



# THE MIDWAY REVIEW

A JOURNAL OF POLITICS AND CULTURE

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**HYDE PARK ADVERTORIALS, BY BOBBY ZACHARIAS**

# THE MIDWAY REVIEW

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# THE LIMITS OF PROGRESS IN FILMS BY SIRK, FASSBINDER AND HAYNES

Nicholas Baer

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*Far From Heaven* (USA, 2002), Todd Haynes's homage to Douglas Sirk's 1950s melodramas, has been received in two major ways by film critics. Some critics have wondered "why, in any case, an imitation Sirk was needed, what appetite or interest it might fill" (Kauffmann 2002, 20). These critics have suggested that Haynes's film has neither a political project nor an aesthetic *raison d'être*. Other critics have argued that Haynes's film represents "a movie Douglas Sirk might have made in 1958—if, that is, Universal Studios had been prepared to release a movie bearing on homosexuality, interracial romance, and the civil rights movement" (O'Brien 2002, 1). These critics have cited Haynes's ability to address "taboo" subjects like homosexuality and interracial romance as an indication that American society has "progressed" in its sensitivity to matters of race, gender, and sexuality since the social rights movements of the 1960s.

In this essay, I will claim that *Far From Heaven* is not an apolitical film, and I will contend that Haynes's political project is not that of celebrating the "progress" made in American society since the 1950s. I will argue that *Far From Heaven* both issues a critique of oppressive elements of Sirk's era and suggests that these elements remain persistent within Haynes's own historical moment. In order to substantiate this argument, I will place *Far From Heaven* within an aesthetic trajectory that includes *All That Heaven Allows* (USA, 1955), the Sirk film that Haynes' film most directly references, and *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (Germany, 1974), Rainer Werner Fassbinder's loose remake of the aforementioned Sirk film.

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*Nicholas Baer is a fourth-year in the College, majoring in Cinema and Media Studies.*

*All That Heaven Allows* is one of the many melodramas that the German émigré filmmaker Sirk directed for Universal International during the 1950s. A follow-up to the popular *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), *All That Heaven Allows* charts the obstacles faced by Cary Scott (Jane Wyman), a middle-class widow with two college-age children, as she enters into a relationship with Ron Kirby (Rock Hudson), her young, working-class gardener. The film's temporal setting is contemporaneous with its release date (1955), and its physical setting is the fictional town of Stoningham, New York.

In *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, Fassbinder maintains the basic narrative of Sirk's film—a widow enters into a relationship with a younger man, much to the consternation of her children and friends—but he changes many of the narrative's details: he increases the age difference between the woman and the man, and he differentiates the two along lines of race rather than class. In Fassbinder's film, Emmi Kurowski (Brigitte Mira), a working-class cleaning woman of German descent who is the widow of a Polish man, marries Ali (El Hedi ben Salem), a Moroccan car mechanic who has immigrated to Germany as a *Gastarbeiter* (guest worker). Like the temporal setting of Sirk's film, the temporal setting of Fassbinder's film is contemporaneous with its release date (1974). Fassbinder sets his film not in small-town New England, but in Munich. Furthermore, unlike Sirk, Fassbinder both wrote and directed *Ali*, and he made the film outside of the studio system.

In *Far From Heaven*, Haynes also maintains key elements of the narrative of *All That Heaven Allows* while changing many of its details. Like Cary in *All That Heaven Allows*, *Far From*

Heaven's protagonist is a middle-class woman who begins a relationship with her gardener, much to the dismay of her family members and friends. However, the woman, Cathy Whitaker (Julianne Moore), is here married rather than widowed, her two children are in grade school rather than in college, and she is roughly the same age as her gardener, Raymond Deagan (Dennis Haysbert). Haynes takes over the aspect of racial difference from Fassbinder's film, differentiating the woman and the gardener on the basis of race rather than class; here, the gardener is an African-American widower with a young daughter. Furthermore, in Haynes' film, the woman's husband, Frank (Dennis Quaid), turns out to be homosexual (a reference to Rock Hudson, the actor in Sirk's film whose homosexuality was revealed in 1985). Unlike Sirk and Fassbinder's films, Haynes's film has a historical rather than a contemporaneous setting; the film takes place in 1957. Like Sirk's film, however, Haynes's film occurs in suburban New England—here, Hartford, Connecticut. Finally, like Fassbinder, Haynes wrote his film's script, and he worked outside of the Hollywood studio system while making the film; Haynes distributed the film in the United States through Focus Features, a subsidiary of Universal.

While the three films are set and were made within particular sociohistorical contexts, I would argue that the films are not just concerned with a particular society and historical moment; the films also engage with issues of modernity. Indeed, the films uphold the emancipatory promise of modernity, but they also identify the ways in which modern societies (i.e. post-World War II urban/suburban spaces in the United States and Germany) do not live up to this promise. The films highlight the discrepancies between their female protagonists' utopian sense of what should be possible and the actual conditions and circumstances in which the women find themselves, and the films elicit pathos by depicting the manner in which the women take seriously the ideals of modernity even as such ideals are negated in practice. The films' political projects are twofold: first, the films denounce the fact that modern societ-

ies fail to live up to their ideals, one of which is the utopian promise of love across boundaries of age, class, and race. Second, the films issue critiques of the ideology of progress, which works to conceal the inert and pathological aspects of modernity—aspects which include social marginalization along lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality, as well as constraining social roles, conventions, and ideologies. I will argue that, when placed within an aesthetic trajectory, the films can be seen both individually and collectively as critiques of the notion of social progress. Indeed, not only do Sirk, Fassbinder, and Haynes convey a sense of stasis, entrapment, and irresolution at the end of their respective films, but Fassbinder and Haynes also self-reflexively refer back to the earlier film(s) as a way of dispelling a facile belief in social progress within and across the films' narratives.

In order to identify the ways in which the films engage with issues of modernity, I will examine the films' closing scenes—scenes in which the films' female protagonists attempt to escape from their oppressive conditions and to express or consummate their desire for their romantic partners. In the process of identifying that which prevents the women both from escaping from their oppressive conditions and from realizing their desire, the films spotlight the oppressive forces that operate within the women's societies. By examining the three films in chronological order, I will track the claims to (or commentary on) social progress within and across the three films. Furthermore, since Fassbinder and Haynes's films respond to the precursor film(s) as a means of putting into question the notion of social progress across the films' narratives, formal analysis of these scenes will be helpful in allowing me to find and note subtle but crucial inter-filmic references.

### *All That Heaven Allows*

I will first examine the final scene of *All That Heaven Allows*—a scene in which Cary reunites with Ron after separating from him due to pressure from her children and friends. In scenes prior to the final one, Cary's doctor, Dr. Hennessy, attributes the headaches that Cary is experiencing

to her loneliness; he urges her to restart her relationship with Ron, despite the social pressures that she faces. When Cary drives to Ron's old mill (his place of residence in the countryside), she does not see him. As Ron unsuccessfully seeks to capture Cary's attention, he falls off a steep hill and suffers a concussion. In the final scene, Cary, having heard about Ron's injury from Alida Anderson, travels to his old mill to help him recover, as well as to recommit herself both to him and to his rural mode of life. Sirk undermines this ostensibly happy ending in three ways: he indicates that a modern medical discourse mediates and facilitates Cary's reconciliation with Ron, he questions Cary's ability to move beyond the role of mother and care-giver, and he casts doubt on the possibility for change and progress within his film's characters and their situations. In this scene, Sirk emphasizes that Cary's attempts to reconnect with Ron are hindered by a modern medical discourse. The camera pans right to follow Cary as she enters the old mill and approaches the couch on which Ron lies unconscious, but the camera stops as a nurse enters the frame and literally comes between Cary and Ron. Sirk communicates a sense of confrontation between the two women through a medium shot in which their profiles face the camera. After the nurse tells Cary that "We don't know anything yet" about Ron's condition, the camera pans right as Cary moves towards Ron, and it once again stops as the nurse positions herself between them. In contradistinction to the two rightward panning shots in which the camera followed Cary, the camera pans left to follow the nurse as she moves across the mill, thereby articulating the nurse's position of power over her. Sirk characterizes the old mill as a doctor's office, with the nurse monitoring the space and Dr. Hennessy using Ron's desk. Indeed, at the film's conclusion, the presence of the nurse, the doctor, and Alida Anderson within the old mill emphasizes that it is less of a private idyll than a public medical office. Ron's final line of dialogue to Cary, "You've come home," is ironic not only because their "home" is now a non-private space, but also because Cary's reconciliation with Ron – an apparent sign of her flight from modern society – is in fact mediated

and even facilitated by a modern medical discourse.

Sirk also identifies patriarchal dynamics that persist even outside of Cary's oppressive society. Though Sirk uses the aforementioned camera movements to articulate the power dynamics between Cary and the nurse, he emphasizes that such dynamics are both centered on Cary's access to Ron and contingent upon Dr. Hennessy's medical advice. A low camera angle designates reverence for Dr. Hennessy as he offers Cary wisdom and advice regarding Ron's condition: "He's got a concussion. He shouldn't be moved... It's going to take time for him to recover... He'll need rest and care. And he'll need you, Cary." After the aforementioned shots in which the camera follows Cary and the nurse, the camera pans left as Dr. Hennessy moves across the mill with the nurse trailing behind him; it thereby designates his position of authority over both women. Later in the scene, the camera pans right and then left to follow Cary as she walks around the couch on which Ron lies and as she kneels down in front of him. Though this camera movement would seem to articulate Cary's degree of agency, it in fact facilitates a shot composition in which Cary is in a suppliant position to Ron. Indeed, after six consecutive shots in which Cary and Ron occupy separate frames, the film's final shot unites them within the same frame. However, in this final shot, Cary is kneeling in front of Ron and holding his hand, offering him her unwavering care and devotion. Through this shot composition, Sirk draws parallels between Cary and Ron's relationship and that of Dr. Hennessy and the nurse in terms of their traditional patriarchal power dynamics.

Finally, Sirk highlights points of implausibility, irony, and logical contradiction in the narrative; in so doing, he casts doubt on characters' capacity for change, as well as on the causes and speed thereof. The *mise en scène* articulates the implausibility of Ron's change of character. While Ron's mill was an eerie, inoperative space earlier in the film, it is now refurbished, domesticated, and modernized, with polished wood floors, rugs, pieces of furniture, electrical sources of light,

and bookshelves. Additionally, the mill's staircase is now on a different side of the mill than it was previously. While Sirk questions the possibility for characters' change through such points of implausibility, he also reveals change to be the product of characters' illnesses and injuries. Alida Anderson reminds Cary and the viewer that she and her husband, Mick, adopted a different mode of life only after Mick's injury in the Korean War. Furthermore, just as Cary sought to reconcile with Ron upon realizing that her loneliness was causing her headaches, she reunites with Ron after learning of his debilitating injury. Not only does Sirk question characters' capacity for change and the causes thereof, but he also casts doubt on the possibility of quick or abrupt change. Indeed, Sirk undermines the apparent "happy ending" of his film by creating an unresolved dialectic between notions of patience and abruptness. While Dr. Hennessy, Alida, and the nurse's dialogue identifies that "it's going to take time for [Ron] to recover" and that change "doesn't happen overnight," change occurs quite literally overnight in the film's final scene. A dissolve from a shot of Cary as she sits at Ron's bedside to a shot of a grandfather clock striking 8 a.m. facilitates an elision of the viewer's own waiting time. Furthermore, in the film's final shot, no sooner are Cary and Ron united within a medium close-up than does the camera abruptly tilt and track up to the window above them, though which the viewer sees a deer run offscreen and the words "The End" appear. By contradicting the notion of patience with such a dissolve and abrupt camera movement, Sirk both marks the ending as kitsch and subverts the logic that underlies the narrative's resolution.

### *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*

I will now turn my attention to the final two scenes of Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. In the scenes preceding the two final ones, Emmi finds ostensible acceptance from her children, neighbors, and co-workers in Munich, and she becomes less sensitive to Ali's situation. Ali, in turn, drinks and gambles with his Arab friends at the Asphalt Bar (a space in Munich populated by *Gastarbeiter*), and he goes to the apartment of Barbara (the Bar's

bartender) for couscous and sex. In the penultimate scene of the film, Emmi enters the Asphalt Bar (as she did in the film's first scene), where Ali and his friends are listening to Arab music, drinking, and gambling. Emmi orders a cola from Barbara and requests the song "Du Schwarzer Zigeuner" ("You Black Gypsy") on the Bar's jukebox. Emmi and Ali reconcile while dancing to this song. However, much as Ron suffers from an injury when Cary seeks to reunite with him, Ali collapses to the floor midway through the song. In the film's final scene, Emmi (like Cary) speaks with a doctor about Ali's condition, and she sits at Ali's bedside. In these two scenes, Fassbinder suggests that industrial capitalism, institutionalized racism, and troublesome cultural traditions are pervasive and inescapable. Furthermore, he emphasizes that Emmi's fate is subject not to notions of love and mutual strength, but rather to a harsh everyday reality. Finally, he identifies the stasis and circularity that typify Emmi's condition.

In the film's penultimate scene, Fassbinder demonstrates that industrial capitalism, institutionalized racism, and troublesome cultural traditions not only mediate interpersonal interactions in the Asphalt Bar, but also provoke them. For instance, a deep composition allows two capitalist exchanges to occur simultaneously within one shot; Ali and two other men gamble in the foreground and center of the frame, and Emmi orders a coke in the background. Emmi's drink order ("A cola, please") and her jukebox request ("the gypsy record") exemplify the influence and output of industrial capitalism; however, they also serve as means through which she can interact with other individuals in the Bar. Likewise, another deep composition showcases the racial dynamics in the Bar. Within one frame, Barbara stands next to the jukebox in the foreground, Ali and his buddies sit in the center, and Emmi sits in the background. During the course of this shot, Barbara stops the Arab music heard up to this point and plays "Du Schwarzer Zigeuner," and Emmi and the Arab men stare at one another. A medium framing distance allows gypsy tapestry to occupy almost one-fourth of the frame

as Ali approaches Emmi and asks her to dance. Though the gypsy music and tapestry represent the troubled cultural history from which Emmi and Ali cannot escape, the music and tapestry also both express the couple's shared desire for utopian escape and facilitate the couple's reconciliation.

Fassbinder also demonstrates the effects of an oppressive society not only on individuals such as Ali, but also on *Gastarbeiter* more generally. Emmi's dialogue, in counterpoint to the action it precedes, represents the futility of notions of love and mutual strength within an indifferent everyday reality. After Emmi and Ali reestablish their common love for one another, and after Emmi states, "Together we're strong," Ali collapses to the floor and groans in pain. Similarly, the diegetic music from the jukebox serves in counterpoint to the action and sounds that it accompanies. "Du Schwarzer Zigeuner" continues to play in the five shots in which Ali groans in pain; it is connected to the aforementioned systems, institutions, and traditions, and it thereby identifies the effects of an oppressive society on individuals and their bodies. Indeed, at the hospital (in contrast to the old mill, which serves as the place of Ron's recovery), the presence of three other occupied beds behind that of Ali emphasizes the impersonal nature of the hospital, as well as the commonness of Ali's condition. Emmi's dialogue exchange with the doctor reveals that Ali's situation is far from uncommon, and it reflects the hopeless condition of *Gastarbeiter* in Germany:

Doctor: He has a perforated stomach ulcer. It happens a lot with foreign workers. It's the stress. And there's not much we can do. We're not allowed to send them to convalesce. We can only operate. And six months later they have another ulcer.

Emmi: And him?

Doctor: Oh, he'll recover. But he'll be back here again in six months.

Emmi: No he won't. I'll do everything in my power—

Doctor: Well, the best of luck, anyway.

This dialogue exchange quickly shifts focus from Ali ("He") to *Gastarbeiter* ("foreign workers") more generally; indeed, the doctor barely looks at Emmi as he offers her his diagnosis of Ali, and he shows little interest in Ali's specific situation. The exchange thus demonstrates that notions of fate ("The best of luck") and love ("I'll do everything in my power") are futile within the context of a harsh, indifferent everyday reality.

Finally, Fassbinder emphasizes that Emmi is both confined to a limiting milieu and unable to find a degree of catharsis and resolution. Fassbinder draws parallels between the hospital and the Asphalt Bar in order to convey Emmi's state of spatial confinement—her inability to break out of oppressive, limiting spaces and into an alternative, liberating milieu. Just as an extreme-long shot served as the first shot of the film's first scene (as well as the first shot of the preceding scene in the Asphalt Bar), an extreme-long framing distance depicts Emmi and the doctor standing in front of the door of Ali's hospital room. Likewise, the composition of Emmi and the doctor, standing still and staring forward at Ali, recalls the tableau-like quality of the earlier shots at the Asphalt Bar. Additionally, four hospital beds within the frame seem to stand in place of the four tables at the Bar. Finally, a tracking camera movement isolates Ali in the frame, just as it did in the fourth shot of the film's first scene. However, though Ali previously stood at the bar, he now lies unconscious in a hospital bed. Furthermore, the lack of color within the *mise en scène* and the absence of diegetic music differentiate the hospital from the Bar; white walls and silence now replace gypsy tapestry and music, respectively. In the film's final shot, Peer Raben's non-diegetic theme music, "Die kleine Liebe" ("The Small Love"), fails to provide the viewer with a sense of catharsis—much unlike the high affect of conventional melodramatic music, such as Frank Skinner's score for *All That Heaven Allows*. Though this non-diegetic music supports Emmi's sobs for the first time in the film, the music itself is directionless and unresolved. Furthermore, Fassbinder frames Emmi in front of a frosted window (in place of the large

window at Ron's old mill, which provides access to an illusory, idealized natural world) to symbolize her sense of confinement within interiors – and, by extension, within her oppressive milieu; Emmi looks left at the window, but fails to see the exterior world. Finally, a fade to black ends the film in medias res (in contrast to the words “The End,” which conclusively denote the conclusion of Sirk's film), with Ali still lying unconscious (cf. Ron, who regains consciousness in *All That Heaven Allows'* final scene), and it thus demonstrates that Emmi's situation remains unresolved and hopeless. By ending the film in this manner, Fassbinder dispels a notion of progress in relation to Emmi's situation, and he highlights the elements of her condition that remain inert.

### *Far From Heaven*

I will now examine the final scene of *Far From Heaven*, in which Cathy, with her kids in tow, drives to the train station from which Raymond and his daughter will depart as they move to Baltimore. In this scene, Cathy waves goodbye to Raymond as his train leaves, leaves the station, enters her car, and drives up a steep street in Hartford. At this point in the film, Cathy has stopped spending time with Raymond, as her friend and husband have told her about vicious rumors circulating throughout town regarding their “relationship.” Furthermore, Cathy's husband has left the family, moved to New York, and begun a relationship with another man. Raymond's daughter has been physically assaulted by three of her white classmates, and Raymond has decided that he and his daughter will move to Baltimore to live with one of his family members. Throughout this final scene, Haynes creates a dialectic between motion and stasis to emphasize that Cathy is entrapped within her society, and he suggests that she exists in an era of limited options. While Haynes identifies that Cathy's era is one of limitations and constraints, he also questions notions of social progress and liberation.

By depicting Cathy in states of motion and stasis both within and across various shots in the final scene, Haynes demonstrates that she cannot per-

manently escape from her milieu. In six successive shots, Haynes shows Cathy moving towards the train station from which Raymond and his daughter are departing; Cathy runs to the entrance of the station, quickly comes down the station's steps, moves onto the boarding platform, briskly walks alongside the stationary train, and walks forward on the platform until she sees Raymond boarding the train. In these six shots, Cathy moves from running to standing still as she sees Raymond and realizes that their relationship is unfeasible. As Raymond's train departs, the camera, positioned on the train, becomes increasingly distant from Cathy; though the camera moves steadily, and though the contents of the frame change, Cathy remains stationary on the boarding platform. In the following shot, the movement both within the frame and of the camera signifies the conflicting forces that quite literally drive Cathy and Raymond apart. Within this shot, the train moves diagonally up and leftwards, and three other women on the platform walk diagonally down and both leftward and rightward. Furthermore, the camera tracks diagonally down and right, placing Cathy's hand within the same frame as that of Raymond as they wave a final goodbye to one another. In subsequent shots, as the train departs, and as other women walk off the boarding platform, Cathy remains the only person on the platform, as well as the only stationary element in the frame. When Cathy finally walks off the platform and towards her car, the camera is in a position similar to the one with which it earlier depicted Cathy running towards the station. The camera's position thus emphasizes that while Raymond is able to leave his milieu, Cathy begins and ends the scene in the same place.

In this scene, Haynes also contrasts the busy-ness of the capitalist society in which Cathy lives to the constraints therein. In the scene's first shot, the high height of the camera allows the viewer to see the clock at the top of the train station. The camera pans left and tracks down and in to street level, and it thereby depicts passing cars (including that of Cathy) and hurried pedestrians. The *mise en scène* is crowded with people in successive shots in which Cathy enters the train station and

looks for Raymond on the platform. Furthermore, the sounds of the train's engine and bell lend the scene a sense of urgency, with a possible last-minute reunion between Cathy and Raymond. Nevertheless, Haynes depicts Cathy's world as one of bland, muted colors, and thus of unfulfilled desires. The red color of Cathy's clothes (like that of Cary's dress in an early scene of Sirk's film) makes her conspicuous throughout the scene, particularly as she moves down asphalt sidewalks and paved streets, and as she passes men in beige, grey, and black suits. As Cathy and Raymond lock eyes at the train station, blue and yellow lights convey their forced detachment from one another. Furthermore, in the film's final shot, the cool, muted lighting signifies that Cathy is stuck within an era in which she cannot pursue her desires. Within this final shot, the camera increases in height to include a blossoming tree branch within the frame, indicating that a new season will soon arrive. Indeed, while Sirk's film is a quintessential "May-December" romance, Haynes' film includes hints of a forthcoming spring; Haynes thus extends the narrative trajectory of Sirk's film. Though the aforementioned tree branch would seem to provide hope not only for a new season, but also for a better future (by way of 1960s social movements), the non-diegetic music and the *mise en scène* undermine such a utopian wish. On the soundtrack, an unresolved dissonant piano chord, which plays after the branch appears onscreen, reminds the viewer of the struggles that Cathy will continue to face. Likewise, within the *mise en scène*, a steep road on which Cathy drives literalizes the "uphill battles" within her future. Indeed, just as Sirk creates a dialectic between notions of patience and abruptness, Haynes indicates that long-term temporal shifts, rather than mere spatial movements, are the markers of substantive change.

Finally, in this scene, Haynes demonstrates that Cathy, as well as the film in which she appears, is perpetually stuck within limiting roles, dynamics, and conventions. At the end of the film, Cathy (like Cary, but here more explicitly) is confined to the role of mother. Throughout the final scene, her children remain in her car, and she returns to

them at the film's close. Cathy's gender seems to be the cause of her immobility. While Frank and Raymond leave town for New York and Baltimore, respectively, at the end of the film, Cathy remains confined to her small town. Though Haynes identifies the ways in which Cathy is denied mobility, he reminds the viewer that Sybil (Cathy's African-American maid) is even more immobile than Cathy. An interaction between Cathy and Sybil in the scene preceding the final one demonstrates that Sybil is literally confined to the domestic sphere, unable to make even a futile attempt to pursue the object of her desire. Furthermore, Haynes identifies a class dynamic among African Americans by depicting an interaction between Raymond and a black train operator. Raymond's suit serves as a marker of his higher class standing than that of the uniformed train operator, who helps Raymond and his daughter with their luggage. The aforementioned blossoming tree branch does not offer hope for Cathy's future, since nature failed to provide Cathy with sustained relief earlier in the film. Though Haynes seems to present a hopeful vision in the film's final shot, he indicates that such hope exists within the confines of filmic conventions and genres; indeed, Haynes seems to indicate that the medium in which these characters are depicted is itself bound by unshakable generic conventions. Though the words "The End" (noticeably missing from the final scene of *Ali*) would seem to signify resolution at the film's close, their presentation in a stylized font that typifies Sirk's 1950s melodramas indicates that the oppressive forces within the diegesis of Sirk's films, as well as within the industry in which Sirk himself worked, are persistent.

Sirk, Fassbinder, and Haynes all deploy cinematic devices and techniques to demonstrate that their films' female protagonists are unable both to escape from their oppressive conditions and to realize their desires. In the scenes that I have analyzed from the films, the directors identify oppressive forces—marginalization along lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality; internalized social roles, conventions, and ideologies; an industrial capitalist economic system—that deny these characters the possibility of escape and ful-

fillment. While all three directors convey a sense of stasis, entrapment, and irresolution at the end of their films, Fassbinder and Haynes also self-reflexively refer back to the earlier film(s) as a way of dispelling a fictitious notion of social progress both within and across the films' narratives.

While I would argue that Sirk, Fassbinder, and Haynes identify common oppressive forces that prevent their characters both from escaping from their milieus and from realizing their desires, I certainly do not wish to ignore the films' significant differences in style, tone, and sociohistorical context. Indeed, as I have suggested, Fassbinder not only changes the setting of Sirk's film from 1950s New England to 1970s Munich, but he also inverts many of the melodramatic conventions to which Sirk adheres (albeit subversively). Furthermore, while Haynes retains the temporal and spatial setting of Sirk's film, he self-reflexively adopts the visual and aural idioms associated with Sirk's melodramas in order to both issue a critique of elements of Sirk's era and suggest that these elements remain persistent within Haynes' own historical moment.

In a recent book, Pamela Barnett comments on the way in which Haynes' film questions notions of social progress. According to Barnett, "Far From Heaven meditates on the meaning of the sixties, both its glories and its failures, and compels its viewers to do so as well" (Barnett 2004, 149). Barnett argues that Haynes' film contemplates the significance of the 1960s not by representing the decade itself, but by dually addressing both a "contemporary, material post-1960s audience" and "the fifties audience that necessarily haunts the Technicolor melodrama about social and sexual oppression and liberation in the fifties" (Barnett 2004, 149). Barnett concludes, "Haynes's dual address—to a spectral fifties' audience and to his contemporary post-1960s audience—suggests the persistence of the dreams and limits that characterized the intervening era of liberation" (Barnett 2004, 152). While Barnett emphasizes that "things have changed" since the 1950s, she argues that viewers' ability to identify with the characters in Haynes' film "suggests that desire

was and is still dangerous" (Barnett 2004, 152).

Barnett's text serves as an important corrective to the teleological, liberatory discourse that characterized a number of reviews of *Far From Heaven*. Some critics (e.g. Mike Clark of *USA Today*, Lawrence Toppman of the *Charlotte Observer*, William Arnold of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*) cited Haynes' ability to address "taboo" subjects like homosexuality and interracial romance as an indication that American society has "progressed" in its sensitivity to matters of race, gender, and sexuality since the social rights movements of the 1960s. As I have noted, however, whereas Sirk was working within the Hollywood studio system, Fassbinder and Haynes had independent sources of funding and were thus able to address more "taboo" subject matter—subject matter that film studios would likely avoid, regardless of decade. While, as Barnett argues, "We cannot mistake our own moment for the fifties—things have changed" (Barnett 2004, 152), it would nonetheless be a mistake to cite the relative explicitness with which Haynes's film addresses matters of race, gender, and sexuality as an indication of linear progress in terms of social equality in American society over the past half-century.

Moving beyond America to consider modernity more generally, I would argue that Sirk, Fassbinder, and Haynes's films are invested in the project of both identifying the inert and pathological aspects of modernity (e.g. social marginalization along lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality, as well as constraining social roles, conventions, and ideologies) and questioning the notion of progress. While each of the three films functions to depict and critique the constraints and oppressive forces at work in modern societies, each of the films is also a product of modernity; each of the films may thus be seen as what David Scott calls "a conscript—rather than a resisting agent—of modernity" (Scott 2004, 107). Rather than evoking a "longing for total revolution," the films adopt a more Foucauldian concept of power, emphasizing the "constitutive and therefore productively conditioning features of power" (Scott 2004, 107).

Indeed, the films are self-consciously marked by the constraints not only within the worlds that they depict, but also within the genres, eras, and countries in which their directors worked.

It bears noting, however, that all three of the directors were not compulsorily operating within generic constraints; instead, the three directors made conscious decisions to operate within the constraints of the melodramatic genre. As Thomas Elsaesser has noted, Sirk worked longer within the genre of melodrama than he needed to; furthermore, while he could have taken advantage of the financial success of *Imitation of Life* (1959) and made a film under conditions of creative freedom, he instead stopped making films in Hollywood altogether. Like Sirk, both Fassbinder and Haynes worked willingly within the constraints of the melodramatic genre, using or referencing visual and aural idioms associated with the genre within their films. While Fassbinder and Haynes operated outside of the Hollywood studio system while making *Ali* and *Far From Heaven*, respectively, they nevertheless made conscious decisions to work within the constraints of one of its prototypical genres. Not incidentally, *Ali* and *Far From Heaven* were/are some of Fassbinder and Haynes' most "popular" and "mainstream" films – films that, upon their releases, drew large audiences, garnered worldwide recognition, and entered the public discourse. I would argue that all three directors consciously and purposefully worked "within the system"—i.e. within the constraints of an established genre—to issue a critique of it.

As I have sought to demonstrate through formal analysis, Sirk, Fassbinder, and Haynes's films convey the futility of the protagonists' attempts both to escape the spatial and temporal confines of their modern societies and to realize their desires. In the process of depicting characters' failed attempts to escape from their conditions and to realize their desires, the films identify inert, pathological aspects of modernity, and they issue critiques of the ideology of progress, which works to conceal such aspects. By denying characters and viewers the possibility of escape, the three films

implicate viewers within oppressive elements of modernity, and they leave viewers responsible for enacting change within modern societies.

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# TEACHING TO THE TEST

Alexander DeWitt

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Like American government, public education balances a national agenda with local concerns. Public teachers, however, do not have the luxury of exclusively serving only the nation or their community. Outside their classroom doors they are handed a stack of tests on the literary techniques and mathematical problems that the government is convinced all students should know. Stepping inside the room, though, they meet children whose education requires lessons beyond what national standards provide. Two educational leaders recently addressed standardized tests, one analyzing them at the governmental level and another at the student's. Neither, however, addressed the liaison between policies and scholars, and therefore failed to address the person empowered to blend a national curriculum with the needs of a local student body: the teacher. Diane Ravitch served on the governing board of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and Monty Neill is the executive director of the National Center for Fair & Open Testing. Ravitch believes national testing promotes a curriculum for the future denizens of a knowledge-based America. Neill, on the other hand, fears national testing will only encourage lessons that already teach to the test, hindering a school's ability to build classrooms and evaluations that attend to a "whole child." On the issue of national tests, they stand on opposite sides of the schoolyard fence—not only in taking distinct positions regarding their merits, but also by approaching educational policy from deeply different perspectives. It is possible, however, for their arguments to be reconciled. A national test ensures that students study topics that researchers regard as critical to American education. Yet these tests

become detrimental as parents, students, and educators take them as the golden standards of learning. A solution lies in advancing an educational philosophy that fosters politically and socially aware teachers empowered and determined to develop nationally and locally pertinent curricula.

Ravitch frames her argument for national tests as a debate between locally divested and national authority. She attributes the conflictingly high scores of local exams and low scores of national exams to the dissimilar interests of each bureaucracy. Local governments, she reasons, would like scores that show progress—however superficial—to indicate that both local administrators and their schools are doing their jobs. Because of its distance from local voters, the national government need not concern itself with superficial progress, enabled to enforce standards that have been scrutinized by groups like the National Academy of Sciences. From Ravitch's perspective, the national government is better equipped to build effective tests because of its access to educational research and its obligation to the whole country, not specific localities. Therefore, a national test imposes high educational standards, guiding schools in developing a classroom curriculum that is well researched to address America's future needs. This in and of itself does not make testing for national standards a poor educational policy.

Monty Neill approaches national testing in a manner fundamentally different from that of Diane Ravitch, seeing the issue of testing not as a debate between local and national government, but as one between curricula that teach to the test as opposed to the whole student. Neill explains the mistake of making the National Assessment of Educational Progress the gold standard of education by claiming that national exams limitedly evaluate student

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*Alexander DeWitt is a third-year in the College, majoring in Philosophy.*

learning, provide dubious pass/fail labels, and produce results that beg the question currently facing Americans as a result of No Child Left Behind: what comes of low-scoring students and schools? If Neill is right that tests are limited in evaluative scope and insufficient to meet the needs of the whole child, then it would be a grave mistake for schools to teach to the test. Children have needs transcending traditional academics that are rooted in a school's locality and are derived from the sociocultural issues that form student identities. For Ravitch, ignoring the critical standards studied and developed by American policymakers jeopardizes our nation's future. For Neill, ignoring the local needs of students fails to integrate academics into a student's personal development. A national test might ensure children learn critical standards, but teaching must be tailored to local student bodies. Both national standards and local needs, it seems, hold essential roles in today's educational landscape, meaning schools must balance a national agenda with the distinctive culture of their student body.

America's teachers must lead this balance—it occurs within their classrooms. Neill advocates professional development to empower teachers with tools that allow for unique classroom evaluations. Combining this philosophy of teacher development with the understanding that Ravitch's critical standards aim to prepare students to meet the demands of America's future, teachers can better integrate nationally relevant topics with the locally determined needs of their pupils. Teachers not only can perform this integration, but they must; neither Diane Ravitch nor Monty Neill—or any other educational critic for that matter—has the unique position occupied by a teacher, who stands with one hand stretched outside the classroom door, accepting sealed booklets and Scantron answer sheets, while tending to a classroom of often non-standard needs.

When taught to the test, students only learn the nuts and bolts of a subject. However, the lessons of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies must not be lessons of rote memorization.

Teachers mediate the middle ground between Ravitch's national standards and Neill's whole child when their students use nuts and bolts to construct something meaningful. In May 2006, Daniel Rabinowitz's Modern World History class planned a demonstration against the genocide in Darfur. The class was granted a protest permit to gather petitions, distribute flyers, and gather outside the downtown Chicago offices of Senators Barack Obama and Richard Durbin. Ultimately, the Chicago Public School bureaucracy refused to allow the demonstration to actually occur. In planning the demonstration, however, Mr. Rabinowitz's students would have used the nuts and bolts a national curriculum might advocate, from honing the reading and composition skills required of well-informed demonstrators, to employing technology to conduct research and investigate the American political system. Mr. Rabinowitz attempted to teach through the test—in his classroom, learning was anything but rote; in his classroom, basic skills became integrated with student demands for a political voice. Balancing national standards with the demands of a local student body may not be simple, as each classroom and every subject poses new demands. But teachers, as the bridge between policies and students, can discover how to bring critical, relevant, and fundamental tools into their diverse teaching environments. Though the strenuous demands of policy and community might often leave educators humbled, teachers empowered by a strong professional education and an ardent social awareness must meet the challenge of public education.

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# BEYOND THE RED HERRING

Brian Libgober

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Two months ago, Richard Perle gave a lecture on American Middle East policy which inspired in me a vulgar little theory about the way politics works these days. Like all theories, mine began with confusion. Perle's lecture lasted for over an hour but there was no thesis I could bring back to my friends to tell them what the talk had been about. Perle's lecture was mostly in the form of a question and answer session and he skipped from one topic to the next in response to questions asked on disparate topics. Yet I could not help thinking that there had nonetheless been a unifying purpose to his talk. Although Perle never dwelled for very long on Iran at any single point in his talk, he frequently returned to the topic, and his argument did manage to achieve coherence. Perle had three important claims: First, Iran and, in particular, a nuclear Iran represents a serious threat to United States' and world interests. Second, the United States has a right to act in its self-defense, which includes the right to strike pre-emptively. Third, the situation is getting worse the longer we fail to act.

Still, something unsettled me. It was not just that the talk had a jumbled feel, but that the talk was very effective in spite of its jumbled nature. Perle had captured the attention and imagination of his audience. I wondered at how such a rhetorical strategy could be so counter-intuitively effective. But even more than that, I was disturbed by the resemblance of Perle's cries for action against Iran to his previous calls for action against Iraq. They recalled, in particular, the rhetorical formulations analyzed by Slavoj Zizek in *The Borrowed Kettle*.

According to Zizek, the real reason for the war in Iraq was suppressed and drowned out by the

sheer number of different justifications offered by the Bush administration. Zizek's point—or at least the point I have taken from Zizek—is much more subtle than any number of Bush-hating arguments that are removed from reality, like the claims, for example, that the War in Iraq is about oil, or Bush's revenge against Saddam for the attempted assassination of his father. The real reason for the Iraq war is the coherent and cogent product of a number of very intelligent people, the culmination of a well-developed branch of thought on international relations, namely neoconservatism. But although there *was* a cogent reason for the war in Iraq, that reason was itself lost in transmission to the public.

To illustrate that in fact there was a loss in transmission from the architects of the war to the American people, one only need ask oneself, “Why did America involve itself in Vietnam?” The answer which everyone knows and invariably gives is epitomized in a concise phrase: the “Domino Theory.” The proponents of entry into Vietnam told the public that if Vietnam fell to Communists, all of Asia would go Communist and jeopardize American interests. If one asks, however, “Why did America go to war in Iraq?” then there are at least four possible answers given by the Administration, to which one could add the cynical postulates of left-wing critics.

The first proffered reason for entry into war was that Saddam supported terrorists, but the nature of his support for terrorists was never precisely defined. It could accurately be claimed that he gave funds to Palestinian terror groups, while some went so far as to claim Saddam had helped bin Laden engineer 9/11. It is unsurprising that the Administration choose to invoke the name of terrorism for their cause since, at the time, the emotional energy for revenge in America was palpable.

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*Brian Libgober is a first-year in the College, majoring in philosophy and mathematics.*

The second reason given by the Bush administration was that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction. Again, although the import of this claim was ambiguous, it was taken to be a priori dangerous. It was never explained precisely who was threatened by Iraqi WMDs. Was the Middle East as a whole threatened? Merely Israel? The possibility that Saddam might transfer a nuclear weapon to a terrorist group enabled the Administration to claim that Iraq posed a threat even to the United States itself since a nuclear bomb might explode in New York City. This scenario was always too absurd a fantasy to convince anyone in government, since Iraq's purpose in obtaining nuclear weapons was to gain leverage in negotiation. Further, even if Saddam did turn the weapons over to terrorists, it would be *much* easier for terrorists to attack their preferred target—Israel—than the United States. Still, WMD was a coherent argument for some action against Iraq since its possession of WMDs would drastically threaten the America's and the world's interests in the Middle East.

The third reason given by the Administration was that Saddam was a war criminal who had murdered his own citizens. The difference between this reason and the previous two is that it lifts the United States' cause out of the banality of self-interest and into the higher moral role of policeman, defender of justice and of the oppressed. The final reason articulated, however, takes the moral argument even further by disavowing self-interest entirely: the United States went to war in Iraq to bring democracy to Iraq and the Middle East.

All of these reasons have something to do with what I believe is the actual rationale for the Iraq War. Since there never was a term like "Domino Theory" coined to correspond to a definitive *casus belli* for the Iraq War, we will always be left unsure as to what this underlying rationale really was. Nevertheless, there was a phrase used before the war and repeatedly as the war went on: "Iraq is the central front in the War on Terror." It is tempting to dismiss this phrase as merely a way to tie Saddam to al Qaeda, but this phrase

is not simply a cynical ploy against the American people; it alludes rather to a conception of the Middle East by neoconservatives which I believe was the theoretical underpinning of the war in Iraq. Some neoconservatives view the Middle East as a region full of failed regimes which prop themselves up by populist rancor against the West, and against Israel and the United States in particular. These regimes also maintain their legitimacy by allying themselves with religion. The result is that resentment gets turned away from these failed governments and wrongly directed towards Israel and the United States, and this resentment finds a concrete outlet in terrorism.

The question facing policy-makers is how to break this cycle, especially given U.S. dependence on these countries for oil. One idea that some neoconservatives have put forth is that if a true democracy, responsive to the people and effective at implementing policy, were established in the Middle East, it would then illustrate to the rest of the Arab World that their anger against the West should instead be aimed against their rulers. This change of targets for anger from foreign to domestic would pressure dictatorial regimes to cave in to liberal reform, resulting in turn in the establishment of democracies throughout the Middle East, and bringing an end to the resentment which is the root cause of terrorism against Israel and the United States. This theory is almost exactly like the domino theory in reverse. Prop up one domino, and the rest all come back up. Prop up one democracy, and the form flourishes throughout the Middle East.

Prior to the war, this theory was widely accepted. Indeed, were a Western-style democracy to spontaneously appear in the Middle East, everyone on both sides of the political aisle would have applauded. In fact, such an event *did* happen in the form of the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon, and the result was universal approbation. Perhaps the Cedar Revolution even adds credibility--certainly the neoconservatives would contend it does--to the idea that a reverse domino theory might work. It is not the neoconservatives' support for democracy

in the Middle East that is controversial, or even its use of force to achieve that end. Democrats largely backed the “Use of Force” resolution for the war in Iraq. The essential point of contention between neoconservatives and everyone else concerns the narrow question of whether or not to wait for the United Nations to authorize the use of force. Neoconservatives, after all, do believe in the rule of law and the Bush Administration made an effort to court the United Nations. Neoconservative thinking, however, is cavalier about the use of unilateral force. Neoconservatives see the United States not just as global policeman, which most liberals also accept, but also as global arbiter. The United States should not only defend human rights, liberty, and so forth, but it should decide how to do so irrespective of what any other country thinks.

This essential distinction--that the argument between Democrats and Republicans was not whether to attack but when and how to attack--was never made clear to the American people. In the eyes of most Americans, a vote in favor of the war is a vote in favor of the war. But a vote in favor of authorizing use of force as additional leverage for Bush to negotiate with the U.N. is not a vote to actually go to war. Democrats by and large believed that the United States should not decide to “go it alone,” since Democrats follow the Wilsonian tradition of benevolent hegemony by consent. But although there was a difference—and a significant difference at that--between Democrats and Republicans, it is important to recognize that up until the time Bush actually declared war, both parties were in lock-step.

Although this reverse-domino theory rationale for the Iraq War is consistent with the ideological thinking of both parties, it is not popular with a large section of the American people. Isolationism is very strong still in the United States, and if the war were billed to Americans as a fight to increase international stability, they would have shrugged off such geopolitics as a waste of time and resources. Especially after the Vietnam debacle, interventionism billed as interventionism, even for extreme humanitarian crises like Rwanda, has

been viewed with skepticism. But because the justification for the war included an element of fear and direct risk to America through terrorism and WMD's, there was enough indication of *casus belli* to convince America to get on board.

On the other hand, this penumbra was not nearly enough to convince the United Nations. It would have dismissed any sort of reverse domino justification for war as inconsistent with international law. War justified by geopolitical theory is the same as aggression and war by choice in the eyes of the United Nations. The Bush Administration did not advance this reasoning nor the argument that Saddam was a brutal dictator to the United Nations because it understood how little either claim would sway the international body. As a result, Iraq could not be seen to pose enough of an imminent threat to warrant the immediate action demanded by the Bush administration.

However, the Bush administration really did believe that Iraq was an imminent threat. Although the rationale I have argued for was likely the actual theoretical foundation for war, the neo-conservative thinkers and their allies in the White House actually believed the other arguments in favor of the war. It is safe to say that most countries believed Iraq was developing WMDs. It is doubtful that the Bush Administration seriously believed that Iraq would use WMD against the United States; they were more likely concerned about their use against Israel. Further, Iraq did support terrorism against Israel, and that this reason should have been enough, at least in the Administration's eyes, for Iraq to face consequences. It was not the case that the ardent supporters of the war believed in the reverse domino theory and then concocted a bunch of lies to sell the war to the American people. Rather, the ardent supporters believed in all four reasons for war simultaneously, and this is precisely the problem.

The Administration's simultaneous faith in all four major justifications obscured each one's individual logic and made it possible for the war to become such an intractable debacle. Three of the reasons

for war—terrorism, WMD, and human rights—were red herrings. If terrorism against Israel was the reason for war, then Syria would have been a better target for war and international pressure. If nuclear proliferation was the reason for war, then the United States should have prioritized sanctions against North Korea and Iran, which were more likely to develop threatening weapons. Certainly the Bush administration would not have attempted to develop a nuclear agreement with India if it was interested in suppressing nuclear proliferation. The human rights rationale is little more than a joke; one need only look at America's current policy with regards to Darfur to see how much the Bush Administration (or any administration) has cared about prevention of humanitarian crises. The only reason for war which *uniquely* implicates Iraq is the promotion of democracy.

Iraq has one of the more secular populations in the Middle East and the U.S. had natural allies for the establishment of democracy in the Kurds. Further, if the United States did intervene by force, then Iraq would be the only country in the Middle East whose ruler could be deposed without engendering resentment in the country's population. No one was more unpopular than Saddam in the Middle East. Only in Iraq could American troops be "greeted as liberators," even in theory. Indeed, it is easy to forget that at first American troops *were* greeted as liberators by many. Although gratitude eroded quickly, the neoconservatives were right at the outset. The idea that Iraq was ripe for democracy was alone among the reasons given in its basis in information beyond any doubt. The rest were red herrings, subject to intelligence error, and each individually insufficient justification for invasion.

Unfortunately, the architects of the war themselves believed the red herrings and, what is worse, planned accordingly. If the Bush Administration really had lied about its intention to use the war to promote democracy in Iraq, then it could not have possibly botched Iraq as badly as it has. If the Administration had modeled their operation on previous successful efforts to institute democracy in Western Europe and Japan after

World War II, then it would have been prepared to stay with a large body of troops for a long time. Instead, the Administration prepared for the rapid conquest of the country, and went in without a plan for reconstruction. A quick dose of shock and awe and then everything would proceed on automatic pilot, they assumed.

While focusing on the goals of finding the WMD's and toppling Saddam, the Administration assumed the more difficult goal of establishing a democracy would be accomplished without the obvious commitment of resources that articulation of that goal at the outset would have entailed. The belief that Americans would be "greeted as liberators" deceived the Administration into thinking that they would have an indefinite timeline for instituting effective governance. The Administration, so eager to prove to the rest of the world that indeed they had been right, overlooked details of reconstruction in favor of finding the WMD. Their eyes were on the prize, it was merely the *wrong* prize. They did not consider that no government instills more fear in a people than bad government, and that the anger engendered by that fear would be turned against the United States.

The notion that the United States had come only to conquer was already present in the minds of Iraqis, and the Administration's failure to present evidence to the contrary early in the war fueled their belief in this claim. The failure to communicate the real reason for the war to the Iraqi people caused even more damage than the communication failure with the American public, and constituted the first sign that failure in Iraq was inevitable. But how could this reason be communicated to the Iraqis if it was never really articulated and clarified by the Administration itself? Even if the administration *had* effectively planned for all contingencies, popular sentiment in Iraq was doomed to turn against Americans so long as the purpose of the policy was not clearly conveyed.

The most disturbing aspect of the problem of red herrings confused for primary rationales is not that the Bush Administration was uniquely

stricken with it. This is precisely where Richard Perle's talk re-enters the picture. Richard Perle claims that a nuclear Iran is a threat to U.S. interests, that the United States has a right to defend itself, and that the situation in Iran is becoming more acute. All of these claims create a penumbra of fear without any discussion of possible plans of action. What can *feasibly* be done about Iran developing nuclear weapons? Nothing.

There are two direct ways to prevent Iranian nuclear development against Iran's wishes. The first is a surgical strike against nuclear research installations. The other is a full-scale invasion of the country. Iran is too organized, however, for surgical strikes to be a feasible option. Its research is spread out across the country, many of the installations are impervious to U.S. attack, and U.S. intelligence has so far proven inadequate in locating them. Invasion is equally impossible. Iraq is a small country compared with Iran, which is home to well over a hundred million people. Further, the United States' budget and military cannot sustain a second invasion.

The only real hope is to buy off Iran with trading privileges and convince its allies, like Russia, to discourage Iran's nuclear program. Admittedly, this option provides no guarantees, but rather than admit this uncomfortable reality, which acknowledges our limited options, Perle invokes red herring after red herring. Muddled reasoning like this leaves the American people living in a dream world where Iraq is not embroiled in civil war and the United States can stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Worst of all, Perle and our other leaders also inhabit this fantasy.

Iraq is on the verge of anarchy, Iran will get the bomb, and the responsibility for this mess lies precisely with the neoconservatives and their confusion of red herring for reality. Although the Neoconservatives have borne the brunt of recent criticism, this vulgar little theory of mine about how American policy is made I believe can be shown to apply universally with only some exceptions. The orgiastic cult of spin is in control of pol-

itics and policy now on both sides of the aisle. As opposed to ideology which is necessarily grounded in a reaction to actual conditions and which produces reasons for its proposals, this "spin" need only appear to provide reason for its propositions. Today what is good policy is subordinated to what sounds like good policy. There is little hope for fixing this political problem. We may all take some consolation, however, in the fact that if one develops an eye for these kinds of things, one can sort the issues out and not be a total party stooge.

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(Note that this study will take place in a large metal cage from which escape is impossible unless the monkeys enter a secret code that only they know; and that the Hospitals cannot be held responsible for any psychological or physical trauma that study participants undergo during the course of the study.)

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# FROM TEENAGE CRISIS TO GIRL POWER: LOOKING INTO EMPOWERMENT

Erin Moore

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“Empowerment,” the idea of socially, politically, and economically strengthening both individuals and communities, has become a liberal catch phrase. Empowerment has also become inextricably linked to the contemporary notion of the liberal subject, which guarantees more freedom, more choices, and more rights to individuals with solidified identities. Given the current heightened sensitivity to identity politics, these individuals mobilize these identities to make intelligible claims both to the state and to the social imaginary. Empowerment has also been exported globally through non-governmental organizations (NGO) and micro-credit programs, helped to sell thousands of self-help cassette tapes to middle class professionals, and entered the mission statements of hundreds of programs aimed at disadvantaged youth, women, and people of color.

Although different actors interpret empowerment in different ways, “difference feminists”—women who celebrate and encourage femininity as an important cultural difference—have conflated the notion of empowerment with women’s visibility and audibility in the public sphere. Employing a liberal discourse that reifies power, identity, and oppression as inherent characteristics of particular American experiences, difference feminists seek to “empower” girls using the following strategy: get the girls to *feel* oppressed based on the marginalization of some of their identities, and then agitate the girls to spur some sort of commitment to “bettering” their community of similarly marginalized people.

In the 1980s, feminist psychologists, self-help instructors, and educators cast female adolescents as the victims most affected by patriarchy and other social inequalities. Looking at these girls as both the unknowing victims of a patriarchal society and the site for fostering a commitment to “social change,” grown women have taken up the cause of struggling girls. They attempt to give these girls the “voice” of difference feminism, which renders the girls audible, but only when they speak of their femininity with pride. They encourage girls to take up leadership positions to bring *supposedly* inherent feminine characteristics to the social table. And, above all, they strive to get the girls to own and rearticulate the victim status of the modern woman living in an oppressive, patriarchal world.

Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in the summer of 2006 at the Brooklyn-based Sadie Nash Leadership Project (SNLP), where I worked as a Summer Dean, I have sought to trace the way in which empowerment is equated with notions of healthy identity development. Sadie Nash’s empowerment discourses and identity-development structures in programming for adolescent girls provide its participants with the time and space to enjoy a moratorium of identity exploration and realization. It does this by employing the difference feminist rhetoric of empowerment and “leadership,” thereby reifying the stability of the category of “woman” in order to promote the exploration of other identities (e.g., ethnic, racial, sexual). In so doing, however, Sadie Nash forecloses other options for young women. It effectively prevents them from becoming female leaders. It manages the girls’ subjectivities within the context of a thoroughly middle class trajectory for success and development, where entitlement to

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*Erin Moore is a fourth-year in the College, majoring in Human Development and Gender Studies.*

future career options as well as to political identities reign as the only answer to social inequalities. So while it proposes to be an open forum for self-exploration, in fact it works to shut down specific options for feminine subjectivities. Sadie Nash strives to locate disadvantaged youth from New York City in order to promote their sense of self-worth and entitlement to middle class lives. This is indeed a modicum of “social change;” however, this was certainly not their acknowledged aim.

Aimed at high school-aged girls from the five boroughs of New York City, Sadie Nash uses a “Feminist Consciousness-Raising Curriculum for Adolescent Women” as prescribed by feminist therapists and educators. The feminist consciousness-raising curriculum, employed by the program and taken up by the girls, establishes the category of woman as an oppressed category, while simultaneously revaluing certain feminine traits as positive and desirable qualities of leadership. Rather than actually producing outlets for “social change,” Sadie Nash reifies the category of woman, particularly the woman who is a “feminist leader.” It establishes a new set of standards that equip the girls with skills (such as computer literacy, career-training, and SAT prep) which they will need in order to be successful participants in the middle class. Yet, in so doing, they reproduce a heightened awareness of marginalization within the girls’ subjectivities.

“Do you realize you are A LEADER?” reads the poster covering the front door of the Sadie Nash Leadership Project’s Brooklyn office. “We do. And we want to make sure YOU realize it too.” These pink and orange posters feature a black-and-white photograph of Melissa, a participant from 2004, looking deeply through the camera to girls in high schools all over New York City, promising a shot at leadership and a better future through participation in the program.

Sadie Nash’s publicity and funding materials are boldly feminist and use the language of empowerment, leadership, and social change. Their mission statement focuses on improving the girls’ “social,

political, and economic decision-making” skills in efforts to “strengthen, empower and equip young women *as agents of change* in their world.” The project’s specific goals for its participants, young women from New York City’s five boroughs’ most disadvantaged schools, at least ideally, are “to increase self-esteem,” to have the girls envision themselves as leaders now and in the future, to encourage the girls to “understand and seek the right to equality,” “to empower their decision-making ability,” and to encourage the girls to “seek and value community action and involvement.”

Cecilia Clarke, the great-granddaughter of Virginia “Sadie” Nash, founded the Sadie Nash Leadership Project in 2001 and held the first Summer Institute, with sixteen girls, in 2002. Clarke valorizes her great-grandmother’s heroic and non-traditional leadership: On a December day in 1902, Sadie Nash removed a petticoat to swaddle a naked baby on a streetcar in St. Louis and was subsequently chastised in local newspapers for daring to remove a petticoat in public. Clarke, whose eldest daughter was in a private New York City arts high school at the time, founded the program in response to the growing concern about the troubles of female adolescents. As she explains herself, Clarke first drew upon her private donor connections in the art world, and eventually reached out to various community and women’s organizations such as the New York Community Trust, the New York Women’s Foundation, the Patrina Foundation (funds programs advancing scholastic opportunities for women), the Liz Claiborne Foundation, and the Lisabeth Foundation. In founding the program, she drew upon the American Association of University Women’s (AAUW) research.

An important source of Sadie Nash’s ideology is Carol Gilligan’s work with female adolescents. In her writings from the 1980s, Gilligan repositioned *care* at the center of woman’s concerns, and this became a major trope in a certain segment of second wave feminist projects, those that were later called “difference” or “cultural” feminism. Echoing nineteenth-century feminist concerns, they focused on caring, cooperation, and

relationships as inherently feminine and morally superior to male moral reasoning. Like Gilligan, Sadie Nash wants girls to find a sense of self, and specifically a sense of ethnically, racially, or sexually diverse self, while identifying with the Sadie Nash community as a community of women. The program also wants to “empower” the girls, because they are girls and because they are disadvantaged. The girls, while searching for stable senses of multiple identities, have already identified themselves as women, and Sadie Nash actively reifies gender as the most stable identity, which turns out to be the project of difference feminists, who want women to identify with each other based on nothing other than their shared gender.

The entirety of the Sadie Nash program is divided into five different components, each corresponding to a different aspect of leadership development. Sadie Nash values “leadership” (specifically nontraditional leadership) as a process of transformation as well as the relevancy and importance of the girls’ personal experiences. The first component of the program is the Summer Institute. This is the most focused and direct exposure the girls have to Sadie Nash’s mission, philosophy, community, staff, and resources, but they are encouraged to remain in the program for two years and to consider themselves a part of the Sadie Nash community for the rest of their lives.

An integral part of the Summer Institute are the “core courses” girls take depending on their year of participation in Sadie Nash. First-years take “Power, Identity, Privilege” (PIP) and a “Leadership Seminar,” while second years take “Leadership Action Project” (LAP), where they begin to discuss and develop their group projects. The Sadie Nash Staff claims that PIP is the foundational course of the program; the goal is to learn about “isms” and to rethink identity and power. PIP covers the spectrum of social inequalities, and the staff warned the Deans: “PIP is where the girls cry.” Often, the girls’ very enduring notions of self and identity are reframed for them in light of liberal frameworks of power and privilege. It is specifically the PIP class where most of the trans-

actions between Sadie Nash’s liberal hopes for the girls and the girls’ bodies and “voices” take place.

My summer began with a three-week Dean training, where we covered the mission and philosophy of Sadie Nash, discussed child development, went over structural programming for the girls and made (pink) decorations. For the common room, the Deans made each girl a “mailbox,” a small rectangular pink or orange box, decorated in glitter with her name, stapled to the wall where staff and other Nashers could drop notes. This room was where the girls convened each morning, and the mailboxes, checked regularly, became an intimate mode of communication. Essentially, we transformed the physical space into something that resembled the stereotypical vision of an adolescent girl’s fantasy world, and were encouraged to do so by Sadie Nash staff to make the building part of the comfortable, girly, “safe space.” In this way, the physical space became an integral part of the program.

Though Sadie Nash appears to be the ultimate youth empowerment program—both in its process and in its spatiality—for under-resourced young women of color who, upon completion of the program, will return to their communities and effect change, it is not as liberating as it may seem. The program deploys both “safe space” and liberal discourses of power, identity and privilege (PIP), which have a number of unintended effects on the girls’ subjectivities.

Following the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s, youth programming became the means of inculcating social change in younger generations, and liberal education became the route toward social revolution. Feminist education especially became imbued with notions of empowerment, and the women who organize the program locate political and social change within the psychological empowerment of adolescent girls. Sadie Nash grooms the girls to speak of social inequalities not using language that might reflect their own experience, but using a discourse of power and privilege, where certain groups are inherently oppressed by “the

system” and others are inherently privileged. Summer Institute core courses reflect this mission. The girls learn that because only dominant groups have the *power* to inflict prejudice, only subdominant groups can be oppressed, and subdominant groups are also always oppressed. The girls learn to “resist” all forms of oppression, especially unconscious and conscious forms of “internalized” oppression. In fact, according to this pedagogy, realizing that one is and has been oppressed is the first step toward empowerment.

My criticism of this type of liberal education is twofold. First, this type of discourse around power, identity and oppression, although initially and ostensibly meant to interrogate personal experiences of identity, actually reifies particular identity categories (e.g., gay, straight, white, black) while aligning power with dominant groups and oppression with subdominant groups. These discourses create a grid of intelligibility upon which one is marked as powerful or powerless, until, of course, one is made aware of her oppressed status. Secondly, these discourses are largely produced by the “ruling class,” and I suggest that these types of discourses are as much a way for this ruling class to confront their own privilege and guilt as they are a method of empowerment for those who fall into subdominant groups. This type of liberal education actually forecloses possibilities of subjectivity expression rather than helps the girls explore themselves. Sadie Nash participants also internalize these sets of oppression discourses and use them to frame their own experiences.

While Sadie Nash demands that all staff, and the girls, recognize themselves and each other as “in process,” there seems to be a tendency toward identity-development and affirmation as the integral part of this process, and the program (like society) favors stable, intelligible and discussable identities, especially for purposes of “maintaining diversity.” It is as if a stable identity unlocks the chest of claim-making upon the state, one of the keys to living as an empowered, liberal subject. Sadie Nash, by deploying power, identity, and privilege discourses, forces its participants to undergo this type iden-

tity crisis, albeit in a “safe space” environment.

In many ways, Sadie Nash’s six-week Summer Institute can be seen as a sanctuary, both emotional and physical, for the girls to explore their personal capacities as leaders (and workers) and to maneuver through different identities, especially their ethnic, sexual, and racial identities. For example, during the first week of the program the girls and I were facing a television playing the movie *Mean Girls*. In the movie, Lindsay Lohan has just moved to Evanston from Africa, and some of the girls talk about the parts of Africa from which their families emigrated. Tajreena asks me where my family is from, and I answer “mostly Ireland, but I’m a mix of other white Europeans too.” She and the other girls are satisfied by this answer and they all agree, “Mixes are prettier.”

After deliberating for a while on the beauty of “Blackanese” (half Black, half Japanese) people, someone asks Runa if she’s a “mix.” She giggles dismissively, waves her hands, and shakes her head: “I’m all Bengali, well, some white from the people that conquered us a long time ago, but 100% from Bangladesh.” Jessica, a 15-year-old from Staten Island, asks what language she speaks in her home with her family, and she responds: “Bengali and English. Mostly Bengali—my father has broken English.” She then imitates his voice in a Bengali accent: “That’s goood,” and the room erupts in laughter.

My point in evoking this story is that Runa, in the safety of Sadie Nash’s sanctuary, is able to express and assert her ethnic identity as Bengali, and she is able to reflect on the difference between her mixed ethnic identification as an American daughter. She remarks upon the language difference between herself and her father, which both reifies her identity as Bengali, and as the daughter of Bengali parents, and marks her awareness of her own identity, however nuanced, as different from that of her parents and the other girls around her.

The girls get to Sadie Nash, in Brooklyn, from all five boroughs of New York City. Their ethnic

makeup is remarkably diverse, and intentionally so. On a pre-evaluation for the program, the girls are asked to describe their ethnicities, and are encouraged to “circle as many as you would like” among the following options: African-American, West Indian/Caribbean, African, Latina/Hispanic, Asian-American, South Asian, Caucasian/White, Native American, Middle Eastern/Arab, Other/more specific. This is just one instance where the program attempts to make inroads to change, especially considering the limited ethnic options most other (usually governmental) forms provide.

Diversity went far beyond ethnicity, and each girl’s preference for the hierarchy of her identities varied. Jennifer Rainbow would tell you that she is bisexual before telling you she is Jewish, Najaf would tell you she is Muslim before telling you she is black, and Kasia would tell you that while she’s from Moldova, she’s, “Everything, fortunately.” All of the girls were between the ages of 14 and 19 years.

Psychologists since Erik Erikson have identified adolescence as the key time to combat racial, ethnic, and cultural intolerance, making diversity-intervention programs aimed at adolescents particularly well-timed. Furthermore, if tolerance for diverse ethnicities and cultures is not learned during adolescence, it might never be learned. This idea has helped to influence Sadie Nash’s “commitment to diversity.” Rather than commit to one school or one group of girls, the program (and programming staff) are quite explicit about their desire to assemble the most ethnically diverse group of girls possible, both in their recruiting methods and in their application-selection process.

Sadie Nash deploys a number of strategies to groom the girls for entry into the middle class pre-professional world, while contradictorily paying lip service to “nontraditional” forms of leadership and living. The CAP program is a good example of this strategy: after finishing the Summer Institute, the girls are placed into internships at different locations around the city and paid by Sadie Nash. The thought behind the payment - that economic self-sufficiency leads to increased self-esteem and

a stronger sense of personhood – reflects the motivations behind globally exported micro-credit programs that attempt to measure increases in self-esteem after giving out meager loans.

Additionally, each Friday of the program was spent on a field trip, and one Friday in July was spent visiting “Women in Action.” The girls were taken to women working in supposedly “non-traditional” careers, such as clothing designers, journalists, and midwives, and learned about the benefits of each occupation. While midwifery seems to be a novel choice for a career day, the girls are unquestioningly nudged in the direction of professional, productive work. And it seems to work; on the last day of Dean Group, the girls and I are talking about where we see ourselves going after SNLP, and Cristina, before telling us a story about being in an abusive relationship where her cousin chased her boyfriend with a gun over drug money, says: “I’m going to college. I don’t know where, but I’m going.”

Sadie Nash establishes itself, first and foremost, as a community of women, and more importantly, as a community of institutionally marginalized—because they are women—people. Yet it is astounding the extent to which Sadie Nash attempts to nurture and validate these presumably feminine characteristics within its female participants, if not explicitly, such as in “motherhood” workshops, then certainly in the “safe space” rules and glittery pink decorations.

Through PIP class the girls are taught that structural and societal discrimination causes “isms” and prejudices. While this may be helpful in understanding the current historical and socio-cultural situation that Americans find themselves in, this structure is rarely questioned or contextualized. Rather, it is taken as a given, and a feature of *the* system that the girls are being trained to fight. These discourses seem to condition the ways in which they experience and understand their own identities, and, furthermore, these categories of oppression go unquestioned. For example, about half way through the program

in PIP class, when asked what it means to “act like a lady,” Carla answers: “to be subjugated,” and the other girls’ answers vary: “to cross your legs,” “to be polite,” “cooking and cleaning.”

Nadeen interrupts this conversation: “But America has come a long way. There’s a lot more available to us than there was a while ago.” Tandi agrees: “good point,” but Adida objects: “Then how come we don’t have a woman president?”

The girls are then asked in which ways they defy gendered stereotypes. Kasia, who is older than most of the other girls and who has undergone a number of New York City’s “social justice” youth programs, is a bit indignant: “I *am* nice, but it’s not because I’m a woman, it’s because I’m a human.” Lauren and Tula both claim that they don’t cry, that they are not vulnerable. Kelly, cheery and proud: “I don’t play with dolls. I play video games!” Kourtnei: “I don’t wear makeup.” Carla: “I’m not quiet.” Amishi: “I’m not modest.” Dianne: “I don’t shave. I curse when I want to. I’m athletic, and I will not be a housewife.”

At the end of the class, the girls are asked what happens to a non-conforming woman. Amy chirps, “My daddy tells me to change my habits.” Kasia argues that non-conforming women are “condemned,” and Dianne adds, “Society thinks of you as weird.”

This conversation, which is the only part of their core class focused on gender identity, is couched in terms of gender stereotypes rather than an actual inquiry into what or who or why the category of “woman” produces. It seemed useful to examine what stereotypes existed for women, but there was no discussion whatsoever of boys who inhabited these stereotypes as well, which might even confirm the original stereotypical traits as feminine and as constitutive of “woman.” These stereotypically feminine roles were condemned *as* stereotypes, whereas the more beneficial feminine traits (e.g., collaboration, caring) remained as both desirable for all people and naturally locatable within the girls.

These girls, at the end of the program, reflected

on their own conceptions of women, although these conceptions have been shaped for them by Sadie Nash. The girls seem to focus on women as reproducers and as nurturers, which were the principal gendered tenets of the program.

Rather than exploring gender as a series of repeated and repeatable performative acts, the girls are taught to embrace gender as a stable identity. Sadie Nash valorizes cooperation and caring as naturally feminine acts. For a program seeking to combat patriarchy’s inequalities and injustices, it seems that stabilizing and naturalizing the category that produces those inequalities will only further entrench the girls within the system they are being led to believe does them harm. Furthermore, Sadie Nash deploys the caring and cooperative category of “woman” under the rubric of empowerment.

For Sadie Nash, among other things, empowerment means providing the girls with viable and visible futures in the form of university education and careers. Empowerment has become the catch-phrase for infantilizing programs deployed by social welfare systems that seek to “help from the ground up;” but instead, they reproduce, and possibly even strengthen, disadvantaged and marginalized categories for subjects to inhabit.

Empowerment is thought to have originated in workers’ projects aimed at African-Americans during reconstruction. “Empowered” by a program organized to employ her, the African-American was on her way to blossoming as an independent, socially and economically free subject. This notion of freedom informs our notion of the “liberal subject” today, and, with it, our notions of individual entitlement. The vocabulary of empowerment entered into the discourse on HIV and AIDS prevention in the 1980s, and now, empowerment is everywhere. From “personal sustainability projects” for the healthy lifestyles of WalMart employees to Alcoholics Anonymous support groups, the historical and contemporary uses of empowerment reveal its close link to identity development, the self-help phenomenon, and worker productivity. It is no surprise that

well-intentioned youth programming, including Sadie Nash, has goals of transforming otherwise disadvantaged, and perhaps unruly, people from the margins into naturalized, civilized and productive workers who are, ironically, being taught to first look within themselves for the “power” that fits the program’s mold of empowerment.

Empowerment has become a liberal catchphrase, and is now used in so many contexts that its actual meaning is ambiguous. But the ways Sadie Nash has taken it up within the difference feminist project as both part of an upwardly socially-mobile trajectory for the girls and as a mode of “confronting internal oppression,” are interesting. What empowerment seems to mean for the Nashers is that, at least while at the Summer Institute, only very particular expressions of identity, those that reflect the program’s notions of empowerment, are privileged as appropriate to the Sadie Nash model. Other modes of expression are discouraged or simply ignored.

I have sought here not to vilify this particular program per se, but rather to examine the limits of empowerment discourses, specifically those produced by difference feminists and imposed on adolescent girls under the guise of liberal education and identity exploration.

My criticism stems more from the double-edged nature of Sadie Nash, because while the program tells supporters and participants alike that “identity-exploration” is occurring, what is really going on is the stabilization of a particular type of feminine identity within each girl. This “woman” is one who shares, one who cares, and one who is sensitive to all peoples, regardless of their race, sexuality, disability, immigration status, or language ability. She epitomizes the middle class fantasy for liberal subjecthood because she has allegedly been prepared to actualize her individual rights and because she believes wholeheartedly in that capacity in others. The idea of “freedom of thought” has been spoon-fed to her in such a way that, under the very guise of “freedom of thought,” she thinks only of a world that guarantees equality and celebrates women as

nurturers. This could be a beautiful world, certainly, but it is one that has already been imagined and re-imagined by difference feminists, and now it is being pressed into the minds of girls with little room for questioning its efficacy or validity.

Perhaps what is really at question here is Sadie Nash’s strategy for “social change.” The organization uses quasi-manipulative discourses that revolve around self-examination and promises of individual freedom to get younger generations to both believe in and attempt to work toward creating the world the program envisions. But they are not alone. Street gangs, Bible camps, and the Girl Scouts all intervene into the lives of their participants, attempting to remake young people as disciples of their messages. Maybe the difference feminist project, which specifically targets females during adolescence, is uniquely problematic precisely because it is so deeply and insidiously rooted in the adolescent identity crisis, and in psychology itself.

President Robert J. Zimmer to speak on

**“What about the Sudan Doesn’t Matter to Me, and Why”**

as part of an ongoing bag lunch series sponsored by Rockefeller Chapel where members of the University community reflect on the basic commitments that inform all they do. President Zimmer will speak on Thursday, May 31st at noon in the Interreligious Center at Rockefeller Chapel (in the basement, through the double doors, right past the Satan Room)

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# A MEDICAL SCHOOL COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Dan Luchins

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*I have never been invited to give a commencement address, but if I were, this is what I'd say. It is an excerpt from the never to be published book, "Uninvited Lectures and Rejected Articles."*

In the course of my life and work, I have learned the importance of one's formative years. Picture a group of young adults, living for years without parental supervision, crowded together in small apartments, with unstructured hours, loud music and easy access to drugs. Where will these people be 20 years from now?

If they were poor and particularly minorities, most will be dead, in prison, strung out on drugs, unemployed or holding dead end jobs. They were shaped by those formative years. In a charitable moment, we would have to admit, they couldn't overcome their environment.

If they were white and middle class, like me, they would now be doctors, lawyers, and businessmen. Those years, which we look back on with fondness, were our college years; a time to find ourselves, have youthful indiscretions and gain valuable experiences. Of course, we too could not overcome our environment. But we attribute our success to intelligence, education and a touch of diligence, not drugs, sex and rock and roll.

This morning I received a phone call from the emergency room about a young man brought in with an overdose. He came with a supportive family, who explained that he was under great stress because he was about to stand trial for his third drug

offense in a state with strict mandatory sentencing laws. It struck me: if you're poor and sell drugs three times, you might very well spend your life in prison. If you're affluent and buy drugs three times, you probably will spend your life in a suburb.

For some reason preying on the other's need for drugs is seen to be more much more reprehensible than preying on his need for money. Could it be that those who make the laws, since they have wealth, are much more sympathetic to the plight of the former than the later? But the law is blind to class or race. It is reassuring to know that if kids from the slums went out to the suburbs to score their drugs, suburban pushers might also get put away for life.

In feudal times, the nobility justified their land and titles on the basis of their superior blood. To the modern ear, this rings hollow. But what is our justification for wealth and titles? That our immigrant fathers or grandfathers or great grandfathers sweated, sacrificed and saved so the next generation could have an education. Is this any more compelling?

I don't believe I say this out of some unresolved guilt. I don't believe I deserve to be in prison or in poverty, nor do I wish that on others who had middle class advantages. Rather, it is to correct what social scientists might label "false attribution." According to attribution theory, we respond with pity and a desire to assist those whose misfortune is beyond their control while feeling disdain and a desire to punish those who are responsible for their own misfortunes. If we perceived the poor as victims of circumstance, we might feel a responsibility to help. But by ascribing our success to hard work tinged with virtue and their failure to a lack of either hard work or

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*Daniel Luchins is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry.*

virtue we avoid any such feelings. I don't know whether I could have had mustered enough hard work or virtue to pull myself out of the ghetto from which my grandfather escaped one hundred years ago. I am even less confident that I could escape from today's ghetto. Could you?

Today you have earned your medical degree, and, in the future, you will earn a comfortable income.

You believe, quite rightfully, that you deserve this degree, and you will feel the same about your income. I don't doubt that hard work and virtue went into your studies and will go into your practice. I am only asking you to remember that many others worked just as hard and are just as virtuous but will be far less generously rewarded. Despite what you might have been taught in Economics 101, wealth remains a measure of power, not of worth.

The Society for the Study of Thinking in Thought  
is pleased to announce their Late Spring Colloquium entitled:

## “Doing Things With Our Minds

or

## Ontologizing the Normal Species While Normalizing the Ontologically Specious”

in Classics 322 on 10 June, 10:00 am

featuring keynote speaker **William Rittenborg**, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Davis

Prof. Rittenborg will cover: How do people communicate using their mouths? While many theorists have concluded that the most frequent method seems to employ the practice of *talk*, this particular mode of “speech” has not been supported by many recent findings of the Committee for Social Entity, as explicated in their recent monograph *Rethinking Rethought*. Following recent developments in the development of developmental linguistics, a deep inquiry into the methods and modes of “cognition,” a putatively skull-based activity, are explored, with emphasis on couching this explication in the Foucauldian rubric *le derrierisme*. Rittenborg will also introduce a new seven-syllable word with German, Greek, and French roots that better captures the state of research in this subdiscipline than the existing lexicon does.

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# AFTER VIRGINIA TECH: GUN CONTROL, CULTURE, AND VIOLENCE TODAY

J. Thomas Bennett

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The current debate over gun control and media violence is misguided at best and harmfully misleading at worst. There are multiple causes for violence, and they are difficult to measure, predict or prevent. Looking at the issue honestly will involve tough questions about the nature of modern freedoms, our culture, and the sources of morality. In terms of current events and historical trends, there is a problem with violence in America. That much is clear, but the causes and solutions are not clear at all. In the earnest search for someone or something to blame for the Virginia Tech shootings, we need to start with a fresh view of where we are as a society.

Over the last two years, rates of violent crime have begun to rise nationwide, reversing the healthy, downward trend of the last decade. The current rise in violent crime is especially troubling considering the trend in decreasing violent crime rates that began in 1992 and lasted until late 2005. In the *New York Times's* reporting on the issue earlier this year, blame is evenly spread for this reemerging social problem. "Local police departments blame several factors," the article said, including "easy access to guns and a willingness, even an eagerness, to settle disputes with them, particularly among young people". Roughly speaking, there are two issues here: access to guns and morality. Our solutions to the kind of violence we saw last week, however, should not boil down to the false choice between liberal and conservative, gun control and morality.

After the shootings at Virginia Tech, gun control has again become a hot topic, along with media violence and the general decay of our culture. Can

anything new or helpful be said about these issues? They seem to be timeless controversies, with no definite answers except for those offered by the dogmatic. Everyone has easy answers, but what is needed is hard thought. Gun control, of course, was the instant response for some, but the idea that additional gun control laws would have averted the shooting is not logically or empirically valid.

The Gun Control Act of 1968 has prohibited the "mentally defective" from the purchase or possession of guns since its enactment. Mentally defective here includes being a danger to one's self or others, as determined by an official body. Cho should have been affected by this regulation. After checking in to a mental health institution, a Virginia magistrate found him a threat to himself. This finding was sufficient under the federal law to keep Cho from buying guns. A mistake occurred when mental health experts and the Virginia magistrate didn't execute the regulation by putting Cho in the database for background checks. The prevention of violence, in this case, could have been achieved through enforcing existing legislation. In one sense, the shooting was "caused" by a loophole. Yet, this leaves open the whole realm of motivations, and the separate means—aside from legally purchasing guns—that "caused" this violence. What of the willingness to use guns, cited by police officials as one cause of the *nationwide* increase in violent crime? The motivation for gun violence and violence overall is incredibly broad, at once personal and societal, dealing with basic issues of responsibility and values.

Criminologist David Garland, who is not conservative, writes that the reasons for increased crime rates from the '60s to early '90s include "a reduc-

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*J. Thomas Bennett is a student in the Master of the Arts program in the Social Sciences (MAPSS).*

tion in the efficacy of social and self controls as a consequence of shifts in social ecology and changing cultural norms". This included "demands for instant gratification" and "the spread of a more 'permissive,' 'expressive' style of child-rearing." These ideas make true believers on the left uncomfortable. As an explanation for crime, culture seems to concede too much to conservatism. But if we're honest with ourselves, we have to admit that the last 40 years of social science and American experience haven't exactly refuted concerns about cultural changes. Social scientists have noted that violence and crime are actively encouraged and valued within some groups. I believe that we are facing a historically unprecedented pro-violence subculture. (We should note that the Tech shootings and school shootings *around the world* serve to de-racialize this insight.) The implications of this cultural change for criminal behavior are vast, but they haven't been fully explored. The bottom line is that informal social controls—non-legal, non-political constraints on behavior—have been weakened. Events like the Virginia shooting show that the influence of weakened informal social controls is growing. Younger people are becoming more violent, and this tendency is strongly reinforced by culture, not objective circumstances of abuse or deprivation. The Tech shootings could have as much to do with norms as with legislation.

I believe that criminal behavior today is connected to self-sustaining subcultures independent of what we would usually call a societal "cause," such as poverty or bullying. It would be absurd to claim that Cho felt a justified subjective sense of victimization, and that this explains his actions. The problem with Cho was that he had guns, and also that he had an immoral set of attitudes about violence, himself, and others. The solution to this problem is not "structural" or legislative. The solution is difficult to define, but it should primarily involve restoring the foundation of norms and trust that supported a safer society in the past. I think this is a legitimate idea that deserves to be taken seriously by academics and policymakers.

Not to blame a single person, but after Freud, will,

choice, and responsibility have been undermined. In 1950, psychologist Otto Rank wrote that "the essential problem of psychology is our abolition of the fact of will." The notion that no one is truly responsible for their actions has made its way into ideologies and our public thinking about violence. This essentially authorizes antisocial and violent behavior. Samenow and Yochelson wrote that the criminal often "blames forces outside himself for his crime or for making him the way he is... This position is usually reinforced by current concepts and practices and often by the judicial attitudes and decisions of those who deal with criminals." It has become too easy to justify or rationalize almost any form of behavior, no matter how cruel. This is to be expected without a counterbalancing insistence on responsibility and decency.

Cho Seung-Hui blamed others for his actions. He was insulted to some degree—and responded with horrible violence—but being bullied or alienated did cause him to do what he did. Again, what needs to be explained is the willingness on the part of young people—almost entirely male—to use forms of violence that were once out of the question. This seems to be a matter of societal norms, child-rearing, and culture, not of abuse or legislation. Speaking into his camera, Cho said, "You had a hundred billion chances and ways to have avoided today. But you decided to spill my blood. You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option. The decision was yours. Now you have blood on your hands that will never wash off." This is a concise statement using cruelty and irresponsibility to justify violence in response to minor aggravation. Cho's statement expressed a false or exaggerated sense of grievance, reflecting a new and troubling attitude. According to psychologist Adrian Furnham, "We may have socialised young people... [to] find it easier and acceptable to blame their woes on others and society rather than on their own lack of ability and effort." Understanding, preventing, and even punishing that attitude is the real solution for such violence, if there is going to be one. That will entail a serious discussion of self control, modern freedoms, our culture, parental controls, and norms and

their roots—including religion. Of course, this prescription gives credence to the supposedly conservative argument that values matter most. It is supposed to be a sign of enlightenment to snicker at “values.” However, it wasn’t progress for us to move as a society from overemphasizing values to completely neglecting them. If this seems like moralizing, it is—and that is not a problem. It is painfully obvious during times like these that a morality deficit is causing more problems than a morality excess. Withholding judgment and failing to take firm measures causes as much pain as being judgmental or harsh. The most powerful example of this is the way Cho was handled by educational, medical, and legal institutions.

Virginia law could have prevented Cho’s buying guns, if all involved had taken a more punitive or public safety-minded approach. Virginia law forbids you from having a gun if you’re a stalker or have been involuntarily committed to an institution. In 2005, two female students reported being stalked by Cho, but didn’t press charges. If they would have, and Cho had been convicted, he would have been ineligible to purchase firearms once a background check was done. There was another opportunity: campus police recommended Cho be detained for mental evaluation. He was evaluated, a doctor found him depressed, then a state magistrate found him a danger to himself due to mental illness, but not a threat to others. The magistrate recommended outpatient treatment instead of involuntary commitment. In hindsight, Cho should have been involuntarily committed, making him ineligible under Virginia law to purchase a firearm. Then the federal-state disconnect would not have been decisive. As it happened, “causation” for the shooting is spread out across civil society, university, government, and mental health bureaucracies—there was no simple, single “cause” in the usual sense of the term.

As with most issues in politics, we’re given a false choice in the debate over the shootings: you can be liberal and say we need more gun control, and that the war in Iraq is proof of our nation’s dark heart, or you can be conservative and say that we

need more morals. This is not a real choice, it’s a phony debate. The most relevant facts about the Virginia Tech killings will force us outside of the ideological box. If liberals are willing to admit that strong moral judgments could have altered Cho’s choice of means, and if conservatives are willing to admit that gun control laws could have repressed Cho’s motives, then we will have learned something from this inexcusable criminal act .

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# ON THE USE OR ABUSE OF AL-FĀRĀBĪ

Aaron Roberts

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*Metaphysics as Rhetoric: Alfarabi's Summary of Plato's 'Laws'*. By Joshua S. Parens. Edited by Shahrouh Akhavi. State University of New York Press. 1995. 195 pp. \$20.

Due to our historical distance from fourth-century classical Greece, the interpretation of Plato is a topic fraught with countless philological and hermeneutical difficulties. Arabic philosopher Abū Nasr al-Fārābī (c. 870-950) made a lifelong study of the classical Greek tradition, and his interpretation of Plato is thought by some (e.g. Leo Strauss and his students) to be as authoritative as St. Thomas Aquinas' interpretation of Aristotle. Yet the interpretations of Fārābī are decidedly more radical than those of Thomas. With Fārābī's unorthodox reading in mind, it would be necessary to demonstrate his access to a mostly unadulterated text (translation or otherwise) of Plato's Greek, in order to demonstrate Fārābī's competence as a commentator for Plato's *Laws*.

Within Near Eastern Studies and related fields, it is generally assumed that Arabic philosophy consists of a refined reiteration of Aristotelian and Platonic thought. Yet frequently an Arab philosopher's acquaintance with classical Greek thought came only through Arabic, Syriac, or Persian translations of synopses or summaries written by later Graeco-Roman commentators. According to Dimitri Gutas, Galen was the principal transmitter of Platonism into the Arab world. In cases such as these, Arabic commentaries on Greek thinkers may have come to be mired in errors and misunderstandings resulting from errors of transmission and translation.

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*Aaron Roberts is a second-year in the College. He is majoring in Fundamentals: Issues and Texts.*

These things aside, Fārābī's "Precise Exposition of Plato's *Laws*" is unique in that it is the only pre-modern, either European or Arabic, exposition of Plato's *Laws* that has also remained fully intact for posterity. Moreover, it is "the only commentary by a [M]uslim author on a Platonic writing of which we possess the original Arabic text" (Mahdi, 1961, pp. 1-2 cited in Parens, xix). Thus, the possibility looms large that Fārābī may be equipped to provide us great insights into Platonic thought.

In a study entitled *Metaphysics as Rhetoric*, Joshua Parens investigates Fārābī's commentary vis-à-vis the *Laws*. Among other aims, Parens's intention is to establish respectability for Fārābī's Platonic interpretation. Parens's book is thus a dual-exegetical work, exploring both the intricacies of Plato's *Laws* and also of Fārābī's commentary on the text.

Fārābī's argument suggests that Plato wrote in a particularly deceptive mode so as to obscure his meaning from the philosophically uninitiated. According to Parens, Fārābī's commentary does not mechanically reproduce the Greek manuscript's reading of the *Laws* because it was not his intention to do so. Writing on Plato's longest dialogue, Fārābī condenses Plato's partially obscured teaching by following the Greek of the *Laws* in one of three ways: he (a) merely summarizes, (b) summarizes with additional comment, or (c) omits reference to elements conspicuous in our modern Greek manuscript. However, Parens follows Strauss in postulating that most deviations from the explicit language and sense of the original Greek are in fact meaningful. Fārābī's central thesis in his commentary on the *Laws* is that men *qua* wise men present a praise-worthy public persona in order to conceal their occasionally subversive teachings:

“The wise...sometimes repeatedly present themselves as possessing a certain character so that people will judge that this is how they always are. Then, afterwards, they act in a different manner, and that goes unnoticed by people who presume they are acting as they had formerly.”

As an apology for the above practice, Fārābī follows by relating this observation on the human *psyche* to the subject of his commentary: [“T]he wise Plato did not permit himself to present and uncover all kinds of knowledge to all people. Therefore he followed the path of using symbols, riddles, obscurity, and difficulty, so that knowledge would not fall into the hands of those who do not deserve it and be deformed or into the hands of someone who is not aware of its worth or uses it improperly.”

Fārābī concludes by stating, “In this he was right”. In his commentary, his purpose is thus to uncover “the secrets of his books” and to “extract...the notions to which he alluded,” by which his commentary might become “an aid to anyone who wants to be cognizant of that book.” Nonetheless, Fārābī’s reading of the *Laws* is decisively at odds with the traditional reading of Plato in general and of his *Laws* in particular. Because of this, we must either abandon the contemporary interpretive tradition or question Fārābī’s access to the *Laws*—and, by extension, his competency as a commentator—in order to successfully adjudicate the two positions.

Because of this, Dimitri Gutas has invoked historical and philological evidence to demonstrate that Fārābī is ill-suited for the task of Platonic commentator. Because it is not certain that Fārābī read Greek, Gutas appears to prefer the assumption that Fārābī was *unable* to read Greek. He assumes that Fārābī’s knowledge of the *Laws* must have been derived from a translation of sorts. However, we do not today possess the Arabic translation of the *Laws* from which we assume Fārābī had been working. Thus, in contradistinction to the position of Parens, Gutas proposes that Fārābī did not have direct access to Plato’s *Laws*,

but instead to Galen’s “Synopsis of the *Laws*” in the fourth book of his *Synopses of Plato’s Works*—of which today we possess only a fragment. In addition to Fārābī’s commentary on the *Laws*, an abridgement of Galen’s lost “Synopsis” comes down to us in the Escorial manuscript 883, which Gutas assumes to have been authored by Christian philosopher and theologian, Abu-l-Farag Ibn-at-Tayyib (d. 1044). However, Gutas asserts that neither one is derivative from the other on the grounds that Fārābī’s commentary contains Platonic material absent in Ibn-at-Tayyib’s text, and vice versa=. Because there exist “striking similarities in both language and extent” between the texts of Ibn-at-Tayyib and Fārābī, Gutas adduces that the two texts are based upon the same third source: namely, Galen’s lost “Synopsis.” Because Galen’s lost “Synopsis” is at best only a partial presentation of Platonic thought, any commentary that makes recourse to that text alone could be considered to be only a sophomoric attempt at Platonic interpretation.

Although he denies legitimacy to Parens’ scholarship, Gutas recognizes that Fārābī habitually perverts or changes the meaning and flow of the original source text on which he comments: “Such editorial intrusions are consistent with Fārābī’s *modus operandi* in other works and with his stated purpose in this one...We know that Fārābī used original sources (i.e., translations) in Arabic and modified them to suit his explanatory purposes...The Fārābī exposition... is ‘doctored’ along the explicatory and doctrinal lines customary with this philosopher... Fārābī molded transmitted material to fashion his own philosophy” (Gutas 1997, 112-119).

Gutas does not (unlike Parens) employ this observation to explain why Fārābī’s putative summary sometimes deviates from the language and sense of Plato’s original Greek, but instead to explain why Fārābī’s text differs from the inferred language of Galen’s lost “Synopsis”. Gutas infers the reading of the “Synopsis” from the Escorial manuscript 883, which he concludes is close to the original sense of Galen’s text.

Nonetheless, because Fārābī was a thinker of the highest caliber, it seems unreasonable to assume that he would deign to reproduce the contents of Galen's "Synopsis" for any reason. As Stern points out in his review of the first critical addition of Fārābī's commentary, "[I]t is difficult to see why Farabi should have made a compendium of a compendium" (Stern, 398). In fact, Fārābī refers the reader within the text to "the original book on which this book is based", indicating that he was aware of, and had access to, a presumably faithful reproduction of Plato's Greek. Moreover, the language of the Conclusion to Fārābī's commentary explicitly suggests that he had access to a copy of Plato's *Laws*. Parens attempts to demonstrate the historical plausibility for this position. However, it should be noted that his account is conspicuously absent of any and all philological analysis. We are presented with two possible scenarios that might account for Fārābī's access to an intact copy of the *Laws*. First, in his *Fihrist*, Ibn al-Nadīm attests to the existence of at least two translations of the *Laws* circulating through the Arab world: one by Hunayn b. Ishāq (d. 974) and another by Yahyā b. 'Adī (d. 873), who was himself a student of Fārābī. Ninth-century caliph Al-Ma'mūn had procured many Greek manuscripts from Byzantium and had brought them back to the Arab world. It seems implausible that Fārābī would not have had knowledge of these translations. (Parens also notes that similar or identical Byzantine manuscripts serve as the source for our present day, critical, Budé edition of Plato's *Laws*). He suggests that Hunayn translated a Byzantine manuscript of the *Laws* into Syriac, which Yahyā then translated into Arabic. Perhaps this is the translation that Fārābī might have employed. Assuming the competency of the translators to be quite high, Fārābī would have had recourse to a text of Plato's *Laws* similar to our own today. Second, Parens suggests that Fārābī may have gained access to a translation of the Greek text while studying in the Byzantine region. According to Fārābī's coeval, al-Khattābī, Fārābī himself had spent upwards of eight years in "the lands of the Greeks"—i.e., either Byzantine proper or Syrian-

Christian territories neighboring Byzantium, such as Antioch or Harrān. Certainly, Parens believes, Fārābī had at least been to Harrān, in order to visit one of his teachers, Yūhannā b. Haylān, as we know from al-Khattābī again. Gutas' response to the above challenge consists in suggesting that the above account is contrived or implausible and is outweighed by the philological data he presents. Does a tenth-century teacher from Baghdad have anything to teach us about a fourth-century Greek whose influence and importance rivals even the Christian Bible? The question is best stated as follows: Does philological data conclusively overwhelm historical plausibility? Unless further insights arise, the issue remains unresolved.

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# SUSAN SONTAG: AN APPRECIATION

Aaron Greenberg

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*At The Same Time: Essays and Speeches.* By Susan Sontag. Edited by Paolo Dilonardo and Anne Jump. Farrar Straus and Giroux. 235 pp. \$23.

I came to Susan Sontag the same way as most overeager late-adolescents of this generation: near her death, looking for the rigorous, searching essays few contemporary thinkers offered, where names like Sartre, Adorno and Benjamin appeared without introduction.

Few American writers rival her in scope still. Joan Didion comes to mind, but her interests seem parochial and her politics rather complacent when compared to the nearly erotic power of Sontag's intellect. Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, and Lionel Trilling perhaps approached her position as a public intellectual. But Sontag was a force. She wrote about film without ever being a film scholar (in fact publicly resenting the academic study of film); she wrote fiction without being a novelist; her cultural criticism was informed by philosophical study (at Harvard and Oxford and at Chicago) but she was no philosopher.

It was ironic too, because like most of those late-adolescents, I found so many uncanny parallels in Sontag's early biography: reading and loving *The Magic Mountain* (a book she apparently read aloud every night when she was fifteen—I was seventeen); finding revolutionary brilliance in Georg Lukács; ending up at Chicago. I even went to high school across the way from her *alma mater*, North Hollywood High—though my school, where Sontag is assigned in photography and English classes, didn't even exist when she graduated.

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*Aaron Greenberg is a second-year in the College, majoring in Philosophy.*

It's for all of these reasons that I anticipated her first posthumously collected writings, *At The Same Time*, released by her longtime publisher Farrar, Straus and Giroux. The collection gathers material that Sontag prepared before her death, essays that (she would argue) exist only as "drafts" but to everyone else are as good as polished works. Editors Paolo Dilonardo and Anne Jump informally divide the essays into three groups according to the context of their publication (long essays, magazine pieces, and speeches); they wisely do not try to append labels (like "politics," "aesthetics" or "culture") to these sections, as any good reader of Sontag knows that such divisions will be only superficial.

Her son, the political writer David Reiff, offers a celebratory forward. "She was interested in everything," he writes, "she wanted to experience everything, taste everything, go everywhere, do everything." This enthusiasm for the beautiful and exciting things in the world spoke through her prose. Some could accuse her of aestheticism (and she probably wouldn't shuck that label so easily) but Reiff reminds us just how seriously she took art.

Culture was not only a necessarily political category but also a normative one. Art offered ethical and political knowledge. The best essay in the collection, whose tropes should be familiar to anyone acquainted with the Sontag corpus, is "An Argument About Beauty."

It opens the collection and, in many ways, inaugurates the ideological and aesthetic oppositions present in all of her work. She begins the essay with the late pope John Paul II's 2002 comment on the Catholic sex abuse scandals—"A great work of art may be blemished, but its beauty remains; and this is a truth which any intel-

lectual honest critic will recognize”—and remarks on how beauty, traditionally understood, meant much more than the kind of subjective, contained judgment that we moderns favor; its force can be religious and eminently moral.

When the moral world disintegrated and moral judgments themselves became suspect, so too did aesthetic judgments. And with traditional beauty went traditional taste: “Today, good taste seems even more retrograde an idea than beauty.” The consumer capitalist society and political culture that degrades moral judgments (*except* for their political efficacy and *except* when they are religiously motivated) also break down any sense of objectivity in aesthetics: ‘beauty’ becomes a snobbish, reactionary category. Instead of calling things “beautiful,” we call them “interesting”—and with so many unintended moral consequences. She finishes, “Imagine saying, ‘That sunset is interesting.’”

The insights in this essay, an otherwise conservative consideration of aesthetic judgment, do not lie in matching up the aesthetic and the moral—thinkers have recognized this nexus since at least Aristotle. Instead, she reminds us of the importance, even the *necessity*, of preserving some sense of beauty. Sontag was a materialist and a moral realist through and through. But she was also the last intellectual to ever condemn popular art: her “Notes on Camp” practically invented American highbrow interest in ephemera and pop culture. In the “Beauty” essay, she lambastes “the resistance to the idea of ‘good taste,’” but in “Notes on Camp,” again, the essay that jettisoned her to the ranks of major critic and taste-maker, she celebrated the impulses in pop culture to produce over-earnest kitsch.

The tension between the aesthetic and the moral in her work finds its resolution in her own moral judgments which are themselves *aesthetic*, and her aesthetic judgments, which are by necessity *moral*. The discovery of cultural artifacts and her great defenses of neglected writers (especially those whose careers suffered under Soviet Communism) attest to this moral vision for art as both historically contingent and essentially moral.

In “Loving Dostoevsky” she remarks on finding Lenoid Tsyppkin, a Soviet medical researcher by trade who never saw his work in publication, but whose *Summer in Baden-Baden* she considers one of the “most beautiful, exalting, and original achievements of a century’s worth of fiction and parafiction.” An argument can be made that Sontag’s greatest legacy will be the countless writers, artists and filmmakers she carried into the canon, acting as many neglected artists’ greatest champion—among them Danilo Kis, Bela Tarr, James Salter and Fernando Pessoa.

This spirit of constant inquiry drips off even her last pages. As a provocative cultural and political critic she could be devastating and bombastic, though always sincere. When she wrote in the *Partisan Review* that despite its cultural achievements, the “white race is the cancer of human history,” she raised the ire of thinkers on both the left and right. As a rhetorician she could be polemical; but again, her polemics served her opinions, which were sincere and informed.

Sontag was never reticent to recant an old position. Her last published work of nonfiction, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), refuted her thesis in *On Photography* (1978).

Readers should find their best opportunity yet to appraise the controversy that dogged her published statements about 9/11. The first, which appeared in the *New Yorker* soon after those events, was written while Sontag was in Berlin, and it reflects the kind of refracted, critical distance available only to those people who experienced 9/11 through cable news. Her infamous statement (“In the matter of courage...whatever may be said of the perpetrators of Tuesday’s slaughter, they were not cowards”) gains new meaning if we begin to understand it as a response to the American media’s own quick moral judgments and blind patriotism.

In a newly published interview “A Few Weeks After,” Sontag complicates her position on the attacks. She at once challenges the language of

a “struggle between two rival civilizations” but also endorses “very narrowly focused” violence against Osama bin Laden, belying any ostensible pacifism. Against the argument that America brought the attacks on themselves (a charge leveled, for example, by the late French theorist and longtime adversary Jean Baudrillard), Sontag responds in no uncertain terms, “To in any way excuse or condone this atrocity by blaming the United States—even though they has been much in American conduct abroad to blame—is morally obscene. Terrorism is the murder of innocent people. This time it was mass murder.”

Sontag’s commitment to democratic discourse and submitting her own judgments (and those of her contemporaries) to scrutiny, made her a rarity, and sometimes an unpopular figure. She called Soviet communism “fascism with a human face” at a time when so many of her colleagues were seduced by the prospect of political Marxism in the East.

*At the Same Time* offers some of her last words delivered in public. The speech that gives the collection its name (“At the Same Time: The Novelist and Moral Reasoning”) celebrates the work of South African novelist Nadine Gordimer. A prolific novelist herself—winning the 2000 National Book Award for Fiction for her *In America*—Sontag has insights into the novelist’s crafts that make “At the Same Time” especially rewarding. “A novel,” she writes, “is *not* a set of proposal, or a list, or a collection of agendas, or an (open-ended, revisable) itinerary. It is the journey itself—made, experienced, and completed.” This particularly experiential understanding of the novel argues for its realist function (capturing the world for the readers’ delights) while leaving open the possibility for moral and political judgments (which might even be contained within that experience). It is no coincidence that this thesis was motivated by a consideration of Gordimer’s work—she might be the most politically engaged writer in the language.

Sontag understood the novelist’s goal in political terms. Novels are subversive in the way that they order experience. (This thesis also belies the

notion that much of her work is simply a footnote to, for example, Walter Benjamin, whose critical studies of Baudelaire reached remarkably different conclusions about novels, modernity and politics.) She writes that the transitional (post-national) capitalist culture “makes literature irrelevant—a mere utility for bringing us what we already know.” And she has a point. But her dire forecasts never yield to adolescent despair—writers like Gordimer can redeem the novelist’s “prophetic and critical tasks...[necessary] to understand our fate.”

In her capacity as an artist (novelist, filmmaker), Sontag certainly saw herself as undertaking an aesthetic and a moral understanding of “our fate.” But being a critic as well, she never shirked from judgments that might increase this understanding. Her incisive application of her own theory of photography to the spectacle of Abu Ghraib in “Regarding the Torture of Others” brought a fresh voice to a media event that was both politically over-studied and aesthetically misunderstood.

The position between spectator and subject, subject and apparatus, especially in the age of global (corporate) media, receives some tender treatment in the essay. She presages (correctly) that the permanence of digital images, the identification of the viewer and the nexus between an unending (un-endable) “War on Terror,” would produce “thousands more snapshots and videos.”

Sontag was an aesthete alive to the moral conflicts of global capitalism without ever falling prey to fancy (and fashionable) nihilism. Few thinkers have ever risen to her level because so few have ever been able to navigate the world so well in so many conceits. Her death fills a great void in the discourse—and it’s unlikely this “MTV generation” will produce so full or self-reflexive an intellect. It is only through (what will likely become) the cottage industry of unpublished essays and ephemera that we will again engage the world through the critical lens of one of this last century’s most original and important thinkers.

# Safety Awareness Alert

**At high noon every single day (weekends, too) from January 23rd through March 17th**, three women have been mugged at the center of the academic quads by an unknown aggressor, described as an:

“African American male of medium build, aged 20–30, wearing clothes.”

Police believe that this may be part of a crime pattern, and recommend that those three women avoid the center of the quads at noon, rather than returning to the scene of the crime every day out of apparently morbid curiosity. Police are investigating.

**\*Remember, if you see somebody matching the above description of the mugger, immediately seek help, blow your safety whistle, and shout “FIRE!” since that has been shown to attract more attention than shouting “STEREOTYPE!”**

Safety Awareness Alerts are based on information that has been reported to the police. The reported facts may not have been investigated or confirmed, and may actually just be the figment of someone’s imagination. Crime prevention tips and Security Alerts will be posted at this site regularly when an incident occurs that should be brought to the immediate attention of the University community.

- Check the historically significant Revolutionary War publication, Common Sense, available online at: <http://commonsense.uchicago.edu>, to learn about criteria for the posting of Alerts.
- To receive these alerts via email, please visit: <https://listhost.uchicago.edu/mailman/listinfo/safety-awareness>. For a map showing the locations of the University Emergency Phones, go to: <http://commonsense.uchicago.edu/phone-map.html>. Comments or suggestions about security, Grove Parc, or related services should be sent to Hank Webber, Vice President for Community and Government Affairs, Admin. Rm. 605, or by email to [sauc@midway.uchicago.edu](mailto:sauc@midway.uchicago.edu).

PLEASE NOTE: The University of Chicago Police patrol area has in recent years has been expanded considerably. In October of 2001, the patrol area was expanded south to 64<sup>th</sup> Street, and in March of 2004, it was expanded north to 39<sup>th</sup> Street. In September of 2005 it was expanded north to Navy Pier and west to the foothills of the Rockies, but that seemed excessive, and was changed back. Therefore, Security Alerts cover crimes committed not only in the Hyde Park neighborhood, but also in the surrounding North Kenwood/Oakland, and Woodlawn neighborhoods. Crime patterns are irregular throughout the patrol area, except that the victims are often portrayed as helpless [and blameless] academic types and perpetrators are often portrayed as young locals who are trapped in an insuperable socioeconomic and cultural chasm from which crime is the only viable escape. Readers are advised to attend carefully to the noted location of any reported incident and remember that traveling south of the Midway is *always* a bad idea.