

**Myopia and Multiplicity:
Narrative, Interpretation, and History in Richard Linklater's *Slacker***

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Senior Thesis
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April 5, 2017

You wait for what will not happen and what you should
 not expect
 My friendly warning:
 Don't bury your heads like ostriches.
 Raise your eyes,
 Look around
 There!
 – Dziga Vertov¹

Slacker savors the everyday. In doing so, the film's fictional structure explores and estranges the oddities within a seemingly dull 1989 day in Austin, Texas. In transit, yet centered, the first shot of the film opens in the interior of a dimly lit bus. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, a nameless man² gazes out of a bus window as the grey morning landscape rushes by. After this man alights from the bus, he strolls to enter a taxicab. Within the cab, he describes his recent dream to a clearly indifferent cabbie, captured in his boredom by a medium close-up shot. He earnestly reflects that this was "one of those dreams that are just completely *real*." Yet, unlike many lucid dreams which are either terrifying or blissful, he explains, in this dream he traversed all of the minutiae of a typical day: reading, watching TV, even going to the laundromat. "I was just travelling around, staring out the windows of busses." Insofar as the very first scene has just depicted this same man staring out of the window of a bus, this reference subtly destabilizes the reality of the opening scene. In addition to the comical familiarity of this situation – a person rambling about a dream that truly bores you – the precarious status of "the real" in the monologue provides a poignant framing for the film which follows. Continuing, he recalls that in the dream he wrote a book that questioned the limits of individual consciousness and perspective. Explaining the necessary limits of experience and knowledge, he analogizes it to Dorothy's choice of the Yellow Brick Road over and against other paths in *The Wizard of Oz*,

¹ Dziga Vertov, *Filmmakers on Filmmaking: "Kinoks Revolution"* (Indiana University Press, 1995), 80.

² The actor is actually Richard Linklater himself.

itself a narrative which blurred the threshold between fantasy and reality. With regard to a stable relation to reality, his account of this dream becomes doubly precarious. The account not only suggests a porous threshold between dreams and consciousness, but also blurs fictional narratives and claims to knowledge.

In a simple sense, then, the opening scenes compel the viewer to ask whether we are still watching a dream. The dream narrative casts doubt upon the clear boundaries between knowledge and misunderstanding. More importantly, as the film proceeds, we witness various characters who attempt to narrate complex reality into some coherence through narrative explanations and conspiracy theories. As I will later explain, the presentation of these accounts destabilizes the seemingly clear distinctions between historical accounts and fiction. Thus, these epistemological questions become an urgent topic for an analysis of *Slacker*. How do we differentiate veridical perception and knowledge from mere subjective illusions or the tainting effects of ideology? When do these differentiations fail? How do our desires, ideologies, and fictions mediate our understandings and narrative accounts of real events? The film's hazy origins stage the subsequent scenes and characters in the unstable, yet fertile territory between knowledge and story, between reality and fantasy, between perception and illusion. More than just a dry re-fashioning of these epistemological questions, though, I will suggest that the film represents both historiographical and political stakes of these drives and limits of knowledge.

Each of these dynamics centers around story, manifest in historical accounts, narratives which aspire to understand the present, or stories of self. Yet, as the camera lingers alongside pedantic café-dwellers, as it depicts a frustrated couple arriving late to a movie, one might ask oneself: "Where is the *story*?" Such a question is both entirely reasonable and telling, insofar as this 100-minute fiction film has neither central action nor character development, as the terms

are typically understood. Thus, when viewed as a singular work of narrative fiction, the film seems to lack a central plot. Since the film is not very well known, it is necessary to provide a brief example of how this plotless structure functions. In a café, a man rises from a table of conversing men, and leaves the café. As he exits the building, a stranger follows him outside. The stranger presents the former with a theory about the government's secret cabal with aliens. After a few minutes of conversing, the original character from the café walks inside a home, and the camera remains outside with the alien conspiracy theorist. When two characters then pass by the conspiracy theorist and enter a home, the camera departs from the conspiracy theorist and follows them into the home. So on, and so on. The camera enters a scene with one character and leaves with another. Thus, throughout the whole film, the audience never watches any one character for longer than a few minutes before the storyline moves to focus some new scene and character. Each scene, then, is connected through some fleeting interaction between characters. In this movement, the camera becomes a figure for a sort of curious spectator. The same wandering curiosity which characterizes the opening monologue of the film also informs the plot structure.

The description, a plotless, dialogue-driven film that meanders through the events of a dreary day, may evoke a dry avant-garde filmic exercise: some intellectual exhibitionism that compels the watcher to cringe in masochistic boredom, only to then ascertain whether she *really* understood the stakes of the immense boredom. On the contrary, I suggest that *Slacker* tantalizes the reader's anticipation for narrative climax and unity, even while depicting the banal contingencies and quiet desperations in a given day. This enticement of the reader could only function if the reader approaches and interacts with a text with particular values and expectations. The expectation of central action or central subject within a work of narrative

fiction is both commonsensical, and aligns with structuralist theory dating back to the Aristotelian theory of dramatic narrative structure.³ Thus, insofar as the film is fictional, it is reasonable for readers to expect that the diverging scenes may ultimately converge at some central action. Only *after* the film's very last scene does the viewer definitively recognize that there was no central action or ultimate integration of these disjointed characters and scenes. In other words, only at the end do we realize that *Slacker* is not a story at all, according to typical standards.

At this moment of realization after the last scene, the question for the reader transforms; the subconscious Aristotelian who has been inquiring, "When is the story going to come together?" shifts to inquire, "What was this movie *about*?" In response to the latter question, the majority of the interpretations have reduced *Slacker* to a movie about 1989 slacker youth culture in Austin's University City. Rob Stone, one of the only academics who has analyzed the work, suggests, "[Linklater] explores the mindset of an isolated, regional community whose liberal, left-wing, existentialist philosophy and lifestyle is at odds with the electorate and its thrice-elected Republican government."⁴ Roger Ebert claimed, "Linklater wants to show us a certain strata of campus life at the present time."⁵ Such limp historicizing, conflating the fiction film with documentary, demonstrates the viewer's search for unified meaning from the film without central action. This is not to say that the film does not show many traces of a particular historical moment, but that its meaning is not reducible to these historical likenesses. Throughout every scene, the film erupts with both verbal and visual references to historical events and pop-culture

³ The key elements for Aristotle's theory of dramatic narrative structure all relate to the plot of a narrative. Insofar as plot is the source of narrative, he suggests that the three key elements of plot are: (1) completeness, (2) magnitude, (3) unity. I will explicate this theory and its relevance in section I.

⁴ Rob Stone, *Walk, Don't Run: The Cinema of Richard Linklater* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2013), 81.

⁵ Roger Ebert. "Slacker Review," <http://www.rogerebert.com>, 1991.

figures of the time: abandoned “Ron Paul for President” signs in the background of a shot, explicit damnations of the growing mass incarceration system, references to Scooby-Doo, and JFK assassination conspiracy theorists. Furthermore, it captures a genre of the frequently described ennui of Generation X twenty-somethings in America. So while these resonances exist, reading *Slacker* as a historical documentary on account of its lack of narrative unity and historical references overlooks the film’s fictionality. Beyond just this logical fallacy, such readings downright erase the complexities of the film’s playful representation of historical accounts.

Interestingly, however, these reductionist accounts reveal two essential features of how we read, interpret, and enliven meaning in texts: (1) even in response to this text without a central action and unified plot, there is a deep drive for unified meaning; (2) each reader interprets through a prism of certain expectations and values which themselves are inseparable from a messy web of texts, historical circumstances, ideologies, and desires. Barthes put it well in *S/Z*: “This ‘I’ which approaches a text is itself already a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite or, more precisely, lost.”⁶ As we see in the interpretations of *Slacker* above, the readings are shaped by a drive for a coherent understanding of the text. While we might accept that this is the case with fictional texts, *Slacker* represents how we bring this drive for coherence to our accounts and understandings of reality. Moreover, the characters’ constant references to cultural texts and historical events portray the interplay between these texts and the characters’ interpretations and understandings of reality. Insofar as the text entices its viewer’s expectations and interpretations for unity, I suggest that the film interpellates the viewer as a similar interpreter of texts, a generator of coherent stories from both reality and fiction.

⁶ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, (London: Blackwell Publishing, 1990), 8.

Just as its diffuse structure tantalizes the viewer's desire to find and interpret narrative unity, so too does *Slacker* represent diegetic characters who similarly seek and interpret unity from their own complex realities: an alien conspiracy theorist, a JFK conspiracy theorist, a breathy old man who provides an existentialist monologue. By representing the various ways in which people provide accounts of self and explain the present to themselves through story, *Slacker* demonstrates how we are always in the process of interpreting and narrating reality to our selves. Indeed, these generalizing narrative understandings are necessary elements of knowledge, and of navigating a social realm. At the same time, the multiplicitous structure of the film contradicts the unified claims that many of these characters make. More significantly, in each of these accounts there are overlapping and distinct drives for a certain type of coherence. As the film depicts, then, these interpretations and narrative understandings are inextricably shaped by the historically contingent web of cultural texts, historical circumstances, ideologies, and drives. This shifting web functions as both an epistemic limit and an ideological prism through which the characters perceive, interpret, and narrate events.

Nietzsche characterized the drive for coherence as a foundational function of human knowledge: "In our thought, the essential feature is fitting new material into old schemas (= Procrustes' bed⁷), making equal what is new."⁸ Nietzsche's epistemology posits an inseparable relationship between values, drives, and the human pursuit of knowledge; he claims, "It is our needs that interpret the world; our drives and our for and against."⁹ Thus, as with many of

⁷ Procrustes was the son of Poseidon. He was famed for inviting people into his home and, through cutting off their limbs one-by-one, forcing them to lie in a bed. Thus, a Procrustean bed has appeared as a figure in many contexts to identify an argument or an idea that excludes and manipulates information to make a coherent point, according to some arbitrary standard. (Britannica)

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 299.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, aphorism § 481.

Nietzsche's epistemological claims, the human will-to-truth cannot be separated from the human value drives. Insofar as we come to know things of the world in relation to their effects and causes upon us, we can never fully separate a pursuit of knowledge from either our own ends and evaluations or the social values which are always informing these evaluations.¹⁰ Within this account, even perception itself is inseparable from some evaluative judgment: "It cannot be doubted that all sense perceptions are permeated with value judgments... Each individual color is also for us an expression of value."¹¹ This is not to suggest that man is the measure of all things. Indeed, we can have veridical perception of mind independent objects. The question here, however, is not whether we are perceiving an object X that exists independent of the mind. Rather, the film's representations of our drive for coherence push us to ask how our perception is fundamentally linked with evaluative inferences, ideology, and interpretation. Thus "the drive to coherence" here refers to two overlapping functions. (1) our synthesis and interpretations of new information and sense data are always shaped by certain epistemic limits; (2) insofar as our knowledge is fundamentally formed by evaluative drives, the perception and interpretation of new data is always shaped by drives and ideological horizons.

Taken together, these questions and trends lead to the ultimate subject of my analysis. I suggest that Linklater's work particularly represents the manifestations of this myopic, Procrustean nature of thought in two ways. The first, a challenge to positivist or objective notions of history, emerges from the contrast between, on the one hand, the film's multiplicity and, on the other, the characters' unified accounts. The "numberless beginnings" of the film directly contradict the idea that one could even provide a local history without missing central

¹⁰ I grant that scientific and mathematic deductions do transcend the shaping effects of evaluative perception and ideology. The social sciences, however, insofar as they are linked to history and social theory, are still completely shaped by the epistemological frame which I articulate here.

¹¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Will to Power*. 278.

causes and effects. This is to say, all historical happenings are radically contingent, and exceed the human epistemic access and searches for cause and effect. Thus, if all historical accounts necessarily exclude some data considered superfluous, the film provides material to suggest that these choices for “disinterested” accounts are necessarily shaped by ideology and perspectivism. As a result, this pushes us to question how historical accounts are tied to story and to interpretation. More specifically, the film presents a significant trope among men in the film. They idolize destructive characters from history, apart from any understanding of the actors’ positive political goals. That is to say, they idolize the destructive act as a political end unto itself, as an expression of transcendent identity. This, I suggest, not only represents and satirizes a certain genre of masculine ideals, but also an idea of dissent that matches a certain political affect in the historical moment of 1980s America.

At the same time, I argue that *Slacker* affirms the weird joy of interpretation and the generative act that it constitutes. Ultimately, then, the film’s wandering eye explores the epistemological territory of the narrative shapings of reality, but does not resolve them. Because the film is not attempting to portray a “true account” of some set of historical or cultural conditions, it embraces and reveals the fabrics of its own perspectivalism. In this embrace, the film affirms the power of representation, of storytelling, of interpretation to shape and re-shape reality.

Section I analyzes the film’s *cinema verité* realism in conjunction with its narrative structure. The relationship between the hit-and-run scene and the rest of the movie will provide an excellent example of how the film interpellates the viewers into their interpretive and anticipatory habits.

Section II will analyze some of the historical and textual background which frames this

film. Through articulating where this film fits into a national history of Reagan-era culture wars, neoliberalism, increasingly complex systems of globalization, and the rapid growth of the entertainment industry, I will clarify the film's mediation of these histories. This section characterizes *Slacker* as a text which represents the dialectical relation between historical circumstances and a web of cultural texts and historical accounts. This dialectic informs not only the characters, but also the film itself.

Section III questions the film's representation of the shaping influence of TV and film. We all know that TV and film representations both reflect and inform our cultural values, but this section asks the inverse question. How does our capacity to watch TV and film require a narrative impulse in the first instance? Moreover, how do these dominant modes of cultural representation shape a shared cultural intertext? Through Sergei Eisenstein's theory of montage, I suggest that the experience of the moving image similarly demonstrates our narrative impulses. These capacities and impulses to derive meaning and narrative from sequences of shots demonstrate our constant evaluation/interpretation. In two pivotal scenes, the camera leaps into the perspective of diegetic cameras. If we are always evaluating and fashioning understandings of reality, these scenes of rupture and their montage quality affirm the power of filmic representation as a medium to do so. Figured through the shift of perspective into diegetic cameras, the joy of shaping and representing embraces the fashioning of the past – a thrill in the act of shaping reality to our own fantasy. The exclusion is a necessary component of the embrace.

I. Drifting from Dramaturgy

As I suggested earlier, the dream monologue of the man in the taxi cab provides a glimpse of the wandering curiosity and uncertainty which shapes the remainder of the film. After

he concludes this monologue, and departs the taxicab, the nameless dreamer drifts along the sidewalk. Suddenly, we hear a dull thud and a screech outside the frame. Panning slowly, the camera moves from our dreaming storyteller to capture a rusty white car skidding away around a corner. The pan slows, and at a mid-angle, the shot slowly scans over a grocery bag, a melon, and then the splayed body of an elderly woman in the street. As the camera continues panning slowly, the washed-out color palette almost renders indiscernible the dull blood on the road. The pedestrian with whom the camera entered slowly approaches the scene. The camera begins to pull back slowly. Suddenly, a pink-clad jogger enters the scene, shouting, “Don’t touch her! You need to call the police.” The camera continues to draw back slowly. The jogger trots in place. Each reaction is eerily dull, complementing the surrealism as the camera continues to pull back. The total effect of this method is one of surreal anti-climax. Just as the camera’s original acquisition of the macabre scene moves eerily slow, almost overlooking the drab blood, so too does this pull-back estrange the climax from the scene. Moreover, the character’s responses, as if this were an everyday event or burden to their personal plans, demonstrate a deeply surreal self-interest.

With the site of the hit-and-run and its oddities still in deep focus, the scene shifts when a car enters the frame and parks. This car appears conspicuously similar to the car which fled the hit-and-run scene. A young man exits the car, and the next scene is within this young man’s apartment. He takes a call wherein it seems that he is being informed of the incident. He asks, “Oh drag. Anybody get a license plate number? Were there any witnesses?” His voice is level, controlled. The room is full of equal parts religious relics and pop-culture paraphernalia (Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head, the children’s book *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*, a poster of the infant from *Eraserhead*). Within three minutes, the police are outside of his apartment. In his last

act before submissively handing himself over to the police, he turns on a film projector. Projecting into an open cabinet, this film appears to be a home video. The film depicts a charming, nostalgic family scene; a smiling woman pushes a toddler in a plastic car. As the man leaves the scene, the camera lingers in the room, watching as this home video plays on an eerie loop. In the next scene, the police cuff him and, as they carry him to the car, the man who entered the hit-and-run scene with a grocery bag watches.

In the scenes that follow, we neither return to any of these characters, nor do we hear a single reference to this event. The event, the conflict, is subsumed and forgotten by the quotidian events which follow. As I suggested earlier, however, this scene frames the remaining scenes and discrete characters as if they might coalesce around this central action. Yet, even in the initial representation of this moment, the pull-back of the camera and the irked, flat responses of the passersby drain the scene of its own central conflict. With deep focus, the shot holds each self-interested character in their distinct solipsism; each is eager to return to the day's plans. The camera's pullback both centers this event and forces distance between the audience and the event. What appears to be a central conflict already is absorbed by the dull, everyday rhythms of a city; morning joggers, hasty businessmen, grocery-holding pedestrians. The spritely runner leaves the scene jogging. After she leaves, the hasty businessman drives off onto some other road. Thus, while this scene in some ways contains the potential sources for a central conflict, it also depicts its own indeterminacy. In this intersection, we see a foreshadowing of the multiplicities which will continue to diverge from one another throughout the film. At the same time, we are left to interpret a causal relationship to explain this hit-and-run; being good Aristotelians, we search for the unity, the completeness of action.

Aristotle's theory postulates the "primacy of plot" over and against character portrayal.¹² Insofar as narratives are imitations, "not of persons but of actions and of life," he suggests, "the plot is the source, and (as it were) the soul of tragedy."¹³ To constitute a plot, then, a sequence of events must needs correspond to three criteria: (1) *completeness*, in the form of a necessary causal and aesthetic link between beginning, middle, and end; (2) *magnitude*, as defined by both a quantity and quality of narrative time that complements the *completeness* of the text; and (3) *unity*, which emerges from the narrow representation of events that correspond with the central action, and the exclusion of superfluous trivia.¹⁴ For instance, a plot might lack unity if it depicts characters who have no connection to the central action. Imagine three added acts of *Hamlet* that followed around the gravedigger, despite the fact that these three acts were impertinent to the central action of the play: perhaps an interesting experiment, but, according to Aristotle, it would betray the unity of action that propels the source of *Hamlet's* brilliance.

This theory of plot and action is worth articulating because such expectations from fiction do pervade our cultural modes of reading. As literary theorist Peter Brooks suggests, "Even children quickly become virtual Aristotelians, insisting upon any storyteller's observation of the rules, upon proper beginnings, middles, and particularly ends."¹⁵ These sensibilities and expectations for the deep structures of a fictional story fundamentally shape how we read fiction. We expect action to coalesce around some central conflict or subject; we link certain events and interpret them in anticipation of such conflict; we interpret the significance of seemingly

¹² Aristotle. *Poetics*, (London: Penguin Books, 1996), § 4.3.

¹³ It will help to clarify the theory of dramatic narrative as "about actions and life." Northrop Frye's analysis of Old Comedy found that these plays are fundamentally based in the triumph of spring over winter; of course, the plays are guided by actors and human situations, but the representation of characters is not the primary source of the play. We only care to see the representation of characters, Frye suggests, because of the central action. Thus, although the events of a dramatic narrative represent humans undergoing some central conflict and resolution, the deep source and subject of the story is the hope and celebration of "life's" cycles. 96-97.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics*, §5.1.

¹⁵ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1984), 3.

discordant events after the conclusion, questioning how they fit into the ultimate central action. *Slacker* denies such unity. In fact, the plot is precisely the opposite of plot unity; each and every scene shift moves away from the prior scene's action. No central characters remain. One could suggest that the central action is this movement itself. Such a contention would stand, except for the fact that this is precisely the opposite of the theory of plot unity: if all narrative action is disordered, this does not imply that the disorder itself is central. This denial of unity, then, challenges the Aristotelian expectations and thereby estranges not only the fiction form, but also the viewer who has developed these deeply reinforced anticipations for fiction.

Several elements of the scene in the man's apartment certainly leave traces for interpretation that could lead to some constellation of causes and motives: the religious relics, the odd childish toys, the looping film projection in his room. When watching, I find myself enacting a quick and dirty Freudian reading: what does the footage of his mother pushing her son in this toy car signify in relation to the Oedipal father? Is the father behind the camera? How does this symbolically relate to the hit-and-run which has just occurred between mother and son? Furthermore, he seems to be leaving a story of self, rolling footage to point to his primary causes. What follows, however, does not in any way resolve or unify these open potentials. After the son submits himself to the police, a man outside suggests, "Looks like uh... some guy ran over his mother." Acting almost as a Greek chorus, this spectator is both storyteller and interpreter. In some crude sense, he resolves the mystery for us; his reasonable inference naturally informs our interpretation. The following scenes never sate the viewer's hunger for the subsequent discrete characters and acts to crystallize in some final central conflict. Only two scenes later, an alien conspiracy theorist fits various events from history and pop-culture into a total narrative of the government's secret arrangements with the aliens. It goes on.

One could imagine a different structure of *Slacker* which would resist my reading of its enticing narrative structure. If, for instance, the film had been composed of similarly quotidian events, but these events were neither connected nor placed with a single day, the film would be a very different work in its narrative structure. The obvious disjunction of the events would likely push the viewer away from the search for a narrative connection back to the hit-and-run. Just as we do when viewing such anti-narrative pieces, we might still read these disjunctions for meaning and perhaps forge a meaning for the work from this interpretation, but the viewing experience would be of a different sort. To take Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* as an example, the viewer can quickly discern that these events and shots do not take place in the same time or place, nor do they follow any central set of characters. Thus, the viewer watches differently, not so much anticipating a narrative climax as interpreting the work's thematic overlaps, finding unified trends in the series of truncated shots. Perhaps a more fitting example, Pynchon's 1965 novella *The Crying Lot of 49*, certainly plays with these same narrative expectations and conspiratorial urges. In this classic postmodern text, Oedipa Rex is the reader of a whirling set of signifiers, traces, and stories in her own life; her drive to find a unified explanation that ties these elements together compels her to read various signifiers that lead to no center. In contrast to this novel, however, *Slacker* follows no central subject. Instead, we the viewers are the central subject. We become the conspiracy theorists, scrounging for connections and *the story*, just as Oedipa Rex looks for evidence to prove the conspiracy. In the process, we continue generating the story and conspiracy, anew and with variation.

As I have already claimed, the film represents how this drive for coherence also manifests in narrative understandings and accounts of reality: mainly through conspiracy theories and theories of the present problems with "the system." Thematic overlaps between distinct

monologues almost seem to leave a set of points and overlaps that a reader can connect. The reader can easily link certain constellations of these figures and trends, in anticipation of a central convergence. One noteworthy theme in these conversations is the idolization of anarchically violent figures from history. From several different characters, we hear celebrations of figures who committed self-destructive acts of violence: Squeaky Fromme, who attempted to assassinate President Gerald Ford, John Hinckley Jr., who attempted to assassinate Reagan, Leon Czolgosz, who assassinated President McKinley. As a fact of history, the political ideologies and motives of each of these assassins were very different; John Hinckley Jr. attempted to assassinate Reagan so as to gain the attention of Jodie Foster. His obsession for her began after seeing the fiction film *Taxi Driver*.¹⁶ Squeaky Fromme was a former cultist of Charles Manson, who hoped to fight for environmental rights through her assassination. For the characters who praise these figures, the figures' motives seem to be of less concern, than their self-destructive attack of the symbolic order, of figures from the "single-world-order." Thus, once more, the film seems to leave certain traces that beg to be linked. In the following section, I suggest that these overlaps do indeed represent two different relations with history: (1) they demonstrate a conflation and deep distrust of institutions of power, and a corresponding idolization of rogue actors around the 1989 moment in the United States; (2) these accounts are representative of the way that ideology informs historical accounts and understandings.

II. History and its (Dis)contents

Why are these people being forgotten from history? Cuz they're not freemasons. The masons are the ones that control history. Every president but one... Mason. Every man that's walked on the moon... 33rd *degree* Mason... The slate of American history needs to be wiped clean. We need to start all over again.

¹⁶ Who needs fiction or theory to demonstrate the odd overlaps between fiction and reality when such acts occur?

-- Person-leaving-bar//Bullshitter

The passage above parallels the general structure of several other conspiratorial monologues from characters in *Slacker*. Predominantly white and *petit bourgeois*, several characters express a deep distrust and resentment towards “the system:” a catchall term referring to the government, the economic system, the entertainment industry, and most other institutions linked with a diffuse category of power. The man in this passage suggests that the Freemasons have not only controlled history’s most powerful institutions, but have also manipulated all narratives of history to serve its own purposes. Of course the conspiracy theory demonstrates a deep suspicion about history as a tool for political power. This distrust that was anomalous neither to the 1989 moment nor today.¹⁷ More significantly, from these monologues we can discern the evaluative drives that always pervade these individuals’ claims. In an earlier scene, an elderly man praises old anarchists, and specifically celebrates Charles Whitman. Whitman committed the Austin, Texas shooting in 1961, in which he shot 14 people and wounded 31 from a bell-tower on UT Austin’s campus. The elderly man seems, then, to conflate this act of violence with an act of enlightened political subversion. He says that this day was, “one of the proudest days of Austin history.” Thus, as with the bar-dwellers who suggest, “Squeaky Fromme should be on the one dollar bill,” there is a value for self-destructive violence as its own end of disruption, regardless of its political affiliations. This demonstrates two things: first, a historical disaffection and resentment of certain power structures; second, a particular manifestation of this disaffection in the way of dudes idolizing haplessly destructive violence from the past. These are not disinterested accounts of past historical data. Instead, the act’s historical value lives in the

¹⁷ With the huge variety of information and media sources today, people can virtually confirm their own biases and tastes at the press of a button. The damnation of the “Lame-stream Media” and the rise of conspiratorial media sources attests to the hunger for a clearer access to the truth. The real danger of this is that such movements constantly batter at any connection between reality and journalistic or even empirical accounts.

interpretation. As we have established thus far, the interpretive reading of these events are always-already informed themselves by a certain set of ideologies. Thus, within *Slacker* the historical understanding of a certain act or event is inseparable from the way in which people have ideologically archived and narratively inscribed that event. These disaffections and idolizations do align with certain accounts of the political climate in America at this moment.

The watered-down Marxist ideas and weary cynical political stances capture a particular political malaise and distrust that characterized young people in the 1980s. Americans were responding to conditions in post-Fordist America. Since 1972 wealth inequality had been rising, the average wage had stagnated, and unemployment was well above the 5% rate considered normal.¹⁸ Furthermore, in a domestic moment of economic and political upheaval, fear about some diabolical elite class controlling all cultural, economic, and knowledge production ran across political boundaries and orders.¹⁹ Both neo-conservatives and the New Left appealed to the imaginary of an all-powerful handful of people elites who controlled every institution, pulled every string. Moreover, the radical movements of the 60s demonstrated the deep injustices that had always pervaded the American project: ongoing racial discrimination, imperial wars abroad, and a flagging national economy for the lower-middle class to name a few.

In *Age of Fracture*, historian Daniel Rodgers analyzes this moment of cultural upheaval and rift. For the neo-conservatives, the “New Class” became the figure which stoked the flammable imagination of a secret cabal of elite leftists who conspired to efface all traditional American values and push us into a totalitarian socialist state.²⁰ The libertarians and Reaganites cited the horrific results under the authoritarian socialist regimes of Stalin and Hitler to push for

¹⁸ David Harvey, *The Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 29.

¹⁹ Andrew Hartman, *War for the Soul of America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 20.

²⁰ Daniel Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 79.

an economic agenda based in free markets and globalization without clunky interference and regulation from the state. As Reagan suggested, the free market was the means to “smash the state”²¹ and remain a nation of autonomous individuals. At the same time, the New Left identified the privatization of many new industries and the rise of globalization as the extension of capitalism to all networks of power.²² In response, they posited that all fundamental institutions and systems of capitalist statehood were not just correlatively linked, but *necessarily* bound to the injustices which they had produced in the past. Thus, any attempt to fix the broken “system” required efforts to shatter the foundations. This entailed not only work to oppose capital, but also to teach histories which demonstrated the injustices that had been part and parcel with American expansion and wealth. Rodgers claims that by 1990, “A general war was already going full blast over [history] textbooks and curricula.”²³ Furthermore, with the increasing ease of producing and accessing material on myriad media platforms (TV, radio, newspaper, magazines), people could find news which both matched and shaped their specific interpretations of current events.

The fraught, contentious status of historical accounts, and the frustration with the political climate in America plays out in many of the theories within *Slacker*. In the men’s consistent praise of destructive agents, I suggest, we see an expression of this general cynicism with the moment in American history. In addition to this, several characters seem to point to a frustrated masculinity; as the elderly anarchist says, “There was such a thing as belief put into *action* in those days.” He proceeds forth to narrate his experiences from the Spanish Civil War, where he claims that he fought alongside Orwell. When he returns inside with the interlocutor,

²¹ Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 90.

²² Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 95.

²³ Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, 227.

the elderly man's daughter informs the interlocutor that her father often lies about having served in the Spanish Civil War. Framing him thus as a sententious liar, this scene clearly satirizes this man who has been monologuing about *real* political action. These men grapple to inscribe themselves into relation with some transcendent identity; either through access to the truth, or through praise of what they see as subversive destruction. These idolizations seem to attest to the destructive drive akin to what Baudrillard analyzes in *The Spirit of Terrorism*. Insofar as "A single world order has come to power through globalization,"²⁴ Baudrillard suggests that a correlative hunger to destroy this single world order must also have increased. At the same time, he claims that since the totalizing logic of global capital can subsume all critique, the opposition must come through attacks against the symbolic order.

While I disagree with this inflated claim, the men in this film seem to express precisely what he describes. Detached from any nuanced understanding of global politics or economic orders, these ideas of a "single world order" are nothing more than an inflated story, almost akin to old ideas of determinism. It is only through a narrative simplification of Marx's theory that one could make such a grand claim. Insofar as one believes that a single world order of capitalism dominates, political action and organizing to overturn this order of power will necessarily fail. This parallels the idolized characters within the film. As I have suggested, their positive political goals are not idolized. Rather, they symbolize an act of transcendent self-destruction in a totalizing system. This is a fantasy in reaction to a simplified misunderstanding; the fantasy parallels a movie wherein John Wayne fights to the last blow, even when he knows he is going to die. The film consistently demonstrates the absurdity of such frustrated men. One man tries to explain to his girlfriend that her act of simple generosity to a homeless man is an act

²⁴ Jean Baudrillard, "The Spirit of Terrorism." *Le Monde*. Paris 2001. Web.

of “slave morality.” Another group of men, sweating in cotton button downs and looking fussy, read from a passage of *Ulysses* to help a friend who has recently broken up with his girlfriend. Although these scenes are silly, they provide insight into the way that subjects are shaped and shape the ideas of self through narrative accounts.

At a broader level, this distrust and contention over historical accounts should not be surprising. For, historical accounts are not merely lists of events, facts, and figures. The narrative structure shows that these characters’ attempts to pin down historical events in unified accounts will necessarily miss elements and connections. Similarly, any historical account is dependent upon a certain linking of these events, facts, and figures. Insofar as the positivist method hopes to isolate the pertinent and necessary causal relationships that led to an event, and insofar as such a pursuit leads to a sort of infinite regress if one hopes to find all the causes, the construction of any historical account also depends upon necessary exclusions of material. In the necessary exclusion of *ostensibly* residual events or figures, we discern the limited human access to History. Over and against this positivist method of finding causal links in historical events, Michel Foucault articulated a new variation of Nietzsche’s genealogical method: “To follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations, the errors, the false appraisals.”²⁵ Thus, accounts and the causal connection of past events constitute narrativity insofar as they value certain events worthy of recording and linking, and they relegate certain events to the either superfluous or the incidental. In doing so, they create coherence and order where there are in fact “numberless beginnings.” While Foucault’s methodology is theoretically rich, it still confronts the human limitations which any historical account does; unless we are God, we cannot identify the

²⁵ Michel Foucault. “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” *The Foucault Reader*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 81

rhizomatic everything, the numberless beginnings and link them with any certainty to the plane of events that are typically relevant to traditional histories. If historians were to abandon positivist accounts of history, there would be massive gaps in historical understanding.

Given these challenges to epistemic access to the past, how do we build any sense of historical events? As this fleeting “absent cause of History”²⁶ relates to our limited human understanding of history, Jameson suggests, “History is not a text²⁷, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but... it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and... our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious.”²⁸ Thus, History itself “is a process without telos or subject,”²⁹ but our access to an understanding of history, by which we can navigate the vast mysterious sea of the past, is necessarily bound to some sort of narrativity. For example, Hayden White demonstrates that we cannot access history with a simply annalistic list of certain events that are recorded discretely.³⁰ That is, human beings rely upon some series of links between these events to build any understanding of historical change. Any access to the past requires narrativity. At the same time, however, if such narrativity implies ideological horizons, then our access to past is always mediated by such ideological horizons (both our own and that of the writers). Historian Michel Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past* provides a compelling account of the way in which archives and historical accounts during the Haitian revolution were clearly shaped by ideology; through processes of erasure, trivialization, events are silenced, perhaps never even recorded in the first

²⁶ Jameson quoting Spinoza from *Ethics*.

²⁷ Here Jameson employs the post-structuralist or Derridean concept of “text”, which extends from a system of language or print, out into the world of signs, signifiers, and signifieds. Insofar as all signification systems have crucial ambiguities, any final or complete interpretation of a text is impossible.

²⁸ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. (Cornell University Press, 1981), 35.

²⁹ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 29.

³⁰ Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1, On Narrative. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980).

instance. These are not intentional erasures, but necessary ones. Indeed, I would suggest that this is true of every element of historical production: chronicling, production of archive, research, and historical accounts. As Benjamin suggests, the choice to narrate a given historical occurrence, and the way in which one narrates it, springs from an urgent now, through which some specific past erupts with significance.³¹ To put it differently, the research of particular historical events responds to a significance of those events that can only have emerged after the events. Quotidian political interactions that contributed to the fall of Rome only become significant after the fall of Rome. The narration thereof is always pervaded by a certain value system, a retroactive process of assigning significance. Some specific historical events, in constellation with our own, shine and erupt forth with some sense of urgency.

I do not mean to suggest that historical accounts are simple, or that these accounts are always passionate fabrications or intentionally silencing. What we can discern, however, is that the conspiratorial accounts within *Slacker* at least share some central elements with the narrativity of historical accounts; they infer causal relationships, establish links between facts and figures, and from this limited data, develop an account. Of course they are not serious historical accounts insofar as they accept extremely limited, sometimes fabricated data and events, and provide absolutely no evidence for their claims. Yet, their essence mimes that of historical account, insofar as they strive to link real facts of history.

Significantly, many of these theories cite fictional TV sources as evidence. For instance, one man believes that the US government is in a grand cabal with extraterrestrial beings. To prove his point about the government cabal with aliens, he cites the “20th anniversary of the moon walk,” the “covert operation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.” He draws primary

³¹ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” *Illuminations*, Trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 263.

evidence from precarious and exclusive entertainment sources, such as “the ‘Late Late Show,’” and “the right kinds of radio.” So, in short, he builds a totalized narrative wherein he selects those elements which he can fit into this theory of a single-world-order. More significantly, however, we see the porous threshold between understandings of the present and pieces of cultural production. This interplay between our interpretations of reality, narrative, and the coalescence around the media of TV and film, is central to the final section.

III. Seeing TV Land

“The sense for the real is the means of acquiring the power to shape things according to our wish. The joy in shaping and reshaping -- a primeval joy!”³² – Nietzsche

It is not at all incidental that film serves as the medium for the story that teases and represents narrative expectations and perceptions. After all, the phenomenology of cinema – our perception of and affective responses to the moving image – has been the subject of much narratological and philosophical analysis. Particularly in the theatre of representation and the moving image, these epistemological queries fold upon themselves. The “reality” of the movie theatre, after all, is essentially bound to fantasy and illusion: a literal and figurative stage that both depends upon and plays with the unstable transaction between reality, representation, and wish-fulfillment. As film theorist Christian Metz suggests, the moving image is so powerful because its formal verisimilitude speaks to the viewer in the language of “It is so.”³³ At the same time, however, this verisimilitude is of course a representation, and therefore mediated, edited, and constructed. Rather than burden the viewer, though, these realities heighten the effect; the real becomes more emphatically “real.”

Moreover, any cultural materialist would agree that TV and film have been hugely

³² Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 480.

³³ Christian Metz, *Film Language: a Semiotics of the Cinema*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 4.

significant forces as shaping cultural texts, representations and reproductions of certain values since their inception. More than just the medium through which the work tells this story, *Slacker* also represents cultural engagement and moments of interface with this media, and some of the ways in which they shape our perception of reality. I do not mean to rehash the apocryphal warnings of Adorno: “Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies.”³⁴ The consumption of enormous amounts of TV, movies, and media do not distort some access to “reality” that was once transparent. Rather, they are another influential force of that which is always shaped: namely, our narrative expectations, cultural values, and evaluative perceptions. Rather than examine to the idea that film and TV somehow blind us to the reality before our eyes, I am interested in the inverse question. How does the capacity for understanding film in the first instance necessarily rely upon the interpretive capacity and narrative function of our perception and thought? What, then, does this reveal about the shaping effects of perception upon our reality?

As has been established, we do not approach texts as some *tabula rasa*. Our capacity to understand movements in films and forge meaning is always dependent upon and shaped by other films and stories. In one scene, we enter the narrow apartment of the TV man. Under dull lights, in a room packed with the buzz of at least 15 operating TVs, the TV Man sits on a chair and attends to the various TVs. One cannot help but notice that many of the moving images depict cataclysm: nuclear experiments, looping footage from the *Challenger explosion*, war films. The different footage is all running simultaneously, draining the climactic energy of these images. TV Man scuttles around on the chair as he explains the intent of his project: to reclaim the “psychic powers of the televised image” for good, rather than subliminal mind control.

³⁴ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972), 123.

Asserting that the video image is significantly more powerful than the experiences of real events, he tells the story of having witnessed a stabbing. To prove his point, he communicates how he has lost all clear memory to the event:

Well and I have no reference to it now, I can't refer back to it, I can't press rewind, I can't put it on pause, I can't put it on slo-mo and see all the little details. And the blood... it was all wrong; it didn't look like blood. And the hue was all off, and I couldn't adjust the hue.

The callous account could be read as this man's attempt to illustrate a simple idea: film helps us to capture moments that we otherwise lose to the weakness of memory. Indeed, this seems to be part of what the man is suggesting. The story expresses disappointment that he could not manipulate the moment afterwards in order to make it more climactic, more real.

And yet, two dynamics of this scene seem to suggest that he was disappointed even in the initial experience of this event. His perceptual experience of the scene *in the first instance* was flat and anti-climactic. "It was all wrong. It didn't look like blood." This is to say, as he was perceiving the bleeding person, he felt some absence and lack in the content of his experience. Even the colors themselves were dull, he sighs: "The hue was off." Of course he contrasts his flat experience with the spectacular climactic depictions of such scenes. The cinematic depiction functions as both the counterpoint and the ultimate standard. If the events of reality fall short of the spectacular representations of violence in cinema, then they are boring. What is most significant, then, is that the cinematic representations of violence serve as the standard for this man. His perception itself is shaped by his experience with television, such that he expects this sort of spectacle from reality. Citing the color's drab quality, he seems to have absorbed both the conceptual and the perceptual evaluations of a hyper-saturated TV-viewer. The moment of explosion, of rupture, is the true event; the climax is the event. Moreover, the saturated and vivid colors of TV have shaped his expectations for color saturation in reality.

While hyperbolic, this picture of how we interface with TV does resonate with the shaping influences of TV and film representations. The camerawork itself seems to attest to the captivating power of the video image. As the TV man is explaining how the image is more powerful than the real event, the shot shifts, and fixes upon one of the TVs. Whereas his monologues had been framed centrally within this multi-screen den of TVs, now the only image in the shot is the content flashing across a TV screen. The TV Man prattles on as the shot fixates on this TV montage: first Elvis playing in a jovial crowd; second, a scene from an old film in which a naked woman slapping a man while riding him; third, footage from nuclear explosion. These spectacular moments are both entrancing and detached. Indeed, the distracted gaze of the camera again interpellates the viewer in two ways: it collapses the viewer's hunger for spectacle. Moreover, his description aligns with the hit-and-run earlier in the film. As has been established, the hit-and-run scene is anti-climactic, but in comparison with *what?* It is banal and surreal in relation to the viewing audience's copious intertext of spectacular, bloody videos.

The looping footage of the Challenger explosion, in collision with these other images, is the precise collision of reality and fiction that occurs within the dialectic of cultural texts, historical texts, and historical circumstances. We can assume that the generation watching this had seen the video images of these real events. This room, then, serves as figurative depiction of both the shared cultural text that has shaped the ideas, memories, values of Generation X, and the responses to this text. Even in this simple looping of the Challenger footage, the threshold between reality and history ruptures. Event becomes manipulable fiction.

In the two scenes of rupture, the shaping effects of perception and recollection are visible in the montage ruptures of the long-form, observational style. Soviet filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein theorized that the intriguing power of film lie in the montage form itself. For

the viewer, he suggests, the montage method produces an effect that is not reducible to just the sum of its parts: “In my view, montage is not an idea composed of successive shots stuck together but an idea that DERIVES from the collision between two shots that are independent of one another.”³⁵ The question, then, is how we come to derive narrative ideas and affects from montage, and how this relates to the drive to interpret. How does the series of shots (a + b + c) shift to become a product (abc=> x)? The ideas do not arise from the collision of these images themselves, but from the dialectic between the viewer and the cinematic material: synthesis emerges from the sense content and the viewer’s inferential leaps. To gain significance, the montage sequence relies upon the viewer’s own capacity and drive to synthesize, and entices this drive in turn. Hitchcock famously identified this power of montage as “pure cinema,”³⁶ insofar as the viewer generates value and significance from something that is not depicted in the film itself. Thus through our memory and perception, recollection is always clashing with present image, and we bring our own concepts and values to this clash: generative synthesis. From this collision, the montage engages the viewer’s capacity and desire to generate meaning from the work’s fissures and contradictions.

A precondition for the capacity to understand a basic film, then, depends upon the ability to infer the content and movement which has transpired during the cut. This also partly depends on our concept of phenomena. For instance, the shower scene in *Psycho* is composed of about 72 different shots. Despite the fact that the scene does not show the knife entering the body, the viewer infers that the knife is indeed entering the body. This is of course a reasonable leap. Through our concept of murder, and our synthesis of the shots, we can infer that Marion Crane is

³⁵ Eisenstein, Sergei. “The Dramaturgy of Film Form.” *Writings Volume 1*, trans. Richard Taylor, (London: British Film Institute, 1988), 163.

³⁶ 1964 interview with Alfred Hitchcock from the CBC TV series “Telescope”.

being stabbed and murdered. The shots, however, produce an effect beyond simply the representation of the phenomena, abstract from the act of murder itself. We could imagine that a long, fixed shot of Norman Bates stabbing a naked Marion Crane to death would be haggard, still terrifying, but would produce markedly different effects and affects in the audience, as opposed to the montage structure of the murder. Furthermore, to understand any element of the scene's effect, we must obviously have a concept of murder. Without this concept, the scene would certainly produce an effect, but the lack of direct explanation, and the cuts, would obfuscate an understanding of what had happened.

Such a process of watching film seems to demonstrate that our very perception of shots in a film is suffuse with narrative interpretations and expectations. Analogously, in the scenes of montage rupture both the form of the footage and the style of shooting shifts. Whereas most scenes are long, observational takes, these scenes move in rapid montage, with non-diegetic music. In the first scene of rupture from the long takes of the film, the perspective occupies a Pixel-vision camera with night vision effects. The woman holding this camera is navigating a noisy dark bar. As soon as we are in the perspective of this character's film camera, a montage ensues. Non-diegetic rhythmic music plays beneath the montage. The montage cuts back and forth between a strange rhythmic percussion set and the bar-dwellers who theorize that all history is produced by the Freemasons. I suggest that this altered editing, especially in contrast with the long takes and naturalist modes of cinematography in the former scenes, illustrates the immanence of evaluation both in perception and in cinematic production. Even scenes composed from long, naturalist takes are excluding elements from their frame. To focus on x is to overlook y. To interpret, we must overlook. In these scenes, the cutting reveals the process of production and ordering that occurs even at a shot-by-shot level. Insofar as the editing implies a choice of a

certain order of shots, this moment of rupture subverts the disinterested representation of “the Real.” With these sequences, the film both exposes and celebrates the generative power of this drive. Film itself facilitates the primeval joy of shaping and reshaping. To embrace representation’s power to shape the real is to acknowledge the limits of such representation and to celebrate its generative interpretation.

The sequence of the final scenes does not resolve these warring, unstable forces and ideas. Providing an early morning monologue, an old man theorizes into a voice recorder, “The more the pain grows, the more this instinct for life somehow asserts itself. The necessary beauty in life is to give yourself to it completely. Only later will it clarify itself and become coherent.” He is then interrupted by a man speaking out of an amplifier on the top of his car. This gritty voice is advertising for a “Free Gun show give-away.” Thus the noisy advertisement disrupts both the literal term and figurative quality of “coherent.” The cacophony of reality’s multiplicities literally shouts over the old man’s unified existentialist claims. As this man shouts out of the amplifier about the gun give-away, a car full of vibrantly smiling young people drives by. Once again, in a scene of rupture, the camera’s perspective shifts to that of the characters who wield the cameras. What follows is a montage accompanied non-diegetic, up-tempo buoyant fluting song. These quickly shifting scenes give way to the final scene: atop a cliff, with the music reaching a crescendo, a character throws a camera off of the cliff. From this camera’s whirling perspective of the fall, the final shot is a swirling impressionist blue. Both fiction and historically referential, both naturalist and montage, both story and not, the film’s energy stems from plurality and contradiction: the dialectical battle between the empirical and the perspectival; the objective and the interpretive; story and reality. More than some text open for infinite interpretation, the plurality of *Slacker* must be preserved in its precision. To tell a story of the

film is to maintain and revive its explosive curiosity.

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