BARTHES, SURREALISM, AND CLASSICAL CONTINUITY CINEMA

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To my cat

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Although much has been written on the Surrealist movement and Roland Barthes as individual entities, scholars have conducted much less research on the theoretical links between the two. In this essay I posit classical continuity cinema as the site of an important philosophical intersection between the avant-garde activity of the Surrealists and the critical theory of Barthes. As an extremely influential institution that both shapes and is shaped by political, economic, and social factors, considering the two in terms of commercial cinema illuminates the way each may have been working toward strikingly similar ends.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

By historicizing and comparing some common threads in the work of the Surrealists and Roland Barthes, I would like to consider the projects of each insofar as they open up conventional narrative to new possibilities. Ultimately, I will envision ways to reconsider and utilize their insights and contributions in order to think through the influence of Surrealism in contemporary critical theory and especially in Barthes' work. How can we consider the social and political questions that both groups engaged with, and the critical methods they derived to do so, in the context of contemporary debates about the value of literary theory?

How do we define the legacy of the Surrealists in terms of contemporary critical theory, and can we read Barthes as carrying on or contributing to this legacy? While traditional intellectual history tends to understand Barthes the semiologist as part of a much different domain than the Surrealists, and while it is indeed certain that each was responding to different movements, nevertheless the two parties share similar ideas, a fact easily disguised by their disparate philosophical frameworks and contexts. While Barthes' methods and tactics are undoubtedly quite distinct in many ways from the Surrealists, who reveled in the act of spontaneous games and public spectacle, both use clearly and carefully elaborated methods to generate new critical approaches to theorize culture. In Barthes' structuralist work beginning as early as *Mythologies* he draws on Saussure's landmark contribution to linguistics in an effort to construct a replicable, repeatable model for describing, and in describing revealing, the complex process by which many different forms of public discourse make meaning. By exporting Saussure's scientific and synchronic (structuralist) conception of language, and applying

it to all different kinds of public discourse at large, Barthes was trying to formulate a method to systematically describe the way ideologies of power function (Dosse 75). This type of structural approach applied to systems that may have seemed quite apart from the conceptual structures of language constituted a notable break from traditional forms of epistemology. In theorizing the objects and processes of everyday life in terms of an a-temporal epistemology of synchronic structure rather than traditional diachronic histories, Barthes helped lay the foundation for an entire structuralist movement.

Yet beneath the Surrealists' oftentimes sensational behavior, too, one finds a legitimate, rigorous and well-elaborated methodology. The methods of Barthes and the Surrealists both illuminated and thus made it possible to symbolically dismantle the ideological relationship between active producer of meaning and passive receiver. Even more importantly, they were transforming the materials of mass commodity culture into the raw materials for a form of pleasure ultimately centered on personal creativity, symbolically liberated from a reliance on commodity culture.

I intend to frame the discussion of the Surrealists and Barthes in the context of a 20th century cultural anxiety in the West about meaning itself, amplified due to various developments at that time. The Surrealists were in dialogue with and deeply dependent on the prominent socio-cultural and technological developments of that time: broadly speaking, two important spurs to Surrealist thought were the mechanical reproducibility of the visual image and the growing popularity of the work and ideas of Freud. The growing prevalence of the photographic image exacerbated the crisis over the increasingly unlikely conception of any kind of teleological or absolute meaning in the wake of World War I or, in the linguistic terms that Barthes would incorporate in the

1950s, the possibility of fixed denotation. In light of sixteen million casualties from the war, the wisdom of enlightenment rationality was reopened to debate. Barthes writes, “in every society various techniques are developed intended to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs” (“Rhetoric of the Image” 39). Indeed, the proposition that meaning may not function in simple one to one relationships but instead in far more complicated and unstable ways was and often still is deeply disturbing. In the decades after World War I, uncertain signs abounded.

CHAPTER 2
BODY

Photography was one potential spur to the kind of spatial logic that provided an important spark for the Surrealist project. One can also read a remarkably similar logic in the psychoanalytic practices of Sigmund Freud. Freud contended that unconscious or latent desires significantly influence conscious behavior. The assertion that one's speech and actions were neither totally under one's control nor always rational, made some sense to the Surrealists, especially in light of World War I. The Surrealists called into question the limitations of rationality as the basis for an epistemology. We could not fully seek to understand human experience via rationalism alone, and all models that did so were flawed and repressive. If our physical actions were the result of unconscious and repressed urges, then we could no longer rightfully take rationality as the only legitimate way of knowing about the world. In the first Surrealist Manifesto, Breton, the leader and one of the few constant members of the Surrealist group, wrote, "Tshe absolute rationalism that is still in vogue allows us to consider only facts relating directly to our experience. . . . It is pointless to add that experience itself has found itself increasingly circumscribed" (9-10). In short, these two significant factors among a confluence of social, cultural, and political factors were an important part of the intellectual backdrop in which Surrealism arose.

One important commonality shared between the photographic image and Freudian psychoanalysis as conceptual models for thought lies in the tenet of both that there is much to be gained from paying heed to the polysemy of meaning (over-determination in Freud's terms) of minute details. Freud's methods suggest a closer emphasis on isolated and seemingly discrete instances and the way we might probe them

synchronically rather than as a single unexamined piece of a causal narrative. Freud applied this kind of logic to troubling moments or incidents in patients' lives. Rather than thinking strictly in terms of a patient's narrative account of past traumas in order to reach the real, repressed and accurate narratives behind superficial "screen" narratives that mask deeper problems, one must work to unpack the complexity of the individual moments that comprise these narratives. In the free association process, Freud and Breuer write,

> As a rule, indeed, the situation is not as simple as we have represented in particular cases – for instance, where there is one symptom only, which has arisen from one trauma. We do not usually find a single hysterical symptom, but a number of them, partly independent of one another and partly linked together. We must not expect to meet with a single traumatic memory and a single pathogenic idea as its nucleus. (287-88)

Likewise, the way one sees or reads a photograph as opposed to a sentence is likewise always the result of a psychologically and ideologically inflected process of selection and interpretation. The method Freud used to this end was very much in line with the spatially egalitarian method Barthes and the Surrealists would later use to read visual images, especially the photographic image. This approach, with a focus on synchrony, was in contrast to the diachrony of the culturally hegemonic form of realist, representational narrative typical of the realist novel. How and why, Freud seems to ask, should one seek self actualization by constructing realist narratives, if we are not able to reliably isolate those truly significant instances in our lives that would constitute these narratives? That certain psychoanalytic practices in some respects so strikingly resemble a kind of photographic logic is probably not purely coincidence: Before photography, dreams, the richest raw material of repressed and latent meaning in

psychoanalysis, were the closest approximation of photographic experiences available to us.

But regardless of what technologies and cultural currents made the idea of a polysemic epistemology prominent but also unsettling, the Surrealists in contrast not only embraced a polysemic mode of thought but felt it to be essential. Rather than fearing polysemy, the Surrealists feared the consequences of its lack and the oppression of humanity that they felt resulted. In contrast to a general trepidation about polysemy, that the meaning of an event or moment was always multiple and contested, rather than fixed and guaranteed by a Judaeo-Christian conception of an all-powerful God, the Surrealists believed in the liberating power of polysemic modes of thought.

Breton argues, “The imagination is perhaps on the point of reasserting itself, of reclaiming its rights. If the depths of our mind contain within it strange forces capable of augmenting those on the surface. . . there is every reason to seize them – first to seize them, then, if need be, to submit them to the control of our reason” (“Manifesto of Surrealism” 10). We can read the Surrealist project as an attempt to gain access to a fuller consciousness not limited by the tyranny of enlightenment rationality. Breton later wrote “I believe the moment is at hand when, by a paranoiac and active advance of the mind, it will be possible (simultaneously with automatism and other passive states) to systematize confusion and thus to help to discredit completely the world of reality. In order to cut short all possible misunderstandings, it should perhaps be said: 'immediate' reality” (“What is Surrealism?”). These pronouncements illuminate a key goal of the Surrealist project: To upset the hegemonic order of rationalism by systematizing forms of irrationality. In doing so the Surrealists hoped to liberate for all a life free from the

dehumanizing demands of a life lived according to reason alone. While the Surrealists devised many methods for achieving this goal of mental and physical liberation, their games with the cinema were some of the most illuminating and, as I will argue, they continue to be relevant.

The prevalence of the photographic image was one spur to the Surrealists' conceptualization of a means to escape the "reign of logic." If nothing else, the invention of the mass produced photograph exponentially increased the sheer number of visual images in circulation. The invention of cheaply produced visual images, including the photograph, made the visual image widely available to all classes of society. If the Surrealists were interested in using the visual image as a canvas for generating a radical new *praxis* that could free thought from rationalism, it is perhaps not surprising that they were fascinated by motion pictures. Cinema, it might have seemed to them, as the synthesis of thousands of individual *still* photos, could serve as an incredibly fruitful canvas for Surrealist activity. Given the Surrealists' conviction that realist, representational narrative was itself a repressive and restrictive element of modern culture, the visual image, in its refusal to be fully reduced to or explained by words, represented a gateway to radical forms of critique. By paying attention to the essential simultaneity of the visual image rather than the temporal narratives one might find embedded in each via different kinds of cues, the Surrealists conceived of a *praxis* that rejected the cultural dominance of realist narrative. The ability to forego the narratives an image or series of images might contain in favor of minute details offered a symbolic resistance to those privileged narratives. Photographs, as Barthes pointed out, were distinct even apart from paintings in their capacity to elude objective description. Yet in

the increasingly dominant continuity-driven narrative cinema, the Surrealists saw an extension of the same enlightenment rationality. The photographic image was not living up to the radical potential they saw in its synchronicity. The photographic image in the increasingly dominant classical continuity-edited films did not, as they had hoped it could, expound a new radical anti-rationalist epistemology. Instead, the photographic image was put into the service of the same realist representational narratives found in older forms such as the popular novel and the theatre. The Surrealists recognized the hegemonic capabilities of these realist narratives at least as far back as 1924, when, alluding to classical continuity cinema, Jean Epstein wrote, “The telephone rings. All is lost”: the beginning of a narrative story for the Surrealists was a disaster (Ray 4). While the photograph could still stand as a testing ground for a new kind of spatial logic, the cinematic language of continuity editing, fully established by the late 1920s, had already foreclosed this possibility, re-orienting the commercial film toward the mimetic realist models of older hegemonic and repressive forms. If realist narrative was an important vehicle of rationalist hegemony and the synchronicity of the photographic image a potential mitigating force, the language that classical continuity cinema imposed on a collection of images undercut their potentially liberating force. Unsurprisingly, films produced by the members of the Surrealist group defiantly eschewed classical continuity narrative for avant-garde forms. Likewise, all of the Surrealist practice in viewing the cinema came to share one trait: a focus on disrupting by a variety of methods the narrative plots of commercial films. If the Surrealists could not consistently coerce commercial studios to make films according to their own revolutionary aesthetic, they could employ practices to change their own experience of these films. For films

that didn't fit their vision for the medium, one such way to attain this liberation was through the inherent freedom found within the visual image. If commercial films constricted meaning via narrative, the Surrealists countered this constriction from the outside through a variety of games that exploited the synchronicity of the photograph, oftentimes by ripping it free from its narrative context.

Though many aspects of the Surrealist movement are fraught with complexities, broadly speaking Surrealist practice was often fairly systematic. I contend that the two most critical and overarching categories of Surrealism were activity, often in the form of games, and what today we might call the theorization of that activity. These two forms depended upon each other: Surrealist practice only came to mean through members of that group arguing for the significances of their actions. The significance of an event or activity was often reassessed anachronistically long after it had occurred. Though the Surrealists produced art themselves, including avant-garde film (literally, art and film created by members of the Surrealist group), I will argue that these two factors represent the most vital contributions of Surrealism to modern critical theory.

Though Surrealist activity encompassed a wide variety of activity which I will not exhaustively define here, it consistently incorporated elements of play. The sociologist Roger Caillois describes some of the essential qualities of play: "The confused and intricate laws of ordinary life are replaced, in this fixed space and for this given time, by precise, arbitrary, unexceptionable rules that must be accepted as such and that govern the correct playing of the game" (7). Elsewhere he writes, "There is also no doubt that play must be defined as a free and voluntary activity, a source of joy and amusement"

(6). I will limit the scope of my argument by focusing specifically on the Surrealist games oriented toward cinema. I have one primary justification for this decision.

Classical continuity cinema, an editing style that strongly emulates classical Aristotelian narrative, was beginning to dominate Hollywood cinema in the years preceding Surrealism. The distinct syntax of the classical continuity system evolved under and therefore absorbed prevailing ideologies extending back to Aristotle but also reflecting enlightenment ideologies as well as highly modern notions of scientific management. The most immediate influence was undoubtedly the literary realism of the 19th century. Noel Burch writes, “The dominance of the Western mode of filmic representation was determined neither by ideological factors alone nor by sheer economic opportunism. Rather, it corresponds broadly to the mode of constitution of the Subject in our culture, and it developed into an ideological vehicle of unprecedented power” (84). One need only look to filmmaking and viewing practices in Japan for compelling evidence of the differing cultural conceptions of storytelling between the two early national cinemas and in turn, the cultures at large. If, as I will argue, the Surrealist movement was taking aim at dominant ideologies of their era, the commercial film industry, then and now, represents one site where these ideologies merged and coincided powerfully and with great consequence. The confluence of cultural, social, and political forces latent in commercial cinema not only partly explains the Surrealist fascination with the cinema but also makes its study especially fruitful.

If it is evident that the Surrealist games conform to Caillois’ characterization of play above, they diverge sharply in at least one area: the value of play. Caillois characterizes play:

> Property is exchanged, but no goods are produced. . . characteristic of play, in fact, is that it creates no wealth or goods, thus differing from a work or art. At the end of the game, all can and must start over again at the same point. Nothing has been harvested or manufactured, no masterpiece has been created, no capital has accrued. Play is an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money. (6)

In this definition, one finds the ideological conception of the distinction between commerce or work and play that Surrealist praxis exploded. The Surrealists' use of rule-driven games as a research method challenged the common conception of play and productivity as mutually exclusive.

In bringing the idea of play to bear on commercial cinema, the Surrealists were engaged with one of the purest manifestations of 20th century commodity culture. "Mass production, standardized designs, concentration of the whole production cycle in a single place, a radical division of labor, the routinizing of workers' tasks, even the after-hours surveillance of employees, all these Fordist practices became Hollywood's own" (Ray 2). Even aside from Surrealist games and the uses to which they were turned, adopting the framework of the game itself had a symbolic function, whether the Surrealists at the time knew it or not. That purportedly valuable research could be produced through games was antithetical to the scientific management philosophies of modern business culture, epitomized in the influential managerial philosophies of Taylorism as early as the turn of the century and Fordism into the 20th century.

By breaking the underlying commercial contract of the dominant cinema via their games, the Surrealists also rejected the strict socially and politically constructed boundaries between work and leisure. Indeed, Ford's role in pioneering a hyper-rationalized production system was not his only significant contribution in shaping 20th century commodity culture. Ford viewed efficiency in the production of commodities as

providing benefits for its participants that extended outside the workplace into all facets of life. He pioneered a modern business model that expanded beyond merely business into the everyday lives of his workers. Thus under Fordism labor and leisure achieved a symbiosis, rationalized as two parts of the larger apparatus of consumer society. It also meant that it was Ford and his policymakers who were, for their workers and the adherents to his model, effectively and unabashedly prescribing the leisure activities of the labor force. The director of Ford's sociological department from 1917-1921, Samuel Marquis, writes, "the Ford idea is to increase a man's capacity for happiness and at the same time to increase his efficiency, his earning capacity, his worth in society, so that he may have access to the things he has been taught to enjoy" (Banta 26). Maximizing efficiency of production in order to pay higher wages granted the worker access to the high consumption commodity culture he or she helped to fuel. In other ways, too, the Ford business model incorporated all aspects of life above and beyond the production of consumer goods (automobiles). Indeed, as indicated above, Ford had an entire division dedicated to sociology. If Ford's project, as Marquis asserted in 1916, was not only the making of cars but "the making of men," the Hollywood motion picture, themselves often produced in Ford's assembly-line style, was one of the primary forms of leisure for those men (Marquis 45). If, too, as many critics across the disciplines have asserted, film both shapes and is shaped by modern history, one could argue that the language and ideas of Fordism and the descendant ideologies of corporate excellence exert a significant influence on the way society mediates their experience. In short, it is difficult to deny that the corporation, both as producer of commercial film and as a socially determining formation in modern globalized culture today, plays a significant

role in our everyday lives. In 1951, Carl Sandburg argued that “the Southern California film metropolis is one of the most important pedagogical institutions on earth” (*Coca-Colonization* 226-227). In one sense, then, we can read Surrealist games with the cinema as playing a critical role in symbolically overthrowing corporate profit-driven forms of mass entertainment that, like all of their targets, circumscribe ways of knowing. If continuity-driven narrative cinema combines the power to craft myths that can both liberate and oppress as well as reach audiences unprecedented in size, the commercial film’s profit-motive creates and ensures its hegemonic content. Reinhold Wagnleitner writes, “Without a doubt, in dealing with film, we are dealing with a complex institution of social control and socialization that represents concrete economic interests” (*Coca-Colonization* 226). In multiple senses, the commercial film always reflects the interests of the corporation that produces it. Indeed, the relationship of consumer to producer that Barthes posits for the classic (readerly) narrative text in *S/Z* holds even more convincingly for commercial cinema than the traditional fiction texts he scrutinizes. In exchange for a ticket, a viewer is entitled viewing privileges to a film under certain conditions. The screening itself has a set of rules, including but not limited to the interpretive conventions of continuity cinema. For instance, the viewer must watch the film linearly, from the first to last frame, only once, and in a controlled setting. The viewer may not rewind, skip, or re-watch any part of the film.

The carefully structured, yet playful design of Surrealist games resisted this narrative emphasis of classical continuity cinema, an emphasis that the Surrealists interpreted as imposing unwarranted restrictions on the viewer’s autonomy. They found

creative ways to bring new and productive (for their own ends) rule sets to the cinema in order to counter the serious, contractual aspect of the classical continuity film.

If the Surrealist movement emerged out of a number of socio-political and cultural transformations (including the carnage wrought by WWI) underway in the early 20th century, similar circumstances may have played a part in Barthes' conception of his own project, born in the midst of a specific ideological struggle occurring in the years following World War II. In a post-war culture centered on fragile and yet to be determined international relations and balances of power, the circulation of symbolic capital became a critical site for a nationalist struggle of ideologies. Wagnleitner writes, "The U.S. impact on the media scene, on the press and news agencies, on photography and comics, on advertisements and public opinion research, on radio and television, on literature and publishers, on education and the public discourse in general, as well as on the strengthening of the position of English and American studies, is undisputed" ("American Cultural Diplomacy" 198). The primary engine of this ideological battle was the Marshall Plan, and specifically the International Media Guaranty (IMG) Program, whose "objective was to promote both European economic recovery and United States Information policy by guaranteeing remittances from U.S. cultural exports to Europe" (Swann 185). In short, in exchange for money to rebuild the French economy, the U.S. often forcefully circulated American cultural values through a number of outlets, including the cinema. In an article called "The Little State Department: Washington and Hollywood's Rhetoric of the Postwar Audience," Paul Swann details the complex relationship between the State Department, the Hollywood Film Industry, and the aims of each:

> After 1945, the U.S. Government tried at many points to orchestrate overseas public opinion through American motion pictures with surprisingly mixed results. The strategic and tactical aims of the film industry in promoting and selling cultural commodities abroad, specifically in postwar Europe, were by no means synonymous with the policies and interests of the U.S. State Department. There is however, ample evidence that generally the two worked extremely well together, and the ties between the State Department and the film industry were very strong – stronger than those between Hollywood and any other branch of Government, including, somewhat surprisingly, the U.S. Department of Commerce. (179)

In light of what most foreign critics regarded as a system of "blatant cultural colonialism" one can more clearly understand the appeal of a systematic method devised to plot the way meanings are made and dispersed through media (Swann 183). If physically preventing the circulation of American values on the level of governmental foreign policy was impossible, such a method could function as a defense against an insidious form of cultural imperialism.

Barthes took exactly this approach by devising a method to systematically decode the ideologically charged and politically motivated messages circulating in public discourse. Both *Mythologies* and "The Rhetoric of the Image" follow a relatively straightforward project: to uncover the ideological basis of public discourse by mapping the inner workings of this process in terms of a linguistic system. Early in *Mythologies* he asserts that "myth is a language" and imports the structural framework of Saussure's linguistics to show how it functions (11). By taking a linguistic approach that systematically examined myths, Barthes thought he could consistently reveal the way cultural constructs and ideologies are formed and come to appear as natural and timeless.

Advertising, a discourse where the motive for each message was always indisputably clear and the denotations the ads sought to associate with their products so

obviously motivated, was an ideal discourse for Barthes to scrutinize the process of signification itself. In "The Rhetoric of the Image" he remarks, "If the image contains signs, we can be sure that in advertising these signs are full, formed with a view to the optimum reading: the advertising image is frank, or at least emphatic" (33). Barthes' enterprise centers on the refusal of absolute, denotative truths or meanings which traditional forms of advertising attempt to establish. As with the Surrealists, a confluence of cultural and political factors had rendered it increasingly difficult to subscribe to the frankly comforting assumption that material signifiers signify in a one-to-one relationship. In his effort to explore the possibility of semiotics to systematically account for this polysemy, Barthes turns to methods that begin to enter Surrealist territory.

If "The Rhetoric of the Image" offers a framework designed to investigate, classify, and in turn neutralize the visual image's over-determined quality and its complex system of signification, *S/Z* functions to reveal and neutralize the ideology at work in our traditional conception of pleasure reading by treating the text as something that more closely resembles the visual image, and particularly the Surrealists' conception of it. Here Barthes elaborates a spatial method of reading that in certain ways resembles Surrealist logic and its influences. "This text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one. . . " (5). Furthermore, if Mythologies represents one of Barthes' most purely structuralist approaches, *S/Z* begins a movement away from the rigid scientism of Saussure's linguistics toward a more experimental reader-centered approach. Whereas the Barthes of *Mythologies* systematically demystifies objects of public discourse, and in the second part of the

book, elaborates for the reader the strict formula by which such demystification has been conducted, *S/Z* is as much about the methodology as the creativity required for its use. In *S/Z* Barthes emphasizes the heightened role of the individual in the process of making meaning. To this end, in challenging traditional conceptions of reading, his strategies remain indebted, as I will demonstrate below, to a spatial conception of thought one finds throughout Surrealism activity.

Though *S/Z* offers, among other things a reconsideration of the act of reading itself and a subversive methodology for reading narrative, it also shares a common goal with *Mythologies*, which is to reveal the ideology that influences the way we interact with material culture. Yet if some of the similarities between Barthes' early structuralist project and Surrealism aren't initially evident, *S/Z* represents for Barthes a turn to more distinctly Surrealist methods; it is a distinct evolution of Barthes' project that tempers the structuralist notion of a scientism without a subject to formulate a methodology that recognizes more strongly the role of the reader.

In *S/Z* Barthes argues that the Western conception of reading is itself ideological and cultural rather than natural. If *Mythologies* functions to systematize, and by systematizing, neutralize the methods of social control circulating in various forms of public discourse, *S/Z* demythifies the act of reading for pleasure. Our modern conception of reading, Barthes argues, is shaped in large part by the economic system of the West. The commercial model of consumption strongly conditions the way we as a culture read texts. In a culture driven by high consumption, the text inherits a critical trait of many or even most commodities in such a system: disposability. "Rereading, an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society, which would

have us 'throw away' the story once it has been consumed ('devoured') so that we can then move on to another story, buy another book and which is tolerated only in certain marginal categories of readers (children, old people, and professors)" (16). By formulating a methodology of reading that radically empowers the reader in the hermeneutic process, Barthes crucially devalues the text as commodity, positing the relation between reader and text as one of pure play rather than commerce: "reading is no longer consumption, but play" (16). Though certainly Barthes does pay attention to what he calls the "tutor" text, Balzac's *Sarassine* (the subject of his experimental reading), what I am interested in here is the several aspects of Barthes' methodology that function independently of the text under scrutiny. By elevating the importance of the reader over the text itself in the production of meaning, one wrests from the text its status as first and foremost a product. The results are twofold: the Barthesian reader wrests from the producer much of its control over a consumer's ideologically inflected reading (consumption) habits and tendencies and in turn the producer's monopolization of meaning. Barthes writes, "the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text (*S/Z* 4). In this way the actual text analyzed becomes secondary to the reader's ability to "make it go" ("From Work to Text" 80). Barthes advocates a radical redefinition of the text: "The writerly text is not a thing, we would have a hard time finding it in a bookstore" (*S/Z* 5). While Barthes posits the division of texts into the readerly and writerly, reading further one ascertains that these distinctions, in keeping with Barthes' privileging of the reader, are imposed on texts by the reader as much as they are inherent qualities of a text. Applied successfully, the methodology outlined in *S/Z makes* a text readerly. Barthes thus

symbolically appropriates the means of production. In a quite practical sense, he teaches us a form of reading that refuses the commercial relationship between the reader of a text and its producer, giving readers the rules for a game in which one needs only a text to play, that one can play anywhere and at any time without restriction, and if followed, exponentially increases the amount of pleasure one might derive from a text. One's skill as a Barthesian reader then, transforms the text and causes it to transcend the category of commodity.

In other ways, too, Barthes exploits a spatial rather than a linear diachronic conception of reading in order to elevate the importance of the reader. The division of the text into fragmented, arbitrary chunks Barthes calls "lexias" is the first step in the process of denying the commodity text the ideological reading consumer culture demands. Barthes writes, "the tutor text will ceaselessly be broken, interrupted without any regard for its natural divisions. . . . What is thereby denied is not the quality of the text (here incomparable) but its 'naturalness'" (*S/Z* 15). By dividing the text into lexias the reader partitions it into a large number of possible starting points, each equal in its ability to signify according to the five codes he elaborates; thus he refuses to privilege the classically Aristotelian narrative focal points of beginning, middle, and end. In this regard, Barthes' treatment of the text draws on his earlier foray into visual rhetoric; he treats the text as, in a sense, a visual image with no temporally defined starting point or entrance; whether or not the visual image has a clearly defined subject is of little consequence; one is not obligated to heed it. Barthes analyzes each lexia in terms of five codes he divides into two classes: reversible and non-reversible. The two non-reversible codes, which Barthes names hermeneutic and proairetic, provide the

foundation for our culture's ideological conception of reading; they depend on reading the text from start to finish.

The non-reversible codes, characterized by their dependence on beginning and end, drive the ideological consumerist reading that renders the text disposable. Barthes attempts to highlight other codes present in such texts in order to make the case that the non-reversible codes are not only not the only codes but that they are no more valuable than the reversible codes. The hermeneutic code establishes the text as working toward a truth value or an ultimate signified that will close the text (*S/Z* 19). If the reader intuitively privileges the ideological non-reversible codes it is often at the expense of the reversible codes; these latter codes, which Barthes privileges (one could argue he creates them outright), serve as the engine that drives his vision of a non-consumerist reading as writing (*S/Z* 30). It is in these codes that one finds non-narrative systems of meaning throughout the text: "there is no first reading, even if the text is concerned to give us that illusion by several operations of suspense." (*S/Z* 16). By placing emphasis on establishing synchronic systems of signification that proliferate throughout the text, Barthes diminishes the power of the narrative as the final signified.

In the Surrealist game of Irrational Enlargement, viewers purposefully focused on the seemingly minute details in the film, using them as engines to generate entirely new and unintended narratives from their own imagination rather than the narrative content contained in the film itself. For the film *The Shanghai Gesture*, for example, they posed to each other questions like these: "What was on Mother Gin-Sling's menu for dinner? Between who or what should an encounter occur at the gaming table?" (Schuster 122). By painstakingly entertaining these purely hypothetical questions, the Surrealists also

rejected the consumer-producer relationship of the cinema. It is significant that though the Surrealist narratives produced by Irrational Enlargement were purely imagined, created by the Surrealists themselves, the film itself did contain the creative spark or impetus for these narratives. In Jean Schuster's remark, "In all honesty, it would be false to bring the creative re-creation of a film to a conclusion," one can observe clear similarities to ideas found in *S/Z* (129). In this refusal to declare an end point of such games, or a certain finite number of legitimate alternative narratives, one can read Shuster as advocating an infinite multiplicity and thus total freedom from the producer rather than a limited number of sanctioned narratives. Barthes later echoes this sentiment in *S/Z*: "Yet reading does not consist in stopping the chain of systems, in establishing a truth, a legality of the text, and consequently in leading its reader into 'errors'; it consists in coupling these systems, not according to their finite quality, but according to their plurality" (11).

If one aims to reject the hegemony of commercial film and its emphasis on non-reversible codes, one must not limit the types of alternatives that can emerge. Breton describes another important Surrealist form of play:

> I agree wholeheartedly with Jacques Vache in appreciating nothing so much as dropping into the cinema when whatever was playing was playing, at any point in the show, and leaving at the first hint of boredom – of surfeit – to rush off to another cinema where we behaved in the same way. . . . it goes without saying that more often than not we left our seats without even knowing the title of the film, which was of no importance to us, anyway. (As in a Wood 73)

If, in Irrational Enlargement the Surrealists construct their own subversive narratives, here they refuse narrative outright. In the act of creatively changing the rules or terms by which they viewed films, the Surrealists asserted an important role as makers of meaning. By rejecting the Aristotelian narrative form of such films they were

implicitly devaluing and revaluing the content of the films as well. Their tactics changed the criteria by which a film's quality was judged. The lavish costumes, elaborate sets, and celebrity actors that had begun to drive the commercial film industry were often considered inconsequential or simply uninteresting to the Surrealists. Their methods produced a radically new aesthetic that cared nothing for the established values of commercial cinema.

One can read *S/Z* as a similar approach disguised in the monograph form of the academic. Whereas the Surrealists were physically playing games of their own design, in *S/Z* Barthes fashions a methodology that mimics Surrealism in its language and methods. He couches his densely theoretical methodology of reading in terms of a game. The format of the book itself is non-traditional in many ways, structured as a collection of rules. In the rhetoric of play as well, Barthes demonstrates significant connections with the Surrealists.

Both Surrealist games and the methodology of *S/Z* function to extend the commodity value of the text. In doing so, each implicitly engages with issues of boredom and desire, some of the most significant and consequential issues in a rapidly rationalized industrial society. In a culture where rationalized modes of production and workplace efficiency come to regulate all areas of life, one's ability to independently satisfy their own desire while abstaining from participation in the commodity economy functions as a form of resistance. Consumer culture aggressively exploits and perpetuates the centrality of non-reversible codes because they insure the text's finite value. Enclosing the value of the text solely within its non-reversible codes posits the text as foremost a consumer good, foregrounding its disposability and the myth of its

inevitable devaluation. In a culture that privileges non-reversible codes, the linear narrative of film and fiction comes to function as an intrinsic form of planned obsolescence that perfectly suited an economy of mass consumption. Indeed, in the 20th century, in order to create a consistent demand, manufacturers began to introduce methods to limit, like the readerly text, the use-value of a product. In 1954 Brooks Stevens, an industrial designer, popularized what he called "planned obsolescence" in product design, a model which quickly attained widespread use: "Instilling in the buyer the desire to own something a little newer, a little better, a little sooner than is necessary" ("Planned Obsolescence"). When successful, it is exactly this type of business practice that seeks to wrest the consumer's control over his or her own consumption habits.

Barthes, like the Surrealists, turns to the human mind or imagination to combat this possibility. If boredom and desire fuel consumption, creatively overcoming these urges is to refuse to participate in consumer society literally and symbolically. He writes, "to suffer from boredom means that one cannot produce the text, play it, open it out make it go" ("From Work to Text" 80). Barthes thus traces the possibility of boredom to our ideological conception of reading and resituates its possibility in a lack of non-ideological "reading" skill on the part of the reader. Once one knows how to "read" properly in the Barthesian sense, any boredom must be attributed to the reader himself. The boredom is the result of a failure to execute rather the exhaustion of a finite commodity's use-value. The solution is not to replace the text, as corporate strategies of designed obsolescence would advocate, but instead to engage in a creative process of renewing and expanding it.

The vast majority of commercial continuity cinema epitomizes the readerly text. While the reader is free to interpret the final meaning of the narrative within a reasonable range, the rigid structure of a story with a causally linked beginning, middle, and end circumscribes meaning by reducing it a handful of determining signifiers. One does not generate meanings but rather as Barthes notes, accepts or denies them; we are given a choice to argue for a fairly limited range of signifieds, but rarely the possibility to question the text on the level of its signifiers (*S/Z* 4). The classical continuity film controls its use-value by insisting on the text's value as contained within a single "ultimate signified" (*S/Z* 165). Furthermore, the dominant cinema circumscribes much of the work of generating meaning through editing techniques that reduce the relationships between scenes to simple pre-interpreted conventions. While one might argue that a viewer's synthesis of these editing conventions constitutes an interpretation and a process of meaning production itself, I would argue that this is not quite the case. While a meaning-making process certainly takes place, the dominant and hegemonic meanings of the editing conventions create a scenario where, while meaning must be arrived at, it is invariably circumscribed.

It is exactly the *modus operandi* of classical continuity cinema to establish a hierarchy within each frame in order to draw the viewer's attention to the narratively significant information at the expense of other details. Such a practice is an important characteristic of what Noel Burch calls commercial cinema's "Institutionalized Mode of Representation" (IMR), characterized by "linearization of the iconographic signifier" in which each shot is "governed by a single signifier, so that each frame would be immediately decipherable. . . at first viewing" (82). Through a combination of such

techniques along with closer shots and faster cutting rather than a static long shot emulating an audience's view of the theater stage, classical continuity cinema evolved to transmit a classical narrative as simply and as clearly as possible. Yet the transition from the *tableau* of what Burch calls primitive cinema with its absence of "indexes of individualization-differentiation" to a highly controlled, formal *mise-en-scene* that directed the viewer's gaze, came at the expense of minimizing non-linear possibilities for meaning contained within a single frame (82).

In this regard, the IMR discourages attention to the minute details on which Barthes and the Surrealists based their methods. Yet, if the cultural hegemony of Aristotelian narrative as a vehicle for meaning sustains the dominance of continuity editing, it is perhaps somewhat ironic that the motion picture, itself comprised of thousands of still, synchronic images, has been reduced to conveying meaning diachronically. Indeed, one can read in the IMR a metaphorical imprisonment of the photographic image's ontological potential. Thus, while it is in the interest of commercial film to be readerly, the ontology of the photographic image of which it is comprised is intrinsically well suited to be produced in the Barthesian sense as writerly (by the viewer as writer). While it would be an oversimplification to suggest that classical narrative cinema reflects capitalist ideology and the still image liberates it, I do propose that both Barthes and the Surrealists were able to gain some important insights by exploiting the openings found in the isolated still shot.

I take as a mildly humorous but significant example of continuity cinema's powerful ideological sway, an IMDB user review of Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart*, a film that uses rearranged footage from a Hollywood studio film *East of Borneo* to create an

entirely new film with a totally different storyline. Quickly considered part of the Surrealist canon, we might see this film as a material enactment of the Surrealist game of Irrational Enlargement. The review:

> I hate to pan a film that has been selected for placement on the National Film Registry, and I must confess my distaste for avant-garde films in general, which perhaps biased me towards a pan. But I got nothing from this film and couldn't wait for it to end. What did Joseph Cornell do to merit any praise? None of the images were his. He re-edited portions of the film East of Borneo (1931) destroying any semblance of story. He projected it through blue-tinted glass. And he selected some samba music as background, again not his (although it's the best part of the movie). The result is a mishmash of meaningless images unconnected to itself or to the music. As bad as the movie East of Borneo was, I'd rather watch it than sit through this one again. (imdb.com)

I read the review as providing some preliminary, admittedly anecdotal evidence that the IMR or any dominant system wields significant power over our own thinking about what we can find both meaningful and pleasurable. The reviewer's assertion that the movie is "meaningless" reflects the ideological conception that meaning is to be manifestly evident, always provided rather than made or deduced. Furthermore, the only legitimate vehicle of this meaning must be conveyed in the form of a causal Aristotelian narrative of beginning, middle, and end ("destroying any semblance of story"). The commercial film conditions the average viewer to reject the avant-garde, a loosely defined genre that only exists in its otherness to the dominant form. The dominance of Hollywood film and its continuity system renders other film forms, and in turn other modes and possibilities of thought, impenetrable to the typical viewer. In that Cornell has not played by the ideological rules of the cinema, his film, for many viewers under the spell of that ideology, cannot possibly mean anything.

This attempt to "solve" a film, as Barthes points out with his methodology, reflects the powerful stranglehold of the IMR. Even for the most plainly irrational films, modern

audiences are conditioned by the dominance of continuity cinema to demand a rational explanation. In an odd but ultimately logical twist, the mere fact of its irresolvable ending may be what makes films by, for instance, David Lynch marketable in the first place. The novelty of a film that so outrageously defies the ideology of mass culture can capitalize (literally) on its novelty by the sensationalism its appearance garners. In a similar sense, one might argue that the success of the 2007 film *Paranormal Activity* achieved a similar effect, grossing nearly two hundred million dollars internationally, perhaps mostly based on the buzz that was created by the knowledge that it cost only three hundred and fifty thousand dollars to produce. In contrast to the commercial films that the Surrealists used their techniques on to in effect *surrealize*, one could argue that several Lynch films, for instance, demand a logic of interpretation not necessarily rooted in rationality. Lynch makes films that often defy (or rather set aside) logic and often renounce the convention of a rational ending that concludes a problem or enigma introduced earlier in the film. Indeed, he has often been considered a Surrealist filmmaker by critics. In terms of Caillois' game framework, Lynch is a director who refuses to play by the rules: "The game is ruined by the nihilist who denounces the rules as absurd and conventional, who refuses to play because the game is meaningless" (7). Likewise, for those whom boredom or anger does not repel from Lynch films, a common ideologically inflected response is to flatly reject the possibility that a film does not follow a rational logic and attempt to impose it externally.

As opposed to the system of continuity editing where one's mind works to fill in gaps to produce a relatively stable meaning (repeating intercut shots of a train coming from two different directions asks us to realize that they are on track to collide head-on),

non-continuous editing styles such as montage ensure that to a much greater extent meaning is produced by the viewer rather than simply with their complicity. This is not to suggest that the continuity system played any active role in eliminating the possibility of other forms. One might argue that it was the discovery of continuity editing that allowed the motion picture to become as ubiquitous as it did. But it does mean that a consistent system that could repeatedly produce coherent narrative surely foreclosed the popularity of other less straightforward forms. The prevalence of narrative film and the neatly packaged sets of meaning it offers often come to preclude a general audience's willingness to conceive of a conceptual framework for film that communicates meaning through less intuitive systems that might demand a more active participation of the viewer. In other words, while I am not interested to argue that the dominance of continuity film leads to the atrophy of the mental muscle required to interpret other film forms, the utter dominance of one set of editing conventions can condition viewers to discount other forms as alien. The dominance of the IMR makes it difficult for viewers to conceive of other possible modes. As a result, films that reject or even simply refuse to foreground non-reversible codes are rarely commercially viable. Thus while it is certainly possible for films to pose interesting or challenging questions and also turn a profit, they rarely stray very far from the conventions of classical continuity cinema. Some filmmakers find a niche working on the margins of the commercial industry, making films that deviate from the IMR in small ways.

The move to creatively rewrite texts attains an even greater complexity and significance when one considers as texts the classical continuity films of Hollywood and modern international film markets, in which the link between the way we read a text and

meanings we derive from it becomes especially crucial. If to read the readerly text composed by an individual author is to accept to some degree the author's monopoly over meaning, how do the stakes change when considering different kinds of texts? In the case of the commercial film one finds an extra layer of complexity; in addition to whatever content the text may offer it also serves as a document of commodity culture. In contrast to texts authored by an individual, where a varying but relatively limited set of factors intervene between author and reader (editor, publisher, etc.), a commercial film epitomizes art as commodity, invariably reflecting the factors of its production. Just as a commercial film is the product of hundreds of minds rather than one, the film is also single-minded in its highest priority: whatever its political, social, or artistic aspirations, commercial film always functions within a capitalist framework.

Despite a newly globalized and diversified global media culture, Hollywood film still has an immense power to reach audiences. The billions of dollars worth of box office receipts each year do not account for massive DVD black markets and other means of viewing including Netflix, television syndication, and streaming delivery services. Not only does the profit motive still effectively circumscribe the kinds and depths of meanings that popular films can transmit, but these meanings now circulate on an international level to an audience subject to ideologies that are now globalized. The ability to exploit elements that seem insignificant to the Aristotelian narrative provides one method for breaking the ideological contract and becoming the active reader of *S/Z*. In explicitly ignoring or de-privileging the non-reversible codes and instead searching for openings anywhere in the film, the viewer strips the narrative structure of the film of its import in favor of what commercial film would like to devalue as tangential and

inconsequential. While it is certainly possible as a reader of literature to valorize less significant details precisely as Barthes does in *S/Z*, the peculiar medium of film makes it especially conducive to this kind of activity. Barthes and the Surrealists both speak of the photograph's uncanny realism; the reproduction of an object as a photograph transforms it without altering its representation in a sense that eludes objective description. On the other hand, traditional arts such as painting and drawing transform an object in the process of representing it. Furthermore, If in representational fiction, every word or sentence (or shot or scene) is consciously selected, the construction of a shot or scene in film is subject to an entirely different set of variables. Even with highly formal *mise-en-scene*, film, distinct from writing and painting, is always subject to the accidental or unaccounted for, both in terms of the factors that go into its production and what is captured in each individual shot or scene itself. In the context of Surrealist games or an *S/Z* style reading, each of these details, accidents, or happenstances, no matter how minute or prominent, may come to constitute raw material for subversive readings. Despite editing techniques that seek to direct a viewer's attention to significant points in a shot, the Surrealists' saw the photograph as containing an inherent imprecision less often found in traditional artistic mediums. Beyond the role of the accidental in photography, the results of technological limitations, financial considerations, and artistic choice are intertwined and confounded in a much different sense than the traditional arts centered on the creative individual.

Barthes and the Surrealists' methods also serve to assert their agency in the context of a rationalized mass consumer society that saw them as an indistinct and uniform group of consumers rather than creative individuals. *S/Z* teaches us how again,

to alleviate the boredom that models of consumptions condition in us: “The reduction of reading to consumption is obviously responsible for the ‘boredom’ that many people feel when confronting the modern (‘un-readable’) text, or the avant-garde movie or painting: to suffer from boredom means that one cannot produce the text, play it, open it out, make it go” (“From Work to Text” 80). By reclaiming for the reader complete control over the terms on which we engage with the text, Barthes’ methodology wrests control of boredom from the producer.

In the case of the Surrealists, their methods, almost always foregrounding the producer as the locus of meaning, also respond to practical considerations. If one reads the Surrealist games as a practical attempt to meaningfully respond to commercial film by employing the only means available to them that could possibly answer or rebut the film on equal terms (the film itself) and in an equally universal language, no form of written response or declaration could have at that time held the same cachet or reached as wide an audience as a commercial film did. Film could communicate to huge audiences, yet one could not talk back to the film. Furthermore, the capital required to make and distribute a film meant that it was usually impossible outside of a corporation. If the several films produced by Surrealists were offered as a counterpoint or counterargument to the continuity system of filmmaking, they were inherently disadvantaged in that they could neither achieve widespread distribution nor could they be reduced to a closed range of meanings like the continuity-driven commercial film could. While for the average viewer reading the Surrealist film required a new kind of logic of watching, on the other hand, in its use of the conventions of Aristotelian narrative, the commercial film conveyed meaning in a form that was recognized and

understood by everyone. If Surrealist film intended to be in dialogue with institutions and ideologies, only a limited audience of artists and intellectuals who closely followed the group's activities and their own writing about them (mostly themselves) could have been aware of it. Given the IMR, the isolated Surrealist film was like a new car without a key. While Surrealist-made films such as *L'Age D'or*, *Un Chien Andalou*, and others have generated an endless number of academic papers, they are seldom screened outside of academic and artistic circles; indeed, it is hard to imagine a warm reception from a general public inured to classical continuity cinema.

Yet the practices of the Surrealists reflect those of a group who were quite confident that their activities could have real ramifications. Barthes and the Surrealists faced the critical problem of finding pedagogical value in their methods. How does Surrealist activity come to "mean" anything beyond its seeming absurdity or irrationality? Jean Goudal entertains this question when he writes "People have had the habit for so long now of using a language to communicate with each other that one asks if they can ever renounce this kind of usage. In short, what we call reason is the part of our mind common to all men: if it is to disappear, will we not lapse into an individual, incommunicable mode of expression?" (86). In short, given the absurdity and intentional eschewal of reason, what could playing Surrealist games actually accomplish? I argue that only by actively and rationally theorizing their own activity could Surrealist practice attain the status of *praxis* rather than mere nonsense. By using rational frameworks to document and explain the purpose they were working toward and how each game functioned in this scheme, the Surrealists did submit their research to "the control of reason" ("Manifesto of Surrealism"). Had Breton and company had no overarching

vision or purpose, their absurd research methods would have been, indeed, only absurd. But in understanding the critical necessity of theorizing their own methods, the Surrealist group established a model for critiquing dominant ideologies without having to depend on the thought and language of those same ideologies, a dependence which would have preemptively rendered any such criticism null. In this sense, the Surrealists, in their methodological reflexivity, shared many similarities with practitioners of contemporary literary theory. Paul de Man summarizes what he views as the essence of literary theory:

> Literary theory can be said to come into being when the approach to literary texts is no longer based on non-linguistic, that is to say historical and aesthetic, considerations or, to put it somewhat less crudely, when the object of discussion is no longer the meaning of the value but the modalities of production and of reception of meaning prior to their establishment – the implication being that the establishment is problematic enough to require an autonomous discipline of critical investigation. (7)

Thus, although it manifested itself in a turn to structural linguistics, the turn to theory in literary criticism would seem to follow many of the same critical impulses that spurred the Surrealists to action. How can we act meaningfully in a hyper-rationalized consumer culture in a way in which our research, our effort, can function to critique the system under which it is conducted, and which won't simply be assimilated as merely one more commodity in this system itself?

CHAPTER 3
CONCLUDING REMARKS

Why would the university as an institution be interested in a Surrealist form of critique? Why is the oft-criticized kind of theoretical approach to literary criticism worthwhile or even necessary? In order to make an informed and responsible critique one must recognize one's own position of enunciation within a set of social and ideological structures and how these structures help to unconsciously determine the very way we are prone to do criticism. In an article written during the height of structuralism in film studies, Dudley Andréw rails against the turn to theory in academic film studies by way of praising, for all intents and purposes, its philosophical anti-thesis: "By according limitless value to experience and by granting all life processes an unquestioned respect, phenomenology seeks to put reason and language at the service of life or at least of human experience. If life and reality lie beyond human experience or our consciousness of it, as certain recent structuralists have avowed, then let's forget it anyway" (125). To the contrary, what the Surrealists hypothesized and Barthes continued to develop is the thought that the lived experience Andréw champions is inextricably bound to the ideologies he discounts. By limiting discussion to film as it is experienced phenomenologically, one accepts the social and political conditions behind such phenomenological reception as natural and immutable, and forecloses the possibility of changing them for the better. Putting aside theory in this way, whether it be out of laziness or conservatism is not a neutral move, an innocent shift of focus, but a thoroughly anti-intellectual move; it is the practice of a criticism that is unwilling or uninterested in the social and political implications of its own practice.

To the contrary, the Surrealists and Barthes, in their interest in the methodology of their critique as much as the critique itself, demonstrated that active critique and its theorization could function as a form of agency; only when one can conceive of conditions as mutable, encompassing forces that can and are manipulated and appropriated by powerful institutions and interests can one meaningfully act. In a claim that, if accepted, should serve as one of the fundamental reminders of the necessity for cultural critique conducted from the outside of prevailing ideologies, Nietzsche posits the concept of a natural or organic essence as Western culture's greatest myth:

> there is a world of difference between the reason for something coming into existence in the first place and the ultimate use to which it is put, its actual application and integration into a system of goals. . . . everything which happens in the organic world is part of a process of overpowering, mastering, and that, in turn, all overpowering and mastering is a reinterpretation, a manipulation, in the course of which the previous 'meaning' and 'aim' must necessarily be obscured or politically effaced. (57-58)

By thinking ideology through the context of one of the most culturally prevalent and, in its uncanny realism, insidious and ideologically powerful entertainment institutions, one finds an ideal platform to distinguish and thus open to criticism the ideologies that influence not only both the production and our reception of film but much of the way we experience our own day to day lives. If the Surrealists simulated a utopian "outside" of enlightenment rationality via systematized unreason, the university, as several critics have argued, might stand as the permanent "outside."

If the Surrealists synthesized out of the material and intellectual culture of the 20th century the means to think its outside, how and where might this process be carried out *in perpetuam*? The university has been one site for building on the legacy of Surrealist praxis, but not without resistance. In *The University in Ruins*, Bill Readings argues that

the university, once functioning as the inculcator of culture within the nation-state (primarily he contends, through literature departments), has been subsumed by consumer culture. Without the task of diffusing a national culture, literary studies becomes one more field of professionalization. “Once the link between literary study and the formation of the model citizen has been broken, then literature emerges as one field of knowledge among others. The canon therefore gradually comes to function as the arbitrary delimitation of a field of knowledge (an archive) rather than as the vessel that houses the vital principle of the national spirit” (86). It is in this context of the end of nationalism as a dominant global ideology that we encounter the contemporary crisis of humanities departments in defining and legitimating a consistent object of study. If globalized multi-national corporatism has co-opted the university as merely another arm of capitalism, the corporatization of the university simultaneously ensures that there is no real culture for the nation-state left to inculcate. All culture is instead consumer culture. Yet in contrast to common conservative arguments, the death of the university’s role as inculcator of a national culture has freed it to pursue new and far more worthwhile pursuits. If the subsuming of the university at large by capitalism is complete, many progressive humanities departments now function as safe havens to critique not only themselves but all dominant institutions from within. Post-Colonialism, Gender Studies, and other forms of Cultural Studies, far from symbolizing a floundering discipline without a mission, signify not a demise of the vaunted mission of Humanities departments but a self-critique from within.

In a *New York Times* column by Stanley Fish from last year called “What Should Colleges Teach?” he writes, “As I learned more about the world of composition studies,

I came to the conclusion that unless writing courses focus exclusively on writing they are a sham, and I advised administrators to insist that all courses listed as courses in composition teach grammar and rhetoric and nothing else." If teaching grammar and the structures of a well-made sentence may teach students to write "well" they do so only within an inherently ideological system. Fish's grounding of his argument on a purely practical level makes some sense, if the university's only goal is to manufacture a student who can upon graduating go out into the world to fulfill the demands of the capitalist workplace. But if we should strive for an education system that provides an engaged citizenry, as has been held as a consistent ideal since the inception of the modern university, it is our duty especially as humanists to make students aware that this education itself functions within a system that is historically and culturally determined and that has very real implications. Willing participation in any politico-economic system is only truly conceivable if one is awakened to the fact of their existence within said system as well as the possibility of alternatives. Doing so would ideally lead to a heightened personal awareness of the world as it is and what it can be or what it might have been, and thus to avoid the learned helplessness that comes with accepting one's conditions of existence as simply "the way it is." In an article mourning Jacques Derrida, Drucilla Cornell speculates about the backlash against Derrida and his deconstructionist critique: "Perhaps, it is precisely because Derrida dared to insist on a future, to insist, indeed, that there can always be a future despite efforts to shut it down in the name of a world historical closure as the advent of a certain market capitalism that cannot be challenged." It is in this spirit that it must remain the role and responsibility of the Humanities to think itself and the university at large, and in doing so

hold the door to the future open despite the hyper-rationalized market logic of consumer society that systematically dictates and indeed necessitates that the future always be closed, circumscribed by market rationale (a rationale that has evolved as far as to assign a monetary value to human life). In this context, the continuing attacks on Humanities education, and the mentalities that give rise to these attacks represent a continuing and grave threat, the consequences of which we cannot afford to leave untheorized.

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