style both recognizable and reproducible. Unlike postmodern "gloss" or "shine" (which has pretensions to what Bora terms "textural lack") or what Sianne Ngai has described as the softness of the commodity par excellance,[47] DIY crudeness offers a different relation to the things one consumes. It promises access and transparency, knowledge of the object: textured imperfection marks traces left by, reveals where and how things were joined or cut apart. Thinking about sincerity as the project of re-texturing (rather than eradicating) commodities might another version of what Ellen Rutten calls sincerity art's fascination with "aesthetic rawness."[48] Sincere texture need not be limited to the tactile—one might, for instance, think about sonic texture (lo-fi recording).[49] What matters is

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[45] Sedgwick and Adam Frank, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 13.
[46] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 13.
[47] Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 64.
[48] Rutten, 181.
[49] Austin's "New Sincerity" music scene is an interesting case study in the convergence of sincerity and DIY music. See Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock'n'Roll Scene in Austin, Texas,* on production of New Sincerity in Austin as a "scene."

that texture is made to feel simultaneously foregrounded and uncomplicated—in the cases of DIY, the question of where this came from (and what it might become) are made to feel refreshingly and reassuringly contained.

Napoleon Dynamite (2004) begins with a striking invocation of tactility: the opening sequence features an unidentified hand laying out an assortment of items against distinctly textured backgrounds—shag carpeting, astroturf, vinyl flooring—arranging each to reveal one of the names in the opening credits.[50] Items that seem mass-produced/utterly banal are eventually shown to have been customized in some way—upon closer inspection, the chapstick is printed with the name of the producer; the candy box reads "edited by Jeremy Coon" under the label "fat free food." This carefully choreographed show-and-tell of the not-quite-commodity, the ordinary commodity made bespoke, sets the tone for the rest of the film. The film opens with the notion that you might understand something about a person (or a film) based on the things it associates itself with, giving new meaning to the phrase "to show one's hand." Showing one's hand becomes a running gag in the film as we follow protagonists who spend a lot of time arranging or distributing items as well, leaving cakes on people's doorsteps, sending hand-drawn portraits in the mail. The objects are not, in themselves, the point it seems—they are spoken of as placeholders, portending a world or sensibility in-the-making. "There's more where that came from," Napoleon assures a horrified classmate who has just received a clumsy drawing he has done of her. That the items are warranted the cinematic staple of attention—closeups—but rarely re-occur as a singular object (the individual drawings do not recur, the objects in the opening sequence never appear again, Debbie's homemade lanyards are, far from singular, later

[50] Hess, Jared, Jon Heder, Jon Gries, Aaron Ruell, Efren Ramierez, Tina Majorino, Munn Powell, and John Seihart. *Napoleon Dynamite*. Fox Searchlight/20th Century Fox, 2004.

distributed to the school in droves during Pedro's campaign) suggests that rather than tracking the objects themselves, we may be better served watching for the moment of bestowal.

Figure 3.4. Not-quite-commodities from opening sequence of *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004)

The opening sequence might be read as an oblique allusion to the film's own production process, whose do-it-yourself ethos has become part of the film's origin myth: reviews and retrospectives often cite its beginnings as a low-budget short film made while Jared Hess and Jon Heder were students. Widely considered a "cult classic"—a phrase whose oxymoronic juxtaposition of the popular and particular encapsulates the paradox of sincere consumerism—*Napoleon Dynamite* has been affectionately fetishized by American audiences since its release.

Critics, frustrated by the bizarre gags and largely plotless structure, were baffled to discover that audiences relished the very elements that they had found so indigestible. If anything, *Napoleon Dynamite* is not meant to be digested, but disassembled: the film lives on in popular culture as a trove of material endlessly convertible into repeatable bits: memes, Halloween costumes, YouTube reenactments. Its quirkiness—its collection of eccentric characters, absurd scenarios (Napoleon's household chores include feeding their pet llama leftover casseroles), and memorable one-liners—seems to invite the film's division into fetishizable parts—isolated images, sound-bytes, gestures. The scene with Napoleon's famous dance, for instance, has spawned numerous imitations and was briefly featured on the gaming platform Fortnite as a dance players would be able to purchase for their avatars.[51]

In what is perhaps the strangest extension of tendency toward broader and broader forms of recognition, Idaho legislature passed a resolution in 2005 "commending" the Hesses for creaating *Napoleon Dynamite*, which the "House Concurrent Resolution No. 29" characterizes as a movie-length commercial for the state of Idaho. The resolution, which mentions in its prefatory statements that the "scenic and beautiful City of Preston, County of Franklin and the State of Idaho are experiencing increased tourism and economic growth," includes numerous shout-outs to moments in the movie itself. It is a story perfectly suited to sincere consumption's intuitions:

[51] This easy traffic between films and commercial world, often framed as a kind of collectability, characterizes the work of other so-called New Sincerity directors as well: Wes Anderson's films, for instance, have been mined for their fictional commodities (copycat version of suitcases in *The Darjeeling Limited*, for instance) This eccentric position in relation to the commodity turns out to be quite amenable to collecting, insofar as a collector collects things that there aren't too many of and that,in one way or another, belong to a set. The collector's impulse comes with sense that one would be able to recognize Michel Gondry or Wes Andersen's highly recognizable style even outside of its usual contexts. The instagram account @accidentallywesanderson documents precisely such a project: follower are asked to send in photos that capture a scene (often architectural) resembling Anderson's highly symmetrical, diorama-like scenes.

in being quirkly customized to Idaho's state character, *Napoleon Dynamite* in fact found broader appeal and made the state more economically viable. The curious phenomenon of a distinctly regional sensibility whose idiosyncrasy has found broader appeal—that is, a product inscribed by signs of narrow circulation that has exceeded this circulation to surprising success—encapsulates the dialectics of an aesthetics of limited circulation. In addition to participating in circuits of particularized consumption, the film takes them up in its narrative. It is no exaggeration to say that selling to and buying from the people in one's proximity constitutes *the* primary means of making contact in the film: we encounter many characters via goods they are selling (or buying) or promotional material they are circulating. Even when one character doesn't buy what the other is selling (which is most of the time), these commodity-mediated interactions serve to prolong contact, not preclude it. After appearing on Napoleon's doorstep peddling "home-woven handicrafts" and a studio photography business she runs from her own bedroom, Debbie accidentally leaves behind her case of lanyards, which Napoleon then returns to her at school; Kip sees a commercial for Rex Kwon Do's martial arts studio in town and shows up in a class in the next scene. Sooner or later, people come face to face. If watching in Wallace's essay absolves viewers of the need to interact with the people they watch, watching in *Napoleon Dynamite* has no chance of serving as a prophylactic against in-person interaction. Screen time is not separate from real world encounter—more often than not, the people seen on or through screens (the martial arts instructor Rex Kwon Do, Uncle Rico, Kip's online girlfriend) materialize in person, bearing uncanny resemblance to their videotaped or virtual counterparts. Unlike the network television shows Wallace so despises, home-recorded videos, made to circulate locally rather than widely, do not install the same kind of distance from its subjects.

Filled with people living in close proximity to one another who nonetheless have no idea what to do with one another once they get into close quarters, *Napoleon Dynamite* offers a comic, offbeat meditation on what we have been calling "loneliness." But if the people around Napoleon—his brother Kip, who pines for a woman he meets online, or his Uncle Rico, recently separated from his wife and increasingly fixated on a counterfactual history in which he became a football star rather than an itinerant Tupperware salesman—are more obvious candidates for lonely subjects, it is unclear for the first part of the film whether the Napoleon fits the bill. He is certainly alone a lot, alternately ostracized and fetishized by his peers. Napoleon alienates his classmates with tall tales about hunting werewolves; he plays tetherball as a solo sport. But Jon Heder's deadpan performance makes it initially difficult to tell if Napoleon minds his solitude or wants otherwise: whether on the receiving end of curious scrutiny or verbal and physical violence, Napoleon rarely lets on anything beyond his characteristically emphatic "god!"

As dispelling loneliness becomes a central concern for its protagonists, however—Napoleon decides that he needs a friend to "watch his back" and the pressure of finding a date for the upcoming school dance structures much of the film—scenes become populated with custom-made objects. Objects made for limited circulation in no way guarantee interpersonal connection—the film is filled with missed encounters, message that need to be passed on, a drawing that horrifies rather than impresses its subject. Even when messages do make it to the intended recipient, they are often accepted begrudgingly or without comprehension. There is a persistent element of indirection, obliqueness: while they do lead to contact, DIY objects and media in no way orchestrate perfect sociality. More often than not, they result in an awkward one: silences and stuttering conversation, having to stay in the same room with the person whose homemade video you've just insulted for instance, becoming a dummy on which to demonstrate

on. DIY intimacies that occur are often indirect and oblique, as any intimacy triangulated through commodities is wont to be.

Close circulation comes with its own discontents. What do we do, for instance, with the fact that these gifts often appear on their recipients' doorsteps, in their bedrooms, unsolicited? These home- and custom- made items are rarely asked for: Michel Gondry pointedly titled a gallery exhibit featuring props from his film *Science of Sleep* (2006) "an exhibition of creepy pathological little gifts," a callback to a scene in the film during the protagonist's love interest discovers, to her horror, that he has been sneaking into her home to leave trinkets he has crafted for her. The exhibit's meditation on "creepiness" announces a motif of unannounced proximity that runs through these films, a wanting to be close often justified through innocent-sounding terminologies of care or love or admiration. "I don't know how to love from a distance" one character declares after secretly purchasing an empty house in order to spy on his estranged wife and son from the kitchen window; a man pursues a relationship with a woman while concealing the fact that he lives in the same building; after leaving a cake for Summer on her doorstep, Napoleon and Pedro wait in the bushes to watch. It is a strangely inverted version of Wallace's ogler: if lurking for him is a way to retreat from sociality, here it becomes a way of taking it into one's own hands. Keeping consumption and production close seems, under these circumstances, to mean staying close enough to consume the moment of consumption—to watch someone else receive the gift of one's sincerity. Such an approach to eliminating loneliness, which asks that one's efforts be tolerated or received, seems to demand a particular response whether or not that response is forthcoming, turning them into a vessel for one's own sincerity. These scenes exemplify the tension between sincerity's championing of vulnerability and affective risk-taking and its formal tendencies toward heavy stylization. Behind DIY aesthetics' play and

whimsicality, low-key accessibility and maybe even collaborative making lies an insistence on aesthetic control, on making something with one's own hands and thus getting to determine where it goes and how it is used. We will return to this fetishization of artistic control later.

The unspoken lesson of *Napoleon Dynamite* the film and "Napoleon Dynamite*"* the cultural phenomenon is this: there is no such thing as ironic consumption, no way to simultaneously consume and preserve one's distance from the object one has consumed. As such, consumption is always, to some extent, sincere: it requires you to put your money or time where your mouth is, to spend your time on something (even if you are "hate watching" it), to elaborate something about your tastes, even if opposition to said object. While it is possible to occupy different positions in relation to the thing you are consuming, that the very act of consuming implicates you, in any number of ways, in a network of other consumers. In *Napoleon Dynamite,* it pays to consume sincerely: even if the terms of this consumption are never made clear and even if your openness to trying things out exposes you to being ripped off by people selling fake time travel machines on eBay, it is also how you find your people. The film toys with the possibility of ironic consumption only to do away with it, concluding that it is better to be a dupe than a cynic: having embarrassing taste or being inordinately committed to one's daydreams is preferable to alternative. "Promise them you'll make their wildest dreams come true," Napoleon advises Pedro before the latter gives a speech for the student president election. [52]

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[52] Hess' later film, *Gentlemen Broncos* (2009), is noticeably more pessimistic about the capacity for appreciative consumption in common to bring people into mutually beneficial but nonexploitative relation. The film revolves around an instance of plagiarism, in which a young science fiction writer, Benjamin Purvis, submits his story to a contest only to have it stolen by a celebrity writer in the industry (Dr. Chevalier). When Benjamin finally finds out what Chevalier has done, it is the culmination of what has been a series of more minor injustices. Misappropriation is consistent key throughout film, as friends and enemies alike misappropriate Benjamin's work, contorting his material and substituting—as is insisted on throughout the film—their more effeminate tastes for his. In this respect, the custom commodity, which can

As it turns out, isolated pockets of individual appreciation are not enough. We move systematically—from Pedro and Debbie's private enjoyment of Napoleon's drawings—to more universal scenes of appreciation by each film's end. Intent on showing this second, more capacious audience, the film never imagines that it is enough that Napoleon has his own small circle of admirers. Because question of taste is so important to sincere consumption, it becomes important that the value of the drawing, book, dance in question be objectively established—recognized politically or commercially: in *Napoleon Dynamite*, through Napoleon's hit dance in support of Pedro's campaign for school president; in *Gentlemen Broncos,* in the form of Chevalier's decision to plagiarize his story, later in the publishing of his own version.

A recurring image in Hess's films is thus one of universal appreciation, scene of an entire audience clapping/unanimous applause. After dancing his heart out in front of the entire school during assembly, Napoleon is unexpectedly greeted with a standing ovation. The desire for the value of the kitsch, the clumsily homemade, to be unambivalently affirmed is recognized—what emerges is a consensus that simultaneously generates sense of collectivity and shifts the previously exclusionary terms of this collectivity. DIY sincerity as world-building project turns understandings of aesthetic value on its head, but the terms of this conversion remain mysterious insofar as the reasoning behind these aesthetic choices is withheld. That the terms of a (changed) aesthetic judgment are no more transparent at the end than the beginning demonstrates how little these depictions of sincere consumerism are interested in revealing much about the sincere consumer other than the fact of their enthusiastically demonstrated appreciation. It doesn't matter

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come to mean different things to different people but whose draw always manifests as enthusiastic appreciation by those who "get" it, takes on a more compromised role. The custom*izable* commodity also becomes a commodity liable to be stolen, transformed beyond recognition, appropriated for purposes contrary to its original one. Chevalier's plagiarism is a perversion of the customizing move that brings sincere consumers together.

that you don't know who most of these people are, or that many of the characters remain somewhat flat—a collection of cartoonish idiosyncracies but little else. This indifference to elaborating the interiority of these people is not meant to be experienced as dehumanizing—not, that is, meant to symbolize their conversion into mindless consumers whose only source of value is their capacity to consume—but instead seeks to demonstrate that their appreciative response to the object is all anyone needs to know. Their love for this commodity distills something about them that we would not know otherwise, an access that amounts to a strange kind of intimacy in the world of sincere consumption.

Fig. 3.5 United in appreciation

This assembling of an applause collective in Hess—a group of people linked, to our knowledge, by little more than their shared appreciation for the commodity at hand—facilitates for protagonists the realization that they are *not alone.* This realization is couched, true to form, in the realization that you are not alone in liking the things you like. Artistic expression in

Napoleon Dynamite is thus guided by the hope or faith that someday one will find their audience. That his audience tends to be larger and less difficult to find than the film has led us to believe suggests quirkiness might, in the world of this film, be a generalizable principle.

If these scenes of universal acclaim space index the dream of a sociality that can, with the right aesthetic object, go without saying, there are also noticeable exceptions. In the collection of commodity-adjacent, custom objects that appear in the film, one object is not like others: the car that belongs to Pedro's cousins, characters who are never named in the film but appear in the script under the racialized epithet "Cholo 1 and 2." A customized lowrider that eventually even features a personalized message ("Vote 4 Pedro"), the car nonetheless assumes a persistent undertone of menace throughout the film. The car shows up to intimidate a bully, to pick up Napoleon's date to the dance only to unsettle her dad. Surfacing several times but never afforded the same treatment as the other items I have mentioned, the car remains, like its owners, inassimilable to the sincere economy of the film.

Fig. 3.6 Inassimilable to sincere circulation

Such a reading is less a wish for the broadening of sincerity's assimilative reach than a way to apprehend the logics of exclusion inherent to the limits of *Napoleon Dynamite*'s romanticized investment in a specific type of cultural production. Sincerity has great faith in legibility—Trilling's account of sincerity as a "congruence between avowal and feeling" is nothing if not optimistic about the efficacy of communicating one's feelings to another. Little surprise, then, that sincerity feels threatened by those who remain structurally illegible, outside cultural knowledge. In the case of the cousins, who remain silent throughout the film and communicate largely through stares, nods and shakes of the head, this inscrutability is quite literal: throughout the *Napoleon Dynamite*, non-white subjects are racialized through, among other things, lack of dialogue. Pedro's cousins utter one cryptic non sequitur ("Simón") in the entire film, and while Lafawnduh does eventually speak, it is not before an extended and exaggerated pantomime sequence in which she and Kip bond wordlessly over yogurt. She, too, has gifts for him, but they are not of the homemade variety. The inarticulacy of these objects, compared to the unexpected eloquence of DIY objects, emphasizes the sense that sincerity imagines I draws on an already shared understanding that is not looking to change, but merely maintain, its terms.

These scenes foreground the limits of sincerity's consolidatory power which, while based on the tenet of consuming differently but in common, nevertheless cannot bring itself to consume certain things, nor can it do away with differences in what it means for people occupying different positionalities to consume same things. Conceived as an aesthetics of limited circulation, DIY allows us to attend more closely to sincerity's materiality. It suggests that when we call a work "sincere," we are not necessarily referring to an undergirding human attitude that makes it so—we might also be describing something about its form or material, or the practices of circulation organized around it. A materialist approach to sincerity allows us to ask: why *these*

particular objects, *these* material cultures? What is, necessarily, left out? Insofar as DIY depends on the idea of staying in the same place, the question of what gets to count is the question of what gets to count as indigenous to that space. The aesthetics of limited circulation are inextricable from considerations of race, gender, or class, just as the question of what counts as DIY or custom in *Napoleon Dynamite* is inextricable from the question of what seems familiar and what doesn't. As it turns out, some textured objects incite curiosity while others, revulsion or fear. The limitations of sincerity as a basis for sociality lie in its reliance on judgments about likeness: the desire for non-lonely, intimate spaces of circulation is also a desire for insularity, for a protected space in which one might be shielded from encountering the injury of another's scorn, incomprehension, or incomprehensibility. What we encounter, then, is not a lost or previously overlooked utopian communality, but rather a sheltered relation made stylish, and the possibilities that fall out in this particular vision of a world re-sensitized and re-enchanted through the promise of intimate circulation.

V. "Never the Two Shall Meet": Gondry's Aesthetics of Conflation

Be Kind, Rewind (2007) + *Kidding* (2018-2020)

Napoleon's dance summons the prospect of long sought-after relationality built entirely on basis of shared appreciation. In *Be Kind, Rewind*, a similar moment of externally mediated connection happens around the commodity of the beloved childhood film. While planning their next homemade movie venture, Mike, Jerry and Alma begin a discussion about *The Lion King*, as which point the other people in the café interrupt them to say how much they, too, love that film. The moment is relatively banal, feel-good but relatively unimportant in terms of plot development: we do not learn anything about these other characters in the scene, nor will we see

any of them again. But for our purposes, the fact that "all" we are given is the title of a shared, beloved childhood film is instructive. Given what I have been describing as about sincerity's commodity and consumption-based ethos, we might sense a certain utopianism to the film's indifference to backstory: it shouldn't matter who these people are, as long as they are shown to like the same thing.

That the DIY filmmaking begins not as an experiment, but as an act of desperation, brings the material conditions that necessitate it into conversation with the conditions it makes possible. Early on in the film, unbeknownst to Mike, Mr. Fletcher is approached by city officials who inform him that the building has been condemned and will be torn down to make room for a new condominium. The symbolism is clear, as Mr. Fletcher and Mike's lifestyle is being edged out in more ways than one: the video store's use of VHS tapes had made it less competitive than many other stores. Planning to stay in the building until forcefully evicted, rather than taking the building company's offer to relocate him and Mike to a property with "comparable value" (the projects) Mr. Fletcher leaves to do market research (spy on a competitor) and leaves Mike in charge.

Mike makes matters worse by accidentally allowing his friend Jerry to demagnetize all the tapes. In desperation, the friends begin recording reenactments of movies for the video store's few remaining patrons, reproducing scenes from famous blockbusters in locations around town. Initially they do it in hopes of fooling their customers and staying out of trouble, but eventually they begin filming to satiate a growing fanbase who are excited by their "sweded" versions. Because the films are low-budget, they require viewers who are willing to play along or even participate in the process. As in Hess, the reasons for the tapes' popularity are never explored: the point is less the psychology of attachment that the observable moments of aesthetic consensus.

The Lion King episode and its enlivening of a commodity through the sharing of everyone's attachment to it is entirely in keeping with the movie's interest in sweding. Sweding describes the drive to recreate commodities despite of the fact that they a) already exist and b) are part of the monopolized system that is choking out one's own means of making a living. Of course, the recreations are hardly faithful. In "sweding," imperfect remembering and technical limitations become the saving grace, the thing that makes the otherwise mass-consumed film *yours:* it requires ingenuity, improvisation to pull off visual tricks that are both surprising in their efficacy and charming in their obviousness. Customization in this case is about often about manipulating the angle from which something is viewed, playing with angles—in a recreation of *Rush Hour*, for instance, Jerry stands on a painted cityscape while he is filmed from above, making it seem like he is dangling over the city—and dimensionality—how to make flat, cardboard look like it has depth, for instance—in order to capture this subjective and highly contingent perspective on camera, such that it becomes accessible to anyone who watches the film.

This play with perspectival shifts describes, too, the characters' relation to their local history. The building's scheduled demolition is indicative of a more general indifference to Passaic as a place rather than merely a lot for real estate development, an indifference that carries racial and classed implications. The keepers of the history are thus the people who live there: Mike, for one, is enamored of the history of his block. Rather than official history, his is mixed with gossip and myth: he accesses history through identification, and is particularly committed to preserving Fats Waller's legacy because he believes Fats was born in his building. When Mr. Fletcher later reveals this to be a lie, told in order to make it more bearable for Mike to live where he did as a child, the admission raises the question of what is the difference between a lie

and an enlivening fiction. The story had the effect, after all, of allowing Mike not only to bear, but to attach to his home: in sincerity's feeling-based cosmology, it is this affective mechanism that takes precedent.

Fig. 3.7 "Get me some cardboard": playing with angles and dimensionality in *Be Kind, Rewind* (2007)

Mike and his friends resolve to create an original film. The result*, Fats Waller Was Born Here*, is not interested in presenting an objective take on history—it fictionalizes an already fictional biography—but rather in objectifying (in the sense of turning into the object form of the film) the "historical" into something that can be identified with and played with, in the form of costumes, special effects. As it turns out, an apocryphal story fashioned for a single person—Mike—ends up having more capacious appeal. Like Hess, Gondry is invested in depicting moment of broader appreciation—from two friends, to three, to a group of neighbors, to the

larger community—which test for or discovering continuities in space. When Mike, Jerry, Alma and Mr. Fletcher hold what they believe to be a private screening for the neighbors involved in the film, only to realize halfway through that a larger crowd has gathered outside. Where do these people come from? We are never told. In any case, they have gathered to watch the projection as well: the makeshift movie screen the protagonists use becomes a channel rather than a barrier, linking the inside of the soon-to-be closed shop with the wider world outside. The broadening of the audience does not bring a heterogeneity of opinion, but merely amplifies what we already know from watching the smaller, test audience: this is something *special*.

Fig. 3.8 All-inclusive harmony in moment of movie screening

The screen that turns out to be a link between supposedly distinct spaces—inside/outside, for instance—exemplifies another aesthetic principle we might associate with objects of sincere consumption: the aesthetics of conflated spaces. Writing on "credulous metafiction" in David Foster Wallace's fiction, Lee Konstantinou tracks the postironic fascination with the nondiegetic—the temporally out of joint—as the desire for a text to do something outside itself. What is particularly useful about a term like "credulous metafiction" is that it treats metafictional self-referentiality as a means to becoming more believable rather than self-aware, suggesting that foregrounding its own constructedness can in fact become a text's way of soliciting credulity. Konstantinou notes: "Wallace inverts the procedures of metafiction, asking not that we become

aware of the fictiveness of his fiction…but rather that we believe in the total, genuine honesty of the author—not the narrator, but the author."[53] Rather than distracting from or disguising the text's textuality, Wallace, in Konstantinou's reading, seeks to engage with the writer's judgment and attitude. The object is less important than the affective atmosphere that Wallace insists on for it. Addressing the reader and thus placing the reading (and writing) of text on display is put in the service of conjuring an "extrafictive truth," "a specific reality beyond fiction's fourth wall."[54]

Konstantinou avoids using "sincerity," preferring the more capacious and less affectively loaded term "postirony," but the texts he reads have also been discussed in the context of New Sincerity. While his account of postirony as cultivation of belief as form is convincing, its terms are specific to a literary context in which conventions of separation are already well established. The kind of frame-breaking in which a speaker in the text directly addresses the reader, associated with a particular type of metafiction (Evelyn Waugh terms it "surfiction") tends to be described in terms of rupture and breakage—"breaking the fourth wall," the presumed barrier between text and extra-text viscerally and forcibly undermined. Whereas Wallace (and Konstantinou) inherits these spatial metaphors of "rupture" or "puncture," such terms feel less suitable for performative forms that are premised on permeability and thus inhabit a different imagination of the text's sociality. The aesthetic techniques I have in mind here do not need to produce a formal "rupture" in the boundary between fictional interiors and social exteriors because there is a sense of an existing continuity between those spaces. We might think of these forms as ones in which the notion of a fourth wall is flimsy or permeable to begin with, less a wall than a film, a permeable skin around which another kind of intimacy gathers. Cultural forms

[53] Konstantinou, 179.
[54] Konstantinou, 181.

featuring a permeable fourth wall with might include talk shows,[55] whose monologic format relies on the host routinely speaking directly to camera, stand-up comedy routines, whose delivery styles and minimal sets seem designed to disavow artifice and create the sense that the comedian is playing themselves rather than a role,[56] or, the focus of this section, children's television shows like *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, in which the host is again regularly felt to be speaking directly to viewers. In these programs, direct address is not about irruption or sudden collapse: insofar as we don't find talk show host's direct address to the camera or a stand-up comic's transition into crowd work in the middle of a routine disorienting, these forms play with the possibilities of a nondiegeticity that feels familiar and routine.

Finding continuities between what was thought to be or was being kept separate plays a crucial role in Gondry's latest directorial work, *Kidding* (2018-), a dark comedy featuring a Mister Rogers-like character and his family in the wake of a family tragedy. Rather than focus the text's metafictional aspects, which are abundant—the structure of a show within a show makes this angle impossible to ignore—I want to think first about other approaches to the question of collapsing spaces. *Kidding* is organized around the problematic of conflation: that Jeff Picirillo, children's television presenter and recently bereaved father, is having trouble

[55] Sincerity's affinity for flimsy fourth walls finds one manifestation in the late-night monologue, whose capacity for sincere delivery resurfaces each time there is a (designated) public tragedy. Whereas late-night monologues typically feature a combination of news headlines and quips about them, the genre very quickly slips into sincerity when it deems this tonal shift appropriate. Though the content is obviously different from show to show or event to event, there are striking resonances in tone and format across instances. Conventions include asking for indulgence (Letterman after 9/11: "I just need to hear myself talk for a bit"), disavowing responsibility (Conan after 9/11: "It's not my job to help people make sense of this"), declaring (temporary) embargo on comedy (Jon Stewart after Charleston church shooting: "I have one job…and I didn't do it"), or invoking need to "get back to work" (Conan).

[56] Limon has pointed out the particular difficulty of parsing different between performer and character in stand-up—person headlining "as themselves." For him, this is an instance of abjection.

distinguishing between himself and his alter-ego Mr Pickles. Picirillo is brought to our attention early on in the first episode, when father-producer (another conflation) Seth gives his son a stern talking-to:

> "You need to understand something: there's two of you. There's Mister Pickles, the one hundred and twelve-billion dollar licensing industry of edutaining toys, DVDs, and books that keep the lights on in this little charity of ours. And then there's Jeff, a separated husband and grieving father who needs to hammer out a few dents in his psyche. And trust me, never the two shall meet, in order to prevent the destruction of them both."

In this cynical spiel, the multiplicative logic of compartmentalization—not one but two of you—emerges as a method of self-preservation: keeping events, responsibilities, memories apart becomes a way to navigate an economic order that asks too many things of its subjects, who live in imbalances. Seth makes his speech in response to Jeff's insistence that the show air an episode on death, spurred by the recent death of Jeff's young son in a car accident. While Jeff believes his onscreen emotion processing will be helpful for viewers, Seth worries this conflation of private grief with public messaging will be controversial and interfere with the sale of *Puppet Time*'s affiliated products. Again and again, Jeff demonstrates a disregard for keeping spheres apart: he conflates the intimate and the commercial (referring to viewers as "friends," dating someone he first meets while visiting a cancer ward as Mister Pickles), cannot seem to keep professional and familial duties distinct (his surviving son asks to be related to as his child rather than an audience member), and so on. This gift for conflation is read by those around him in a variety of ways—as pedantic, wishful, irresponsible, endearing. Some in his family do their best to shield him from having to relinquish his idealism which, while inconvenient, is also understood to be improbable and thus precious. (In one episode, his family members scramble to protect him from the realization that he did not get a text after a first date because the other person isn't interested—rather than because, as he believes, his phone is broken. It turns out that

the date's phone was broken.) What is unanimous, however, is that such sensitivity is unsustainable. Seth, preparing for the worst, has replacements able to imitate Mister Pickles' voice on standby and asks his daughter, the show's puppet designer, to make a giant papier maché Mister Pickles head (to be worn by another performer) for the upcoming "Mister Pickles on Ice."

Fig 3.9 Mister Pickles and "Mister Pickles on Ice" in *Kidding* (2018-2020)

Despite his father's scheming, things do not go according to plan. Jeff refuses to say the lines he is given, instead ad-libbing on the show in increasingly erratic ways, and eventually goes off brand in such spectacular fashion—turning a national tree-lighting ceremony into a platform to indict all parents and attempt to instigate a (small-scale and mild) child rebellion— that the network promptly cancels the show. *Kidding* is thus a story about sincerity as disruption, its

capacity to throw a spanner into the smooth workings of the show's profit-generating machine. Disruptive of civility and good manners, which exchange composure for transparency, Jeff's his refusal and incapacity to behave or think cynically and thus to modulate behavior depending on context—his sincerity—is read by those around him as maladaptive, unlifelike and potentially life-threatening in its inflexibility. Of course, figuring out what *would* resemble life under capitalist regimes is a question in itself, one that Marxist autonomist Paolo Virno answers by turning to sincerity's opposites: structures of cynicism and opportunism. Unlike cynicism and opportunism, which Virno describes as having acquired "certain technical importance,"[57] sincerity falls short of offering ways to navigatie (and potentially capitalize on) the "chronic instability of forms of life."[58] In the post-Ford era mode of production, subjects are socialized to be flexible, to "keep up with the most sudden conversions."[59] What is curious about the cynic's worldview is that it both abolishes the idea of division and sees it everywhere: cynicism assumes the interpenetrability of all aspects of life (especially work and non-work), such that survival or thriving is dependent not on learning the rules of a particular context but on figuring out how to move seamlessly between them, while taking for granted that the same rules don't appear twice, that constant reinvention is necessary.

In Virno's terms, sincerity is counter-adaptive because it insists on a consistency of behavior and thought across contexts that no longer holds under postindustrial conditions of labor and sociality. To be structurally sincere rather than structurally cynical betrays a misunderstanding of what the world is or what it has become. "This is reality—join us," Jeff is

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[57] Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 86. Virno is careful to clarify that he is talking about "structural, sober, non-moralistic" versions of these states. His point is not to indict contemporary cynicism, but to locate its cause in a changing social fabric.
[58] Virno*, Grammar of the Multitude*, 87.
[59] Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 86.

told more than once. Yet, as I alluded to earlier, the bringing together of what are, in some contexts, considered discrete realms can induce a disorientation that is desired, sought after. Sincerity's insistence on continuity is only disruptive—non-diegetic, not of this world—from the perspective of those who live under the rule of compartmentalization in the first place. Continuity is only disruptive, is only conflation, if discontinuity is a priori. When *Puppet Time* turns, from the perspective of its producers, explicitly political—all "veiled marxism and songs about genocide"—it represents less an incursion on a cordoned-off space than a capitulation to the form of the children's television show, which has had, perhaps more intensely than most, permeable boundaries all along. That Jeff is no longer interested in shielding children from knowledge of state violence or environmental catastrophe follows from the logic that such atrocities are not outside threatening to come in but already synonymous with the world they inhabit. Sensing tension over the open secret of her father's affair, Deirdre's daughter begins intermittently screaming and clutching at empty air in what, we are told by a child psychologist, is a regression to an infantile reflex to grasp for the mother to avoid falling. The mistake was to think that the kids weren't already sensing shifts in their surround or understanding things about the "grown-ups" supposedly in a world apart— that they weren't, in their own ways, receptive, observant, and precocious. That their knowledge—often embodied in physical fits or acted out in antics that they are never asked to explain but merely told to stop—goes unacknowledged or dismissed speaks to the blind spots that compartmentalization can bring. The show goes to lengths to demonstrate that children are listening, sensing, even behind closed doors.

In *Kidding*, conflation and its aesthetics seems inextricable from the weird positionality that results comes from building an object for children. What happens to an object when it is understood to be for children? An obvious answer would be insulation: children's television has,

since the postwar popularization of television as a family medium, been the site of ongoing debates about what constitutes appropriate, safe, or worthwhile content.[60] Writing on the plethora of advice given in the midcentury to parents who, upon purchasing television sets for the first time, were suddenly burdened by the daunting task of managing what their children had access to, Lynn Spigel notes parenting guides' tendency to encourage readers to cultivate the "right sensibilities" in offspring (while also warning, jokingly perhaps, of new conditions like "telebugeye" children could develop from watching too much television).[61] In these accounts, adhering to middle-class values of taste and propriety and safety would ensure that children's television could perform a socializing function without being excessively social. Such positioning of television, as both barrier against and portal to the world outside, provided in turn the ideal conditions for programming's true function: the cultivation of the child as consumer through advertising.[62] The two-way permeability of the television screen—new products would be introduced into the home through it, children would go out into the world trained to be consumers by it—became both a site of anxiety and possibility.

By the end of the first season of *Kidding*, *Puppet Time* has been cancelled and there is nothing left to lose. After the studio has been cleared out and Pickle Barrel Falls moved into storage, however, children begin to make their way into the studio, asking to speak to Mister Pickles in person. Once again, a would-be virtual audience materializes: the motif of people meeting in person after one of them has seen the other on the small screen is a recurring figure in Gondry. The children's pilgrimage signals an investment in indexicality that underpins *Kidding*

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[60] Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 186.
[61] Spigel, 201.
[62] Spigel, 206. See also: Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Kids Rule!: Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship.*

as a whole—the sense that once the artifice and make-believe has been stripped away, one can stand in the same space with people and meet in person. This moment would seem to encapsulate all that sincerity idealizes: direct and immediate contact, the overcoming of aestheticization in order to communicate without stylistic interference.

The children demonstrate the argument of this chapter, that sincerity is at its most artful when it purports to lay aesthetics aside—the making continuous of previously divided spaces does not portend communication without stylistic interference, but instead the careful staging of conflation of spaces, a development of a visual grammar and set of conventions that can be recognized as having the effect of conflation. As for the omnipresent sincere commodity: it is notable that these children all show up with the Mister Pickles doll, whose only recorded message—"I'm listening"—they have arrived in response to. The doll becomes a ticket to entry, a way to access the real Mister Pickles—it is the thing that will get you to the real thing. The season also closes with another moment of indexicality: we learn that traces Jeff's life outside the show have been, in puppet-form, in the show all along. His sister has based her creations on people in their lives: Bigfoot is their inaccessible, authoritarian father issuing commands from above, Secret Chef is her husband who has many secrets. The moment of conflation confirms what we and Jeff have sensed all along but needed, perhaps, to see allegorized: things can be as they are even when they are hiding in an artificial body. The move is not, as with metafiction, to foreground the text as text, to point out or play with its contrivances, but to point outward, toward emotional contact zones that transgress the bounds of where the text ends and where the real world begins.

Fig. 3.10 Mister Pickles' viewers come to him

VI. Conclusion

In a call to rethink sincerity "outside of its bond with subjectivity," Bal and Van Alphen raise the possibility of exploring sincerity outside of its bind to any particular intentioning subject and thus as an aesthetic formation that coordinates social forms in excess of a subjectivity marked by either transcendent honesty or sentimental excess. That sincerity does not provide unqualified access to a poet or author's freeform expression, but is in face always already generic, a conventionalized rather than spontaneous performance, would seem to cheapen the very aspects that make it valuable. Yet, the notion that sincerity might be conveyed in terms commonly rather than personally devised becomes particularly difficult to avoid when its forms are repeated or taken up collectively—when, for instance, the need to banish irony in the wake of a "national tragedy" is offered as a means to cobble together a communal reaction in wake of crisis,[63] or when the promise of a sincere commodity is used to bolster lucrative industries.

[63] Roger Rosenblatt, "The Age of Irony Comes to an End"

The stakes of a collective sincerity become starkest, it would seem, in the wake of catastrophe. Another approach to sincerity this chapter could have opened with would have been to turn to the calls for sincerity that sounded in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, an event which commentators at the time characterized, somewhat hastily, as portending the "death of irony." The invocations of sincerity that followed were, fittingly, postapocalyptic, characterisitc of what Roger Rosenblatt called a "new and chastened time." Announcing the end American irony's thirty-year reign Rosenblatt writes:

> History occurs twice, crack the wise guys quoting Marx: first as tragedy, then as farce. Who would believe such a thing except someone who has never experienced tragedy? Are you looking for something to take seriously? Begin with evil. The fact before our eyes is that a group of savage zealots took the sweet and various lives of those ordinarily traveling from place to place, ordinarily starting a day of work or--extraordinarily--coming to help and rescue others. Freedom? That real enough for you? Everything we cling to in our free and sauntering country was imperiled by the terrorists. Destruction was real; no hedging about that. Where the Twin Towers were, there is now only empty air.

The sheer range of things accused of harboring insincerity is striking: from fairy tales to Marxian wisecracks to M. Night Shyamalan's twist endings, Rosenblatt's list is insatiable in its desire for confirmation. Sincerity emerges here, in wake of a shattered "postmodern irony," as a last resort, the equivalent of a reset button after end of world as we know it. Rosenblatt describes "amorphous zones of reality" which he is then only too happy to give form: as "grief and common sorrow." Alongside the "realness" of grief, "honor and fair play," Rosenblatt places "anger," "pain," and "the greatness of the country."

It is a wide-ranging and starkly Manichean set of associations. Sincerity here plugs effortlessly into a nationalist rhetoric of American exceptionalism: under the duress of dark forces that threaten the sweet, ordinary, and free, sincerity comes as a call to action—an attitude to not only rally but to militantly defend. Rosenblatt's proclamation of the "death of irony" is

made alongside a claim for a rejuvenated sincerity that has to be taken up because there is nothing else left. Rosenblatt's polemic exemplifies the territorial underpinnings of sincerity's imagination: its refusal to make room for ambivalence in order to make a case for its necessity. The question of sincerity's social reparativity, then, is always structured by a central conservatism: how little does the social needs to change for something to shift—in the midst of adjustment, how much can stay the same? The desire to be continuous with what already exists—to rebuild rather than reimagine—goes far in explaining the kinds of violence that are deemed permissible by those who simply looking to feel safe again

Whereas Sartre sees the avoidance of sincerity as a "constant effort to dissociate oneself from oneself"[64] in an effort to avoid being "considered a thing," sincerity in the films we have explored does become a way to be thought of through and in association with a thing. It is a particular kind of thing: a commodity whose customization demonstrates an insistence on idiosyncratic vision and taste, despite its potential detriment to market value. (Of course, the fantasy of sincerity is ultimately that these things will not be in conflict.) With sincerity, the results are always uncertain: sincerity's ethics and political entailments stay, Gregg Seigworth notes, radically uncertain.[65] Just as irony is not so much an ideology as a technique, adjustable to different projects and amenable to a range of political commitments, sincerity provides no guarantees. For Seigworth, this is not an unhopeful thing—indeterminacy portends the possibility of finding novelty in the same-old, uncovering transformation in cliché. Corniness "gives voice to the near-impossible belief, in the face of all-available evidence to the contrary,

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[64] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press), 1956.
[65] Gregory J. Seigworth, "The Affect of Corn." *M/C Journal* 8.6 (2005). <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0512/12-seigworth.php>

that traversing the dreadfully familiar still holds the chance potential for imagining (and perhaps creating) a world that is decidedly otherwise."[66] This is also what Virno means by "ambivalent"—that the same condition of cynicism might, under different circumstances, yield various outcomes and lead to various courses of action.

In this spirit of open-endedness, I would like to end this chapter with a glimpse of the disturbance sincere consumption, as with any mobilization of affect, might be able to hint at. This possibility stems from a seemingly strange detail in *Be Kind, Rewind*: the frequency with which the police appear. Several times throughout the film, police emerge to disrupt the filmmakers as they are filming.

Fig. 3.11 The police show up

At the climax of the movie, corporate lawyers show up with a cease and desist, plus a demand that the video store destroy all of its sweded copies on the basis that the videotapes

[66] Seigworth, "The Affect of Corn."

themselves are the property of the respective movie companies. The videos are dumped unceremoniously on the street outside, and a cement roller is used to crush the tapes. The protagonists look on in disbelief, and a small crowd forms as neighbors, who have also had a hand in building this archive of low budget imaginativeness, gather to watch. At one point, one of the character attempts to break away and save the tapes, only to be stopped by crowd control.

Fig. 3.12 Sincerity as threat?

The image is striking in its uncharacteristicness: despite the prevalence of slapstick humor and thus bodies being whacked and zapped and poked throughout the movie, violence is more often a punch line than a visible force in *Be Kind*. Its occurrence at this moment seems to present sincerity—the mere feeling of really liking a video you made, and being willing to risk something to protect it, even in the face of the law—as an actual threat. What happens when you get a taste of the power, pleasure, excitement of taking the commodity into your own hands, or customization the amorphous, distributed, unstable notion of ownership it suggests, only to have it taken away again?

In these moments, the possibility of sincere consumption not bearing a wholly normative relation to the objects of its consumption begins to puts pressure on notions of propriety, not just in sense of a rules for conduct, but also in that the sense of "property": what *belongs* to whom as a determinant of which kinds of relation are appropriate and which are not. Propriety's

proprietorial imagination clashes with sincerity's propensity for spontaneity and infringement and inordinate enthusiasm in the name of love. The political potential of sincerity might, then, be the potential for the disruption of dominant logics of commodity distribution. Sincerity's disrespect for due process in its propulsion toward the commodity might contain the kernel of something less sheltered, less protective of the status quo, if only it were given a chance.[67]

[67] For the politics of targeting goods and their circulation, we might to turn to Joshua Clover's thinking on the historically opportune seizure of commodities. For Clover, the history of anti-capitalist struggle has been marked by distinct stages in the styles of resistance, which oscillate between strike-based and riot-based. Whereas striking takes the form of occupying the location of production, rioting disrupts the circulation of goods. We are now, Clover argues, in the second golden age of the riot, in the which shared deprivation of basic goods needed for survival, rather than shared conditions of exploitation at work, have become the site of mobilization. Shared conditions of consumption (or the shared conditions of denied consumption) becomes the basis for action. Such action takes the form of forcefully restricting the circulation of goods, interrupting their conveyance to where they would need to be into order for surplus value to be realized.
Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot : The New Era of Uprisings* (London: Verso, 2019).

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