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Angels of history: reception, distraction and resistance

Gunnar Benediktsson
University of Iowa

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ANGELS OF HISTORY: RECEPTION, DISTRACTION AND RESISTANCE

by

Gunnar Benediktsson

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of
Philosophy degree in English
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

July 2010

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Adalaide Morris

ABSTRACT

A key term in the cultural criticism of Walter Benjamin is his notion of “reception in distraction” as an antidote to ideology’s domination over the mass society in the modern age. This dissertation attempts to illuminate this idea by offering case studies of three projects that summon into existence a new kind of reader, one capable of a trained apperception we may describe as “distracted.” One objective of the mass society according to a Frankfurt model of culture is the erasure of the subject; reception in distraction serves at once to create a space for the social dream and to re-inscribe the subject at the moment of reception through an insistence on its unruly, embodied presence. “Reception in Distraction” creates a cognitive space for disengagement from ideology, modeling what Michael Denning called the “dream work of the social.”

Critical theory is thus available to the mass public in the form of the “dream of history” that is solely available to a distracted apperception and whose subject is the faint possibility that the crisis of the present may be redeemed and repaired in the future. This project attempts to locate this dream of history in the autobiographical writings of Gertrude Stein, the detective fiction of Kenneth Fearing and the late silent cinema of Charlie Chaplin, each of which illustrates clearly the manner in which “distraction” functions to generate contradiction in the face of ideology’s mass cultural form. Stein’s experiments with the autobiographical form call for exactly this manner of reception, for which “Alice B. Toklas” becomes a key model. Similarly, Kenneth Fearing’s Marxist detective novel *The Big Clock* and *Modern Times*, Charlie Chaplin’s final silent film, reflect on the possibility of a productive reception-in-distraction that may co-opt the social forms of capitalism into a project of resistance and counter-discourse. “Distraction” is therefore more than merely an attitude of reception: it occasions a cognitive distance from ideology that is a key form of critical theory in the modern period.

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Graduate College
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

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has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy
degree in English at the July 2010 graduation.

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To Magdalena and Adrienne

Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man. Even if one has a general knowledge of the way people walk, one knows nothing of a person’s posture during the fractional second of a stride. The act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is familiar routine, yet we hardly know what really goes on between hand and metal, not to mention how this fluctuates with our moods. Here the camera intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions. The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.

Walter Benjamin

“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

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The paradoxical nature of writing is that it only *feels* solitary. A project such as this one, spanning many years and many different shapes, necessarily bears the mark of countless unnamed, uncredited contributors over the years and without whose help it would likely never have come to fruition. With the full expectation that an inclusive roster of these people would itself be a dissertation, I will attempt to name a few of the people to whom I am grateful; inevitably there will be a few people who should be listed here and are not, and I humbly beg their forgiveness and understanding of the limitations of space and memory.

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ABSTRACT

A key term in the cultural criticism of Walter Benjamin is his notion of “reception in distraction” as an antidote to ideology’s domination over the mass society in the modern age. This dissertation attempts to illuminate this idea by offering case studies of three projects that summon into existence a new kind of reader, one capable of a trained apperception we may describe as “distracted.” One objective of the mass society according to a Frankfurt model of culture is the erasure of the subject; reception in distraction serves at once to create a space for the social dream and to re-inscribe the subject at the moment of reception through an insistence on its unruly, embodied presence. “Reception in Distraction” creates a cognitive space for disengagement from ideology, modeling what Michael Denning called the “dream work of the social.”

Critical theory is thus available to the mass public in the form of the “dream of history” that is solely available to a distracted apperception and whose subject is the faint possibility that the crisis of the present may be redeemed and repaired in the future. This project attempts to locate this dream of history in the autobiographical writings of Gertrude Stein, the detective fiction of Kenneth Fearing and the late silent cinema of Charlie Chaplin, each of which illustrates clearly the manner in which “distraction” functions to generate contradiction in the face of ideology’s mass cultural form. Stein’s experiments with the autobiographical form call for exactly this manner of reception, for which “Alice B. Toklas” becomes a key model. Similarly, Kenneth Fearing’s Marxist detective novel *The Big Clock* and *Modern Times*, Charlie Chaplin’s final silent film, reflect on the possibility of a productive reception-in-distraction that may co-opt the social forms of capitalism into a project of resistance and counter-discourse. “Distraction” is therefore more than merely an attitude of reception: it occasions a cognitive distance from ideology that is a key form of critical theory in the modern period.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Works by Walter Benjamin:

A.P.: *The Arcades Project*

O.H.: *On Hashish*

Works by Gertrude Stein:

A.A.B.T.: *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*

Blood: *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor*

G.H.A.: *The Geographical History of America*

H.T.W.: *How to Write*

L.I.A.: *Lectures in America*

Works by Kenneth Fearing:

A.O.P.: *Afternoon of a Pawnbroker*

D.R.: *Dead Reckoning*

T.B.C.: *The Big Clock*

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: DISTRACTION AND THE MODERN SUBJECT

Left cultural producers and theorists ... have often by reaction allowed themselves to be unduly intimidated by the repudiation, in bourgeois aesthetics and most notably in high modernism, of one of the age-old functions of art—the pedagogical and the didactic. The teaching function of art was, however, always stressed in classical times (even though it there mainly took the form of moral lessons), while the prodigious and still imperfectly understood work of Brecht reaffirms, in a new and formally innovative and original way, for the moment of modernism proper, a complex new conception of the relationship between culture and pedagogy.

--Fredric Jameson,
Postmodernism; Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism

1.1 Angels of Historicity: Reception in Distraction and the Re-emergence of the Subject from Domination

“The Angel of History” is what Walter Benjamin called Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*, in a description that is justly famous for the manner in which it sums up the experience of the subject under the conditions of modernity (Figure 1). The painting depicts an angel with wings outstretched, but Benjamin interprets the image as a metaphor for the subject’s reception of history and time:

[The Angel’s] face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (“Theses” 257)

Benjamin owned Klee’s painting at the time that he wrote these words, and for the purposes of a dissertation that concerns itself primarily with “distraction,” it is nice to imagine that at the moment he put pen to paper to make these observations, his own reception of the present was, in a sense, divided: that his gaze rested on Klee’s angel, while the audible sound of his ruminations supplied an ongoing “index of the real” that

kept him rooted in the empirical world, that prevented him from a total absorption in the artifice of Klee's assiduously two-dimensional work.

Indeed, it is perception—or more precisely, “reception”—that if it is not the *subject* of this dissertation, is at least the unspoken warrant that underlies the ultimately formal analysis that I will undertake. The angel is a perfect example: his is a reception that is conceived under duress, but also one that models the subject's re-emergence from domination in new and revolutionary form. In effect, what Benjamin's annotation describes is both a historical crisis and a rebirth that accepts the overwhelming force of ideology while occasioning the creation of what Fredric Jameson might have called a “cognitive map” that oversees the dream of a future in which the wrongs of history are finally redressed.¹

Nor was this the only moment in Benjamin's career when he was concerned with the dialectical, or counter-ideological possibilities of reception. A key term in Benjamin's cultural criticism that remains relatively under-theorized is his notion of a “reception in distraction” that functions as an antidote to ideology's domination over the mass society in the modern age.² Just what Benjamin meant by “reception in distraction” is a matter of some debate, but in part he may well have sought to explain the contours of his own method of reception, which not only oscillated between the competing intellectual influences that oversaw his lifelong critical project but also assumed various contradictory guises at different moments in his career.³ Benjamin's “angel” thus ascends the ladder from metaphor to allegory; he stands for nothing less than the subject's relation to history and time, and is therefore very much germane to Benjamin's later theories about the nature of resistance as emerging from the reception of art under modernity.⁴

This dissertation attempts to illuminate this critical idea in the Benjaminian lexicon by offering three case studies of formal projects that both model “distracted reception” and summon into existence a new kind of reader, one who by way of

“distraction,” reserves a cognitive space for the calculated disengagement from ideology, and perhaps in this way occasions what we may following the example of the angel call the “dream of history.” Reception in distraction thus serves at once to create a space for the social dream and to re-inscribe the subject at the moment of reception through an insistence on its unruly, embodied presence.⁵

In essence, this dissertation builds upon what Miriam Hansen describes as Benjamin’s interest in “the human sensorium, the epochal restructuring of subjectivity and collectivity, the crisis of the aesthetic, and the conditions of possibility for postauratic forms of experience and memory, intersubjectivity and agency” (“Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street” 306). What Hansen describes is in effect Benjamin’s central heterodoxy with the Frankfurt School vision of the mass society, in which mass culture works uniformly to colonize attention, structure experience and repackage subjectivity itself in its new commodity form. Benjamin’s work on the other hand implies the possibility of a counter-discursive impulse that resides in the trained attentive practices of the mass populace. This dissertation uses a combination of historical, theoretical and textual analysis to understand how certain formal projects in the American modern age not only actively cultivate an attitude of cultural inattention, but also model that attitude and register its potential as a site for the secret and furtive dream of futurity under industrial capitalism.

Although Benjamin did not use the term “mass culture,” the historical and theoretical context of his work renders that term a useful proxy for his model of the social under modernity. Daniel Bell famously reflected on the state of the mass society in the modern period that it reflected the fully theoretical presumption of “a radical dehumanization of life”:

...it is probably the most influential social theory in the Western world today. While no single individual has stamped his name on it—to the extent that Marx is associated with the transformation of personal relations under capitalism into commodity values, or Freud with the role of the irrational and

unconscious in behavior—the theory is central to the thinking of the principal aristocratic, Catholic or Existentialist critics of modern society. (21)

For Bell, the key problem of the mass society is in fact this very tension, between a denatured and dehumanized “mass society” and the “possibility, for some few persons, of achieving a sense of individual self in our mechanized society” (21). Bell’s field of critical discourse, by which he arrives at a full analysis of modernity, bears mentioning here: the subject, the mass medium and the machine of modernity. What Bell outlines is in effect the contested and fraught site of mass culture itself, which for our purposes we may describe as the convergence of marketplace, machine and subject upon the art-work under the regime of its own infinite reproducibility.

This narrative, of course, carried with it the *de facto* support of the state, not to mention the equally official imprimatur of accepted social and economic theory. For instance, conservative American economist W.W. Rostow’s “Take-off Model” held that the economic crises of the past were reaching their conclusion (and indeed, apotheosis) in an “age of high mass consumption” after the war. Rostow’s vision, composed in the 1960s as an encomium to late industrial capitalism, was in essence the fully realized dream of Fordism, in which the pursuit of consumer goods against a stable backdrop of prosperity and wealth became the unspoken subtext to a public’s full dedication of itself to the process of production.⁶ Indeed, the “Take-off model” must have sounded to the remaining Frankfurt thinkers like the final, nightmarish confirmation of their own theories of the mass society:

The emergence of the welfare state is one manifestation of a society’s moving beyond technical maturity; but it also at this stage that resources tend increasingly to be directed to the production of consumers’ durables and to the diffusion of services on a mass basis, if consumers’ sovereignty reigns. The sewing-machine, the bicycle, and then the various electric-powered household gadgets were gradually diffused. Historically, however, the decisive element has been the cheap mass automobile with its quite revolutionary effects—social as well as economic—on the life and expectations of society. (Rostow 11)

In another context, this analysis could almost have been composed by Theodor Adorno; Rostow seems to share with the Frankfurt School a belief that economic history had arrived at its apocalyptic final phase, and that this phase represented the final maturation of the form of capitalist domination. In the context of recent events, Rostow's notion of "high mass consumption" as the mature, sustainable shape of modern capitalism seems ever more risible; but it is in the context of this precise "crisis of history" that Benjamin began to theorize a role for the art work in situating and enabling the dream of the future, what Michael Denning would later call the "dream work of the social."

In *How to Live/ What to Do*, Adalaide Morris describes both H.D.'s poetry and the task of the art work more generally, as

... a cultural link, a relay, a connection, tie or bond among three interdependent realms: the printed page, recorded voice, and filmstrip of modernist aesthetic practice, the socioeconomic crises of the first half of the twentieth century, and the matrix of ideas through which thinkers in different fields have struggled to comprehend these crises. (1)

In a sense, the field of this project is the same; I will simply add that form is best understood through the lens of the reception that it trains. In that case, a key presumption of this project is that one "crisis of the present" in the age of modernity has to do with the role of the subject in reception, and that the art work of the first half of the twentieth century attempts to situate itself in relation to a reader with new and different technological and cultural competence, for which new forms of communication must be designed. Benjamin's theory that the modern subject might receive culture in a state of "distraction" brings his annotation of "Angelus Novus" into a powerful synthesis with the condition of modernity as described by Daniel Bell. Combined with his notes on the subject, this synthesis may allow a fully realized *theory* of "reception in distraction" to emerge, one which might supply the basis of a simultaneously formal and historical analysis of reception that tracks the presence of the "dream of history" in cultural productions across the spectrum of modernity.

It thus merits immediate attention that the passage from Benjamin above opens with a contrast between two types of *reception*: that of the angel of history and that of a nameless “we,” implicitly the subject-position of Benjamin and his reader as alert critics of history, conscious of both its past and future courses as a causally linked “chain.” However, this form of engaged, critical attention turns out not to be what the Angel’s situation in history calls for. Instead, the angel’s perspective on temporality is literally redacted and limited by an invisible force that not only “propels him into the future,” but forces him to turn his back upon the future into which he is helplessly rushing. As a result, the Angel views the past, not as a chain, but as a single catastrophe, the course of history collapsed telescopically into one cataclysm of destruction. Taken as historical metaphor this passage then becomes a thought experiment, the results of which are an affirmation of the gloomy suspicions of the Frankfurt school about the nature of modernity itself, let alone the function of the mass society in industrial capitalism. Benjamin suggests a model for an unthinkable totality of the social, a structure of dominance the face of which is the apocalyptic “storm of progress,” which literally pins the angel’s back to the flow of history and renders him helpless to imagine a future that emerges whole from the crisis of the present. In the context of this model, a left critique of society is left with just one important question: in the face of this crisis of the present, what is the role of the dialectic, or of what we may in more politicized terms call the “counter-discourse”?

As it happens, the passage creates a model for this too. The angel “dreams” of “making whole that which has been smashed,” and this stands as a tacit critical rejoinder that although it does not alter the course of time, nevertheless insists on the possibility of reparation, or put another way, the possibility of a future that is unlike the present. That future is the key to revolution, but it is worth insisting that the angel does not *speak* this rejoinder: he “dreams” it. This becomes a crucial point of formal analysis in a dissertation that tries to locate this “dream of reparations” in the reception of novel

cultural forms. This is what this dissertation will call the “dream of history”: not the psychologically revealing dream of Freud, but as with the angel of history a *socially* revealing and calculated vision of a future in which the crisis of the future is synthesized and redeemed.

For our purposes, the angel’s “dream” of reparation might as well be called “critical theory”: it is through his trained apperception that he is able to recover the fractured pieces of history into a single narrative, one to which a critical reasoning might usefully apply, even if it is intractable to change on that basis. For Benjamin, this is the essence of the subject’s engagement with the real under modernity: it consists of two eternally competing narratives, one in which the index of the real is materially summoned into existence by forces beyond our control, and another, existing in the realm of the dream, in which the course of history is analyzed and reparations are undertaken with the objective of occasioning radical new futurities unimaginable to the forces behind the “storm of progress.” The Angel of History is thus more than a mere chronicler of events: his peculiar reception, itself a product of the forces that oppress him, is the substrate of a meta-narrative that he (albeit helplessly) produces even as he submits to the dominance of forces beyond his control. In that sense, he might as easily be called the “Angel of Historicity.”

The angel thus reveals Benjamin’s “distraction” as more than merely an attitude of reception. In both a social and (more crucially for this project) a formal sense, “distraction” is the shape of critical theory in the modern period. The popular and avant-garde cultural spheres equally register the faint threads of a “dream of history” that is solely available to a distracted apperception, and whose subject is the vain hope that the crisis of the present may be redeemed and repaired in the future. This project attempts to locate this dream of history in the autobiographical writings of Gertrude Stein, the detective fiction of Kenneth Fearing and the late silent cinema of Charlie Chaplin, each

of which illustrates clearly the manner in which “distraction” functions to generate contradiction in the face of ideology’s mass cultural form.

1.2. Reception as Formal Praxis: Three Case Studies in Distraction

To take seriously Fredric Jameson’s dictum “always historicize!” is also to recognize that a left criticism of culture is confronted with a thorny and intractable problem of history.⁷ By the time Benjamin wrote his annotation of Klee’s watercolor, a left criticism had already begun to view the course of time in the same manner that his Angel does: that is to say, in cataclysmic terms, as a history that merely serves as the explanation for a nightmarish present that differed substantially from the predictions of Marxism. All of which is to say that left criticism, to the extent that it is involved in empirical predictions about material reality (and it must be, or else its “political” aspect becomes the emptiest of orthodoxies), must confront the failure of those predictions to come true, whether about the course of history under capitalism or about the stability of liberal democracy in the modern era.

A left critique of culture thus often generates *parallel* histories: the empirical, or observational history (read: the history of liberalism/capitalism), and the history of *futurity*, often ironically the history of *past* cultural production in which criticism attempts to locate the thread of a potent counter-discourse that speaks, shall we say *sotto voce*, to the non-inevitability of present material circumstance, even as it depends on the conditions of production that are generated through that material, empirical reality. In that sense, culture consists according to a left model of at least two voices raised in contrapuntal harmony: the louder voice of ideology and the softer voice of the weakened but still present human subject, objecting to its suppression, even if only in secret, and only within the circumscribed space of the vain dreams of futurity that mass culture generates as the silent subtext to history and modernity.

The overall project of this dissertation belongs, if a bit uncomfortably, in this tradition: it is to describe the manner in which a few novel media forms gave birth in the twentieth century to an equally novel receptive mode: a “trained apperception” that permitted culture to contain simultaneously the voice of the noisy and totalizing new “mass culture” and a persistent counter-discourse that takes the form of a meta-commentary on the material realities of the present. In that sense, we seek an answer to the problem of political reading in the age of a degraded, corporatist mass society, by attempting to show how both the culture industry and the historical avant-garde (with an eye to revising the traditional relationship between the two) work to exploit and train this new receptive form as an emergent property of the new media. Ultimately, the objective will be to point to this newly trained reception as the site of a counter-discourse in the age of mass culture. Put another way, we will aim to show that it is *reception* that generates and dictates culture’s counter-discursive form, even and especially in an age where the machinery of the culture industry becomes the noisy and totalizing mouthpiece of ideology in the modern age. This reception is “reception in distraction,” and the dialectical possibilities it unlocks are limitless, but only in the realm of the “dream of history” that lurks in the shadows and liminal spaces of the halls of capitalism. Three case studies will form the basis of this project, in showing ways in which in a formal sense, texts render themselves legible to this “distracted” reception, and even privilege that reading method as a possible site for a discourse that (in keeping with the project of a left critique) attempts to re-inscribe the autonomous subject into a discourse that ostensibly seeks to degrade and redact it.

It is worth noting that in Benjamin’s description of the Angel of History the latter’s analysis rests on a particular assumption about the nature of historicity: the present’s encroachment onto the field of history itself, as an explanation and account for the wreckage that it leaves in its wake. What this generates is a powerful and bewildering contradiction in which “progress” both ushers in a nightmarish future and

also signals the endpoint of history itself, now supplanted by an apocalyptic and ever present “Now,” what Benjamin later referred to as the *Jetztzeit*. Note that the angel’s perception of history *specifically contradicts* the conventional vision of time as a series of events that are causally linked, and he perceives in this way by virtue of a specialized relation to history that is formally trained by his conditions, and which we presume must also be trained in a critically conscious and politicized populace.

1.3 Understanding “The Art of the Present”: Benjamin’s

Notes on Distraction

Frederick J. Schwartz complains that Benjamin’s use of the term “distraction,” along with its presumable opposite “absorption” or “fascination” remains “stubbornly in the lower case—general, unexamined, unmentioned in the Benjamin glossaries, with their everyday meanings as an alibi for their mysteriously blurred contours” (401). This is indeed a perplexing oversight, since both in the “Work of Art” essay and elsewhere, “distraction” seems to situate reception’s revolutionary form, and its application to an otherwise degraded and powerless mass society that, like the Angel, is swept up in the “storm of progress.” However, Benjamin did begin work toward a theory of distraction,⁸ and the concept occurs with sufficient regularity in his early work that it is safe to surmise that he saw this new, trained apperception as offering a novel and critical mode of reading for the new annals of the mass society.⁹ Although Schwartz is right that the term merits no elucidation or even definition in Benjamin’s work, (though in truth, the same may be said for terms like *dream* or *boredom* in A.P.), its meaning may be glimpsed indirectly through its usages in Benjamin’s work. In that context, a brief note on translation may be helpful in arriving at a useful sense of Benjamin’s meaning here. The word “distraction” in Benjamin generally translates *Zerstreuung*, which has two meanings.¹⁰ The first is what Frederick Schwartz might call the “every day meaning” of “distraction”: a term characterizing a disengaged or partial reception or attention.

However, the second meaning is something more akin to “entertainment”; in that sense it is worth considering two possible meanings for the term: one referring to the quality of reception, that is a trained apperception that arrives as an emergent property of the mass medium, and another as a description of the formal character of the art-work. The art-work thus functions as a training-manual for a newly dialectical reception even as it simultaneously distributes and normalizes the content of ideology across all sectors of the mass society. Benjamin’s notes on the subject of distraction are quite revealing in this context:

Just as the art of the Greeks was geared toward lasting, so the art of the present is geared toward becoming worn out.

This may happen in two different ways: through consignment of the art work to fashion, or through the art work’s refunctioning in politics.

Reproducibility—distraction—politicization.

Educational value and consumer value converge, thus making possible a new kind of learning

Art comes into contact with the commodity; the commodity comes into contact with art. (Other Writings on Media 57)

When considered alongside Benjamin’s “Angel of History,” and his notion from the “Work of Art” essay that distracted reception could offer a new antidote to the left’s historical problem that arguably (and certainly according to the Frankfurt School model) arose from a problem of culture, this passage takes on special significance. His notion here of the “wearing out” of art recalls the notion of “aura” from the “Work of Art” essay, and in that sense distraction’s role in a political counter-discourse is abundantly clear: to produce, if not a politicized cultural production, a meta-narrative of culture that is literally simulcast along with the contents of ideology or what we may term the daily, material reality of the consumer.¹¹ Perhaps for that reason, distraction is an effect that is fundamentally rooted in the body; Benjamin’s notes are clear on this aspect of his theory at least: he writes that “distraction, like catharsis, should be conceived as a physiological phenomenon” (Other Writings on Media 56). Catharsis is similarly a concept theorizing both reception and form, positing a receptive mode that is ultimately an emergent

property of the theater, with social effects that may be observed in real time, if not measured. Moreover, distraction and “destruction” (the annihilation or “wearing out” of the art work) function as opposite aspects of a coin, or “as the subjective and objective sides, respectively, of one and the same process” (Other Writings on Media 56). I want to pay particular attention to the terms “subjective and objective” here, because in my view they clarify beyond any doubt the true stakes of “distraction” in Benjamin as a source of cultural rejoinder that could not more literally be described as “critical.”

The formula here is clear: distraction and entertainment, as forces behind the “wearing out” of the art work are also the productive forces behind the generation of a new art work with didactic value, and thus oversee the *re-emergence of the receptive subject from domination*. In that sense, distraction is the locus of mass culture’s counter-discursive form, and as “art comes into contact with the commodity,” the didactic and exchange values “converge, thus making possible a new kind of learning” (Other Writings on Media 57). This is certainly a departure from what might be termed a Frankfurt School orthodoxy, and for Benjamin an inconvenient shibboleth that he may well have let fall by the wayside to accommodate his slightly more ambivalent take on mass culture in the final draft of the “Work of Art” essay.¹²

A catalogue of Benjamin’s apostasies from Frankfurt-School notions of the mass public would take too long to recount here; but it is clear that he shared with Adorno at least one central idea about the nature of the mass society under modernity: the notion that reception is the product of form.¹³ For an investigator of culture as a politically contested site, at which we must by definition find both discourse and counter-discourse,¹⁴ this raises a question that is aesthetic and formal rather than sociological and cultural. For Benjamin, the novel receptive modes of modernity were trained by culture, which took the form of the *ubungsinstrument*, a didactic “training instrument” that endowed the mass public with new reading competencies that could bring about a new material criticism even as the same process results in the erasure of an older, outmoded

“cultural competence.” In other words, the capacity to view time in properly Hegelian terms is no longer a critical tool that can be used by the “Angel of History”; he cannot perceive causal relations, or even perceive time as the outcome of the past. The angel only perceives the past as the trace left by the apocalyptic present. Crucially, he is also unable to perceive the future in teleological terms, much less the quasi-empirical terms proposed by orthodox Marxism, and is forced instead to allow “futura” to remain invisible, locked into the realm of the terrifying, liminal dream of a future that is merely and completely the “not-now,” the future in which the trace of the past is erased and the present is transformed. He literally has his back to the empirical and turns his attention instead toward the dream of the past at the moment of the apocalyptic present.

In that case, a question of form begins to emerge quite clearly: what are the media forms that can train this reception, that simultaneously render the public’s vision of history in these oneiric terms, and also give birth to a newly critical vision of time, one that both accounts for the stability of capitalism in the mass culture era and gives voice to the mass public’s insistent if vain rejoinder? Put another way: what does the *ubungsinstrument* look like? To answer that question, this dissertation will take on three case studies of form, beginning with the prose and explanatory work of Gertrude Stein, continuing through the Marxist pot-boilers of leftist poet and pulp novelist Kenneth Fearing, who seemed to inhabit and understand both the world of ideology and the world of its inevitable rejoinder. Finally, the project will conclude with an analysis of “distraction” in Charlie Chaplin’s final silent film *Modern Times*, whose very title at once signals its unique place in history and the trenchant nostalgia that the film undertakes beneath the veneer of comedy.

Chapter 2: Easy Listening: Distraction and History in Gertrude Stein

Chapter 2 argues that Stein’s *Autobiography* summons into the public discourse a new kind of reader, one that is well suited to discovering within mass-produced culture a

kind of space for imaginative dream-work, the oneiric negativity of Benjamin's *flaneur*. Whereas much of Stein criticism follows Ulla Dydo in understanding her work of the thirties to either be a departure from her earlier compositional methods to a more audience-centered commercial form of writing, this chapter will argue that in a sense, the *Autobiography* functions as a manifesto of "reception in a state of distraction," articulating the possibility of a receptive space that is useful to the consumer of mass culture, but which turns out to originate in the experimental compositional practice of Stein's earlier work. In this sense, we may see the *Autobiography* as an evolution and refinement of Stein's earlier experiments, and entirely continuous with her return to a more avant-garde practice in *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor* and *Stanzas in Meditation*. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is useful not because of its counter-ideological *content*, but because the modes of artistic reception that it describes are useful in discovering a common negativity and cultural critique in the modes of reception and apperception that modernity requires. In this way, both avant-garde cultural practice and mass cultural receptive practices, even though in a formal sense they are nothing alike, are here articulated as authorizing the creation of negative space through the process of misprision and misapperception. This misprision turns out to take the form of a failure to perceive a "totality" of culture, and instead a perception of the fragment as a metaphor for the whole. When Marie Laurencin uses her *lorgnette* to observe the art work as an unconnected sequence of parts, Stein seems to argue that this way of perceiving culture, rather than resulting in a nonsensically fragmented culture, foments a practice of metonymic cultural apperception, a substitution of dissociated fragment from contextualized content according to more genteel practices of reception. The fragment's being divorced from its context is in a way the final articulation of the *phantasmagoria*, in which the consumer product bears no conceptual relation to the market forces that have produced it. However, what this also allows is a repackaging of culture into a totalized and *functional* metonymy in which fragments can be recruited into the service of

ideology even as its negation is simultaneously re-inscribed by their form, even if only in secret and only in the temporary and limited space of the social dream.

Chapter 3: “Other Forms of Crisis”: Kenneth Fearing’s Hard-Boiled Counter-discourse”

This chapter argues that Fearing’s chief innovation was to cultivate a novel practice of reception in both his poetry and his fiction that permitted the presence of a rejoinder to the dominant discourse to coexist with the ideological message. Although there has been a recent renaissance in Fearing criticism, much of it has emphasized his poetry at the expense of his novels; this chapter attempts to locate a symmetry between his poetry’s appropriation of a mass culture idiom and his popular fiction’s unique capability of registering the dialectic in a form available to a distracted apperception. The eponymous “Big Clock” is Fearing’s metaphor for the system of total domination that is arguably the objective of mass media, but for him what it engenders is a hegemonic and perpetual struggle in which even “escape” has been resolved into the totality of the system. This is in effect the condition of modernity that Marcuse would later call the “repressive ideology of freedom,” in which subjective freedom is recruited into the service of the domination of the state (40). The true struggle of the novel then, taking place in the background of its more or less conventional *noir* plot, is the attempt to re-inscribe subjectivity in the face of a system that seeks and for the most part achieves total domination of everything, including “freedom.” What Fearing implicitly argues for is a novel task for the modern art work, whether that art work is a poem or a pot-boiler: the conditioning of a new cognitive and emotional register for attentive reading, a reception of ideology in a state of distraction. What this brings about is not merely non-productivity, or escape from domination, but a productive disengagement from ideology in general, and a re-deployment of the tools of mass society toward counterproductive and counter-ideological ends.

Chapter 4: The “Mask of Noninvolvement”; Charlie Chaplin and the Dream of Technology

Chapter 4 concludes the case studies with an analysis of *Modern Times*, which is not only Chaplin’s final silent film, but in a very real sense the final film of the silent era, having been released some seven years later than *The Jazz Singer*. The bewildered reaction of Chaplin’s public had everything to do with the fraught relation between technological form and history, but the obsolescence of silent film as a form gives Chaplin the opportunity to use the medium to critique not only talking cinema but the ideology of modernity more generally, and in particular the tacit “narrative of progress” that it presumes. Chaplin’s “tramp,” an internationally familiar figure, is himself transformed by his new historical context; where his costume and makeup had earlier signaled his character (and, following Brecht, his *gesture*) as that of a clown, and his backdrop as “farce,” his impassive face now becomes the “mask of noninvolvement” which conceals the dream of reparation and rejoinder in the face of mortification and humiliation at the hands of industry. In this way, farce tips over into the satire that it was already on the brink of becoming, and the previously lighthearted “clown” learns to stand in for the human subject under modernity, whose (admittedly pyrrhic) victory involves the refusal to participate in the bargain of Fordism in which work is exchanged for comfort.

Chapter 5: Weather Reports in the Nuclear age: Gertrude Stein’s Apocalyptic Poetry.

Finally, the last chapter will conclude with two key examples of distraction as applied to the challenges of the ideological present, both from Stein, but both having wider consequences in terms of a prescription for social action. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this chapter will describe the central crisis of the 1940s and 1950s as arising from the latest and most abject form of the technologization and aestheticization of war. It was

Herbert Marcuse who claimed that the threat of nuclear annihilation serves “to protect the very forces which perpetuate this danger?” (xli) If this is so, then the atomic bomb becomes the ultimate technology of domination in the modern age, and it is not surprising to find it referenced as the representative not merely of apocalypse itself, but also of the *apocalyptic present* or *Jetztzeit* in the annals of both the avant-garde and in mass culture.¹⁵ This is consistent with Marcuse’s model of technology more generally; but this dissertation will ultimately be more interested in the antidote to domination that is offered through distraction as a form of resistance, a signal that, like Benjamin’s angel, the mass public are swept into the apocalyptic present with the voice of resistance almost literally on the tip of its tongue, awaiting its full-throated articulation in the future. In that sense, Gertrude Stein’s reflections on the atomic bomb, which conclude among other things that a technology with the power to annihilate everything is simply “not interesting” serves as a potent rejoinder to Harry S. Truman’s chilling (in hindsight) address on the subject of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

1.4 Notes on Distraction: Recovering the Identity of the Disparate

In his writing on Bertolt Brecht in “What is Epic Theater?” Benjamin describes the “relaxed aspect” of reception that then becomes the staging ground for what he calls “interruption.” This audience, which Benjamin seems to imagine as virtually summoned into existence by the form of epic theater, is “relaxed and follows the action without strain” (“Epic Theater” 147). What this mode of reception allows for is interesting—not a disengagement from the art work exactly, but instead a more distanced apperception that is open to the unforeseen unity of the disparate, the observation of the system in its separate and unlinked constituents. There is a hint of Adornian elitism in Benjamin’s understanding of mass reception; his reference to the masses’ “limited practice of thinking” comes to mind. However, it is the mass culture audience that can bring the

correctly trained apperception to bear on Brecht, a stagecraft that “calls for detachment” in its generation of the image of social crisis itself. This detachment is for Benjamin what allows the nexus of audience and action to become the site of “interruption,” a key dramatic feature in the Brechtian theater if not in theater itself more generally.

According to this logic interruption depends on a concentration that can abstract the gesture from its context, and thus to make new dialectics visible through the fissures that arise from this process of disruption. That this theory seems of a piece with Brecht’s own notion of a “shock effect” is unsurprising; however, here the linkage between “shock” and “distraction” becomes clear, since interruption is not only a formal characteristic of the art work, but also the literal effect of the audience’s detachment, their refusal to be absorbed before the eternal quality of art according to the customary model. Instead, in the Epic theater

the songs, the captions, the lifeless conventions set off one situation from another. This brings about intervals which, if anything, impair the illusion of the audience and paralyze its readiness for empathy. *These intervals are reserved for the spectators’ critical reaction.* (“Epic Theater” 153, emphasis added)

It is crucial here to emphasize that in Benjamin interruption is not a cognitive critical engagement, but an emergent property of modernity itself, of the saturation of media with the ideological message, its total penetration to the core of social experience itself. It is thus not the subject speaking in its own voice, but the subject’s own critical dreams instantiated through the substrate of culture; like the architectural halls of capitalism they are “only faint atavistic terrors which still lurk within the blackened sheds” of experience (Benjamin A.P. 406).

Benjamin further notes that “interruption is one of the fundamental devices of all structuring. It goes far beyond the sphere of art. To give only one example, it is the basis of quotation” (“Epic Theater” 151). The observation that “to quote a text involves the interruption of its context,” is for Benjamin a way of explaining how the “epic theater” is itself quotable, that is, pre-abstracted from its context and always already applicable to

unforeseen situations, both present and future” (“Epic Theater” 151). But this notion of quotation as interruption only achieves its fullest significance when considered in light of Benjamin’s meditation on the status of the work of art under the conditions of its infinite reproducibility. In a sense, the effect of mass production is to produce quotation without an original, to produce a text that is both a quotation of itself and of future instantiations of itself, pre-fabricated with interruption but now utterly without reference to an abstract and unitary whole. Interruption is the formal character of mass culture itself, and just as the gesture in Brecht both continues his form and interrupts its narrative, each reproduction in the age of mass media both replicates culture and situates a kind of social rupture at the intersection between text and reader. Quotation, not surprisingly, is also the form of historicity itself:

A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, *only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments*. (Benjamin “Theses” 254, emphasis added)

This notion of the past returning in its ghostly, sublimated form to haunt the present is more or less a motif in Benjamin—and in every case this counter-discourse manifests itself with “retroactive force” that “will constantly call into question every victory, past and present, of the rulers” (“Theses” 255). For Ackbar Abbas, the collusion of past and present, what Benjamin will later call a “dialectics at a standstill” is manifested through an “apocalyptic Now, where fragments of past and future collide to disrupt the continuum of history” (“Dialectic of Deception” 348).

In the broadest terms, we may refer to the notion of interruption as the confluence of the technological present with the mythic dream of the past. Esther Leslie places the work of Benjamin into exactly this context:

from the late 1920s onwards, Benjamin devoted his energy to demonstrating how mythic drives continue to dally in modernity, even in those precincts where instrumental rationality is

alleged to reign. Kitsch and clutter is where these dreams and unconscious impulses of a “dreaming collective” are to be found.
(72)

Benjamin’s criticism was itself in a manner of speaking “distracted” in precisely this sense, ignoring the master narratives of culture in favor of “kitsch and clutter.” This, and not some more fully theoretical linkage between the popular and the modernist, is the reason for this dissertation’s focus on the non-serious, both as a form and a mode of reception. After all, the historical avant-garde’s interest in the popular was identified as early as Marshall McLuhan as political rather than aesthetic:

Picasso has long been a fan of American comics. The highbrow, from Joyce to Picasso, has long been devoted to American popular art because he finds in it an authentic imaginative reaction to official action. Genteel art, on the other hand, tends merely to evade and disapprove of the blatant modes of action in a powerful high definition, or “square,” society. (228)

McLuhan might have added Gertrude Stein to the list, but it is important to point to the similarity between the popular’s relation to the highbrow and the past’s relation to history in Benjamin’s crisis of the present.¹⁶ This is in a sense the shape of the dialectic in Benjamin’s model: not as a master discourse that is interrupted by a conscious counter-discourse, but the future and past, or the technological and mythical, colliding in the theater of the present. The presence of an array of non-serious discourses (pot-boilers, romance, autobiography, comedy, silent film) speaks to the importance in modernity of an equally non-serious reception that emerges from that form as the subject’s unruly and embodied “interruption” of the ideological message.

In “Reading, Writing and the Rackets,” the polemic essay that doubled as the introduction to his 1956 *Poems*, Kenneth Fearing claimed that “there are other forms of crisis on everyone’s private, crowded calendar, apart from the central tragedy; other moods, other people, or the same people in different circumstances”(New and Selected *Poems* xxiii) These “other forms of crisis” are by definition locked into the realm of the non-serious—themselves merely interruptions of a larger master narrative which Marxism has historically had a difficult time reconciling with this more limited,

subjective phase of the ideological message. It was perhaps Adorno who first understood the need for a theory of the viewing subject here, noting in 1954 that “it seems timely to investigate systematically socio-psychological stimuli typical of televised material both on a descriptive and psychodynamic level” (158).¹⁷ Adorno’s conclusions in this investigation perhaps fall victim to an overabundance of belief in the superior status of the art work,¹⁸ and wind up describing a mass reception that is submissive to dominance: one of “fascination” rather than of “distraction.”¹⁹

However, Adorno correctly diagnoses the investigation that must take place as one which will posit receptive modes as emergent properties of their media forms, and in that sense his work is of a piece with this dissertation’s emphasis on distraction as having receptive and formal aspects that co-exist in mutual identity with one another. This is distraction’s true face, the final realization of Benjamin’s theory of reception in the face of art coming into contact with the commodity—not attention to something else, but the conditioned reception of the sensory excesses of modernity, and out of this the revolutionary creation of the *Jetztzeit*. This is the epochal moment of the present; a *crisis of the now*, out of which must emerge both domination and a counter-ideology in the form of “courage, humor, cunning and fortitude” (“Theses” 255). In that sense domination and recovery are merely opposite faces of the coin of modernity, just as the popular and the poetic, exchange value and the commodity, the fascinated subject and the distracted public are now placed into new and urgent relation with one another. Distraction discovers the identity of the disparate, the similarity across the categories of cultural taxonomy through which domination is communicated. Thus through the application of a logic of sameness that is nowhere explained better than in Benjamin a new image of the dialectics of interruption emerges:

The category of similarity, which for the waking consciousness has only minimal relevance, attains unlimited relevance in the world of hashish. There, we may say, everything is face: each thing has the degree of bodily presence that allows it to be searched—as one searches a face—for such traits as appear.

Under these conditions even a sentence (to say nothing of the single word) puts on a face, and this face resembles that of the sentence standing opposed to it. In this way every truth points manifestly to its opposite, and this state of affairs explains the existence of doubt. Truth becomes something living; it lives solely in the rhythm by which statement and counterstatement displace each other in order to think of each other. (A.P. 418)

Benjamin might well be describing Adorno's implicit divide between the degraded mass product and the transcendent Art work that may for a few re-inscribe the dialectic into a de-historicized, flattened culture. He goes on to say that "in this crowd the inferior is disguised as the superior, and the superior as the inferior" (A.P. 418). Nevertheless, what emerges here from the experience of intoxication, indeed from a distracted rhythm of reception brought on by hashish, is the capacity to generate newly meaningful resemblances between those objects that taxonomy itself has declared to be opposites. Opposing relations become merely interruptions, continually displacing one another and producing that same apocalyptic relation that emerges from the violent collision of past and present and their integration into what Jameson might call a cognitive map of temporality.²⁰

Distraction, in that case, is a product of the crisis of history that arises at the nexus between the unseen future, and the trace that time leaves on the landscape of the past—the "wreckage of history" that accumulates at the Angel's feet, and through which he must reconstruct historicity itself. It is that attention which is divided between the idea-universe and the world of materiality, and this is nowhere clearer than in the age of mass culture, in which the field of human attention becomes the final proving ground for a capitalism that seeks to monetize the sensorium. Indeed, the final apotheosis of a teleological Fordism must be that capitalism's final product at the end of history is *human experience itself*, and thus the final battleground of ideology takes place at the boundary between the mass product and the mass subject, with the former attempting to erase the latter, while the subject insists upon its own priority by reserving within itself the space for a dream of futurity, a non-monetizable space within the human subject. In this way

Mass culture becomes by definition a dialectical field, one in which the colonization of attention by corporate interests is accompanied as a condition of its production by a culture that insists upon producing a counter-discourse in which the regimes of the present are partial, limited and fragile rather than totalizing, final and complete. For the present project, this is perhaps the central warrant, the key presumption that underlies both capitalism and mass culture as ideology and ideological product respectively: that mass culture is the realization of the fantasy of late capitalism, the creation of a consumer society that penetrates to every aspect of culture and thus always prefabricates and structures experience itself according to consumerist models of its own devising—but that in doing so it trains a novel reception that preserves the place and priority of the subject, and reserves a field for counter-discourse that yields to a critical analysis that is produced, I argue, according to Benjamin’s admittedly hazy model of a reception in distraction.²¹

The stakes of distraction are thus clear in the context of attention’s cultural meaning as the colonizable cognitive space of the subject. Distraction is the vessel by which the ideological form of mass culture may be transformed into its counter-discursive opposite—a reception that may account for and catalogue the logic of futurity as the sublimated and repressed message of the present. The historical moment of modernity, then, which produces simultaneously a Taylorized and efficient culture industry in a form that can now be truly described as the “mass culture aspect” of industrial capitalism, and a modernism which reacts to this development with a fully theoretical if ambivalent hostility, calls upon its public to practice the apperception of Jameson’s “postmodern viewer,” in order to register and re-inscribe the apocalyptic narratives of modernity and mass culture themselves in newly counter-discursive form.

1.5 “Keeping a Finger” on the Index of the Real

The notion that novel media forms train reception has an intuitive power, and has led to a not-inconsiderable amount of needless hand-wringing in every generation, beginning with Adorno’s idea that popular music would gradually degrade and retard the process of active and critical listening, but certainly extending into the ages of television and through the information age. However, it may be the case that the clearest example of a novel reception comes from a medium that isn’t new at all, but one where a theory of reception seems particularly urgent since it is one in which the audience and the performance are placed in urgent and tense apposition, one which produces of necessity both absorption in artifice and attention to index. Reception in this medium was succinctly theorized by Gertrude Stein in “Plays”: “When one reads a play . . . it was always necessary to keep one’s finger in the list of characters for at least the whole first act, and in a way it is necessary to do the same when the play is played. One has one’s programme for that” (Stein "L.I.A." 254). Stein has understood a key aspect of performative reception, which is that it involves attention to dual, co-existing planes of reality.

The first is the realm of the performance, and in that context it is worth noting that a performance by definition consists of an agreed-upon pretense, in which the performer pretends already to be somewhere else, and the audience pretends that the performance has transported them there. However, the reference to a program functions in effect as a reminder of the physical presence of the body in the theater. The “finger” that Stein keeps on the program might as well be the constant reminder of the limits of artifice—she is in a sense not merely keeping a finger on the *dramatis personae*, but also upon the “index of the real,” which is the site at which the embodied subject re-asserts its presence in the theater even as the performers and audience simultaneously pretend that the audience is absent, under erasure. Although plays are an ancient medium, they offer here a critical model for the mass society; mass culture, like conventional drama, presumes the

simultaneous existence and absence of its own audience. This dissertation's project will be to find the ways in which that audience, placed by mass culture in a hazy state of simultaneous colonization and erasure, places its finger on the "index of the real," as if to say "I am still here." Chaplin's tramp, whose gut announces its indiscreet presence with the loud, embarrassing burble of gastric distress, speaks in the language of embodiment in that precise sense: "my body cannot be erased." Chaplin's distraction thus takes the form of an insult to gentility: I am aware of your ideological message, it says: it has been broadcast loudly to every corner of this suddenly tiny modern world. However, I cannot hear its content over the sound of my own body.

For Stein, it is theater that offers the possibility of a trenchant commentary on the present:

I may say that as a matter of fact the thing which has induced a person like myself to constantly think about the theatre from the standpoint of sight and sound and its relation to emotion and time, rather than in relation to story and action is the same as you may say general form of conception as the inevitable experiments made by the cinema although the method of doing so has naturally nothing to do with the other. (Stein "L.I.A." 251)

For our purposes, it is worthwhile to point to the specific formal qualities of the theatre that grant it the capability of reflecting on "emotion and time." In plays, time is transformed into *episodic time*; that is, it is compressed or stretched according to the demands of narrative, and granted a status that is superior to the experiential time of the viewer. The "relation to emotion and time" refers to the viewer's subordination of experiential time to the time of the composition, something that cannot be duplicated in a written text—time thus becomes a function of narrative rather than a function of attention to one's whereabouts in the realm of the real. Stein goes on to say, referring to her "Composition as Explanation" that the function of the art work, far from articulating a teleological or apocalyptic social sense of time, is "to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present" ("L.I.A." 251). It is perhaps for this reason that Stein explains that "for me there

was the reading of plays which was one thing and then there was the seeing of plays and of operas a great many of them which was another thing" ("L.I.A." 256). Tellingly, this passage recalls Stein's explanation from A.A.B.T. of her failure to complete her degree: "Gertrude Stein had been going to the opera every night and going also to the opera in the afternoon and had been otherwise engrossed and it was the period of the final examinations" (A.A.B.T. 79). It can be no accident that this explanation of Stein's distraction—her "frank boredom" with medical school and psychiatry, follows directly on the heels of her observation that "America having begun the creation of the twentieth century in the sixties of the nineteenth-century is now the oldest country in the world" (A.A.B.T. 78). For Stein, the time of the performance has supplanted experiential time, and her preference, naturally, is to inhabit fully the dreamlike state of operatic time and to forget altogether about the "period of final examinations" and other requirements of a daily life.

The typescript for a lecture given by Stein at Cambridge in 1936, bearing the title "An American and France" is illuminating here: after describing the particular (and ahistorical) way in which living in France allows Americans to create art, she muses on the twentieth century's drastic effect on the national literature:

there is another matter that must be settled before we can find out what is the second civilization needed by any one who is to be a creator. And that is the size of the world. That is going to be a very serious matter. The size of the world that is the world getting inevitably (getting) smaller and smaller and less different is going to be a very serious matter.²²

The shrinkage here seems to be precisely that which McLuhan noted in his prediction that the mass society would bring about a "global village." However, Stein also notes that the world is getting both "smaller" and "*less different*," a reference simultaneously to the consumer and cultural effects of mass production. The question of difference is a crucial one, because it is the "clash of civilizations" within a creator's mind that becomes the locus of creativity, which is itself a species of distraction. "Difference" here refers to the

creator's ability, in other words, to attend simultaneously to two separate loci of culture.²³ In Stein's words, "that is what romance is and is not what history is,"²⁴ a crucial distinction that in essence proposes a way of distracting the linguistic faculties of the mind, an artistic experiment not unlike those she conducted in "Normal Motor Automatism" and "Cultivated Motor Automatism," the experimental studies she published while working with William James.

Distraction thus becomes more than a creative tool for Stein. In this lecture we see the resolution of a problem that she begins to tackle in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*: how to counter the shrinking sameness of modernity through a manipulation of consumer attention. It is distraction that creates the interstitial space where dream-work may occur; it is the one cognitive space that is not available to be purchased and re-packaged as a cultural experience commanded to take a certain shape by the magisterial voices of official culture.

All of which is not to pin on Stein a utopian, or Marxist agenda: the Republican Stein, who supported Dewey over Truman, and disliked Roosevelt, is unlikely to have been sympathetic to a desire for widespread social reorganization. But "dreaming" is not only the engine of utopia: it is also the shifting locus where the art work can take on the new forms of modernity, and can retain its own status as "romance" rather than history. It can, in other words, be creative rather than rational, oneiric rather than wakeful, and deal in multiplicities and jumbles rather than fixities and *a priori* truths. In this sense, we may view *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* as an *ubungsinstrument*, or training device, in the full Benjaminian sense. Its function is to train an apperception that may instantly grasp contradiction and resolve it through a dialectical but functional metonymy, by relegating the ideological message to the margin while presenting the non-central as the newly metonymic stand-in for the counter-ideological whole.

Stein's example of the play and the programme takes on its newly instructive force in this context: after all, it is culture's "programme" that offers a glimpse of the

master narratives of modernity itself: the narratives of a more sophisticated, more Taylorized mass culture, penetrating to the heart of consumer society. The story of modernity is thus also the story of a modernist aesthetic that attempts to negotiate a relation between high and low cultural loci, and of a consumer given the task of observing one while keeping their finger on the other: of participating in a totalizing mass culture while always recalling, as if in a dream, the existence of a hypothetical exteriority, a future in which the power of the masses, like popular culture's dark and frightening repressed, may return to enact a potent and demotic eschatology.

Ideology's power of domination is driven by the engine of attention, but it is distraction that permits the dreaming amble of the flaneur, the counter-productive intoxication of the gambler, not to mention the restorative reversal of the commodity fetish of the collector. Each attends to the ideological message, but, as it were, with their back turned, like Alice B. Toklas who brings her domestic pursuits into the cultural center and allows them to stand in for the rigid and politicized ideological message. It is marginalization in reverse, the transubstantiation of master narrative into marginal echolalia and vice versa. The programme becomes the play; the play in turn becomes the supplement to the printed verse that indexes its action. It ought therefore to come as no surprise that this project, while looking at modernism through a broader lens, will attempt to "keep its finger" on Stein, remembering not only her admonitions about writing and composition, but also the audience that her writing hailed, an audience that Stein, herself the *ubungsinstrument* par excellence, helped to create. However (and more critically) this dissertation will follow as closely as it can the reading practice that it describes; it will, in that sense, attempt to divide its own attention between artifice ("the product") and what we may, following Pierre Bourdieu, call the "index of the real,"²⁵ sometimes approached head-on, but more often glimpsed in the haze of an apperception that is absorbed into the crisis of modernity at the same moment that it generates its own meta-narrative of history. Put another way: in this project we will uncover the angels of

historicity, the subjects that refuse to be swept up in the storm of progress without leaving behind the slight trace of their silent, potent protest, the insistent rejoinder of what we may call the dream of futurity.



Figure 1. "Angelus Novus," Paul Klee, 1920. Painting,

CHAPTER 2. EASY LISTENING: DISTRACTION AND HISTORY IN GERTRUDE STEIN

The relation of procedures to the fields of force in which they act must therefore lead to a *polemological* analysis of culture. Like law (one of its models), culture articulates conflicts and alternately legitimizes, displaces, or controls the superior force. It develops in an atmosphere of tensions, and often of violence, for which it provides symbolic balances, contracts of compatibility and compromises, all more or less temporary.

--Michel de Certeau,
The Practice of Everyday Life

2.1 Stein and the Popular Historical: The Historicity of the Nonserious

Although it is conventional to read *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* as a formal experiment with identity, part of its subject is quite clearly reception. When “Alice” narrates her first meeting with Marie Laurencin, she meets the artist not in the process of painting, but of receiving the art work, in a manner that is both peculiar and telling given the book’s interest in the problem of attention’s relation to the art work:

She looked at each picture carefully that is, every picture on the line, bringing her eye close and moving over the whole of it with her lorgnette, an inch at a time. The pictures out of reach she ignored. Finally she remarked, as for myself, I prefer portraits and that is quite natural, as I myself am a Clouet. (A.A.B.T. 61)

This reception is at least in part the effect of being “terribly near-sighted.” However, Laurencin’s reception also confirms the metonymic logic of analytical cubism; the paintings are exploded by her reception into syntactically arranged one-inch sections that pass away from perception the moment that she moves her *lorgnette* over to the next section. Laurencin literally must move toward the art-work in order to receive it, and pore carefully over each element of its composition in turn while ignoring the exterior world of the real, which without her *lorgnette* she could not have seen anyway. Unsurprisingly, the art work’s status is elevated in the process until it becomes a substitute for reality itself, until Laurencin’s love of portraits transforms her into a portrait herself, in the style

of Clouet. The art-work thus encodes and packages reality itself, and this example clarifies what is at stake in the cultural practice of “reception in distraction” which will be modeled by “Alice B. Toklas” as an antidote.

Although Walter Benjamin imagined “distraction” as a reading strategy informed by the crisis of the present and trained by technology, we may in the case of Gertrude Stein trace the beginnings of a notion of distraction as it applies to the process of composition. In Gertrude Stein’s autobiographical writing, distraction is more than the emergent property of the technological as it applies to reception; as she outlines in the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and her later “explanatory” work, distraction in Stein takes the form of a *praxis*, a receptive choice that allows for the re-inscription of the subject, and of the embodied “index of the real” into a world of modern artifice that attempts to erase both.

For Stein, attention to divergent planes of meaning is more than an accident of form: it is a foundational condition of her aesthetics. It is often supposed that Stein’s career has two phases: an avant-garde phase and a popular phase that builds on her notoriety after the *Autobiography* was published in order to explain the aesthetic mission that underpins her earlier, more experimental work.²⁶ This is a fundamental premise of much Stein criticism, and it is one that this chapter will in effect reject, proposing instead that what unites Stein’s work from *Tender Buttons* through *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor* is that it summons into existence a novel species of reception, one that we may, following Benjamin, term a productive distraction that generates understanding, or in terms more suitable to a Benjaminian analysis, a distracted reception that allows for the generation of a secret metanarrative of history that supplies a running commentary on the crisis of the present.

Any political analysis of Stein’s work must confront the reality that Stein was not especially political, and it might be fair to say that the explicitly revolutionary ideals of the Frankfurt School would have been unlikely to find a sympathetic ear in Stein’s

atelier. However, Stein was profoundly interested in grammar, and it is here that an analysis of Stein's politics must begin, and eventually, end. After all, grammar in Stein is more than linguistic: it is the elemental analysis of the epistemic shape of culture. When Stein writes of "an arrangement in a system to pointing," what she refers to is the arrangement of epistemology as a grammar, its schematization within a paradigmatic order that submits to the indexical function of language (T.B. 1). In that sense, we may say that politics has a grammar, and that part of what interested Stein, particularly in the years after A.A.B.T., was the *grammar of the political*, available to a reception that could receive culture as simultaneously an index to their empirical reality and as a more or less stable set of relational syntactic structures that transcend the specificity of content.

In *How to Write*, Stein offers us this helpful advice: "Forget grammar and think about potatoes" (H.T.W. 109). In a sense, this instruction is the essence of "reception in distraction": to turn away from the systemic, relational shape of culture and attend instead to the material form of reality as experienced by the body. The implied equivalence between tubers and syntax is dizzying, but in the context of this dissertation its internal logic could not be more sound. For Stein, it is in fact "thinking about potatoes" that generates the profoundest understanding of the grammatical "system of pointing" that potatoes are a part of. In Stein's formulation the abstraction of grammar is metonymically linked to the material index to which it refers, a hierarchical "flattening" in keeping with the aesthetics of Stein's cubist contemporaries. Stein goes on to say that

grammar after all has to do with why they were presented.
I see they observe they will feel well.
Now this can be considered as a sentence or as synonyms. (H.T.W.
109)

"Sentences" and "synonyms" might as easily stand for two divergent analytical approaches to the process of grammar, or indeed the process of culture in a broader sense. One (the sentence) implies meaning ordered into a system of hierarchy, or something we might following the formalist tradition call metaphor (since sentences depend upon

functional parts of speech that are hierarchically ordered) versus an infinite, paratactic intelligibility among different parts of speech.²⁷ The other implies a system of understanding disparate elements “as synonyms,” in which case there is no *paradigmatic* difference between “grammar” and potatoes” other than that grammar refers to potatoes and that thinking of potatoes grant a profoundly material understanding of grammar that mere abstraction cannot. Abstraction thus exists in the service of matter, and both provide *metonymic indices* to one another that are exclusively available to a reception that comprehends grammar by “thinking about potatoes.”

The clearest Steinian touchstone for a “grammar of the political” is *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. It should therefore come as no surprise that A.A.B.T. is a complex, contradictory book. On one hand, its publication was greeted with newspaper headlines across America, swooning over its plain, accessible style;²⁸ on the other, the book destabilizes and undermines the narrative conventions of subject-position and voice, with Gertrude posing as “Alice”—an Alice who is, nevertheless, far more interested in a story of Gertrude’s life than she is in presenting an autobiography all her own. At once simple and complex, confessional and disingenuous, the *Autobiography* presents us with a case study for distraction *par excellence*—since to read it is of necessity to attend simultaneously to the widely divergent horizons of popular culture, the avant-garde, mass production and the narrating subject. To make matters more complex, “reception” as a cultural practice turns out to be a central theme in A.A.B.T., meaning that this text is at once an abstract work of theory, and a practical training instrument, the *ubungsinstrument* of culture that summons into existence a reception in distraction that winds up performing a sort of cultural criticism, or offering a counter-discursive antidote to the cultures of critical gentility that were the always-present adversary to the avant-garde.

For this project, the key to this conundrum lies in the realm of the non-serious, which A.A.B.T. both participates in with joyful exuberance, and articulates as an

aesthetic field. In 1931, amidst a dense and (for Stein) serious meditation on “Forensics,” Stein offers this momentary digression: “At last I am at work on a popular novel” (H.T.W. 391). That Stein had already, prior to its publication, conceived of A.A.B.T. as “a novel” and as “popular” reveals that project’s importance as a re-contextualization of her prior work. Of course, Stein instantly undercuts the notion of “the popular” as a stable category: “Popular with whom. They may be popular with them. Or more ferociously” (H.T.W. 391). However, we may begin to see here that an appeal to a wider audience was indeed a founding aesthetic condition of A.A.B.T. Stein’s reaction here has a tone of relief: “at last,” she writes, she may write a “popular novel”; in this way she comments not only on A.A.B.T., but on her own prior compositional project, placing her own past work into the context of a new crisis of the present.²⁹ This crisis is modernity, what Stein frequently called a “twentieth century of life,” a phenomenon that she both saw as an emergent property of geography and politics and also as an opportunity for aesthetics to produce a new grammar of the political, or a new meta-commentary on the empirical present.

In keeping with her earlier reflections on the role of nationality in history and culture, Stein conceived of the crisis of the present as evidence of the priority of America in the art and technology of the modern period:

Gertrude Stein always speaks of America as being now the oldest country in the world because by the methods of the civil war and the commercial conceptions that followed it America created the twentieth century, and since all other countries are now either living or commencing to be living a twentieth century of life, America having begun the creation of the twentieth century in the sixties of the nineteenth century is now the oldest country in the world. (A.A.B.T. 78)

In part, this quote illustrates the extent to which, for Stein, this crisis of the present also reflected an upheaval in the regimes of cultural gentility that previously had privileged continental creative and receptive modes over those produced in America. This is important not because of its ethnic or national implications, but because of the causal

relation that Stein also posits between technology and the forms of culture. According to Stein's vision of time and history, it is technology that produces novel forms of composition and reception, and thus occasions either the re-inscription of the static forms of gentility or their erasure under a regime of reception that is simultaneously attentive to artifice and to the material changes wrought by technology upon every day life: what I have referred to as the "index of the real."

In *Narration: Four Lectures*, Stein ponders the process of history in a manner that recalls Benjamin's meditation on Paul Klee: "Narrative concerns itself with what is happening all the time, history concerns itself with what happens from time to time. And that is perhaps what is the matter with history and that is what is perhaps the matter with narrative" (Writings, 1932-1946 339). The difference between temporality as viewed by history and narrative ought to look familiar; it is in a sense the same as the difference between the empirical, teleological history of "critical theory" and that of the angel of history, who perceives time only as a total crisis event, or the "crisis of the present." Here it is narrative that views time as a total crisis event, or "what is happening all the time," and "history" that observes events empirically, or in causal sequence: "what happens from time to time." Implicitly, the statement reads: the empirical errors of history are redressed through the act of *narrative*, which alone is capable of the correct apperception, one which sees time, like Benjamin's angel, as the total crisis of the present toward which the past careens, and from which vantage the future is dark, terrifying and imaginary. Stein was in fact profoundly concerned with history; and indeed, her concern here is clearly with something that we may term "historicity" in the strictest sense of the creation of a meta-narrative of the temporal as a platform from which commentary or counter-discourse might originate. Though Stein was perhaps not particularly interested in politics in a strict sense, here is one instance in which the grammar of the political begins to take on greater significance.

Keeping in mind Stein's helpful advice regarding grammar and potatoes, we would be wise to remember that the word "matter" has a hidden semantic nuance: it may refer to "that which perturbs" narrative and history, or it may refer to a more literal "matter," the material contents of competing epistemological narratives, each of which designs a competing grammar for referring to that material universe. In this sense, we have returned to the paratactic categories of "grammar" and "potatoes," and we may adduce a homology in which the former stands for historicity and the latter for time—and in that sense, the stakes of describing and indeed transforming the grammar of the political could not be clearer, and could not be more central to an aesthetics that seeks upheaval and counter-discourse. A "popular avant-garde" literature is thus not an accident or some vain affectation—it is a critical aesthetic move that broadens the potential political impact of an ostensibly non-serious work like A.A.B.T.

By her own admission, Stein did crave commercial success, having written in A.A.B.T. (which though it was only arguably the sole vessel of her ascent to notoriety, certainly *preceded* it)³⁰: "I would like to have a little [success] you know. Think of my unpublished manuscripts" (A.A.B.T. 121).³¹ Stein's remark was in response to the ardent wish of *New York Sun* art critic Henry McBride, who claimed that success "ruins you, it ruins you...the best that I can wish you...is to have no success. It is the only good thing" (A.A.B.T. 121). McBride's comment is informed by a certain avant-garde cultural elitism in the form of the implicit notion that artistic success may be diluted or watered down through overexposure to a degraded mass culture. Stein, on the other hand, was clearly thinking of culture according to a different model; in fact, she was devising an aesthetics that depended on her new "popular novel" as a critical intervention into a new readership, one newly responsive to the crisis of the present that was modernity.

Loren Glass comments that Stein's "popularization" of her own aesthetic project was a mixed success. Having predicted that she and her writing would one day enter the

mainstream of American culture, she found after the publication of A.A.B.T. that “she was only half right”:

After her celebrated lectures in the United States, she found that she was having her cake—she was now world famous and her work was finally being published—but she wasn’t being allowed to eat it, too; her readers remained the “precious” few who had the patience and determination to work through her difficult writing. (Glass 116)

Glass suggests that the project of E.A. is to bring her notoriety into line with her aesthetics, in other words to explain “why writing that is apparently opaque and inaccessible is nevertheless intimately connected with the sensibilities of modern mass society” (116). It’s likely that Stein had felt throughout her writing life that her aesthetic mission was in keeping with those mass-cultural “sensibilities.” In that sense, we may see A.A.B.T. as the final realization of fame and notoriety as an aesthetic and political project, with serious real-world consequences, which included both an expanded readership, more acclaim, more money and a profoundly new sense of her own identity as a writer. This last truth was in its own way, highly ambiguous. Nevertheless, Stein had in A.A.B.T. finally resolved the central contradiction of modernism and of her own career: that which Ellen Berry refers to as the tension between the “art of the museum—and her own fundamentally different art of the present” (167).

Indeed, fame and notoriety, rather than being ends in themselves, became the vessel for a more mature and sophisticated aesthetic project, one for which A.A.B.T. became a virtual manifesto: to summon into the cultural dialogue a new kind of reader and a new mode of reception—a reading practice that is far more transformative than the “writing practice” suggested by Ulla Dydo’s term “composition.” This new reader is not the erudite and attentive reader of high modernism, but the distracted observer of mass culture—that same reader whose “reception in a state of distraction” is hailed by Walter Benjamin for an ability to discover within a mass-produced culture a transformative and

subversive (if also repressed and oneiric) mode of engagement with authority and high culture ("Work of Art" 240)

2.2 Alice in History: The Receptive Distraction of Alice B.

Toklas

The vision of history offered by Benjamin's "angel" has an important and significant application to the wider picture of modern culture. Recalling the salient features of Benjamin's idea: the angel's structural relation to "progress" as the subject continually colonized by the storm that sweeps time forward, and the angel's reception as an outgrowth of that structure, we may begin to see the outline of an aesthetics of readership in modernity that has applications outside of a strictly Marxist view of culture. That Stein wrote A.A.B.T. in part as the first foray of a carefully planned entry into the popular is quite revealing, because it begins to explain the particular features of A.A.B.T.'s central character, "Alice B. Toklas." In fact, Alice is herself a sort of angel of history, though in a far less apocalyptic sense, and perhaps far less interested in redress. Rather, Alice exemplifies the new reception that is called for by the technologies of modernity. As with the "angel of history," this reception is in part the emergent property of the new regimes of production that Stein now sought fully to participate in.³² Stein had been interested in reception and its capacity to produce new grammars and new epistemologies since her earliest work with William James on "Normal Motor Automatism," but in the end it is not Stein herself but "Alice B. Toklas" who is positioned in A.A.B.T. as the stand in for an audience that perceives culture through the lens of Benjamin's "angel"; that is, as engaging in a clearly embodied but nevertheless "distracted" reception that in spite of its uncomprehending gaze, is able through its trained apperception to access the meta-narratives of history and culture. This meta-narrative is available to a reception that perceives "what is happening all the time": that

is, a reception that attends simultaneously to divergent planes of meaning, that is, simultaneously to the artificial object and the indices of the real that surround it.

A word on “Alice B. Toklas” as the central character in this “popular novel” is not amiss here. In Stein’s rendition, Toklas had some early “intellectual adventures,” but clarifies immediately that they were “modest ones,” this last disclaimer symbolized by her having discarded an encouraging letter from Henry James so that she might focus on more domestic interests. These interests, along with “needlework and gardening” include “paintings, furniture, tapestry, houses and flowers and even vegetables and fruit-trees” (Stein A.A.B.T. 3). Toklas goes on to say that “I like a view but I like to sit with my back to it” (Stein A.A.B.T. 4). The comparison to Benjamin’s “angel” must not be overstated here—for it is clear that the manner in which Toklas “receives” a view is to consciously turn away, not to turn her back as an inevitable effect of the structuring of reception according to the regime of the modern.

Yet we cannot allow this analogy to pass by without comment, since it transforms what for Benjamin was a symptomatized interpretation of mass reception as a condition of history into a *strategy of reading practice* that clarifies Toklas’ role in Stein’s new aesthetics of the modern. That is, Toklas knows what she should be looking at, but instead attends deliberately to the index of the real, while remaining marginally conscious of the sublime or the artificial that surrounds her. She is not unaware of the view: she looks away from it, observing instead what to her is more domestic, more material and more immediate: the people whose attention is absorbed into the process of artifice. One instance in particular from A.A.B.T. stands out as illustrating the significance of “liking a view” but sitting with one’s back to it:

We had been resting and looking at every body and it was indeed the vie de Boheme just as one had seen it in the opera and they were very wonderful to look at. Just then somebody behind us put a hand on our shoulders and burst out laughing. It was Gertrude Stein. You have seated yourselves admirably, she said. But why, we asked. Because right here in front of you is the whole

story. We looked but we saw nothing except two big pictures that looked quite alike but not altogether alike. (Stein A.A.B.T. 19)³³

This encounter at the “*vernissage*” more than likely takes place at the *salon des independents*’ 1907 exhibition, which did in fact display works by both Braque and Derain. Part of what this anecdote illustrates is Stein’s fondness for linking the aesthetic to the historical in sweeping, gnomic fashion. However, we may also see here one practical instance of “liking a view but sitting with one’s back to it”; in that sense, it is worth paying attention to the particular indices of the real that “Alice” kept her fingers on as a result. Indeed, much like a “view,” the *vernissage* is opened up as a novel cultural field by the apperception that “Alice” brings to bear on it, and her attention to the *vernissage* as a bustling cityscape in its own right substantiates this beyond any doubt. When Alice tells her that the exhibition is for her a “vie de Boheme,” she may as well be confirming her affinity with Benjamin’s anamnestic flaneur, who observes the commercial and cultural interactions of the city under capitalism, but in a manner that is assiduously, consciously detached—as though to insist here that he receives it in a spirit of “distraction.”

Her enjoyment of the “culture” of the gallery is not characterized by absorption into the artifice of art—but about an enjoyment of and absorption into a cultural locale. Indeed, Toklas reveals that as she carefully observes culture at a single site, she has mentally “kept her finger” on another: “it was indeed the vie do Boheme *just as one had seen it in the opera.*” It will not escape notice that it was also the opera that was behind Gertrude’s failure to perform in her exams, an event which will be expanded on below; however, more notable is that Toklas is now revealed as a reader of culture who engages in a particular kind of distraction, her gaze drifting from site to site, always placing artifice into the broader context offered by the embodied surroundings that instantiate her reception.

It was Richard Ohmann who suggested in 1988 that divergent sites (in his case a romantic story and a Quaker Oats advertisement) might be placed in apposition and then

linked together inextricably via a “broad social process” exterior to the publication’s physical substrate, and reflecting “historical change” in the real world (Ohmann 361). Ohmann’s article is taken to be the first salvo into a new field of cultural criticism that unites disparate categories of message-making, but I am interested in what it implies about readership more particularly. Ohmann’s suggestion is that the primary text to which both the story and the advertisement refer is a social process exterior to the magazine that houses both, a social process that we may infer also includes the texts’ readers, who absorb a new mass culture only in the context of a historical change of which they are already, if distantly, aware. The effect of this social context is that two disparate texts that formerly might have merely been physical appositives now offer a critical commentary on one another; the reader of these texts is not only capable of reading this conversation but indeed, *helpless not to*, being him/herself the subject of the same social process that instantiated the conversation in the first place. Indeed, without a newly competent reading subject, the social process outside the magazine is at once silent and meaningless, and though Ohmann is careful not to make empirical claims about the nature of this reader, his model’s union of the critical with the textual presumes that such a reader must exist.

Like Ohmann’s magazine reader, Toklas is here revealed as helpless in the same sense: helpless not to interpret culture as taking place within numerous interrelated sites of artificial production, each of which converses inevitably with a “broad social process” outside the substrates of culture. Ohmann’s model of culture thus echoes Gertrude Stein’s interest in the difference between “inside” and “outside” in much of her explanatory writing. Ohmann’s presumption is that cultural production is the interior that refers to an unseen exterior whose outlines we can only infer from the shape of magazines, periodicals and newspapers. Pierre Bourdieu’s “aesthete’s variant” describes the manner in which the newspapers’ attempt to connect the reader to the material world paradoxically generates detachment. For Bourdieu, the newspaper offers only a

“mediated, relatively abstract experience of the social world,” and this detachment generates the contradiction that by learning about the abject real, readers are also distanced from it (21). Stein made a remarkably similar observation about newspapers, which she called “real life with the reality left out” and went on to describe this effect as fundamentally ontological, having to do with the nature of the real itself:

...the reality being the inside and the newspapers being the outside and never is the outside inside and never is the inside outside except in the rare and peculiar cases when the outside breaks through to be inside because the outside is so part of some inside that even a description of the outside cannot completely relieve the outside of the inside. ("L.I.A." 347)

In this context, Bourdieu’s remark that newspaper reading habits reveal the reader’s social habit of detachment from the real emerges into sharper focus as an argument for a new readership, one that is attuned to the problem of attending simultaneously to the cultural product and the real world that it describes. Every “outside,” as Stein points out, is also an “inside”: they are categories without stable boundaries, as even Bourdieu’s newspaper-reading public is also anchored to its own indexical present. A crucial corollary of Richard Ohmann’s model of readership is thus revealed: a reader who attends to multiple cultural productions at once is also capable of a critical perception that can allow the contradiction between ideology and the real to remain unresolved. If “inside” is the ontological force of the real and the “outside” is its artificial representation, then Stein’s argument is essentially in keeping with that of the Frankfurt School, whereby the form of mass culture structures the experience of the mass public and comes to replace a knowledge of the real, or indeed of historicity in its pure form as the knowledge of the historical as it relates to the self. Inside and outside do not refer to the newspaper alone, but the form of culture under modernity, in which the technologies of the present render the subject in shifting and dialectical relation to the social.

Loren Glass points out one manner in which inside and outside reflected the trace of the technology of the present in Stein’s own life, after the publication of A.A.B.T.

Stein and Toklas used the money from *ABT* to modernize their already-comfortable lives. They had a bathroom and an electric cooker installed in their summer home at Bilignin; they had telephones installed in both their Bilignin and Paris residences; and they bought a new, eight-cylinder Ford. In a sense, they used the money to upgrade the technologies mediating outside and inside. (Glass 128)

Inside and outside turn out to be ineluctably historical terms, referring to the shifting role of the subject's perception of culture under equally shifting technical regimes of modernity. In that case it is not surprising that Stein turns next to the newspaper's effects on the perception of time:

And so you have this curious situation. Newspapers are written as if what is happening is happening as they are writing and as it is happening in that way they can have in them no beginning and ending but after all they are writing and they are writing not as it is happening not as it the newspaper is printing or being read and yet all that has to be as if it were. ("L.I.A." 349)

Just as the photograph renders the three-dimensional in two dimensions, the newspaper renders the past as the present, and Stein is clear as to the effects of this on the nature of experience in a mass-culture universe:

finally the newspaper gets its readers so that it does not make any difference whether any event can or will happen as long as the newspaper can go on getting larger and larger with anything or smaller and smaller with anything, and always tell be telling that thing, that they are larger and larger and smaller and smaller in telling everything. ("L.I.A." 349)

The seeming contradiction at the end of this statement (larger and larger and smaller and smaller) may indeed reflect a sort of McLuhanite belief in the information age, whereby the larger the network of information dissemination, the smaller the physical location of the world effectively becomes. However, there is a price to pay, and it comes in the form of the nature of the experience of time itself: "A newspaper man is trained to make this easy by never changing, nothing must ever be changing, things are happening but nothing must ever be changing about their being happening" ("L.I.A." 350). The "reality effect" of the newspaper is therefore also an effect of temporal stasis: events occur, but they do not change the fundamental bargain of the newspaper reader, that these events be

repackaged, per Bourdieu's formulation, as the "bracing accompaniment" to their morning coffee, part of a daily routine that is inured to the possibility of historical time even as it insists on the presence of the temporal as its nominal backdrop.

This process, depending on whether we are here referring to distraction as a competence, or distraction as an effect, is what Benjamin called the *Jetztzeit*, or the crisis of the present--but we may also, following Bourdieu, insist that it is the *index of the real*, in keeping with Gertrude Stein's lifelong effort to offer an *empirical* epistemology of the subject's relationship with culture, composition and readership. In the case of Toklas' experience at the Salon, the aesthetic spectacle of the "people" present (what Toklas, revealing simultaneously her *petit-bourgeois* sensibilities and her ethnic otherness calls the "*vie de Boheme*") takes on a paratactic relation to the art works that are supposedly the central purpose of the exhibition, but which are now revealed as one more layer of artifice, an ancillary site of pointing toward the index of the larger cultural event that surrounds both them and "Alice" together.

This kind of reception makes for one critical alteration in the status of the art-work itself, one that might have perturbed the earliest proponents of what Alison Pease would later call a "modernist criticism."³⁴ When "Alice" places art into a deliberately paratactic relation to domesticity, her meaning is not that art is the same as decoration—but rather that she has de-centered the art-work's relation to the historical crisis of the present, which is no longer the authoritative immutable entity that alone is the source of a historical meta-narrative, but merely part of a tapestry of cultural productions, nearly invisible in a sea of other practices that take on new meaning when a distracted, multitudinous apperception is brought to bear on it. This is the true meaning of "turning one's back" to a view: that is, a refusal to privilege artifice over index, or the art work itself over the embodied, empirical reality of the present. Toklas' description of her life in the chapter "Before I Came to Paris" is a fitting axiom for this mode of cultural

appreciation: “my life was reasonably full and I enjoyed it but I was not very ardent in it” (Stein A.A.B.T. 4).

Toklas’ view of the status of the art work is thus clearly placed in a sharp contrast with that of Picasso, who famously declared that although people claimed Stein looked nothing like his portrait of her, “it does not matter, she will.” Where Picasso sees the art work as ultimately constituting and indeed replacing reality, Toklas sees art as an unstable proving ground ripe for a multitudinous cultural usage. In other words, rather than *standing in* for the real, art serves in *metonymic relation* to the real; art is in essence a technology of reception, a paratactic invention that summons the gaze of the reader but yields to different cultural uses, even those that place it into dialogue with the dreary, embodied present.

This apperception is distraction, an insistence upon the priority of the subject in the reading process, and this is equally true whether the reader is distracted as a function of progress or as a conscious praxis, a cultural competence designed to generate an abstraction from the real that is the foundational requirement of “criticism.” In this way, Stein’s grammar of the political has broad implications for a mass society in which the site of the subject in culture is continually being contested. Moreover, through grammar we may account for the curious narrative form of A.A.B.T. in the sense of explaining why Toklas—in particular, the unrefined “Toklas” of the early chapters, not yet influenced by the “genius” of Stein—is a better stand-in for this kind of reception than Stein herself would have been.³⁵

2.3 Easy Listening: Alice B. Toklas and the Modernist

Aesthetics of the Non-Serious

The encounter with Stein at the *salon des independants* is almost a parable of mass reception in this case. The same story narrated in Stein’s own voice might have been inclined toward a profound, penetrating, attentive analysis of the paintings in

question, but “Toklas” takes a different approach. She is able to observe art as merely a faint signal that cannot be abstracted from its background, one that hovers in continual paratactic relation to the broad cultural process that surrounds it. Indeed, prior to Stein’s entry on the scene, we are given to understand that Toklas had not looked at the art works at all, other than to note the overall strangeness of the pictures on display. It is Stein who introduces the notion of an explicated art form, insisting that behind Toklas and her friend is a “story,” a narrative that one might access given a more refined, trained competence in the reading of art works. It is also Stein who identifies the specific works in question (although at least in one case her precision is somewhat in doubt). The paintings that Toklas is seated near, but not looking at are described in some detail:

One is a Braque and one is a Derain, explained Gertrude Stein.
They were strange pictures of strangely formed rather wooden
blocked forms, one if I remember rightly a sort of man and women,
the other three women. (Stein A.A.B.T. 18)

Toklas, as if noticing the paintings for the first time, remarks only “we were puzzled, we had seen so much strangeness we did not know why these two were any stranger. [Stein] *was quickly lost in an excited and voluble crowd*” (Stein A.A.B.T. 18, emphasis added). Stein’s redirection of Toklas’ attention becomes just another event which is quickly absorbed into what may as well be a cityscape of cultural practices around her, and Toklas and her unnamed friend are left to ponder the work of art itself, which is fittingly never explicated, only named. In that sense, Stein’s sweeping historical claim, like the art work that was its subject, remains unabstracted from its contextual background. More crucially, there is no indication that Toklas made any attempt to comprehend this event other than to describe it in passing as part of a story intended to illustrate her linkage to an avant-garde community that she seems deliberately to not bother understanding. The reception of “Alice” is more than unrefined; it is perversely content to allow the art-work to sink into merely paratactic relation to the “excited and voluble crowd,” a backdrop to the exhibition but not paradigmatically different from, say, Stein herself, the crowd or

Toklas' unnamed friend. Instead, in a manner that is strikingly similar to the compositional aesthetics of analytical cubism, the various parts function as metonymic, non-hierarchical indices to one another, and it is Toklas' "distracted" reception that allows for her insistence upon the re-emergence of the subject into the cultural process of the art work, even if here only in the sense of insisting on art's place within the material universe, what Adorno might have dismissively called its *use-value*.

Given the available context clues, it is possible to identify the Derain piece as his 1907 work "Bathers," which features three nude women painted in an early cubist style reminiscent of Picasso's African Mask Period (Figure 2). Even a cursory glance reveals that this too is a work that exemplifies and models "distraction": the painting features three bathers whose attention is directed toward three separate loci, all of which point away from the center of the canvas. However, this may only be part of the manner in which this work relates what Stein calls the "whole story." The three figures, in keeping with the early cubist aesthetic, are also connected to each other in a manner that we may describe as paratactic rather than paradigmatic. As the description from "Toklas" indicates, their features are indeed blockish and wooden, and the facial features are indistinct enough that they might as easily be the same figure in three separate poses. As if to allow for this possibility, the painting is structured as a triptych, and we may in that sense infer its relation to the narrative of the historical, as the teleological evolution of attention itself. The three women (or perhaps three instances of the same woman across time), though they are enclosed in the same frame, are physically located in clearly separate two-dimensional planes. The figure in the foreground, looking up and to the viewer's left, is signaled as being in the foreground only because her elbow overlaps the midsection of the figure on the left, whose attention is directed down and to the viewer's right. The last bather has her back turned, and is pushing aside an incongruously placed tree or large bush, suggesting that not only are these three on different planes, but that each might belong to an entirely different perspectival assimilation. The figure on the

right appears at first to be behind the other two, but she may indeed be in front of them, and merely smaller. Like the cubist work that would follow this exhibition, this work has abandoned conventional ideas of chiaroscuro and depth for an obviously artificial and flattened aspect which challenges the eye to construct a background into which all of the figures can comfortably fit. We are left to ponder how this work, along with another unnamed work by Braque, can be in Stein's words, "the whole story"—and if it is the whole story, then the story of precisely what?

Derain is an artist who has long escaped serious attention, in part because of his habit of being easily influenced by others. His 1907 "Bathers" does not depart in many ways from a conventional late fauvist work: it is characterized by vibrant colors explosively applied within a nearly cubist method of composition and an elimination or at least subversion of the illusory depth that is conventional in portraiture. However, "Bathers" is significant because of the kind of attention or reception that it invites—precisely, in a sense, the kind of reception that it had been given by Toklas, sitting with her back turned to it while enjoying the spectacle of the exhibition. The 1907 *Salon des Independents*, where "Bathers" was exhibited, was a significant moment in the history of continental art, and to suppose that Toklas paid only a passing attention to the "significance" of this event is more than merely a joke on her own degree of cultural sophistication: it is to imagine that she applied a new kind of perception to this event, one in which attention may glide over several loci at once—where she may, in a sense, look up and left and down and right at the same time. Similarly, "Bathers" does not yield to a single, authoritative perspective; the three figures gaze in different directions, and direct the viewer's gaze to three different ways of viewing the same art-work. At a glance, it seems like a work that apart from a resemblance to the early cubist work of Picasso and later Bracque, yields to a relatively conventional analysis, and yet it is a painting that resists the natural attempt to make sense of it as a single moment; indeed, such an exercise is dizzying. To read it as Alice does, on the other hand, is to comply with the

regime of reception that it depicts: to allow three planes to overlap nonsensically, by simultaneously and effortlessly seeing the implied three-dimensional construction and the left-to-right teleological construction of the triptych. In that sense, “Bathers,” like A.A.B.T., is both a work of theory and like Benjamin’s reproducible art work, an *ubungsinstrument*, interested in altering and training the cultural practice of its own reception.

Alice’s reception of modernism is significant in part *because* it is nonserious: her attention is divided, and she thus approaches the art-work as merely the backdrop to the true aesthetic event of the salon itself, which she calls the “vie de Boheme.” A conventional understanding of avant-garde reading and compositional practice emphasizes its *difficulty*, both in its production and in its consumption. Both the “modernist criticism” that Alison Pease sees emerging from the rigorous compositional practices of high modernism, and for that matter Andreas Huyssen’s “great divide” logic of modernity with its characterization of “modernist” art as fearful of contamination from the bastardized *ersatz* culture of mass society, point to a rigorous practice-as-praxis in the cultural products of high modernism.³⁶ That is to say, *difficulty* is not only an accidental feature of high modernism, but is indeed *its classical form*, and a founding condition of its production. This version of modernism has by now become a mere critical artifact—Alison Pease describes it as a species of cultural criticism that had the objective of “making English literature a subject of serious study at university but also of making it the moral focus of a public debate about individual sensibility and the “health” of culture at large” (Pease 78). Nevertheless, the notion of difficulty as a moral imperative in a true aesthetics—particularly a “critical” aesthetics—is a persistent idea that has an intuitive ring of truth, and a broad basis in the history of cultural criticism.

Theodor Adorno, perhaps the central figure in a criticism that emphasized the negative “health” effects of mass culture, famously argued that popular music fostered

what he called “regressive listening.” In his formulation, reception had come to mirror the debased and *ersatz* quality of cultural production itself:

The consciousness of the mass listeners is adequate to fetishized music. It listens according to formula, and indeed debasement itself would not be possible if resistance ensued, if the listeners still had the capacity to make demands beyond the limits of what was supplied. But if someone tried to ‘verify’ the fetish character of music by investigating the reactions of listeners with interviews and questionnaires, he might meet with unexpected puzzles. In music as elsewhere, the discrepancy between essence and appearance has grown to a point where no appearance is any longer valid, without mediation, as verification of the essence. (45)

Adorno’s claim here is interestingly one having to do with *reception*: an audience, helplessly debased by a mass cultural product that is *produced* according to formula, also *listens* according to formula. The problem with this “listening” is, Adorno clarifies, not that it is strange, or alien, but specifically that it is too easy. Rather than demanding erudition and vigor, this is a listening practice that calls for what Adorno calls “deconcentration” (48). The conceptual affinity between “deconcentration” and “distraction” is unmistakable here, and as if to clarify this connection, Adorno goes on to say that “the standardized products, hopelessly like one another except for conspicuous bits such as hit lines, do not permit concentrated listening without becoming unbearable to the listeners” (48). In effect, Adorno here presents the Marxist face of high modernism as a social and aesthetic praxis, and it is arguably this fundamental concept that has underwritten aesthetic practices of “difficulty” from the historical avant-garde to the poetry of the New Left: Adorno’s model holds that it is the erudite reader’s rapt and penetrating gaze that can untangle the web of ideology and finally arrive at something akin to a cultural criticism. Difficulty is trenchant, Adorno’s model holds: entertainment on the other hand, or what Benjamin referred to as *Zerstreuung*, generates merely standardization, sameness and compliance with ideology.

In the context of this kind of a modernist criticism, the astonished popular reception of *The Autobiography* begins to make a sinister, elitist kind of sense. A modern

composition is supposed to reward concentration: the site of social dreaming is the focused, attentive reader, whose erudition meets his match in the superior sophistication of a Joyce or Pound, who cements his authority by way of a Byzantine array of cultural significations that only the most well-heeled scholar may unravel with ease. By contrast, *The Autobiography* commits the crime of being easy; its primary offence, and a key source of the bewildered critical reception that greeted it, is that of yielding to a “listening practice” that may just as easily have its back turned, or be keeping its finger on the index of a reality at some remove from the aesthetic product. The “easiness” of A.A.B.T. is thus a key aspect of its political grammar: it is through the “easy” practices of reception that the book invites that Stein explains the “easy” nature of political or cultural resistance. As Stein might say, “anyone can understand this”; or, more precisely, she was designing a political grammar that was both “easily” accessible and “easily” marshaled into the broader dialogue of social change and of the re-inscription of the subject into culture and its practices.

It is worth noting here that the *compositional* practice of *The Autobiography* is the same as the *reading* practice it invites: distracted, absorptive, *easy*. As she reveals the “joke” behind the composition of the book, Stein emphasizes that the book took “six weeks” to compose—and as she claimed never to have revised her work, we are meant to assume that the text as it arrives in our hands has the quality of a first draft.³⁷ Stein’s now famous punch line reads:

About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you are ever going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you. I am going to write it as simply as Daniel Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. And she has and this is it. (Stein A.A.B.T. 252)

Steven Meyer suggests, compellingly, that this passage “makes ends meet” by inviting the reader to return to the beginning at this point, in other words to re-read the text armed with the knowledge that they were “had” the first time around, and that now they will be able to see the magician behind the curtain. Meyer points out that “all of this was

confirmed in the first edition with a photograph, on the facing page, of the first sheet of the manuscript,” suggesting that a reader might therefore *literally* begin the book again, but now with the physical evidence of Stein’s own handwriting revealed as the source material for the printed text which is the final product of the publication process (Meyer 12). Of course, it’s abundantly clear that the reproduction of a manuscript page in the midst of a printed book achieves much more than simply “making ends meet”: it also signals the printed page’s artificiality, its abstraction from the “simple” compositional practice that produced it. Of course, to a casual reader the comprehension of the printed page is far “simpler” than attempting to decipher Gertrude Stein’s handwriting, a task that apparently only Toklas was equal to.³⁸ The composition, Stein tells us, is simple: as simple as fiction, which is to say that its complexity rests in the imaginative power of readerly reception. *Robinson Crusoe* can only be considered autobiography if we imagine that the process of reading may summon characters into existence; arguably, we are called upon to do just that with the Alice B. Toklas of the *Autobiography*. This final punch-line might just as well stand in for the legal disclaimer of later years: “any resemblance to the real Alice B. Toklas is purely coincidental,” just as the resemblance between the manuscript page and the physical artifact of the printed book itself verges on the imaginary.

However, we must also note here that the manuscript photograph insists upon something else: that is the simultaneous presence of Stein’s physical hand, her embodied self in the process of composition, perfectly invested in the process of the real even as she generates the absorptive, popular product that is AABT. The page written in Stein’s hand may as well serve as a second reminder of the embodied presence of Stein herself at the moment of writing, and in that sense asks its reader to traverse a vast temporal and conceptual distance to attend to the locus of reading and the locus of production simultaneously. One conventional criticism of “the popular” is that it erases or occludes the forces of production, and in that context Stein’s final move here is a sort of fillip, a

placeholder that advises her reader: “keep your finger here. This is the material index to the production of this book.” By “keeping their finger” on that page, the reader may see through the artifice of the mass product, and even if Stein might not have insisted upon “historicity” as the outgrowth of this process, it is here that we may sense the formal outlines of Stein’s “grammar of the political.” It is after all this same receptive process that may generate both apprehension of the present and the silent meta-critical dream that brings to mind Benjamin’s “Angel of History.”

Worth noting is the reason for Toklas’ inability to complete the admittedly arduous (however “simple”) task of composing an autobiography: “I am a pretty good housekeeper and a pretty good gardener and a pretty good needlewoman and a pretty good secretary and a pretty good editor and a pretty good vet for dogs *and I have to do them all at once* and I found it difficult to add being a pretty good author” (A.A.B.T. 251, emphasis added). This description bears a more than coincidental resemblance to Stein’s explanation for why she found it just as difficult to write an examination paper in philosophy: recall that Stein was herself absorbed in other pursuits: “Gertrude Stein had been going to the opera every night and going also to the opera in the afternoon and had been *otherwise engrossed*” (A.A.B.T. 79, emphasis added). Stein’s boredom with medical school, detailed in the pages which follow, is the perfect instance of being in a “twentieth century of life”—in which one’s attention is divided amongst various pursuits rather than focused on something arduous and difficult. Stein, we are told, was bored in medical school because she “dislikes the abnormal, it is so obvious. She says the normal is so much more simply complicated and interesting” (A.A.B.T. 83). In both cases an excess of attention to “normal” matters has prevented a focused and thorough interest in the “abnormal.” Stein might as well be saying here that the domestic pursuits of Alice Toklas outlined in the introduction (needlework, tapestry, etc.) have in her mind a value equal to that of the “art work,” which according to the aesthetic project of modernist criticism enjoys a special status outside of every day life.

2.4 Automatism and History: Distraction and the Project of a New Modern

Some part of an analysis of Stein as instantiating an aesthetics of distraction, or of divided reception as a praxis, rests on a relatively conventional reading of her work and career. Specifically, the notion that she preferred a paratactic rather than a paradigmatic apperception is confirmed by nearly any analysis of her work, and is an unavoidable aesthetic feature of her compositions as early as *The Making of Americans*. However, Stein's work on attention is not sufficiently examined yet, and it is moreover clear that the *process of attention* (as opposed to something less measurable like *consciousness*) was a lifelong preoccupation of Stein's. Given her early tutelage by the psychologist William James, this is perhaps not a surprise, but it is my contention that her earliest work (two refereed publications in psychology) reflects an interest in attention and its relationship to personality that reaches its final, crucial phase in A.A.B.T. Stein was, of course, first and foremost an avant-garde artist, and her affinity to the coterie culture of the historical avant-garde in Paris serves as a potent confirmation that what she was interested in was an aesthetics, and that she believed profoundly in the importance of her own contributions in that sense. However, I think it is critical to avoid assigning to Stein a postmodern or a post-critical sensibility in which her work is thought to attack epistemology as such. Indeed, Stein was clearly interested in the grammar of things as a presumably intelligible universal language according to which the object-world could be linked to the world of the symbol.

In that sense, Stein's work, in addition to being strange and unsettling, is clearly *empirical* at its core. Her empirical approach, cemented both by her work in *The Making of Americans* and in her early experimental work under William James, serves as the crucial link between her grammar of the political and the subject's embodied purchase on the real, or what we may term a materialist reading. Much like we may describe cubism as having an "analytic" phase, we may see Stein's work as beginning with a material or

empirical phase (thus the obsession with language as an index to the object-world in, for instance, *Tender Buttons*) and concluding with a didactic phase in which her work becomes a manifesto for a reception that unlocks the counter-discursive possibilities of a political grammar.

When Stein remarks in 1931 that she is “at last” writing a popular novel, this is a comment that has special significance to the evolution in her vision of the status of the art-work more generally. It bears mentioning that this comment also reveals a generic constraint, clearly also a foundational condition of A.A.B.T.: that it is not an “autobiography” in a strict sense, but a “popular novel.”³⁹ In that sense, A.A.B.T. becomes the perfect vehicle for what we may term an aesthetics of the nonserious, or an attempt to marshal the new force of the nonserious into the generation of counter-discourse and meta-commentary. The newspaper headlines emphasizing the writing style of Stein’s latest book were of course perfectly correct to point to a greater “simplicity” in her diction: to write “as simply” as Defoe writing the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe, is of course not to *write* simply, but to invite a simple kind of reading: the kind of reading that Stein herself may well have brought to bear on her own life, from the opera in the afternoons and evenings to the art work displayed on the walls of her *atelier*.

The “simplicity” of Defoe, and of A.A.B.T., coupled with the “normal” life which distracts Stein from the “abnormal” pursuits of a career in medicine, are both gestures that make sense not only in a popular novel but in an aesthetic project that *privileges* the popular reception of mass society, a reception that is characterized by a disengaged, divided apperception. Indeed, this distracted reception proves to be a key feature of Stein’s own twentieth century of life—both in her disappointment with medical school and in her description of twentieth century culture in the form of its mass media. Stein writes that:

...in the Making of Americans, I was doing what the cinema was doing, I was making a continuous succession of the statement of what that person was until I had not many things but

one thing. ... I of course did not think of it in terms of the cinema, in fact I doubt whether at that time I had ever seen a cinema but, and I cannot repeat this too often, any one is of one's period and this our period was undoubtedly the period of the cinema and series production. ("L.I.A." 294)

Stein here links her earlier critical tradition to the technologies that constitute modernity itself, and we may here recall her comment in "Narration: Four Lectures" as a touchstone to both cinema and the novel. After all, if "anyone is of one's period," then the process of culture must inevitably be a response to the crisis of the present, or to modernity itself. In "Narration," Stein advises the reader who is interested in the process of narrative in history to "think of newspapers, of novels, of detective stories, of biographies, of histories and of conversations" (Writings, 1932-1946 339). Implicitly, these new popular forms exemplify the difference between "narrative" and "history" in the sense that they address the moment of the present differently. It can hardly be accidental that these are essentially the cultural forms of that "twentieth century of life" that Stein saw as being ushered in by the social and economic forces of the industrial postbellum period.

It is telling to remember Marshall McLuhan's description of the social function of the artist here: even his largely deterministic view of media as predetermining social relations includes a place for an artist who "picks up the message of cultural and technological change decades before its transforming impact occurs. He, then, builds models or Noah's arks for facing the change that is at hand" (McLuhan 96). At the risk of painting Stein as a programmatic revolutionary (a definition that she might argue belonged to an older socio-technological regime of thought), we might argue that her use of "Alice B. Toklas" to represent the distracted, receptive quality of the mass audience does indeed have a didactic bent, at least to the extent that her work has all along been available to a reader whose "back is turned" to the specific, focused, concentrated contents of media. Implicit in McLuhan's analysis of the "artist" as the agent of instruction under a new formal regime is this critical axiom: that like the techniques that give it shape, the art work is itself a sort of technology, designed according to prescribed

receptive regimes that function emergently from its form. In that sense, just as cinema, magazines and newspapers are novel media forms that function technologically in summoning into existence an equally new audience, A.A.B.T. is a “Noah’s Ark” for the “change that is at hand” in the crisis of the present.

In his short essay “The Ring of Saturn,” an early draft of ideas that would later become part of his *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin meditated on the cultural changes resulting from iron-molded construction, a technology that became more or less commonplace in France in the early part of the nineteenth century. Immediately Benjamin grasps that this new technology, with its occasioning of changed economic relations, also occasions a new social relation between the world of art and the world of the commodity:

Iron construction began with winter gardens and arcades—that is, with genuine luxury establishments. Very quickly, however, it found its true range of technical and industrial application. What resulted were constructions that had no precedent and that were occasioned by wholly new needs: covered markets, railroad stations, exhibition halls. Engineers led the way, but poets, as well, displayed amazing foresight. Thus, the French Romantic Gautier declares: “A proper architecture will be created the moment we begin making use of the new materials furnished by the new industry. (Benjamin “Saturn” 886)

What Benjamin grasps here is in essence the central idea of *The Arcades Project*: that culture’s usage of available materials and technology often occasions new modes of both artistic production and artistic reception. After a moment of resistance to the new technological forms, which Benjamin describes as an early example of nostalgia or *kitsch*,⁴⁰ what follows is “an effort to renew art on the basis of technology’s own rich store of forms” (“Saturn” 887). In a way, this is precisely the project of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*: to, in the words of Marshall McLuhan, find “Noah’s arks” which can become the vessels not only of newer literary forms, but of technologically mediated forms of reception.

Stein's work on attention and apperception very clearly began in the earliest stages of her career, when she was experimenting on states of attention and distraction under the supervision of William James in the 1890s.⁴¹ In 1896, Stein published "Normal Motor Automatism" in the *Psychological Review*, in which she attempted to catalogue and theorize the operations of the brain under conditions of distraction. Stein's work in "Normal Motor Automatism" has received a good deal of critical attention, beginning perhaps with B.F. Skinner's "Has Gertrude Stein a Secret?" which proposed that Stein's writing was pathological rather than artistic. Had Skinner read her follow-up article "Cultivated Motor Automatism," he might have had yet more ammunition for his claim that Stein was using her work in the study of psychology to develop an aesthetics of modernity itself in later decades. Stein describes her methods in terms that ought to sound familiar by now:

The method of teaching a new movement was as follows: When the subject's attention was fully distracted I would gently, at first slowly, then more rapidly, guide the planchette into the movement I wished to teach. The subject the first few times would either come to a standstill or return to the old movement. I would guide again, and then release, keeping this up till the new movement was learned. At first there was a continued return to the old movement or to no movement, but gradually came an aimless indefinite movement, then again the old, then the new, and then again an uncertain movement, then a more decided revision of the new, then a slight return to the old, like the struggle between two themes in a musical composition, until at last the new movement conquered and was freely continued. (Stein "C.M.A." 296)

That the state of composition here is "distraction" serves as merely an exclamation point to the thesis that for Stein a productive inattention was the key to unlocking the possibilities of modernity in the new world that was being forged by newspapers, detective novels and the cinema. More interesting, however, is the description that we have here of the fruits of such a mental state: an aimless indefinite movement that oscillates from "new" to "old" means of creative production, like "two themes in a musical composition."

This composition is not created in a Freudian unconscious, unavailable except to some psychoanalytic process of unearthing: it is created at the very margin of wakeful *attention* itself, as a flutter at the edge of perceptual vision. I believe that Stein saw this edge between the conscious and unconscious mind not as a site for a psychically revealing “repressed” but as potentially a site at which the grammar of the political might find hidden, preconscious expression: if not a political unconscious in a strict sense, then a creative one. It is for her the touchstone of that twentieth century of life; a writer may compose if they are distracted from the “time sense” that produces “history” rather than “romance.” Or they may produce writing in one language while they are being spoken to in another. To take an example from Stein’s own life, they may write a portrait while sitting for a portrait of themselves, produced in a different medium and substrate with different rules, but nevertheless generating layered and multifocal compositions that depend on one another for their full meaning.

It’s therefore no surprise that Stein picks up the themes of nationalism and the twentieth century in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Her concept of the American character is frequently not separable from her concept of modernity itself, the latter being in large part the expression of the former through the substrate of technology. In a conversation with Bertrand Russell, “Alice B. Toklas” reports that Stein waxed eloquent about the linkage between technology and philosophy in America:

England which was an island needed Greece which was or might have been an island. At any rate greek was essentially an island culture, while America needed essentially the culture of a continent which was of necessity latin. This argument fussed Mr. Russell, he became very eloquent. Gertrude Stein then became very earnest and gave a long discourse on the value of greek to the english, aside from its being an island, and the lack of value of greek culture for the americans based upon the psychology of americans as different from the psychology of the english. She grew very eloquent on the disembodied abstract quality of the american character and cited examples, mingling automobiles with Emerson...(A.A.B.T. 152)

What do automobiles and Emerson have in common? Perhaps nothing—and one suspects that in part Stein may have been taking the argumentative Russell to task for his elitist assumptions about the American education system. However, the implication here is that both are exemplars of the “disembodied abstract quality of the American character,” and here we have an echo of Stein’s experiments themselves, which effectively sought to divorce the subject from their experience of embodiment, and produce a composition that is unhinged from the tyranny of the self.

In her experimental work with William James, Stein theorized that an “automatic personality” came to the forefront when the attention of the individual was misdirected. In a sense, Stein was attempting to recreate, under controlled laboratory conditions, a sort of psychic Schrodinger’s cat, on the theory that direct attention fastens the personality to a bound and embodied existence, while distraction liberates the individual to create, albeit according to scientifically definable types. Her experiences with the group she defined as Type I is instructive here:

I could never get them to write well unless I got them distracted by talking to them or making them talk to me. The more interested and excited they got the more their hands would write. ... As soon as they stopped talking, or their interest flagged, here was a strong tendency for the movement to slow up and soon stop. This type, although in some cases suggestible, is on the whole auto-suggestible rather than responsive to influences from without, *unless the appeal is directed completely to the automatic personality*. The subjects usually expressed themselves at first as having an impersonal feeling toward their arm and then becoming oblivious of it. (“C.M.A.” 297, emphasis added)

It’s worth noting that Stein does not say that distraction was necessary for her subjects to write *at all*—only that it was necessary before they would *write well*. Good writing, then, comes from the automatic personality—and moreover, is prevented by attention to the process of composition.⁴²

Of course *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is more interested in distracted reception than in composition, though it can be argued that its own composition, performed in the voice of one subject but “voiced” by another, shares with Stein’s

experimental work the desire to tap into an automatic personality through a sort of directed disembodiment. “Distraction” in A.A.B.T. is thus best described as having two aspects—the automatic personality, whose composition is catalyzed by attention to something else, and the automatic reader, whose attention is directed simultaneously toward the material, cultural product and to the “index of the real,” or what Richard Ohmann might have called the “broad cultural process” outside the of the that material substrate. The reception in distraction that is epitomized by “Alice B. Toklas,” whose remark that “I like a view but I like to sit with my back to it” now takes on a more urgent and dogmatic tenor, in that it is precisely when one’s back is turned that the view-not-attended-to begins to summon into existence that “twentieth century of life” that is, for Stein, so quintessentially American.

Stein, who frequently commented that she “didn’t like” Germans, characterized the difference between Germans and Americans in this way:

...the germans had no organization, they had method but no organization. Don’t you understand the difference, she used to say angrily, any two americans, any twenty americans, any millions of americans can organise themselves to do something but germans cannot organise themselves to do anything, they can formulate a method and this method can be put upon them but that isn’t organisation. The germans, she used to insist, *are not modern*, they are a backward people who have made a method of what we conceive as organisation, can’t you see. (Stein A.A.B.T. 153, emphasis added)

She goes on to comment that it is the republican character of America that supplies its inevitable link to modernity.⁴³ This passage seems to provide, in characteristic fashion, a slippery four-term homology that more than anything seems to beg the question, to want for a proper definition of terms in order to bring it into focus. What *is* the difference between method and organization? The difference seems to be a matter of agency: method is “put upon” a group of people, while organization comes from democratic action, from a republican rather than medieval social compact of the individual. Method is totalitarian and objective, while organization is rooted in the

collective action of subjects.⁴⁴ It is telling here to remember Stein, using the planchette to teach a motion to a distracted subject, and then observing how the subject composed well in a state of divided attention. In her methodology, the experimenter stands for method—but the arm and mind of the subject co-exist in a loose *organization* with one another—and out of this relationship emerges the composition, organized but not methodical, intuitive more than rational and evocative more than meaningful.

The difference between “method” and “organization” is a fine distinction, even for Stein; more critical here is the other half of the four-term homology, having to do with medievalism and republicanism as organizational forms of the social. “Methodical,” for Stein, is associated with a “backward” social organization. She goes on to avow that “the fundamental sympathy in America is with France and could never be with a mediaeval country like Germany” (A.A.B.T. 153). We know from Stein’s other writings that it was America that introduced the world to “a twentieth century way of life”; in that case, what seemed like mere nationalism now takes on the overtones of social critique, and though France and England are let virtually off the hook, the insistence on America’s originary status as a “republic” might as well be a condemnation of the roots of the European polity more generally in medieval ways of conceiving of the social compact.

This characterization of the difference between America and Germany might as well be an aesthetics; in this context, Stein’s peculiar literary and artistic tastes, her love of the detective novel, of the newspaper, and of modernity emerge into a sharper focus as Stein’s articulation of the project of modernism in discovering and training its own readership. Unlike high modernism, with its stodgy co-optation of mass-cultural forms, but always with the objective of recruiting them into the service of the art work, Stein loved these forms for themselves, and sought to create an art work that addressed its reader in the same way that they did, calling upon their divided attention. To borrow the phraseology of her own research with William James, Stein sought a compositional aesthetics that addressed itself to the *organized reception of the automatic self*. For Stein,

the task of the composition is akin to the task of the experimenter with the planchette: to adapt the technologies of the modern toward the task of transforming the methodical form into its organized opposite, by creating an art that is best received while attending to something else; a view that one appreciates the most when one's back is turned. "Alice B. Toklas" thus becomes more than just Stein's *first* reader; she is the modern reader par excellence, restoring the disparate poles of culture and material into their properly paratactic rather than hierarchical relation.

Modernity thus becomes the exact crisis between "method" and "organization"—with "method" standing for technology's newly hegemonic dominance of the subject, and "organization" for the repositioning of the individual as the site of social dreaming itself, as the source not only of the art-work, but of everyday life in the twentieth century.

In the final analysis, this is perhaps what automobiles and Emerson share: each instantiates a dreamlike relation between the individual and the cultural world, a relation that if it is not always socially activist, is definitely oneiric. Indeed, Emerson's own writings seem to refer to something akin to the "automatic personality" that for Stein produces the composition:

Each material thing has its celestial side; has its translation through humanity into the spiritual and necessary sphere, where it plays a part as indestructible as any other. And to these their ends all things continually ascend. (Emerson 7)

The nature of the individual in Emerson, as a linkage to a universal and natural thematics of transcendence, is not altogether foreign to a Steinian analysis of the individual as merely the veneer covering an automatic personality that generates the composition. "Distraction" is a key concept here, as the re-inscription into the contested field of culture of the individual subject. In this way the subject persists at the moment of reception, in a realm that for Emerson is transcendental and for Stein perhaps merely *sociable*. Certainly Stein's project of classifying the receptive subject into "types" (a project that she arguably continued in *Making of Americans*) would have seemed to Emerson like the

vain attempt to catalogue the ineffable. Nevertheless, it is valuable to note the annihilation of the authorial subject that takes place in Emerson:

the study of many individuals leads us to an elemental region *wherein the individual is lost*, or wherein all touch by their summits. Thought and feeling that break out there, cannot be impounded by any fence of personality. This is the key to the power of the greatest men—*their spirit diffuses itself*.(Emerson 19, emphasis added)

The automobile, it may be argued, performs a similar function. Useless without a collective infrastructure, the automobile links the individual to the social without bringing them into contact with their fellow men, the crowded metropolis that Emerson in elitist terms describes as “disgusting, like moving cheese, like hills of ants, or of fleas—the more, the worse” (4). In that sense, the automobile can aptly be described, even in its earliest iterations, as an Emersonian form. The automobile is a technology that is at once solipsistic and sociable; it renders the urban landscape into a new, panoramic form, across which the gaze must range far but never penetrate. Inside (or, more properly in the 1930s, “atop”) the automobile a new technology of reception is summoned into existence, one in which the “individual” is only lost according to an older, now outmoded regime of sociability, but is re-inscribed in a newly disengaged form, one which ironically occasions the re-birth of something akin to Benjamin’s peripatetic *flaneur*. It is perhaps for this reason that Stein used both transcendentalism and transportation in her eloquent defense of America’s system of education.

In “Cultivated Motor Automatism,” distraction is shown as a technology of production, but it is in the person of Alice B. Toklas that we begin to see its value as a technology of *reception*. It is in some ways unsurprising that Stein had settled upon “Alice” as not only the proxy through which Stein might herself be understood, but as in a sense her ideal reader. Loren Glass notes the cultural significance of the aesthetic and formal methodology that Toklas and Stein had arrived at, an arrangement of convenience that nevertheless had a profound impact on form:

The two had settled into the intimate division of literary labor that would remain for the entire course of Stein's career, in which Stein would compose in the evening what Toklas would type in the morning. What was opaque for the public was most likely clear to Toklas, Stein's original private audience. (Glass 120)

Toklas was without doubt Stein's first audience for any of her work, but Glass' comment here merits elucidation in the context of Toklas as an exemplar of mass cultural reception. It is therefore helpful that in describing her reception of art, "Toklas" reports that "I always say that you cannot tell what a picture really is or what an object really is until you dust it every day and you cannot tell what a book is until you type it or proof-read it"(Stein A.A.B.T. 113).

True modernist reception, then, arrives in the form of an attention that is not directed at the art-work itself, but somewhere in its approximate vicinity, an attention that is focused on the quotidian work of "dusting" while the art work lingers in the background, available perhaps to the automatic personality, but partly escaping the notice of the subject.⁴⁵ Toklas' description coyly hints at her reception of the autobiography itself, her contribution to the final product that was at once creative, and—it must be noted—"distracted" in the precise sense of her reception of the art work at the *salon des independants*. Both "dusting" and "proof-reading" in a manner of speaking attend to an object's *form* while not its *content*—and both are connected with the domestic labor that Stein associates with Toklas' aesthetics from the opening pages of the book. To sit with one's back to a view is in essence the same thing—it is to privilege the cultural effects of the art work over the art work itself. In this way, A.A.B.T. is a manifesto, one which urges its reader to devise new technologies for reception in distraction, and to access a futurity thereby that though it exists at the margins of conscious perception, nevertheless occasions a new grammar of history.



Figure 2. "Bathers," Andre Derain, 1907. Oil on Canvas, 52" x 6' 4 3/4"

CHAPTER 3. THE POEM AND THE POT-BOILER:
RECEPTION IN KENNETH FEARING'S *THE BIG*

CLOCK

The statistics of the class distribution of newspaper reading would perhaps be interpreted less blindly if sociologists bore in mind Proust's analysis of 'that abominable, voluptuous act called "reading the paper"', whereby all the misfortunes and cataclysms suffered by the universe in the last twenty-four hours—battles which have cost the lives of fifty thousand men, murders, strikes, bankruptcies, fires, poisonings, suicides, divorces, the cruel emotions of statesman and actor, transmuted into a morning feast for our personal entertainment, make an excellent and particularly bracing accompaniment to a few mouthfuls of *café au lait*.

--Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*

3.1 Hard-Boiled Historicity

By the time he wrote "Reading, Writing and the Rackets" as the introduction to his 1956 *New and Selected Poems*, Kenneth Fearing was among the elder statesmen of Left poetry in America. His essay, which as its title implies is more or less a jeremiad of a cynical if essentially nonpartisan Marxism, offers an illuminating glimpse into Fearing's theory of modernity and a broader theory of the mass media universe. The influences it manifests are wide-ranging: his critique of mass society's anesthetizing effect recalls the social theories of the Frankfurt School, while his analysis of the medium's reshaping of the message recalls the prophetic if less politically astute work of McLuhan. However, a larger question remains for a current and correct analysis of Fearing's understanding of the problem modernity poses to the population's reception of a counter-ideological message: what is the difference between a poem and a pot-boiler? Fearing wrote both, and I argue, demonstrates in both that the medium for counter-ideology is the conditioning of a new cognitive and emotional register for attentive reading, a reception of ideology in a state of distraction from the totalizing aspects of its message. The task of the modern art-work, then, is not to defamiliarize, but to

dishabituate, to teach a productive disengagement from ideology that amounts to a re-appropriation and re-deployment of the tools of mass society toward a counter-productive and counter-ideological end.

It is clear that Fearing had given considerable thought to the problem of political speech in the modern age. His understanding of modernity is astute, and like that of other Marxists rests on the effects of the techno-culture on the populace's capacity to understand history: in other words, on historicity in its popular form as the way in which a revolutionary, apocalyptic futurity is summoned forth into the cognitive realms already inhabited by ideology. In essence, Fearing argues that the electronic age produces a history without a record; that is, it produces a "present" but provides no "catalogue (nor even an effective method for cataloguing) clues to identify the nature of the electronic past" (New and Selected Poems xvii). The ideological effect of this is clear to a Marxist understanding of history. Without a record of history there can be no historicity and therefore no *dialectic*: in Fearing's words, because the message of modern media "can never be confronted with a previous message that might contain material to contradict it, it is also the first word, and the only word" (New and Selected Poems xvii).

In and of itself, this analysis is by no means unique: it holds that technology produces mass culture in a newly phantasmagoric form, which erases the trace of history on the present and dulls the senses of the public to the possibility of a dialectical historicity. We find versions of this schema of modernity in the Frankfurt School and in contemporary Marxism as well. It is in effect the classical conception of ideology in the modern age, in which the ideological mass-product is merely the trace left by the ideological superstructure, and here that superstructure is what Fearing refers to as "the American investigation," a term at once historically specific and revealing in that posits ideology as the *ongoing* project of producing submission to its message among a public that if it knew any better would resist.

Fearing famously remarks that “all time and all space in every medium is merchandise” (New and Selected Poems xix). In this description we may sense the dialectical materialist’s nightmare of the Fordist culture writ large, enacted according to the gloomy model of a Frankfurtized mass society, its political perception dulled in the same breath that a degradation of its aesthetic sophistication is enacted through media saturation. This may be why many analyses of Fearing look to the mass culture model of Adorno in order to explain Fearing’s “appropriation of mass culture” as merely part of a larger project of condemning the mass society’s “atrophying” of the subject and a disintegration of the individual in the face of ideology (Jenemann and Knighton 173). The endpoint of such an analysis is inevitably that the attempt to recover Fearing’s novels into the critical conversation winds up in the same breath privileging his poetic and explicitly ideological work over his copious writings in the popular media.⁴⁶ This chapter hopes to begin the process of recovery by engaging directly with the novels of Kenneth Fearing, and more specifically a description of how distraction, as a trained apperception that re-centers authority over the text, serves as an antidote to the media’s ideological saturation in the modern period. His remark that “all time and all space” is merchandise is usually interpreted as a confirmation of the commodity fetish’s transcendence and the production of capitalism’s inescapable idea universe: the phantasmagoria that escapes notice because no alternative is possible or even imaginable. However, it is worthwhile to reconsider this comment in its original context, as part of an introduction that is both a meditation of the ideological saturation of the mass society but also on the potential of the mass medium to mobilize an instantaneous and potent counter-discourse. Here is the quote in context:

But even the suggestion of discord between the electronic world and the satellite press seems monstrous. All time and all space in every medium is merchandise, so expensive and so profitable in the great treasure hunt of the day that *not a moment, not a line can be wasted on matters irrelevant to communications as a flourishing commerce*. What other, better kind of freespeech

can there possibly be than news and opinion that pays such dividends. (New and Selected Poems xix, emphasis added)

Fearing knew full well that all ideology is hegemonic rather than total; that is, the ideological message recognizes and acknowledges by the very volume of its shouting that there are corners to the human sensorium that it cannot reach, and although it may enjoy dominance, it cannot provide finality or closure. In this case, Fearing emphasizes that any consumer action that is not in the service of the commerce of communications is itself an apodictic denial of the supremacy of ideology through commerce in the final analysis. In other words, a single wasted line, or a moment of inattention to the ideological message brings the system crashing down, even if only for a moment, and only in the dreamlike, imaginative realm of the popular and the cheap. Fearing's novels are thus not a trashy sidebar to his true project as a leftist poet standing above the fray of the "commerce of communications"; his understanding of the mass media is more elegant and engaged. Rather, his novels are designed to produce that instant of cognitive disengagement, a momentary inattention to the constant drone of the ideological message that occurs ironically in the very act of consuming that message as a product. In essence, this is that blinking alterity that Fredric Jameson identifies as the key feature of the science-fictional imagination, positing a new and different futurity or a novel engagement with the hegemonic voice of the mass society in order to produce the counter-discourse in the form of a social dream. In a nutshell, this is also what this dissertation refers to as "distraction."⁴⁷

In this way the mirroring of reception and production through distraction as a conditioned mode of apperception comes into sharper focus. It is distraction that produces the wasteful moment, the inattentive consumer, the nonproductive worker, and so on—in effect a work slowdown of the mass society as a silent protest to its growing media saturation. Fearing believes furthermore that *writing*, even the formula-driven work for hire done in the service of the culture industry itself, may unleash a newly apocalyptic understanding of history. In this way, Fearing identifies the twin processes

of art and reception as effecting a re-historicization of the mass media object, or its rescue from the degrading effects of ideology in the condition of mass culture. By 1956 his methods were more or less mature, and he outlines in some detail the recipe for a newly political mass culture in this way:

There can be a unique exhilaration in creative writing, and it can offer the surprise of final discovery. These qualities exist in life (sometimes), and if they are not to be found in a verbal presentation of it, then the reader (or audience) has been cheated and the writer has been killing everyone's time. This excitement and surprise must be real, not counterfeit, and have in it the breath of those crises upon which most people feel their lives are poised, sometimes crossing into them, in fact and then rarely with routine behavior, seldom with standardized results. (Fearing New and Selected Poems xxii)

This formula seems to proffer a recovery of the real through its re-rendering as an unfamiliar, unconventional space, a kind of Brechtian alienation effect that nevertheless eventually produces realism, or harmony between the “written work” and the readerly life, in which reading engenders and codifies the “crisis” of Marxism in the Fordist society. The readerly “crises,” Fearing goes on to explain, may be personal, political, even aesthetic; however, taken together they produce what the slightly abrupt conclusion to his aesthetics refers to as “mood.” Mood, in his formulation, is “invisible, since it can't be pointed out, but it's there: essentially it's the relationship established between the author and the reader” (Fearing New and Selected Poems xxiv).

One senses that given the opportunity to go on, Fearing might have allowed his definition of “mood” to move beyond this faint gesture toward a common, shared unconscious, but here his evocation of a revolutionary dream-space established by the work of art becomes neatly circumspect. This is perhaps because the optimism and revolutionary energy such an idea suggests must by the 1950s have seemed the most distant and fleeting of dreams, available only in a story, and only in the glimpses of the aestheticization of culture proffered at the margins of attention to the ideology of the “American Investigation.”

3.2 Producing the Non-Productive Subject: Kenneth Fearing's Popular Dialectics

Interestingly, Fearing's explication of his aesthetic project makes very few specific references to his poetic works, and his final analysis practically begs the reader's forgiveness for the lack of a cohesive ideological message to his 1956 collection, claiming that the poems, having been written "in a variety of moods" reflect merely the shifting moods of the writing subject. More succinctly, Fearing writes that the disunity of mood in his poetry arises "because at one time or another I felt that way," and one senses here an echo of the fractured, multivocal narrative structure that Fearing preferred in his novels (Fearing New and Selected Poems xxiv). In a sense, the very thing that makes his poetry more accessible to a leftist reading of his work also seals that work away from the messy backdrop of mass culture against which his ideological message is set: to be a "Marxist" or "counter-discursive" poet whose work is produced and circulated by a coterie of those already initiated into its message is in the same breath to abandon the hope of a counter-discourse that takes place on the fraught and bloodied ground of ideology itself, which in the world where "time and space" are commodities is the public itself, or more precisely the subject. Fearing's antidote to this thorny problem was to produce a work that offers a historical synthesis through the interruption of the train of production at the very locus of attention itself.

Fearing recognized that under the regime of a newly technical modernity, mass production could now intersect with its public at the very site of culture itself, which is ineluctably the human sensorium, or the body itself. As McLuhan more or less predicted, the human nervous system thus becomes ideology's final frontier as much as it is also the site of alterity, futurity and counter-ideology. As Fearing comments in "Happy New Year," the notion that "THE WORLD IS FOR SALE" carries with it this critical addendum: "THE NERVE AND BREATH AND PULSE ARE FOR SALE" (Fearing D.R. 18). The body, or what we might more exactly term the "sensorium," is the

processing center for the mass society, and as such any intervention into its totalizing effects must act on what Benjamin calls the “psychic economy” here. The art work that functions according to this aesthetics of distraction works to violently disengage the subject’s attention to the message of modernity, and to direct the consumer to redeploy the mass-produced object along new sensorimotor pathways. Thus the total economy of information is interrupted by the nonproductive consumer, the phlegmatic, neurotic subject who in Benjamin’s formulation “is compelled to channel [the mass-produced article] violently among the ideas within the natural circulation process” (Benjamin A.P. 340). Poetry’s limitation is that its form re-renders the word itself as aesthetic, that it invites consideration, reflection and attention that because it is itself abstracted from mass culture, fails to interrupt the productive regimes of the popular. The antidote to this problem for Fearing is the Marxist pot-boiler, a form that he experimented with throughout his career.

In this context it is interesting to note that Fearing does make reference to an earlier work of his in his introduction to the 1956 collection, one that addresses itself directly to what he calls “the rackets” behind media saturation in the modern world: his 1946 novel *The Big Clock*. Ten years later, Fearing seems struck not by the plot of his corporate thriller, but by its setting in the magazine industry, a locale with which he was all too familiar:

The rigor mortis overtaking that mythical nerve center was a little too educational; “Anything but the News” was some character’s facetious description of its published output; but the cream of the joke was far more grisly, for soon the ersatz issued by all such gazettes would fill with spy recitals, as the great treasure hunt gathered momentum; it was the eve of the first *coups* staged by the Americaners in and with a world of communications already moribund. (Fearing New and Selected Poems xxiii)

Fearing’s ambivalence about his own embeddedness in the industry is clear here, and if anything it is the stark realism of his own representation that horrifies him most: “some of the evidence has been too appalling and too conclusive, even for me” (Fearing New

and Selected Poems xxiii). Yet Fearing has put his finger on the source of *The Big Clock*'s revolutionary energy. The novel depicts a totalizing media marketplace, a market enterprise designed specifically for the conquest of attention, for the transformation of the commodity into the ubiquitous fetish of the Marxian phantasmagoria. Yet this landscape is relegated to the margins of attention to make room for a dreamlike crisis of more personal proportions, inhabited by a narrator who subverts that same industry like a perverse fly in the ointment while leaving in his wake the traces of his guilt in the form of objects that because they retain the ontological shape of their creation, escape the attention of the magazine industry and reveal its limitations as an ideological police force.

It is precisely mass culture's having been keyed to the production of the *ersatz*, of ontological emptiness, of the commodity-for-itself that both produces mass society's domination over the individual subject and also generates that domination's important critical caveat that Fearing's work tries to exploit: that attention is always a voluntary submission to whatever kind of message, and the boundaries of domination may be found at the margins of the sensorium itself. Fearing goes on to remark that

it has been a privilege (though I can think of safer ones) to learn something of the nature of the eclipse, and to know people better in the way they met it, chiefly through the discipline enforced by writing about them in the margin of whatever light remained. (New and Selected Poems xxiii)

What Fearing proposes here is that the ideological message has a "margin" built in, that the site of the counter-discourse appears at the boundary of domination, or what he calls "the American Investigation," for ideology had by 1956 already taken on its inquisitorial form. In essence, this description sums up aptly the challenge faced by the characters in Fearing's novels: each is embedded, like Fearing himself, in a media marketplace or ideological message-making apparatus that is at best indifferent to the needs of the individual; it is perhaps this consistent thematics that leads David Jenemann and Andrew

Knighton to conclude that Fearing's novels merely replicate the gloomy materialism of the Frankfurt School *in toto*, or that they in principle

reflect an uneasiness at the bad faith that results when one persists in trying to tell an individual's story at the same time that mass technologies threaten to render the very notion of 'individualism' increasingly problematic. (173)

Yet Fearing does provide for the possibility of a counter-discourse, even if it is one that is subsumed within the unspoken appetites of the worst mass-culture shills, or in the drunken reveries of failed artists and bankrupt physicians. To attend to "the margin of whatever light remained" after the shadow of domination permeates all space is also to delineate the boundaries of that domination, to reserve an attentive space for the social dream.

In "Happy New Year," the message of domination is delivered in all caps: "IF IT IS TRUE THAT THE WORLD IS FOR SALE... IF IT IS TRUE THAT THE NERVE AND BREATH AND PULSE ARE FOR SALE" (Fearing D.R. 18). Meanwhile the poet's moodier voice advises an imaginative disengagement from that message, a perverse social dreaming that will tell "how it was in some gayer city or brighter place, speak / of some bloodier, hungrier, more treacherous / time / any other age, any far land" (D.R. 18). "Time" is given its own line in the passage, and this serves perhaps to emphasize its dual nature as a function of economics and as the location of the fissure between mass culture and the body. In *The Big Clock*, Fearing imagines time to be a kind of massive golem of mass culture itself, a machine that by definition parcels experience into mechanical ticks whose regularity marks their presence in the ontological void of the phantasmagoria: as Fearing describes the world of *The Big Clock*, all experience is finally resolved into the mechanistic experience of modernity:

...then I met a small legal cog in a major political engine.
And next Janoth's latest invention in the way of social
commentators. And others, all of them pretty damned important
people, had they only known it. Some of them unaware they were
gentlemen and scholars. Some of them tomorrow's famous
fugitives from justice. A sizeable sprinkling of lunatics, so

plausible they had never been suspected and never would be. Memorable bankrupts of the future, the obscure suicides of ten or twenty years from now. Potentially fabulous murderers. The mothers or fathers of truly great people I would never know.

In short, the big clock was running as usual, and it was time to go home. (T.B.C. 5)

Fearing goes on to remark that “all other watches have to be set by the big one,” and indicates that “the Big Clock” does not measure time as much as it regulates experience, transforms society into a fearful golem of temporality in which violence, revolution and alterity are relegated into a future that is already subject to the dominance of the technological monstrosity that is the synthesis of information and culture provided by the mass society.

3.3 The Golem of History: Intoxication and Resistance in

The Big Clock

Fearing was not only a consumer of mass culture; as a professional writer he was frequently involved in *producing* it, and thus he embodies in reverse the conventional wisdom of the producer reborn as consumer in the age of mass culture. This is often the reason given for his use of the diction of newsreels and comic books in his poetry: that in adopting the diction of the degraded mass culture universe, Fearing is attempting to de-anesthetize a mass society that has become numb to the depredations of capitalism. This reflects once again Fearing’s adoption of the key terms in a Frankfurt-school-driven cultural analysis, one which sees mass culture itself as merely the blunt instrument of ideology, resulting in a brutal anesthetization of the masses against the pain, conflict and disharmony of modernity itself. This becomes complicated in the 1930s, as Rita Barnard notes, that decade seeing the emergence of both great poverty and great abundance, in her terms giving rise both to the utopian promise of consumer culture and also to capitalism’s need to reposition the worker *as* a consumer.⁴⁸ Barnard is interested in this pas-de-deux between the promise of utopia via consumption and the abject poverty of the 1930s, noting that even as images of want are “part of our popular iconography of the period,”

the depression is characterized by the promise of “comfort, mobility and pleasure promised by the ‘dime-store dream parade’ of commodities” (Barnard 21). What she refers to is in essence the fraught and contradictory relationship between the twin poles of “reification” and “utopia,” famously addressed in Fredric Jameson’s 1979 article of that name. Jameson’s remark that the character of mass culture is, indeed *must* be dialectical rather than merely ideological is one that has arguably had wide-ranging implications in Left criticism and Culture Studies equally:

The concept of the commodity introduces the possibility of structural and historical differentiation into what was conceived as the universal description of the aesthetic experience as such and in whatever form. The concept of the commodity cuts across the phenomenon of reification... from a different angle, that of consumption. In a world in which everything, including labor power, has become a commodity, ends remain no less undifferentiated than in the production schema—they are all rigorously quantified, and have become abstractly comparable through the medium of money, their respective price or wage—yet we can now phrase their instrumentalization, their reorganization along the means/ends split, in a new way by saying that by its transformation into a commodity a thing, of whatever type, has been reduced to a means for its own consumption. (“Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” 131)

Like Barnard’s, this is in a manner of speaking a Baudrillardian analysis, in that it culminates with the transformation of the “instrument of commodity satisfaction” into “its own material image” (“Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” 131). And yet the specter of a commodity that re-inscribes the problem of reification, that “cuts across” it by abstracting the object of consumption from the agreed-upon measure of its instrumental value—its price—differs significantly from the Frankfurt School’s dire prediction of a Taylorized cultural marketplace. Jameson does not abandon the Frankfurt School’s notion of a critical approach to mass culture that seeks to unmask it as the tool of ideology in the abstract, but he chides them (Adorno in particular) for their belief that “the great work of modern high culture ... can serve as a fixed point or eternal standard against which to measure the ‘degraded’ status of mass culture,” suggesting instead that an analysis that accounts for an interpenetration of these two realms would be most useful

(Fredric Jameson "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" 133). This analysis, of the "utter senselessness" of this split is part of what leads Barnard to her analysis of Kenneth Fearing, whose relatively obscure and yet wide-ranging literary career seems to take up these questions and infuse them with new energy.

Criticism of Fearing has, with only a few exceptions, suffered from this Frankfurt-School hangover⁴⁹: his rootedness in the material conditions of depression and status as both a "proletarian poet" and a writer of potboilers, pulps and pornography makes him a dual sign of the eternal standard of high modernism and the degraded products of mass culture. In spite of a recent renaissance of interest in his work, Fearing's novels have largely escaped critical attention: as Jenemann and Knighton put it in 2004, "with the exception of *The Big Clock*, each of Kenneth Fearing's novels are out of print, out of sight, and largely out of memory" (172)⁵⁰. Recently, the work of Kenneth Fearing has re-entered the critical discourse about modernist cultural materialism, if something less than triumphantly; it remains true that Fearing's novels are rarely taken seriously, even when they are as formally complex and engaging as his poems, as is certainly the case with *Clark Gifford's Body* and arguably also with *The Hospital* and *The Big Clock*.⁵¹ One goal of this chapter will be to offer a beginning salvo in what I hope will eventually be a longer conversation about each of Fearing's novels, including the ones no longer in print.

The Big Clock follows a by-now-familiar noir formula: the corporate thriller. The protagonist is George Stroud, a magazine editor for the publishing conglomerate Janoth Enterprises. Stroud is the editor of the monthly periodical *Crimeways*, and as the name suggests the magazine is more or less a police blotter for crime of all sorts, blue and white-collar. As such, Stroud is both a magazine editor and an amateur private investigator, having been involved simultaneously in crime reporting and in detection in the past, and is more or less Janoth Enterprise's resident expert in both. Eventually, Stroud has the misfortune of witnessing Earl Janoth's murder of his mistress Pauline

Delos, a woman with whom Stroud himself is romantically involved. When Janoth tries to cover his tracks he makes use of the one resource eminently at the disposal of a media magnate: he turns to his magazine's investigative team to find the witness to the crime so that he may be eliminated. This leads to the novel's central irony: that George Stroud is given the task of identifying and locating George Stroud, through a series of clues that include a local bar, an extramarital affair and a series of paintings by the artist Louise Patterson. It is the last of these that leads to the novel's climax, in which Stroud must unmask Janoth as the killer before he himself is discovered and presumably killed in order to cover up the crime.

Janoth Enterprises supplies *The Big Clock* with the kind of totalizing corporate setting that is ideal for Fearing's message of individual action at the margins of a totalizing attention. The corporation, as others have pointed out, is a thinly veiled metaphor for Time, Inc., which employed Fearing briefly. However, the corporation here is the producer of phantasmagoria itself, the manufacturer of that media landscape which supplies a waiting public with ideology in all its totalizing forms. It's no surprise that the producers are themselves caught in a phantasmagoria that erases the individual: as Nicholas Christopher observes, the "hero" of *The Big Clock* is a person already broken-down and defeated by the system, living his "true" life in the interstices between a banal working life and an unfulfilling family, and mostly in a drunken stupor.

In the midst of his affair with Pauline Delos, George Stroud remarks often on the distracted and intoxicated nature of experience. He finishes a drink that he "seemed to have in [his] hand" before ending up, practically through no volition of his own, in a hotel with his blond paramour, where he is "a little bit surprised and dismayed to see it was already three o' clock" (T.B.C. 39). As he and Pauline get drunk together, they begin to regain control over temporality, that aspect of experience that is regulated by the "Big Clock" of modernity: "we had our drinks with straight tap water. It was all right. The life we were now living seemed to quicken perceptibly" (T.B.C. 39). The experience

of this affair, which is more or less a temporary escape from the controlled time-sense of his daily life, resolves finally into the ultimate experience of detachment, in which the vehicle of intoxication engenders a novel perception of materiality, indeed of objects themselves:

I remembered to tell Pauline, lying on the floor with a pillow under her head and looking more magnificent than ever in my pajamas, that our home would no longer be ours after noon. She dreamily told me I needn't worry, it would be all right, and why didn't I go right on explaining about Louise Patterson and the more important trends in modern painting. I saw with some surprise I had a book open in my lap, but I had been talking about something else entirely. And now I couldn't remember what. I dropped the book, and lay down on the floor beside her.

"No more pictures," I said. "Let's solve the mystery."
 "What mystery?"
 "You."
 "I'm a very average person, George. No riddle at all."
 I believe I said, "You're the last, final, beautiful, beautiful, ultimate enigma. Maybe you can't be solved." (T.B.C. 40)

This passage's tone recalls some of Fearing's less known work: the erotica that he wrote for hire for the pulps throughout his career, and which occasionally makes a stylistic appearance in this more mainstream novel. However, it's worth noting in this context that George Stroud is more than just a drunk: he is transported by intoxication, experiencing a productive detachment that rather than muting the sense, simply discards and overlooks the material surface of his universe. His drunkenness clarifies and crystallizes experience, and permits a sophisticated understanding of the ontological character of objects.

Indeed, much like Benjamin in the trance state induced by Hashish, Stroud uses the moment of intoxication to muse about the state of modern art, and though each of his perceptions is clouded and murky, marked by uncertainty and distraction, one nevertheless senses that intoxication and sex here mingle to create an experience that transcends the control of the big clock, that re-inscribes art, objects and subjectivity into a new and dangerous awareness. Stroud describes their lovemaking in this way, both displacing it within an offstage ellipsis and revealing its elusive importance to the notion

of subjectivity under the Big Clock's regime of transforming subjects into the continual experience of domination: "I found out again why we are on this earth. I think" (T.B.C. 40). Even here the experience is demarcated by the disclaimer of uncertainty, and the distracted nature of Stroud's experience becomes ever clearer in this context; he is surprised to find a book in his lap, cannot remember what he was saying about modern art, recalls only dimly the sweet nothings he murmurs to Pauline in their dingy hotel room, but in this process he is reminded of the experience of subjectivity, of its purchase on the body and moreover of its transformative power. Like Pauline it is an enigma that can't be solved, only perceptible in this altered state and then only as a temporary interlude before a ringing phone announces the return of the temporal nature of experience. Immediately he complies, looking at his watch to register the correct time (it is 1:30) and now rather than transcending the Big Clock his tipping is commanded by it: "I got a quick shave, and after that I had a quicker breakfast, and then a split-second drink" (T.B.C. 41). That intoxication produces both distraction and understanding is predicted by the findings of Walter Benjamin's hashish experiments:

As for our own inability to focus, to concentrate on the subject under discussion, the feeling resembles an interrupted physical contact and has roughly the following features. What we are on the verge of talking about seems infinitely alluring; we stretch out our arms full of love, eager to embrace what we have in mind. Scarcely have we touched it, however, than it disillusion us completely. The object of our attention suddenly fades at the touch of language. It puts on years; our love wholly exhausts it in a single moment. So it pauses for a rest until it again appears attractive enough to lead us back to it once more. (O.H. 28)

The cruel irony is that as intoxication ends, sobriety is revealed to be one more facet of the regulation of experience through the regimes of the mass society. Yet as with Benjamin, it is the "murky, alien, exotic aspects of the intoxication that remain" in the subject's memory, subject to new ideological codes but remaining just beyond the regimented grasp of attention and thus always suspending the infinite revolutionary potential of the social dream (Benjamin O.H. 23).

Like Benjamin's "dialectics at a standstill," Fearing's is a suspended revolution, trapped inside a theoretical ellipsis yet filled with malevolent, apocalyptic force. For Benjamin, the state of intoxications causes his musings to take on "a satanic phase...my smile assumed satanic features, though it was the expression of satanic knowing, satanic contentment, and satanic calm, rather than satanic destructiveness" (O.H. 23). For Stroud, intoxication functions much the same way, revealing the true shape of the real beneath the layers of ersatz that cover it. However, his romantic interlude merely delays his return to his workplace, where he finds his secretary "listlessly typing in the small room connecting our two offices," and discovers that nothing has changed; he finds himself "an afternoon like any other afternoon" (T.B.C. 42). He wonders briefly if his wife suspects the affair, but dismisses the thought from his mind with the time-collapsing realization that "everything was the same as it had always been," meaning both that his encounter of the night before might as well be erased altogether from memory, and that its significance in terms of instantiating a newly critical perspective on the real was illusory and fleeting.

3.4 "Steering in the Other Direction"; The Shape of Resistance in the Age of Totality

Much has been made of George Stroud's curious family, in which each of the three members carries some variation the name "George": George Stroud, his wife Georgette and their daughter, Georgia are all referred to by one another as "George." A superficial reading here would suggest that Stroud has experienced a fracturing of the subject according to the familiar formula of a Fordist ideology whose objective is the erasure of the individual. In that formulation "George Stroud" has been fractured, his identity scattered across three individuals. This fracturing is further emphasized by the novel's multiple, shifting narrators, who in Jenemann and Knighton's terms bring about an imaginative world in which "the individual's battle with the culture industry has

already been decisively lost” (176). Yet Stroud’s family is also the site of a peculiar and imaginative social dance, which simultaneously offers an antidote to this new shape of the “crisis of the present.”

Each morning, George Stroud tells a story to his daughter Georgia, one which inevitably contains the seeds of counter-discourse in its very narrative: the cornflake which is eaten by the girl avenges its demise by giving her a stomachache, or the inanimate table-leg that she continually kicks eventually kicks her back, sending her flying out a window. The stories are designed to elicit laughter, but in each case they carry within them the potent social subtext of resistance to domination. In the end, resistance always turns out to have the nihilistic, “satanic” aspect of Benjamin’s hashish-induced vision: the cornflake offers its resistance after it is destroyed. The table-leg registers its own resistance in the form of violent revolt, but in doing so obviates and destroys the very purpose for which it was built. As if to emphasize this point, a conversation between Stroud and his wife Georgette offers this incisive analysis of the nature of social action under the conditions of modernity:

“Would you like to go back to newspaper work, George?”
 “God forbid. I never want to see another fire engine as long as I live. Not unless I’m riding on it, steering the back end of a hook-and-ladder-truck. The fellow on the back end always steers just the opposite to the guy in the driver’s seat. I think.”
 “That’s what I mean.”
 “What do you mean?”
 “You don’t like *Crimeways*. You don’t really like Janoth enterprises at all. You’d like to steer in just the opposite direction to all of that.” (T.B.C. 14)

Arguably Fearing felt much the same way in his time at *Time*, inc.; but of particular interest here is the nature of “steering in the opposite direction.” Ostensibly, this is the counter-balance to the action of the driver, but in the end both discourse and counter-discourse are required to keep the apparatus moving forward. The fire-engine places power in the hands of the driver at the same time as it authorizes an oppositional steering that suggests the possibility of new futures and new directions, from within the very

system that supposedly offers only the unitary voice of ideology itself. It is for this reason that to conclude that Fearing depicts only a mass society in which the “multiplicity of alternatives is little more than an increasingly sophisticated and pernicious means of entrapment” is to ignore that it is also mass society that revives the specter of a popular art, and with it the notion of a newly subliminal negativity that complies with ideology but steers in the opposite direction (Jenemann and Knighton 176). In this way Fearing’s curiously contradictory remark from “Reading, Writing and the Rackets” that the media is “the central nervous system that *actuates, or paralyzes* a whole society” becomes manifestly clearer (Fearing New and Selected Poems xix, emphasis added). Media paralysis is by now a familiar topic, and one that generally makes copious use of the Frankfurt School model in which the autonomous quality of the art-work is degraded through the process of distribution, just as the autonomy of the individual is erased by the commodity fetish. But Fearing here points to the same phenomenon that gives the socialist Clark Gifford hope for the possibility of revolution and social change: the notion that mass media may also *actuate* the political consciousness of a people, even if it must do so covertly under the aegis of a corporate media industry comfortable in its control of both the medium and its content.

It is perhaps no surprise therefore that the main actors of *The Big Clock* are themselves emptied, degraded subjects, heartless golems along the lines of Benjamin’s “metallized man” who has forsaken any hope of pleasure exterior to the codes and systems of ideology that have produced him (Work of Art” 241). One is the inventor of a machine that is “better than Einstein,” another a “small legal cog”; still another is “Janoth’s latest invention in the way of social commentators” (Fearing T.B.C. 5). These descriptions cement Fordism’s radical mechanization of culture, or the transformation of every day life into the radically Taylorized landscape of the factory floor. In effect, it is the media machine that is Janoth enterprises that oversees this transformation, and this is perhaps nowhere clearer than in a project that the news conglomerate is developing for

the aptly if curiously named subsidiary *Futureways*. The project is called “Funded Individuals,” and it has a shape not dissimilar to the targeted and limited entitlement programs of the New Deal:

In theory, Funded Individuals was something big. The substance of it was the capitalization of gifted people in their younger years for an amount sufficient to rear them under controlled conditions, educate them, and then provide for a substantial investment in some profitable enterprise through which the original indebtedness would be repaid. The original loan, floated as ordinary stocks or bonds, also paid life-insurance premiums guaranteeing the full amount of the issue, and a normal yearly dividend.

Not every one of these incorporated people—Funded Individuals was our registered name for the undertaking—would be uniformly successful, of course, however fortunate and talented he might originally be. But the Funded Individuals were operated as a pool, with a single directorship, and our figures had demonstrated that such a venture would ultimately show a tremendous overall profit. (Fearing *T.B.C.* 29)

This might as well be a description of the New Deal’s secret rationale, the generation of a limited entitlement with the aim of sustaining the very system that made those entitlements necessary in the first place.

“Funded Individuals” is on its face a democratization of profit, a redistribution of capital for the common good. However, its true objective is abundantly clear in the context of a narrative of depersonalization, of the golem-ization of society: the creation of “incorporated people,” of a populace that is so personally invested in the machinery of mass society that their every self-interested action also serves the larger interests of the corporation, what Fearing here calls “the Big Clock.” The Big Clock is not only a timepiece, although certainly one of its roles is the regulation of temporal experience. Its true function, as the overarching mechanism of industrial society itself, is to bring into sharper focus that fraught relation between the individual and the machine that is at the center of a mechanized, incorporated society. Fearing illustrates this with a gloomy description of the clock’s social function in the easily recognizable terms of a familiar nursery rhyme:

Time.

One runs like a mouse up the old, slow pendulum of the big clock, time, scurries around and across its huge hands, strays inside through the intricate wheels and balances and springs of the inner mechanism, searching among the cobwebbed mazes of this machine with all its false exits and dangerous blind alleys and steep runways, natural traps and artificial baits, hunting for the true opening and the real prize.

Then the clock strikes one and it is time to go, to run down the pendulum, to become again a prisoner making once more the same escape. (T.B.C. 15)

This is the central allegory of T.B.C., in which the eponymous clock stands for the shape of modern domination itself, what Fearing later called the “American Inquisition.” The message, that every subject implicitly understands, indeed agrees to as part of the contract of the social, is that the pursuit of escape is both inevitable and illusory. All action, including resistance, is finally in the service of the apparatuses of capital in which the subject is caught. This is why the subject is at least apparently “empty,” lacking in the force of subjectivity or the ontological sense of the individual: not because it lacks the will to resist, but because the site of domination is not (as under Taylorism) the body, but (as with the more advanced phase of Fordism) the commodification of all human experience and its redeployment toward the shared project of production. However, the story carries a hidden ambiguity: the narrative of the mouse in the machine also amounts to an insistence upon a stable subjectivity that although it meanders, settles finally on this repeating loop, a continuous story of escape from domination. Put another way, the action of escape is commodified and futile, but the dream of escape cannot be resolved into its commodity form, no matter how often the story repeats.

It hardly bears insisting that “Funded Individuals” can also stand in for the multiple, shifting narrators of the story itself; it is at least clear that like “incorporated people,” the narrators in each chapter attempt a daring escape from the machinery of the monstrous golem that has entrapped them, attempting gambits ranging from fraud and deception to murder, and likewise that in each case their escape only proves their complicity with the corporation all along. On its face this is a fundamental message of

dominance, but like the supremacy of the culture industry it carries with it the caveat that although the desire for escape cannot be erased, it must instead be re-inscribed as illusion, an act which both vitiates and grants eternal life to the pursuit of revolution; or, in Fearing's own words, both "paralyzes" and "actuates" the act of escape.

Jenemann and Knighton argue that "Fearing deals with the mutilation of the traditional narrative subject as a direct consequence of the rise of mass-media transmissions, and in so doing, effects a critique of transmission itself" (176). In this way, Fearing's critique takes on an aesthetic dimension, not only describing the annihilation of the subject, but also critiquing the form of the novel itself, as having perpetrated an illusory subjectivity in an age when the novel "was to prove increasingly inadequate to the demands it traditionally shouldered"⁵² (175). These are presumably revolutionary demands in keeping with a larger project of producing a discourse of futurity, of a realist critique of the present, and they thus seem to Jenemann and Knighton less possible in the age of fractured subjectivity that they associate with that mass transmission. In that sense, what Jenemann and Knighton propose is a realist novel that when it corresponds to recognizable subjectivity may do important social work, but that falters when confronted with modernity's new demands upon the subject. According to this analysis, though "Fearing's novels dispute the independence of political action," they nevertheless propose a revision of the "dusty dialectics and sagging synthesis" of traditional left politics (Jenemann and Knighton 174). The conceptual antidote that Jenemann and Knighton propose is an "endogenous" praxis in which the novels "serve as imaginary testing grounds ... as a forum for experimentation with a new age, and as a means of launching a new politics" (175).

The metaphor of the mouse inside the clock lends credence to the notion of an "endogenous" praxis, but Jenemann and Knighton's work is decidedly short on details when it comes to understanding the true form of a new politics, or indeed the form of experimentation itself as a literary or cultural model of action. Having defined poetry as

having an “impressionistic style” that limits its capacity as political speech, they are more or less content to adduce a “new politics” emerging from this “endogenous praxis,” even though they concede that in Fearing “the individual’s battle against the culture industry has already been decisively lost” (176). In that context the mouse’s continual struggle for escape, as repetitive as it is itself timeless (originating from inside the production of corporate time) belies the notion of a battle that is already lost, instead indicating the continual if futile struggles of a hegemonic power whose very totality delineates the boundaries of its own influence. Perhaps a more useful way of understanding the way the mouse moves through the clock, and continually attempts escape only to be perpetually thwarted by the machinery of the system, is by reference to Michel de Certeau’s distinction between “strategy” and “tactic.” In de Certeau’s analysis, a “strategy” is

...the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an “environment.” A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper (propre)* and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it. (xix)

We may detect here echoes not only of Gramsci, but of Althusser’s notion of ideology as the product of institutional apparatuses generating and disseminating its message. Indeed, what de Certeau means by a “subject of will and power” is in Marxist terms the ideological message itself, disseminated by mass culture but originating in the institutions of the state, here granted the status of “subject” to mass society’s teeming, faceless “object.” However, de Certeau’s critical innovation is to insist that “culture” is not merely a product of interaction between a reader and a text, but a synthesis of strategy with a second mode of action that he calls “tactic.” For our purposes it is well to note the unspoken caveat that the very presence of strategic apparatuses of dominance announces and delineates the problem of tactic as a limited but ever-present resistance.

3.5 “Three Criminals, or Three Hundred?”: *The Big Clock*
and the Arithmetic of Domination

It is this central irony of domination that brings *The Big Clock*'s obsession with time into sharper focus. Time, of course, is money, as the characters in *The Big Clock* are well aware. George Stroud's editorial colleague Roy Cordette dismisses a crime story from the annals of *Crimeways* by noting the irrelevance of “figures” to an analysis of crime's importance: “What is the difference whether it is a half million, half a thousand, or just half a dollar? *Three years, three months, or three minutes?* Three criminals or three hundred? What makes it so significant that it must be featured by us?” (T.B.C. 23, emphasis added). Cordette's striking parallel here reveals the reason for the Big Clock's domination over the time-sense: time itself is merely a quantifiable figure, a commodity that may be parceled out by mass media in the form of experience. Fearing's remark in “Reading, Writing and the Rackets” that time and space amounts to merchandise in a mechanized media world clarifies this sentiment, but Cordette's parallel serves a second, more sinister purpose. In a sense, he and George are involved in the true ideological project of the mass society, which must always be to define that which is beyond the pale in a social context in which every aspect of experience has been re-deployed in its commodity form. In essence, they are looking for that story that transcends the figurable, that departs from the mere language of exchange that dominates stories of ordinary crime. In the end, this particular tale doesn't qualify; Cordette relegates it to a sidebar with an almost off-hand calculation of its degree of resistance in the terms offered by the marketplace:

“... We'll give it two or three paragraphs in *Crime Wavelets*. ‘Sober, hard-working thugs invest \$175,000, three years of toil, to stage a bank robbery. Earn themselves a profit of \$325,000, net.’ At three men working for three years,” he calculated, “that amounts to something over thirty-six thousand a year each. Yes. ‘This modest wage, incommensurate with the daring and skill exercised, proves again that crime does not pay—enough. (T.B.C. 24)

What Cordette truly notes about this crime is that although it is ostensibly a form of resistance, it lacks the grander importance that he believes his audience is looking for. The reason this crime will fail to attract the attention of the *Crimeways* reader is that ultimately it is an act that can be understood in the language of exchange; in fact, it is a crime whose costs can easily be absorbed by the system of capitalism, and in that sense this crime is merely “work” or “production” of another kind. Arguably this crime is pre-ordained by the very system that it resists: it merely alters the *mode* of exchange, but does not fundamentally escape its *form*.

Bank robbery thus lacks the ontological character of crime, that is, the quality of the denial of the structure of authority itself in the form of an act that devastates society’s commodity form beyond repair. Murder is one such crime, but the story Cordette approves, about the “criminal abortion racket,” appeals to him because it reveals an arithmetic that is not comprehensible under the logic of capitalism’s regimes of exchange: “we’ll start by giving the figures for social security survivor benefits. Funeral allowances, in particular, and make the obvious contrasts. Here, on the one hand, is what our government spends every year to bury the dead, while here, at the other end of the scale of life, is what the people spend to prevent birth” (T.B.C. 25). On its face this is a nonsensical equation, but its merit to Cordette is its understanding of the negative value of human life under a regime of exchange: when life is re-inscribed as mere merchandise, the only remaining form of resistance to the Big Clock’s domination over experience is death. In the end, even death is a commodity, as Cordette muses: “you might get in touch with the Society of American Morticians for additional figures on what we spend for death, as contrasted with what is spent to prevent life” (T.B.C. 25). Crime, for Cordette, is that “satanic” appetite that for Benjamin was the unraveling of genteel experience under the influence of hashish; we may call it a death urge, or *thanatos*, but Cordette understands that its primary feature, what makes it interesting to the *Crimeways* reader, is

that it is the clearest form of resistance to the language of exchange that permeates the codes and regimes of mass society.

In that case, we must return to the work's title, and its central metaphor, which not insignificantly repeats a motif that we find in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. A clock is not merely an instrument for the measurement of time; it imposes upon a preexisting temporality a regime of repetition and measurement that is mechanical in nature, and that therefore empties time of historicity; every tick of a clock is the same as the last, and the one that is to come; in every case the measure of the turning of a gear becomes the only rational measure of temporality itself, and the notion of a teleological time, a time with originary force, or an apocalyptic destination is impossible; a time that records linear history, even more so. Clocks, an old invention here made new by the notion of their dominance over experience under modernity, have in Fearing's novel transformed temporality itself.

Fredric Jameson describes the occultation of the distant subalterns of colonialism in this way:

The existential realia of the metropolis are thus severed from the cognitive map that would alone lend them coherence and reestablish relationships of meaning and of its production. The new daily life is thereby rendered at best enigmatic and at its most extreme absurd (in the philosophical sense), while abstract knowledge of the colonial situation and its worldwide economic structure necessarily remains abstract and specialized; the colonial laborers and producers have no direct experience of the "advanced" world for which their exploitation is responsible. ("The End of Temporality" 700)

In a sense, the experience of mass society in *The Big Clock* is the same: the effect of the big clock's golem-ization of time and experience itself is an emptied, flattened historicity, a time that is no longer linear, but like the face of a clock, literally goes in circles. Time is now parceled out in its ultimate commodity form, the final realization of a world in which "time and space in every medium is merchandise," every bit as mass-produced and empty as the controlled and regulated media experience manufactured by Janoth

industries. To emphasize this point, Fearing's metaphor of the mouse in the clock warrants another look: life is an attempt to escape the machinery of the Big Clock. However, the experience of escape, the dream of futurity and of apocalypse, turns out in the end to be subject to the very domination it seeks to subvert. As a result, the mouse's escape, like the mechanical tick of a second hand, always begins and ends the same way, once again in the eternally repeating terms of the old nursery rhyme: "the clock strikes one and it is time to go, to run down the pendulum, to become again a prisoner making once more the same escape" (Fearing T.B.C. 15).

In this sense, the Big Clock also measures and regulates the repetition of class struggle, not to mention the very oppositional discourse of the body itself; its regulation of experience therefore also reveals the clock; insistence on control over both time itself and more importantly the *time sense*, the narratives of our own history and the historicity that this produces. Even mass media is not in control of the time displayed on the Big Clock, being itself subject to a machinery that is as invisible as it is necessary. George Stroud explains that the editorial board of *Crimeways*, although they reflect the message of ideology, are not producers of culture as such: they are simply the mute functionaries of an external authority to which they must also bow. Specifically, they are the face of the clock, which turns out to be the public face of the machinery of domination: "the moving impulse simply arrived, and we, on the face that the giant clock turned to the public, merely registered the correct hour of the standard time" (Fearing T.B.C. 27). Yet if the Big Clock is a story of the machinery of domination that accords to mass culture the status of supreme dispenser of the ideological message, projecting its fiefdom over the very nature of diachronic experience itself, then it is perhaps valid to look back to the mouse in the clock as a way of understanding how a revolutionary praxis may manifest itself in the face of the totalizing presence of the Big Clock: regulating and revealing experience even as it conceals the invisible machinery of the interests it represents.

In his essay discussing Kenneth Fearing's Marxist poetry, Nathaniel Mills argues for a linkage to Benjamin's positioning of counter-discourse along the continua of sleep and awakening, or anesthesia and actuation:

Fearing's understanding of revolutionary praxis mirrors Benjamin's, as it entails the awakening of the individual from the anaesthetizing dreamworld of capitalism and a concomitant engagement in class struggle. Fearing's poetry attempts to stimulate this awakening in the reader. (Mills 19)

Mills goes on to argue that it is in formal techniques that we may find the revolutionary message of Fearing's poetry: that they "rely on shock and sensory disruption in order to penetrate the modern individual's state of sensory anaesthetization, a necessary first step in inculcating revolutionary praxis" (Mills 19). This line of reasoning is more or less Brechtian, in that it posits something akin to an alienation effect in generating in a reader a newly perceptive vision of their own disengagement from ideology and its apparatuses of authority. Mills' reading of Fearing and Benjamin likewise rests on Susan Buck-Morss' 1992 revisiting of Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay, in which she generally characterizes revolution as an awakening from slumber or an actuation of the physical senses in the face of anaesthesia. What Buck-Morss refers to as a "sensory alienation" is here positioned as the engine of both fascism and likewise as the facilitator of warfare itself:

Benjamin is saying that sensory alienation lies at the source of the aestheticization of politics, which fascism does not create, but merely "manages" (*betreibt*). We are to assume that both alienation and aestheticized politics as the sensual conditions of modernity outlive fascism—and thus so does the enjoyment taken in viewing our own destruction. (Buck-Morss "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered" 4)

For Buck-Morss, the final paragraph of the Work of Art essay sounds a dire warning about the nature of mass culture itself, and it is here that we may begin to understand why criticism of Fearing is often hard-pressed to avoid a gloomy materialism that locates the faint hope of a novel praxis in the formal experiment, but instantly brackets it as ultimately falling victim to its own alienation from the mass experience. If praxis

requires a “shock effect” that reawakens a desensitized populace, then the key critical caveat is a crippling media determinism that supposes mass culture itself to be the anesthetic that in Adorno’s formulation results in a reified mass cultural object that causes a regression in the very character of artistic reception itself.

Adorno describes the phenomenon of “regressive listening” as an example *par excellence* of the commodity fetish penetrating to the core of artistic reception itself:

...it is contemporary listening that has regressed, arrested at the infantile stage. Not only do the listening subjects lose, along with the freedom of choice and responsibility, the capacity for conscious perception of music, which was from time immemorial confined to a narrow group, but they stubbornly reject the possibility of such perception. They fluctuate between comprehensive forgetting and sudden dives into recognition. They listen atomistically and dissociate what they hear, but precisely in this dissociation they develop certain capacities which accord less with the concepts of traditional aesthetics than with those of football or motoring. (46)

Adorno has earlier claimed that the very status of the art work is degraded by its transformation into the object of mass consumption, through the phenomenon of the commodity fetish: “the works which are the basis of the fetishization and become the cultural goods experience constitutional changes as a result. They become vulgarized. Irrelevant consumption destroys them”(40). The nature of the commodity fetish in this case is clear: it is an emergent property of mass culture and monopoly capital themselves, the fetishization of art being a function primarily of its death and rebirth within a totalizing culture of exchange. Adorno perhaps puts it more succinctly as “the more inexorably the principle of exchange value destroys use values for human beings, the more deeply does exchange value disguise itself as the object of enjoyment”(39). A political art then, a revolutionary praxis, can only take place by rejecting the “principle of exchange value” altogether and presumably by restoring an abstract aesthetic standard into which only a narrow group will be welcomed as pre-initiates into its ideological work. That this formulation is at its core elitist, or that it fundamentally re-inscribes a genteel aesthetics that runs contrary to the proletarian aims of Marxism itself is by now

perhaps a familiar critique of Adorno. However, I want to suggest another angle, one which Fearing himself explored at some length in both his fiction and his poetry. In essence, although the new mass culture provides for a more dominant ideological message and concomitantly less space for a productive counter-discourse, Fearing wishes to explore the limits of domination at its final frontier: that of consumption, which turns out to be a more contested ground than Adorno is willing to account for.

3.6 Everyone's a Critic: The Democratization of Negative

Poetics

It is worth stressing here that mass culture is not itself a stipulation as to content but merely an industrial means of content distribution. For Fearing, the growing dominance of mass culture is a complex problem, resulting both in a growing penetration of the ideological message of capitalism, but also in the growth of new readerly competences, new receptive forms to go along with new forms of the dissemination of information across the populace. In "Continuous Performance," a poem about the cinema, Fearing describes a common practice among movie-goers, that of arriving late and sitting through the end of the movie before staying in the theater to watch the beginning after the end has already been revealed. The result is a reversal of the genteel narrative in which resolution follows conflict, in which the viewer is unsettled as "the amorous business that ended with happiness forever after / is starting all over again, this time with a curse and / a pistol shot. It is not so good" (A.O.P. 3). Time itself, as Fearing notes at the Poem's start, is "out of joint." Effects literally precede causes, revelations precede mystery, resolutions precede conflict, and from this new mysteries are born, in the form of a "packed valise" whose meaning is revealed not by the end of the film but by its gnomic and reticent beginning, as the story that ended with a carnival "resumes itself in arctic regions among blinding snows" (A.O.P. 3). This new perception

extends beyond film and into the poetic arts; Fearing describes this new receptive mode literally rewriting the canon of genteel literature, as his moviegoer stays to

see the Hydra's head cut off, and grown again,
and incredibly multiplied,
And observe how Sisyphus fares when he has once more
almost reached the top
How Tantalus again will nearly eat and drink.

And learn how Alph the sacred river flows, in Xanadu, for-
ever to a sunless sea,
How, from the robes of simple flesh, fate emerges from
new
and always more fantastic fate. (A.O.P. 4)

What Fearing has described is the aesthetic effect of the reader's denial of linear, narrative time, of an insistence on a mass cultural experience that is already fractured and unsettled by a new media universe in which the representation, as produced by a mass culture which dominates the sensorium, has supplanted the object being represented. In Baudrillard's formulation this is the

new generation of signs and objects which comes with the industrial revolution. Signs without the tradition of caste, ones that will never have known any binding restrictions. They will no longer have to be *counterfeited*, since they are going to be produced all at once on a gigantic scale. The problem of their uniqueness, or their origin, is no longer a matter of concern; their origin is technique, and the only sense they possess is in the dimension of the industrial simulacrum. (96)

Fearing's turn at the end of "Continuous Performance" to a bygone and genteel age of a poetic form that produces a narrative time-sense alongside the time-sense of the reader's own embodied experience leaves no doubt that he sees mass culture as having transformed all art in its image, having changed the fundamental recipe of representation itself.

The new regime is one in which the mass culture product both dictates the cultural tempo and also relegates the embodied time sense, or what in a bygone age might be referred to as empirical time, into the oneiric realm of a political unconscious, perpetually suspended beyond discourse but continually the subject of the persistent social dream

instantiated by a disengaged, distracted reception. Fearing's remark that "all time and all space in every medium is merchandise" may then also be understood as his way of defining the contested ground of the dialectic itself, the ground upon which historicity may be re-inscribed, even if perpetually deferred by modern culture's "continuous" performance. For Fearing, the public's response to mass culture's fetishization of exchange value is clearly a valuable site of counter-discourse: his poem "Art Review" lionizes the efforts of graffiti artists and vandals, who negate the culture of exchange by defacing the art of the public advertisement in a silent but explicit protest:

Recently displayed at the Times Square station, a new Van-
dyke on the face cream girl.
(Artist unknown. Has promise, but lacks the brilliance
shown by the great masters of the Elevated age.)
(A.O.P. 5)

What follows is a mock-critique of popular, guerrilla art in all its forms: wood carvings in telephone booths, nude drawings in the rear of a bar, a slanderous graffito that declares that "Bleecker Street Mike is a doublecrossing rat." In the end the reader is left with the knowledge that "Pete, the people's artist, is ever watchful," and here it is clear that for Fearing a popular art must take place at the nexus between the consumer and mass culture itself, on the very ground of reception itself (A.O.P. 5). The "people's artist" is here the consumer who provides mass culture with the only retort that remains: to repossess the advertisement and abstract it from the realm of exchange value, in effect to re-inscribe it in the form of a novel, populist praxis. A consumer that defaces an advertisement does more than destroy its aesthetic appeal. That would be senseless in any case, since any advertisement presumably consists of infinite reproductions of an absent original, as in Baudrillard's "industrial simulacrum." Unlike in Adorno's formulation of the abstract quality of art, there is nothing to destroy here; however, the artist who draws a Vandyke on the face-cream girl is literally repossessing the private advertisement as a public art form. In the face of the ontologically empty reproduction is

born an art form that reclaims its status as original, because it is born of the character of reception and its rootedness in time. The Vandyke is a way of saying “Pete, the people’s poet, *was here*,” and in that same breath to affirm by way of the past participle the temporal rootedness of reception and the historicity that may be born of it. Similarly, the moviegoer who supplants the narrative time-sense with another of their own making effectively reasserts the primacy of reception, in particular a reception in distraction that by unsettling and disputing narrative temporality also displaces the ideological message. A receptive mode that disregards the modalities of movie-time themselves, and understands a film only through the accidental time in which they happened upon the movie theater is the distracted mass audience *par excellence*. As Benjamin puts it, “a man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, *the distracted mass absorbs the work of art*” (“Work of Art” 239, emphasis added).

This kind of “reception in distraction” is critical in *The Big Clock*, both as a description of George Stroud’s peculiar way of moving around culture, and as a key plot device. As the manhunt draws its net ever closer around its prey, the investigation begins to center on a painting Stroud purchased during his brief affair with Pauline Delos. The art-work in this case was painted by Louise Patterson, a relatively obscure modern artist who will become involved in the plot both indirectly and personally. By coincidence, George Stroud is one of only a few collectors of Patterson’s work, and when he sees a painting of hers among a collection of otherwise worthless canvases in a thrift store, he immediately recognizes her style and purchases it, outbidding a woman whose interest in the work rivals his own. The woman turns out to be Louise Patterson herself, in person less recognizable to Stroud than her work is; however, it will become crucial to the plot that the encounter makes her a witness to Stroud’s connection with Pauline Delos. In this encounter is the seed of Stroud’s first miscalculation: having directed the investigation

down as many wild goose chases and blind alleys as he can think of, he fails to remember the encounter with Patterson in the thrift store. When the investigators discover the identity of the artist, they quickly conclude that they need only find the Louise Patterson that Stroud purchased, and they will find their prey. Meanwhile, Stroud is not only a Patterson collector, but actually has a Louise Patterson hanging on the wall of his office. At this moment, Stroud realizes the trouble he is in:

I became aware of the picture above [Roy Cordette's] head on the wall against which he leaned. It was as though it had suddenly screamed.

Of course, I had forgotten I had placed that Patterson there, two years ago. I had bought it at the Lewis Galleries, the profiles of two faces, showing only the brow, eyes, nose, lips, and chin of each. They confronted each other, distinctly Pattersonian. One of them showed an avaricious, the other a skeptical leer. I believe she had called it *Study in Fury*.

It was such a familiar landmark in my office that to take it away, now, would be fatal. But as I looked at it and then looked away I really began to understand the danger in which I stood. It would have to stay there, though at any moment someone might make a connection. And there must be none, none at all, however slight. (T.B.C. 98)

Cordette's reception of this work is not unlike Alice Toklas' at the *salon des independents*; he leans on the wall, his back to the art-work, and unbeknownst to him, behind him is the "whole story," waiting to unmask Stroud and requiring only that someone attend to it. Yet Cordette never looks at the painting, or rather never directs his inquisitorial attention in the appropriate direction, and in this sense he is much like the Big Clock itself. Although the "big clock" seeks domination over the cultural contents of media, it is ultimately uninterested in the nonproductive realm of art, which produces objects whose exchange value is not intelligible in the language of the media economy.

Nevertheless, the picture presents an immediate danger to Stroud, who instantly realizes that the painting's familiar, "Pattersonian" style can link Stroud to the Patterson picture that he purchased at the thrift store, then to Patterson herself and finally to the murdered Pauline Delos. More importantly, in what is perhaps the novel's central irony (not to mention its critical commentary on the status of the art work) Stroud immediately

grasps that the best way for the picture to escape notice is for it to remain on display. Stroud resolves to destroy the other painting in order to protect himself, but later reconsiders:

why should I sacrifice my own property just because of [Janoth]? Who was he? Just another medium-sized wheel in the big clock.

The big clock didn't like pictures, much. I did. This particular picture it had tossed into the dustbin. I had saved it from oblivion, myself. Why should I throw it back? (T.B.C. 114)

The nonproductive nature of Stroud's interest in art is clear. It supersedes even his desire to survive, and his love of the picture takes on a suicidal quality as the plot comes to its climax. Even knowing that "Study in Fury" may destroy him, Stroud keeps the other nameless art work, declaring hubristically that "I could beat the machine. The super-clock would go on forever, it was too massive to be stopped. But it had no brains, and I did. I could escape from it" (T.B.C. 115).

This statement, a sharp contrast to the metaphor of the escaping mouse that earlier in the novel represented Stroud's best understanding of the role of the Big Clock in regulating even the dream of escape, is emboldened here by his special, conditioned reception of art, his insistence on its non-productivity, the refusal to engage with culture in the rapt manner of Benjamin's attentive, "absorbed" audience. Even Stroud's artistic interest is deflected and encoded through his experience of intoxication and distraction: not an art collector, or an expert, he is "a dilettante by profession. A pretty good one, I had always thought" (T.B.C. 114). At the height of his hubristic enchantment with the art object, itself having become the very fetish of *thanatos* as he careens toward his own death, Stroud compares his own existence to that of the unnamed Patterson:

There were lots of good pictures that were prevented from being painted at all. If they couldn't be aborted, or lost, then somebody like me was dispatched to destroy them.

Just as Billy would be sent to destroy me. And why should I play ball in a deadly set-up like that? (T.B.C. 114)

What is at stake in this distracted reception, in nonproductive intoxication, even in *being a dilettante* is nothing less than life itself. Under a regime that the Frankfurt School model suggests culminates with the obliteration of the subject, Fearing's protagonist responds through a nonconformist disengagement.

The earlier image of *The Big Clock* as arbiter of the contents of culture, of the parceling of experience, indeed of time itself is forgotten now as Stroud loses himself in the action of escape. Stroud is now certain that he will probably fail in his effort to remain alive, but is more content in his role in conceiving of ways to work against the Big Clock from within: finally he is "steering in the opposite direction" to the machinery of mass culture, itself a vitiated organ that he now describes as merely the empty vessel containing the repressed dream-work of its inhabitants, literally driven to distraction by its totalizing message:

... the whole organization was full and overrunning with frustrated ex-artists, scientists, farmers, writers, poets, lawyers, doctors, musicians, all of whom spent their lives conforming, instead. And conforming to what? To a sort of overgrown, aimless, haphazard stenciling apparatus that kept them running to psychoanalysts, sent them to insane asylums, gave them high blood pressure, stomach ulcers, killed them off with cerebral hemorrhages and heart failure, sometimes suicide. Why should I pay still more tribute to this fatal machine? It would be easier and simpler to get squashed stripping its gears than to be crushed helping it along.

To hell with the big gadget. (T.B.C. 114)

The Big Clock is also a novel about work; it is work that becomes both the machinery of domination for members of the media industry and also the site of their distracted dream-work, their deferred dreams of another life, in this case agrarian, creative, or academic. Their bodies and minds literally unhinged by the strain of submission, the "ex-artists, scientists, farmers, writers, poets, lawyers, doctors, musicians," wage the war between industry and subjectivity on the battered ground of their own bodies, the desserts of which are high blood pressure, ulcers, cerebral hemorrhages and heart attacks. Meanwhile, the elegant machine of mass society that

earlier functioned literally like clockwork is now an “overgrown, aimless, haphazard stenciling apparatus,” and worse, a “big gadget.” It remains a technique of domination, but newly a transparent one, and Stroud’s hubris stems in part from the knowledge that at least his resistance and death will not be fruitless, and indeed that death in this case is preferable to conformity. His anthem recalls the justly more famous words of Patrick Henry, but in this case the call to action does not invoke “liberty” as much as vandalism, and not “death” so much as the perverse cessation of productivity, the insistence on the subject’s non-intelligibility to the system of exchange. Work alienates the subject, enacts that noir universe adduced by Jenemann and Knighton, in which

the conversations between characters sap their interactions of any affect. Connections are distilled to the smallest admissible linguistic link. Sentences are chipped off from their speakers, offering no clue to their subjective intentions, betraying no interior at all. (176)

By contrast, the subject is liberated by the work of art, by art’s insistence on the non-productive and distracted engagement with mass media transmission, on a non-rapt, non-absorbed, non-submissive attention. The pot-boiler is thus reborn as the *ubungsinstrument* of the dialectical culture, even if it brings with it some necessary high-modernist baggage having to do with the insistence on the role of art in the production of the dialectic.

For this reason it is worth insisting that the subject and the art work are here similar, especially in a novel which presents life, objects, experience and time as all being merely the controlled constructs of the Big Clock itself, and thus more or less ontologically empty, signs only of the way mass society dominates and controls experience itself. Stroud’s family, who share one name to both mask and symbolize the emptiness of naming itself might as well stand in for the work day itself, in which time is experienced as parcels of experience meted out by the Big Clock, but which importantly are all the same. The fundamental conditions of life, the regulation of every aspect of experience right down to the attempt to escape, all are merely part of the language of

exchange in which all experience is interchangeable, and all experience is therefore empty of meaning. The art-work, by contrast, is equal to itself only, and in a way insists on not being fungible in the same sense that experience, labor and the commodity so clearly are. This may be why even in the case of Louise Patterson, there can clearly be no agreed-upon value that her work possesses. When she and Stroud first meet in the thrift shop, she is unwilling to pay fifty dollars to reacquire her painting, but at the end of the book Stroud learns that the painting's value, inflated by its recent publicity, is anywhere between five and ten thousand dollars. Patterson knows that the value of art is intangible, telling Stroud in the thrift shop that her picture was "either worth ten dollars or a million times that much" (T.B.C. 52). In short, art is exchanged, but its exchange value is non-rational. Patterson won't pay fifty dollars to purchase a work of art; on the other hand, Stroud later refuses to sell the same picture for ten thousand dollars, even though he probably could use the money. Presumably if neither person had ever found it the painting would have remained worthless for all eternity.

As it turns out, the picture's meaning, indeed its very title, is subject to the whims of its shifting audience. It depicts two hands, one giving and the other receiving a coin, and we learn later that its original title is *Study in Fundamentals*. The title it will be known by throughout the book is *The Temptation of St. Judas*, a name given to it by Pauline Delos. In a very real sense the painting has no intelligibility to the concrete world, and interpretation of it only reveals the cognitive state of its viewer. It portrays nothing except for a crass metaphor of the nature of exchange itself, and thus its applicability is both limited and infinitely broad. Stroud offers this explication of Pauline's choice of title, which he finds very apropos in spite of her being what he calls "picture-blind":

On the spur of the moment I decided, and told her, that Judas must have been a born conformist, a naturally common-sense, rubber-stamp sort of fellow who rose far above himself when he became involved with a group of people who were hardly in society, let alone a profitable business.

“Heavens, you make him sound like a saint,” Pauline said, smiling and frowning.

I told her very likely he was.

“A man like that, built to fall into line but finding himself always out of step, must have suffered twice the torments of the others. And eventually, the temptation was too much for him.

(T.B.C. 53)

Even the most cursory reader will instantly perceive that Stroud is not talking about Judas here, but himself, describing his own fall to the temptation of Pauline Delos, here encoded as the temptation toward conformism, and away from social action. Pauline, having concocted this reading of the painting in spite of being herself “picture-blind” reveals the final rule of the art work as described in “Reading, Writing and the Rackets”: that art engenders and reveals the “other forms of crisis on everyone’s private, crowded calendar, apart from the central tragedy” (New and Selected Poems xxiv).

In this context the multi-narrator structure of *The Big Clock* (and virtually every other Fearing novel) comes into sharper focus as a way of presenting these “other forms of crisis” as they pertain to the many subjects around whom the plot marches indifferently onward. According to Jenemann and Knighton, the effect of this is akin to Fearing distributing “his narrative tasks among a variety of incommensurable viewpoints. The effect is comparable to channel-surfing on the television or twisting the radio dial” (176). This invocation of the mass media is, I think, exactly right. However, Jenemann and Knighton conclude that this ultimately serves to support a pessimistic materialism that they ascribe to Fearing’s politics, in which “Fearing’s scattershot technique parallels the expansive offerings of consumer culture, whose multiplicity of alternatives is little more than an increasingly sophisticated and pernicious means of entrapment” (176).⁵³ In that sense, their reading of the subject in Fearing is not unlike that of Nicholas Christopher, who sees Stroud as the epitome of the emptied subject, though “it’s not clear what exactly he’s been emptied of, since he doesn’t appear to have possessed much vitality, passion or creativity to begin with” (ix). However, the art work itself, with its insistence on the shifting meanings that depend on mood, or on the individual “crises” of

the characters, serves in effect to re-inscribe the viewing subject. Indeed, the notion of crisis itself is here viewed through the lens of subjectivity, and one surmises that the ontology of objects can similarly be re-inscribed through the fickle and shifting guises of human perception and the subtle, distracted gaze of the dilettante, who can allow the multiply voiced meanings of art to continue to exist, their contradictions, crises and accompanying dialectics deferred and unresolved.

As if to confirm this, the novel's most curious interludes take place in Stroud's favorite watering hole, a place known as "Gil's Place," which has nothing particular to distinguish it except for a game that its proprietor plays with the customers—a game which has the effect of making the ontological character of objects and their dependence on imagination part of the central thematics of the book. At Gil's place, the customer is challenged to name an item that Gil does not possess. Meanwhile, behind the bar is collected a pile of unsorted debris, more or less the bric-a-brac of modernity itself, decompiled and reconstituted as needed in whatever form is called for. Gil's claim that "everything in the world was there, somewhere" as much as confirms that what is at stake here is his capacity to reinvent the detritus of modernity through the power of reception, or to assign new ontological significance to objects whose relegation to the trash heap has signified their final emptying (T.B.C. 34).

Pauline Delos asks to see a "steamroller," thinking this will flummox the barkeep. Gil returns "with a black and jagged metal cylinder that had once served... as Christopher Columbus' telescope—a relic certified by the Caribbean natives from whom Gil had personally secured it" (T.B.C. 35). The outcome of the game is clearly a foregone conclusion. As T. Jeff Evans puts it, the real object here is "the customer's agreeing to play the game in the first place, to engage in the fancy of selecting the found object and then willingly accept Gil's imaginative efforts" (196). This game is not unlike drawing a Van Dyke on the face-cream girl; it is effectively the consumer's redeployment of the products of mass culture in new directions, a kind of perversely nonproductive *bricolage*

with no aim in particular except to unsettle the nature of objects in order to make their very functions dependent on mood and caprice.

If, as Nicholas Christopher puts it, Fearing's pulp novels, detective fictions and soft-core pornography "infected his work," then this may serve as an explanation (xi). The pot-boiler itself is a product of industry, consumed, discarded and soon relegated to the junk pile itself. Its main feature is disposability: like time as parceled out by the big clock, each instantiation is meaningless and identical, until it is reclaimed and redeployed to serve new purposes unimaginable to its original user if not always its creator. Christopher's criticism that Fearing "never managed to insulate his poetic faculty from the wear and tear of hack journalism, pulp writing, and public relations assignments" is both exactly right and exactly wrong (xi). The originary form of mass culture is the production of its own self-perpetuating ideology; its secondary form is the *ubungsinstrument* adduced by Benjamin in training a newly technical apperception that absorbs, rather than is absorbed by, the media industry with which George Stroud is at constant loggerheads. There is a connection between Gil's ontological game and the character of the Louise Patterson that Stroud and Pauline discover in the thrift store. Both are literally reclaimed from the trash heap, and reinvented and redeployed to serve new purposes disengaged from their original conditions of production. This redeployment, beginning as the empty display of trash, takes on the new shape of "other forms of crisis," born of this new apperception that assigns new character to the art object according to their whim.

When Stroud brings Emory Mafferson on board with his investigation, relying ironically on his total unsuitability to the job, he describes him thus:

His plump face was in perpetual mourning, his brain was a seething chaos, his brown eyes seemed always trying to escape from behind those heavy glasses, and I don't believe he could see more than ten feet in front of him. (T.B.C. 109)

Mafferson, appearing to Stroud before his desk like a defeated Bartleby, serves as a reminder of this novel's central theme of the subjugation of the subject and the co-optation of the very experience of escape itself. In that sense, escape is a fruitless endeavor, doomed to be reclaimed by the Big Clock's perpetual repackaging of experience itself. For Mafferson, his glasses serve as a prison for his perception, and even his attempt to reinvent the polity in the form of Funded Individuals merely (unbeknownst to him) replicates the logic of exchange value on which the original polity is predicated. Nevertheless, the narrative of *The Big Clock* is one of escaping the machinery of mass culture, of the massive and heartless machine of ideology in which George Stroud and Emory Mafferson are employed. While the engine moves in one direction there is a countervailing force that works in opposition to the ideological message, that provides for ideology's concomitant negativity. The displaced, depersonalized and atomized experience of self makes a truly Fourierist unity of action impossible, but the dream of Utopia, its ontological form, remains in the shape of what Jameson describes as "the drawing back of the curtains of tradition and the customary, of the sacred and its conventions, of what seemed to derive a meaning from other spaces than those of human praxis and construction" (*Archaeologies* 238)

In *The Big Clock*, counter-discourse takes place at the nexus between the art-work and the viewing subject, as a function of a conditioned reception. Just as the only form of resistance to the language of exchange is death, the final resistance to the regime of mass culture is attention's counterpart to the death urge: inattention, or what Benjamin calls "reception in distraction." Distraction here is the cognitive disengagement from mass culture itself. It is a refusal to attend, which in a formal sense might simply be an insistence on the non-productive dream, but takes on its new shape as the reclaiming of the form of mass culture and its deployment in the service of an art work that provides for the reincarnation of a limited and deferred historicity. The mechanism is relatively simple: the conditioned apperception that modernity requires also serves the needs of the

dialectic, in that modernity has conditioned a new mode of reception that is open to placing the unrelated into unforeseen and productive apposition. In essence, this allows perception in its new technological form to both accept the regime of exchange and simultaneously to rewrite the laws of exchange as ontological intelligibility, essentially to substitute exchange *value* for *exchangeability*. Fearing understood that a different site for the dialectic had to be dreamed up in the context of a modernity in which the media had become “literally all-pervasive, for they send their messages literally everywhere, send them literally within an instant and literally permit no rejoinder of either agreement or contradiction” (New and Selected Poems xv). What is at stake in ideology is then the removal of the extraneous, a regime of mass culture in which “the artless messages are uniform. There can be no surprises in them, for they use the language of subtraction, from which every discordant thought and detail has been skillfully pared and removed” (New and Selected Poems xix). In this sense, praxis is by extension that which refuses subtraction, that which insists on inclusion in the canon of modernity despite its being non-serious, non-engaged, non-demanding, non-productive.

The power of mass culture is dual in Fearing’s formulation: it “actuates or paralyzes a whole society” according to the receptive modes it stimulates (New and Selected Poems xix). In describing writing as praxis, Fearing invokes the detective novel itself, now in its dialectical form as writing which “can offer the surprise of final discovery” (New and Selected Poems xxii). What is discovered is the site of the social dream itself, and for our purposes the discovery of one site of what Michael Denning calls the “contested terrain” of the mass culture audience (262). Denning goes on to note that “any book can become a private scripture and license oppositional and utopian desires, drives and actions, not to mention antisocial and pathological behaviors” (263). In a way, this last statement renders his reception-based dialectics somewhat tepid, for it represents a return to the relativistic assertion that reading is the mellow and capricious imaginative territory that exists beyond the producerist influence of the writer. Yet this is

in a way what this dissertation will insist: not that reading is contingent, as in this formulation, on subjectivity as a shifting domain; rather, that the distracted apperception of modernity effectively re-inscribes the subject in the face of a totalizing media marketplace.

After all, it is Fearing's assertion that "the invention of the amplifier means change in every perspective of the writer-audience relationship" (New and Selected Poems xvi). Mere submission to the message, according to the model of absorption, requires no subjectivity at all; moreover, if media has colonized and taken possession of both the ideology of domination and the narrative of escape, then the only remaining realm for the subject is at the margins of culture in the haze of intoxication, or in the realm of the daydream, preferably during the hours of productivity as stipulated by mass culture's inquisitorial, directorial form.

CHAPTER 4: THE MASK OF NONINVOLVEMENT:
 CHARLIE CHAPLIN AND THE DREAM OF
 TECHNOLOGY

The difference between the modernist and the anti-modernist is that the modernist makes himself at home here, while the anti-modernist searches the streets for a way out.

--Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*

4.1 Silent Film's Mute Promise: Nostalgia, Farce and the
 Trenchant Critique of *Modern Times*

Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* occupies a unique historical position. It is not only Charlie Chaplin's final silent film, but quite self-consciously the final film of the silent era, and in that sense represents Chaplin's wistful retrospective on the shape and conventions of a bygone genre—and as its title reflects, a meditation on the new regimes of modernity that were heralded by the new technological forms of economics and culture in the mid-1930s. Its release was postponed several times before it finally premiered in New York in February of 1936, where it was greeted with puzzled enthusiasm. It is important to recall this context: *The Jazz Singer* had been released nearly a decade earlier, and the era of the “talkie” was in full swing by the time *Modern Times* premiered in New York, making Chaplin's project a curious species of self-conscious kitsch, which at the very least was an invitation to consider in depth the profundity of silent film as a genre, including its capacity to resurrect the past's tacit criticism of the future that is the critical form of nostalgia.⁵⁴ In a way, the title of the film—*Modern Times*—reflects perfectly that particular species of trenchant hindsight, an almost crassly explicit critique of the present here packaged in the performative modes of the past. In the opening credits, Chaplin adds this subtitle: “a story of industry, of individual enterprise - humanity crusading in the pursuit of happiness.” If anything, this emphasizes what is at stake in this film: not only the cataclysmic present—modernity as

both a political and historical reality—but “industry” itself as the organizing principle of the social. More critically, we may see in *Modern Times*’ admittedly light-hearted and comical approach to the problem of the present a trenchant criticism of the menacing relation of industry and enterprise against humanity and the pursuit of happiness: a four-term homology that sums up perfectly the manner in which the tramp summons the past into critical relation with the future.⁵⁵

Perhaps for this reason, it is nearly inevitable that this dissertation, which seeks to link the popular and the counter-discursive as simultaneous acts within the moment of reception, would conclude with a discussion of Chaplin’s “little tramp.” Although we must endeavor not to confuse the actor and director with his iconic character, it is worth noting that Chaplin and the tramp became very nearly synonymous, the latter being a symbol and trademark that practically consumed and digested the artistic genius that produced him. Benjamin argues that it is Chaplin who originates what we may see as the central idea of modernity according to his model: the co-optation of media and its forms into the twin projects of ideology and capitalism occurring alongside the total and radical democratization of the media’s audience. According to the Benjaminian model, that democratization, that transformation of the ideological products of the mass society into their implied counter-discursive opposite is at the heart of “reception in distraction,” where the latter is the project of uncovering the secret dream of history within the products of ideology. Distraction, like the mass audience itself, is thus both the product of ideology and its antidote, even if that antidote must take the form of a suspended dialectics in which the revolutionary energy of the future is held at a standstill in the present.⁵⁶ As with the work of Kenneth Fearing, and the political work of Stein, this “dialectical distraction” is staged on the fraught battleground of the human subject, here represented as the tramp, who also stands in for the factory worker, the criminal, the revolutionary, the lover and the citizen.

The task of this chapter, then, is twofold. First, to locate the thread of the “dream of history” in Chaplin’s final film, and in that process to account for its unique place in history, as a silent film in the era of the “talkie.” Second, to describe how this dream is both generated and modeled by Chaplin’s unique figure “the tramp,” who makes his final and most trenchant appearance on the silver screen in *Modern Times*. In a sense, both the tramp and Chaplin himself belonged to an outmoded aesthetics, and part of the aim of this chapter is to register the specific formal and stylistic differences between silent films and “talkies,” and in that process to uncover how the formal practice of the past is capable of recruiting the impulse of nostalgia into a politicized and critical commentary on the present. It is worth recalling that by 1936, when *Modern Times* finally premiered in New York, Chaplin’s late career had already begun to take on political dimensions that would have seemed strange during his earliest work with Keystone films. After the premiere of *City Lights* (another quite trenchant film), Chaplin embarked on a fifteen-month world tour, during which he seems to have arrived at the final understanding of the role of his artistic work as politics.⁵⁷ According to Charles J. Maland, the world tour

...was an experience that modified his world view and affected his subsequent career. He wrote extensively about the trip, publishing his reflections both in a high circulation magazine and later as a book, and this too affected the American star image of Chaplin as a celebrity. The trip itself, the press’s coverage of it, and Chaplin’s account of it provide a basis for understanding Chaplin’s next film and constitute a starting point for the politicization of Chaplin’s star image. (128)

This is in fact an extremely helpful context, for it serves as an explanation not only for what turns out to be a significant aesthetic and subjective turn in *Modern Times*, but also for the suspicion and controversy that attended Chaplin’s production of the film. In effect, Chaplin had already announced his transformation from comedian into commentator, and that transformation was met by the public with a mixture of surprise and suspicion.

It is therefore doubly significant that Chaplin chose to speak to his audience using an obsolete form. When *Modern Times* was released, the era of silent film had arguably already ended some seven years earlier—and the technique of the film straddles the boundary between the two modes of production. The film is shot at 18 frames per second (fps), known as “silent speed,” but contains some synchronized sound effects, including a small amount of dialogue. However, the film retains the stylistic conventions of silent cinema, including the use of inter-title cards to comment on the action. The effect of this straddling of technologies ought not to be understated; part of the transition from the silent film to the talkie was a transition from a profoundly ironic and self-reflexive melodramatic *style* to a more naturalistic realism in the talking film era—and the particular style of Chaplin, blending melodrama, comedy and pathos in his character of the “tramp” had by 1936 already begun to seem passé. As Garrett Stewart puts it, “silence’s poetic license was being revoked by the spoken epoch’s dubious new hegemony. Chaplin’s *Modern Times* is in part, brilliantly, about just this” (303). In fact, Stewart’s remark sums up precisely the nostalgia of Chaplin for his obsolete form and the profound stylistic limitation of the more “realistic” films heralded by the “talkie.” It is silent film that had the capacity for “poetic license” with reality, and therefore equally silent film that can combine the *reality effect* of film with the *verfremdungseffekt* of Brecht—simultaneously summoning the audience into intimate and absorptive contact with artifice and also insisting on the medium’s presence as a thick veil between representation and reality.

In this case, the “comedy” of Chaplin was, in a manner of speaking, serious business: its role was, through new receptive modes that it trained in its audience, to provide what Barrett Watten calls a “ludic corrective” to the encroachment of production and capital into the embodied world of the subject. Watten’s “ludic corrective” is a key to understanding the aesthetics of Chaplin in this context. The “comedy” of the tramp is at once the signal of the non-serious and also the sign under which a social criticism may

take place, masked by the sociable and embodied act of collective laughter. Richard Ward somewhat clumsily observes that

comedy is not often highly esteemed by the arbiters of cultural value. If a comic filmmaker places serious stock in the rather artificial standards of worth imposed upon his craft, he must either attempt to reconcile his work with high art, or he must abandon the form altogether.” (115)

Ward does more than overstate his case here—he fails to understand that under a regime in which distraction is the source of counter-discourse, comedy is the fundamental form of the critical, holding together the non-serious with the dialectical in an uneasy tension—which might as well also be the unspoken credo of Chaplin in *Modern Times*. Comedy functions in effect in the same manner as intoxication in *The Big Clock*, which frees George Stroud from the responsibility for attention to his own words and deeds in the marketplace of experience. Here, it is beneath the veil of laughter that the day-dream of history begins to assert its faint outlines, available to the modern subject’s reception of that dream in distraction.

The morning after *Modern Times* premiered, Frank S. Nugent of *The New York Times* mused that “the hands of the cinema clock were set back five years last night when a funny little man with a microscopic mustache, a battered derby hat, turned up shoes and a flexible bamboo cane returned to the Broadway screen to resume his place in the affections of the film-going public” (23). Nugent’s remark serves to remind us how “old-fashioned” Chaplin’s “Tramp” already was, some twenty years after his first appearance on the silver screen. Silent films, we should recall, are not merely technologically different from talkies; their *stylistic* differences are profound and meaningful in the context of the nascent age of Fordism, and therefore offered to Chaplin (among others) the perfect vehicle for a substantive *critique of the social*. Silent film acting, because of the demands of the medium, requires an exaggeration of gesture that frequently tips over into melodrama. The “talkie” on the other hand heralded a newly intensive reality effect into the world of film, and stylistically this was reflected in a non-critical “realism” that

could not have resembled less the self-ironized and jerky *gestus* of Chaplin's "Tramp." It is for this reason that it is in a way impossible to politicize silent film—as a medium it is *pre-politicized*, always already positioned at an ironic, perhaps not-quite-critical distance from the "reality effect" that it engenders. This ironic distance, the reserved engagement of the not-quite-convinced, the not-quite-engaged, is the reception in distraction that for Benjamin was the vehicle of counter-discourse, an emergent property of modernity as much as it was modernity's antithesis, a sort of built-in agitprop that militated against the profound effect of modernity on daily life and experience—which, as Chaplin clearly understood, was in essence the regimentation and formalization of reality itself.⁵⁸

To describe *Modern Times*, Chaplin's final silent film, as a political project is not to depart much from a conventional analysis of the film. Indeed, the accusation that the film was "too political"—that at its core was a Marxist critique of modern capitalist America—actually *preceded* the film's release, with the New York Times in particular noting with veiled suspicion Chaplin's eleventh-hour consultation with Soviet film executive B.Z. Shumiatsky some four months prior to the film's premiere.⁵⁹ Its basic plot, which follows Chaplin's familiar "little tramp" through six distinct acts, presents its critique of modernity in stark, practically naked terms—starting with the tramp's now-iconic stint on the assembly lines and ending with his return to his bucolic roots (or, more exactly, to an originary state of bucolic *rootlessness*⁶⁰) as the tramp-turned-factory-worker leaves the city behind for the simpler life of the rural bum, the bundle slung over his shoulder serving as a virtual emblem of his rejection of modernity. The tramp's final choices—of country over city, homelessness over prosperity, unemployment over material success—and not insignificantly, love over money---speak to a rejection not only of the "modern times" alluded to in the title, but of what we may in more historical terms call the Fordist phase of capitalism, that system of radically efficient production and accumulation in which subjects become "producers" and "consumers"—a system with which one must either comply or starve. Faced with only one "rational" choice, the

tramp makes the irrational choice—to not get involved, to disengage, to reserve the space of subjectivity as the site of future revolt against a system that no longer accepts even reluctant participation, but instead recruits subjectivity into the project of its own erasure.

In the sense that *Modern Times* is nakedly (as opposed to subliminally) political, it belongs to a tradition of overt leftist critique of modernity that makes it an awkward fit for a project such as this—and yet, the modes of production and distribution that made Chaplin’s films a sensation generate an inescapable irony that must be untangled. Chaplin’s critique of the forms of capitalism cannot exist without them—it cannot be produced, catalogued, distributed or monetized without the assistance of the Fordist regime that is under criticism. That modernity tolerates such an internal counter-discourse is significant, and is indeed part of what this dissertation presumes: that within the social forms of domination lies the possibility of a rejoinder, what we have called the “dream of history.” This rejoinder, which we have called “reception in distraction,” occurs at the messy intersection between technology and the subject.

However, what is most significant for this chapter is the tramp’s own method of disengagement from the social, which allows for a newly politicized “distraction” to take its finally popular and finally revolutionary form. Crucially, although the film is overtly critical, the tramp himself is not political at all, preferring instead to subsist and survive as he can at the margins of the social and to resist assimilation by the modes of production ushered in by modernity simply by non-participation. An unpublished fragment of Walter Benjamin’s entitled “The Formula in Which the Dialectical Structure of Film Finds Expression” offers this explanation for Chaplin’s centrality to his model of a dialectical mass culture:

Chaplin’s way of moving [*Gestus*] is not really that of an actor. He could not work, the human being is integrated into the film image by way of his gestures—that is, bodily and mental posture. The innovation of Chaplin’s gestures is that he dissects the expressive movements of human beings into a series of minute innervations. Each single movement he makes is composed of a succession of staccato bits of movement. Whether it is his walk,

the way he handles his cane, or the way he raises his hat—always the same jerky series of tiny movements applies the law of the cinematic image sequence to human motorial functions. (Other Writings on Media 340)

Benjamin returned several times to the subject of Chaplin: the above fragment, dated 1935, was preceded by two drafts of a reflection on *The Circus*, the second of which was published in *Die Literarische Welt* in 1929. Benjamin also alludes to Chaplin as the innovative precursor to the distracted reception of film as embodied by Mickey Mouse in the second revision of the “Work of Art” essay. Benjamin saw Chaplin as a trailblazer in the adaptation of the new medium of film to the demands of modernity—Chaplin, in Benjamin’s formula, was “the first to inhabit the new fields of action opened up by film—the first occupant of the newly built house”⁶¹ (Other Writings on Media 38). As with other technological forms under modernity, film gave voice to the sublimated utopian appetite of the masses. This utopian appetite depends heavily on Benjamin’s logic of reception as an emergent property of form. It is thus significant that in Benjamin’s formula it is always *form* that responds to the twin demands of technology and reception, and trains and discovers its own readership, one capable of regulating and directing its attention both to the historical present (Bourdieu’s “index of the real”) and to the metanarratives of history, the dream of reparation in the face of the dominance of ideology under mass culture. Benjamin clarifies that film “corresponds to profound changes in the apperceptive apparatus—changes that are experienced on an individual scale” (“Work of Art” n. 19, 250). For our purposes, the question becomes: in what manner does the *gesture* of Chaplin, inflected by the technical medium that instantiates it, train the apperception that gives birth to criticism?

That Benjamin refers to Chaplin’s *gestus* is significant—since, following Brecht, he wanted to insist upon the significance of the embodied performance as the vehicle of the counter-discursive within the dramatic form of film.⁶² What Benjamin describes as gesture is also quite clearly the trace left by technology upon the human performance. The “jerky series of tiny movements” is in part an effect of recording the film at a rate

slower than the speed at which the same film was projected. In effect, rather than a “staccato performance,” this creates in a literal sense a *rupture*—or 18 moments each second in which the smooth, organic quality of the tramp’s motion in its original form is erased by the medium of film, or more exactly, *omitted in the final product*. The effect is both invisible to the naked eye and unmistakable; it is also a key source of the comic irony in Chaplin. The rupture, or erasure, here functions as an interruption not only of the body, but of its representation, or its *simulation*. The choreography of the body, that which on stage we might call gesture, is in silent film placed in antagonistic and manifest apposition to the technical mode of production. Silent film therefore gives us a potent case study for a divided reception, in that it allows for the simultaneous presence of a radical reality effect and a potent foregrounding of the medium not at all unlike what one might find in the historical avant-garde.

More specifically, the *gestus* of Chapin is a struggle between the organic body and the technical medium, and that struggle takes the form of physical comedy on the screen. The effect is not unlike dancing under a strobe light: the interruption of the organic by the technical renders the smooth motion of human dance into a mechanized staccato. In other words, Chaplin’s is a world in which the body “must confront an opposing universe of mechanical energy which is both its antithesis... and its *reductio ad absurdum*, and where the friction of this encounter sets off sparks that ignite latent satiric matter in distant corners of the narrative” (Stewart 296). *Modern Times* thus exemplifies perfectly not only Henri Bergson’s model of the laughable as the ungraceful union of the body with the mechanical⁶³, but the Benjaminian dialectical form (Benjamin is right to insist that it is the intersect between technology and the body that underwrites Chaplin’s mass appeal). The laughable union of machine and man thus also becomes the trenchant form of “distraction,” in both the broad sense described by Benjamin and in the stricter sense of this dissertation, as the locus of the dialectical form in mass culture, originating in technology and production, but finding its voice in novel forms of mass reception. As

we will see, the nexus between machine and subject always generates comedy and horror at the same time, and part of the tragicomic appeal of Chaplin's tramp is the audience's suspicion that they should not be laughing at his antics, but weeping.

In this way, medium places its profound and invasive mark upon content, and the result is again Barrett Watten's "ludic corrective" to the reality-effect of the moving picture, and it is this profound technical effect that underlies the social criticism, and indeed the comedy, of Chaplin. It is Watten who discovers within the gaps and omissions of a purportedly unitary "Modernism" a "formally coded response" in the avant-garde's adoption of the formal logic of Fordism and the assembly line (139). For Watten, the assembly line is beset by the same irony that we find in Walter Benjamin's model of the mass culture. The assembly line is literally the form of domination in the mass society, but according to Watten it also situates its own counter-discourse. Fredric Jameson might argue that this counter-discourse is always doomed to find itself already part of the machinery of domination that it nominally resists; however, for Watten the assembly line becomes the ironic site at which we find both the structuring and regulation of the human gesture and the aleatory response to a "modernity built to order but only to fall into ruin and decay as soon as its moment is past" (140). The assembly line thus becomes the emblem of Fordism's eternally partial dominance of the subject, its regulation of experience and gesture that also occasions dance, improvisation and resistance.

There is likewise a logical kinship between Fordism and *film* that Chaplin clearly understood—and it can be no accident that his final silent film chooses the assembly line as its initial setting, that place which according to Watten houses not only the final, hyper-rational phase of capitalism's reality effect, but also an improvisatory quality, "a kind of autotelic formalism, a self-tooling *auto*-matism... in which the production of goods was subordinated to the production of machine components" (143). Though the context is quite different, we may say that Watten's description of the link between the

form of capitalism (here exemplified by the assembly line) and the *practice* of avant-garde poetics corresponds roughly to the argument of this dissertation. Specifically, Watten's argument rests on a curious but powerful description of the mechanism of modernity as it is manifested through the extension of capital into the sphere of culture. Watten argues that the assembly line is a potent social form that both unleashes a restrictive and conformist power onto the populace, and an arena in which the formal structure of "production" gives way to an improvisatory space that both speaks against and is authorized by the mode of mass production itself. That is to say, the assembly line occasions simultaneously radical restriction and radical improvisation, and though his argument rests on the avant-garde foundations of the new left, it might as well be a description of the Tramp's aleatory choreography of the assembly line in the opening sequence of *Modern Times* (Figure 3).

Watten's analysis does not directly mention *Modern Times*—but his description of an autotelic formalism which contains the seeds of a counter-discourse to domination brings to mind this iconic and decidedly dreamlike sequence in which the technical intersection between Fordism and the body is staged and—importantly—subverted. Chaplin's tramp retains his familiar mannerisms and moustache; however, he is now dressed in the sleeveless shirt and overalls of the "factory worker" (and indeed, the opening credits announce his new status as a gainfully employed citizen of the Fordist state). He is a decidedly ordinary worker, if somewhat small of stature in comparison to his peers. Chaplin's factory, on the other hand, looks as though it was conceived in a cyclopean nightmare of mass production: the humans are literally dwarfed by the enormous cogs and wheels, and the viewer has the sense that human beings are merely visitors in a strange, alien place that was not designed for their small, fragile bodies.⁶⁴ Indeed, the contemporary viewer will recognize in *Modern Times*' futuristic and brooding industrial workplace the genre of "science fiction": here what Darko Suvin called the "novum" is the factory's rigid and technically advanced adherence to the

ideological tenets of Fordist production.⁶⁵ Along with elephantine turbines, comically large levers and bewildering control panels, the factory is equipped with a highly advanced intercom, complete with two-way closed-circuit television. In this advanced Fordist factory, it was technology that provided both surveillance and control, and effectively the radical centralization of authority along with the equally radical alienation of the worker from the value that he produces.

In a sense, this is the dream of technology in which every human activity—even (and perhaps especially) communication—is interrupted, regulated and *structured* by technology. As if to emphasize this, the factory’s “boss” can only speak to his workers by way of the closed-circuit intercom, and when we hear his voice, it is projected through a loudspeaker, the technical medium becoming both a “medium” in a strict sense and also the source of his authority and potency (Figure 4). Indeed, the human voice (with one crucial exception) is *always* projected artificially in *Modern Times*, from the boss’s magisterial pronouncements to the voice of the “mechanical salesman” who attempts to sell his automatic feeding machine by means of a recorded message on a gramophone.

The factory’s central machine consists of gigantic turbines and a control panel operated by a burly, shirtless man who nonetheless looks tiny by comparison. This machine, we presume, powers the factory itself—that is, provides the forward direction of production, causing the assembly line to roll imperviously along unaware of and unconcerned with the human misery that is a byproduct of its inexorable process. What exactly this factory *produces* is never clarified, and this serves only to emphasize our (and the worker’s) alienation from the product.⁶⁶ For Chaplin it is enough that the factory produces *work*, and work in the peculiar repetitive form of the assembly line, which in turn becomes the arena for an aleatory dance not unlike that described by Barrett Watten.

When we first encounter the tramp, it is after the factory has been given the order to commence production; he is somewhere in the bowels of the leviathan, far away from

the giant turbines that power the machine. He is tightening bolts on small, nondescript metal plates; he must tighten the bolts quickly, to avoid disrupting the work of other workers farther down the line. From the start, his performance has a frantic but graceful quality, and this, we presume, is the nature of repetition on the assembly line, something Stein might well appreciate: the organic action of the tightening of the bolts is the *gestus*, here juxtaposed against the impervious and constant advancement of the machine of capitalism. The collision of these forces produces an almost balletic sequence in which the tramp tries desperately to conform to the ever-increasing demands of his work, but is thwarted not only by the acceleration of the assembly line but by his own body's silent rebellion against the line's repetitive motion: the body's stubborn insistence that it will not be made into a prosthetic of the machine (Figure 3). In one sense, this scene reflects the final triumph of Fordism over the human body: the body merely extends the function of the machine. Gestures and actions that are outside the scope of the machine's ritualized motion are proscribed, to the point where even the swatting of a fly presents an intractable problem for our little tramp. Yet the fly's annoying presence is also the signal of the ineluctable presence of the tramp's body at the center of this mechanized repetition, inserting brief moments of unmistakable, embodied subjectivity. He may repeat the motion that is required of him, but his nose *will* itch if a fly lands on it—and in this way the body insists upon its own presence at the very moment of its erasure, much as the tramp's own body appears through the substrate of film, interrupted by the technical but unmistakably organic, balletic and yes—aleatory—dance. In the exact sense of Dada's experiments with form in which technology became the unwitting accomplice to the generation of an artistic alterity beyond its original scope, the tramp's dance adapts the action of the assembly line to the undisciplined and unruly project of embodiment. It is here that we may see what Benjamin meant when he wrote in the second version of the Work of Art essay that "Dadaism attempted to produce with the means of painting (or literature) the effects which the public today seeks in film" (Other

Writings on Media 38). Benjamin goes on to say that “film has freed the physical shock effect—which Dadaism had kept wrapped, as it were, inside the moral shock effect—from this wrapping” (Other Writings on Media 39). This effect is clearly visible in *Modern Times*, where the drama of technology’s invasion of the human body engenders no moral shock at all, but is instead presented as farce.

The repeated motion of tightening bolts, repeated *ad infinitum*, at increasing speed, with increasing efficiency, becomes the choreography of Fordism, in which the human gesture reflects with perfect clarity both the assembly line as the official structure of authorized motion and the aleatory dance of the human being. The motion here is that of the clown, but one who clowns, as it were, in earnest. It is the union of Chaplin’s human gesture with the substrate of film, its interruption as a function of form that generates this curiously political *gestus*, which both complies with domination and insists on the presence of the subject at the site of its own annihilation. Chaplin artfully blends the comic with the tragic here: in the beginning, the tramp is able to keep up with the work, but when the time comes for a lunch break, he finds that the demands of the factory have in a sense colonized his body: he is now unable to keep from repeating the bolt-tightening motion, causing him to spill hot soup all over a co-worker. The motion, the “dance” of the assembly line has now become an involuntary twitch, an unwanted artifact of his body’s supposedly temporary status as mechanical prosthetic. The intersection between technology and the body is further blurred a few minutes later, as the tramp, having failed to keep up with the pace of the machine, is swallowed up into its innards, where its teeth literally grind themselves into his fragile form; his response is to continue the bolt-tightening motion, tightening bolts on the cog below him, generating the iconic image of man-in-machine that so clearly sums up the stakes of this film (Figure 5).

The thematics of this image should not be understated. Chaplin’s tramp is here literally consumed by the factory that employs him, sucked into its inner workings and chewed upon by the teeth of the cogs and wheels that he discovers beneath the surface.

In a sense, this scene resolves the dilemma of alienation from the product; earlier, the tramp is unable to see beneath the surface of production. However, when he is consumed by the machine he discovers that its interior is simply more machinery, but machinery that now has taken a more recognizable form: the clock. It is thus significant that the opening credits are also displayed against the backdrop of a clock face. In a sense, the product of this factory is not merely work, but *time*. The tramp's workplace accident thus uncovers the secret and terrifying truth of the Fordist regime of accumulation, in which the primary product of the factory is not the consumer good, but the colonization of experience and subjectivity themselves and their redeployment into the marketplace in their new commodity form. The image of the tramp against the toothed wheel of a giant timepiece is also prescient of George Stroud's metaphor of the nature of systemic power under capitalism: the "mouse" who discovers that not only can he never escape from the clock in which he is trapped, his attempts to get out are already manifestly a part of the clock's inner function. That is to say, his attempted escape—and its failure—are pre-ordained within the system that the clock has devised, and therefore the union of machine and body is finally and ghoulishly complete. Resistance is not futile; resistance is pre-ordained, accounted for, packaged and commodified under a Fordist regime in which all action is folded into the totality of production that is the new form of the social.

It is in this way that we may explain the tramp's rictus of insanity as he lies atop the toothed wheel inside the machine. Subjected to a series of indignities, including both being eaten by a machine and being force-fed by one, the tramp suffers a "nervous breakdown" in which his humanity re-emerges in the form of compliance-as-resistance. As the machine erases subjectivity and volition, the tramp enters a solipsistic universe in which subjectivity and volition are the only possible guides for his behavior: in short, he goes mad. The form of this madness is significant. The tramp does not refuse to work: rather, he *refuses to stop working*. He continues to tighten bolts, now tightening any bolts he sees (including bolt-shaped buttons on a woman's dress). The disciplined gesture is

now undisciplined; the very motion that once signaled his compliance with and his colonization by the technological now signals complete and total rebellion against the system.

The tramp descends upon the factory floor in a ludic ballet, spraying oil into the faces of his co-workers and dancing around the machinery in an antic parody of the motions of productivity. It is here that Chaplin's tramp enters the dream of technology and the body, and arguably he never emerges from it.⁶⁷ From here he goes to the hospital, to the streets among communists and the unemployed, to prison, to the shipping yards, and finally returns to the countryside, declaring in the end despite all evidence to the contrary that he and his newfound love "will get along"—since the world they inhabit is one that is generated by disengagement and non-participation. At the end of the film, the tramp and the gamin have been broken down and defeated by the cyclopean, Fordist city, but one senses a final triumph in their final escape from it, as though the final moment in the dream of technology is the triumph over domination by way of distraction. Put another way, the bargain of Fordism is that all rational action is structured and authorized by mass production and mass consumption; in that case, the only possible avenue of resistance is madness, the final and irrational disengagement from the form of capitalism and the retreat into the undisciplined and ludic form of the unstructured human body.

4.2 Chaplin and the Gastronomic: Food and the Body in

Modern times

In a 1935 interview with *Stage's* Max Eastman, Chaplin himself commented on the linkage between work and the body in the modern world: "Why this terrible insistence on work?... Work is a beastly thing, especially when it gets to be a kind of religion. 'If you don't work, you can't eat'"(qtd. in "Chaplin's 'Modern Times'" X5). If the political implications of this were not clear, Chaplin goes on to say that "they've got

to offer us something better than that in a communist society”—but here it is crucial to note precisely what Chaplin insists upon: the presence of the body as the site of resistance to work. The logic of the Fordist society is inescapable: “If you don’t work, you can’t eat.” However, this is a bargain that as Benjamin might say “points manifestly to its opposite,” since its contra-positive (“If you don’t eat, you can’t work”) is just as insistently true. Eating thus becomes both a site at which the logic of Fordism attempts to regulate the body, and at which the body restores and re-establishes its priority at the moment that “work” takes place.

It is only the slightest of overstatements when Mark Winokur writes that “*Modern Times* is about food” (220). Winokur notes that the film contains “a dozen scenes of people eating, or trying to cadge meals,” a litany that ranges from the tramp’s being force-fed by the automatic feeding machine to his ordering a meal at a lunch counter that he knows he cannot pay for—only because he knows that in prison the meals are regular. However, one scene—frequently disregarded as mere comic interlude—places these episodes of what Winokur calls “frustrated eating” into sharper focus. Chaplin’s tramp is in prison, where he is now considered a model prisoner, having accidentally thwarted an attempted jailbreak. A minister and his wife visit the prison, and the tramp, assigned the duty of serving tea to the guests, sits next to her while they wait for her husband to perform his ministry within. What ensues can only be described as an awkward, interrupted silence (“silent” films, after all, are anything but), as it becomes instantly clear that the tramp and the minister’s wife might as well be from different planets. As she glances askance in his direction, we see in her face a mixture of barely-suppressed pity and contempt; he responds by fidgeting uncomfortably, clearly wishing that his body occupied less space on the seat (Figure 6). In a sense, what is restored here is the status quo; the tramp, having been elevated above his peers in the prison, is humbled by the presence of his better, reminded that there are class boundaries that he can never, *must* never cross.

However, it is the insistent presence of the body that intervenes; both the tramp and the minister's wife simultaneously begin to suffer from comically noisy gastric distress. Garrett Stewart describes this scene as a kind of "intrusion of dialogue," though here is a dialogue that takes place in the shared language of the gut, positioned as that which transcends the now-suddenly-permeable boundary of class:

... as they glare at each other with a mixture of anguish and accusation, we are treated to every churn and gurgle and volcanic burp on the soundtrack. This prolonged intestinal joust seems to exist entirely as a set-up for its own interruption by a radio announcer's strident, assertive tones, advertising a product guaranteed to relieve none other than "gastritis." When we recognize this scene as a diagnostic interlude in media history, when we realize that radio is itself belching out antisocially at us, we see at once Chaplin's point: the source of the cure is as bad as the disease. (Stewart 310)

That the radio's "belch" represents its own form of technical "gastritis" is abundantly clear, and Stewart is right to note that part of Chaplin's critique is aimed at the interruptive presence of technology at the moment of human contact. However, we have already seen that the distinction between body and machine is somewhat blurry in *Modern Times*, and we might just as easily surmise that the radio's untimely emission reflects the sympathetic unhappiness of its own gut joining the chorus. We might more fruitfully ask: if this is dialogue, who is speaking? These sound effects, meticulously crafted by Chaplin himself, using a straw to blow bubbles into a glass, are indeed a kind of synchronized sound effect, and in that sense we are again in the realm—or at least the technology—of the talkie. Although we are in prison, we are in effect also in a drawing room, complete with furniture and tea service. The prison has been transformed temporarily into the setting of the genteel, and here just as in the factory the uncomfortable presence of the body announces itself with a gurgle. The setting may be sanitized, populated with furniture and finery or alternately with cogs and turbines; but the irrepressible sound of the human gut, unmistakably organic and *for that reason offensive* will nevertheless intrude into the controlled and rational landscape of the

factory floor and drawing room alike. The anguish of the tramp and the minister's wife might as well also be their shared complicity in rebellion, both simultaneously announcing their own bodies' resistance to the rational, cleaned-up regime of modernity that earlier had attempted through an automated feeding machine to colonize and control the human digestive system itself.

In that sense, the "interlude" here places the rest of the film's interest in the gastronomical into a clear and political context. And like silent film in general, this scene turns out to be pre-politicized, comfortably packaging together moral drama and farce to great comic effect. When we first meet Paulette Godard's "gamin"⁶⁸ she is stealing bananas from a boat, frenetically sawing at their husks with a knife that she then places rakishly between her teeth as she throws the "fruit" of her labors to a group of enthusiastic street urchins on the docks. When she is spotted by the ship's owner she scrambles away and a brief chase scene ensues that clearly recalls the familiar Keystone Kops (as another, later scene does even more clearly). In a sense, this *homage* reflects Chaplin's capacity to join pedantry and pathos; we are asked to grant the young urchin our sympathies (she is, after all, a kind of Robin Hood of the street-urchin set) while simultaneously reimagining the entire silent film tradition (on which *Modern Times* self-consciously reflects) as reinvigorated with the political stridency of the present: the effect is to transform farce into the satire that it had always teetered on the brink of becoming. For the purposes of this dissertation it is worth noting that this transformation depends on the complex relation of the body to domination; the gamine's circumvention of this bargain only serves to underline its importance as the credo of industrial capitalism: work or starve. As the gamine and the tramp engage in an unlikely whirlwind romance, consummated over the theft of a loaf of bread and their subsequent arrest, their love story serves as the unruly intrusion of *eros* into the Apollonian, rational universe of the factory floor. This is in effect the shape of distraction in *Modern Times*: the irrational insistence

on the presence of the subject at the precise moment of its domination, subversion and rationalization under the regime of Fordism.

In that case, it is eating that provides, not the *subject* of *Modern Times*, but rather its *situation*; that is, its drama makes use of eating as a way of signaling the body's presence at the moment of cultural or social conflict. That a film about factory life might take up the question of automated eating is no surprise—after all, the aim of Fordism is literally to colonize the subject and recruit it into the project of production and consumption, and the final moment of unproductive leisure under this regime is the lunch break, as the “mechanical salesman” so aptly explains: “Don’t stop for lunch! Stay ahead of your competitor!” the recorded voice urges—and this salesman has taken his own advice, recognizing that the portable, *reproducible* sales pitch is infinitely more efficient than a sales pitch that requires the presence of a human body. The mechanical salesman doesn’t “stop for lunch” either: his sales pitch, copied (we presume) thousands of times over, remains productive even when its “producer,” having recorded the message at some time in the past, is at rest. The mechanization of the body in both cases effectively erases leisure, and as such it is no surprise that the automatic feeding machine turns out to be a mixture of comedy and horror, blending Barrett Watten’s “ludic corrective” effect with the nightmarish cautionary tale of industrialism (Figure 7). The machine consists of a seat into which the tramp is strapped, with a rotating table at chest-height, and a variety of progressively horrible “feeding tools” designed for hands-free eating. It’s worth noting that this design does more than simply allow the worker to produce while eating; it literally straps the worker to the assembly line. The machine not only eliminates the lunch hour: it also presumably eliminates breaks altogether, and functions in that case in a transformative capacity. That is, the automatic feeder transforms the body itself into an extension of the assembly line mechanism.

Much like the tramp himself, driven mad by the indignities of the factory floor, the feeding machine ultimately goes haywire—and at that point the machine undergoes a

significant transformation of its own from time-saving invention to implement of torture. The same mechanism that initially gently wiped the tramp's mouth now beats him mercilessly about the face. The rotating spindle that fed him corn on the cob now spins horribly under the tramp's nose; his expression of anguish summons in the film audience a mixture of laughter and horror. The bowl that gently lifted hot soup to the tramp's mouth now hurls the scalding liquid down his front. Worst of all, as the sales crew scrambles to repair the machine, the rotating plate and spoon assembly that pushed small cakes into his mouth now force feeds two large metal nuts to the tramp while the wiping implement holds his mouth shut until, horribly, he is forced to swallow one of them. In part, this reflects a kind of narrative symmetry; later, just as the tramp "swallows" the machine, he will be swallowed by it, cementing his status as both producer, and in a grimly literal joke, a *consumer*. However, it also reflects the invasion of the body that the automatic feeding machine represents. The transformation of the machine into implement of torture should surprise no-one: in a sense, the machine's very *purpose* is torture, that is to erase the undisciplined, nonproductive organic body from the site of production. The machine's malfunction—and its subsequent revelatory transformation in which comedy becomes horror—is something akin to the transformation of farce into satire in silent film more generally.

Later, it is the tramp and the gamine's complicity over the desperate act of stealing bread that unites them. Indeed, both characters are now confirmed aliens of the social, he an unemployed ex-convict (though bearing an almost totemically powerful letter of reference from the prison warden) and she a homeless orphan on the lam from the authorities. After the two escape from a wrecked police van, they share a domestic daydream of middle-class utopia. They are resting along the side of the road when a husband emerges from a nearby house, kissing his wife goodbye before going off to work. Significantly, the man is not dressed in the coveralls of the factory worker but in the pressed suit and tie of the factory boss. The tramp turns to his new companion and

smiles: “can you imagine us in a little home like that?” he asks, and this prompts a lengthy reverie in which the tramp and the gamine dream together about the life of the middle class, which turns out to be as fantastical as the brobdingnagian factory that opened the film. The dream sequence begins with the two of them inside the house, he wearing the coveralls of the factory worker, accessorized with his trademark jacket and bowler hat, with a handkerchief wrapped rakishly about his neck. The gamine, on the other hand, is the very picture of domesticity; she is wearing what appears almost a satiric cartoon of the attire of the housewife that they had seen moments earlier, with a frilly apron and printed dress with matching bow in her hair. The dream takes a turn for the surreal when the tramp casually reaches out of his window and helps himself to one of the ripe peaches that is practically hanging into his living-room off a tree just outside. He takes a few bites before being summoned for breakfast, where while the gamine is cooking enormous steaks in a frying pan, the tramp whistles for a cow that is stationed just outside and by setting a jug underneath her udder, procures milk for them with a casual tap on the cow’s rump. While he is waiting for the milk, which spurts effortlessly from the cow’s udder, the tramp enjoys a few grapes from the vines that conveniently hang over the doorway.

As usual, the dream is interrupted by the inescapable reality of the body in the present. The dream evaporates, and the gamine looks helplessly at the tramp, rubbing her stomach. “Gosh, I’m hungry,” she says, and this prompts a newly urgent search for food that will provide the impetus for the remaining action of the film. The tramp slaps his knee with determination and declares “I’ll do it! We’ll get a home, *even if I have to work for it!*” A police officer interrupts their reverie and sends them on their way at that moment, but it is significant that the “dream of domesticity” in part involves a casual abundance of food—and yet, this dream is no more real than the automatic feeding-machine’s implicit dream of abundant, disembodied labor. Instead, the true stakes of the dream are only revealed afterward, when we learn that it is not food that creates the

dream of domesticity, but work—and implicit here is the bargain of the Fordist worker more generally: comply or starve—or, as Chaplin told Max Eastman, “if you don’t work, you can’t eat.”

In fact, the tramp and gamine are later involved in an explicit parody of this dream sequence, when the gamine finds a run-down shack for them to live in, attempting to build for themselves the dream of domesticity that has lingered in their minds since the shared daydream. The house is comically decrepit, with rotting boards attacking the tramp both from above and below, and a swimming-hole outside that turns out to be only an inch or so deep. The gamine seems instantly conscious of the dissonance between dream and reality, saying “Of course, it’s no Buckingham Palace”—but the tramp seems content there, and the shack does seem, surprisingly, to contain an abundance of the very thing both characters have craved for so long: food. The tramp asks the gamine where she got the food, but she only smiles coyly; we may presume illegitimate means, given that we have twice seen her stealing food already. Nonetheless, food is present in comical abundance, gigantic ham hocks and slices of bread three inches thick that the tramp attempts to construct sandwiches out of. However, the meal is once again interrupted, this time by the imminent return of work, which by now the alert viewer knows is the true antagonist in this story. The tramp has barely tasted his breakfast when he unrolls the newspaper, learns that a factory is re-opening, and proclaims “work at last!” He manages just one bite of his sandwich before sprinting across the field (their shack, by narrative coincidence, is adjacent to the factory) to his new place of employment.

In this way, the symmetry of the relationship between work and the gastronomical is completed. As if to continue the metaphor beyond its tasteful limits, Chaplin then turns his protagonist into a kind of automatic feeding-machine himself, attempting to feed lunch to his supervisor (a mechanic who literally gets trapped within the machine) echoing the tramp’s “consumption” by the factory at Electro Steel Corp. The tramp’s

methods are ingenious, but the results are every bit as humiliating and horrifying as they were earlier; the tramp performs the function of the feeding machine and in that capacity re-imagines food itself as a machine, for instance using a whole chicken as a funnel, with which he pours hot coffee down the throat of the mechanic. As the mechanic struggles helplessly against this indignity, we almost cannot help seeing him as a kind of latter-day John Malcolm, the hapless official of state power who becomes the site of punishment and torture by the masses just before they go into open revolt against authority itself. As if to confirm this, no sooner is the mechanic freed from his prison than the workers go on strike, and the scene outside the factory is eerily reminiscent of the communist protest that first landed the tramp in prison—and the circle completes when the tramp accidentally hurls a brick at a police officer and lands himself in the clink for the third and final time.

In the work of Benjamin on reception in the age of mechanical reproduction, two forms of the reception of art compete: what he calls *Zerstreuung*, or “entertainment,” which is normally translated as *distraction*, and *Einverleibung*, which Howard Eiland and others usually render as “absorption.” As usual, translation renders the linguistically nuanced into the categorical, and we must insist here on *Einverleibung*’s more specific meaning, which is “ingestion.”⁶⁹ In *Modern Times*, as Garrett Stewart observed, the technology of the present is itself subject to a kind of embodiment: radios emit embarrassing noises, machines emit oil, noisome odors and even fire and smoke, reminding us that their production of value is not independent from their physical presence in time. Most crucially, on at least two occasions, the machines of modernity *eat*, and here their “ingestion” is almost a stand-in for that absorptive ideological communication that Benjamin’s *einverleibung* refers to. That is, *Modern Times* clarifies the bargain of modernity in this way: not as “comply, or starve,” but “be eaten or do not eat.” And implicit in this bargain is the bleak proviso that “consumption” is the agreed-upon method of culture and that it functions in two ways: as the consumer’s

“consumption” of products and the workplace’s “consumption” of the worker, and in two cases this last sense is all too literal. This is more than cute wordplay—*consumption* is what requires the tramp to work (remember, it is not food, but “a home” that he is after) and in order to consume, he must become a *consumer*, a status that carries with it the silent but unmistakable echo of a different grammatical form of the same word: *consumed*.

4.3 The Silent Film and the Talkie: Progress and the “Little Tramp”

One of the tasks of modern times (and, I argue, of *Modern Times*) is to invent a new mode of the critical that is suitable to the union of technology and culture in the present. “Fools lament the decay of criticism,” Walter Benjamin gloomily observed in 1923 (“These Surfaces for Rent” 173). Indeed, the critical eye which attempted to reflect on culture from a suitable (in all likelihood, bourgeois) distance, is as much a daydream as the domestic home with fresh fruit, abundant steaks and a magic cow. Benjamin goes on to lament that criticism’s “day is long past. Criticism is a matter of correct distancing. It was at home in a world where perspectives and prospects counted and where it was still possible to adopt a standpoint” (“These Surfaces for Rent” 173). It is the totalizing logic of the mechanized age of capitalism that presents the problem here for Benjamin, just as it is that totalization that presents the moral drama for the tramp in *Modern Times*. For Benjamin, this is an atypically “Frankfurt-School” moment, in which he almost adopts the pessimistic stance of Adorno toward the popular; but more interesting here is Benjamin’s use of the theme of “reflection” in a way that perfectly describes “distraction” nearly a decade prior to his use of that concept in the “Work of Art” essay. Benjamin observes that the reality of the present is also the impossibility of critical reflection, that is, reflection-at-a-distance according to a model that presumes a space to which a subject may retreat. The antidote is in another sort of “reflection” altogether.

Having noted that the “most real, mercantile gaze into the heart of things” is the advertisement, Benjamin goes on to say this:

The warmth of the subject is communicated to [the art lover], stirs sentient springs. What, in the end, makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon sign says—but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt. (“These Surfaces for Rent” 174)

The “reflection” of the subject is here supplanted by the physical “reflection” of culture against its own substrate. Note as well the manner in which this new criticism may be unlocked—by *looking away*—and here, criticism is re-imagined as a kind of conscious saccadic masking that has the effect of passively undoing the implicit hierarchy of technology and culture under modernity. I do not look at the advertisement, Benjamin tells us, but at the advertisement’s reflection, in which the stark communicative terms of its ideological message have been transformed into the stuff of dreams, emptied of content and now merely revealing their own re-incarnation as dissonant and uncontrollable—a sort of oneiric underworld that rumbles threateningly beneath our feet as we walk the halls of capitalism unaware. It is this “reflection” that clarifies the possibilities of the “ludic corrective” in the case of Chaplin, who attempts to render the Fordist phase of capitalism as laughter. Recall Bergson’s description of laughter’s undisciplined, inarticulate re-structuring of the social:

Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo. Listen to it carefully: it is not an articulate, clear, well-defined sound; it is something which would fain be prolonged by reverberating from one to another, something beginning with a crash, to continue in successive rumblings, like thunder in a mountain. It can travel within as wide a circle as you please: the circle, remains, none the less, a closed one. Our laughter is always the laughter of a group. ... However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughs, real or imaginary. (5)

Walter Benjamin found in Chaplin the same collective laughter-response, but now infused with the subtle threat of revolt: “Chaplin never allows the audience to smile while watching him. They must either double up laughing or be very sad. Chaplin greets

people by taking off his bowler, and it looks like the lid rising from the kettle when the water boils over” (“Chaplin” 333). Benjamin observes in the tramp a peculiar mixture of bathos and criticism, and we may at some hazard of overstatement observe that this is the criticism that is reflected in “fiery pools” in the asphalt. In that case, it is no surprise that for Benjamin it is Chaplin who gives rise to the revolutionary reception of film—he embodies and demonstrates perfectly the revolutionary threat of merely looking away, the manner in which the communicative and rational takes newly undisciplined and ludic forms when reflected, not reflected on.

It is here that we may finally understand the import of Chaplin in the model of reception devised by Benjamin—in particular, that while Chaplin summons into existence a distracted reception in his audience, his character also models it with his specific style of gesture. Writing about *The Circus*, Benjamin notes that it is the first film of Chaplin’s “old age,” and in this he finds a renewed maturity of purpose in the latest iteration of Chaplin’s “tramp,” a purpose that turns out to be didactic and polemical:

Chaplin now has a clear overview of his possibilities and is resolved to work exclusively within these limits to attain his goal. At every point the variations on his greatest themes are displayed in their full glory. The chase is set in a maze; his unexpected appearance would astonish a magician; *the mask of noninvolvement* turns him into a fairground marionette. (“Chaplin in Retrospect” 335, emphasis added)

As with George Stroud, the profound threat to the order of Fordism here is not that someone might fight against it; after all, as with *The Big Clock*, active resistance is a rational action that can be understood by and pre-ordained within the system of the social. Rather, it is that the subject might choose not to pay attention to its ideological message, or that it might disengage itself, even if only for a moment, from the category of the rational itself.

Benjamin notes Chaplin’s age but fails to note that even in 1929, the medium of silent film was, like the eternal art-work, on the verge of being “worn out.” This accident of history turns out to be a key critical problem in the interpretation of Chaplin,

because it is only in the age of the transformation of the medium of film from the conventions of silent cinema to the conventions of the talkie that the tramp's "mask of noninvolvement" becomes noticeable. Chaplin's tramp retains not only the "gesture" of silent film, but also its visual style, which includes a noticeably different style of make-up and facial expressiveness. In a silent film, the tramp might not especially stand out—but in the context of a silent film that recognizes itself as already passé, the iconically impassive face of the tramp now becomes a mask,⁷⁰ a blend of impassivity and melodrama that almost cannot help but give rise to the critical dimension of farce—or more exactly, to satire.

4.4 Speech Acts: The Mute Tramp and the Voice of Resistance

The first time the tramp is sent to prison, it is a simple case of mistaken identity. He innocently picks up a red warning flag that falls from a construction vehicle, but as he is waving it to get the attention of the crew, a mob of communist demonstrators arrives behind him, and the red flag suddenly takes on a new and dangerous meaning. Mistaken for the leader of the communist protest, the tramp is jailed; it is through this official act that the true shape of the tramp's threat to the establishment is clarified. It is important to avoid overstatement here, but the key to this moment is that although the tramp is not the leader of a protest (nor indeed is he at all interested in politics), in an official sense he might as well be. That is, the significance of his "mask of noninvolvement" is not lost on the authorities who arrested him: they single him out in part because of his particular demeanor, namely his insistence, in the face of a rational, Fordist *ideology of the productive*, that *he* will be unproductive, careless, uninvolved. The mask of noninvolvement does not signal revolution; indeed, the tramp is as unconcerned with the communist protesters with whom he is erroneously associated as he is with the mores of

the Fordist regime that he tacitly rejects. However, it is the mask of noninvolvement that in this case originates and situates Benjamin's "dream of reparations" in *Modern Times*.

In an unpublished fragment reflecting on Mickey Mouse, Benjamin mused in a manner that recalls his later vision of a new reception that re-inscribes the subject at the moment of its own erasure by mass culture: "in these films, mankind makes preparations to survive civilization" ("Mickey Mouse" 338). It is in Chaplin that the true import of distraction, not as a revolutionary, but as an *apocalyptic* form emerges into clearer focus. In that case, distraction is the nexus of what Benjamin called the "dialectics at a standstill"—the placement of the revolutionary impulse into suspended animation beneath the impassive "mask of noninvolvement," from which it could theoretically emerge in newly threatening form at some time in the future. In a curiously exact rendering of Benjamin's "dialectics at a standstill," Mark Winokur writes that "Chaplin's tramp holds a number of opposing impulses together in an almost easy tension" (219). Winokur will go on to argue that the comedy of the film is in deadly earnest:

As the film is about the oppression of the individual by industry and society, and the strategies of re-perception the individual counters that oppression with, so the jokes are not only the central devices of that strategy, but they are also about the arbitrary oppression of one thing by another, and the re-perception of that thing by a creative sensibility that redefines that thing and so, momentarily, liberates it. (226)

What Winokur calls "re-perception" is specifically the adaptation of items to purposes for which they are not intended, in the way that the tramp himself is adapted to numerous "purposes" over the course of the film, as factory worker, shipyard laborer, dancing waiter and bum. Yet Winokur's description takes on a political dimension in the final analysis, as "re-perception by creative sensibility" becomes the vehicle of (in this case) a relatively conventional discourse of liberation.

Chaplin clearly understood that one of the keys to his character's international comic appeal was the fact that he did not speak; his muteness both rendered him as a caricature and reduced the specificity of his characterization to the point where anyone,

of any nationality, could superimpose his or her own voice over the tramp's imaginary vocalizations. Chaplin was famously dismissive of the talkie; however, *Modern Times* contains a number of concessions to this novel form, including synchronized speech (the factory boss) and sound effects. Neither of these could approach in notoriety the most significant moment in the tramp's twenty-two year career on the silver screen: the first time that film audiences would hear his voice.

When the tramp emerges from prison after his second failure at the factory, he finds that the gamine has been transformed in his absence. She has finally found gainful employment, as a dancing waitress at a café, and the news is even better: she can get him a job there. They proceed to the restaurant, where the tramp is subjected to a cursory interview by the proprietor, with the gamine helpfully answering questions for him while he stands politely—and silently—next to her. The restaurant owner asks if the tramp can wait tables; as far as we know he has never done this, and given his history of blundering into disaster at every other job he has held, we might be forgiven for doubting it. Nevertheless, he nods, with faint enthusiasm. However, he is clearly flummoxed by the next question: “Can you sing?” As the gamine nods, unworried, the tramp's mouth hangs open in stunned terror: sing? *Him?* The proprietor walks away, and the tramp performs one of the most subtle, yet loaded gestures of the entire film: he clutches, helplessly, at his throat with one hand, as if to confirm what film audiences had known about him for fourteen years: he does not speak (Figure 8). To clarify, he is not, in a technical sense, mute: he is often seen speaking, with intertitles approximating (though usually not reproducing exactly) his dialogue. It might be accurate to say that *the tramp has no voice*; that is, in 81 appearances on film his character had existed in a universe of silence. This is the true significance of the hand-to-throat gesture, which registers simultaneously as a commentary on *Modern Times*' peculiar historical status and as a lighthearted joke; it is almost as if the tramp is suddenly beset with a mixture of performance anxiety and laryngitis.

The gamine is unconcerned, and they proceed to rehearse his number, which turns out to be the familiar French bar hall song “Titine.” The tramp has just one problem: he cannot remember the words. The gamine helpfully writes the lyrics on the cuff of his shirtsleeve, but during the opening dance routine, the tramp accidentally flings his shirt cuffs into the crowd, not realizing his mistake until the time has come for him to finally allow his voice to be heard. He stares helplessly at the gamine, who repeats the gesture of finger-pointing-to-mouth, but this time with insistence: “Sing! Never mind the words!” Murray Pomerance calls this “a command unsurpassed in strangeness,” and this is undoubtedly true (49). However, it is also a command that seems perfectly appropriate in the final silent film of the silent era, the tramp’s twenty-four year journey on the silver screen having been in some way defined, as Garrett Stewart points out, by the credo “never mind the words.”⁷¹

Indeed, this history of “silence” is critical to any understanding of this iconic moment. Garrett Stewart observes that

the splendid suspense that mounts through the latter part of this penultimate scene, as melody threatens to burst into lyric, as the girl actually writes on his cuff the words of the song he is about to perform, is a function not of plot but of film history. (312)

It is hard to imagine an audience’s reaction to the moment that Chaplin finally allows his tramp’s voice to be heard on film—but we must begin by imagining the twenty-four years of Chaplin’s career on film as an utterance about to be made—that is, we must imagine his audience as having *waited for him to speak* for as long as they could remember, without the expectation that this desire would, or even *could*, ever be satisfied. In the end, it is not until he discards utterly the notion of “intelligibility” that he is freed to vocalize: and vocalize he does, in an utterly unique made-up argot that is part French, part Italian and part nonsense. Chaplin’s pantomime that accompanies the lyrics has the effect that the “nonsense song” seems continually to hover just out of reach, as though the tramp is speaking in an ancient, familiar language whose rules and conventions we have

simply forgotten. On its face, this scene offers the most compelling critique of the “talkie” that we have yet seen. Chaplin is in part demonstrating that gesture is everything, and speech might as well be nonsense. It is gesture that narrates, gesture that performs, and in the end gesture also that *critiques*. Chaplin is indeed speaking in an ancient, forgotten tongue: the language of gesture, which since the start of the film has worked to infuse the present with the trenchant critical energy of an obsolete form.

In this context, the ending, featuring the tramp’s final appearance on screen, walking away from the city down a long stretch of road, seems perfectly *apropos*. First, the two lovers sit along the side of the road while the tramp works methodically at retying his bindle. The gamine, having finally learned that her lot in life is not the middle-class dream of domesticity that she dreamed of when she and the tramp first met, bursts into tears. However, the tramp asks her to “smile”; he knows that in giving up the dream of prosperity they have gained their own freedom from the system that has dominated them. The final inter-title of the silent film era might as well be an exhortation to an audience that has just relearned the language of critique that they had earlier forgotten: “Buck up! We’ll get along!” The tramp himself, as it happens, will not: this would be his final appearance on film. But the toolkit of reception-in-distraction that Chaplin has provided would live on, in this case merely a reminder of the applicability of a language of gesture and melodrama to the crisis of the present.

Interviewed in the New York times in the fall of 1935, Chaplin had this to say about the provenance of *Modern Times*:

I was riding in my car one day and saw a mass of people coming out of a factory, punching time-clocks, and was overwhelmed with the knowledge that the theme note of modern times is mass production. I wondered what would happen to the progress of the mechanical age if one person decided to act like a bull in a china shop—for instance to say ‘nuts’ to a red light and drive on—or scream at a concert that was boring. I decided it would make a good story to take a little man and make him thumb his nose at all recognized rules and conventions. ("Enter Charles Chaplin")

Crucially, this quotation reveals the extent to which the film, which undertakes a critique of mass production, is nevertheless born within and authorized by the regime of Fordism; in that context, it is no accident that like Stein, Chaplin has his revelation about the nature of the subject in society while “riding in a car.” Recall that the car, like film itself, both reflects novel modes of production and also generates profound changes to what Benjamin called the “apperceptive apparatus.” However, Chaplin may in some ways be overstating the subversiveness of his film. After all, the tramp’s agenda is not to “thumb his nose at rules” but simply to “get along” in a world that he cannot understand. But here is the seed of the dream of mass production in *Modern Times*: that even as the Fordist society absorbs all productive activity in the city, it is powerless to erase the human subject, or even to entirely conquer the human body.



Figure 3: Chaplin's improvisatory dance on the Fordist assembly line.



Figure 4: Authority in *Modern Times* is projected through, and mediated by, technology

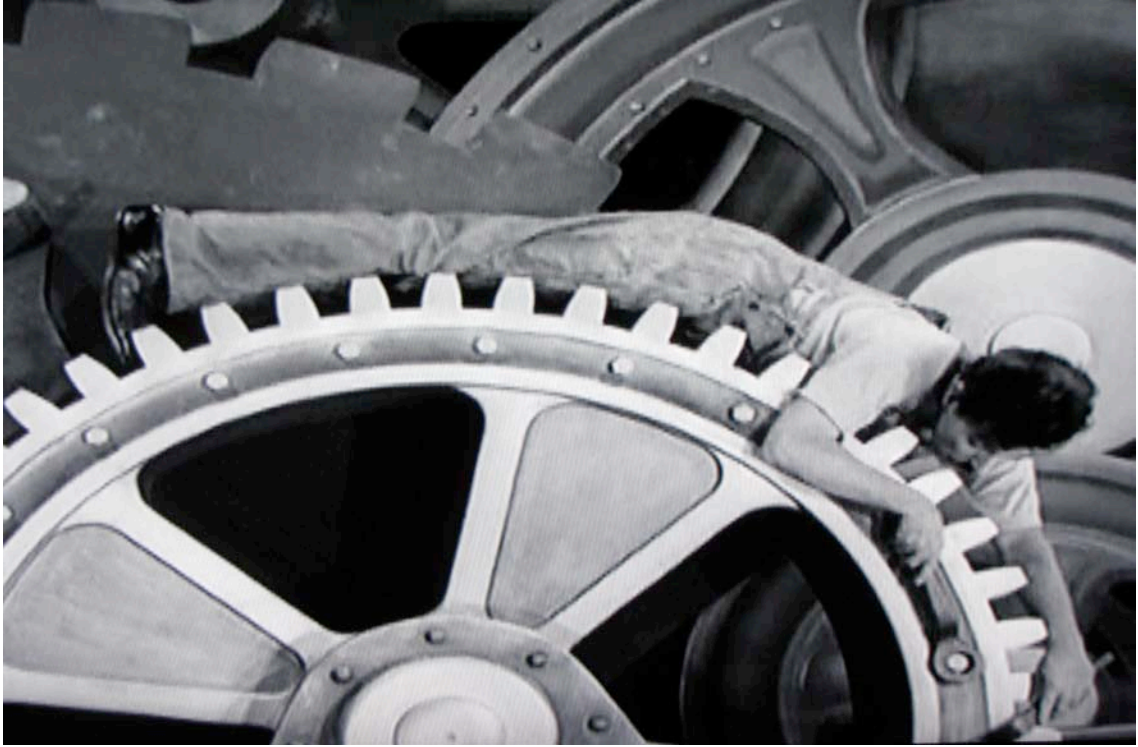


Figure 5: Chaplin's iconic image of the man gone mad in the bowels of the machine.



Figure 6: The tramp seated next to the minister's wife.



Figure 7: The mixture of comedy and nightmare in the “Automatic Feeding Machine”



Figure 8: The tramp's gesture of voicelessness at the "singing waiters" café.

CHAPTER 5. WEATHER REPORTS IN THE
NUCLEAR AGE: GERTRUDE STEIN'S APOCALYPTIC
POETRY

Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie. The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert. Such fusion is of great social significance.

--Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of
Mechanical Reproduction"

5.1 Distraction and Destruction: Modernity and Crisis

Among Gertrude Stein's papers held at Yale's Beinecke Library is a handwritten poem scribbled in the author's loose hand into the lined pages of one of her famous blue *carnets*, and bearing the title "A Poem About the End of Man." The poem is dated 1942, and in that sense we may judge its topicality as purely a function of history: written in Bilignin, in what was still Vichy France, the Poem's title might well reflect a sense of the impending and terrifying future provided by the very pressing political problems of world war and of global and ethnic politics in Western Europe. Stein may have felt that the time was right for a reflection about the apocalyptic nature of the present, not only in modernity's sense of the subsumption of the past into a flattened "now-ness" that had long been a feature of contemporary historicity, but in the real sense of global conflict, new weapons of mass chaos, strategic bombing and genocide. The text of the poem, however, strikes a light, wistful tone.

I wish that is what they say,
I wish that to-day was anyway,
That is what they say,
They wish that thunder began to thunder,
They say that they wish that thunder began to
thunder.⁷²

This writing then, coyly offering only the loosest reflection on its subject, nevertheless presents its reader with a serious critical question, one with wide-ranging relevance to a

broader critique of modernity: how can we arrive at a sense of this work's urgency when its form so clearly rejects urgency itself, even at a time when the demands of history on the present must have seemed more pressing than ever? Put another way, how can we attend to a work that *does not attend* to its own subject, that signals a topicality, a referentiality to contemporary historical demands and then casually rejects that topicality by attending instead to the subject's bored and wistful desire for a change in the weather?

Barbara Will writes of Stein's compositions in this period that they reflect a "compositional submissiveness" that is revealed through "texts whose thematic exploration of passivity in the face of unexpected and arbitrary violence is echoed in a textual passivity characterized by equivocation, doubt, and obsessional repetition" (Will "Lost in Translation" 659).⁷³ That a formal repetition which was formerly experimental is now "obsessional" is one of Will's more surprising claims; but it may be fruitful to wonder what Will would say when confronted with the above example, of a poem which takes "passivity" in the face of crisis *as its very subject*. Interestingly, Will had in 2000 proposed a linkage between Stein's experiments with the automatic self and the "mature aesthetic" of her writing prior to A.A.B.T., but it is clear that for her Stein's writing during the depression and the War years re-inscribes a patriarchal aesthetic overtop of the "radically antiauthoritarian, antipatriarchal poetics" that characterized her earlier work (Will "'and Then One Day There Was a War': Gertrude Stein, Children's Literature and World War II" 652).⁷⁴ In essence, what this chapter will propose is a fundamental revision of Will's model, which I take to be a version of the split between "composition" and "audience writing" that we may trace back to Ulla Dydo. Instead, I propose that the later work of Stein, very much conscious of the urgent demands of the history, places the crisis of the present into a radical synthesis with the model of the "automatic personality" that she developed in her earliest experiments with William James. There is not a "break" in Stein's compositional aesthetics between an "antiauthoritarian" and a "patriarchal" phase; rather, the work that Stein composed in the last years of her life, in

which she witnessed the rise of fascism, a return to World War, genocide and the dropping of the first atomic bomb, prompted her to develop a mature aesthetic that united the resistance of the avant-garde with the receptive practices of the mass public.

Indeed, this dissertation has in effect argued that what Will sees as passivity is actually a calculated disengagement from the ideological message, what Benjamin referred to as “reception in distraction.”⁷⁵ At a glance, Stein’s “Poem About the End of Man” might seem to illustrate Will’s point perfectly, reflecting a masochistic desire for patriarchal domination in the poem’s “wish that the thunder would thunder.” However, just as with Chaplin’s ever-malleable tramp, “passivity” here takes on a complex, subversive dimension. The text of the poem, far from being a reflection about the “End of Man,” is virtually an interruption of the title’s apocalyptic promise and an insistent return to an indolent, even bored longing for a change in the weather, even if that change brings with it the upheaval and disruption of a “storm.”

It is well to remember here Walter Benjamin’s definition of boredom as the knowledge of an “incurable imperfection in the very essence of the present” (A.P. 106). Boredom and apocalypse thus both find their origin in the cosmos, and there is perhaps no better way to assign the proper modality to the bored longing for a future that differs from the present than to reserve conversation to the very topic that both combats and signals ennui: the weather. Benjamin writes that

Nothing is more characteristic than that precisely this most intimate and mysterious affair, the working of the weather on humans, should have become the theme of their emptiest chatter. Nothing bores the ordinary man more than the cosmos. Hence, for him, the deepest connection between weather and boredom. (A.P. 101)

The “Angel of History” is another figure whose relation to history is framed in terms of weather, in the terms of a storm that arrives by way of primal history and sweeps the subject forward into the terrifying and invisible future. Similarly, Stein’s subjects yearn for the storm to come (though they are helpless to control it), and dream of a future in

which the reparation of the present crisis is possible: they “wish that to-day was anyway.” This last line yokes together the temporal and the transformative, and “boredom” thus assumes, as in Benjamin’s model, its simultaneously apocalyptic and dialectical form. Stein’s poem raises the dual problems of apocalypse and modernity and places the burden of response on the cosmic state of boredom. The subjects stand with their backs turned to history’s devastating future, and confronted with the social problems of modernity, they yearn for a change in the weather. What is striking here is the spirit in which these subjects receive the news of apocalypse, which can only be described as “distracted”; they attend only to the physical body in the present, and the noise of its embodiment effectively drowns out the message of ideology in the form of the storm’s attack on the subject.

A few years earlier, Stein had told Charlie Chaplin that the core of her aesthetic mission was an art that does nothing,⁷⁶ and by that we may deduce the existence of a Stein aesthetic that *can* account for this active inattention to the undisciplined terror of modernity, a reception in distraction that effects the instantaneous redaction and bracketing of the historical present, in the Benjaminian sense of a bored knowledge of its incurable imperfection. In part, Stein was interested in revising the conventional and genteel model of an art-work that retains its ceremonial presence, its command over attention and cognition. In “What are Master-Pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them,” Stein wrote that a master-piece “has essentially not to be necessary... the minute it is necessary it has in it no possibility of going on” (Stein Writings, 1932-1946 357). Much of that essay deals with the linkage between the art-work and the creating subject, the fraught and difficult relationship between author and text, or identity and entity. However, Stein also addresses two issues more germane to this dissertation: form and reception as measures of a “Master-Piece,” which following Stein’s own logic we may refer to as a training-instrument for an art that “does nothing” and therefore invites no rational or utilitarian engagement. Stein clarifies that part of what prevents master-pieces

is memory, by which she means a consciousness of the art-work's duty as an index to the real:

This is what makes secondary writing, it is remembering, it is very curious you begin to write something and suddenly you remember something and if you continue to remember your writing gets very confused. If you do not remember while you are writing, it may seem confused to others but actually it is clear and eventually that clarity will be clear, that is what a master-piece is, but if you remember while you are writing it will seem clear at the time to any one but the clarity will go out of it that is what a master-piece is not ... The minute your memory functions while you are doing anything it may be very popular but actually it is dull. (Stein Writings, 1932-1946 359)

To “remember” is in this case to “represent,” and here we have a clear articulation of Stein’s aesthetics of distraction, both as a method of composition and as a receptive mode that emerges from the new technological and cultural competences of modernity. To “remember” is to produce the real in ideal form before summoning up its representation in written form, and in that case memory functions primarily as an anchor that links the subject to the material present. In that case, memory is also the attention one pays to the index of the real, and for Stein this is a limitation within which a writer must work, much like Chaplin transforming the regulated and repetitive gesture of the factory floor into dance.

After all, attention and distraction are not merely attitudes of reception, but cultural practices that inflect the art-work itself, as Benjamin realized in the “Work of Art” essay. That attention is laden with the baggage of social submission ought not to come as any surprise: after all, the first lesson of the schoolroom is to “pay attention,” or to participate in the ritual of social learning with the rapt and silent aspect of the student. The practice of contemporary learning (eyes front, heads on desks, *listen don't speak*) reflect the establishment’s goal, not to encourage an attention that might be termed “critical,” but rather to cultivate an *attentive silence*, passively receptive to the message of ideology, the true and secret content of which is always the perpetuation of the social models of the status quo. It is no accident that this is also a lesson that is “remembered”;

its memory serves to prompt the mass public to police and regulate its own actions, and in this sense memory is merely the medium to the “content” of ideology.

In a sense, however, the specific content is irrelevant; the true lesson of what Althusser calls the ideological apparatus of the state is not domination to a specific ideological content, but domination itself as the ineluctable *form of the social*. The central instruction of ideology is, in terms that barely avoid tautology, to become passively receptive to its message and to cultivate only repetition of its rote content, finally becoming uninterested in any rejoinder, which will only be met with discipline anyway.⁷⁷ This culminates with the student granting the teacher power over his or her own voice, only raising a hand to dutifully repeat the message of the lesson, as if to confirm their compliance with this passive paradigm of learning, a skill that will surely serve them well in their life away from school.

In this way we may see the true significance of Gertrude Stein’s advocacy of “talking and listening at the same time.”⁷⁸ Stein’s famous phrase illustrates, among other things, the true objective of attention, which using her own schematic we may describe as “listening without talking.” Stein understood that the objective of summoning attention is not cognitive engagement, but *silence*. If we continue the Althusserian analogy above, we may say that to grant one’s attention is to consent to a silence that paves the way for interpellation, and moreover for the subjection of the self to a message that we know to be at once self-interested and ideological. By contrast, “talking and listening at the same time” requires a kind of “reception in distraction” in the form of a simultaneous attention to two separate and parallel speech acts: what we are told, and what we are saying, which is another way of saying that Stein insists on the stubborn presence of the subject at the site of cultural consumption. In this case, it is a subject that not only offers to a sanitized, rational mass society the insult of its own embodiment, but also refuses, once and for all, to stop talking.

How then, to understand mass culture, which convention tells us is the loudspeaker of ideology? According to that convention, which carries with it a substantial Frankfurt-School hangover, mass culture is in essence the dialectical effect of the colonization of attention by corporate interests.⁷⁹ This was in part what Benjamin was after in his use of the phantasmagoria as an analogy for mass culture's function within the ideological shape of the present: mass culture is the realization of the fantasy of late capitalism, the creation of a consumer society that penetrates to every aspect of culture and thus always prefabricates and structures experience itself according to consumerist models of its own devising.⁸⁰ The marketplace in the age of mass culture offers a ghoulish bargain, in which the commodity culture's promise of affluence and comfort is offered to the consumer, but carries with it the secret cost of complicity with the ideological message that it transmits, which according to the model of the marketplace is always and only its own perpetuation. In this sense mass culture becomes the frightening hall of mirrors that is the public face of capitalism itself, or what Fredric Jameson calls "relationship through difference":

I believe that the most striking emblem of this new mode of thinking relationships can be found in the work of Nam June Paik, whose stacked or scattered television screens ... recapitulate over and over again prearranged sequences or loops of images which return at dissynchronous moments on the various screens. The older aesthetic is then practiced by viewers, who, bewildered by this discontinuous variety, decide to concentrate on a single screen, as though the relatively worthless image sequence to be followed there had some organic value in its own right. The postmodern viewer, however, is called upon to do the impossible, namely, to see all the screens at once, in their radical and random difference. (Postmodernism 31)

Jameson's remark occurs in the context of his account of the alteration of the form of the work of art under the regime of reception that he calls postmodernism—and it stipulates both art's newly disjointed form and the altered mode of absorption that art now implicitly commands. However, what Jameson describes here is also a regime of the re-packaging of experience itself in the age of mass culture, and he ambivalently asserts that

one effect of this is the virtual eradication of the work of art and its replacement by “the text.” The art-work, having previously enjoyed a unique ontological status, what he here calls “organic value,” is under the regime of its reproducibility and its fragmentary nature now empty, literally referring to and referent to nothing. Consciously or unconsciously, Jameson here echoes Benjamin’s “Work of Art” essay, and describes with astonishing precision Benjamin’s model of a reception in distraction that emerges from art’s new technological form.

However, Jameson’s analysis produces one crucial proviso that may help to untangle the difference between the unkempt disengagement of the tramp and the more consciously trenchant “distraction” of George Stroud. Clearly, “distraction” has two forms. One is as a readerly response to a mass culture that produces the disparate and dissynchronous in a form that only the distracted apperception can piece together into something like futurity. The other is the writerly text that actively produces its own counter-discourse by illustrating the subversive form of passivity in the face of ideology, not Thoreau’s “passive resistance” so much as Walter Benjamin’s slightly gloomier suspension of the dialectic in the present, reserving its energy for future upheaval, awaiting the final, apocalyptic arrival of the “storm of progress.”

The historical moment of modernity, then, which produces simultaneously a Taylorized and efficient culture industry in a form that can now be truly described as the “mass culture aspect” of industrial capitalism, and a modernism which reacts to this development with a fully theoretical if ambivalent hostility, calls upon its public to practice the apperception of Jameson’s “postmodern viewer,” in order to register and reinscribe the apocalyptic narratives of modernity and mass culture themselves in newly counter-discursive form. Of course, as both Jameson and before him Benjamin noted, that transformation is suspended, frozen in time in temporary compliance with the ideological message, thus generating an insistent and relatively stable “crisis of the

present” in which the permanence of modernity as a cultural moment is always already undercut by its instant transformation into impermanence, instability, and interruption.

5.2 The Crisis of the Ceremonial Present: Distraction and Apocalypse

Benjamin’s description of the “Angelus Novus” merits a second look here. Recall that the Angel’s vision of history is the materialist’s view of the apocalyptic present itself, placed at the nexus of the present and the past’s cataclysmic eruption, in other words at the historical moment of modernity itself. In this way we may see the temporal projection that is implied in Stein’s story of Toklas at the *salon des independents*, who like the Angel has her back turned, and would she only turn around might be able to achieve a true historicized vision, a knowledge of both past and future and a full understanding of the present. Benjamin’s “we,” as elsewhere in the Theses, can only be the historical and empirical present, a present “endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim” (“Theses” 254). The angel on the other hand, named “New Angel” because it is brought into existence only through its knowledge of the apocalyptic present, represents the distracted modern subject as much as the storm in its wings represents progress. History, the diachronic series of events that only a redeemed historicity can render “citable,” to the angel becomes “one single catastrophe” that it can only view by virtue of turning its back toward the progress of modernity’s relentless mechanical advancement. Benjamin goes on to say that

nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological developments as the fall of the stream with which it thought it was moving. From there it was but a step to the illusion that the factory work which was supposed to tend toward technological progress constituted a political achievement.
(Benjamin “Theses” 258)

In other words, the angel’s vision of time is one in which, rather than moving with the stream, it observes with panoramic vision the path history leaves in its wake, but turns its

back to a future that it is helpless to prevent. The angel's aspect is thus one of refusal, of silent protest, and an insistence that it moves forward as the result of domination, not consent. In this sense we may see the limits of distraction as engendering the counter-ideological; like the collector's "dangerous but domesticated" attempt to divorce the object from its exchange value, the distracted subject turns its back to ideology, to *progress* in its modern form as the mindless golem of history, but is helpless to enact social change in the empirical world.⁸¹

The crucial caveat is this: the angel's aspect is the direct result of the formal demands of his environment. Fearing's theory of a modernity that alters historicity itself can thus find its progenitor in Benjamin's notion of the *Jetztzeit* or the crisis of the apocalyptic present, and perhaps also in Gertrude Stein, who theorized media saturation in this way in a conversation with Charlie Chaplin:

I said the films would become like the newspapers just a daily habit and not at all exciting or interesting, after all the business of an artist is to be really exciting and he is only exciting, when nothing is happening, if anything happens then it is like any other one ... I said that the moon excited dogs because it did nothing, lights coming and going do not excite them and now that they have seen so many of them the poor things can no longer see the moon and so no lights can excite them. (E.A. 291)

Stein's example of the moon recalls McLuhan's idea of hot and cool media, of data-poor substrates being thrust aside in favor of hot, data-rich media which drive even the most basic medium—light itself—into a state of sensory domination.⁸² However, it seems clear that there are once again two receptions under the condition of modernity; as in Benjamin, Stein adduces a contrast between an engaged, rapt reception in the by-now-ancient period of the eternal art work, and a distracted reception that responds to the formal demands of this new environment by turning its back to the future, not by choice but because progress demands and trains this apperception. The "crisis" of modernity thus also has two aspects: the reception engendered by the multitude of lights and stimuli that render the modern subject unable to see the moon, and the formal crisis for the art

work itself, which must learn to operate according to its own logic of distraction in order to provide for a social message that like George Stroud may “steer in the opposite direction.”

Stein’s vision is of an art that, robbed of the backdrop of inaction that the eternal art work requires, insists on an inaction of its own, that in her words is predicated on “a sentiment of doing nothing” (E.A. 291). Stein is perhaps an unlikely candidate for an argument so clearly invested in the recovery of the dialectic, but the linkage to Benjamin’s *flâneur* is at the very least instructive, and it is noteworthy that for Benjamin it is also inaction, indolence, non-productivity that provide for a space in which the dream of history may finally manifest itself. Reception of Stein moreover follows the same logic of Benjamin’s ideal audience for the epic theater, an audience that receives art with a relaxed aspect, and which presumably can “keep its finger” on the text while casting a simultaneous and casual eye on the unfolding historical narratives of the city before them. Distraction, the perverse insistence on a reception that is uncommitted, nonserious and nonproductive thus takes on its own apocalyptic tenor in the age of a modern art that seeks to rewrite the rules both of the art work and of reception. This was perhaps already clear to Stein’s critics: Elliot H. Paul, writing for the Chicago Tribune in 1927, wrote that Stein’s reader abandons intensity in favor of a “less arduous” reception:

Hysterical intensity is not a requisite of artistic appreciation. Comforted by the feeling a Botticelli will be as good one day as the next, the discriminating beholder conserves his emotions, as a connoisseur of wines tastes his fine vintages sparingly. Stein’s admirers do not write her mash notes, but say “Damn good” and rejoice that art has its less arduous phases. (Paul 7)⁸³

Paul’s remark is rooted in a historical context in which art itself was undergoing an “arduous phase,” under pressure from the forces of modernity, technology and reproduction’s transformation of the social and formal role of the art work itself.

In a sense, it is clear that for Stein the arduousness of her time called for this less arduous, less serious reception, in part as an antidote to the abject challenges of the crisis

of the present, which defied explanation within the conventional epistemologies of the past. As Adalaide Morris puts it, the “bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is an event that does not leave the mind intact and apart from the violence without” (208). Yet the bomb itself belongs within a broader context of socio-political events that had a similar effect on the subject, that we may say generated an apocalyptic collision between violence and the mind that left the conventional modes of reception powerless to explain them. In her lifetime, Stein witnessed two great wars, a great depression, genocide and the invention of nuclear weaponry, and yet only a few of these events find their way into her writing, and then only rarely. This may explain why given the opportunity to remark upon the atomic bomb, she commented merely that “I had not been able to take any interest in it”; yet it is extremely significant that the last words of her writing life were a surprisingly crystal-clear instruction to a public confronted with the apocalyptic present of the nuclear period (“Reflection on the Atomic Bomb” 823).⁸⁴

For the postwar audience, the atomic bomb defined both the technological present and the apocalyptic future that could not be stopped: that is to say, the shape of progress itself as it entered its final mechanistic phase in which even the human body is subject to annihilation at the hands of technology. Yet Stein’s advice is to turn one’s back on this progress and allow destruction’s dialectical opposite to arise from this process of active inattention. After all, the atomic bomb “will destroy a lot and kill a lot, but it’s the living that are interesting not the way of killing them, because if there were not a lot left living how could there be any interest in destruction” (“Reflection on the Atomic Bomb” 823). Stein has diagnosed the modern dialectic perfectly, in which the potency of the dream of distraction is signaled by the volume of the ideological message itself. Just as in Benjamin, “every truth points manifestly to its opposite” (A.P. 418). The antidote then arises from the attitude of the reader, who responds to the abject threat of annihilation with the most potent weapon in the modern subject’s arsenal, which Benjamin articulated as the dialectical form of “distraction”: boredom.

In the same review, Eliot Paul goes on to write of Stein that as her career progressed, the “narrative function seemed increasingly childish and unimportant to her, as magazine writers turned it into an applied science with all the elements of quantity production” (7). This statement in part seems to reflect Paul’s own antipathy toward the new culture as it is affected by mass production, as an “applied science” rather than an eternal artwork, subject to a presumably universal aesthetic standard. In that sense, Paul perhaps misses the point of Stein’s formal experiment; however, his particular interest in Stein’s alteration of the narrative function speaks once again to reception and apperception. Narrative is rooted in temporality, and it is for this reason that a diachronic narration that reassembles the unity of the time-sense seemed no more possible to Stein than it was to Fearing. In the sense of the “angel of history,” such a historicity is contrary to the vision of the present as the total crisis event that emerges from the “wreckage of history” that is the past. Moreover, narrative is a formal element that at least commands the attention of its reader *across* time, a different apperception than what is called for in the reception of silent cinema, or even in the shifting, discontinuous and multi-vocal narration found in the novels of Kenneth Fearing.

This shape of counter-discourse as the reflection on the abject, the undisciplined terror of modernity followed by its instantaneous redaction and bracketing and the refusal to attend to its more abject dimensions, is also in a way the crucial formal move of *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor*, Stein’s “detective novel.” Although *Blood*’s formal experimentation makes it a little opaque, this move is fundamentally in keeping both with the detective novel genre, and with Stein’s remark to Charlie Chaplin about the nature of the art work under modernity, an art work that “does nothing.” The displacement of the abject is a move that both sidelines its horror and places it at the margins of attention as the novel moves forward, as if it were a dead body in the room that no-one will talk about or acknowledge:

As I said there were eight of them, four brothers and four sisters. The four sisters and three brothers exactly resembled the eldest brother and the mother. But of course this is not possible. It is foolish to think such a thing is possible since there was only two years difference between every brother and every sister until the youngest. And he was to be a priest. (Blood 22)

Note how the unpleasant image of incest emerges for a moment, only to be instantly thwarted by the narrator's refusal to attend to its implications. *Blood's* curious narrative structure, in which the language of the detective novel hints constantly at a dark and terrifying event that never takes place, makes a kind of perverse sense when imagined in terms of an aesthetics that is "predicated on doing nothing," or on active inattention to the uncontrollable object. Instead of a body, there is blood; instead of murder there is an unexplained death that may or may not be a suicide. It can also be no accident that these events are first set in motion by an ultimately harmless act of vandalism performed upon that symbol of modernity, the automobile.

To ignore is to vitiate, and in that context these disruptive presences are not unlike Charlie Chaplin's "Little Tramp": marginalized and robbed of their dangerous force. However, it is also instructive to recall Benjamin's "sentence" that tacitly implies its opposite: the potency of the danger in *Blood* is implied by the strength of the narrator's denial of their place of priority within the narrative. In this context, a sentence like "there were dogs in the house but they were no bother" becomes authority's fragile insistence on the durability of order in the face of the potentially unruly and undisciplined modern body (Blood 13).

According to Brooks Landon, Blood on the Dining-Room Floor is "the work in which Stein seems to have first come to grips with the conflict of god and mammon in her writing, the conflict between human nature and the human mind" (497). The business of "god" and "mammon," a recurring motif in Stein's writings through the 1930s, follows Benjamin's logic of a truth that manifests its opposite with astonishing regularity. Landon's proposal that god and mammon are essentially covert terms for the contrast between a "direct and indirect" form of writing is perhaps less important for our purposes

than his diagnosis of Stein's oppositional logic here (Landon 497). Landon follows Richard Bridgman in linking the concepts of "god and mammon" to "human nature" and the "human mind" as the key terms in what turns out to be an astonishing theory of modernity and technology in *The Geographical History of America*.⁸⁵ Having said that "human nature is like a great war," Stein distinguishes between nature and the mind by alluding to the character of nonproductive play in a description that once again registers attention and apperception as key terms in the subject's resistance to domination:

I say two dogs, but say a dog and a dog.
 The human mind. The human mind does play. Of course
 the human mind does play.
 Human nature. No human nature does not play, it might
 desire something but it does not play.
 A dog plays because he plays again.
 The human mind plays because it plays.
 Human nature does not play because it does not play again.
 And so to make nervousness and not excitement into a
 play.
 And then to make excitement and not nervousness into a
 play.
 And then to make a play with just the human mind.
 Let us try. ("G.H.A." 396)

Stein enjoys a bit of gamesmanship with the word "play," allowing it to slip seamlessly from its sense as nonproductive recreation to "a play," standing here for the art work, which she sees as following the same logic as the "play" that a dog engages in. Here the seeds of the aesthetic that Stein described to Charlie Chaplin emerge into a sharper focus: the seeds of an art which registers only non-productivity, pure recreation without purpose or instrumental value. In Marxist terms this sort of "play" is the "leisure" that modernity promises but will never deliver because the cycle of production dominates every facet of the subject's experience.

The difference between "mind" and "nature" that Stein delineates in *G.H.A.* is difficult to understand, except by reference to the semantic set that accrues beside these terms as she explores their relation to one another. "Human nature" is linked to war, the aeroplane, individualism, communism, propaganda and government. The "Human mind"

is linked to speech, knowledge, writing, play, superstition and truth. Having begun by linking the two terms, Stein later claims “there is no relation between human nature and the human mind,” but it seems clear that into each of these poles is inscribed the genetic material of its opposite, and both represent one half of the experience of the modern subject at the moment of crisis (“G.H.A.” 422). Landon claims that the difference arises from the conflict between creativity and the “desires and concerns of daily existence, memory, emotion, identity” (496).

However, human nature and the human mind seem to revolve particularly around these two senses of the word “play”; according to that logic the human mind is the nonproductive, the inattentive, the mental escape route from domination that follows the logic of a distracted apperception. Human nature, on the other hand is directed activity, and thus encompasses ideology and the state. Together these concepts illustrate perfectly the at once private and cosmic crisis of the subject. Stein’s exhortation: “let us try” to generate an art that does away with human nature’s addiction to authority, productivity, attention, arrives in the form of a dialectical collision between the homonymous senses of “play.” Let us try to play, Stein seems to say, and through this process transcend the instrumental desires and appetites of modernity.

The notion that Stein’s autobiographical works seek to undermine subjectivity has virtually risen to the level of an accepted truth in the literature.⁸⁶ Reading A.A.B.T. through the Benjaminian notion of a distracted apperception reveals this to be a double-edged process whereby the reading subject is simultaneously re-inscribed as the source of counter-discourse in an age of media saturation and the amplification of the ideological message. That this process is linked to temporality is unmistakable in Stein, who writes in “Composition as Explanation” that “it is understood by this time that everything is the same except composition and time, composition and the time of the composition and the time in the composition” (Writings, 1903-1932 522). These two orders of time, Stein suggests, represent the opposing ideological claims of the epochal modernism itself, a

time in which the acceptance of a work of art—and thus the vitiation of its creative force—stems directly from the acceptance of the time-sense, a process which makes art “beautiful” instead of “irritating and stimulating”(Writings, 1903-1932 522). The work of art’s “crisis” in the modern age has everything to do with temporality and history, even in an avant-garde formulation such as Stein’s. The nexus that she outlines, the collision between “time of the composition” and “time in the composition,” takes place at the same temporal and geographic location as Kenneth Fearing’s “other kinds of crisis”: that is, the reading subject, keeping their finger on what we may term their biological time sense, over which the compositional time sense is haphazardly laid, an imperfect palimpsest to the temporal freezing of modernity’s apocalyptic present. The crisis of modernity, then, takes place *within* the modern subject, and the *Jetztzeit* takes its true shape as the accumulated weight of a million private crises, a million personal revelations of the present as the threshold of what Benjamin called the explosion of history.

The age of the mechanical reproduction of art is equally (as Benjamin most certainly understood) the age of the mechanical reproduction of ideology, and the hypnotic force of the eternal art work is thus not unlike the trance state of the mass culture audience when technology is pressed into the service of the state or of capitalism. A strictly McLuhanite formulation of the mass culture moment would hold that the industrialization of the message of domination amounts to a “hotting up” of its content while its media forms become vaster, more data-rich and more ubiquitous. However, as Benjamin insists, each truth points manifestly to its opposite, and in that case it must be noted that mass media also oversaw the birth of data-poor forms such as pulp fiction, comic books and radio, not to mention silent cinema. The critical positioning that follows is to insist that forms powerfully inform reception, a total media determinism that is perhaps somewhat less elegant than Kenneth Fearing’s description of “mood” in the art work, which for our purposes may well fill in for the more theoretical “dialectic”:

Technically speaking, the mood in which a work is presented is probably the largest factor in the effect it makes; it's invisible, since it can't be pointed out, but it's there; essentially, it's the relationship established between the author and reader, during the course of a conversation in which the author does all the talking. (New and Selected Poems xxiv)

The limits of a McLuhanite formulation thus become clear as rooted in that theory's insistence on form as the endpoint of analysis, and content as merely the signal of another form's existence, a process of unfolding that yields to persistent and critical analysis. Likewise the notion of a negative dialectics, or materialism with its devotion to a negativity rooted in criticism or in the eternal art work, fails to comprehend the aesthetics of the troubled, paranoid moment in which Fearing found himself.

Indeed, though Fearing is a sophisticated critic of modernity, here he finds himself more or less at a loss for words, attempting to describe the universal content of art, its instantiation of a novel social relation that cuts against the grain of culture, or "steers in the other direction." In that context, his paradoxical assertion that mood is invisible because it can't be pointed out seems to render it in the faint and muddled outlines of the social dream, itself a topic with which Fearing was deeply concerned, knowing that part of the goal of the "Investigation" was to seek out the counter-ideological in its darkest, most oneiric home and stamp it out. In "Family Album (4)" the voice of the investigation is given the last, interrogatory word on this subject:

WHO DO YOU, WHO DO YOU, WHO DO YOU, WHO?
 WHO DO YOU KNOW, WHO DO YOU HEAR ABOUT,
 WHO DO YOU SEE
 AND MEET IN YOUR DREAMS AND DAYDREAMS?
 (New and Selected Poems 142)

The creation of an art that speaks to the social dream, that registers a connection with a disengaged, distracted reception is thus the purpose of Fearing's modernism. Mood, crisis, dreams, distraction—these become the semantic set of a novel reception that is summoned into existence by an art that refuses the epistemological project of modernity which attempts to discover culture's singular sense, its unifying purpose. Instead this art registers the present as the ontological game in which culture's cast-off

debris takes new shape in the social imaginary, much like the object game in Gil's Bar. Mass culture's ephemeral form thus takes on the character of the novel art work in an age where the eternal art work is fading into the distant recesses of history along with the instrumental epistemologies of monopoly capitalism. In that sense, distraction is a form, not a reception; and it is furthermore a form in which we may adduce an affinity for what Adalaide Morris calls "radical modernism," a modernism that "challenges 'natural,' 'realistic,' or scientific epistemologies by situating language as an entity with properties of its own rather than as an instrument to be used neutrally or transparently" (189). Here the distinction between the Marxist project of a leftist poet like Fearing, and the radical, experimental project of an avant-gardist like Stein becomes merely a quibble over content in a dissertation about form; in any case, although Stein and Fearing might have cast their votes differently, they clearly shared a notion of the historical present as a crisis rooted in the modern subject.

As Stein puts it in "Composition as Explanation," "the creator of the new composition in the arts is an outlaw until he is a classic" (Writings, 1903-1932 521). Clearly the term "outlaw" has applications both to an avant-garde critique of culture and a leftist critique of the social; more importantly, Stein here theorizes the effects of history on the work of art, and the reason for an avant-garde practice in the first instance, which is that even the radical is eventually re-situated within the auspices of gentility. In this way the avant-garde becomes ordinary over time and the counter-discursive becomes conformist; by that definition the dialectic cannot stand the test of time, but can only exist in a kind of apocalyptic, suspended present, the *Jetztzeit* which allows for what Rolf Tiedemann calls "dialectics at a standstill."⁸⁷

5.3 The Arithmetic of Domination: A Reflection on the Atomic Bomb

In the end, I have stopped slightly short of arguing for a total re-contextualization of Stein's notion of the "continuous present," though that term certainly resonates with a Benjaminian force if it is considered to have a historicist, materialist angle along with the formal one that it is generally thought to connote. It may suffice to say that Stein, having conceived of the continuous present as acting upon time both in and of the composition, may well have imagined a historical dimension to her work taking shape in its experiments with the distance that erupts between formal time and the reader's perception of history. Put another way, the temporal experiment of the continuous present might prevent her work from being emptied of its creative force through exposure to temporality, or from becoming in her words a "masterpiece." For Stein, the continuous present is in any case less a formal activity of her own devising than a natural effect of modernity, as she points out in "Composition as Explanation":

A composition of a prolonged present is a natural composition in the world as it has been these thirty years it was more and more a prolonged present. I created then a prolonged present naturally I knew nothing of a continuous present but it came naturally to me to make one, it was simple it was clear to me and nobody knew why it was done like that, I did not myself though naturally to me it was natural. (Writings, 1903-1932 524)

Barrett Watten argues that Stein is the perfect exemplar of a "revisionist effort in modernist studies [that] has argued for a return to a modernism that actively engages—either positively or negatively—the reified world of mass production" (119). This elegant argument links Stein's formal practice to the formal practice of industrialism and later to mass culture, an analysis I suspect Stein would have liked. Watten, following Michael Davidson's reading of Stein through the ideology of Fordism, argues that the automobile becomes "the implicit crux between portrait and landscape," two visual forms that fascinated Stein throughout her career (121).⁸⁸ For Stein, this site between the intimate subjective focus of the portrait and the impersonal vastness of the landscape

picture may well illustrate the re-inscription of the subject into the dialectic of history. The automobile, produced by the same forces of the new rational economy that also colonizes the landscape and transforms it into a broadened human infrastructure, simultaneously confers a kind of autonomy on its user, even if only a brief and illusory one. Watten alludes to the possibility here of a dialectical Stein, articulating the “conventional split between modernism and modernity” through her adoption of the mode of production and its redeployment in a context that allows mass culture to produce and reproduce the subject of the art work that transcends history:

Driving her Ford, Stein is the literary genius at the same time that she is supported by the invisible agency of the mode of production itself. Her work, in its capacious displacement and integration of literary materials, is an imitation, or form of parallel play, of that mode of production—which is distributed everywhere in her work. Stein’s genius just is her mode of production—along with the singular intelligence necessary to foreground her originary place in it as an index of conspicuous participation. (126)

The re-inscription of the subject into the discourse of industrialism is a process in which the stakes could not be higher. Stein’s reflection on the atomic bomb is in essence a recipe for the reassertion of the primacy of people in the context of a modernity that seeks to render human life as mere arithmetic.

In 1945, after the atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima, Harry S. Truman delivered a statement explaining this stunning event to a public that must have felt trepidation along with the nationalistic reactions that attend triumph in war. Truman’s words are shocking in both their belligerence and the extent to which they elide the true human cost of nuclear war, and his description of the bomb’s production effectively restates late capitalism’s separation of producer from product, labor from capital:

Employment during peak production numbered 125,000 and over 65,000 individuals are even now engaged in operating the plants. Many have worked there for two and a half years. Few know what they have been producing. They see great quantities of material going in and they see nothing coming out of these plants, for the physical size of the explosive charge is exceedingly small. We have spent two billion dollars on the greatest scientific gamble in history—and won. (2)

Truman's bewildering array of numbers confirms that this act of war is done according to the ineluctable logic of what Adalaide Morris calls the "scientific epistemologies" of modernity (189). Truman's description of hundreds of thousands of workers, engaged in labor that produces, from their standpoint, nothing whatsoever, is delivered with a mixture of awe and pride; he goes on to say that

hardly less marvelous has been the capacity of industry to design, and of labor to operate, the machines and methods to do things never done before so that the brain child of many minds came forth in physical shape. (2)

Industrialism then takes on its final, apocalyptic phase: the military defeat of the Japanese and Germans, Truman implies, is both preordained and the formal outcome of the marshalling of the resources of American industry into the eradication of its enemies. The attentive reader will wonder whether this feat of social engineering represented "organization" or "method." Either way, Truman's mathematics was the apodictic precursor to a dire and apocalyptic warning: that unless they surrendered unconditionally, the Japanese could expect "a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth" (3). Herein is the rationale for the atomic bomb: it represents the apotheosis of an ideal form of the social which produces human life as merely a number on a balance sheet, and reconstitutes the subject as arithmetic. Those thousands of Americans employed by the project are ghoulishly weighed against the tens of thousands instantly killed in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, not to mention the hypothetical casualties that the American military might have suffered in the course of a house to house invasion of Tokyo.

In that context, Stein's insistence that the bomb is "not interesting" amounts to an argument that *this* arithmetic is not worthy of attention, that interest should instead be directed at those people who are living under the suspended and deferred threat of their own annihilation. Stein may well have written this piece shortly after hearing Truman read his statement on the radio, and given the President's litany of numbers, her final

statement, perhaps the final sentence of her writing life, may stand as a virtual call to action against the information overload of modernity, the scientific epistemology that can explain even the annihilation of the body through simple arithmetic. Or as Gertrude Stein puts it, in a manner that seems a fitting way to close a chapter that reflects on the function of common perceptions, nice stories and the non-serious in mounting a casual and covert resistance against the industrial forces of modernity and mass culture:

“Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense. They listen so much that they forget to be natural. This is a nice story.” (Writings, 1932-1946 823).

CONCLUSION: THE DREAM OF HISTORY IN STEIN,
FEARING AND CHAPLIN

An art worthy of the name must be subordinated to science, morality and justice. It must aim to arouse the moral sense, to inspire feelings of dignity and delicacy, to idealize reality, to substitute for the thing the ideal of the thing, by painting the true and not the real.

--Pierre Bourdieu, *On Distinction*.

As Benjamin's "Angel of History" demonstrates, dreams are not reflections of the psyche, but articulations of the social relations of culture; as with the angel, the relation of dreams to history, the wreckage at the angel's feet that amounts to the crisis of the present, is one key to understanding their function. Recall that the Angel stands, as a function of the formal character of the mass society, with his back to the future, gazing over the wreckage of history that reflects the past's collision with the present. The "dream of history" is one in which the future repairs and redeems the catastrophe of the past, and is thus only possible when his back is turned to the actual, empirical future, in which the visions of Marxism are revealed to be vain and foolish. In this way, distraction and dream are brought together in a dialectical synthesis around the angel's meta-analysis of history. However, the "contents" of this dream merit some mention here, for the manner in which they depart from the conventional orthodoxy of Marxism (which sees crisis as the threshold of futurity) to inscribe a vision of the redemption of a present that history (and most especially a *left* history) dictates to be irredeemable:

The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. ("Theses" 257)

The three case studies of this dissertation: Gertrude Stein, Kenneth Fearing and Charlie Chaplin, have in common a particular historical reference point. This is not to say that they arise in the same period, and it's worth insisting that Stein and Chaplin reached the

twilight of their careers in the same decade that Kenneth Fearing's career began. However, in both a historical and a thematic sense, all three are reflecting on progress in its particular and totalizing form in the period between the great depression and the Second World War. We may in a casual sense link the 1930s productions of Stein and Chaplin to the 1946 novel by Kenneth Fearing, following the same logic that Miriam Hansen used to anchor Walter Benjamin to a cultural moment with a specific and pre-ordained grammar, a moment in which

...the media of technical reproduction were lending themselves to oppressive social and political forces—first and foremost in the fascist restoration of myth through mass spectacles and newsreels, but also in the liberal-capitalist marketplace and in Stalinist cultural politics. ("Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: 'the Blue Flower in the Land of Technology'" 181)

In a sense, all of these works are situated in a media universe in which the “social and political forces” of the present are produced in rapid synthesis with the technological forms of culture, and each reflects on the status of the subject in that context.⁸⁹

When Alice B. Toklas seated herself at the *vernissage*, next to but not looking at the art works that to Stein's more cultured apperception told the “whole story,” Gertrude Stein did not admonish her, or redirect her attention. Instead, she merely commented that “you have seated yourself admirably.” This curious moment merits a second look. Stein's implication is twofold: first, that one absorbs the “story” of the art work simply by proximity, and second, that by seating herself near the art works in question, Toklas herself becomes unwittingly implicated in the narrative, historical and aesthetic dialogue that the art work instantiates, and that we might in this context term “progress.” The “whole story” in this case turns out to be the story of an evolution of aesthetics from fauvism to cubism, but it might as well reflect the passage of time in modernity itself, in which the new is always placed into a dynamic and powerful contradistinction to its own historical origin.

As Stein understood, the power of grammar lies in its capacity to transcend specificity by registering culture as a set of relational frameworks among syntactic elements; the “grammar” of Toklas’ relation to this narrow history therefore equally describes her relation to historicity in a broader sense. The specifics are different: one is the “whole story” of aesthetics in the historical avant-garde, the other a reflection on technology’s influence on culture and the present, but they share a grammatical relation that both posit between the subject and history. In effect, Toklas is the angel of history in this case, and by turning her back to the narrative’s rational content she gains the capacity to access the dream of history, which turns out to be aleatory and inchoate, but nevertheless situates the subject in a position of abstraction from the material present, a distance that could not more literally be described as “critical.” This is in essence the message of modernity for Toklas, which explicitly authorizes the kind of instinctive knowledge that arises in the absence of trained reception:

...I went to see Mrs. Stein who had in the meantime returned to Paris, and there at her house I met Gertrude Stein. *I was impressed by the coral brooch she wore and by her voice.* I may say that only three times in my life have I met a genius and each time a bell within me rang and I was not mistaken, and I may say in each case it was before there was any general recognition of the quality of genius in them. (A.A.B.T. 5, emphasis added)

Exactly how Toklas recognizes that she is in the presence of genius has the quality of an epiphany. A “bell within me rang,” she writes, and the knowledge arrives in her mind as if out of a dream, a knowledge with profound significance when it comes to the history of modernism that she would be a part of. This knowledge seems in part to depend in a curious way on the same domestic interests that Toklas had earlier noted: Stein’s coral brooch and the quality of her voice are at least as informative to Toklas as anything Stein had written, which Toklas not only had not yet read but as yet *knew nothing about*. In that sense, Toklas has once again seated herself next to the “whole story,” in this case the evolution of the genius of Stein, but assigns her attention instead to Stein’s coral brooch, which in the original sense of metonymy reveals to Toklas a genius that was not yet

recognized as such, even by those who had read her work. Indeed, Toklas' evaluation of Stein might as well be considered the unconscious product of what Stein had called the "automatic self," inattentive, marginalized and displaced and yet capable of sudden and trenchant insight, or what Stein called "composition."

The Big Clock is likewise a story of the distracted reception of the automatic self, here in the context of an "automated" system of domination under capitalism. T.B.C. is not in a conventional sense a crime novel, (though crime is at its center) but a novel that narrates the experience of resistance in a universe in which "all time and all space is merchandise." In the language of Fordism, leisure time is either "spent" or "wasted"; thus, leisure itself is re-imagined as occurring within the paradigm of exchange, and thus becomes merely the signal of the ubiquity of its opposite, "work."⁹⁰ George Stroud's nursery-rhyme mouse, that reflects the experience of the subject under Fordism, "searching among the cobwebbed mazes of this machine with all its false exits and dangerous blind alleys" illustrates this point perfectly (T.B.C. 15). *The Clock* is not merely a regulator; it is also a new and curious species of prison. Rather than issuing a propagandic denial of the existence of an exterior, the Big Clock preordains the subject's attempt to escape from its interior dominance. Even the ultimate escape of "death" has a market value, intelligible within the system of exchange as both loss (the loss of labor) and as profit (the funeral home industry). The only escape from this system, as Roy Cordette clarifies in his description of the ontological character of "crime," is the refusal to accept the market's insistence on the stable commodity value of objects. In that sense, two concepts elude the production of experience as commodity under the regime of the Big Clock: distraction and art.

The second of these is perhaps the crucial lesson of the "game" that Pauline and George play at "Gil's Bar." This game, in which the bric-a-brac of culture is haphazardly assembled into a pile behind the bar, is ostensibly an exercise in imagination. A customer names an artifact, and Gil produces it, along with a more or less believable tale

of provenance as proof of its origin. As Stroud notes with amusement, the same object can be used many times, and in that sense the junk-heap of modernity behind the bar is merely the sign of the total ontological emptiness of the product itself in consumer culture. These objects have no “content,” no significance beyond that which they are contextually assigned, and as if to confirm this, they are themselves nondescript and altogether empty of history or time-sense: a “black and jagged metal cylinder” serves equally well as a modern steam roller and as Christopher Columbus’ telescope (T.B.C. 34). However, the game carries a profound subtext that encapsulates the shape of “distraction” in T.B.C. Gil’s game generates an unstable, shifting ontology, but along with it an equally unstable valuation within a system of exchange. Priceless artifact transitions seamlessly into worthless cultural jetsam, and both valuations are certified and validated by the presumption of what Benjamin called *aura*, which is a function of the relation between artisanal production and time. This “game’s” serious undercurrent is that by producing *aura* in illusory form, Gil undermines its legitimacy and reveals its centrality to the notion of exchange value.

In fact, the game is a *parody* of exchange: the subject “orders” an object, and Gil “delivers” the *story* of that object, along with a physical item that once had an actual value but is now worthless, literally consigned to the junk-heap, but re-invented as a prop. In this way, Gil’s imaginative perception, which deliberately flouts the objective marketplace, invents a universe in which imagination dictates value, and in that case his role is the same one that Fearing assigned to the artist in “Reading, Writing and the Rackets.” It is no accident that art itself also denies and displaces the notion of stable value within the marketplace. Louise Patterson’s painting “A Study in Fundamentals” turns out to be the object of its own “game,” with precisely the same stakes, and indeed the same outcome. The painting begins its odyssey through the narrative in the same sort of junk-heap that Gil has in his bar: a bin filled with worthless kitsch items in a thrift store. By the end of the story, it is nearly priceless, revealing that its true “worth” is

incomprehensible within a system of fixed market value. In this sense it is doubly significant that the subject of “A Study in Fundamentals” is the elemental (or we may say grammatical) shape of exchange itself: one hand giving a coin, another receiving it. The painting represents exchange, and implicitly offers a critique of the economies of value that are the subject of *The Big Clock*; but its true resistance to those economies is its own ontological status as art work, its capacity to undermine the notion of value itself. After all, the system of the Big Clock allows for only one crime, only one act that threatens its inquisitorial power: not the *destruction* of value (which is merely vandalism), but the destruction of the *very idea* of value as a stable category.

In this way, the aleatory dance of Charlie Chaplin on the assembly line takes on its true significance, not as destruction of industry, but as the re-deployment of the action of production as art work. If the lesson of the tramp’s nonsense song is the manner in which gesture instantiates critique, then we cannot understate the importance of a gesture which transforms the productive and rational gesture of *work* into its own ludic, satiric opposite. However, it is worth noting that the assembly line itself is also a composition in the language of gesture: its form is the regulation and repetition of human motion, with the tacit end goal of the final transformation of the body into an extension of the machinery of capital. In another sense, working on the assembly line becomes the critical shape of repetition. *Modern Times* opens with an image of a clock, and like Fearing’s *The Big Clock*, this seems to indicate that one staging ground for the dialectic of industry is time, in which workers mechanically “clock in and out” to signal their obedience to the “time of production,” which supersedes and erases the subjective time-sense. However, repetition is also crucial in the realm of the assembly line: if gesture is its *form*, then repetition is its *content*. However, repetition under modernity also instantiates a highly ambiguous temporal and aesthetic collapse, which authorizes both the verbal experiments of Gertrude Stein and the antic ballet of Charlie Chaplin’s tramp. As Walter Benjamin understood, repetition on the *ad infinitum* stage of industrial capitalism collapses time

and brings about boredom, in its full dialectical form as the “knowledge of an incurable imperfection in the present”⁹¹

In the idea of eternal recurrence, the historicism of the nineteenth century capsizes. As a result, every tradition, even the most recent, becomes the legacy of something that has already run its course in the immemorial night of the ages. Tradition henceforth assumes the character of a phantasmagoria in which primal history enters the scene in ultramodern get-up. (A.P. 116)

Repetition thus instantiates primarily a confusion of experience, a blurring of the line between the “dream” of history and the empirical real to which the angel of history and the distracted subject casually turn their backs. Tradition and the present collapse into one another, as with the original mechanism of the phantasmagoria, which used the substrate of new technologies to re-enact ancient terrors and ghost stories, and in that sense part of what “recurs eternally” is the return of history’s atavistic terrors to haunt and unmake our concentration on the present. Yet boredom’s primary function is to bring about this very de-concentration, this historical flattening in which the past emerges into sharper focus while the empirical “crisis of the present” fades into the grayed-out contours of the “dream of history” itself.

...boredom is a warm gray fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colorful of silks. In this fabric we wrap ourselves when we dream. We are at home then in the arabesques of its lining. But the sleeper looks bored and gray within his sheath. And when he later wakes and wants to tell of what he dreamed, he communicates by and large only this boredom. For who would be able at one stroke to turn the lining of time to the outside? Yet to narrate dreams signifies nothing else. (A.P. 105)

This turns out to be the gloomiest of Benjamin’s stipulations about the shape of the dialectic, not to mention the most potent clarification of the stakes of developing an aesthetics of distraction as a persistent receptive form. After all, the “dream of history” is only available to the sleeper *while he sleeps*, and yields to no analysis, no interpretation and no form of wakeful attention. Instead, the “arabesques of its lining” disappear beneath the attentive gaze of an alert analysis, and re-appear again only in the uncontrolled and unregulated environment of sleep, where they are sealed away from

public view and from the developing conversation about the economic present, which as a result seems natural and intractable rather than artificial and in flux.

Modern Times closes with a familiar film cliché: the hero walking away into the sunset (Figure 9). The gamine's newly acquired middle-class attire now seems an incongruous parody of their new life as rural bums; the reality of their present circumstance is signaled by the tramp's bundle, slung over his arm, containing every ounce of his worldly possessions. In that sense, the tramp's triumphant exit is instantly and profoundly undercut by the irony of his own failure to thrive in his new identity as "a factory worker." Once again, the tramp invites his audience to re-imagine a familiar image in the annals of film. To "walk into the sunset" usually signals an unspoken but idyllic future; we know that the future of this particular couple will in all likelihood take the shape of misery, starvation and death. The best the tramp can hope for is a future in which he and his new bride (for surely this is also an image of matrimony for this curiously chaste couple) in which they merely "get along."

However, one aspect of this scene merits mention in the context of Benjamin's "Angel of History"; the action of walking into the sunset involves the final resolution of the equation in which the angel turns his back to the future and is swept away into its clutches by the storm of progress. Instead, the tramp faces his future head-on, and turns his back, pointedly, to the audience. The horizon before them is the bucolic vista that emerges from the tramp's rejection of the Fordist regimes of the Metropolis behind him; however, it already bears the marks of modernization, with telephone poles and power cables lining the dirt-packed road away from the city. The tramp, like the Angel, has turned his back; but his victory over the "Big Clock" that dominated his experience is illusory, pre-ordained within a narrative in which even the sunset will eventually become a commodity, photographed on camera and reproduced *ad infinitum* in the form of popular film.



Figure 9: The Tramp and the Gamine turn their backs and walk into the sunset.

NOTES

Notes to Chapter 1

¹ A fully theoretical description of Jameson's "cognitive mapping," an idea that emerges per his own admission from his unusual, practically Benjaminian synthesis of Althusser and Lacan, is impossible here. Jameson does offer this brief definition of the cognitive map's *function*, which for our purposes must suffice: "...to enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole." Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism 51.

² As noted below, many critics have remarked upon this gap in Benjamin's theory of the mass audience. Howard Eiland, for instance, describes distraction as "one of the more elusive of the Benjaminian topoi." Howard Eiland, "Reception in Distraction," 52.

³ One of those two intellectual influences was the Jewish mysticist Gershom Scholem, whose bemused remark about Benjamin's reception and intellectual practice reveals the "distraction" that was inherent to the latter's method, not to mention his critical model of the social. Scholem commented that Benjamin "might offer several viewpoints in turn, as if he were conducting an experiment." (qtd. in Michael Hamburger, "Scholem and Benjamin," 128.) In a sense, Scholem has in the same breath remarked astutely upon Benjamin's fundamentally empirical approach to the cultural sphere, and indeed to experience itself, both of which are in evidence in O.H. and A.P. As with Gertrude Stein's experiments on the "automatic self," Benjamin's empiricism was directed toward the hazy ground of the subject, and as such it's no surprise that he turned to his own unusual synthesis of materialism and mysticism in order to untangle the critical and theoretical problems that arose for him along the way.

⁴ As Susan Buck-Morss points out, "mass culture" is not a term we will find in Benjamin, although his "Work of Art" essay is frequently taken to be a reflection on that very phenomenon. Buck-Morss clarifies that the "Work of Art" essay is in fact "concerned primarily with art in the age of industrialism, when it has become possible to reproduce technologically not only the work of art, but also the subject matter (reality) which art has striven traditionally to represent." Susan Buck-Morss, "Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*: Redeeming Mass Culture for the Revolution," 212. This is a crucial point of clarification for this dissertation: mass culture typically denotes a structure of domination, and it is clear that for Benjamin part of the "age of mechanical reproduction" is the subject's re-emergence from that domination by way of a novel attitude of reception.

⁵ Benjamin's model of "distraction" is never described in much detail in his work, but makes its first appearance in the first draft of his 1935 "Work of Art" essay. The essay appears in four versions, but this dissertation cites only the first two. Unless otherwise noted, the version cited in this project is the first: Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.". However, a few citations are drawn from the second version, and this is indicated in the text: Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.". Editor Michael Jennings calls the second version the "master version" of the "Work of Art" essay (17).

⁶ The development in the modern period of a nascent “consumer culture,” though it is widely used in both left criticism of modernity and elsewhere, is a matter of some controversy. The Rostovian take-off model more or less uncritically accepts that the evolution of consumer needs is a natural outgrowth of the subject’s physical needs, and in that sense the economy works in tandem with the material requirements of the body. However, as Mark Seltzer notes, part of the “culturization” of consumption is its precisely defined by the way in which it exceeds and displaces those needs; in that case, a “critique of the culture of consumption in terms of its gratuitousness and unnaturalness amounts to a critique of culture in general: not a critique of the culture of consumption but a critique of culture *as* consumption.” Mark Seltzer, “The Still Life,” 456.

⁷ See Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act 9. However, a cautionary note is called for here, in that an “empirical” history, especially if it were constructed along the lines of conventional literary historical methodology, would be contradictory to the main impulse of this book, which might better be articulated as “always politicize!” What Jameson really seeks is to awaken a conscious interpretation of both literature and culture and literary criticism as a parallel “meta-commentary” on the cultural superstructure, and to show how in both these cases “Marxism” may stand as the point beyond which analytical transcendence is impossible. In other words, the relationship between conventional literary critical methods and the Marxist dialectic is one of “content” and “form.” Specifically, the former will always be accessible and available to the totalizing telos of a Marxist critique, while the latter is the precondition of any full literary analysis that takes place along other lines. As if to illustrate this, he adapts the terms of a Freudian methodology and recasts it in the context of a literary culture which is the site of a class conflict between hegemonic and oppositional discourses, a dialectic in the historical sense which takes place within the confines of a shared linguistic and formal code. In developing the notion of a “political unconscious,” Jameson takes an example from Levi-Strauss in which facial decorations among the Caduveo Indians “constitutes a symbolic act, whereby real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm (79).

⁸ Most famously these reflections take place in the work of art essay (Benjamin, “Work of Art.”), but a collection of notes titled “Theory of Distraction,” probably from around 1935, may be found in Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media. Variations on his meditations on distraction as a critical mode may also be found in his work on Brecht, and in *AP* among others.

⁹ “Distraction” is also an idea that has become more or less casually associated with Benjamin as a shorthand for the reception-as-resistance under mass culture. Fredric Jameson casually references this in the opening to Postmodernism, even claiming that postmodernism is “more distracted, as Benjamin might put it” than its modernist predecessor. However, for Jameson distraction still turns out to be the simple inattention of the non-critical: it “only clocks the variations themselves, and knows only too well that the contents are merely images.” Jameson, Postmodernism ix. One aim of this dissertation will be to uncover the paradoxically critical and meta-historical possibilities of “distraction,” which I take to be Benjamin’s initial aim in any case.

¹⁰ See “Theory of Distraction” in Benjamin, Other Writings on Media 56 n.1.

¹¹ A cautionary note is warranted here as regards Benjamin's use of the term "aura," which is usually taken to mean that aspect of a genteel reception that is erased by a more democratic productive and receptive cultural practice in the present. Miriam Hansen "aura" is a term that for Benjamin originates in his experiments with Hashish, and by the time it finds its way into the "Work of Art" essay reflects in part a desire to bring his criticism in line with a stricter brand of materialism, perhaps following Brecht. Hansen clarifies that "the exemplary linkage of aura to the status of the artwork in Western tradition, whatever it may have accomplished for Benjamin's theory of modernity, was not least a tactical move designed to isolate and distance the concept from the at once more popular and more esoteric notions of aura that flourished in contemporary occultist discourse (and do to this day)" Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin's Aura," 337.

¹² A much different view of the "Work of Art" essay may be found in Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered." Also, of some relevance to Benjamin's distraction is the term "fascination" in Adorno, a related but practically much different term that we may argue has opposite connotations. For more on Adorno and "fascination," see Ackbar Abbas, "Dialectic of Deception."

¹³ Interestingly, Marshall McLuhan's more optimistic work also shares this core assumption, arguing in, if anything, more deterministic terms that media forms require or engender certain modes of reception. McLuhan referred to the media form that trains reception as the "Noah's Ark"—for Benjamin it was the *ubungsinstrument*—but the essential relation between mass culture and mass public has the same basic outline. See Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.

¹⁴ And indeed, both of these terms are themselves implicitly *plural*.

¹⁵ By the time Marcuse made this argument, the bomb, and its resulting carnage had already appeared both as an affirmation of the nascent American Century, and as the final image of the abject and technological form of apocalypse. By the 1950s, nuclear explosions had been reflected on extensively in both the annals of popular culture and in the avant-garde; for instance, an iconic Action Comics cover from 1946 featured Superman pointing a camera at a mushroom cloud, and Gertrude Stein would complete the circle with her own reflection on the atomic bomb not long after Harry Truman delivered his famous "rain of ruin" speech. Wayne Boring, Action Comics 110 (Cover), Gertrude Stein, "Reflection on the Atomic Bomb."

¹⁶ Stein and Picasso were interested both in comic books and photography; they spent hours poring over civil war photographs, and seemed to understand intuitively the link between technology and the representation of the abject present. Both were equally interested in the "kitsch and clutter" of culture, sharing an interest in *The Katzenjammer Kids*. Part of the task of this dissertation is to explain the linkage between a data-rich medium like photography and a data-poor medium like the comic strip. Gertrude Stein, The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas 16, 23.

¹⁷ Adorno's essay "How to Look at Television" first appeared in *The Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television* in 1954 before appearing in Theodor W. Adorno, The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture.

¹⁸ Adorno's error in elevating the modernist art-work to the pedestal of social criticism is perhaps nowhere more clearly explicated than in Bob Perelman's influential book The Trouble with Genius. Perelman argues that Adorno's model "carries a ring of self-sufficiency that ignores the tension generated in these works as the authors deal with the social world insistently while with equal insistence they place themselves above it." Bob Perelman, The Trouble with Genius: Reading Pound, Joyce, Stein and Zukofsky 5.

¹⁹ A cautionary note should be sounded here, for Ackbar Abbas has also identified fascination as a complex kind of reception with its own reserved, dreamlike space, as "a response to other imaginaries, other musics, other strange gods.... a *paracritical* mode of attention." See Abbas, "Dialectic of Deception," 348.

²⁰ See Jameson, Postmodernism.

²¹ It is precisely the penetration of mass production to the core of culture that permits the kind of analysis found in Richard Ohmann, "History and Literary History: The Case of Mass Culture." Ohmann argues that mass cultural forms permit (indeed, require) the analysis of cultural texts alongside the ideological products of capitalism, such as advertisements in magazines. It's less clear in Ohmann's analysis that this sort of approach is only possible in the late 19th century, but what his approach assumes is a reader that simultaneously perceives capitalism's overtly ideological products and the less overtly ideological messages of genteel culture—a possibility that is intriguing given that the current project is one about the diversion of attention between seemingly disparate cultural products.

²² Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, CT. (Box 2, Folder 28/29)

²³ Although here these loci are encoded in the form of ethnicity, we know from Stein's other work that "countries" often stand in for "models of social practice." See, for instance, the discussion of German "method" and American "organization" in Chapter 2.

²⁴ Box 2, Folder 28/29, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Collection.

²⁵ It was Bourdieu who wrote that "an art worthy of the name must be subordinated to science, morality and justice. It must aim to arouse the moral sense, to inspire feelings of dignity and delicacy, to idealize reality, to substitute for the thing the ideal of the thing, by painting the true and not the real." Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste 49.

Notes to Chapter 2

²⁶ This has been a tacit presumption since the earliest iterations of a "Stein criticism," but it is made explicit in Ulla Dydo's Language that Rises, in which Dydo divides Stein's work into "composition" and "audience writing," using A.A.B.T. as the transitional text that announces the start of the explanatory phase. See Ulla E. Dydo and William Rice, Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises, 1923-1934. Similar approaches to Stein's oeuvre abound; the same presumption may be found, for instance,

in John Whittier-Ferguson, "The Liberation of Gertrude Stein: War and Writing." Stein's avant-garde writing is more explicitly *privileged* in Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing*.

²⁷ Walter Benjamin engaged in a species of formalism himself, when he wrote in 1917 that "there are two sections through the substance of the world: the longitudinal section of painting and the transverse section of certain graphic works. The longitudinal section seems representational—it somehow contains things; the transverse section seems symbolic—it contains signs." Of course, Benjamin's is a kind of materialist formalism, foundationally concerned with painting's process of representing a reality that corresponded more or less empirically to these "longitudinal" and "transverse" sections. Walter Benjamin, "Painting and the Graphic Arts," 219.

²⁸ See Phoebe Stein Davis, "Subjectivity and the Aesthetics of National Identity in Gertrude Stein's *the Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*." Davis cites the headline "Gertrude Stein Writes a Book in Simple Style" from the Chicago Tribune of Sept. 2, 1933 (18). She goes on to claim that "the book presented a Gertrude Stein previously unknown to the American Public—understandable, entertaining, conversational and seemingly confessional (18).

²⁹ Loren Glass points out A.A.B.T.'s disturbance of the "distinction between art and commerce, between symbolic and economic capital, between god and mammon, on which [Stein's] original literary reputation was based." Loren Glass, *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States 1880-1980* 117.

³⁰ Worth noting here is that Alyson Tischler has discovered that Stein's notoriety in the popular presses comes much earlier. Alison Tischler, "A Rose Is a Pose: Steinian Modernism and Mass Culture." However, it remains undoubtedly the case that Stein's readership was vastly expanded by the publication of *The Autobiography*, even if many were already familiar with secondhand accounts of her work.

³¹ For an alternate reading of Stein's attitude toward celebrity and fame, see Whittier-Ferguson, "Liberation of Gertrude Stein." Whittier-Ferguson claims that Stein's writing after AABT shows an ambivalence about celebrity; her writing in the late 30s, according to Whittier-Ferguson, must be understood through the lens of "her often anguished meditations—composed for the most part following the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in 1933—on audience and intimacy, on self-possession and the self dispersed, on writing with and without reference, on being read by a necessarily alien public as well as by the few who know her" Whittier-Ferguson, "Liberation of Gertrude Stein," 79.. Whittier-Ferguson is a little less than scientific here—it is worth noting that for him the notion that Stein must have been "ambivalent" about her newfound fame and notoriety is a *premise that he assumes*, and not one with a substantial evidentiary basis—and yet it forms the central warrant for his reading of the entirety of Stein's explanatory work, a body of writing which would not have been possible without the success of A.A.B.T. However, this reading has almost taken on the status of accepted critical consensus: Kirk Curnutt writes that Stein's fame "exacted an unexpected cost, for she suffered a brief but unprecedented writer's block." Kirk Curnutt, "Inside and Outside: Gertrude Stein on Identity, Celebrity and Authenticity," 292. This may be, but Stein's own explanations for this generally point to a problem with "identity" rather than with "fame" or "money" as solitary causes. In that sense, it is easy to see how

a project that de-centers authorship in favor of reception might also unsettle Stein's confidence and her sense of her own "genius."

³² It seems quite clear that this entry into the realm of the popular had unintended consequences for Stein. However, Loren Glass argues that it is in fact the Great Depression that restores her sense of identity as a writer: Stein "acknowledges that the volatilization of economic value precipitated by the Depression motivated her to write *EA*. It should not be surprising, then, that money and its meaning are central to that text." Glass, *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States 1880-1980* 124.

³³ The Derain is easy to identify; the 1907 salon des independents, along with numerous famous (and infamous) works of Henri Rousseau and Matisse's "Blue Nude", exhibited the first of three works of Andre Derain that bear the title "Baigneuses," or "Bathers." Bracque, however, exhibited six fauvist landscapes at the same exhibition; since the work Stein describes is clearly a portrait of some kind, I can only conclude that her recollection is incorrect, or that she is for her own reasons placing two works in apposition that were never exhibited together. Bracque did not begin work on his "Grand Nu," which is thought to be his first cubist work, until later that same year. For a description of Derain's first "Bathers," and its link to the 1907 *Salon des Independants*, see Susan L. Ball, "The Early Figural Paintings of Andre Derain, 1905-1910. A Re-Evaluation," 87.. For a history of Bracque's transition from fauvism to cubism, see the official Georges Bracque website, which dates his work on "Grand Nu" to *October* of 1907: <http://www.georgesbraque.fr/biographie-chronologie-en.php/>

³⁴ Allison Pease, "Readers with Bodies: Modernist Criticism's Bridge across the Cultural Divide."

³⁵ On the other hand, many of the same reading practices are in evidence in *E.A.*, in which Stein is herself the protagonist, under the pseudonym "everyone"—which in this context amounts to an almost obvious *nom de guerre* signaling Stein's newly political project in her later work.

³⁶ Pease, "Modernist Criticism.", Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Gertrude Stein's relation to modernism, mass culture and postmodernism has been extensively discussed. See in particular Ellen Berry, "Modernism/Mass Culture/Postmodernism." Berry argues for a postmodernist reading of Stein; however, Stein has also been linked to a range of other cultural traditions, ranging from feminism to structuralism. For a "structuralist" interpretation of Stein, see Bruce Bassoff, "Gertrude Stein's 'Composition as Explanation'."

³⁷ In fact, there is ample evidence that the manuscript was heavily revised. See Dydo and Rice, *Gertrude Stein : The Language That Rises, 1923-1934*.

³⁸ Ulla Dydo remarks on this somewhat daunting obstacle to serious research in Stein's archives at the Beinecke Library: Dydo and Rice, *Gertrude Stein : The Language That Rises, 1923-1934*. In my own research in the archives, I found the handwriting nearly impenetrable, though thanks to the vast, unacknowledged labor of Alice B. Toklas in typing Stein's manuscripts while she slept, Stein's illegible cursive lettering is often accompanied by corrected typescripts that differ only slightly from the handwritten *carnets*.

³⁹ Much more has been written on the novelistic character of the book: Steven Meyer, "Gertrude Stein Shipwrecked in Bohemia: Making Ends Meet in the Autobiography and After.", Corinne Andersen, "I Am Not Who 'I' Pretend to Be: The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas and Its Photographic Frontispiece.", Davis, "Aesthetics of National Identity.", Georgia Johnston, "Narratologies of Pleasure: Gertrude Stein's *the Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*."

⁴⁰ Benjamin writes that "people, and 'artists' in particular, did not quite dare to acknowledge this new material, with all its possibilities. Whereas we allow our steel furnishings of today to be what they are, shiny and clean, a hundred years ago men took great pains, by means of subtle coating techniques, to make it appear that iron furniture—which was already being produced by then—was crafted of the finest wood. It was at this time that manufacturers began to stake their reputations on bringing out glasses that looked like porcelain, gold jewelry resembling leather straps, iron tables with the look of wicker-work and other such things. Walter Benjamin, "The Ring of Saturn," 887.

⁴¹ This chapter presumes a continuity between Stein's earliest work on composition in the nineteenth century and her later, avant-garde work, particularly given her methodology of producing compositions "in distraction." However, it is important to note that critics such as Lisa Ruddick interpret Stein's avant-garde phase as a rejection of the nineteenth-century empirical tradition that this work belongs to, and of William James as the controlling influence behind that tradition. Ruddick writes that "James had come to represent to [Stein] everything she now questioned about the nineteenth century, and as she went about "killing the nineteenth century" through a modernist literary practice, she pulverized the ideals that had once drawn her to James but now repelled her." Lisa Ruddick, Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis 1.

⁴² This analysis recalls the substance of B.F. Skinner's infamous attack on Gertrude Stein in the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly*—though Skinner is himself mired in a modernist paradigm of the creative, authorial genius that I would argue Stein is here dispensing with. See B.F. Skinner, "Has Gertrude Stein a Secret?."

⁴³ The lower-case "r" in "republican," given Stein's political stripe, could perhaps safely be capitalized. Stein famously opposed the New Deal, and reflected on Money and taxation in a series of articles composed for the *Saturday Evening Post*. Loren Glass remarks that these articles, in addition to revealing Stein's ideologically conservative attitudes about taxation and entitlement programs, also reflect a "reactionary naïveté," along with a "fundamental" misconception about economics. Glass, Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States 1880-1980 129. However, in this case it seems relatively clear that Stein was referring to the American model of governance, and not to party politics.

⁴⁴ Of course, by this definition, the war itself was "methodical" rather than "organized." And modernity of the sort that Stein knew at the time *A.A.B.T* was published might not have been possible without the "Great War," which altered the national psyche in wide-ranging ways. For one reading of the cultural effects of war and its memory, see Paul Fussell, The Great War and Modern Memory.

⁴⁵ Or, as Jake Kennedy puts it, "Alice's" domestic toils are implicitly about aesthetic self-fulfillment: she dusts the paintings and the sculptures in order to *know* them

better, even in order to seek direct aesthetic pleasure.” Kennedy seems to invert the genteel and the mass-cultural here, creating a formula in which the former is purely aesthetic and the latter a “*Ladies’ Home Journal* mass-culture dialectics” in which dusting prepares the art work for viewing by others. For our purposes, the key is the dual attention that dusting requires to the process of display and the material substrate in which the art-work’s “content” is presented. Jake Kennedy, “Dust and the Avant-Garde,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture: A WWWeb Journal* 7 (2005): paragraph 5.

Notes to Chapter 3

⁴⁶ For instance, see Rita Barnard, *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance: Kenneth Fearing, Nathaniel West, and Mass Culture in the 1930s*. Barnard’s brilliant and thorough analysis barely mentions the novels of Fearing, emphasizing instead his long and ambiguous career as a poet of the left.

⁴⁷ In various forms, the notion of the future as an interruption of the present is a fundamental theme in the work of Jameson, even though as Eric Cazdyn puts it, “the future is already bought and sold like so many other commodities.” However, Cazdyn sums up the stakes of a project like this one, whose subject is dialectical thought in the age of totality, very nicely: “Jameson used to say that postmodernism marks the colonization of the last two refuges of humanity, nature and the unconscious; now he wants to add a third territory to be annexed, invested in, and captured by the capitalist logic: the future.” Eric Cazdyn, “Anti Anti: Utopia, Globalization, Jameson,” 342.

⁴⁸ Readers familiar with the history of Left criticism will recognize this as a formulation Barnard borrows from Baudrillard’s *The Mirror of Production*, in which he proposes that 1929 is the age that ushers in “consumerism” as a key element of the ideological apparatus of capitalism. Barnard is careful to note Baudrillard’s “inevitably simplistic” overstatement of the historical significance of that year, even as she reserves for her own work the centrality of another pivotal historical moment, 1927. Barnard, *Culture of Abundance* 17.

⁴⁹ Barnard is one exception, but other examples abound. See David Jenemann and Andrew Knighton, “Time, Transmission, Autonomy: What Praxis Means in the Novels of Kenneth Fearing,” Nathaniel Mills, “The Dialectic of Electricity: Kenneth Fearing, Walter Benjamin, and a Marxist Aesthetic.”

⁵⁰ To that list we may now add Kenneth Fearing, *Clark Gifford's Body*.

⁵¹ In his introduction to *The Big Clock*, Nicholas Christopher offers this off-the-cuff remark: “One of the most innovative aspects of *The Big Clock* for a mystery of its time is Fearing’s use of multiple narrators, a constantly shifting point of view. He had experimented less successfully with this method in his 1942 novel *Clark Gifford's Body*, an avant-garde mosaic that employed twenty-three narrators over six decades of scrambled chronology” (xv). This is a puzzling statement. Christopher is apparently unaware that Fearing employs this same technique in *The Hospital*, *Dagger of the Mind*, and *The Generous Heart* (1954) to name a few. By the time *The Big Clock* appeared in 1946 this was more or less a signature of Fearing’s. It’s also unclear by what standards Christopher measures “success” in the case of a technique designed to reflect a

decentralization of narrative authority, but it should be noted that this technique is not dissimilar to that of John Dos Passos in the *U.S.A.* trilogy, to name just one novel in which multiple narrators result in a fracturing of the narrative subject. However, I will elaborate on this narrative below, arguing essentially that for Fearing this multivocal structure serves in effect to re-inscribe the subject onto a depersonalized, ontologically emptied landscape.

⁵² It's not entirely clear what "tradition" is being referred to here, but given the linkage they draw between realism and "praxis," it's reasonable to assume that Jenemann and Knighton are referring to Lukacs' *Theory of the Novel*.

⁵³ It is worth noting that for Jenemann and Knighton this reading serves to emphasize that hard-boiled fiction in general mobilizes this erasure of the subject as a description of the depersonalization that attends modernity and the rise of mass culture. For a different approach to the hard-boiled novel see Erin A. Smith, *Hard-Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines*. Smith argues among other things that the essential hard-boiled novel "was a profoundly ambivalent proletarian literature, however. It addressed the reader specifically as an individual, a way of thinking of oneself more characteristic of the bourgeoisie" (79).

Notes to Chapter 4

⁵⁴ In a similar vein, Garrett Stewart calls *Modern Times* a "self-conscious anachronism." See Garrett Stewart, "Modern Hard Times: Chaplin and the Cinema of Self-Reflection," 303.

⁵⁵ The notion of nostalgia as "trenchant" or "critical" reflects, I confess, one of my own apostasies from the source material for this dissertation. Fredric Jameson, for one, is famously dismissive of "nostalgia films." However, Linda Hutcheon sees more than misdirected longing in nostalgia, proposing that it is a mode not unlike irony, in that it offers the unexpected union between "a partial, idealized history" and a "dissatisfaction with the present." Linda Hutcheon, "Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern.", Fredric Jameson, "Nostalgia for the Present."

⁵⁶ For more on Benjamin's "Dialectics at a standstill," see Rolf Tiedemann, "Dialectics at a Standstill." The idea, though it appears elsewhere in Benjamin's writings, is most clearly articulated in Benjamin, "Saturn."

⁵⁷ Chaplin collected his thoughts on that world tour in a memoir, which represents his first piece of autobiographical writing. See Charlie Chaplin, *A Comedian Sees the World*.

⁵⁸ Nor was this politicization of melodrama lost on contemporary critics, some of whom lauded Chaplin's resistance to the "reality effect" of cinema. It was Rudolph Arnheim who noted that "in a Chaplin film no face, no motion of the hand is true to nature, and it is indeed a shameful thing for the apostles of 'Objectivity', who always preach that the mission of cinema is unvarnished realism, that the first blossoming of the young art of film presented itself as so made-up, and in such unnatural colors." See Rudolph Arnheim and Walter Benjamin, "Walter Benjamin and Rudolph Arnheim on Charlie Chaplin." Siegfried Kracauer and Theodor Adorno were also great admirers of

Chaplin, for similar reasons. See Theodor Adorno, "Chaplin Times Two.", Siegfried Kracauer, "Two Chaplin Sketches."

⁵⁹ See in particular "Modern Times," New York Times Sept. 29, 1935 1935. However, the cozy relation of Chaplin with Russia had been noted with some suspicion much earlier. See "Chaplin Films for Russia: Latest Pictures of Star May Soon Be Seen in Soviet Theatres," New York Times Jul. 29, 1928 1928, "Soviet Invites Chaplin," New York Times Jan. 18, 1926 1926. Arguably Chaplin's fifteen-month world tour in 1931, during which he rubbed shoulders with important cultural figures of all ideological stripes and nationalities during a period of intense political unrest served only to confirm Chaplin's exteriority to the populist isolationism and veiled nativism that by the 1930s had become the primary political mode of speech in America. In other words, Chaplin needn't have saddled himself with the inconvenient shibboleths of a true, theoretical leftism; for American political culture, his trip abroad, along with his dubious national and class origin, was enough to cast suspicion on his storied career. For more on the twin evolutions of populism and nativism in American political culture, see Michael Kazin, The Populist Persuasion: An American History, Nancy MacLean, Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan.

⁶⁰ It can be no accident that leaving the city for the country and "going on the bum" is for Chaplin the final antidote to the modern city. This is precisely the antidote preferred by Upton Sinclair in *The Jungle* and by John Dos Passos in the equally trenchant *USA* trilogy: see John Dos Passos, The Big Money, Upton Sinclair, The Jungle.

⁶¹ Not insignificantly, the heir to Chaplin's tradition is not the "talkie," but Mickey Mouse. In part, the enhanced reality effect of the talkie was antithetical to the more distant, more "critical" mode of silent film, and in Benjamin's formula, of the cartoon. Nor is Benjamin the only critic to take note of the cartoon's clear roots in silent film and in Chaplin. See Kathy Merlock Jackson, "Mickey and the Tramp: Walt Disney's Debt to Charlie Chaplin.", Miriam Hansen, "Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney."

⁶² Brecht was of course somewhat ambivalent about film in general, but did see tremendous potential in the medium's "externality" as a counterbalance to the bourgeois trend of introspection and psychology. For more on the link between Brecht and Chaplin, and in particular the way in which Chaplin's "gesture" both prefigures and arises from Brecht's theory of the epic theater, see Jennifer E. Michaels, "The Gold Rush and the Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny.", Ian Marshall, "'Imitation as Imitation': The Brechtian Aspect of Chaplin's Cinema."

⁶³ Bergson writes that it is "automatism," or the rendering of the body as mechanical object that is the source of comedy—an observation that although it reaches a level of refinement that Bergson himself would likely not have imagined, seems perfectly suited to the comic project of *Modern Times*. See Henri Bergson, Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic 10-16.

⁶⁴ The opening sequence of the film recalls Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, though it's unclear whether this was a direct influence, or if Chaplin had even seen it. More likely, both films reflect a cultural interest in the factory as a model of the structuring of experience under industrial capitalism.

⁶⁵ Darko Suvin's "novum"—as the singular aspect of a science fiction narrative that represents the core of its "cognitive estrangement" is by now the hoariest of chestnuts, but it may be found in Darko Suvin, "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre."

⁶⁶ The name of the factory ("Electro Steel Corp") is also suitably generic.

⁶⁷ For a discussion of the "dream sequence" in Chaplin, see David J. Lemaster, "Charlie Chaplin and Dreams." My own feeling is that the role of the dream in Chaplin is more complex than Lemaster is willing to admit; his contention is that the tramp's dreaming reflects a version of the "American dream"—or a kind of Ragged-Dick-esque dream of prosperity to be realized in the future. However, in the case of *Modern Times*, one might argue that the film itself is a dream from start to finish, at least from the moment that the tramp re-emerges unharmed from the bowels of the machine. Its surrealism, melodrama, stylized visuals, all combine to render the dream as the politicized dream of the future that is Benjamin's "dialectics at a standstill."

⁶⁸ Chaplin quite clearly meant "gamine," though the error persists throughout the credits and inter-titles.

⁶⁹ See n. 3 in Walter Benjamin, "Theory of Distraction".

⁷⁰ This argument might even more fruitfully be made for Chaplin's contemporary silent-film comedian Harold Lloyd, who was affectionately known to his public as "Stone-Face."

⁷¹ Or as Stewart puts it, "for as long as he could, Chaplin paid [the words] no mind, and his antic gestures spoke more loudly to us, and more bewitchingly, than most words our movies have known." Stewart, "Modern Hard Times," 314.

⁷² Stein's handwriting is often a challenge; "comfy" is my best guess, and it's a usage that suits both the poem's tone and Stein's sometimes slyly childlike style. The entire poem may be found in the Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Collection, Box 10 Folder 217.

⁷³ For a similar analysis, see Wanda Van Dusen, "Portrait of a National Fetish: Gertrude Stein's 'Introduction to the Speeches of Marechal Petain' (1942)." Van Dusen and Will are both chiefly interested in Stein's unpublished manuscript containing translations of the speeches of Phillippe Petain, and use this project as a touchstone revealing a conservative, even collaborationist turn in Stein's later works. Together, their work amounts to a relatively narrow indictment of Stein, but one which ascribes to her a "masochistic-fetishistic desire" for masculine domination (Will 660). Though Van Dusen's analysis was interrupted by her untimely death, Will has continued this work in recent years, showing how patriarchal values are re-inscribed in Stein's later work, including her children's writing, and early 1940s texts such as *Ida* and "Three Sisters Who are Not Sisters." See also Barbara Will, "'and Then One Day There Was a War': Gertrude Stein, Children's Literature and World War II".

⁷⁴ See Barbara Will, *Gertrude Stein, Modernism, and the Problem Of "Genius"*. Will is quite specific about which of Stein's works "count" in this context: *Tender*

Buttons, The Making of Americans and *Three Lives* make the cut, and the autobiographies do not.

⁷⁵ In a way, this model may offer a resolution to the “difficult historical questions” that Zofia Lesinska argues arise from the foregrounding of “passivity rather than resistance” in Stein’s autobiographical writings through the Second World War. Zofia Lesinska, “Gertrude Stein’s War Autobiographies: Reception, History and Dialogue,” 339. In the end, Lesinska reluctantly condemns Stein on political grounds, though she notes that Stein was not alone in enclosing the most abject failures and crimes of the mass society within a shocking and violent elision. However, I would like to offer this important proviso, one which stands as response both to Lesinska and to the more trenchant condemnation of Wanda Van Dusen: passivity and resistance are not antithetical, and any politicized, historicized analysis of modernity must confront the reality of a newly penetrating and dominant mass society in which many forms of resistance were pre-ordained and destined to be re-issued in their new commodity form before their negative potential could be achieved. In that sense, the dialectic is displaced and modified into the sublime dream of the future manifested in the culture of the present.

⁷⁶ More precisely, an art that is predicated on “a sentiment of doing nothing.” See Gertrude Stein, *Everybody’s Autobiography* 291.

⁷⁷ The terms of this argument emerge from the more fully theoretical model elaborated by Althusser. See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.”

⁷⁸ Stein explores this idea in some depth in Gertrude Stein, “The Gradual Making of *the Making of Americans*.” For a differing view on the significance of “talking and listening,” see Dana Cairns Watson, *Gertrude Stein and the Essence of What Happens* 24.

⁷⁹ In fact, Rita Barnard worries that to even use the term “mass culture” is a shibboleth that reveals a covert or unconscious affiliation with a Frankfurt-School model of the mass society. Barnard, *Culture of Abundance* 13.

⁸⁰ It is precisely the penetration of mass production to the core of culture that permits the kind of analysis found in Ohmann, “Mass Culture.” Ohmann argues that mass cultural forms permit (indeed, require) the analysis of cultural texts alongside the ideological products of capitalism, such as advertisements in magazines. It’s less clear in Ohmann’s analysis that this sort of approach is only possible in the late 19th century, but what his approach assumes is a reader that simultaneously perceives capitalism’s overtly ideological products and the less overtly ideological messages of genteel culture—a possibility that is intriguing given that the current project is one about the diversion of attention between seemingly disparate modes of cultural engagement, if not exactly of cultural production.

⁸¹ For an interesting reading of Benjamin’s figure of the collector as representing the modern subject, presenting a bracketed protest to modernity, see Ackbar Abbas, “Walter Benjamin’s Collector: The Fate of Modern Experience.”

⁸² See McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.

⁸³ This review may be found in the Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Collection, Box 169, Folder 4331.

⁸⁴ According to Catherine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman, "Reflection on the Atomic Bomb" may be Stein's last piece of writing before she died, having been written somewhere in 1945 or 1946. See Gertrude Stein, Writings, 1932-1946 840.

⁸⁵ See Brooks Landon, "'Not Solve It but Be in It': Gertrude Stein's Detective Stories and the Mystery of Creativity," 496.

⁸⁶ See especially Gerri Reaves, Mapping the Private Geography : Autobiography, Identity, and America, Johnston, "Narratologies of Pleasure: Gertrude Stein's *the Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.", Sidonie Smith, "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance." A useful précis of the basic argument, along with a reading of A.A.B.T. through the theme of nationalism may be found in Davis, "Aesthetics of National Identity."

⁸⁷ See Tiedemann, "Dialectics at a Standstill." See also Benjamin, "Saturn."

⁸⁸ See Michael Davidson, Ghostlier Demarcations : Modern Poetry and the Material Word.

Notes to the Conclusion

⁸⁹ Recall that for Howard Eiland, reception in distraction was equally the product of technology: distraction "is conditioned, first of all, by the dynamics of modern technology, by the technologization of things—the accelerated pace of life, the rapid transitions of modern media, the press of commodities and their programmed obsolescence and so on." Eiland, "Reception in Distraction," 57.

⁹⁰ This dissertation has presumed that the "Clock" is a sign of the totalizing logic of Fordism, in which the "machine" of industry consumes and mechanizes the realm of the social, up to and including the commodification of temporality and experience themselves. However, E.P. Thompson has noted that the "clock" is a shifting and complex signifier in the annals of labor history, with a centrality to discourses about work, labor and time that dates back at least as far as the seventeenth century. The image of the clock as the oppressive articulation of the power relations between workers and their bosses thus predates by some centuries the emergence of modernity, let alone Fordism. Thompson sees the crescendo of this sign as occurring in the eighteenth century: "As the seventeenth century moves on the image of clock-work extends, until with Newton, it has engrossed the universe. And by the middle of the eighteenth century (if we are to trust Sterne) the clock had penetrated to more intimate levels." See E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," 57.

⁹¹ See Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project 106.

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