Deconstructing National Identity:

Character, Place, and Contemporary American Independent Cinema

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Abstract

This thesis achieves a deconstructive interrogation of American national identity by analysing its representation in contemporary independent cinema. Drawing upon the post-structuralist work of Jacques Derrida (and limited applications of his thought to film scholarship), this project theorises a rigorous (but non-programmatic) model for conducting deconstructive readings of cinematic texts. Engaging with a corpus of ostensibly independent films, case-study analyses of American identity narratives are used to theorise and enact a fruitful process of Derridean cinematic and cultural interpretation. In undertaking this broad theoretical objective, I intervene within a range of specific filmic and socio-political debates. Analysing texts drawn from within prevailing independent film definitions, this project undertakes a deconstructive re-inscription of this prominent cinematic category. Destabilising its conventional designation as Hollywood's antonymic "other," the ontological solidity of independent film is fatally compromised, opening up its constituent texts to a greater range of interpretative gestures. Furthermore, in addressing textual representations of national identity, I elucidate a discursive area largely unexplored in existing independent film scholarship. Characterising case-study analyses as overtly deconstructive, this thesis also destabilises structural orthodoxies that orient American identity discourses around dichotomous concepts of *character* and *place*. Thus, studying representations of prominent cultural narratives (*individualism*, the *nuclear family*, the *small-town*, and the *wilderness*), this thesis uncovers and then dismantles their restrictive metaphysical foundations. Specifically, drawing attention to discursive slippages and paradoxes that inhabit these forms of cultural narration, textual readings problematize their self-coherence and ontological closure. Relating these cultural analyses to popular and academic discourses of national identity, this thesis also expands the reach of Derridean theory into a range of other disciplines, such as American studies. Ultimately, this thesis' multifaceted research objectives open up American identity discourses to an unfixed freeplay of *différance*, laying the foundations for a liberatory intervention into oppositional American cultural debates.

Table of Contents:

List of Illustrations:

Introduction - Deconstruction, Film Theory, and National Identity

Introduction

This thesis provides a deconstructive reading of American national identity by interrogating its representation in contemporary independent cinema. This overarching research objective is constituted at the intersection of several methodological, thematic, and discursive aims. To begin, this project offers a vital theoretical contribution to film studies, augmenting limited scholarship that has explicitly utilised Jacques Derrida's deconstructive elucidations to intervene within cinematic discourses. Specifically, I theorise a rigorous (but non-programmatic) model for applying Derridean reading strategies to film texts, redressing a dearth of sustained academic work in this area; in doing so, this project builds upon scholarship that relocates cinema within post-structuralist discourses of textuality.[1] These theoretical gestures will be explored in this introduction, following a brief elucidation of Derridean theory.

This thesis also provides a series of more specific interventions into a range of cinematic and cultural discourses. To begin, I engage with a particular textual corpus, comprised of films positioned within prevailing definitions of contemporary American independent cinema. Therefore, one of this thesis' central research objectives is to undertake a deconstructive re-inscription of independent film itself; engaging directly within these ontological debates, my project highlights, overturns, and displaces the reductive binary logic with which it is constructed as a totalised cinematic category. In doing so, I challenge a conceptual orthodoxy that coercively restricts the readings one can draw from related texts; by disturbing independent film's definitional certainty, myriad films are opened up to a greater range of interpretative gestures. This aspect of my thesis is elucidated in chapter one.

Thus, this thesis' deconstructive engagement with independent cinema operates as a pre-cursor to a series of Derridean textual readings, marrying the project's broad theoretical objectives with more specific interventions into film and cultural studies. Namely, a range of independent films will be approached as reflexive critiques of American national identity, evoking but then dismantling a prominent series of collective cultural narratives (*individualism*, the *nuclear family*, the *small-town*, and the *wilderness*). Drawing attention to discursive slippages and paradoxes that inhabit these forms of cultural narration,[2] these

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[1] For a key example of such approaches, see Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1989), 62.

[2] This approach draws upon Derridean cultural theory; see Homi K. Bhabha, "Introduction: Narrating the Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 1; Geoffrey

textual readings fatally compromise their self-coherence and ontological closure. By using national identity as a focus for this project's reading strategies, I also intervene in a series of representational discourses that have received little critical attention in existing independent film scholarship. Furthermore, by relating case-study analyses to popular and academic discussions of national identity, this thesis also provides an expansion of Derridean theory into a range of other disciplines, such as American studies; these interventions are outlined at the end of this introduction. Finally, this thesis' multifaceted research objectives open up American identity discourses to an unfixed freeplay of *différance*, laying the foundations for a liberatory intervention into restrictive American "culture wars" debates.[3] This significant impact *outside* of academia is detailed in this thesis' conclusion.

Derrida and Metaphysics

Before outlining this thesis' deconstructive intervention into film studies, one must briefly establish the underlying tenets of Derridean theory. However, any attempt at coherently outlining deconstructive thought is haunted by the spectre of self-contradiction. As Derrida's theoretical project offers a sustained critique of metaphysical truth,[4] any fixed definition of deconstruction is inevitably sustained by the very structural forces it sets out to destabilise; as Robert Smith notes, attempts to programmatically describe deconstruction are wholly "essentialist," a theoretical approach that Derrida's work "diverges from" and "challenges indefatigably."[5] Yet, for the sake of legibility, this introduction tentatively summarises a number of general *principles* that animate Derridean reading; this objective is qualified by a heightened awareness of the reductive assumptions embedded within the explicative act, a caveat that extends to every definitional gesture that follows.

To begin, Derridean theory can be productively conceptualised as a sustained dismantling of Western metaphysics. In treating Derrida's diverse works as complementary "critiques"[6] of this pervasive thought-system, deconstruction has been approached as "a questioning stance taken towards the most basic aspects of the production of knowledge."[7]

Bennington, "Postal Politics and the Institution of the Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 121.

[3] This theoretical gesture draws upon Bhabha's Derridean reading of nationhood and cultural difference; see Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 292.

[4] See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chavravorty Spivak, Corr. ed. (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 12.

[5] Robert Smith, "Deconstruction and Film," in *Deconstructions. A User's Guide*, ed. Nicholas Royle (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 120.

[6] The term "critique" has itself has been placed under deconstructive scrutiny; see Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone Press, 1987), 46.

[7] Peter Brunette, "Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction," in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, eds. John Hill and Pamela Church-Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 91.

This perspective hinges upon Derrida's identification of a purportedly consistent and stable origin, centre, or *telos* that orients Western philosophical enquiry; this is the theorisation of being as *presence*.[8] For Derrida, the metaphysics of presence idealises an ontological model that renders a being's essence or meaning immediately perceptible; put simply, metaphysical philosophy is based upon the assumption that objects or texts communicate a fixed, self-coherent meaning or truth (*logos*). In metaphysics, presence takes on a number of complementary significances, each supporting the generalised principle of the "self-identity, self-continuity, or self-sufficiency of a being."[9] In summarising this multifaceted presence, Derrida discerns a foundationalist logic that he refers to as "logocentrism," itself based upon the following "subdeterminations" of presence:

> Presence of the thing to the sight as *eidos*, presence as substance/essence/existence [*ousia*], temporal presence as point [*stigmè*] of the now or of the moment [*nun*],… the co-presence of the other and of the self, intersubjectivity as the intentional phenomenon of the ego, and so forth.… Logocentrism would thus support the determination of the being of the entity as presence.[10]

Therefore, logocentrism encapsulates the visual presence of a being or object, the presence of that object's essential meaning, the static nature of that structure as temporal presence, and the self-presence of the thinking subject that perceives it.[11] Derrida's project can be read as an attempt to unsettle these metaphysical assumptions, uncovering and strategically exploiting textual and discursive excesses that undermine presence in all its guises. Importantly, Derrida does not treat the metaphysics of presence as merely one philosophical school amongst others, but rather as the basis for all Western thought; its operation is not limited to theoretical discourses, but rather extends into the "everyday language" that structures all human experience:[12] metaphysics "governs culture, philosophy, and science."[13] As a result, Derridean theory offers a means of critically intervening into a plethora of cultural discourses, of which philosophical discussions are but one manifestation. It is this observation that underlines my thesis' central research objectives; in allowing independent film and national identity to be approached as explicitly *metaphysical* structures, they can be subjected to deconstructive textual interrogation.

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[8] See Simon Morgan Wortham, *The Derrida Dictionary* (London: Continuum, 2010), 103.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 12.

[11] Also see Wortham, *The Derrida Dictionary*, 103; David Norman Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 18-19.

[12] Derrida, *Positions*, 19.

[13] Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, ed. Alan Bass (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), 18.

In positing a wholesale critique of metaphysical knowledge, Derridean thought inevitably engages with the field of semiotics; as Peter Brunette and David Wills argue:

> A potentially fruitful way of approaching deconstruction is as a radicalization of Saussure's insights into the nature of language, and specifically into the nature of the sign itself and the relation between signifier and signified.[14]

To begin, Derrida firmly places the structuralist model of the sign (a fixed relation between signifier and signified) within metaphysical discourse. On one level, the distinction between signifier and signified institutes a spatio-temporal rupture in the presence of an object or meaning, a division at the heart of the metaphysical sign.[15] In *Of Grammatology*, this difference is epitomised by the logocentric division between speech and writing, an opposition that Derrida discerns as a consistent model for all metaphysical signification. Whilst speech is treated as an immediate presentation of thought and the self-presence of the metaphysical subject, writing is cast as a derivative, second-order representation, a *signifier* that merely points towards an absent presence or meaning.[16] Thus, the signifier operates as an exterior, derivative, representational instrument, a non-presence; conversely, the signified is associated directly with metaphysics' idealised *telos* of absolute presence, a value embodied both within the immediate manifestation of a specific meaning and the signified's own formal structure: "the formal essence of the signified is *presence*, and the privilege of its proximity to the logos as *phonè* is the privilege of presence."[17] The metaphysical sign is rendered a divided structure of presence and non-presence, a vital constitutive binary opposition exploited throughout deconstructive theory.

However, whilst the signifier/signified division challenges the self-presence of the sign, it also establishes its logocentric function, insofar that the signified is positioned within a fixed, direct relationship with a corresponding signifier. Indeed, Derrida notes that structuralist readings of the sign neutralise the division between signifier and signified by arguing that the two distinct halves of the sign form a fixed totality: "the notion of the sign always implies within itself the distinction between signifier and signified, *even if, as Saussure argues, they are distinguished simply as the two faces of one and the same leaf*."[18] Thus, metaphysics disavows the ontological rupture that the division of signifier and signified opens up: "the sign must be the unity of a heterogeneity, since the signified (sense

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[14] Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 6.
[15] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 11-14.
[16] Ibid., 11.
[17] Ibid., 18.
[18] Ibid., 11. Emphasis added.

or thing, noeme or reality) is not in itself a signifier."[19] By evoking meanings that are "capable of being present,"[20] the direct correspondence between signifier and signified is established as metaphysical;[21] the signified is again associated with presence, an *a priori* unity that the secondary signifier points towards in its temporary absence: "the sign represents the present in its absence…when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign."[22] Thus, whilst the sign does not achieve self-presence it is implicated in its metaphysical idealisation, compensating for a lack of immediate, essential meaning.

In intractably associating the signified with a *telos* of presence, Derrida describes a metaphysics that venerates a holistic, eternal meaning that halts (and stands outside) signification; it "would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign."[23] Derrida explores this metaphysical master-concept at length, arguing that the signifier/signified model precipitates the possibility of such a "transcendental signified," "*a concept signified in and of itself*, a concept simply present for thought, independent of a relationship to…a system of signifiers."[24] As the apotheosis of self-presence, the transcendental signified is established as an "eternal verity,"[25] a universal truth that governs all discourse from a position of totalized authority. Thus, as Brunette and Wills suggest, Derridean deconstruction amounts to a critique of the fundamental ontological grounds that anchor Western culture:

> Also called into question is the attendant logocentrism of this metaphysics, which is that system of concepts such as 'truth,' 'good,' 'nature,' and so on, which are regarded, throughout the entire history of Western thought, as being whole, internally coherent, consistent and originary.[26]

Derridean thought elaborates the impossibility of fixing any such absolute, self-coherent signification. Importantly, this notion of the transcendental signified is again vital to this project, as the varied American cultural narratives that my case-study readings interrogate are conceptualised as national equivalents of these fixed structures of cultural meaning.

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[19] Ibid., 18.
[20] Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 6.
[21] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 13.
[22] Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 9.
[23] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 49.
[24] Derrida, *Positions*, 19-20. Emphasis in original; Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 13.
[25] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 15.
[26] Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 6-7.

Metaphysics and Binary Oppositions

In initiating his critique of metaphysics with a commentary on Saussurean linguistics, Derrida observes that logocentric discourse orders presence through the construction of binary oppositions, two of which (speech/writing and signifier/signified) have been explored above.[27] Within Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist paradigm, it is the oppositional difference between signs that allows meaning to be legible; as Derrida notes, "the play of difference…is the condition for the possibility and functioning of every sign."[28] Unpacking this idea, Brunette and Wills note that "nothing in language is meaningful in and of itself, but only as it *differs* from other elements within the system."[29] Hence, the apparent presence of a term relies upon its structural differentiation from others; this observation lays the foundations for a critique of metaphysical self-identity.

Importantly, logocentric binaries should not be approached as neutral antinomies, conceptual oppositions between two equal presences. Rather, Derrida notes that there is an inevitable hierarchical relationship between the two sides of any structural dichotomy: "in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand."[30] Outlining a series of logocentric governing concepts that are constructed as being "whole, internally coherent, consistent, and originary," Brunette and Wills note that their oppositional antitheses are denied similar positive values of plenitude and coherence: "invariably these concepts are seen to have opposites ('falsehood,' 'evil,' 'culture') that are always presented as in some way harmful, deficient, deformed, or secondary, in short as a falling away from the fullness and self-sufficiency of the primary term."[31] Thus, the metaphysical opposition plays out an underlying antinomy of presence and absence, solidifying the plenitude, identity, and eminence of one term by denying that status to another. Furthermore, Simon Morgan Wortham notes that this logic extends beyond theoretical discourse, as it governs "cultural relations and practices more broadly."[32] These observations illustrate the ideological ramifications of metaphysical binarism. Extending into the realm of cultural politics, the dichotomous structure of presence/absence engenders a discrepancy in power and authority, favouring certain structures by homogenising and marginalizing their multifarious "others."

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[27] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 27-73. Also see Wortham, *The Derrida Dictionary*, 103; Brunette, "Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction," 92.
[28] Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 5.
[29] Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 6-7.
[30] Derrida, *Positions*, 41.
[31] Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 7.
[32] Wortham, *The Derrida Dictionary*, 103-104.

Thus, the play of difference is regulated as an oppositional relationship between two static entities, a closed antinomy that ensures the plenitude, wholeness, and presence of the superior term. Indeed, this study contends that prominent American cultural narratives operate precisely in this way, producing universal structures that disavow a greater multiplicity of cultural identities or experiences.

Différance

Whilst the differential play of the binary opposition is treated as the structural basis of metaphysical meaning, it also provides the tools for Derrida's critique of the sign, and ultimately, presence itself. In noting that a sign relies upon a differential "other" for its existence, Derrida argues that all metaphysical structures inevitably surrender the presence they appear to embody; the absence of those terms that a sign excludes is paradoxically re-inscribed within the sign itself as a "trace," constituents of its (illusory) plenitude. Brunette and Wills argue that this observation radicalises the oppositional difference Saussure postulates between signs as the structure of all language, as any

> thing, idea, or event cannot ever be whole, self-contained, and uncontaminated by an 'outside,' because it depends for its very existence on that which it is *not*. Every concept, in other words, has its opposite somehow inscribed within it, in the form of what Derrida calls a 'trace,' which…is paradoxically there and, as a sign of an absence, not there at the same time.[33]

Importantly, this paradoxical economy problematizes presence at the very moment of its constitution. The trace is rendered as the force or possibility that both *allows* signification and *denies* the presence it purportedly signifies:

> The trace, where the relationship with the other is marked, articulates its possibility in the entire field of the entity [*étant*], which metaphysics has defined as the being-present starting from the occulted movement of the trace. The trace must be thought before the entity. But the movement of the trace is necessarily occulted, it produces itself as self-occultation.[34]

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[33] Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 7.
[34] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 47.

Rather than externally marking difference upon a pre-existing presence, the trace is established as a "non-signifying difference that is 'originarily' at play in all signification."[35] Consequently, the metaphysical opposition can be approached as a means of expunging (and thus mastering) the "otherness" that the trace instils at the heart of all meaning;[36] as Peter Brunette (paraphrasing Barbara Johnson) notes, "in the Western tradition, differences *within* are inevitably recast as differences *between*."[37] The (externalised) opposition of binary difference is re-marked within the sign itself, an originary "supplement"[38] that metaphysics exorcises in its unerring quest for transcendental presence. As a result, the trace disturbs the very division between presence and absence, the foundation of metaphysics itself; as Wortham suggests:

> Since every sign in its manifestation or apparent 'presence' always includes traces of others which are supposedly 'absent', the trace can be reduced to neither side of the presence-absence opposition so prized by the metaphysical tradition…The trace names that non-systematizable reserve which is at once constitutive and unrepresentable within such a field.[39]

Thus, in evading any fixed or self-coherent ontology, the trace unsettles the presence of the sign at the same time that it makes signification possible.

It is through the trace that Derrida elucidates *différance*, a vital term within deconstructive thought. As explored above, Derrida notes that the sign's presence is divided by its location within a differential signifying economy, carrying within it traces of excluded meanings. However, presence is not simply divided by a static trace of an internalised binary opposite. Rather, Derrida argues that meaning is deferred by a hypothetically boundless chain of references and substitutions: "the trace proclaims as much as it recalls: differance defers-differs [*diffère*]."[40] Exceeding the "regulated play" of the binary opposition, meaning-making is cast as a dynamic process that institutes a "freeplay" of difference; traces of absent signifieds in turn evoke traces of other absent signifieds, instituting an open-ended and inexhaustible referential chain.[41] In his 1968 essay on "Différance," Derrida describes how this semiotic reconceptualization directly challenges a metaphysics orientated towards a *telos* of static, totalized meaning:

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[35] Wortham, *The Derrida Dictionary*, 229.
[36] See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 62.
[37] Peter Brunette, "Toward a Deconstructive Theory of Film," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 19, no. 2 (1986): 62.
[38] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 7.
[39] Wortham, *The Derrida Dictionary*, 230.
[40] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 66.
[41] Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 11.

The signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself. Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. Such a play, *différance*, is thus no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality.[42]

Thus, the signified does not mark the eternal fixing of self-coherent meaning; indeed, Derrida notes that *différance* describes "the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play, that is to say the destruction of ontotheology and the metaphysics of presence."[43] Each signified in turn acts as a signifier, referring to other terms that are evoked as differential traces within the signified's illusory presence: "'Signifier of the signifier' describes…the movement of language…the signified always already functions as a signifier.... There is not a single signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language."[44] Destabilising the difference between signifier and signified, *différance* describes a process by which all signifieds unceasingly refer to other terms or meanings, which in turn do the same, denying metaphysical properties of fixity, self-coherence, and, ultimately, presence; as Derrida notes, "nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces."[45] In precipitating the play of *différance*, the trace becomes the motor for a sustained challenge to the presence/absence opposition that underlies metaphysical discourse;[46] the trace's status as a "presence-absence" mirrors Derrida's theorisation of *différance* as "the nonpresence of the other inscribed within the sense of the present."[47] Importantly for this project, this aspect of *différance* closely mirrors Derrida's brief discussions of the cinematic image, which he establishes as a "hauntological"[48] form that renders spectral figures that resist any fixed being, neither present nor absent.[49]

However, *différance* is not a thesis on the impossibility of meaning, or an attempt to theorise a new significatory model beyond metaphysics. Indeed, Derrida argues specifically

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[42] Ibid., 11.

[43] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 50.

[44] Ibid., 66.

[45] Derrida, *Positions*, 26.

[46] See Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 10.

[47] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 71.

[48] Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*, trans. Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 117.

[49] In describing it as "neither a word or a concept," Derrida places *différance* within its own dynamic chain of differences and substitutions; see Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 3; Derrida, *Positions*, 14, 40.

that the movement of *différance* underlies the generation of all meaning: "what defers presence, on the contrary, is the very basis on which presence is announced or desired in what represents it, its sign, its trace."[50] Rather than simplistically disavowing the binary oppositions that structure metaphysical language, *différance* is treated as their precondition: "the movement of *différance*, as that which produces different things, that which differentiates, is the common root of all the oppositional concepts that mark our language."[51] Thus, *différance* generates differences that can be cast in binary terms, a pre-requisite for metaphysical signification; yet, *différance* simultaneously renders these discrete oppositions arbitrary, transient, and *irrelevant*, as there will always be a trace of one term within the other (and vice-versa): "at the point at which the concept of *différance*…intervenes, all the conceptual oppositions of metaphysics (signifier/signified; sensible/intelligible; writing/speech; passivity/activity; etc.) – to the extent that they ultimately refer to the presence of something present… - become nonpertinent."[52] As Derrida summarises, "Differance produces what it forbids, making possible the very thing that it makes impossible."[53] Here, *différance* exceeds the metaphysical "principle of non-contradiction,"[54] insofar that it both underlies and critiques all forms of signification as presence.

Therefore*,* perhaps it is best to consider any signified (or associated binary structure) as a "micro-stabilization" of an "unstable and chaotic" economy,[55] a "regulated play" of differences that temporarily halts the originary chain of signifiers that *différance* initiates.[56] In arresting a pre-existing differential play (and simultaneously extolling their own timeless inherence), binary oppositions entail "a subordination of the movement of *différance* in favor of the presence of a value or a *meaning* supposedly antecedent to *différance*, more original than it, exceeding and governing it in the last analysis."[57] Indeed, Derrida suggests that this process of reduction is the foundational purpose of metaphysical philosophy:

> All dualisms…are the unique theme of a metaphysics whose entire history was compelled to strive towards the reduction of the trace. The subordination of the trace to full presence summed up in the logos...such are the gestures required by an onto-theology determining the archaeological and eschatological meaning of being as presence, as parousia, as life without differance.[58]

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[50] Derrida, *Positions*, 8.
[51] Ibid., 8-9.
[52] Ibid., 29.
[53] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 143.
[54] Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 7.
[55] Jacques Derrida, quoted in Paul Bowman, *Deconstructing Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 127.
[56] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 44.
[57] Derrida, *Positions*, 29. Emphasis in original.
[58] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 71.

Thus, Derrida discerns within logocentrism a "desire to restrict play" that is "irresistible";[59] metaphysical meaning's stabilization of chaotic *différance* inaugurates an act of semiotic violence, forcefully assembling a closed, oppositional economy of ontological stasis.[60]

In contrast, *différance* posits a radical play left unstructured by metaphysical forces; it inaugurates a heterogeneous textual field that produces a multiplicity of potential significations in place of rigid binary frames. In evading spatial integrity and temporal fixity, *différance* "marks an irreducible and *generative* multiplicity";[61] in noting this fundamental challenge to logocentric structuration, Derrida revels in the diverse semiotic possibilities that *différance* actively engenders:

> Turned towards the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediacy is therefore the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play whose other side would be the Nietzschean *affirmation*, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation.[62]

Thus, *différance* eludes metaphysical presence, binary codification and a logocentrism that posits truth as a fixed ontological *telos*; in their place, Derrida diagnoses a generalised textuality that abets the exhilarating possibility of heterogeneous, unrestricted, inexhaustible signification.

Deconstruction

As argued above, Western metaphysics both relies upon and disavows *différance* as the basis of all signification. Feeding off (but then arresting) spatio-temporal freeplay, logocentric structures regulate difference within binary oppositions, expunging the sign's internal divisions and recasting them as (hierarchical) antinomies between self-identical presences. Deconstruction can be thought of as the process by which this metaphysical operation is uncovered, reversed, and displaced. The purported unity of any text is undermined by focusing upon its "margins,"[63] an "untranslatable remainder" or

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[59] Ibid., 59.
[60] See Bowman, *Deconstructing Popular Culture*. 127.
[61] Derrida, *Positions*, 45.
[62] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), 369.
[63] Derrida, *Positions*, 6.

"supplement" that inhabits all meaning, yet is disavowed by metaphysical discourse.[64] In doing so, deconstruction uncovers and exploits moments of "undecidability,"[65] textual self-contradictions and ellipses that operate beyond (and between) the presences and oppositions that govern a specific discursive field. As a process, it demonstrates how metaphysical forms are always already inhabited by *différance*, providing the conditions of possibility for meaning whilst simultaneously exceeding the structural logic that such significatory systems impose. Demonstrating that no structure can exhaust the play of differences and deferrals from which it is assembled, deconstruction locates moments of self-contradiction *inside* metaphysical discourse; in transgressing the structural laws that govern the text within which they reside, semiotic slippages undermine the totalizing, essentializing pretensions of logocentric concepts and dualisms.

However, as previously discussed, attempts to describe deconstruction are complicit in the metaphysical logic it ostensibly aims to displace; as Derrida explicitly states, it necessarily eludes definition: "deconstruction doesn't consist in a set of theorems, axioms, tools, rules, techniques, methods."[66] Furthermore, attempting a systematized elucidation of deconstruction is also methodologically problematic, insofar that developing a fixed procedure undermines its logic as a critique of metaphysics *from within*. For Derridean scholars, every metaphysical form inevitably carries within itself the possibility of its own disruption. Utilising this reflexive potential, deconstruction strategically mobilises logocentric structures to compromise their illusory presence and plenitude. Thus, Derrida explicitly argues that attempts to unsettle metaphysical constructions of being cannot dispense with a philosophical heritage orientated towards ontological presence. Rather, deconstruction takes the form of a close reading of this metaphysical economy, forever explicating and disrupting its logocentric assumptions and foundations as they become apparent.[67] Thus, the positioning of deconstruction within metaphysical discourses is deemed a theoretical necessity and a discursive inevitability; the act redirects one's inevitable (and inescapable) positioning within metaphysics to a critical end:

> The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They
> are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting
> those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and
> all the more when one doesn't suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside,
> borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old

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[64] Wortham, *The Derrida Dictionary*, 31-32.
[65] Derrida, *Positions*, 42-43.
[66] Jacques Derrida, "As *if* I were Dead: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Applying: To Derrida*, eds. John Brannigan, Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 218.
[67] See Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 22-23.

structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work.[68]

As demonstrated above, deconstructive readings operate on a "double register,"[69] simultaneously mobilising and critiquing metaphysical discourse; as Derrida notes, "one can say *a priori* that in every proposition or in every system of semiotic research…metaphysical presuppositions coexist with critical motifs."[70] In these interrelated observations, Derrida outlines an unavoidable complicity that simultaneously provides the conditions of possibility for presence *and* its critique. Deconstruction occupies an undecidable position at the margins of metaphysics, inhabiting textual elements that contradict (and thus betray) the structural oppositions and ontological purities of logocentric discourse.[71]

In denying deconstruction any totalized definition, Derridean theory demonstrates that each of its critical gestures is fundamentally singular;[72] the precise form of any deconstructive act is dictated by the particular logocentric forms upon which it operates: "what is called or calls itself 'deconstruction' also contains, lodged in some moment of its process, an auto-interpretative figure which will always be difficult to subsume under a meta-discourse or general narrative."[73] As a result, deconstruction takes on a gestural character. Eluding any *a priori* ontological presence, it is constituted in the very moment of its application;[74] as David Wills argues, "it is important to reinforce the revolutionary potential of deconstruction as a *shifting set of strategies* that should by definition disturb the status quo."[75]

The methodological commentary provided above problematizes any attempt to construct a fixed deconstructive method that encompasses a finite number of discrete textual practices. Nevertheless, one is able to summarise a number of principles that orient a heterogeneous galaxy of singular deconstructive gestures; importantly, this allows deconstruction to be grasped as a distinct (yet structurally amorphous) theoretical project. Indeed, Derrida attempts such an undertaking in "Positions," in part to protect the term from

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[68] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 24.
[69] Derrida, *Positions*, 41.
[70] Ibid., 36.
[71] Ibid., 6.
[72] Derrida describes deconstruction as "a thinking of singularity"; Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Television*, 6.
[73] Jacques Derrida, *Memoires: For Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 13.
[74] Derrida, "*As if* I were Dead," 217-218.
[75] David Wills, "Jaded in America," in *Deconstruction Is/In America: A New Sense of the Political*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (London: New York University Press, 1995), 257. Emphasis added.

metaphysical domestication; he calls for a "*general strategy of deconstruction*,"[76] differentiating between textual readings that reinforce logocentric principles, and those that disrupt foundational metaphysical dualisms. In this regard, any gesture that embodies a "strategic and adventurous"[77] discursive intervention would be considered a part of this "general economy."[78] In forwarding this project, Derrida suggests that one cannot simply observe, outline, and erase a term's presence, or the oppositional structures within which it is constituted; this would amount to "simply *neutralizing* the binary oppositions of metaphysics," a temporary suspension of a dualistic economy that will inevitably reassert itself as its basic structure has been ignored (and thus left intact).[79] To do so would also neglect a sustained interrogation of the *hierarchical* relationship between the two sides of the opposition, a vital step in any challenge to the authority and presence of certain concepts within metaphysical discourse.

Thus, Derrida carefully outlines a series of non-proscriptive stages that together constitute a rejection of logocentric presence and its hierarchical, antonymic foundations; this begins with a conceptual "overturning," reversing the authority of the two concepts it regulates:

> On the one hand, we must traverse a phase of *overturning*…. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition. Therefore one might proceed too quickly to a *neutralization* that *in practice* would leave the previous field untouched, leaving one no hold on the previous opposition, thereby preventing any means of *intervening* in the field effectively…The necessity of this phase is structural; it is the necessity of an interminable analysis: the hierarchy of dual oppositions always re-establishes itself.[80]

Yet, focusing solely upon the reversal of the opposition's hierarchical economy would be equally problematic: "to remain in this phase is still to operate on the terrain of and from within the deconstructed system."[81] Thus, one would simply switch the dominance of a specific concept to its formerly oppressed "other," trading the eminence of one totalized presence for another; the antonymic structure of logocentric discourse would be necessarily

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[76] Derrida, *Positions*, 41. Emphasis in original.
[77] Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy,* 7.
[78] Derrida, *Positions*, 41.
[79] Ibid. Emphasis in original.
[80] Ibid., 41-42. Emphasis in original.
[81] Ibid., 42.

retained. Accordingly, Derrida suggests that the overturning of any binary opposition must be accompanied by a complementary displacement of the difference between its bifurcated terms. In applying this strategy, deconstruction seeks out and exploits discursive moments that cannot be governed by existing discrete oppositional frames:

> By means of this double, and precisely stratified, dislodged and dislodging, writing, we must also mark the interval between inversion, which brings low what was high, and the irruptive emergence of a new 'concept,' a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime.[82]

Here, Derrida mobilises his notion of the "undecidable" to challenge metaphysical difference:

> Henceforth, in order better to mark this interval…it has been necessary to analyze, to set to work…certain marks, shall we say…that *by analogy* (I underline) I have called undecidables, that is, unities of simulacrum, 'false' verbal properties (nominal or semantic) that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, but which, however, inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganizing it.[83]

Therefore, deconstruction hinges on undecidable "moments of negation"[84] that are perceptible within metaphysical oppositions yet disobey their bifurcated logic, resisting discrete categorization and delineation;[85] as Derrida puts it, the mark embodies a new textual logic of "neither/nor, that is, *simultaneously* either *or*."[86] In this regard, deconstruction does not merely disrupt the binary division of metaphysical concepts, but also troubles the self-identity of the terms themselves. As Johnson puts it:

> Instead of 'A is opposed to B' we have 'B is both added to A and replaces A.' A and B are no longer opposed, nor are they equivalent. Indeed, they are no longer even equivalent to themselves. They are their own differance from themselves.[87]

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[82] Ibid., 41-42.
[83] Ibid., 42-43. Emphasis in original
[84] Laura R. Oswald, "Semiotics and/or Deconstruction: In Quest of Cinema," *Semiotica* 60, nos. 3-4 (1986): 315.
[85] See Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism*, 277.
[86] Derrida, *Positions*, 43. Emphasis in original.
[87] Barbara Johnson, "Translator's Introduction," in *Dissemination*, by Jacques Derrida, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Continuum, 2004), xiii.

As a textual element that can be located within two seemingly paradoxical paradigms, the undecidable undermines the positioning of said concepts as polar opposites, pointing towards an excess that escapes rigid dichotomisation; in turn, the undecidable demonstrates that each term is necessarily inhabited by traces of paradoxical and absent significances.

Thus, deconstruction troubles metaphysical closure, presence, and being through a complex process of supplementarity. In doing so, oppositional terms are re-positioned within the dynamic chain of mutually-constituting differences that institutes them whilst denying transcendental meaning: each concept is simultaneously its antonym, "different and deferred."[88] Deconstruction therefore liberates the heterogeneous play of *différance* that facilitates all signification; overturning and displacing temporary logocentric stabilizations, Derridean readings release a dynamic spatio-temporal freeplay from the coercive shackles of metaphysical structuration. Importantly, this underlying deconstructive objective encapsulates my thesis' intervention into American national identity discourses. Specifically, I explore how recent films seek out moments of deconstructive undecidability in logocentric cultural narratives; in doing so, they open up American cultural discourses to a radical, heterogeneous field of *différance*.

Derrida and Film Theory

Having briefly outlined some general characteristics of Derrida's critique of metaphysical ontology, it is important to consider the presence (or, conversely, absence) of deconstructive influences on contemporary film theory. Immediately, it is noticeable that the majority of existing Derridean film scholarship is reflexively self-justified as an attempt to address a theoretical *aporia*, a vital intervention into a sparse discursive terrain.[89] Nevertheless, scholars qualify such claims by noting that deconstruction has had an *indirect* bearing on the shaping of film theory. Thus, it has been argued (in fittingly Derridean terms) that the theorist "haunt(s)" the discipline;[90] as Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake suggest, "within film theory Derrida is perhaps best conceived of as a structuring absence,"[91]

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[88] Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 17.
[89] See Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 3; Philip Rosen, "The Politics of the Sign and Film Theory," *October* 17 (1981): 7; Louise Burchill, "Jacques Derrida," in *Film, Theory and Philosophy: The Key Thinkers*, ed. Felicity Colman (Durham: Acumen, 2009), 164-165; Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton, *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters* (London: Routledge, 2010), 108.
[90] Burchill, "Jacques Derrida," 165.
[91] Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 65. Also see Antony Easthope, "Derrida and British Film Theory," in *Applying: To Derrida*, eds. John Brannigan, Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 187.

a "spectral" status that eludes metaphysical categorisation.[92] Nevertheless, other critics have noted a series of more explicit theoretical relays;[93] theorists such as Libby Saxton and Brunette observe a recent encroachment of deconstruction into film theory via its influence on "feminist, queer and post-colonial theory," particularly through the influential work of Homi K. Bhabha and Judith Butler.[94] Thus, as Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis summarise, deconstructive strategies "can now be assumed to form part of the received methodological wisdom of film theory and analysis."[95]

As alluded to above, traces of Derridean thought in film studies can be discerned primarily in its influence on other theoretical models, a process that simultaneously integrates and excludes Derrida from the disciplinary canon. Indeed, this situation can be partly explained by the predominance of other post-structuralist philosophers in recent film theory, providing related paradigms that superficially reduce the need for an explicitly Derridean cinema discourse. As Brunette and Wills noted in the late-1980s, "most contemporary post-structuralist film criticism and theory continues, for better or worse, to be based on the strong re-reading of Freud initiated by Jacques Lacan."[96] In turn, this orthodoxy is commonly attributed to different theoretical (and figurative) foci. Brunette and Wills suggest that the pre-eminence of Lacanian psychoanalysis in film studies is attributable to "Lacan's emphasis on the visual," which may have "seemed particularly appropriate to the study of film."[97] In contrast, Saxton notes that Derrida's (particularly early) work demonstrates "suspicions of the visual" and "appeared to prioritize language over vision and perception," a possible explanation for his relative discursive occlusion.[98] Finally, it is argued here that the recent primacy of Foucauldian, and more prominently, Deleuzian approaches in film studies (undoubtedly motivated by his voluminous writings on the subject) have provided another barrier to specifically Derridean engagements with cinema, a trend that this thesis intends to redress.[99]

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[92] This reading mirrors Derrida's theorisation of cinematic; see Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Television*, 113-134.

[93] See Richard Allen and Murray Smith, "Introduction: Film Theory and Philosophy," in *Film Theory and Philosophy*, eds. Richard Allen and Murray Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 9.

[94] Downing and Saxton, *Film and Ethi*cs, 108; Brunette, "Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction," 91.

[95] Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Poststructuralism and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2000), 25-6. Furthermore, "deconstruction" has been used in film studies as an idiomatic "synonym for ideological analysis"; see Rosen, "The Politics of the Sign and Film Theory," 7-8; Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 16; Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism,* 22.

[96] Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 16-17.

[97] Ibid., 17. Such a reading ignores the pictographic aspects of Derrida's theoretical expansion of "general writing"; See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 9.

[98] Downing and Saxton, *Film and Ethi*cs, 109.

[99] See Ian Aitken, *European Film Theory and Cinema: A Critical Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 123; Smith, "Deconstruction and Film," 119-120.

For many, however, this academic *aporia* is simply attributable to the virtual absence of sustained discussions of cinema in Derrida's own work. Thus, whilst Derrida occasionally discussed the medium in interviews, appeared on-screen in three films and a piece of "video-art," and co-authored a commentary on one of these texts, references to cinema are almost non-existent in his more prominent writings.[100] Noting a diversity of other art-forms that Derrida directly addressed (such as painting, architecture, and photography),[101] Louise Burchill maintains that "there is no text by Derrida on cinema, rendering him in this respect an exception amongst other French thinkers of his generation or, more precisely, his 'philosophical sequence.'"[102] Discussed by scholars as a "blind spot,"[103] Derrida's neglect of cinema amounts to a noticeable discursive gap; the topic of cinema is rendered a constituting difference *within* deconstruction due to its apparent under-theorisation. In turn, Derrida explains that his relative silence on cinema was largely self-inflicted, dictated by a lack of disciplinary expertise: "I like cinema very much; I have seen many films, but in comparison with those who know the history of cinema and the theory of film, I am, and I say this without being coy, incompetent."[104] This thesis reads the above quote not as a dismissal of deconstruction's relevance to film theory, but as an implicit challenge to those with a more sustained disciplinary grounding to assume this theoretical project. Indeed, scholars have noted "tremors of the cinematic" in Derrida's work,[105] an unexplored deconstructive potential that is further hinted at by his own assertion that cinema "exceeds philosophical discourse and questions philosophy."[106] Thus, such statements amount to a scholarly "invitation," a gesture that Derrida established as the basis for all his intellectual acts.[107] A limited number of theorists have attempted to fulfil this discursive demand, a task that this thesis productively contributes towards.

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[100] See Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Television*," 113-134; Jacques Derrida, "The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*, eds. Peter Brunette and David Wills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 9-32; Burchill, "Jacques Derrida," 165-166. Furthermore, although Derrida wrote more frequently about mass-media, these discussions focus most clearly on "communication," "liveness," and "actuality"; see Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Television,* 3-27.

[101] Also see Smith, "Deconstruction and Film," 119.

[102] Burchill, "Jacques Derrida," 165.

[103] Smith, "Deconstruction and Film," 119.

[104] Derrida, "The Spatial Arts," 9-10.

[105] Akira Mizuta Lippit, Review of *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory* by Peter Brunette and David Wills, *MLN* 105, no. 5 (1990): 1130. Ulmer argues that affinities between Derridean theory and cinematic montage demonstrates that Derrida was "already thinking filmicly"; Gregory L. Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology: Post(e)-Pedagogy From Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985)*,* 305. Also see Jacques Derrida in Michael Bachmann, "Derrida on Film: Staging Spectral Sincerity," in *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, eds. Ernst van Alphen, Mieke Bal and Carel Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 214. Bachmann's translation.

[106] Derrida, "The Spatial Arts," 24.

[107] Ibid., 10.

In reflecting upon existing Derridean film theory, one may notice two distinct trends (a perception that undoubtedly imposes a binary logic upon a field of amorphous interpretative differences). Importantly, each approach draws upon complementary aspects of Derrida's work to address prevailing assumptions within film theory, and, ultimately, to critique and re-inscribe cinematic ontology. The first of these re-positions film within Derrida's expanded notion of "arche-writing," laid out in *Of Grammatology*;[108] consequently, "film as writing"[109] scholars deny cinema its common status as an indexical representation of a visual presence, transforming it into a heterogeneous Derridean text. Conversely, more recent work on Derrida and film theory has drawn heavily upon his later notion of "hauntology," a concept outlined in his limited ruminations on cinema (principally his on-screen performance in Ken McMullan's *Ghostdance* [1983] and commentaries on the film). In such approaches, theorists expand upon Derrida's characterisation of film's "logic of the spectral,"[110] rendering it a ghostly medium that exceeds and resists foundational logocentric oppositions between presence and absence.[111] Any clear delineation between such approaches is problematized by their clear conceptual affinities, and their arbitrary division erases differences *within* these methodologies. However, in discussing these theoretical trends separately, I can ultimately demonstrate that they achieve similar goals. Namely, they productively locate cinema within Derrida's reading of textuality as a dynamic process of semiotic difference and deferral. Finally, I demonstrate how this discursive re-appraisal underlies the deconstructive textual analyses that this thesis undertakes. Thus, whilst this project is not primarily an intervention into debates surrounding cinematic ontology, the following discussion elucidates how this study expands the influence of existing Derridean film theory into the realms of textual reading and interpretation.

"Film as Writing"

Abstract ruminations that tentatively ally cinema with Derridean *différance* have been consolidated within a framework that reconsiders film within Derrida's deconstructive expansion of writing. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida outlines how the logocentric idealisation of being as presence has led to the hierarchical, "phonocentric" subjugation of writing to speech. For Derrida, this inequality is produced by the purportedly unmatched closeness of speech to thought: "the voice, producer of *the first symbols*, has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind…. It signifies 'mental experiences' which

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[108] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 56-57.
[109] For a summary of this approach see chapter three of Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 60-98.
[110] Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Television*, 117.
[111] Ibid., 117.

themselves reflect or mirror things by natural resemblance…the voice is closest to the signified."[112] Thus, the expression of a self-coherent speaking subject orients an entire philosophical system around the possibility of immediate presence, essentialist being, and transcendental ontology. Conversely, Derrida demonstrates that metaphysical writing has conventionally fulfilled "a secondary and instrumental function: translator of a full speech that was fully *present*."[113] Thus, writing is devalued as an abject deformation of speech and its transcendental self-identity, evidenced by its reliance upon the division of signifier from signified.[114]

Having outlined the vital role of speech/writing oppositions in metaphysical knowledge, Derrida deconstructs this hierarchical couplet. Noting the pervasive hierarchical subjugation of writing to speech, this duality is initially overturned, as spoken language is re-cast as a derived form of writing. As Brunette and Wills eloquently summarise: "writing becomes the model for all linguistic operations, including speech, to the extent that they always involve a dependence on the difference, spacing, and rupture that the speech model occludes."[115] Derrida provides his own lucid description of this process, outlining his theorisation of "a new concept of writing" that "*simultaneously* provokes the overturning of the hierarchy speech/writing, and the entire system attached to it, *and* releases the dissonance of a writing within speech, thereby disorganizing the entire inherited order and invading the entire field."[116] Thus, Derrida repositions writing as a broader model for all linguistic utterances. In doing so, he theorises a "mutation" of writing, one that "enlarge(s) and radicalize(s)"[117] the concept to the point that it undermines the entire metaphysical system within which it is positioned; this model grants the Derridean critic "the assured means of broaching the de-construction of *the greatest totality* – the concept of the *epistémè* and logocentric metaphysics."[118] In undertaking this gesture, Derrida uses the term "arche-writing" to distinguish "vulgar" logocentric models of inscription from their deconstructive reconceptualizations;[119] arche-writing re-introduces the textual excesses, supplements, and ruptures that constitute any system of signification, yet have been routinely repressed by metaphysics in its desire for absolute presence. Noting that arche-writing resides within metaphysics as both its possibility and critique, Derrida equates it directly with the differences and deferrals of freeplay: "the unnameable movement of *difference-itself* which I have strategically nicknamed *trace*, *reserve*, or *differance*, can be called writing only within

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[112] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 11-12.
[113] Ibid., 7-8. Emphasis in original.
[114] Ibid., 11.
[115] Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 9.
[116] Derrida, *Positions*, 42. Emphasis in original.
[117] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 10.
[118] Ibid., 46. Emphasis in original.
[119] Ibid., 56. Also See Derrida, *Positions*, 7.

the *historical* enclosure, that is to say within the boundaries of metaphysics."[120] Writing is repositioned and reappraised, embodying the *différance* that initiates, inhabits, and exceeds all forms of language and signification.[121]

The possibility of treating cinema as a manifestation of *différance* is enabled by its inclusion in Derrida's expanded taxonomy; he lists "cinematography" as a non-scriptural form of writing, which now covers "all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice."[122] Thus, Derrida's equation of cinematography and writing implicitly positions film within discourses of arche-writing, as it is subject to this broader transformation and radicalisation. Numerous theorists have unpacked these discursive links between Derridean writing and cinema. Foremost in this trend are Brunette and Wills, as they explicitly relate a re-theorisation of "film as writing" with the destabilisation of reigning orthodoxies within film theory. To begin, they contend that cinema constitutes a "reproducible language"; thus, "to the extent that (film) is a language, it is to be considered as a type of writing."[123] In doing so, they outline how the technical specifications of film support this re-reading of the cinematic:

> Cinema can never be directly 'spoken.' We would merely add that this is because it is always *written*. Cinema, like all other forms of writing, leaves something behind, something involving material effects that cannot be hidden if the operation is to continue to function, like printed letters and words or reels of celluloid.[124]

Indeed, several theorists have argued that cinema may be approached as an *ideal* model for Derridean writing. In her theorisation of "cinema-graphia," Laura Oswald boldly claims that the medium's ontological heterogeneity and temporal properties allows film to "outweigh literary discourse as a model for the kind of writing Derrida defines as 'the becoming-space of time, the becoming-time of space.'"[125] Conversely, Brunette and Wills reach similar

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[120] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 93. Emphasis in original. As a result, Derrida's notion of arche-writing inhabits (and problematizes) all metaphysical discourse from its beginnings; see Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 56-57; Wortham, *The Derrida Dictionary*, 242-243.

[121] This expansion of writing has also been elucidated in reference to Derridean "spacing"; see Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 57, 68; Oswald, "Semiotics and/or Deconstruction," 317; Johnson, "Translator's Introduction," xvi.

[122] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 9.

[123] Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 61. Also see Dana Polan, "'Desire Shifts the Differance': Figural Poetics and Figural Politics in the Film Theory of Marie-Claire Ropars," *Camera Obscura* 12 (1984): 67; David Norman Rodowick, "The Figure and the Text," *Diacritics* 15, no. 1 (1985): 36.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Laura R. Oswald, "Cinema-Graphia: Eisenstein, Derrida, and the Sign of the Cinema," in *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*, eds. Peter Brunette and David Wills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 249, 257. Others have drawn direct links between written inscription and cinematic editing; see David Wills, "Derrida, Now and Then, Here and There," *Theory and Event* 7, no. 2 (2004), https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v007/7.2wills.html:

conclusions but for seemingly divergent reasons; they argue that cinema superficially refutes its textual form, appearing as a mimetic, indexical reproduction of the real:

> In the case of cinema, its 'writtenness' simply seems less obvious because it is received as still more natural and direct than speech…. From this point of view, the visual occupies a position of primacy with respect to the verbal similar to that which speech occupies with respect to the written.[126]

However, Brunette and Wills suggest that such assumptions actually reinforce cinema's suitability to deconstructive theorisations of writing. Replicating many of metaphysics' foundational assumptions, film theory provides an object of study that is particularly receptive to Derridean reading and, once deconstructed can "provide new insights into the ancient problematic of the relation between image and referent."[127]

These observations provide a useful bridge to a closer investigation of how cinema has been furnished with the deconstructive properties of arche-writing; it is recast as a medium that visualises semiotic ruptures and differential chains that undermine textual self-presence and unity. One of the earliest exponents of this approach was Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, particularly in *La text divisé* (1981).[128] In her theorisation of cinematic *écriture*, Ropars-Wuilleumier re-conceptualises the film image as a heterogeneous hieroglyph, incorporating diverse, "nonunifiable" signifying elements; in doing so, it breaks down absolute divisions between seemingly distinct semiotic registers, inscribing ontological difference within the very fabric of the image.[129] In *Of Grammatology*, the ideogram or hieroglyph is endorsed as an exemplary limit-case for the metaphysical speech/writing opposition: it represents "the organized cohabitation, within the same graphic code, of figurative, symbolic, abstract, and phonetic elements."[130] Brunette and Wills conclude that this reading of the hieroglyph provides a suitable figurative model for film, as its "mixture of signifying systems makes it especially appropriate to the study of cinematic signification."[131] Importantly, Ropars-Wuilleumier argues that this re-inscription of cinema

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8; Peggy Kamuf, *To Follow: The Wake of Jacques Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 110-111.

[126] Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 61-62.

[127] Ibid.

[128] An English translation of this work has never been published. However, articles drawn from the monograph have been reprinted in English-language journals.

[129] See Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier quoted in Oswald, "Semiotics and/or Deconstruction," 316; Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 130-131; Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, quoted in Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology*, 271.

[130] Jacques Derrida, quoted in Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 129.

[131] Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 118-119. For a similar readings of the cinematic see Derrida, "The Spatial Arts," 13; Tom Conley, *Film Hieroglyphs: Ruptures in Classical Cinema* (Oxford:

entails a "radical dismantling of the sign," evidenced in her specific analysis of the discordance between a film's visual and aural registers. Focusing on the "montage of the signs and the staggered movement of the visual signals and the sound emissions,"[132] Ropars-Wuilleumier discerns ruptures in cinematic self-presence; isolating and exploiting "privileged fracture zones,"[133] she argues that

> the supposed unity of signification explodes in the separation of meaning and sound; slipping beneath the signified, the signifier is reduced to fragments which can be released, available for other combinations, which inscribe in the sign the call for and the trace of other signs.[134]

Thus, Ropars-Wuilleumier further locates cinematic textuality ("the endless *filmic* sliding of the signifieds")[135] within Derridean discourses of *différance*, dissemination, the trace. This discordant interplay of different discursive registers visualises a textual heterogeneity that undermines metaphysical self-identity, a process that "cinema is best able to show."[136]

Whilst the filmic hieroglyph challenges the unity of the metaphysical sign through its incorporation of divergent significatory systems, it also exemplifies *différance* as a process of ceaseless temporal deferral. As Oswald suggests, the Derridean ideogram embraces the movement of *différance* as the precondition for all linguistic utterances:

> Each ideogram taken in isolation has a meaning based on its iconic function.… This signified becomes a signifier in its turn in a chain which produces meaning by means of relations between different ideograms organized in time and space, thus deferring the presence of meaning and the unity of the subject of discourse.[137]

This observation leads Oswald to conclude that "from the start, the process of signification in cinema is inscribed with division and threatened with erasure."[138] In typifying Derridean constructions of arche-writing as *différance*, this semiotic process has also provoked direct

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University of Minnesota Press, 1991), viii, x, xxviii; Kamuf, *To Follow*, 110; Brunette, "Toward a Deconstructive Theory of Film," 65.
[132] Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, "The Disembodied Voice: *India Song*," *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 254.
[133] Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, "The Graphic in Film Writing: *A bout de Souffle*, or the Erratic Alphabet," *Enclitic* 506 (1982): 147.
[134] Ropars-Wuilleumier, "The Disembodied Voice," 261.
[135] Ibid., 263.
[136] Ibid., 267. Also see Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology*, 306.
[137] Oswald, "Semiotics and/or Deconstruction," 318
[138] Oswald, "Cinema-Graphia," 257, 259.

comparisons with Sergei Eisenstein's theory and practice of cinematic montage;[139] Ropars-Wuilleumier explicitly cites Eisensteinian theory in locating the production of cinematic meaning in an unceasing process of "juxtaposition" and "conflict" between adjacent stills, a "play of signifiers."[140] Thus, theories of cinematic montage mirror those of film as hieroglyphic writing, insofar as they both posit a play of *différance* within and between textual elements; in turn, they also initiate a critique of metaphysical film theory and its reliance upon the medium's conventional association with photographic self-presence or textual unity. To provide but one example, Derridean reconceptualizations of film have launched a sustained deconstructive attack on mimetic theories of cinematic ontology, typified in the work of Andre Bazin.[141]

Spectrality and the Cinematic Image

As explored above, readings of cinema as arche-writing have relocated the medium within discourses of Derridean *différance*. In doing so, such accounts challenge pervasive theories of cinematic realism, which have utilised the purported indexicality of the photographic as a means of theorising cinema's privileged proximity to an *a priori* material reality. However, following Derrida's own (limited) discussions of cinema in the 1980s and 1990s, deconstructive engagements with the medium shifted focus towards the conceptualisation of the audio-visual as a "spectral" or "hauntological" form. This should not be considered as a fundamental theoretical shift; indeed, it is argued here that such approaches reach similar conclusions to considerations of film as writing. However, in establishing a distinct vocabulary with which to critique metaphysical ontology, such approaches warrant further discussion. Although positing a precise origin for this theoretical trend would undoubtedly be compromised by metaphysical complicity, one can identify Derrida's earliest engagements with cinema in *Ghostdance*, a film in which he plays a fictionalised version of himself. Asked to reflect upon the medium by a student (Pascale Ogier), Derrida elucidates his theorisation of cinematic spectrality, a deconstructive framework to which he would sporadically return:

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[139] For commentaries on the similarities between *différance*, arche-writing, and Eisensteinien montage see Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology*, 270-300, 305; Oswald, "Semiotics and/or Deconstruction," 318-322; Oswald, "Cinema-Graphia," 251-263; Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 108.
[140] Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, quoted in Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 129. Also see Oswald, "Semiotics and/or Deconstruction," 319.
[141] For deconstructive critiques of Bazinian film theory, see Oswald, "Cinema-Graphia," 248-251; Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 60-78.

To be haunted by a ghost is to remember what one has never lived in the present, to remember what, in essence, has never had the form of presence. Film is a 'phantomachia.' Let the ghosts come back. Film plus psychoanalysis equals a science of ghosts. Modern technology, contrary to appearance, although it is scientific, increases tenfold the power of ghosts.[142]

Importantly, these words take on their own spectral form, as Derrida refers to the phantasmic appearance of their cinematic utterance; when asked whether he "believes in ghosts," Derrida responds: "that is a difficult question. Do you ask a ghost if he believes in ghosts? Here, the ghost is me."[143] Derrida clarifies this point in a later interview, arguing that spectrality is a property of the cinematic image; explaining that film entails a "disappearance…which promises and conceals in advance another magic 'apparition,' a ghostly 're-apparition,'" Derrida concludes that "we are spectralized by the shot, captured or possessed by spectrality in advance."[144] Thus, as Burchill notes, Derrida's meditations on the subject amount to a "phantasmic *mise-en-abyme*," as his spectral theoretical insights are simultaneously spectralized by their cinematic rendering.[145]

In "Artifactualities," Derrida outlines a broader "law of the spectral": "the phantom or ghost [*le revenant*] is neither present nor absent, it neither is nor is not, nor can it be dialecticized."[146] Derrida expands upon this subversion of metaphysical being and binarism, arguing that the spectral cannot be accommodated within totalized categories or oppositions: "it regularly exceeds all the oppositions between visible and invisible, sensible and insensible. A specter is both visible and invisible, both phenomenal and nonphenomenal: a trace that marks the present with its absence in advance."[147] Thus, the spectral represents a point of undecidability in the hierarchical separation of presence and absence, the underlying structure of Western metaphysics.[148] Importantly, Derrida's reading of spectral cinema does not entail the transformation of an *a priori* presence into a ghostly image, a second-order representation of a pre-existing material referent. Rather, he argues that the spectral embodies a supplementarity that always already inhabits the image as a pre-condition of its possible filmic representation:

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[142] Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Television*, 115.

[143] Jacques Derrida quoted in Bachmann, "Derrida on Film," 216.

[144] Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Television*, 117.

[145] Derrida notes that were he to have discussed cinema more explicitly, his ruminations would have centred on the concept of spectrality; Burchill, "Jacques Derrida," 165-166.

[146] Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Televison*, 22.

[147] Ibid., 117.

[148] See Colin Davis, *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 153, 157; Burchill, "Jacques Derrida," 166.

Because we know that, once it has been taken, captured, this image will be reproducible in our absence, because we know this *already*, we are already haunted by this future, which brings our death. Our disappearance is already here.[149]

As Burchill notes, this theorisation explains Derrida's assertion in *Ghostdance* that "here, the ghost is me"; even as he is being recorded, Derrida is "aware of the images' vocation to be reproduced in (his) absence, (he) is haunted in advance by (his) future death."[150] Cinema is thus imbued with an iterative potential; seemingly singular images can be repeated (and hence transformed) by their possible reproduction in new, unpredictable contexts.[151] The spectral is not the product of the ghostly conversion of an absolute being that pre-existed the acts of filming and projection, but rather haunts (and therefore fractures) all presence.[152]

Finally, the cinematic medium's hauntological character can also be discerned in the temporal properties of the *moving* image. This aspect of cinematic spectrality is explored by Louis-Georges Schwartz in his interrogation of the filmic "possibility of preserving a living image of the dead."[153] Discussing early cinema, Schwartz argues that the moving image's apparent ability to foster an "absolute illusion" of life was directly related to "the concept of action, the movement of the living image."[154] Schwartz proceeds to note that the medium was perceived as a machine that can (as Derrida puts it) "let the ghosts come back"; "a film of someone who has died brings the person back to life."[155] However, he then demonstrates that this reading of cinema reifies the difference between life and death, and is thus plainly logocentric. Conversely, Schwartz argues that Derridean spectrality allows for a more radical reading of cinematic time that dislocates the medium's normalised ontological frames. The present (and presence) are thrown into temporal crisis, producing "a living present always already fissured, heterogeneous and out of joint from the inside."[156] Mirroring Schwartz's discussion, Derrida notes that specific temporal properties of the moving image undermine any absolute visual presence: "film is a very particular case:…this

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[149] Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Televison*, 116-117. Emphasis in original

[150] Burchill, "Jacques Derrida," 165.

[151] For an anecdotal expansion of this point, see Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Televison*, 115, 119-120.

[152] See Smith "Deconstruction and Film," 123. Derrida occasionally postulates a singular relationship between cinema and spectrality, going so far as to argue that this "phenomenology was not possible before cinematography"; see Jacques Derrida quoted in Burchill, "Jacques Derrida," 171. Burchill's translation. Yet, Derrida also notes that attempts to define an essentially cinematic ontology are logocentric; see Derrida, "The Spatial Arts," 13-15; Jacques Derrida, "Videor," in *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, eds. Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 73.

[153] Louis-Georges Schwartz, "Cinema and the ~~Meaning~~ of 'Life,'" *Discourse* 28, nos. 2-3 (2006): 7.

[154] Ibid., 10.

[155] Ibid.

[156] Ibid., 15.

effect of presence is complicated by the fact of movement, of mobility, of sequentiality, of temporality."[157] This phenomenon, in which temporal linearity both relies upon and destabilizes presence, is furnished with a spectral character by Roger Luckhurst:

> The absent presence of the spectre fractures the self-identity of the present, installs an anachronistic, differential temporality which is not divorced from, but renders both possible and impossible, the 'unfolding' of time understood as a succession of self-present moments.[158]

Thus, film's spectral destabilisation of presence and absence both relies upon and challenges pervasive models of cinematic temporality and linearity. The ghostliness of motion pictures relies upon spatio-temporal reproducibility and succession, an impression of life afforded to the *moving* image. Yet, such a project is exposed as ultimately illusory; the very properties that allow the perception of cinema as a "living presence" also lay bare temporal ruptures that undermine the conceptual plenitude they institute.[159]

To conclude, in treating cinema as a play of absence and presence, hauntological readings embody a radical ontological gesture; Derrida unequivocally states that "the spectral logic is de facto a deconstructive logic."[160] In arguing that the spectral "exceeds all the oppositions"[161] of metaphysics, Derrida positions the cinematic image as a heterogeneous text that cannot be enclosed within logocentric antinomies. However, it must be remembered that the foundational metaphysical dualism of presence and absence is organised hierarchically, treating presence as an idealized state of conceptual plenitude. The spectral first overturns this opposition, placing greater emphasis on the absent "other" that inhabits cinematic presence: Derrida notes that "our relation to another origin of the world or to another gaze, to the gaze of the other, implies a kind of spectrality. Respect for the alterity of the other dictates respect for the ghost."[162] Burchill clarifies that this inversion and effacement of oppositional difference is achieved by equating the spectral with undecidability; it is "at once, *both and neither*: visible and/nor invisible…sensible and/nor insensible, living and/nor dead, perceptual and/nor hallucinatory." Thus, "spectrality would

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[157] Derrida, "The Spatial Arts," 10.
[158] Roger Luckhurst, "(Touching On) Tele-Technology," in *Applying: To Derrida,* eds. John Brannigan, Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 172.
[159] Ibid., 16. For an extension of this argument to cinematic perception, see Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 78.
[160] Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Television,* 117. For readings of deconstruction as spectral, see Bachmann, "Derrida on Film," 219; Nicholas Royle, "Blind Cinema," in *Derrida: Screenplays and Essays on the Film*, eds. Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 11-13.
[161] Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Television,* 117.
[162] Ibid., 123. Also see Davis, *Haunted Subjects*, 152.

ultimately scramble philosophy's determination of being as presence";[163] as Luckhurst confirms, "the spectre makes tremble a Western metaphysics, an ontology that would exorcise the impurity of a ghost hovering *between*."[164] This effacement of binary structures into "between" states of "both and neither" again furnishes cinema with a deconstructive character, providing another conceptual underpinning for the close readings undertaken in this thesis.

Film as "Text"

Whilst providing distinct terminologies with which to challenge metaphysical readings of cinema, one can discern clear parallels between cinematic spectrality and film arche-writing. Both theoretical approaches perform a "strategically important" task: they "(inscribe) film…within the domain of the *textual*."[165] However, it is important to note that a Derridean reading of text extends beyond its common definition as a "signifying practice."[166] Arguing that all art-forms are inhabited by a deconstructive "spacing," Derrida mobilises a vital analogue for arche-writing: "there is text because there is always a little discourse somewhere in the visual arts, and also because even if there is no discourse, the effect of spacing already implies a textualization." Thus, in any attempt to apply deconstruction to the visual arts, "the expansion of the concept of text is strategically decisive."[167] In this manner, the text initiates *and* challenges logocentric discourse, allowing signification whilst preventing its transcendental fixing and closure. This textual function is elucidated by Derrida, who asserts that deconstruction

> cannot be the work of a discourse entirely regulated by essence, meaning, truth, consciousness, ideality, etc. What I call *text* is also that which 'practically' inscribes and overflows the limits of such a discourse. *There* is such a general text everywhere that (that is, everywhere) this discourse and its order (essence, sense, truth, meaning, consciousness, ideality, etc.) are *overflowed*, that is, everywhere that their authority is put back into the position of a *mark* in a chain that this authority intrinsically and illusorily believes it wishes to, and does in fact, govern.[168]

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[163] Burchill, "Jacques Derrida," 166.
[164] Luckhurst, "(Touching on) Tele-Technology," 172. Also see Schwartz, "Cinema and the ~~Meaning~~ of 'Life,'" 24.
[165] Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play,* 62.
[166] See Easthope, "Derrida and British Film Theory," 192.
[167] Derrida, "The Spatial Arts," 15.
[168] Derrida, *Positions*, 59-60. Emphasis in original.

The text signifies but then displaces a number of logocentric concepts, opening these up to a play of *différance* that disperses their illusory totality. Indeed, Derrida contends that it is the operation of a "network of differences and references" that grants any discourse "a textual structure."[169] In turn, Ropars-Wuilleumier notes that evaluating the cinematic image as a Derridean text re-introduces discordances and ruptures into purportedly self-coherent, significatory models:

> It is a question of crossing films and cinema from the point of view of the text, that is, in the sense used here, of the capacity of signifying systems, whatever their technico-sensorial status – to point to a weakness in linguistic theory based on the sign.[170]

The text therefore establishes a dynamic, heterogeneous, differential field that disturbs many of the totalised anchors of metaphysical discourse. Importantly, it is this reading of textuality that facilitates a comparison between complementary Derridean readings of the cinematic. A dynamic freeplay of presence and absence constitutes textual *différance*, inaugurating an unbounded differential economy that underlies both Derrida's re-inscription of writing and his discussions of ontological spectrality. Indeed, Derrida directly notes the mutual imbrication of writing and hauntology, describing the former as a "spectral response."[171]

Finally, in denying logocentric semiotic closure, Derrida calls into question the very possibility of distinguishing between distinct textual wholes. The differential play of signifiers cannot be confined within rigid discursive boundaries, as a diverse series of textual, contextual, and extra-textual factors are gathered up into the play of *différance* that precipitates *and* denies ontological coherence; this process is summarised by one of the most widely circulated maxims of Derridean thought: "*There is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside-text; *il n'ya a pas de hors-texte*]."[172] With regard to this thesis' research objectives, Derrida's reading of the "decentered text"[173] provides a vital intervention into the relationship between film and close reading.[174] Lapsley and Westlake briefly discuss this

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[169] Derrida, "The Spatial Arts," 15. Also see Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play,* 62; Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, quoted in Oswald, "Semiotics and/or Deconstruction," 316. Oswald's translation.

[170] Marie Claire-Ropars-Wuilleumier, quoted in Oswald, "Semiotics and/or Deconstruction," 316. Oswald's translation. Also see Rodowick, "The Figure and the Text," 43.

[171] Jacques Derrida, quoted in Russell J.A. Kilbourn, *Cinema, Memory, Modernity: The Representation of Memory from the Art Film to Transnational Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 157.

[172] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158. Emphasis in original

[173] Ibid., 62.

[174] Some theorists have used Derridean textuality to analyse a film authorship and genre; See Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 105-106.

theoretical problematic, arguing that an expanded notion of text nullifies attempts at fixing cinematic meaning:

> Just as no one person or institution can finally control the contexts in which a text will be situated, no one person or institution can specify the limits of meaning accruing to the text. Readers constantly relate any given text to others, so producing new meanings, new interpretations. The possibility of 'the text overrun(ning) all the limits assigned to it' entails that meaning is always potentially both different and deferred.[175]

Brunette and Wills further suggest that a deconstructive model of film analysis endorses a move from interpreting films as totalities to a process of "reading in and out of the text, examining the other texts onto which it opens itself out or from which it closes itself off."[176] Here, the authors motion towards a Derridean form of textual engagement, in which attempts to demarcate textual unity have been abandoned; rather, the chains of references and associations that constitute *différance* become a crucial focus in the analysis of cinematic meaning as a (unceasing) textual process. This reorientation of the text has a vital effect on reading strategies; it lays bare an unbounded structure of differences and substitutions that abet deconstructive re-readings of any film. This gesture lays the groundwork for a future practice of Derridean textual reading; it is within this critical area that this thesis productively intervenes.

Deconstruction, Film, and Textual Reading

Having briefly outlined prominent manifestations of Derridean film theory, this project's intervention into a broader critical landscape is more easily discernible. Namely, this thesis theorises and enacts a deconstructive form of cinematic textual analysis. As demonstrated already, the majority of Derridean interventions into this discipline have explored how a critique of Western metaphysics can undermine orthodox conceptualisations of the cinematic apparatus. In contrast, sustained Derridean film readings are sporadic and under-theorised; engagements with this topic usually involve short, standalone interpretations of single texts, in which one aspect (or a more generalised conception) of deconstructive theory is applied to specific films or film discourses.[177] It is this state of

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[175] Lapsley and Westlake, *Film Theory*, 63.
[176] Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 62, 105-106.
[177] See Shannon Donaldson-McHugh and Don Moore, "Film Adaptation, Co-Authorship, and Hauntology: Gus Van Sant's *Psycho* (1998)," *Journal of Popular Culture* 39, no. 2 (2006): 225-233;

affairs that my project redresses. In adopting this methodological aim, I demonstrate that existing Derridean film scholarship provides a vital (but limited) precursor to my thesis, as my textual reading strategies are enabled specifically by their reconceptualization of cinema as a Derridean text.

As implicitly suggested in the discussion above, a deconstructive expansion of the text also precipitates a re-interpretation of textual analysis itself. Again, Brunette and Wills have explored deconstruction's transformation of close reading in a cinematic context.[178] Specifically, the pair argue that prominent forms of film reading are guided by a "will to totality or integrality, the inevitable essentialization, categorization, and repression of elements that 'don't fit'."[179] Yet, they also demonstrate that deconstruction does not amount to the rejection of a consistent, attentive argumentative logic; indeed, they note that Derrida's own analyses were constructed with an "obsessive rigour."[180] Paul Bowman usefully unpacks this understanding of deconstruction as a radicalisation of metaphysical models of textual engagement. Based upon the premise that "no interpretation is total," deconstruction is tasked with "putting in question the established limits of the existing interpretations perpetuated by institutions and taken-for-granted readings."[181] Thus, Derridean interpretation provides both an amplification and critique of logocentric close reading, a reflexive re-orientation of textual analysis away from totalizing aims and towards a celebration of interpretative heterogeneity.[182]

Drawing upon these observations, it is possible to theorise a direct call for a deconstructive mode of textual analysis within existing film discourses, predicated upon the transformation of cinema into a Derridean text. For example, Brunette and Wills argue that "the greatest impact of a Derridean point of view on film studies – beyond the questions of film history, genre, and various theoretical models – may very well be in the area of interpretation itself."[183] This observation is reinforced in their suggestion that all forms of Derridean film theory ultimately feed into discussions of textual engagement:

Mary Alemany-Galway, *A Postmodern Cinema: The Voice of the Other in Canadian Film* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002); Sarah Dillon, "Time for the Gift of Dance," in *Sex, Gender and Time in Literature and Culture*, eds. Ben Davies and Jana Funk (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Steven Hamelman, "The Deconstructive Search for Oz," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2000): 312-319; Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Ex-Cinema*: *From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Glen M. Mimura, *Ghostlife of Third Cinema: Asian American Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

[178] See Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 185-186.

[179] Ibid., 58.

[180] Ibid., 91.

[181] Bowman, *Deconstructing Popular Culture*, 48. Also see Johnson, "Translator's Introduction," xv.

[182] See François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort, Josephine Berganza, and Marlon Jones (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 52, 111.

[183] Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 58.

It seems to us that any attempt to extend Derrida's ideas concerning the image to the domain of the cinema will come back to the matter of how strategies for reading film might challenge, more radically than semiotics did or does, the institutions that determine and restrict such reading(s).[184]

In turn, this observation is accompanied by a more explicit call for "reading practices that challenge the imposition of institutional forms" and "would seek a more adventurous marrying of theory to reading practice."[185] Importantly, this re-theorisation of close reading

would see the gaps of a text not so much, or not only, as signs of elision but as aporias representing important points of articulation between its inside and outside. It would accept that although such aporias might be productive of further readings, there can be no simple way…in which one reading could 'correct' another – thus no way out of reading itself.[186]

In postulating this re-orientation of both the object and aims of textual analysis, Brunette and Wills espouse a reflexive interpretative form that opens up (rather than closes down) other nascent textual readings. The analyses undertaken in this thesis directly build upon Brunette and Wills' ruminations on the topic, answering a call discernible throughout their scholarship but never actualised in any sustained fashion.[187] In doing so, my thesis constructively contributes to a growing Derridean film discourse; rather than providing an oppositional counter-argument to existing work within the limited field, this project enacts a form of close reading that relies upon more abstract re-theorisations of the medium that are already in process.

National Identity and Cultural Narration

In this introduction, I have briefly explored the Derridean principles that guide my thesis' methodology, demonstrating how these productively expand the limited field of deconstructive film scholarship. Specifically, this project intervenes within critical debates regarding cinema and textual reading, allowing films to be critiqued as metaphysical forms *and* interpreted as deconstructive engagements with other logocentric discourses. In the final

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[184] Ibid., 135.
[185] Ibid., 59, 136.
[186] Ibid., 59.
[187] Despite briefly undertaking textual analyses in one chapter, the authors admit that they "have not been especially interested, at least not in the present volume, in producing a series of deconstructive readings of films"; Ibid., ix.

section of this introduction, I demonstrate how my analyses enact this scholarly objective. Drawing upon the work of Bhabha[188] and Geoffrey Bennington, my analyses of case-study texts and their socio-political representations are guided by a Derridean re-conceptualisation of nationhood. By treating American national identity as a form of cultural *narration*, it is explicitly established as a logocentric discourse; in turn, this discursive shift abets the dislocation of its totalising function, a gesture that constitutes this thesis' central research aim. However, before exploring these scholarly precedents, this thesis must be contextualised within a broader academic discourse that has re-cast nationhood as a complex, ideologically-constituted form. Whilst an exhaustive survey of such approaches is impossible, one can perceive a general shift towards re-defining the nation as a "multidimensional concept,"[189] assembled from a plethora of diverse cultural determinants; for example, Anthony D. Smith constructs a taxonomy of potential sources for national solidarity that includes shared ethnicity, myths, religion, and geography.[190] In turn, acts of discursive complexification underline readings of nationhood as an arbitrary, intellectual construct. Drawing upon Benedict Anderson's theorisation of the nation as an "imagined community," countless national identity scholars have endorsed his premise that "nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of that word's multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind."[191] In turn, studies of nationalism have furnished these "artefacts" with an explicitly ideological character.[192] For example, Ernest Gellner reverses orthodox readings of nationalist rhetoric as the expression of a coherent, *a priori* national body; he argues instead that nationalist discourses construct and solidify national forms, rendering specific nations and their collective identities as "arbitrary historical inventions."[193] Thus, varied readings of national

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[188] Martin-Jones also draws upon Bhabha's work in his study of cinema and national identity; however, in contrast to this thesis, he constructs a Deleuzian reading of cultural discourses that focuses specifically on "narrative time in national contexts"; see David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity: Narrative Time in National Contexts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 32-49.

[189] Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991), vii.

[190] Ibid., 8-15.

[191] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 4.

[192] Studies of American identity often highlight the importance of ideology to national togetherness; see Richard Hoffstadter, quoted in Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (London: Norton, 1996), 19; Michael G. Kammen, *People of Paradox: An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of American Civilization* (New York: Knopf, 1972), 9; Samuel P. Huntingdon, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 12, 38-39, 48; John Higham, *Hanging Together: Unity and Diversity in American Culture*, ed. Carl J. Guarneri (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 8.

[193] Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 54-55. For commentaries on these approaches, see Smith, *National Identity*, vii, 14-17, 91-92; Hayward, "Framing National Cinemas," in *Cinema and Nation*, eds. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London: Routledge, 2000), 89.

identity ostensibly challenge its purported status as a concrete historical phenomenon; in turn, by treating the nation as a discursive structure, these interpretations problematize the furnishing of national forms with any inherent, essential meaning. However, these scholars stop short of a subversive critique of metaphysical national identity; instead, they propose a self-consciously arbitrary yet equally totalised model of national ontology.[194] Nevertheless, in providing an (albeit compromised) critique of essentialist identities, engagements with the nation as an ideological construct lay the groundwork for a more radical disruption of its logocentric foundations.

Overtly deconstructive engagements with this area of cultural discourse radicalise these insights in their treatment of national identity as a metaphysical narratology. In one of the most influential examples of this academic discourse, Bhabha systematically unpacks the theoretical strengths of treating the nation within discourses of Derridean textuality.[195] To begin, he argues that the pre-eminence and timeless solidity of the Western nation stems from its literary and discursive narrativisation:

> Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation – or narration – might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west.[196]

In complementary terms, Bennington focuses on the nation's "origin," again elucidating its status as a narrative construct:

> It is tempting to try to approach the question of nation directly, by aiming for its centre or its origin. And…we undoubtedly find narration at the centre of the nation: stories of national origins, myths of founding fathers, genealogies of heroes. At the origin of the nation, we find a story of the nation's origin.[197]

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[194] For readings that treat national identities as totalised culturally constructs, see Smith, *National Identity*, 16-17, 91-92; Huntingdon, *Who Are We?* 22.

[195] Several scholars have approached American national identity specifically as a (non-Derridean) form of cultural narration; see Sacvan Bercovitch, "Fusion and Fragmentation: The American Identity," in *The American Identity – Fusion and Fragmentation*, ed. Rob Kroes (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 1980), 29; Priscilla Wald, *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 2, 10.

[196] Bhabha, "Introduction," 1.

[197] Bennington, "Postal Politics and the Institution of the Nation," 121.

Here, Bennington initiates a deconstructive study of nationhood by demonstrating how the narrativisation of national identity furnishes it with the fixity of the metaphysical centre;[198] in doing so, he also demonstrates how national meaning operates as a transcendental signified that effaces its own historical contingency.

Due to its role in constituting metaphysical national identity, Bhabha interrogates cultural narration to challenge it with a counter-reading that stresses the nation's structural ambivalence and "conceptual indeterminacy."[199] Expanding upon this general principle, Bennington explores how national narration necessitates the fixing and hierarchization of difference within discrete binary oppositions: "the idea of the nation is inseparable from its narration: that narration attempts, interminably, to constitute identity against difference, inside against outside, and in the assumed superiority of inside over outside, prepares against invasion and for 'enlightened' colonialism."[200] In uncovering this metaphysical function, deconstructive critics have explored a freeplay of cultural difference that inhabits (but is forcefully regulated) by the Western nation. For Bhabha, this is achieved by radicalising the nation's narratological status, exploiting its relocation within discourses of textuality:

> To study the nation through its narrative address does not merely draw attention to its language and rhetoric; it also attempts to alter the conceptual object itself. If the problematic 'closure' of textuality questions the 'totalization' of national culture, then its positive value lies in displaying the wide dissemination through which we construct the field of meanings and symbols associated with national life.[201]

By considering the nation as a textual object, Bhabha places national identity within discourses of arche-writing, a term explored earlier in relation to cinema. Indeed, Bhabha establishes this theoretical re-inscription as an underlying objective of his project, arguing that "poststructuralist theories of narrative knowledge – textuality, discourse, enunciation, *écriture*" can be utilised "to evoke the ambivalent margin of the nation-space."[202] Finally, John Brannigan's Derridean reading of literary national identity again allies a deconstructive expansion of writing with the emergence of spatio-temporal difference within identity discourses; "writing" is established as "the very condition of national identity that opens it up to otherness, and that allows a certain play of differences within the discourses of

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[198] The metaphysical centre is discussed in chapter two.
[199] Bhabha, "Introduction," 2.
[200] Bennington, "Postal Politics and the Institution of the Nation," 132.
[201] Bhabha, "Introduction," 2-3.
[202] Ibid., 4.

national identity."[203] As he concludes, "writing serves then to both determine the nation, and to testify to its indeterminability, its endless heterogeneity."[204]

In the citations provided above, critics call for a deconstructive re-inscription of national identity that this project constructively contributes towards. Firstly, I fundamentally challenge the illusory solidity of American cultural narratives, demonstrating the textual slippages that problematize national self-presence. In turn, this gesture opens up the possibility for a cinematic representation of American *différance*, a Derridean model of cultural undecidability. To achieve this goal, I exploit Derridean readings of national identity as an assemblage of narrative structures, locating and exploiting a deconstructive potential within cinematic renderings of prominent cultural texts. Whilst the selection of these specific forms must be placed under reflexive methodological scrutiny, the four narratives that my thesis explores are legible through a series of prominent discursive tags: *individualism*, the *nuclear family*, the *small-town*, and the *wilderness*. To clarify, the narratives explored here are not treated as a closed, exhaustive taxonomy of self-identical American cultural forms. Rather, they are merely presented as indicative case-studies that facilitate fruitful deconstructive engagements with American national identity. Specifically, they have been selected due to a shared scholarly and textual pervasiveness, pertaining to normative constructions of *character* and *place*; each narrative represents a common structure of national experience explored within American studies scholarship, as well as a frequent textual focus of contemporary independent film. However, this thesis acknowledges the metaphysical choices that underline the selection of its case-study themes; not only are there a plethora of other cultural forms that could have been chosen, but also an even greater number of ways of conceptualising the discursive objects that are being analysed. Furthermore, one can note a series of conceptual interdependencies between these thematic foci; to provide a couple of examples, individualism plays a vital role in scholarly discussions of wilderness, and the nuclear family is often treated by cultural critics as a microcosm of small-town community.

Nevertheless, treating this thesis' case-study themes as structurally distinct, metaphysical entities is a necessary pre-cursor to their deconstructive analysis. Bearing in mind Derrida's contention that deconstruction resides within the discourses it subsequently disturbs, Philip Rosen notes that the (initial) retention of "more or less determinate categories" appears methodologically vital.[205] Thus, attempts by deconstructive critics to transcend metaphysical discourse are both practically impossible and theoretically ill-

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[203] John Brannigan, "Writing DeTermiNation: Reading Death in(to) Irish National Identity," in *Applying: To Derrida*, eds. John Brannigan, Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 56.
[204] Ibid., 64.
[205] Rosen, "The Politics of the Sign and Film Theory," 9.

advised.[206] Instead, the critic must pay close attention to the source and extent of the logocentric assumptions that he or she mobilises, a reflexive attitude practiced in this thesis; not only are my uses of metaphysical structures constantly interrogated, but I also analyse the discursive context from which they have been drawn. In doing so, my project engages with a series of narratives whose ontological solidity have been reified in *other* scholarly works and fields; this gesture diminishes my own metaphysical complicity, whilst extending the deconstructive influence of my project into a greater range of disciplinary contexts, such as American studies.

Deconstructing National Identity

As alluded to throughout the preceding discussion, any attempt to deconstruct American national identity presupposes the overtly metaphysical character of its existing discursive construction. Indeed, the concept itself appears predicated on a range of logocentric assumptions; existing scholarly literature has frequently treated the nation as an essentialist structure with static conceptual (and geographical) borders, exhibiting (and engendering) properties of cultural homogeneity, fixity, and presence.[207] For example, Smith's definition of national identity is sustained by conceptual demarcation and ontological self-coherence:

> There is, for example, a straightforward understanding of the concept of 'identity' as 'sameness'. The members of a particular group are alike in just those respects in which they differ from non-members outside the group…. This pattern of similarity-cum-dissimilarity is one meaning of national 'identity'.[208]

Thus, treated as a self-coherent whole constituted in binary difference from other totalised structures, national identity is theorised as an (ideally) self-identical form of cultural unity. Lee D. Baker neatly summarises this link between logocentric discourse and national belonging, asserting that "identity reifies notions of homogeneity, hierarchy, and essentialism."[209]

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[206] The impossibility of the Derridean critic to escape metaphysical complicity is explored in chapter one.

[207] For logocentric readings of national identity, see Smith, *National Identity*, 9-11, 16-20, 74-78; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7, 11-12, 24-26; Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 120. For examples in an American context, see Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 176-212; Huntingdon, *Who Are We?* 11-12, 19; Higham, *Hanging Together*, 8; Kammen, *People of Paradox*, 3-4.

[208] Smith, *National Identity*, 75.

[209] Lee D. Baker, "Introduction: Identity and Everyday Life in America," in *Life in America: Identity and Everyday Experience*, ed. Lee D. Baker (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 3.

Importantly, in terms of this thesis, numerous scholars have located totalising structural properties within specific manifestations of American nationhood. To begin, perceptions of the United States as a demarcated spatio-conceptual structure can be discerned in discussions of the nation's geographical closure and its role in constituting homogeneous national meanings; Robert Burgoyne describes this as a foundational American myth, presuming "the existence of a single, homogeneous nation extending from 'sea to shining sea.'"[210] Furthermore, scholars have argued that national identity actively engenders a monolithic collective uniformity through the disavowal of cultural difference;[211] such models appear particularly pertinent in an American context, discussed in terms of "Americanization" and the "assimilation" of heterogeneous groups into a collective "melting pot."[212] This interpretation of American national identity is exemplified by Sacvan Bercovitch, who argues that cultural uniformity is only legible through the uniting of diversity: "the rhetoric of American identity…derives authority from its power to unite disparities. It feeds on fragmentation, gathers strength from the variety of conflicts it can obviate or absorb."[213] Thus, demonstrating a paradoxical reliance upon *and* disavowal of heterogeneous forms of cultural contestation, American identity ameliorates ruptures that problematize national self-coherence; yet, as with all metaphysical structures, it also depends upon a matrix of multifarious differences as a precondition of its very existence.

Importantly, Derridean theorists have noted the logocentric tenor of existing national identity scholarship; in doing so, they validate the applicability of deconstruction to studies of national self-coherence. Indeed, Derrida's sporadic work in the area demonstrates that "the national" frequently connotes conceptual plenitude and homogeneity; he describes a nationalist perspective that reifies the concept's essential wholeness and "obligatory solidarity,"[214] outlining "a certain image of the quasi-biological hygiene of the inviolate national body."[215] In his more sustained ruminations on national identity, Bhabha endorses and expands upon the observations above, elucidating "the problematic unity of the nation."[216] Vitally, this observation alludes to both the metaphysical character of national identity *and* the inevitable textual contradictions that deny the nation absolute ontological

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[210] Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 7.
[211] For readings of American identity as a disavowal of difference, see Stanley A. Renshon, "America at a Crossroads: Political Leadership, National Identity, and the Decline of Common Culture," in *One America? Political Leadership, National Identity, and the Dilemmas of Diversity*, ed. Stanley A. Renshon (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2001), 3; Huntingdon, *Who Are We?* 37-41, 178, 181; Wald, *Constituting Americans*, 2.
[212] David Mauk and Johan Oakland, *American Civilisation: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2009), 10, 12.
[213] Bercovitch, "Fusion and Fragmentation," 20, 34. Also see Higham, *Hanging Together*, 12.
[214] Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Television*, 66.
[215] Ibid., 18.
[216] Bhabha, "Introduction," 5.

closure. Thus, Bhabha explicitly discusses existing socio-historical constructions of nations as "totalities" that represent themselves as "transcendent," a view he subsequently challenges with his own heterogeneous conceptions of cultural hybridity and difference.[217]

In "DissemiNation," Bhabha further elaborates this critique through his theorisation of a multiplicitous "field of cultural difference,"[218] a Derridean economy that problematizes the nation's internal coherence and its antonymic opposition to other national structures. In doing so, Bhabha observes a "'splitting of the national subject'" that is the product of a particular temporal paradox:

> Such a shift in perspective emerges from an acknowledgement of the nation's interrupted address, articulated in the tension signifying the people as an *a priori* historical presence, a pedagogical object; and the people constructed in the performance of narrative, its enunciatory 'present' marked in the repetition and pulsation of the national sign.[219]

Mobilising an explicitly Derridean reading of iteration, Bhabha treats this paradoxical dynamic as the basis for a challenge to the nation's ontological solidity. In doing so, national belonging is treated as "a form of social and textual affiliation":

> Such a pluralism of the national sign, where difference returns as the same, is contested by the signifier's 'loss of identity' that inscribes the narrative of the people in the ambivalent, 'double' writing of the performative and the pedagogical. The iterative temporality that marks the movement of meaning *between* the masterful image of the people and the movement of its sign interrupts the succession of plurals that produce the sociological solidity of the national narrative. The nation's totality is confronted with, and crossed by, a supplementary movement of writing.[220]

Here, Bhabha directly relates the temporal complexities of national identity to Derridean supplementarity, a theoretical gesture that underlies Bhabha's textual critique of metaphysical ontology. Indeed, he clarifies that the "act of cultural enunciation," of re-marking identity in the face of its purported pedagogical solidity, should be treated as a form of arche-writing, and is thus governed by *différance*. In doing so, he poses a fundamental challenge to national unity and the dichotomous economy within which it is constructed:

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[217] Bhabha, "DissemiNation," 293, 304, 309.
[218] Homi K. Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," in *Questions of Third Cinema*, eds. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (London: BFI Publishing, 1989), 125.
[219] Bhabha, "DissemiNation," 298-9.
[220] Ibid., 305. Emphasis in original.

> Cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in relation of Self to
> Other.… The reason a cultural text or system of meaning cannot be sufficient unto
> itself is that the act of cultural enunciation – the *place of utterance* – is crossed by
> the *différance* of writing or *écriture*.[221]

Noting the originary *différance* at work in the constitution of all cultural identities, Bhabha offers a Derridean critique to any normalised, *a priori* national coherence. This theoretical project is unpacked further in the remainder of this introduction, facilitating its application throughout this thesis' resultant textual readings.

Dislocating American Difference

As mentioned briefly above, the metaphysical foundations of national identity are not merely demonstrated by its construction as a structural self-presence, but also by its constitution within a logocentric economy of binary opposition. Whilst numerous theorists suggest that any act of national definition entails a differentiation from externalised "others,"[222] this form of oppositional rhetoric is particularly perceptible within discourses of American national identity. Specifically, the prominent maxim of "American exceptionalism" intractably ties constructions of a totalised national character to widespread assumptions that the United States is ontologically unique. For example, Seymour Martin Lipset begins his sociological analysis of "the American difference" by contending that popular and academic discourses construct America as "*qualitatively different*…an outlier."[223] In disseminating this narrative of cultural distinctiveness, exceptionalist rhetoric tacitly constructs the nation as a self-coherent entity to be juxtaposed with equally reified external "others." Deborah L. Madsen demonstrates this logocentric dynamic in her suggestion that "the exceptionalist mythology of America" engenders "the idea that America has a coherent national identity and that a consensus concerning the nature of American national identity does reign."[224] Finally, the logocentric tenor of exceptionalist discourse is further demonstrated in its construction of American identity in hierarchical opposition with a specific "other";[225] prominent currents within popular and scholarly discourse approach America as a cultural (and religious) ideal to be contrasted with a debased or fallen "old

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[221] Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," 128-129. Emphasis in original.
[222] For readings that stress the importance of external difference to the theorisation of coherent national identities, see Huntingdon, *Who Are We?* 21-22; Smith, *National Identity*, 25; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7; Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, 17.
[223] Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, 18. Emphasis added.
[224] Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 14.
[225] However, some scholars cast American exceptionalism non-hierarchical terms. See Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, 18.

world," represented by Europe.[226] The thematic significance of oppositional difference to American national identity again renders it a suitable object for Derridean interrogation. Indeed, Anselm Haverkamp argues that it is America's regulated difference from Europe that opens it up to deconstructive reading.[227] In establishing this subversive potential, Haverkamp asserts that exceptionalist, oppositional difference effaces an originary, heterogeneous cultural freeplay that inhabits the very concept of America itself:

> In America's multifaceted landscape of differences, the European tradition has turned into a mortgage of uncanny proportions. Quite against the grain of leaving it behind, the European difference returns as the repressed and reveals what had to remain repressed in its difference. That great design of America as a radically open space to newcomers meant more than just the erasure of these newcomers' histories; it meant the retroactive idolization of one particular difference erasing all others.[228]

Thus, Haverkamp explicitly casts the opposition between America and Europe as a dichotomous play that regulates an unbounded difference that challenges American identity from *within*.

Returning to Bhabha, his application of writing and *différance* to the metaphysical nation further elucidates critiques of its regulated dissimilarity from other national forms. To begin, Bhabha argues that *external* binary oppositions between holistic nations are problematized by a "liminal" cultural difference that operates *internally*: "in place of the polarity of a prefigurative self-generating nation itself and extrinsic Other nations, the performative introduces a temporality of the 'in-between' through the 'gap' or 'emptiness' of the signifier that punctuates linguistic difference."[229] Consequently, the presumed discrete (and antagonistic) difference between nations is re-inscribed as an uncodified undecidability within the nation that "threatens binary division" and opens up "a space that is *internally* marked by cultural difference and the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities, and tense cultural locations."[230] Thus, as Bhabha eloquently notes, "paranoid projections 'outwards' return to haunt and split the place from which they were

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[226] For readings of America's exceptional difference from Europe, see Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 183; Kammen, *People of Paradox*, 23; Huntingdon, *Who Are We*? 25-26, 48; Madsen, *American Exceptionalism*, 38.

[227] Anselm Haverkamp, "Deconstruction is/as Neopragmatism? Preliminary Remarks on Deconstruction in America," in *Deconstruction Is/In America: A New Sense of the Political*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (London: New York University Press, 1995), 3.

[228] Ibid., 5.

[229] Bhabha, "DissemiNation," 299.

[230] Ibid. Emphasis in original.

made."[231] This critique of regulated national difference amounts to a rejection of national coherence itself:

> Once the liminality of the nation-space is established, and its 'difference' is turned from the boundary 'outside' to its finitude 'within', the threat of cultural difference is no longer a problem of 'other' people. It becomes a question of the otherness of the people-as-one.[232]

Bennington provides a similar challenge to any model that differentiates between nations as *a priori* cultural totalities; he argues that the act of structural differentiation complicates the internal solidity of the nations it produces: "the 'origin' of the nation is never simple, but dependent on a differentiation of nations which has always already begun. The story of (the institution of) the nation will be irremediably complicated by this situation."[233] In such a reading, the nation is rendered "imperfect" by traces of other nations against which it is delineated and defined. Thus, the nation is inhabited by (and forged from) a heterogeneous internal difference that is arbitrarily stabilised by the construction of coherent nationhood:

> We have to go further, and say that this complication is not an *accident* which befalls the state in its ideal purity, but that it is originary…national differentiation does not come along to trouble the state *after* its perfect constitution, but precedes the fiction of such a constitution as its condition of possibility.[234]

Thus, Bennington's critique is cast in explicitly Derridean terms, uncovering the *différance* that allows (but also problematizes) the presence and ontological closure of any metaphysical national identity.

Importantly, this re-inscription of the nation as an ungrounded venue of cultural heterogeneity opens up the possibility of a potentially boundless play of identities. Utilising his notion of "cultural difference," Bhabha re-marks the nation as an indeterminate realm of contradictory narrational forms:

> The nation is no longer the sign of modernity under which cultural differences are homogenized in the 'horizontal' view of society. The nation reveals, in its

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[231] Ibid., 300.
[232] Ibid., 301.
[233] Bennington, "Postal Politics and the Institution of the Nation," 122.
[234] Ibid., 130-131. Emphasis in original.

ambivalent and vacillating representation, the ethnography of its own historicity and opens up the possibility of other narratives of the people and their difference.[235]

Predicated upon an in-built "*instability* of cultural signification,"[236] Bhabha's model stresses the unique, transitory nature of identities that are always open to unpredictable transformations: "the aim of cultural difference is to re-articulate the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the signifying *singularity* of the 'other' that resists totalization."[237] Bhabha clarifies this reading by suggesting that the play of differences engenders emergent forms of cultural identity that can never be exhausted by any static ontology: "cultural difference marks the establishment of new forms of meaning, and strategies of identification, through processes of negotiation where no discursive authority can be established without revealing the difference of itself."[238] Thus, Bhabha's thesis embodies Derridean *différance*, insofar that it suggests that cultural meanings are only constituted in an unceasing chain of spatio-temporal referrals; identities are forged yet simultaneously evoke other forms from which they diverge, deferring any transcendental significance.[239]

  The close textual readings undertaken in this project facilitate a similarly heterogeneous model of cultural *différance*, drawing upon Derrida's theorisation of the term and its application to national identity discourses by aforementioned deconstructive theorists. Facilitating a vital intervention into American socio-political debates, this aspect of my thesis can provide a tangible, political impact *outside* of a solely academic context. Specifically, it forwards a fluid re-conceptualization of American identity that destabilises and de-centres the coercive, homogenising function of normative cultural forms and discursive frameworks. Thus, this thesis is not merely presented as a critical contribution to relevant academic discourses (although this aspect will be outlined presently); rather, it also has the potential to directly intervene within *popular* socio-cultural debates. This disruptive intervention into broader cultural discourses will be returned to as the focus of this thesis' conclusion.

Scholarly Interventions

  In undertaking a deconstructive engagement with American national identity, this thesis provides a multifaceted intervention into a range of scholarly discourses. To begin, the

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[235] Bhabha, "DissemiNation," 299.
[236] Ibid., 302. Emphasis in original.
[237] Ibid., 312. Emphasis in original.
[238] Ibid., 313.
[239] Derrida briefly discusses cultural singularity and national identity in Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Television*, 80.

cultural narratives explored by this thesis' textual analyses have been subject to extensive critical attention within the amorphous field of American studies. Thus, this project offers a Derridean contribution to the discipline, presaging each cinematic textual reading with a deconstructive interrogation of related scholarly discourses. Importantly, this intervention is predicated upon the post-structuralist assertion that American studies constitutes its own object of study. As will be explored in chapter one, deconstructive scholars demonstrate that any act of reading entails a process of re-writing; it necessarily contributes to the discourses that surround (and subsequently, infiltrate) the cultural, philosophical, or cinematic texts it interprets.[240] Furthermore, certain American cultural scholars have noted that academic engagements within their field necessarily re-shape their texts. For example, Baker argues that social scientists frequently mobilise the same "reified, bounded, ahistorical, and static understandings of cultural practices and social groups" that they purportedly interrogate; in doing so, he ponders whether it is possible to interpret cultural identities without reinforcing their apparently metaphysical foundations.[241] In more explicitly Derridean terms, Bhabha discusses cultural studies' complicity in constituting its logocentric foci; in questioning the reductive opposition between "theoretical" and "activist" scholarship, Bhabha argues that "they are both forms of discourse and to that extent they produce rather than reflect their objects of study."[242] It is my contention that this observation applies to all forms of scholarly discourse, *this thesis included*. However, in explicitly noting that academic work never simply analyses a fixed, coherent cultural object, this project displays a heightened level of critical self-reflection, guarding against significant lapses into metaphysical methodological assumptions. Furthermore, this project's re-evaluation of academic practice also provides an effective means with which to intervene into the discursive landscape of American identity. Thus, the strengths of this method are twofold: not only are close-readings of American studies debates vital in constituting a legible object of study, but the process also precipitates a deconstructive engagement with the self-same scholarly literature.

In focusing on how cinematic texts can challenge prominent American cultural narratives, this thesis also provides a vital intervention into scholarly debates concerning "national cinemas." As has been noted by countless theorists in recent years, national cinema discourses frequently reify links between film texts and essentialist national identities. To cite a prominent example, Andrew Higson argues that the construction of a national cinema performs an inherently homogenising function: "to identify a national cinema is first of all to specify a coherence and a unity; it is to proclaim a unique identity and a stable set of

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[240] See Bowman, *Deconstructing Popular Culture*, 39.
[241] Baker, "Introduction," 3.
[242] Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," 113-114.

meanings."[243] Thus, Higson concludes that a national cinema is principally theorised "in terms of its relationship to an already existing national political, economic and cultural identity."[244] In similar terms, Rosen demonstrates how national cinemas presuppose a classificatory plenitude, implying an *a priori* national totality around which a unified film practice can solidify: "intertextual coherence is connected to a socio-political and/or socio-cultural coherence implicitly or explicitly assigned to the nation."[245] Thus, by enacting metaphysical categorical imperatives, national cinemas imbue related structures of identity with similarly fixed ontologies.[246] However, a growing number of critics have challenged the discourse's logocentric foundations, with varying degrees of success and self-implication. Higson demonstrates that the constitution of a homogeneous national identity necessitates the erasure of a range of diverse subjectivities: "The search for a stable and coherent national identity can only be successful at the expense of repressing internal differences, tensions and contradictions – differences of class, race, gender, region, etc."[247] Thus, national cinemas are forever inhabited by self-paradox; they are expected to "pull together diverse and contradictory discourses, to articulate a contradictory unity, to play a part in the hegemonic process of achieving consensus, and containing difference and contradiction."[248] Here, Higson rejects reductive readings of national cinemas as the simple expression of "already fully formed and homogeneous national culture and identity"; rather, "it needs also to be seen as actively working to construct subjectivity."[249] Higson's reading of national cinemas remains problematic insofar that he implies that they *successfully* repress the incoherencies that inhabit the nation of Western metaphysics. Yet, his observations simultaneously draw attention to the structural inadequacies of logocentric nationhood, laying the foundations for a radical deconstruction of cinematic and cultural narration.

Importantly for this thesis, similar deconstructive potentials can be discerned in the work of other national cinema theorists. Focusing on the evocation of metaphysical binarism in the constitution of coherent national cinemas, Stephen Crofts references Bhabha in his suggestion that "pristine" national identities must be challenged with a heterogeneous understanding of the "hybridity of national cultures."[250] He concludes by citing Trinh T.

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[243] Andrew Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema," *Screen* 30, no. 4 (1989): 37.
[244] Ibid., 43.
[245] Philip Rosen, "History, Textuality, Nation: Kracauer, Burch and Some Problems in the Study of National Cinemas," in *Theorising National Cinema*, eds. Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen (London: BFI Publishing, 2006), 18.
[246] Several scholars treat cinema as an ideal medium for disseminating a homogenised American national culture; see Burgoyne, *Film Nation*, 6; John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture*, 2nd ed (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005)*,* xxi.
[247] Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema," 43-44.
[248] Ibid., 44.
[249] Ibid.
[250] Stephen Crofts, "Reconceptualising National Cinema/s," in *Theorising National Cinema*, eds. Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen (London: BFI Publishing, 2006), 56-57.

Minh-ha, whose reading of identity entails a similar re-marking of traces of the "other" within purportedly pure national cultures.[251] Rosen poses an equally explicit challenge to the "coherence(s)" of a national cinema by treating it as a "body of textuality." In doing so, he disturbs the metaphysical closure of interrelated cinematic and cultural categories, initiating a play of signifiers that closely resembles Derridean *différance*: "a theory of intertextuality treats those gaps as openings onto other texts, but those gaps can, in opposed or complementary ways, also be treated as openings onto society or history."[252] Thus, Rosen ultimately calls for scholars to place the homogenising claims of national cinemas and identities under greater scrutiny, a desire that his textual approach arguably fulfils.[253] Finally, in noting a common assumption that cinema constitutes a "national bounded cultural artefact,"[254] Susan Hayward argues that such perspectives uncritically perpetuate the nation's supposed structural fullness.[255] Engaging with prominent scholarship from other national cinema theorists (principally Tom O'Regan), Hayward extols a self-interrogatory approach that probes the category's role in constructing its own object of study:

> This approach…does more than expose the "masquerading" practices of the nation as a categorical concept…this approach also carves out spaces that allow us to *revalue* the concept of national cinema. It makes it possible to reterritorialise the nation…not as bounded, demarcated and distinctive but as one within which boundaries constantly criss-cross both haphazardly and *unhaphazardly*.[256]

Thus, Hayward explicitly calls for national cinema scholarship that self-consciously avoids replicating the Western nation's "masquerade of unity." Additionally, she notes that this discursive re-orientation also constitutes a vital revaluation of film studies and its relationship to cultural representation, converting it into "a *mise-en-scéne* of scattered and dissembling identities as well as fractured subjectivities and fragmented hegemonies."[257] As has already been outlined in this introduction, my thesis utilises an overtly deconstructive methodology to productively contribute towards these currents in national cinema scholarship, building upon the discursive shifts outlined above.

    This intervention into national cinema debates augments aforementioned contributions to Derridean film theory, providing a case-study that fruitfully utilises

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[251] See Trinh T. Minh-ha, quoted in Crofts, "Reconceptualising National Cinema/s," 57.
[252] Rosen, "History, Textuality, Nation," 17.
[253] Ibid., 17, 27.
[254] Hayward, "Framing National Cinemas," 91.
[255] Ibid., 92.
[256] Ibid., 93. Emphasis in original.
[257] Ibid., 101.

deconstruction as a basis for close readings of cinematic texts. In exploring cinematic representations of national identity in an American context, this project also expands the scope of deconstructive scholarship itself. Indeed, on the specific topic of American cultural identity, scholars have noted another surprising discursive gap in Derrida's work.[258] James Ceaser even argues that on certain occasions Derrida actively avoided an opportunity (or "obligation") to ruminate upon the nation.[259] For example, he once gave a keynote address concerning the "Declaration of Independence," a foundational document and event in the constitution of the United States as a national entity; however, his talk focused on authorship, the "signature," and political authority, ignoring any discussion of American culture in its own right.[260]

The scarcity of direct references to America grants it a spectral status in Derrida's work, akin to his treatment of cinema; traces of American culture imperceptibly inhabit many of his deconstructive engagements with broader socio-political discourses. This view is espoused by Peggy Kamuf, who claims that Derrida indirectly addressed American society throughout his discussion of certain political issues; importantly, this observation encompasses cultural tropes, forms, and values that will be explored in this thesis, including "the American public scene," politics, movies, television, and violence.[261] Indeed, Kamuf concludes that "Derrida has kept his promise to go on criticizing and deconstructing America from wherever he might be, whether within America or elsewhere."[262] Thus, America's core institutions, themes, and values have arguably proved a fruitful object for his deconstructive analyses, providing a useful jumping-off point for this thesis' wider interpretative aims. Finally, the purportedly exceptional relationship between America and Derridean thought explored above is solidified by the more concrete influence of his work on the American academic (and cultural) landscape.[263] Indeed, Derrida notes that "it is commonplace to say that the United States has been very open to deconstruction, the main place for the legitimation of deconstruction is the United States."[264] François Cusset suggests that these intellectual inroads may stem from America's position as an ideal logocentric

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[258] See Kamuf, *To Follow*, 77.
[259] James W. Ceaser, *Reconstructing America: The Symbol of America in Modern Thought* (London: Yale University Press, 1997), 242.
[260] See Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, trans. and ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 46-54. Ceaser, *Reconstructing America*, 242.
[261] Kamuf, *To Follow*, 82.
[262] Ibid., 85.
[263] See Wallace Martin, "Introduction," in *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America*, eds. Jonathan Arac, Wlad Godzich, and Wallace Martin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), xv-xxxvii.
[264] Derrida, "*As if* I were Dead," 225.

object for Derridean analysis; from this viewpoint, deconstruction is rendered "one of the keys to American culture."[265]

Contextual links between American culture, academia, and post-structuralist theory are drawn together in one of Derrida's singular theoretical gestures, in which the nation is playfully evoked as a possible synonym for deconstruction itself. In "Mnemosyne," Derrida "risks" the following statement: "America *is* deconstruction." Unpacking this bold proposition, Derrida outlines its wider ontological significance: "America would be the proper name of deconstruction in progress, its family name, its toponymy, its language and its place, its principal residence."[266] However, Derrida ultimately rejects this assertion, demonstrating that such a metaphysical definitional gesture would betray deconstruction's non-totalizing principles.[267] Yet, Derrida's abortive attempt to synonymise deconstruction and America demonstrates a multifaceted affinity between the two terms. Even in refusing their lexical co-presence, Derrida solidifies a number of less tangible discursive links between America and his theoretical enterprise; the United States is cast as

> that historical space which today, in all its dimensions and through all its power plays, reveals itself as being undeniably the most sensitive, receptive, or responsive space of all to the themes and effects of deconstruction…. In the war that rages over the subject of deconstruction, there is no front; there are no fronts. But if there were, they would all pass through the United States.[268]

Thus, Derrida follows his rejection of "America *is* deconstruction" with a statement that reaffirms a pre-eminent link between the United States and deconstructive reading: "Let us say instead, deconstruction and America are two open sets which intersect partially according to an allegorico-metonymic figure."[269] The above statements render America as deconstruction's constitutive force *and* the focus of its critique;[270] this fittingly self-contradictory framework reaffirms Derrida's assertions that deconstruction must be practiced *within* the specific logocentric structures that it aims to disrupt. In this project, it is this complex and mutually-constitutive relationship between American culture and Derridean thought that will be explored in greater detail, ultimately demonstrating the exemplary applicability of deconstruction to a metaphysics of American national identity.

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[265] Cusset, *French Theory*, 239.
[266] Derrida, *Memoires*, 18.
[267] Ibid.
[268] Ibid.
[269] Ibid. For commentaries on Derrida's statement, see Haverkamp, "Deconstruction is/as Neopragmatism," 3-4; Wills, "Jaded in America," 253.
[270] Wills alludes to this reading in his assertion that "Deconstruction… becomes invaginated within America"; Wills, "Jaded in America," 253.

In extending the reach of deconstruction into numerous areas from which it has largely been excluded, this thesis displays its continuing worth and adaptability as a form of close textual reading. In making this claim, I explicitly support critics who have established deconstruction's relevance outside of the philosophical and literary context within which Derrida most commonly intervened.[271] When probed about deconstruction's wider applicability, Derrida suggests that its most effective uses do not delimit its analytical potential; indeed, he argues that deconstruction cannot be contained as it is *already* at play in a wide range of cultural contexts:

> Beyond an institution…deconstruction is operating, whether we like it or know it or not, in fields that have nothing to do with what is specifically philosophical or discursive, whether it be politics, the army, the economy, or all the practices said to be artistic and which are, at least in appearance, nondiscursive and foreign to discourse.[272]

Extending this argument further, Wills suggests that the sustained academic analysis of a broad range of cultural texts "would not have been possible without…the conceptions of textuality and re- or decontextualisation that have been developed by Derrida."[273] Following Wills, this thesis engages with an arena of cultural representation that falls clearly within the bounds of Western metaphysics, yet would be closed off to scholars without deconstruction's prominent theoretical insights.

This thesis' academic worth extends beyond a simplistic demonstration of how deconstructive principles can be consistently applied to cinematic and cultural artefacts. Rather, the act of applying deconstructive approaches to new intellectual areas ensures its methodological and political vitality.[274] As demonstrated earlier, the consistent deconstruction of American studies scholarship demonstrates this thesis' radical discursive reach. Referring to extensions of deconstruction as "disseminations,"[275] Derrida notes the subversive act of moving across disciplinary borders, subverting the taxonomic presences embedded within particular scholarly fields. Indeed, he has praised scholars who attempt to subvert traditional disciplinary delineations, describing such acts as "courageous" and "political."[276] Paul Bowman expands upon Derrida's challenge to academic demarcations in

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[271] For a discussion of metaphysics' role in governing "everyday language" and Western culture, see Derrida, *Positions*, 19-20.
[272] Derrida, "The Spatial Arts," 14-15.
[273] Wills, "Jaded in America," 254-255.
[274] See Wills, "Jaded in America," 257.
[275] Derrida, "As *if* I were Dead," 214.
[276] Ibid., 226.

relation to the increasingly prominent discourse of cultural studies. Engaging directly with the concept of the disciplinary "field," Bowman argues that these categories should not be treated as "homogeneous terrains," as "the disciplinary '*field*' is not itself a unity."[277] Noting Derrida's attempts to initiate scholarly practices that cross disciplinary boundaries and avoid monolithic definition, Bowman demonstrates that several deconstructive scholars (including Derrida himself) have critiqued cultural studies as such a homogenising tag.[278] However, for others, cultural studies embodies the Derridean project of dismantling pervading scholarly hierarchies, a view that solidifies this thesis' intervention into this field. For example, Patrick McGee describes cultural studies as "the methodology of hope,"[279] a perspective based upon the category's heightened conceptual impurity and reflexivity; indeed, McGee argues that cultural studies "has made visible its own internal contradictions as the basis for its intervention in cultural politics."[280]

Whether one endorses or jettisons cultural studies as a useful term, it has been demonstrated that Derridean theory necessitates an approach that cuts across disciplinary borders and, in the process, scrutinises their ontological stability. In concluding his study, Bowman theorises such a radical scholarly discourse, a project to which this thesis will contribute. To begin, his aforementioned critique of disciplinary solidity lays bare the logocentric complicity of "interdisciplinarity," as the term connotes a mixing of distinct, coherent subject-areas. Thus, as Bowman notes, a Derridean critique of disciplinary categories entails a remarking of the purported difference *between* fields as a heterogeneous difference *within* those fields: "This discipline is not one. That field is not one. The conflict of the faculties does not *just* consist in the differends *between* putatively distinct disciplines like these. It is also internal to and constitutive of disciplinary fields as such."[281] To achieve this goal, Bowman theorises a practice of "alterdisciplinarity," a model that respects the play of *différance* that produces disciplinary categories but denies them fixed definitions.[282] I contend that my project exemplifies this "deconstructive humanities to come";[283] engaging with varied academic disciplines, this thesis interrogates the metaphysical assumptions that construct these categories as structurally self-coherent.

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[277] Bowman, *Deconstructing Popular Culture*, 183-185.
[278] Ibid., 155.
[279] Patrick McGee, *Cinema, Theory, and Political Responsibility in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 36.
[280] Ibid. Also see Wills, "Jaded in America," 254-255.
[281] Bowman, *Deconstructing Popular Culture*, 183. Emphasis in original.
[282] Ibid., 185.
[283] Ibid., 155.

The Structure of my Arguments

Having established this project's thematic and methodological tenets, objectives and interventions, I conclude by summarising the structure of my arguments. Utilising Derrida's work on genre as a starting-off point, the first chapter provides a sustained deconstructive engagement with pervasive definitions of American independent film. Specifically, I argue that the category is frequently constituted as a static, homogeneous totality, the lesser term in a metaphysical opposition with a normative Hollywood monolith; this tendency is perceptible even in scholarly work that attempts to problematize the boundaries between these two classifications or superficially jettisons independent cinema as a useful definitional structure. Thus, by exploiting conceptual contradictions present in independent film discourses, I directly challenge its ontological plenitude. In turn, I elucidate my own repositioning of independent film from a *definitional rule* to a *deconstructive tool*. Noting the heightened structural reflexivity imbedded in the notion of cinematic independence, a deconstructive engagement with the term fruitfully transforms it into a discursive limit-point that disrupts pervasive logocentric assumptions and oppositions. Finally, the chapter concludes by outlining my project's intervention into identity politics debates that dominate studies of independent cinema's socio-cultural representations. Principally, I explore how existing readings demonstrate their own logocentric tendencies by focusing on self-coherent minority identities; this problematic complicity is challenged by this thesis' Derridean engagement with independent texts and their intervention into the largely disregarded discourse of national identity.

The following four chapters each address a specific cultural narrative and its deconstructive rendering in specific case-study films. Chapter two inaugurates this trend in its focus on an atomistic locus of American national identity, individualism. Principally, I identify structural affinities between individualism, goal-oriented cinematic narratives, and metaphysical models of linear history and causality. Subsequent textual readings position *Wendy & Lucy* (2008) and *Sure Fire* (1990) as complementary critiques of individualism's implication in these logocentric discourses. *Wendy & Lucy* dislocates individualism's dependence upon narrative linearity and a fixed origin, before problematizing the goal-oriented form's reliance on the discrete delineation of success and failure. In contrast, *Sure Fire* enacts Derrida's call for a non-metaphysical model of history based on repetition and recurrence, before troubling the self-coherence of specific narrative events, structural unities that are vital to individualism's causal fulfilment of personalised goals. I conclude by analysing the film's contradictory narrative *telos* of violent death; this ending ruptures *Sure Fire's* individualist premise whilst simultaneously epitomising an absolutist form of presence upon which it structurally relies.

In chapter three, my project enacts a scalar expansion, re-locating the American subject within the nuclear family. To begin, I demonstrate how scholarly, cinematic, and popular representations have frequently constructed the American family as an idealised metaphysical centre. In turn, I argue that recent challenges to this orthodox model have primarily taken the form of antonymic, negative portrayals; importantly, such readings mirror the metaphysical totalities they ostensibly critique, tacitly constructing their counter-representations as the other side of a logocentric binary opposition. In the second half of the chapter, I conduct a detailed textual analysis of *Happiness* (1998), within which I read a co-presence of purportedly contradictory familial images; ultimately, the nuclear family is re-inscribed as a cultural undecidable, a simultaneously wholesome and abusive realm. Chapter four provides a further structural enlargement of this argument, engaging with the American small-town. Like the family, the small-town is frequently constructed by American studies scholars as a nexus of contestation in national identity debates; prominent representations oscillate between reductive, antonymic, value-laden poles. This analysis and deconstruction of the small-town's scholarly appraisal is accompanied by a complementary textual reading of *George Washington* (2000). In this close analysis, the town is interpreted as a fragmentary, contradictory location; here, the small-town's cinematic depiction enacts a structural decentering, marrying its conceptual dismantling with an accompanying visual, spatial, and architectural breakdown.

Finally, chapter five provides a deconstructive engagement with the American wilderness. To begin, I critically interrogate prominent scholarly readings that constitute wilderness in a discrete binary opposition with American civilisation. In doing so, it is demonstrated that the ontological separation of nature and culture has remained a fundamental structural antinomy of national identity, despite myriad shifts in their respective values and connotations. Intervening into ecocritical discourses, I then read a pair of case-study texts as deconstructive disruptions of this bifurcated economy. Firstly, *Dead Man* (1995) utilises its common generic positioning within Western discourses to dismantle discrete wilderness/civilisation dualisms; the film systematically contaminates textual elements with co-present traces of contradictory meanings, complicating the essentialist ontologies of both terms. *Gerry* (2002) provides a more detailed Derridean engagement with wilderness landscape depiction. Rather than treating the film's setting as either an acultural void or a repository of cultural meaning, my reading of *Gerry* identifies varied semiotic processes that motion toward (but ultimately defer) any intelligible reading of its natural environs; ultimately, the film constructs a radical landscape of *différance*.

Importantly, the layout of this thesis' textual analyses provides a further deconstructive gesture, intervening in the aforementioned opposition between American *character* and *place*. To begin, the semiotic co-presence of these foundational concepts is

inaugurated by this thesis' chapter order. Specifically, the structure of my argument engenders a gradual spatio-thematic opening-out; the thesis begins with a detailed analysis of the individualist subject, and ends by deconstructing vast expanses of wilderness. Between these apparent polar extremes, I have chapters dedicated to the family (a purported centre of American socialization) and the small-town, an iconic cultural location often described as a macrocosm of the nuclear unit. Thus, one can clearly discern a process of scalar expansion and assimilation, by which the American character is gradually integrated (and eventually subsumed) into American places and spaces. Furthermore, this process is augmented by the uncovering of traces of each narrative within the national identity structures explored in the other chapters, moments of cultural excess that are discussed as they arise. However, this does not amount to the theorisation of a logocentric continuum model, stretching out between discretely opposed conceptions of character and place. Rather, this structure steadily fosters a structural undecidability that builds throughout the piece, a process that progressively effaces their binary difference and ontological certainty. Thus, the final chapter (concerning the wilderness) renders explicit the deconstruction of this foundational American cultural division. Erasing any clear delineation between nature and culture, this concluding analysis foregrounds and effaces the antinomy between place and character perceptible throughout this thesis' broader structure.

Finally, my project concludes by arguing that a deconstructive engagement with national identity offers a mere starting-point for a heterogeneous re-conceptualisation of American cultural identity. In this manner, I suggest that this thesis facilitates a radically open and unfixed cultural discourse that can intervene into a range of popular socio-political debates. This is demonstrated by a deconstruction of restrictive, interrelated frameworks of American experience: these are discourses of multiculturalism and "culture wars." I finish by reaffirming the generative powers of deconstructive criticism, arguing that this project facilitates further, affirmative explorations of cultural *différance* within both scholarly and non-academic realms.

Chapter One – Relocating American Independent Cinema: From Definitional Rule to Deconstructive Tool

The Death of American Independent Cinema?

Although contemporary studies of "American independent film" conceptualise this disputed cinematic category in potentially discordant ways, many endorse a shared discourse regarding the current state of their object of study.[1] Put simply, commentators have perceived a "crisis" in independent practice, a series of industrial and conceptual trends that threaten (or have precipitated) the "death" of independent cinema. As Geoff King notes, such judgements pervade industry accounts of the American filmmaking landscape; articles in the trade press have treated the initial presence *and* resultant closure of studio-owned specialty divisions as paradoxical portents of an upcoming calamity in the "indie sector."[2] This crisis rhetoric has largely stemmed from specific financial and infrastructural determinants: these include perceived downturns in box office receipts, the scarcity of public funding, and the effective closure of iconic independent distributors, studios, and specialty divisions.[3] In contrast, prominent producers such as James Schamus and Ted Hope have located a crisis not only in the practical mechanics of the "independent film market," but also in the potential co-optive threat of media conglomeration.[4] Whilst Schamus lauds "untold benefits" resulting from "the successful integration of the independent film movement into the structures of global media and finance," he warns against the transformative effects of commercialisation upon independent cinema, instituting the demise of a cinematic identity sustained by coherent socio-political principles:

> We might be worried not so much about 'independent film' as about independence itself, the preservation of some form of civic space in which freedom of expression

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[1] From the outset, this project fundamentally questions the ontological solidity of "American independent film" and related concepts. Although the term will be used without qualification from this point onwards (for ease of reading), this rejection of essentialist definitions must be kept in mind; this caveat extends to other categories discussed in this thesis.

[2] Geoff King, "Thriving or in Permanent Crisis? Discourses on the State of Indie Cinema," in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, eds. Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York: Routledge, 2013). 41-44; Geoff King, *Indie 2.0: Change and Continuity in Contemporary American Indie Film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 9.

[3] Pat Brereton, *Smart Cinema, DVD Add-Ons and New Audience Pleasures* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 205; Sherry B. Ortner, *Not Hollywood: Independent Film at the Twilight of the American Dream* (London: Duke University Press, 2013), 264.

[4] See James Schamus, "A Rant," in *The End of Cinema as we know it: American Film in the Nineties,* ed. Jon Lewis (London: Pluto Press, 2002); King, *Indie 2.0*, 1.

is not simply a privilege purchased with the promise of an eventual profit, but the exercise of a fundamental right.[5]

Thus, one can discern two contrasting models of independent expiration; the first assumes the industrial collapse of independent filmmaking, the second laments the erosion of its ontological distinctiveness. This apparent contradiction demonstrates the pervasiveness of crisis rhetoric within independent cinema discourse, as well as its implication within broader definitional debates.

These paradoxical deaths of independent film constitute the focus of recent academic texts, extending earlier discussions of the term's discursive demise. In *Indie 2.0*, King analyses the current state of the sector, noting that aforementioned developments have been simultaneously cast as a holistic, industry-wide crisis and a precursor to the renewal of a more "authentic" form of independent filmmaking.[6] Using 2007 as an exemplary case-study date, Thomas Schatz also invokes crisis discourse, drawing a clear distinction between studio-owned "indie divisions" and "genuinely independent producer-distributors"; whilst noting the critical and commercial success of releases from major studio subsidiaries, Schatz contrasts this with the "worst year ever" for the "genuine" independent sector.[7] Finally, Robert Sickels provocatively suggests that independent film "arguably, is either on its deathbed or buried deep underground, already snuggly ensconced in its coffin."[8] In doing so, he argues that the high-profile commercial success of certain independent films in the late-1980s planted the "seeds of death" for the sector, encouraging increased studio infiltration into marginal film practices and a resultant saturation of the marketplace with "indie-style" films.[9] Yet, whilst the rise of studio-owned specialty divisions is cast as a primary cause for the independent sector's woes, they are also treated as victims of this slump, an apparent conflation of industrial and ontological crisis models; 2008 is chosen as the moment of "death" for independent film primarily due to the mass closure of these self-same studio subsidiaries.[10] As a result, Sickels perceives "a return to a more accurate, or at least more reasonable, definition of 'independent' within the industry," an essentialist, production-based reading that precludes high-budget studio-funded texts.[11]

Many of the academic texts outlined above locate the crisis of independent cinema within a specific historical moment, relating it to a series of events and a broader socio-

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5 Schamus, "A Rant," 256, 259.
6 King, *Indie 2.0*, 12. A similar reading is present in Ortner, *Not Hollywood*, 264-265.
7 Thomas Schatz, "New Hollywood, New Millennium," in *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies*, ed. Warren Buckland (London: Routledge, 2009), 20-21.
8 Robert Sickels, *American Film in the Digital Age* (Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2011), 34.
9 Ibid., 40-41, 45-47.
10 Ibid.,,, 47.
11 Ibid., 51.

economic context (the "world-wide financial crisis of 2008.")[12] This viewpoint is expressed by a number of prominent scholars in this area (Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis) as they ask whether the downsizing and eventual sale of Miramax by Disney in 2010 "might suggest the end of the 'Sundance-Miramax era,'" used here as a "convenient shorthand for the broader indie sector of its time."[13] However, it is important to note that diagnoses of crises in independent film are not solely an innovation of recent academic discourses; indeed, scholars such as Justin Wyatt and J.J. Murphy have located similar apocalyptic trends at significantly earlier dates.[14] This seemingly continual evocation of crisis in scholarly work is astutely discussed by King, who argues that the perception of emerging catastrophe has been an essential element of independent film's self-identity. As a result, King notes that recent discourses have been dominated by seemingly conflicting (but mutually implicated) judgements of an impending death and subsequent rebirth of a "'true' indie" practice.[15] King elucidates this rhetoric by locating it as a vital precondition of definitions that construct independent cinema in binary opposition to a Hollywood "other":

> Indie cinema often seems to have been viewed as existing in a state of close-to-permanent crisis of one kind or another…. One way of understanding this is to suggest that, within the prevailing discourse, the indie sector almost needs to be seen as existing in a permanent state of crisis; that this is, in a sense, part of its definition.[16]

King concludes his perceptive analysis by critiquing the ontological status of the "true indie" frequently mobilised (explicitly or implicitly) in normative definitions of American independent cinema;[17] he contends that independent texts are rarely "void of any forms of institutionalisation," an argument that undermines essentialist and oppositional readings of this cinematic category.[18]

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[12] Sickels, *American Film in the Digital Age*, 47.

[13] Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis, "Introduction," in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, eds. Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 4.

[14] These scholars perceive a crisis precipitated by corporate takeovers of independent studios in the early 1990s, events cited above as integral to the development of an identifiable independent sector. See Justin Wyatt, "Marketing Marginalized Cultures: *The Wedding* Banquet, Cultural Identities, and Independent Cinema of the 1990s," in *The End of Cinema as we know it: American Film in the Nineties*, ed. Jon Lewis (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 70; J.J. Murphy, *Me and You and Memento and Fargo: How Independent Screenplays Work* (London: Continuum, 2007), 3.

[15] King, "Thriving or in Permanent Crisis?" 41, 45.

[16] Ibid., 45.

[17] King refers to the "true indie" as an "institutionalized discursive conception"; Ibid., 50-51.

[18] King ultimately mobilises a spectrum model for American film that relies upon a similar "hypostatization of a reified notion" of the "'truly' free or independent"; Ibid.

King's analysis neatly relates notions of "indie crisis" to broader definitional discourses that increasingly dominate academic writing on independent film. Furthermore, assertions of a widespread industrial calamity have been accompanied by an ontological crisis within academic discourses themselves, characterised by an increasing scepticism towards independent cinema as a useful analytical category. Indeed, several studies have displaced emphasis from debating the films, filmmakers, and institutions commonly used to construct independent cinema as a coherent film sector, replacing these with a growing, reflexive focus upon the terms and categories with which such discourses are signified. Importantly, accounts that challenge existing discussions of independent film crystallize around common perceptions that the term "confuses more than it clarifies."[19] For example, Yannis Tzioumakis has argued throughout his work that conglomeration and institutionalisation have rendered the "label 'independent'…increasingly difficult to sustain"[20] and "virtually meaningless,"[21] leading to the adoption of more ambiguous terms (for example, "indie" and "indiewood") that reference a growing symbiosis with major studios.[22] However, he extends this argument further by questioning the usefulness of any such terms within the cultural and media contexts they are commonly applied. Thus, Tzioumakis outlines a trend in which "independence" was increasingly used as a marketing label, a development that led to a decline "in public and critical interest in questions of independence…. After so much appropriation, overuse and abuse, the label was inevitably rendered *meaningless* for critics and the cinema-going public alike."[23] Furthermore, this focus on the diminishing semiotic value of cinematic independence is repeated in further academic claims that it is "spent as a useful term"[24] or has been "appropriated into insignificance."[25]

Importantly, in almost every instance cited above, the semiotic emptying of independent film is ultimately related to perceived contextual changes in the American cinematic landscape; for example, in noting increased charges of meaninglessness directed at independent film, Michael Z. Newman cites the following as possible causes: "the incorporation of the discourse of independence by the major media industries and their mini-

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[19] Alisa Perren, "A Big Fat Indie Success Story? Press Discourses Surrounding the Making and Marketing of a 'Hollywood' Movie," *Journal of Film and Video* 56, no. 2 (2004): 23.
[20] Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 247.
[21] Ibid., 270.
[22] Ibid., 247.
[23] Yannis Tzioumakis, *Hollywood's Indies: Classics Divisions, Specialty Labels and the American Film Market* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 13-14. Emphasis added.
[24] Michael Z. Newman, "Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 3 (2009): 17.
[25] E. Deidre Pribram, *Cinema & Culture: Independent Film in the United States, 1980-2001* (New York: P. Lang, 2002), 202. Also see Murphy, *Me and You and Memento and Fargo*, 263; Michael Z. Newman, *Indie: An American Film Culture* (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2011), 223-224.

majors' dominance of the market for Oscar-worthy, upscale, artistically ambitious films."[26] Such judgements appear to be predicated upon the assumption that independent cinema once constituted a distinct, self-coherent cinematic form, a conceptual totality that has been subsequently thrown into a recent crisis of being. Therefore, most scholarly work only superficially questions the *current* integrity of independent film as a unified cultural presence; contentions of the term's meaninglessness rarely initiate more sustained attacks upon its purported ontological fixity. In contrast, a central argument of this thesis is that a crisis of meaning within independent cinema can be traced to the metaphysical structural foundations of the category itself, a series of arbitrary binary oppositions that underlie a *superficial* appearance of conceptual self-presence. It is my contention that the seeds of the category's demise lie within its own conditions of possibility, a proposition demonstrated through a deconstructive analysis of its bifurcated logic and internal contradictions.

Feeding upon this assertion, this chapter provides a general critical survey of existing independent cinema discourses, analysing prominent impressions of the topic through a deconstructive lens; indeed, it is demonstrated that even those approaches that ostensibly challenge the self-coherence of independent film are often implicated in its metaphysical logic. In turn, I conclude this literature review by arguing that several critics have utilised analogous definitional terms to side-step many of the complex debates that now circulate around the concept of cinematic independence. However, it is demonstrated again that these seemingly original modes of categorisation reify many of independent film's structural assumptions, replicating the discursive simplifications that they attempt to evade. Following on from this, I engage in detail with one particular framework ("smart") that has tentatively laid the foundations for an explicitly deconstructive intervention into independent cinema discourses. Teasing out the latent radical potential of this scholarly area, I systematically elaborate my thesis' re-inscription of independent film, transforming it from a definitional category to a deconstructive limit-point within metaphysical discourse. Having established the theoretical and methodological bases of this Derridean gesture, I delineate the textual corpus of the thesis, demonstrating how this latent deconstructive potential can be directed at a specific discursive case-study, American national identity. Finally, this chapter concludes by demonstrating how this specific thematic emphasis differentiates my thesis from pre-existing readings of independent cinema and socio-cultural representation. In doing so, I shift focus from *personal* to *national* identities, an area largely unexplored in existing independent film scholarship.

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[26] Newman, *Indie*, 223.

Deconstructing Indie Dualisms: Independent Cinema as a Relational Term

As suggested above, existing accounts of independent film constitute a superficially diverse discourse of competing definitions. However, as few readings interrogate the act of definition itself, one can discern within them a series of shared ontological assumptions. To begin, any act of classification amounts to a totalising metaphysical gesture, ordaining the object of study with a legible and self-coherent structural form. Indeed, several scholars explicitly attempt to ascertain independent film's precise meaning, a recuperative response to the increasingly amorphous appearance of contemporary cinematic categories; for example, John Berra rationalises his project as an attempt to "'rescue' the term from such lazily non-specific usage."[27] This idealisation of definitional plenitude is implicit in other scholarly and journalistic texts on the subject, even if it is regularly accompanied with caveats regarding the term's increasing ambiguity; indeed, several accounts directly establish this problematic, only to apply their own rigid definitional practices. Jim Hillier introduces his discussion of independent film by claiming that the term constitutes a "loose and slippery label." However, these statements preface his contention that "American independent cinema has a relatively specific meaning."[28] Furthermore, whilst theorists like Newman largely reject existing essentialist definitions, their reconceptualizations of the field are again predicated upon the assumption that independent film constitutes a distinct, definable category, "a stable cluster of meanings."[29]

In attempting to map independent film's purported ontological closure, many commentators have mobilised the aforementioned notion of "true" independence, a term that unproblematically implies the presence of an essential set of authentic indie criteria.[30] Tellingly, this rhetorical device has primarily been used to differentiate between texts judged as genuinely independent and those dismissed as Hollywood facsimiles. Such a distinction underlies Sickels' aforementioned readings; discussing the takeover of Miramax and New Line by large media conglomerates, Sickels plainly suggests that "when you are owned by a major, you are by definition no longer independent."[31] Thus, such assertions implicitly construct essentialist, production-context definitions of independent cinema, ensuring that a

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[27] John Berra, *Declarations of Independence: American Cinema and the Partiality of Independent Production* (Bristol: Intellect, 2008), 12.

[28] Jim Hillier, "Introduction," in *American Independent Cinema: A Sight and Sounder Reader*, ed. Jim Hillier (London: BFI Publishing, 2001), ix.

[29] Newman, "Indie Culture," 18.

[30] Such attitudes can be discerned in numerous works; see Berra, *Declarations of Independence*, 77, 107; Schatz, "New Hollywood, New Millennium," 25; Geoff Andrew, *Stranger Than Paradise: Maverick Film-Makers in Recent American Cinema* (London: Prion, 1998), 5; Michael Atkinson, "That's Entertainment," *Sight & Sound* 17, no. 4 (2007): 18-22; Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 219-220.

[31] Sickels, *American Film in the Digital Age*, 35. For a similar reading see Hillier, "Introduction," xiv.

specific film's claim for inclusion in this category is reductively policed by absolute discursive boundaries; to be considered independent, a text must be produced in total isolation from the infrastructure and resources associated with the Hollywood studio system. In *Celluloid Mavericks*, Greg Merritt makes explicit this interpretative orthodoxy, as he uses industrial criteria as the *sole* arbiter of independent status; he specifies an "independent film as any motion picture financed and produced completely autonomous of *all* studios, regardless of size."[32] In such approaches, independent cinema's ontological solidity relies upon a regulated economy of difference, embodied by metaphysical dualism. José B. Capino provides a cogent summary of such assumptions, suggesting that independence is mobilised as a marker of industrial distinction, inaugurating "a discourse of difference based on an oppositional practice."[33] Thus, presented as a superficial totality, independent film is constructed (and solidified) by the necessary absence of another term; it can only exist by inscribing a rejection of its conceptual antonym, usually characterised as mainstream Hollywood film.

Returning to Merritt, he argues that his rigid interpretative stance abets an objectively-verifiable method of defining independent film. In doing so, he critiques other approaches that focus on a film's textual attributes to identify a common "independent spirit"; Merritt dismisses such readings as highly subjective and "slippery."[34] Thus, if one subscribes to the definitional framework outlined above, the aesthetic, thematic, or formal properties of independent texts are rendered a consequence of their means of production. Exemplifying this logic, Schamus tentatively constructs a determinist link between industrial context and aesthetics; he notes that "we have heard that a film's mode of production bears some relation to its mode of representation. Perhaps the many modes of financing independent films bear some relation to their meaning."[35]Although King fundamentally rejects simplistic industrial definitions, he provides a cogent summary of how such perspectives reify essentialist correspondences between text and context: "a degree of distance, industrially, from the Hollywood studio system often appears to be a necessary condition for substantial formal or socio-political departure from the dominant norms."[36]

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[32] Greg Merritt, *Celluloid Mavericks: The History of American Independent Film* (New York, NY: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000), xii.
[33] José B. Capino, "Seminal Fantasies: Wakefield Poole, Pornography, Independent Cinema and the Avant-Garde," in *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, eds. Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (London: Routledge, 2004), 158.
[34] Merritt, *Celluloid Mavericks*, xii.
[35] James Schamus, "To the Rear of the Back End: the Economics of Independent Cinema," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Stephen Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 91. Also see Thomas Schatz, "Conglomerate Hollywood and Contemporary Independent Film," in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, eds. Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 131.
[36] Geoff King, *American Independent Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 2.

Thus, whilst commentators analyse independent film's purportedly distinct textual qualities, these are frequently approached as a secondary by-product of a more concrete contextual difference.

As suggested in the preceding discussion, independent film scholars have theorised an amorphous "independent spirit," signifying a series of aesthetic, formal, and representational commonalities. Whilst the critical accounts explored above treat a film's aesthetics as a secondary definitional characteristic, others have used textual factors as a more central classificatory focus;[37] indeed, such approaches are frequently conceptualised as a direct response to the perceived limitations of narrow industrial definitions.[38] Although Tzioumakis notes that independent spirit is "a notoriously difficult to define concept,"[39] he argues that absolutist industrial definitions have "failed to register the subtleties of independent film production historically as well as in the 1990s and 2000s."[40] This critique provides the foundation for definitions that focus more clearly upon textual properties: "As the industrial background of a film has become gradually an irrelevant factor in its claim to independence, questions of aesthetics have assumed an increasingly prominent position in the discourse of contemporary American independent cinema."[41] Therefore, such approaches allow for a far more inclusive construction of independent film, incorporating any number of "independently-spirited" texts that have relied (to some degree) upon Hollywood's production, distribution, and exhibition networks.

However, a shift in focus from industrial to textual definitions does not fundamentally challenge the binary logic with which the former have been constructed; independent spirit still implies an oppositional rejection of homogenised constructions of mainstream Hollywood film, albeit with a complementary focus on textual rather than contextual norms. For example, Hillier treats these two approaches as different manifestations of a shared oppositional relationship with Hollywood film: "we may today identify American independent cinema against the dominant of Hollywood – both as a mode of production and as a set of stylistic norms."[42] Positioning Hollywood as an "implicit referent" against which independence is defined, E. Deidre Pribram also identifies discursive

[37] For examples and summaries of these readings, see King, *American Independent Cinema*, 10; Emanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film* (London: New York University Press, 1999), 54-55; Murphy, *You and Me and Memento and Fargo*, 2, 14, 266.
[38] See Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*, 3; Janet Staiger, "Independent of What? Sorting Out Differences from Hollywood," in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, eds. Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 22.
[39] Yannis Tzioumakis, "Academic Discourses and American Independent Cinema: in Search of a Field of Studies. Part 2: From the 1990s to Date," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 9, no. 3 (2011): 324.
[40] Ibid., 320.
[41] Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema,* 266.
[42] Hillier, "Introduction," xiv.

fields that interact in producing independent film as a "discrete cultural site"; importantly, these entail both "representational discourses" and industrial factors.[43] Finally, whilst Janet Staiger's theorisation of "American indie cinema" as a neo-formalist *film-practice* reflexively addresses several limitations of discrete productive and textual definitions, she tacitly retains the dualistic, logocentric economy that they embody.[44] Thus, whilst applying a multi-faceted model that factors in socio-historical, narrational, thematic, and spectatorial attributes, she ultimately groups these determinants within a totalised, cohesive alternative to Hollywood film: "American cinema might be described as having at least two lively film practices rather than being homogenized into the classical Hollywood mode."[45] Thus, whilst scholars like Pribram and Staiger note a plethora of ways of inscribing independent distinction, these are cast as structural equivalents, each reinforcing an oppositional difference from a normative Hollywood centre.

Vitally, pervasive readings of independent film and Hollywood as ontological opposites usually engender (implicitly or explicitly) a hierarchically-uneven dualism, a structural inequality that allows this regulated economy to be considered as overtly metaphysical.[46] The earliest sustained exploration of this logocentric system can be located in the work of Chuck Kleinhans, whose reading inaugurates dominant discursive trends within this scholarly area. In asserting that "we must first look at the dominant institution – Hollywood cinema – in order to understand the alternatives,"[47] Kleinhans explicitly defines independent film as a reactive category that is meaningful only when considered in relation to another term that it responds to and rejects:

> The rest of filmmaking exists below, beyond, subordinate to Hollywood…
> 'Independent', then, has to be understood as a relational term – independent in
> relation to the dominant system – rather than taken as indicating a practice that is
> totally free-standing and autonomous.[48]

Importantly, Kleinhans' discussion of independent film's subordinate position constructs a hierarchical relationship between this category and Hollywood, preventing their constitution as two equal, complementary values. Similar conceptions of independent film as a fallen,

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[43] Pribram, *Cinema & Culture*, xi-xiii, 5.
[44] Staiger, "Independent of What?" 17-18, 22-23.
[45] Ibid., 23.
[46] Conversely, some readings imply that independent film and Hollywood exist as parallel industries, denying any power differential; see Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*, 53; Berra, *Declarations of Independence*, 90; Newman, *Indie*, 2,
[47] Chuck Kleinhans, "Independent Features: Hopes and Dreams," in *The New American Cinema*, ed. Jon Lewis (London: Duke University Press, 1999), 308.
[48] Ibid.

inferior term can be discerned in its occasional positioning as Hollywood's "other."[49] Indeed, Claire Molloy notes a pervasive scholarly tendency towards "spatially oriented descriptions" of the American cinematic landscape, arguing that they "give rise to an interesting geography of American film that has mainstream studio fare at its industrial centre with the outlying borders being home to an 'othered' independent cinema populated by 'outsider' filmmakers."[50] As has been noted in this thesis' introduction, Jacques Derrida insists that there is always a power differential at play within any metaphysical binary opposition, as one term inevitably dominates the other: to reiterate, "we are not dealing with a peaceful coexistence of a vis-á-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy."[51] In this regard, independent film's constitution as an inferior, reactive "other" of Hollywood clearly locates the term within the closure of metaphysics.

The brief critical literature review above demonstrates the pervasive retention of specific binary theorisations of independent film, dualistic structures that cement the metaphysical tenor of such definitions.[52] Indeed, totalised readings of independent cinema and their reliance upon logocentric dichotomies have themselves become the subject of recent academic scrutiny. For example, a number of scholars note the difficulties faced in defining independent cinema as an object of study, an observation that alludes to both the arbitrariness of the term and its common constitution as a structure of ontological negation. Emanuel Levy uses such rhetoric in introducing his monograph, outlining a number of categories and attributes that are *not* constituents of independent film; tellingly, this is framed as a means of addressing the difficulty of establishing a positive definition.[53] Most commonly, such negative definitions construct independent film in a specific relationship with a homogeneous Hollywood mainstream. Discussing "'independent' films" that employ "twisted narratives of various kinds," Martin Barker asserts that "they have tended to be described by what they *aren't*: they are 'not mainstream,' 'off-beat.'"[54] Finally, whilst

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[49] See Pribram, *Cinema & Culture*, 4. Certain scholars superficially invert this relationship, positioning Hollywood as independent film's "other"; whilst some explicitly reject independent film's structural inferiority (see Berra, *Declarations of Independence*, 95), most still frame it as a response to Hollywood norms; see Newman, *Indie*, 225; Michael Allen, *Contemporary US Cinema* (London: Longman, 2003), 114, 169.

[50] Claire Molloy, "Introduction," in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, eds. Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 181.

[51] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone Press, 1987), 41.

[52] Recent anthropological accounts from Newman and Ortner retain a binary opposition between independent film and Hollywood, but recast it as a discursive strategy that allows indie to self-define as a cohesive film culture. However, they tacitly endorse these frames by using them as the basis for subjective textual analyses; see Ortner, *Not Hollywood*, 3-4, 29-31, 46. Newman, *Indie*, 5, 11, 87, 91, 222-226.

[53] Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*, 6. For a commentary on this view, see Berra, *Declarations of Independence*, 25.

[54] Martin Barker, "The Pleasures of Watching an 'Off-beat' Film: The Case of Being John Malkovich," *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies* 11 (2008): http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/article.php?issue=11&id=1020. Emphasis in original.

Newman ultimately rejects such definitions as "inadequate," he characterises indie film as a deleterious discourse, sustained through the necessary negation of another form of cinematic identity: "its identity begins with a negative: these films are not of the Hollywood studios and the megaplexes where they screen."[55] Whilst not explicitly critiquing independent film discourses from a post-structuralist perspective, these observations allude to the internally-divided structure of the metaphysical sign, explored at length in this project's introduction. As a result, the concept of independent film embodies Derrida's assertion that

> An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being.[56]

Thus, whilst being treated as structurally self-identical, independent cinema carries within itself *traces* of those concepts against which it is negatively theorised; the very absence of Hollywood is itself rendered an *internal* constituent of independent film's structural definition, a precondition of its very existence. This economy of ontological imbrication is touched upon by Pribram, as she suggests that the object of her discursive analysis should be seen as "codependent, rather than wholly independent, in the sense of always requiring, by definition, a dominant industry to define (itself) against."[57] Importantly, these readings lay the groundwork for the deconstructive engagement with the topic that follows. By characterising independent film as a product of a broader metaphysics of presence, the term is opened up to a radical structural dismantling, a move that erases the term's definitional self-coherence.

In imposing a reductive, dualistic model of difference onto a potentially heterogeneous American cinematic landscape, various texts, forms, and practices have been grouped into arbitrary, discrete terms, undermining a more nuanced engagement with their own specificity and singularity. As a result, the multifaceted *différance* that necessarily inhabits independent film is expunged and regulated, cast as an oppositional difference with another, externalised presence. This totalising function can be further elucidated with reference to Derrida's work on genre, a discursive area that has already been applied to cinematic categories by Peter Brunette and David Wills, and, in an example relevant to this study, by Claire Perkins in her work on "smart" film. In the "Law of Genre," Derrida

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[55] Newman, *Indie*, 2.
[56] Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, ed. Alan Bass (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), 13.
[57] Pribram, *Cinema & Culture*, 12.

establishes the concept's implicit logocentric purity: "Genres are not to be mixed."[58] In doing so, he notes that any act of generic classification entails an act of structural enclosure, in which a set of pure, essential criteria ("taxonomic certainties")[59] are used to police generic membership (and difference): "as soon as the word 'genre' is sounded…a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind."[60] Brunette and Wills demonstrate how genre's metaphysical properties of "completion and closure" pervade the diverse scholarly terrain of film studies: "surveying the field, one quickly discovers that much serious writing about film is based upon a constant, enabling assumption concerning the possibility of accurately describing different kinds of *totalities*."[61]

Yet, Derrida asserts that any "law of genre" is only possible through the *a priori* acceptance of a "counter-law", a "principle of contamination";[62] "every *mark* or *trait*" that could signify generic membership "will always already be divided and lacking the wholeness that could generate whole categories or genres."[63] This is in turn attributed to the iterative operation of genre, a form of classification based upon transformative re-citation; again using filmic examples, Brunette and Wills explain that "genre distinctions are usually seen as existing *outside* or drawing their definition from *outside* the individual film, but are actually always *inside* it at the same time through citation and reference and through each text's individual semiotic functioning."[64] This problematization of textual boundaries is then focused upon the structure of genre itself. As Derrida notes, generic "re-marks" are required to arbitrate any legible generic membership. Yet, the re-mark is necessarily external to the generic category that it signifies, enacting "a taking part in without being part of";[65] as Perkins summarises, "genre-designations cannot be part of the corpus that they designate."[66] As a result, generically-marked texts can never "belong" but rather "participate" in (multiple) open-ended genres, as they always refer to an external designation and, more broadly, "a system of difference outside any given genre."[67] The self-integrity of any genre (or generic trait) is thus fundamentally compromised; as Brunette and Wills summarise,

> a genre trait will be…divided between inside and outside, it will be *différant* and
> thus always constituted by its opposite. This division always allows a kind of

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[58] Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," trans. Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 55.

[59] Ibid., 63.

[60] Ibid., 56.

[61] Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1989), 33. Emphasis in original.

[62] Derrida, "The Law of Genre," 59.

[63] Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 46.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Derrida, "The Law of Genre," 59.

[66] Claire Perkins, *American Smart Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 13.

[67] Derrida, "The Law of Genre," 59; Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 48.

otherness, an indefinite openness or incompleteness, to exist at the very heart of the concept of genre.[68]

It is precisely this originary impurity that this thesis positions "at the very heart" of independent film. Its totalised constitution in opposition to an equally homogeneous Hollywood designation is undermined, as this antonymic difference is re-cast as a structural incoherence that resides *within* the category itself. In levelling this attack upon independent film's ontological self-coherence, this thesis disrupts the pervasive oppositional frames and totalising definitions that reinforce a normative mode of reading and categorising cinematic texts. This dominant structural equation discourages any engagement with the singular distinctiveness of the varied discursive elements subsumed within pre-existing conceptual categories; in positioning independent properties as deviations from Hollywood convention, they can only be read in one fashion, as departures from an external structural centre-point. As will be established later, it is this methodological orthodoxy that this thesis aims to re-dress; in doing so, it opens up a varied matrix of emergent re-conceptualisations and interpretative gestures that can be applied to the study of contemporary American film.

Independent Film as a Hybrid Category: Cinematic Continuums and Oppositions

As explored in detail above, foundational scholarly discourses on independent film have repeatedly reasserted a relationship between discrete conceptual opposites. Independent cinema and Hollywood have often been treated as antithetical presences, superficial coherences that are themselves inhabited by traces of their absent antonymic double. However, in more recent academic work, several theorists have attempted to interrogate rigid, binary definitions. For some scholars, dichotomous frameworks represent simplistic, outmoded structures that must undergo urgent revision. Relating apocalyptic appraisals of the independent film sector to essentialist constructions of "true" or "originary" independence, King argues that any attempt to theorise an authentic definition is undermined by its position as an "institutionalized discursive conception."[69] King then extends this ontological critique to the oppositional, binary framework within which self-coherent independent and mainstream categories are constructed: "If the negative object in the purist account might be opened up to a more complex reading, the opposite pole is also a mythic notion."[70] In noting this critical shift, King, Molloy, and Tzioumakis characterise recent

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[68] Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 49.
[69] King, "Thriving or in Permanent Crisis?" 50. Also see Perren, "A Big Fat Indie Success Story," 18.
[70] Ibid.

independent film scholarship as a turn away from discrete oppositional models, even if the solidity of the term is eventually reaffirmed:

> Together, academic and other publications helped establish independent film as a concrete and distinct category of American cinema characterised by a number of specific traits, rather than as one simply defined negatively on the basis of existing outside the 'mainstream' represented by the output of the major studios.[71]

Writing alone, Tzioumakis explores this trend in a pair of detailed survey articles that analyse this scholarly field. In the second of these (dealing with academic interventions "from the 1990s to date,") Tzioumakis asserts that

> the 2000s saw a large number of studies that have made American independent cinema one of the most debated subjects in the field of film studies at a time when questions of definition of the term 'independent' were becoming progressively complex.[72]

Accordingly, Tzioumakis notes the common application of "discursive" definitions and "hybrid" or "continuum" models in problematizing earlier essentialist readings. In such formulations, independent cinema has been approached as an ever-shifting discourse shaped by a greater range of contributing criteria and factors; in turn, it has also been located as a relative "centre-ground" in a complex spectrum of cinematic forms and categories, incorporating both marginal and mainstream influences.[73] Such redefinitions ostensibly challenge independent film's presumed fixity and self-identity, whilst also downplaying its rigid, oppositional separation from mainstream Hollywood; this is evidenced in characterisations of the category as "a notoriously slippery designation,"[74] a "kaleidoscope of modern film-making,"[75] and a classification with "increasingly elastic"[76] boundaries. However, it is my contention that such readings are implicated in the logocentric definitional logic they purport to subvert, even if their metaphysical complicity is less structurally explicit.

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[71] King, Molloy and Tzioumakis, "Introduction," 1.
[72] Tzioumakis, "Academic Discourses and American Independent Cinema," 318.
[73] Ibid., 324-336.
[74] Denise Mann, *Hollywood Independents: The Postwar Talent Takeover* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 4.
[75] Berra, *Declarations of Independence*, 138.
[76] Justin Wyatt, "Revisiting 1970s' Independent Distribution and Marketing Strategies," in *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, eds. Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (London: Routledge, 2004), 241.

To address a prominent example, Tzioumakis' influential study is predicated upon a conception of independent film as a dynamic, shifting structure that changes shape depending upon its specific historical and cultural context; it constitutes "a discourse that expands and contracts when socially authorised institutions (filmmakers, industry practitioners, trade publications, academics, film critics, and so on) contribute towards its definition at different periods in the history of American cinema."[77] In such a reading, this thesis' object of study amounts to but one epoch in independent film's dynamic definitional history, referred to within Tzioumakis' text as "Contemporary American Independent Cinema."[78] Nevertheless, there are a number of methodological assumptions that ensure his argument clings to existing totalising categories and binary definitional frames. To begin, the study's exploration of independent cinema in a series of specific socio-historical periods must be challenged from a post-structuralist perspective. As noted by Brunette and Wills, grounding textual analyses within self-coherent historical contexts is itself an act of metaphysical reduction, as one necessarily disavows a plethora of equally valid historical sub-divisions or alternative interpretative foci.[79] Secondly, whilst Tzioumakis places the concept of independence under analytical scrutiny, terms such as "mainstream" and "alternative" are unproblematically reified; this is evidenced in his assertion that contemporary independents are "grounded" in "mainstream" conventions, and in his mobilisation of "co-dependent" and "hybrid" categories.[80] Finally, whilst independent film is treated as a dynamic, changeable discourse, it must carry an intelligible, static form in any given historical moment to allow such changes to be observed and mapped; independent film's continuing categorical solidity is evidenced in Tzioumakis' assertion that "despite the continuing problems of definition, American independent cinema has finally established itself as a relatively distinct category of filmmaking both in the global entertainment industry and in public discourse."[81] Therefore, this approach constructs a corpus that is *structurally* dynamic but signifies a range of self-contained, historically-specific meanings.[82]

Whilst the range of studies explored above superficially disrupt independent film's ontological fixity, a greater number have attempted to complexify its antonymic, regulated difference from an equally static Hollywood mainstream. In doing so, several recent texts have constructed independent film as a hybrid location on a broader continuum, assimilating

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[77] Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, 10-11. Pribram's reading closely resembles Tzioumakis', and is inhabited by a similar tension between independent film's "shifting discursive parameters" and its role as a "discrete cultural site"; Pribram, *Cinema & Culture*, xi-xii, 11.
[78] Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, 167.
[79] For a Derridean critique of film history see Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 33-45.
[80] These observations underlie Tzioumakis' reaffirmation of hybridity models of independent film; Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, 249-250, 267.
[81] Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, 270.
[82] Similar tensions are discernible in Newman, *Indie*, 3.

a range of influences from seemingly divergent cinematic sources. To begin, several scholars have posited a growing symbiosis between independent and Hollywood practices and aesthetics, a merging of two initially distinct categories within the specific context of recent American cinema. Indeed, such assumptions are commonplace in aforementioned industrial definitions, identifiable in the work of Richard Maltby, Merritt, Schatz, and Sickels.[83] These scholars argue that in recent years a previously distinct independent sector with a coherent, oppositional identity has been co-opted, commercialised, and institutionalised into crisis or compromise; this process is evidenced by the purported rise of indiewood film, specialty divisions, and corporate takeovers of prominent indie studios. However, whilst this industrial narrative offers a vague indictment of recent industrial convergence and its creation of a "pseudo-independent" product,[84] it has also been mobilised as a starting-off point for more rigorous reappraisals of recent independent films as hybrid textual configurations.

To begin, numerous critics have characterised a specific historical context (the 1990s onwards) within which certain infrastructural developments and trends undermined strict oppositional definitions of independent and Hollywood film. For example, in noting a greater accommodation of "queer themes" within 1990s mainstream cinema, Michele Aaron contends that the decade "was a…period when the polarity of the Independent and Hollywood sectors was fraying";[85] Levy forwards a similar argument throughout his exhaustive study of "the rise of American independent film," suggesting that "over the years, the definition has blurred as a result of the increasing consolidation of power among Hollywood's majors and mini-majors."[86] Tzioumakis offers a detailed periodization of these cinematic trends in a recent article, locating a similar coming together of antonymic categories within a specific historical context. Thus, whilst arguing that "much of American Independent cinema has always operated at close range with the Hollywood majors,"[87] Tzioumakis outlines a series of "phases" that chart a changing relationship between independent cinema and Hollywood. Thus, "indie" (1989-c.1996) and "indiewood" (1996/8-present)[88] eras are characterised as different stages in a growing "convergence between

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[83] See Merritt, *Celluloid Mavericks*, 348; Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema* 218; Schatz, "Conglomerate Hollywood and Contemporary Independent Film," 137; Sickels, *American Film in the Digital Age*, 42-46.
[84] Murphy, *You and Me and Memento and Fargo,* 263.
[85] Michele Aaron, "New Queer Cinema: An Introduction," in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 9.
[86] Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*, 2.
[87] Yannis Tzioumakis, "'Independent,' 'Indie' and 'Indiewood': Towards a Periodisation of Contemporary (Post-1980) American Independent Cinema," in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, eds. Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 30.
[88] Ibid., 33-36, 36-39.

independent and Hollywood cinema," a gradual phenomenon that involved "the lines between independent cinema and Hollywood" becoming increasingly "blurred."[89]

Whilst the examples offered above posit an originary opposition between independent film and Hollywood that has been slowly eroded, a number of more complex academic engagements consider ontological hybridity as a structural pre-condition of independent cinema itself. King offers the most prominent, sophisticated example of this definitional argument. Despite endorsing readings of a historical convergence of independent and mainstream texts,[90] he constructs a broader cinematic continuum sustained by varying points of structural hybridity, using this coherent interpretative framework to group and order (in relative terms) a plethora of texts associated with independent film. Thus, citing industrial, textual, and socio-political aspects as vital "points of orientation" for independent cinema, King cogently describes a range of discursive possibilities subsumed within this category:

> Some films customarily designated as "independent" operate at a distance from the mainstream…: they are produced in an ultra-low-budget world a million miles from that of the Hollywood blockbuster; they adopt formal strategies that disrupt or abandon the smoothly flowing conventions associated with the mainstream Hollywood style; and they offer challenging perspectives on social issues, a rarity in Hollywood. Others exist in a closer, sometimes symbiotic relationship with the Hollywood behemoth, offering a distinctive touch within more conventional frameworks.[91]

In stressing independent film's textual diversity, King furnishes this category with a hybrid structure, arguing that it is constituted by the interplay of a number of mainstream and alternative forms:

> Independent cinema exists in the overlapping territory between Hollywood and a number of alternatives: the experimental 'avant-garde', the more accessible 'art' or

[89] Ibid., 37, 39. For similar readings, see Murphy, *You and Me and Memento and Fargo,* 263; Justin Wyatt, "Independents, Packaging and Inflationary Pressure in 1980s Hollywood," in *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989,* ed. Stephen Prince (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 158-159.

[90] See King, *American Independent Cinema*, 44; Geoff King, *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 271; King, "Thriving or in Permanent Crisis?" 59.

[91] King, *American Independent Cinema*, 1-2.

'quality' cinema, the politically engaged, the low-budget exploitation film and the more generally offbeat or eccentric.[92]

King directly acknowledges this structural hybridity in his study of *Indiewood*, a cinematic sub-category that exemplifies the purported assimilation of mainstream and marginal forms, practices, and themes. Describing indiewood as a "hybrid location," King uses the term to describe "an area in which Hollywood and the independent sector merge or overlap."[93] Indiewood is treated as a "combination of more and less mainstream ingredients,"[94] a theorisation that clearly problematizes readings of independent film as totalised, self-contained, and discretely opposed to a homogeneous Hollywood monolith. Indeed, in concluding his study, King directly positions his model as a challenge to essentialist definitions and fixed binary frames; his aim "is not to suggest the existence of an open field of forces but to move away from the notion that a simple binary opposition can be asserted between the commercial mainstream and all points of relative departure and difference."[95] Whilst indiewood exemplifies King's structural re-conceptualisation, this argument implies that a range of ontological hybrids can be discerned, myriad differential mixtures that replace one discrete, absolutist antinomy. Thus, as King summarises, "the lines between the independent sector and Hollywood are in many places blurred, the difference between one and the other being sometimes radical, sometimes far less clear-cut."[96] Importantly, King's reading elucidates an increasingly visible structural tendency in recent independent discourses, where the category is cast as an "in-between space"[97] that "exhibits all vigor of the hybrid";[98] such equations are perceptible in the aforementioned work of Tzioumakis and Pribram,[99] as well as related categories of "semi-independent"[100] and "major independent" film.[101]

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[92] Ibid., 2-3.
[93] King, *Indiewood*, 1-3.
[94] Ibid., 23.
[95] Ibid., 271.
[96] King, *American Independent Cinema*, 261.
[97] Michele Schreiber, "Their Own Personal Velocity: Women Directors and Contemporary Independent Cinema," in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, eds. Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 96-97.
[98] Gina Marchetti, "Guests at *The Wedding Banquet*: The Cinema of the Chinese Diaspora and the Rise of the American Independents," in *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, eds. Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (London: Routledge, 2004), 224.
[99] See Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, 248; Tzioumakis, *Hollywood's Indies*, 1; Pribram, *Cinema and Culture*, xi, 12.
[100] See Matthew Bernstein, "Hollywood's Semi-Independent Production," *Cinema Journal* 32, no. 3 (1993): 49; Merritt, *Celluloid Mavericks,* 348.
[101] Justin Wyatt, "The Formation of the 'major independent': Miramax, New Line and the New Hollywood," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Stephen Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 74, 86-87.

As briefly mentioned earlier, King's theorisation of a range of hybrid cinematic forms is mapped onto a bounded continuum that stretches out between hypothetical mainstream and marginal poles; a text or category's precise location is dependent upon the extent to which they incorporate and merge seemingly antithetical influences: "at one end of the American cinematic spectrum is the globally dominant Hollywood blockbuster. At the other is the low-budget independent or 'indie' feature and, beyond that, various forms of avant-garde, experimental, no-budget or otherwise economically marginal production."[102] Thus, whilst indiewood provides an increasingly prominent middle-ground for this linear framework, spectrum models accommodate and order a large variety of texts that have been discursively associated with American independent film. As King concludes, these multiplicitous textual possibilities stretch out between two antonymic poles: "many shades of difference…continue to exist…between the extremes constituted by Hollywood and Indiewood, at one end, and the underground and avant-garde, at the other."[103] Thus, King's cinematic continuum superficially undermines a strict binary segregation of Hollywood and independent film, allowing for a complex mixing or merging of these terms into numerous singular variations. King's spectrum of indie ontologies has been mirrored, mobilised, and revised in a number of further scholarly studies. Chris Holmlund inaugurates a similar model in her suggestion that "independent and mainstream feature films are linked together on a sliding scale. Neither ideologically nor economically are they purely antithetical." This form of structural interconnection purportedly runs in both directions; whilst various "key sectors of independent film have indeed migrated towards the mainstream, from the margins," this has in turn led "many contributors (to) choose to speak *from* the margins *to* the mainstream."[104] Yet, these seemingly opposed dynamics are rendered as manifestations of a single theoretical shift; for Holmlund, in the act of definition, "what's at stake is a continuum, not an opposition."[105]

As evidenced above, recent intellectual currents within independent film scholarship have encouraged works that seek to redefine their object of study; applying similar theoretical models, these works ostensibly critique the rigid oppositional definitions that characterise earlier popular, journalistic, and academic readings. Considering independent film as a hybrid site (or series of sites) mapped onto a broader cinematic spectrum, any attempt to theorise the category as a pure, polar opposite of Hollywood is fatally

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[102] King, *Indiewood*, 1.
[103] King, *American Independent Cinema*, 262-263.
[104] Chris Holmlund, "Introduction: From the Margins to the Mainstream," in *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, eds. Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (London: Routledge, 2004), 3-4.
[105] Ibid., 3. For other continuum readings, see Jim Hillier, "US Independent Cinema since the 1980s," in *Contemporary American Cinema*, eds. Linda Ruth Williams and Michael Hammond (London: Open University Press, 2006), 249; Murphy, *You and Me and Memento and Fargo*, 16-24.

undermined. Furthermore, in reading independent texts as an amalgam of mainstream and marginal determinants, this model superficially erases any clear division between these countervailing tendencies, as they are shown to co-exist (and intermingle) in the production of textual meaning. Finally, by reading independent cinema as a hybrid of varying cinematic traditions, dualistic frames are rejected in favour of a multifaceted integration of disparate influences; numerous theorists have considered independent film as a productive meeting of a plethora of filmic forms, including Hollywood, art cinema, avant-garde film, and exploitation.

However, whilst such models undoubtedly complexify reductive oppositional frameworks, they ultimately reify the metaphysical principles upon which earlier definitions are founded. For example, this section began by noting a scholarly consensus concerning the perceived convergence of independent and mainstream cinematic forms and practices, a process located directly within a specific socio-historical context. However, whilst such arguments superficially challenge discrete, oppositional independent definitions, they rely upon essentialist constructions of the categories whose boundaries they purport to blur or merge. Firstly, in positioning this trend as a recent textual phenomenon, such readings tacitly embrace *a priori*, originary constructions of "true independence"; for independent film and Hollywood to have recently merged, there must be an earlier context within which they were fundamentally separate. Thus, the dualistic antinomy between independent and Hollywood film is retained as one historically-specific manifestation of American cinematic reality.[106]

Secondly, the application of this hybrid discursive form implies the mixture of two legibly discrete values, hypothetical opposites that are subsequently integrated. Such an observation is discernable in Mark Shiel's astute interrogation of "cult cinema," a definitional discourse that bears striking structural similarities to bifurcated independent film models. Shiel argues that similar hybridity discourses utilised by cult theorists like Joan Hawkins actually reify strict binary frames, dependent as they are on the "resurrection" of an "out-of-date opposition."[107] Furthermore, in his deconstructive interrogation of genre, Derrida notes that the superficial interspersing of textual forms does not entail a radical effacing of their *a priori* ontologies: "if it should happen that they do intermix, by accident or through transgression, by mistake or through a lapse, then this should confirm, since, after all, we are speaking of 'mixing,' the essential purity of their identity."[108] Thus, the act of

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[106] An originary, oppositional difference between independent and Hollywood film is also perceptible in more complex conceptualisations of American film. See Patricia R. Zimmerman, "Digital Deployment(s)," in *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, eds. Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (London: Routledge, 2004), 245-246, 248.

[107] Mark Shiel, "Why Call them 'Cult Movies'? American Independent Cinema and the Counterculture in the 1960s," *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies* 8 (2003): http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/article.php?issue=may2003&id=260&section=article.

[108] Derrida, "The Law of Genre," 57.

generic assimilation reinforces the necessary distinctness of the ontologies it brings together. It is the contention of this study that a similar theoretical critique can be applied to the work of figures such as King, Holmlund, and Wyatt, who construct independent cinema at the intersection of mainstream and marginal forms, aesthetics, and practices. In positioning independent film as a hybrid of antagonistic tendencies, mainstream and marginal must carry essential ontologies; without retaining metaphysical self-coherence, the integration of previously distinct entities would be rendered illegible.

This reading of independent film as an "eclectic mixture"[109] of discrete elements is solidified by the terms with which this specific hybrid category is described. Importantly, the readings outlined above do not characterise it as a fluid textual zone within which previously distinct elements are transformed into undecidables through heterogeneous interactions; rather, independent texts are commonly described as an assemblage of oppositional components that retain their *a priori* meanings even as they are structurally interspersed. This set of structural assumptions is clear in King's work on indiewood. Locating this category as "an area in which Hollywood and the independent sector merge or overlap,"[110] King's detailed textual descriptions suggest that elements drawn from antonymic tendencies remain discretely discernible within case-study films. Thus, indiewood is established as a "combination of more and less mainstream ingredients," ensuring that films within this category are the products of a process in which "elements of more and less distinctive/mainstream cinema are mixed in varying quantities."[111] Finally, this process is typified by King's mobilisation of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "distinction" as it relates to prevailing taste cultures; he suggests that "each of the films analysed so far combines largely conventional cinematic structures or devices with some markers of difference or distinction."[112] In such a reading, countervailing properties remain clearly separate.

In constructing indiewood as a mixture of opposed tendencies, King ameliorates the seemingly undecidable textual logic that inhabits the category. As noted in this thesis' introduction, Derrida regularly evokes this concept to elucidate his deconstructive project; re-marking a point where previous categorical oppositions begin to unravel, the undecidable exceeds the dualisms of metaphysics as it simultaneously embodies seemingly paradoxical ontologies.[113] Derrida then contrasts this theoretical gesture with Hegelian "speculative dialectics," a form of criticism he deems complicit in searching for a *telos* of logocentric closure and conceptual self-unity; in such models, paradoxes are uncovered but then

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[109] Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, 248.
[110] King, *Indiewood*, 1; See also King, *American Independent Cinema*, 2-3.
[111] King, *Indiewood*, 23, 26.
[112] Ibid., 234.
[113] Derrida, *Positions*, 42-43.

defused, as pre-existing polar opposites are integrated into a new totalising concept that escapes the metaphysical dualism that produced it:

> Hegelian idealism consists precisely of a *relève* of the binary oppositions of classical idealism, a resolution of contradiction into a third term that comes in order to *aufheben*, to deny while raising up, while idealizing, while sublimating into an anamnesic interiority (*Erinnerung*), while *interning* difference in a self-presence.[114]

Conversely, Derrida argues that deconstruction uncovers textual self-contradictions so that they can be *exploited* rather than *resolved*; instead of being comfortably accommodated into a new (and totalized) meaning, they are used to pull apart the oppositional foundations of metaphysical discourse. Thus, in contrast to a Hegelian method that "determines difference as contradiction only in order to resolve it…into the self-presence of an onto-theological or onto-teleological synthesis," Derrida notes a "conflictuality of *différance*," a model of textual self-contradiction that "can never be totally resolved."[115] Bearing this commentary in mind, a similar critique can be levelled at pervasive readings of indiewood. As demonstrated above, the category fulfils a role that mirrors the logocentric dialectics that Derrida attacks; outlining the co-presence of paradoxical textual and contextual discourses (independent film and Hollywood), these are resolved or synthesised within a third term (indiewood) that is then taxonomically defined, granting it absolute ontological closure. Thus, whilst indiewood draws attention to contradictions within American cinematic discourse, these are neutralised within a new structural self-presence, which is in turn granted its own legible, essential being. In contrast, this thesis, as a Derridean intervention into similar debates, utilises these textual paradoxes for deconstructive ends.

Finally, the metaphysical complicity of aforementioned hybridity definitions is equally discernable in the continuum models from which they are drawn. Superficially, theorisations of cinematic "gradational scales"[116] elude discrete, binary formulation; such a framework visualises a broad range of textual possibilities in place of monolithic absolutes, laying bare a conceptual diversity that is forcefully homogenised within independent film and Hollywood categories. However, for a continuum to operate, it must stretch between two polar opposites, theoretical essences between which a variety of figures or terms can be positioned. As a result, any such framework solidifies the integrity of these oppositional end-points; even if they are posited as *practically* unobtainable extremes, their *hypothetical*

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[114] Ibid., 43.
[115] Ibid., 44.
[116] David E. James, "Alternative Cinemas," in *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, eds. Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (London: Routledge, 2004), 60.

solidity is vital to the continuum's operation. Furthermore, by locating the object of study between distinct poles, spectrum models again demonstrate the originary *différance* that inhabits the metaphysical sign; whilst being shown to differ relatively from two specific oppositional points, each text, category, or value is again defined in relation to an external (and absent) "other," which can be recast as an internal differential constituent. By stressing the "shades of difference" that exist between two (externalised) "extremes,"[117] such studies mobilise a logocentric framework themselves, rationalising and bounding a radical textual heterogeneity and a freeplay of cinematic *différance*. Yet, in doing so, hybridity and spectrum models also demonstrate their structural reliance upon this unbounded semiotic economy.

Side-Stepping Independent Discourses: (New) Punk, Smart, and other Analogous Concepts

As demonstrated above, recent independent film discourses have reiterated a range of metaphysical structural assumptions, intractably tying the concept to a series of interrelated binary oppositions. In turn, the weight of previous scholarship has made it increasingly difficult for contemporary studies to explore this textual area without being drawn into these well-trodden ontological debates; this often leads to the regurgitation of the same reductive definitional frameworks they set out to subvert. However, in recent years a tangential trend in indie scholarship has emerged, within which academics have begun to reject independent film as a useful conceptualisation of their object of study. Thus, original interpretative and cinematic categories (such as "[new] punk," "post-pop," "quirky," "smart," and "specialty film")[118] have been constituted in recent academic works, incorporating a plethora of films and filmmakers that had previously been located squarely within independent film discourses.

Ostensibly, one could read these studies as attempts to side-step the myriad discursive impasses elucidated within this chapter. Indeed, several such works are explicitly justified by their superficial transcendence of this definitional area's problematic structural assumptions; for example, Tzioumakis extols his re-christening of independent cinema as

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[117] King, *American Independent Cinema*, 2, 11.
[118] See Nicholas Rombes, "Introduction," in *New Punk Cinema*, ed. Nicholas Rombes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); Jesse Fox Mayshark, *Post-Pop Cinema: The Search for Meaning in New American Film* (London: Praeger Publishers, 2007); James MacDowell, "Notes on Quirky," *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* 1 (2010): 1-16, http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/film/movie/contents/notes_on_quirky.pdf.; Jeffrey Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism, and the New American 'Smart' Film," *Screen* 43, no. 4 (2002): 349-369; Tzioumakis, *Hollywood's Indies*, 12-27; Peter Hanson, *The Cinema of Generation X: a Critical Study of Films and Directors* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002).

"specialty film" because the new term "removes the ideological and political implications and meanings that have been attached by various institutions to the label 'independent' and its derivatives over the years."[119] Whilst these reconceptualizations may encourage original perspectives that complement orthodox studies, it is argued here that any attempt to side-step independent cinema discourses is deeply problematic. As evidenced in Derrida's assertion that "*there is nothing outside of the text*,"[120] the meaning(s) of any object of study are reciprocally constituted, augmented, and transformed by the act of analysis itself; accordingly, previous readings of independent film have actively re-shaped the category they have attempted to describe. If one rejects theorisations of independent film as a fixed entity that can be objectively defined, it can be re-appraised as an amorphous, dynamic cultural construct, a signified that is constantly open to an endless process of revision, flux, and iterative transformation.[121] Furthermore, the various practices, texts, and filmmakers associated with the category are themselves ontologically modified by the popular, industrial, and academic accounts that have debated, analysed, and (ultimately) shaped their meanings. Thus, in ignoring a range of relevant discursive elements, meanings, and structures, such approaches deny a complex web of connotations that partly constitute their objects of study.

Furthermore, a large number of these discursive innovations ultimately perpetuate the arbitrary totalities and metaphysical bifurcations that structure independent film ontologies. Indeed, the very act of initiating a new cinematic category encourages logocentric generalisations and reductions. Constructing and enforcing a series of discursive limits, these definitional texts shape and demarcate a broader textual heterogeneity; as Brunette and Wills note, "any analysis necessarily divides a domain in order to study it."[122] In being granted this structural closure, many of the aforementioned terms are theorised within an explicitly oppositional economy; whilst evading the reified binary dualism between independent film and Hollywood, these new categories are often located on the margins of the American cinematic landscape, again establishing them in relation to a homogeneous mainstream. Furthermore, many examples of this trend also replicate the hybridity or spectrum discourses outlined above; often responding to or trying to refine the amorphous territory of indiewood film, new cinematic sub-categories are placed at the intersection of two or more seemingly divergent film traditions. Whilst there are numerous

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[119] Tzioumakis, *Hollywood's Indies*, 14-15.
[120] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chavravorty Spivak, Corr. ed. (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 158. Emphasis in original.
[121] For a detailed version of this argument, see Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 121-122; Such a reading is alluded to by Tzioumakis, who lists academics as one of the "socially authorised institutions" that contribute to independent film definitions; Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, 11.
[122] Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 107.

potential examples of such methodological gestures, they are elucidated here in relation to one exemplary case-study: (new) punk cinema.

Nicholas Rombes, Stacy Thompson, and Bruce Isaacs' explorations of (new) punk cinema encapsulate recent attempts to provide a more complex or variable definitional alternative to independent film. Indeed, (new) punk is explicitly introduced as a more nuanced, fluid conceptualisation than the existing independent discourse it superficially resembles. Rombes describes it as containing a "contested heart,"[123] a view reinforced by Isaacs' assertion that any theorisation of "a new punk tradition" must account for "textual heterogeneity";[124] extending this perspective even further, Thompson suggests that punk is often circumscribed by practitioners as "'that which cannot be defined.'"[125] This implicit critique of conceptual rigidity is rendered explicit by Rombes, as he directly discusses how the new concept destabilises dualistic definitions of American independent film: pointing out that his corpus of new punk texts are "not all 'independent'" and are drawn from a variety of national contexts, Rombes argues that the latter term "has less value today when so many films are financed by complex and interrelated networks."[126] As a result, he contextualises new punk within a range of "new movements that seek to move beyond the worn-out 'mainstream vs independent cinema' paradigm, a paradigm which…is trickier to sustain now that 'indie' cinema has become a multi billion dollar industry."[127] However, scholars like Thompson have also located the term as a categorical structure *within* independent discourse; at times the author refers to the object of study as a "sub-genre,"[128] deferring to an industrial definitional framework that defines punk cinema as "independently produced."[129] Thus, whilst Thompson does not theorise punk as an explicit indie analogue, the manner in which he positions punk within existing categories allows it to be discussed *aside from* the problematic structural assumptions that orient independent cinema as a broader, self-coherent cinematic category.[130]

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[123] Rombes, "Introduction," 18.

[124] Bruce Isaacs, "Non-Linear Narrative," in *New Punk Cinema*, ed. Nicholas Rombes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 129.

[125] Stacy Thompson, "Punk Cinema," *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 2 (2004): 47. Mayshark adopts a similar justificatory approach in his study of post-pop directors, who he argues "(defy) easy categorization"; Mayshark, *Post-Pop Cinema*, 5.

[126] Rombes, "Introduction," 2.

[127] Ibid., 16. Mendik and Schneider espouse similar arguments in their reading of underground film; Xavier Mendik and Steven Jay Schneider, "Explorations Underground: American Film (Ad)ventures Beneath the Hollywood Radar," in *Underground U.S.A.: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon*, eds. Xavier Mendik and Steven Jay Schneider (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), 1, 10.

[128] Stacy Thompson "Punk Cinema," in *New Punk Cinema*, ed. Nicholas Rombes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 26.

[129] Thompson, "Punk Cinema (1)," 64.

[130] A range of other analogous interpretative frameworks (such as MacDowell's notion of quirky or Hawkins reading of "downtown film culture") are positioned as independent film sub-categories; see MacDowell, "Notes on Quirky"; Joan Hawkins, "Dark, Disturbing, Intelligent, Provocative, and Quirky: Avant-Garde Cinema of the 1980s and 1990s," in *Contemporary American Independent*

As alluded to above, attempts to transcend independent film discourses are often undermined by the mobilisation of a similar metaphysical logic within new cinematic categories. Returning to (new) punk cinema, it has been theorised as an explicit attack upon structural simplifications and oppositions mobilised in normative models of American cinema, typified by antonymic definitions of independent and Hollywood film. However, when considered closely, one can discern similar logocentric properties within (new) punk cinema itself, metaphysical gestures that undermine the term's purported "openness" and "heterogeneity."[131] Specifically, (new) punk cinema frequently mobilises materialist and auteurist structures that are strikingly similar to those observable within dualistic independent film definitions. In Rombes' introduction to the category, he constructs a series of historical, textual, and structural frames that closely resemble pervasive independent film taxonomies: "Beginning in the mid 1990s, a series of films from around the world began to emerge that challenged, or at least radically revised, many of the narrative and aesthetic codes that governed mainstream Hollywood fare."[132] Furthermore, several of the exemplary new punk texts he outlines are more commonly approached by critics and scholars as independent; these include *Gummo* (1997) and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999).[133] Thus, whilst explicitly arguing that this category is not analogous with independent film, Rombes defines new punk with a timeframe and corpus that is roughly equitable with pervasive indie definitions; additionally, he places the category in a similar dualistic, antagonistic relationship with a monolithic mainstream Hollywood. For Thompson, punk is also characterised as a "resistant cinema,"[134] an aesthetic attack upon a normalised Hollywood mainstream aesthetic: comparing the workings of punk film and music, Thompson argues that major record labels and Hollywood studios play identical "gatekeeping functions," providing self-coherent, monolithic textual norms that punk products can oppose and subvert.[135] Thus, noting the differences in pacing that characterise the oppositional aesthetics of punk music and film, Thompson demonstrates that punk narration is primarily defined by that which it excludes, namely the commercial imperatives of classical Hollywood convention: to abet the development of a "punk" aesthetic, "the Hollywood aesthetic – linear, teleological, and fast-paced – had to be diverted, rendered open-ended, and slowed

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Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream, eds. Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (London: Routledge, 2004), 89-90.

[131] Whilst scholars have discerned a heightened textual "openness" within (new) punk cinema, it is accommodated within a framework that *downplays* a radically deconstructive textuality; see Thompson, "Punk Cinema (1)," 47, 49-51, 64; Thompson, "Punk Cinema (2)," 33-37; Rombes, "Introduction," 3-4, 10; Nicholas Rombes, "Sincerity and Irony," in *New Punk Cinema*, ed. Nicholas Rombes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 79, 84-85.

[132] Rombes, "Introduction," 2.

[133] Ibid.

[134] Thompson, "Punk Cinema (2)," 32.

[135] Thompson, "Punk Cinema (1)," 50.

down. In punk cinema, scenes that do not advance the narrative signify a lack of concern with money and therefore with the commercial market."[136]

This purported textual subversion is underlined by an equally important industrial antinomy; for a text to be considered as punk, any formal or stylistic oppositionality must be accompanied by (and stem from) a marginal productive context. Thompson introduces this idea by providing a dualistic summary of punk discourse's "two vectors,"[137] arguing that different groups have chosen to define punk either as "a loosely construed aesthetic" or "in terms of its economics – its production and reproduction."[138] In contrast, by adopting a "materialist critique,"[139] Thompson proposes a "more dialectical approach, one that grasps the aesthetic of punk cinema that has emerged from and been informed by 'punk economics.'"[140] Here, Thompson clearly replicates traditional independent film definitions that rely upon industrial oppositionality, as he presumes a direct causal relationship between productive and aesthetic attributes. Finally, there are also brief moments when (new) punk discourse evokes more complex (yet equally metaphysical) hybrid definitional models. In Rombes' introductory text, his rejection of independent film as a useful category informs assertions that new punk films should be approached as a "brutal mixture of underground, avant-garde technique and mainstream, genre-based storytelling"[141]; this reading closely resembles recent theorisations of independent film forwarded by figures such as King and Holmlund.[142] Thus, whilst (new) punk scholars explicitly reject independent film as a useful analytical category, they tacitly reinforce the relational or hybrid models that have dominated recent American film scholarship.

This brief survey of (new) punk scholarship demonstrates the logocentric complicity of reductive attempts to side-step independent film discourses. However, there has been one trend within recent American film scholarship that provides a tentative basis for a more sustained deconstructive re-inscription of independent film; this is the gradual rise in work on smart cinema, evidenced by the work of Jeffrey Sconce, Pat Brereton, and Perkins. Undoubtedly, existing constructions of smart cinema replicate many of the problematic methodological assumptions discerned within other interpretative models, demonstrating an (albeit increasingly self-conscious) logocentric complicity. Firstly, this is evident in its discursive positioning as both a sub-category *of* and a cypher *for* independent film; in both formulations, smart's heightened structural reflexivity is centred upon its own distinct being,

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[136] Ibid., 55-56.
[137] Thompson, "Punk Cinema (2)," 22.
[138] Thompson, "Punk Cinema (1)," 47.
[139] Thompson, "Punk Cinema (2)," 21.
[140] Thompson, "Punk Cinema (1)," 47. Thompson also evokes aforementioned discourses of "true independence"; Ibid., 49.
[141] Rombes, "Introduction," 2.
[142] For uses of a related punk continuum, see Thompson, "Punk Cinema (1)," 47.

deflecting critical interrogation away from the broader discourse of "commercial/independent" filmmaking within which it is positioned.[143] Secondly, smart has been theorised as a "nebulous *tendency*"[144] or "loosely conceived"[145] category "with a specific interest in confounding the discrete categories of art, independent and mainstream filmmaking."[146] Yet, in spite of these caveats, it has often been constructed with an (albeit self-conscious) taxonomic certainty; in Sconce's inaugural definition of smart he outlines a number of smart texts, filmmakers, and shared textual elements, including a characteristic "'blank' style," synchronous narrative structures, "a focus on the white middle-class family as a crucible of miscommunication and emotional dysfunction," and a political interest in issues of "taste, consumerism and identity."[147] Finally, smart's structural solidity has been underlined by its constitution either in opposition to mainstream cinema and culture, or as a hybrid of countervailing tendencies, structural models that closely replicate prominent independent film definitions; thus, smart has been imagined as both a "style defined in opposition to Hollywood"[148] and a category "that survives…at the symbolic and material intersection of 'Hollywood', the 'indie' scene and the vestiges of what cinephiles used to call 'art' films."[149] However, in spite of these metaphysical implications and structural limitations, smart scholarship has achieved several reflexive theoretical breakthroughs; these are ultimately beneficial to my thesis' re-inscription of independent film as an interpretative tool that embodies a radical deconstructive potential.

Specifically, it is argued here that smart's purported characterisation as a nihilistic, postmodern, and self-reflexive category render it a useful starting point for the application of deconstructive reading strategies to American cinematic texts. The construction of smart as a sensibility within contemporary US film has crystallized around purported tonal commonalities within case-study texts, expressed repeatedly as being ironic in character.[150] Indeed, Sconce introduces smart as one manifestation of a broader cultural shift, manifesting

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[143] Perkins, *American Smart Cinema*, 1-5. For examples of these definitional gestures, see Brereton, *Smart Cinema, DVD Add-Ons and New Audience Pleasures*, 7; Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism, and the new American 'Smart' Film," 351.
[144] Perkins, *American Smart Cinema*, 4.
[145] Brereton, *Smart Cinema, DVD Add-Ons and New Audience Pleasures*, 1.
[146] Perkins, *American Smart Cinema*, 27.
[147] Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism, and the new American 'Smart' Film," 352, 355, 357-358. For similar discrete definitions and textual taxonomies, see Brereton, *Smart Cinema, DVD Add-Ons and New Audience Pleasures*, 33, 39; Perkins, *American Smart Cinema*, 8, 16-17, 157.
[148] Perkins, *American Smart Cinema*, 157. For similar oppositional definitions, see Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism, and the new American 'Smart' Film," 350-351.
[149] Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism, and the new American 'Smart' Film," 351. For similar hybrid definitions, see Perkins, *American Smart Cinema*, 1-5, 29; Brereton, *Smart Cinema, DVD Add-Ons and New Audience Pleasures*, 20.
[150] A heightened focus on irony or nihilism is also present in readings of other analogous categories, and independent film itself; for examples, see Hanson, *The Cinema of Generation X*, 1-2; Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*, 55-56, 130, 151, 508; Pribram, *Cinema & Culture*, 45; Hawkins, "Dark, Disturbing, Intelligent, Provocative, and Quirky," 95.

and expressing "a predilection for irony, black humour, fatalism, relativism and, yes, even nihilism."[151] Thus, arguing that the ironic tone of smart is applied "as a means of critiquing 'bourgeois' taste and culture," it is perceived not as a symptom of socio-cultural disengagement, but rather a shift in the political strategies of American film:

> American smart cinema has displaced the more activist emphasis on the 'social politics' of power, institutions, representation and subjectivity so central to 1960s and 1970s art cinema (especially in its 'political' wing), and replaced it by concentrating, often with ironic disdain, on the 'personal politics' of power, communication, emotional dysfunction and identity in white middle-class culture.[152]

Thus, describing smart irony as a "semiotic chasm,"[153] Sconce argues that case-study texts offer subversive challenges to overarching ethical and political frameworks: "from within the prism of irony…many of these films suggest the futility of pure politics or absolute morality."[154] In introducing her own study, Perkins comments upon Sconce's observations at length, discussing how the perceived ironic tone of smart can be used to explore the cycle's reflexive critiques of contemporary American society and prevailing cinematic conventions.[155] Consequently, Perkins also frames smart as an attack on essentialist categories and absolute knowledge; citing smart's reflexive approach to genre as a key example, she notes that it "has obvious resonance with the techniques of pastiche and quotation that are central to a postmodern aesthetic that distrusts ultimate positions of truth or reason."[156] In turn, smart's construction as an ironic cultural form again places the category within broader discourses of the postmodern, a point reinforced by Brereton's assertion that it constitutes "a dominant framing device for smart cinema."[157] Thus, smart is consistently defined as a critique of transcendental meaning, allying the category with broader currents within contemporary post-structuralist theory. Finally, references to smart as a potential critique of metaphysical presence are also discernible in pejorative evaluations of the category and associated texts; criticised by conservative commentators as part of a pervasive "new nihilism," smart films have been located as "a particularly active battleground within a larger moral and artistic war."[158] For its disparagers, smart films are devoid of "rational moral judgement and politics," embodying a perceived "nihilistic"

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[151] Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism, and the new American 'Smart' Film," 350.
[152] Ibid., 352.
[153] Ibid., 358.
[154] Ibid., 368.
[155] Perkins, *American Smart Cinema*, 12-16.
[156] Ibid., 14.
[157] Brereton, *Smart Cinema, DVD Add-Ons and New Audience Pleasures*, 21.
[158] Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism, and the new American 'Smart' Film," 349, 353-354.

amorality that motivated comparisons with the cinemas of Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany.[159]

Whether framing the category as politically progressive or fascistic, critical and scholarly engagements with smart texts have continually focused upon a pervasive ironic tone; this "ineffable"[160] quality underlies contrasting readings that posit both a radical political potential and a reckless apathy. However, in this thesis, I consider smart's supposed ironic qualities as neither a full-fledged conceptual critique nor a retreat into nihilist detachment; rather, they can also be considered as a nascent deconstructive potential.[161] In meeting charges of nihilism and "blank disengagement" frequently levelled at smart, Sconce contends that its ironic disposition does not constitute a withdrawal from political or moral judgement;[162] rather, he reads the sensibility as an emergent form of political engagement "conducted on a new terrain," rooted in the bifurcated socio-political climate of late 20th century American culture wars: "frequently dismissed as apolitical or even amoral, the new smart cinema might be better seen as a transition rather than an abnegation of political cinema."[163] Indeed, Sconce proceeds to argue that "many of these films are extremely politicized and even rather moralistic."[164] Importantly, such a judgement is related to Sconce's own observations regarding the potential political role of irony itself, as he refers to it as a "strategic gesture" or a "semiotic intervention within politics."[165] Thus, the subversive potential of smart is clear, as it is positioned directly within a "semiotic war of position" that uncovers and exploits cultural and cinematic contradictions.[166] Interrogating prominent ontological frameworks, smart texts directly engage with specific textual and contextual structures; however, they are in turn subverted through the ironic character of their rendering, a gesture that amounts to a critical self-interrogation of their engrained logocentric properties. From such a perspective, smart does not inaugurate a new set of political or ontological truth claims; rather, it operates as a textual tool that evokes but then undermines conventional models of cinematic and cultural knowledge.

Whilst smart is not elucidated within an explicitly deconstructive methodology, its ironic tone can be fruitfully reconceptualised within an overtly Derridean framework. Indeed, smart irony bears strong foundational resemblances with the more sustained

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[159] Ibid., 350.
[160] Perkins, *American Smart Cinema*, 14.
[161] Hutcheon notes the deconstructive potential of certain applications of irony; see Linda Hutcheon, "The Power of Postmodern Irony," in *Genre, Trope, Gender: Critical Essays by Northrop Frye, Linda Hutcheon and Shirley Neuman*, ed. Barry Rutland (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1992), l35.
[162] Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism, and the new American 'Smart' Film," 352.
[163] Ibid., 367.
[164] Ibid., 352.
[165] Ibid., 352, 369. Also see Perkins, *American Smart Cinema*, 4.
[166] Ibid., 367.

deconstructive method that will be applied in this project; the latter also relies upon the general principle of overturning and displacing metaphysical structures *from within*, through the uncovering and explication of their internal contradictions and textual slippages. In this manner, the "double-voicing"[167] of irony provides a useful starting-off point for an explicitly deconstructive reading of American independent film and cultural politics. Indeed, this latent affinity between smart principles and Derridean theory is demonstrated in the language Sconce uses to describe the "ironic position-taking" undertaken by smart moviegoers; suggesting that viewers must adopt a spectatorial position that involves "reading 'against the grain,'" he mobilises a term frequently associated with deconstructive textual analysis.[168] Furthermore, the aforementioned critical aims of smart (to demonstrate the "futility of pure politics or absolute morality") closely resemble the objectives of the deconstructive critic, in his or her broader challenge to Western metaphysics and its idealised *telos* of absolute presence. In turn, the purportedly nihilistic rejection of all meaning in smart films can also be re-contextualised as an unravelling and deconstruction of *specific* metaphysical structures.

Additionally, smart discourses briefly touch upon a subversive re-appraisal of American national identity, a vital pre-cursor to this project's thematic aims. Brereton provides a limited commentary upon smart's relationship with the national, arguing that its post-9/11 context locates it within a broader "re-polarization of cultures," a position that allows it to critique "mythic expressions of national solidarity" and "triumphal national narrative(s)."[169] However, such observations are limited specifically to "war films" and non-linear narrative structures, and no deeper analysis of specific shared national identity structures is forthcoming.[170] Furthermore, whilst Sconce theorises smart as an intervention into contemporary American socio-cultural discourses, such readings crystallize around a specific "interest in the politics of taste, consumerism and identity."[171] Finally, Perkins analyses smart's socio-cultural representations within a similar thematic range, arguing that case-study texts focus "on the psychological state of middle-class America," a rumination that is usually located within domestic settings.[172] Thus, once again, smart is positioned as a critique of specific, essentialist cultural structures, an assault on prominent socio-cultural narratives that are developed and expanded upon in this project.

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[167] Perkins, *American Smart Cinema*, 28.
[168] Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism, and the new American 'Smart' Film," 357; See Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 88.
[169] Brereton, *Smart Cinema, DVD Add-Ons and New Audience Pleasures*, 17-18, 51.
[170] Ibid.
[171] Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism, and the new American 'Smart' Film," 358.
[172] Perkins, *American Smart Cinema*, 10-12. This focus on the nuclear family is replicated in Brereton, *Smart Cinema, DVD Add-Ons and New Audience Pleasures*, 85.

Finally, there are brief moments in smart scholarship that mobilise more overtly deconstructive gestures, further expressing its potential as a foundation for a sustained Derridean intervention into independent film discourses. For example, in Brereton's discussion of smart as a postmodern phenomenon, he argues that such texts constitute a direct disruption of dualistic binary oppositions: "the postmodernist paradigm is said to promote a 'both-and' philosophy, which effectively copes with apparently contradictory discourses, often replacing the less inclusive (modernist) 'either-or' paradigm."[173] Importantly, Brereton's observation closely resembles Derrida's aforementioned discussion of the undecidable, the destabilising force that resides within metaphysics and its regulated model of binary difference. Clearly, Brereton stops short of inaugurating a deconstructive method; the co-presence of contradictory discourses is presented as an ontological endpoint, halting the spatio-temporal *différance* that deconstruction aims to liberate. Furthermore, when considering the critical potential of smart, Brereton focuses most closely upon the disruption of textual values, evidenced in his detailed analysis of smart's reflexive subversion of Hollywood narrative.[174]

Brereton's focusing of an anti-metaphysical potential onto artistic forms is even clearer in Perkins' reading of smart as a "critical sensibility" that interrogates connected "historical and international intertexts."[175] In doing so, Perkins again establishes a series of "conflicted stance(s)" in smart's interventions into cinematic culture, history and tradition. Prominent filmic structures (such as authorship and narrative) are initially embraced, only to be critiqued and transformed through their subsequent smart iteration, frequently cast as a negotiation of shifting, co-present textual registers of irony and sincerity.[176] Furthermore, an increasingly radical deconstructive potential is discernable in Perkins' general theorisation of smart as a category. As mentioned briefly before, Perkins directly cites Derrida when discussing smart's structural self-reflexivity, approaching the classification as an indicative example of a deconstructionist critique of genre. In her reading, it is the two-fold "ineffability" of smart as an ironic sensibility that allies it with Derrida's observations; for Perkins, by classifying smart texts through an *intangible* ironic tone, the category self-consciously performs the act of genrification, in that texts are grouped by criteria that

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[173] Brereton, *Smart Cinema, DVD Add-Ons and New Audience Pleasures*, 22.

[174] Ibid., 22-28.

[175] Perkins, *American Smart Cinema*, 4. In comparison, her ruminations on the American culture and the family are limited to the final two chapters.

[176] Ibid., 4, 16-17, 28. A textual co-presence of irony and sincerity underlies other related categories, such as quirky, post-pop, (and) new punk. Although this is occasionally cast as a deconstructive undecidability (see Rombes, "Irony and Sincerity," 72-75), it is more often treated as a rejection of irony's reflexive critical capacities; see MacDowell, "Notes on Quirky"; James MacDowell, "Quirky," in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, eds. Geoff King, Claire Molloy and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 54-55, 60; Mayshark, *Post-Pop Cinema*, 5-6.

"cannot be identified with itself."[177] Thus, smart's purportedly self-reflexive attitude to cinematic discourses is attributed to a deeper textual engagement with its own unstable (and even paradoxical) generic status.[178]

However, whilst a number of affinities have been charted between smart and overtly Derridean strategies, it must be reiterated that smart merely offers a burgeoning deconstructive potential. Although smart motions towards a fruitful form of Derridean textual interrogation, this is compromised by aforementioned metaphysical implication, itself a product of smart's problematic discursive relationship with independent film. Furthermore, whilst theorists like Brereton and Perkins have noted that smart can explicitly challenge pervasive logocentric oppositions and totalised presences, these observations are not used to inform a sustained deconstructive method. Textual contradictions are uncovered but not exploited, stopping short of a radical dismantling of the metaphysical structures that smart films strategically engage. As a result, this thesis builds upon several of the useful properties associated with smart, extending these threads into an explicitly deconstructive methodology. In doing so, deconstructive reading strategies are applied here to a variety of themes that have been largely unexplored by smart scholars. As noted previously, the most sophisticated forms of smart criticism have been directed at cinematic categories themselves, evidenced in Perkins' characterisation of smart as a Derridean reading of genre. Whilst this chapter undertakes a similar post-structuralist reconceptualization of a specific cinematic category (independent film), this forms a theoretical precursor to this thesis' central research objective; to explore how recent cinematic texts can be approached as deconstructive critiques of American national identity. As a result, this project's broader interrogation of American cultural narratives encompasses a wider variety of cultural meaning-structures than previously addressed in smart scholarship. Indeed, whilst one of this thesis' cultural narrative foci (the nuclear family) remains a central concern of smart discourses, it is discussed in relation to personal rather than national identity;[179] furthermore, themes of individualism, the small-town, and the wilderness have garnered little or no explicit attention in existing smart literature.

Finally, in addressing a number of the limitations discerned within smart, this thesis eschews any attempt to construct new cinematic categories to frame its deconstructive textual engagements; as discussed earlier, smart approaches sidestep a broader discursive context surrounding many of its case-study films, whilst simultaneously reifying that discourse's logocentric structural properties. Conversely, this study challenges independent film's metaphysical contradictions and reductions head-on. In contrast to smart, this thesis

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[177] Perkins, *American Smart Cinema*, 14.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Ibid., 10-12.

locates a deconstructive impulse directly within the pre-existing categorisation of independent film; indeed, as will be explored in the following section, the very act of deconstructing independent film provides the term with this radical interpretative potential. Thus, once shorn of any strict, definitional role, independent cinema provides a useful means of conceptualising a deconstructive method of reading cinematic texts; embodying a heightened structural self-consciousness, the term independent lays bare its own dualistic foundations as a precondition of its semiotic existence. It is to this act of conceptual relocation that we now turn.

Reconceptualising Independent Cinema: From Definitional Rule to Deconstructive Tool

As outlined in the detailed literature review above, existing independent film scholarship has focused primarily upon definitional acts, and the complexities that accompany this process of cinematic classification. However, isolated readings have tentatively challenged the solidity of this discourse, either directly or through the location of a latent deconstructive potential within case-study texts. As explored in the previous section, scholarship surrounding smart cinema provides the most sustained example of this, allowing canonical independent texts to be approached as ironic, self-reflexive critiques of pervasive cultural and cinematic structures. At this point, it must also be noted that similar qualities are fleetingly discernable in scholarly texts that deal more overtly with independent film. However, as will be elucidated presently, these largely take the form of elusive deconstructive moments; whilst pointing towards potentially radical analyses, they are rarely (if ever) followed through by a radical dismantling of the categories' metaphysical structural frames. Thus, whether observing an ironic or self-reflexive engagement with Hollywood form, genre, or broader cultural meanings, existing readings avoid framing these interventions as *deconstructive*.[180] They operate as fissures and slippages in conventional independent film discourses, textual ruptures that this thesis aims to extend into a sustained deconstructive method.

Providing the most developed dissemination of deconstructive theory into independent film discourse, Pribram discerns a series of potentially post-structuralist impulses within the textual properties of numerous avant-gardes; in turn, these categories are treated as stimuli for future independent practitioners. Hypothetical deconstructive elements

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[180] For scholarship that positions independent film aesthetics as a reflexive critique of Hollywood style, narrative and genre, see Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*, 57; King, *American Independent Cinema*, 189-195, 238-239; Schreiber, "Their Own Personal Velocity," 96, 103, 106; Andrew, *Stranger than Paradise*, 361.

are also located in Pribram's later discussions of independent textuality, as traces of these specific discursive influences.[181] David E. James' study of "alternative cinemas" in 1960s America analyses similar avant-garde texts and practices, positioning them as repositories for a potentially deconstructive film aesthetics. In doing so, he articulates a reading of cinematic representation that bears clear Derridean influences:

> The interruption between signifier and signified that is the condition of signification separates signs, not only externally from their referents, but also internally from themselves. Constituted in difference, all images are thus inhabited by an otherness that erodes the affirmation of their apparent presence.[182]

Nevertheless, any tangible post-structuralist influence on contemporary independent film is ultimately downplayed. For example, whilst potentially deconstructive elements are occasionally discernable within Pribram's textual analyses, they are qualified by a greater emphasis on how independent texts perpetuate pervasive metaphysical structures. Thus, Pribram approaches independent film as a diluted inheritor of more radical cinematic forms: "many would argue that independent cinema is a watered-down version – some would say, compromised version – of the avant-gardes."[183] The possibility of a radically post-structuralist approach within independent film discourses is thus downplayed, demonstrated in Pribram's greater focus on the construction of alternative cultural representations over the deconstruction of existing semiotic structures. Thus, whilst certain theoretical works imply the operation of potentially deconstructive influences on independent cinema, they are (fittingly) located on the margins of this discursive area, in the tangential category of the avant-garde. In contrast, this study builds upon these theoretical observations, reintegrating a reflexive textual potential into American independent film's very definitional core.

As demonstrated throughout this chapter, any attempt to furnish independent cinema with specific ontological borders mobilises a number of essentialist metaphysical assumptions; as Derrida notes in his discussion of genre, any form of classification institutes a series of structural edicts that posit an identifiable set of criteria with which to arbitrate a text's inclusion or exclusion.[184] Whilst this section has outlined moments of deconstructive

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[181] In discussing avant-garde influences on independent film, Pribram draws heavily upon Wollen and Harvey's discussions of "political" and "aesthetic" avant-gardes; Pribram, *Cinema & Culture*, 45-47; see also Peter Wollen, *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 93-99.

[182] James, "Alternative Cinemas," 64.

[183] Pribram, *Cinema & Culture*, 52. For a similar reading of post-structuralist influences within independent film discourses, see Hawkins, "Dark, Disturbing, Intelligent, Provocative, and Quirky," 94.

[184] Derrida, "The Law of Genre," 56.

potential within independent film scholarship, these are typically neutralised by their location within what is primarily a *definitional discourse*. Thus, it must be reiterated that this thesis does not intend to *redefine* independent film, as any such act presupposes a (hypothetically) identifiable essence or presence that animates the category in question. Nevertheless, neither does this thesis call for an outright rejection of independent film as a useful term, as argued for in some recent scholarship. Instead, aforementioned paradoxes and ruptures within existing discourses will be strategically exploited to *re-mark* independent film, transforming it from a definitional rule to a deconstructive tool; this aim has already been inaugurated by this chapter's critical discussion of existing definitional models. Thus, the preceding discussion and forthcoming textual analyses amount to a reversal and displacement of independent film's (oppositionally-constituted) presence. A fundamental rejection of relational definitions precipitates a shift in focus *away* from independent cinema's perceived deviation from Hollywood norms; in turn, analytical attention is turned *towards* the singular textual configurations of case-study films *on their own terms*. In doing so, the hierarchical, oppositional difference *between* independent film and Hollywood is displaced, to be ultimately relocated *within* the former as an originary spatio-temporal *différance*.

In effacing the rigid, antonymic framework within which the term is commonly defined, independent film's claim to metaphysical definitional authority is fatally compromised; in turn, this allows it to be re-appraised as a reflexive interpretative device, a destabilising influence within contemporary cinematic discourses. Indeed, in the act of deconstruction, logocentric concepts are retained but then re-inscribed, placing them "under erasure" (*sous rature*). Represented typographically by an act of "crossing out," this process amounts to a recognition of a term's necessity to metaphysical discourse, whilst also denying its self-presence.[185] Thus, rather than embodying a logocentric presence suspended within the regulated play of the binary opposition, the deconstructed term can be rethought as a critique of this pervasive thought-system; it represents an undecidable discursive limit-point, a textual kernel that undermines the metaphysical structures within which it operates. As Derrida explains, deconstruction

> is not a question of junking these concepts, nor do we have the means to do so.
> Doubtless it is more necessary, from within semiology, to transform concepts, to
> displace them, to turn them against their presuppositions, to reinscribe them in other

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[185] See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Preface to *Of Grammatology*, by Jacques Derrida, Corr. ed., trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), xiv.

chains, and little by little to modify the terrain of our work and thereby produce new configurations.[186]

Such a process guides the deconstruction and re-location of independent cinema undertaken by this chapter. The term is deconstructed and re-inscribed, allowing it to be turned against the logocentric cultural discourses it engages. Thus, this thesis can be read as a sustained attempt to place independent cinema "under erasure" (~~independent cinema~~), a move abetted by the category's heightened structural reflexivity.

Whilst such a process may initially seem amorphous and abstract, my thesis solidifies this conceptual repositioning by using it as the theoretical basis for deconstructive textual engagements with a specific set of cultural themes and narratives; these have all been positioned (in existing popular and scholarly discourses) as constituents of American national identity. Furthermore, this method can only be built upon the ruins of independent film as a definitional category. As demonstrated at length, the metaphysical foundations of the term are evidenced by its constitution as the "other" of an equally discrete Hollywood mainstream. As a result, the purported presence of independent film is a direct product of this regulated binary structure; it can only be treated as a "discrete cultural site" by expunging its own *internal* differences and divisions, which are homogenised and recast *externally* as an absent antonym. However, unlike similar categories (art or cult cinema, for example), independent film self-consciously references its own underlying metaphysical logic. Such an observation has been touched upon by a handful of critics, but finds its clearest elucidation in the work of King; he perceptively notes that the category's dualistic foundations are alluded to in its lexical signifier: "'Independent cinema' is itself a term that asserts a distinction from the Hollywood mainstream."[187] So, the concept of independence embodies a potentially heightened structural reflexivity, as it makes no attempt to cover the difference that establishes (but also undermines) its self-coherence and solidity; the term explicitly acknowledges that it is simultaneously defined in opposition to another term (that from which it is independent, usually Hollywood film). Accordingly, this indirectly foregrounds the metaphysical sign's internal divisions, as traces of the absent "other" are rendered constituents of independent film's own (purportedly) pure definition. Thus, encapsulating a critical method that relies upon the uncovering and dismantling of conceptual oppositions, independent film signifies the first steps required in any sustained act of deconstructive reading; it lays bare the dichotomous framework with which it was initially defined.

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[186] Derrida, *Positions*, 24.
[187] King, *American Independent Cinema*, 195.

Furthermore, this project's aim to subvert existing definitions *from within* necessitates the initial mobilisation of certain metaphysical structures and assumptions; as noted previously, a superficially coherent object of study must be signified before its integrity can be questioned through the exploration of its discursive slippages and fissures. This project's corpus (as laid out briefly in the introduction) has been intentionally drawn from dominant independent definitions and periodizations. Thus, whilst the texts chosen for analysis have been selected primarily to meet this project's (subjective) thematic and textual criteria (as films that abet a potentially deconstructive engagement with specific cultural narratives), they have also been selected due to their critical and scholarly location within independent cinema; all six case-studies have been consistently (and primarily) identified as independent texts by a variety of commentators. Furthermore, the aforementioned case-study texts have all been drawn from within a specific timeframe, the temporal borders of which are again motivated by a desire to destabilise existing independent film definitions. Thus, each text discussed falls within a socio-historical context that runs from 1989 until the present day, the earliest (*Sure Fire*) being released in 1990 and the latest (*Wendy and Lucy*) being released in 2008. Of course, these historical limit-points are (in many ways) arbitrary, and are symptomatic of the desire for definitional plenitude discernable in existing independent film scholarship. However, the strategic use of this framework is vital, as it is the most common periodization discernible within recent studies of contemporary independent practice. Whilst it would be impossible to list every account that utilises this model, it is coherently summarised by Newman as "the Sundance-Miramax era," stretching from

> the 1989 Sundance Film Festival, where *sex, lies and videotape* launched itself improbably to commercial and cultural success, and Disney's shuttering of Miramax, which had been so influential over more than two decades in defining and promoting independent cinema, in 2010.[188]

Thus, whilst distancing himself from attempts at positing fixed indie origins, 1989 is used as a foundational cut-off point for his study. Newman is not alone in treating the premiere of *sex, lies and videotape* as a vital moment in independent film history; commentators including Hillier, Schatz, and Staiger approach this specific event as either a legible origin of or a transformative pre-cursor for a prominent independent film movement.[189] Furthermore, even those studies that chose an earlier start-date stress the importance of 1989 in shaping

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[188] Newman, *Indie*, 1.
[189] See Hillier, "Introduction," xv; Schatz, "Conglomerate Hollywood and American Independent Film," 127, 129; Staiger, "Independent of What?" 20.

the character of independent film discourses; for example, Tzioumakis' recent attempt at a more complex sub-periodization of this discursive area treats 1989 as the starting point for "the indie years."[190] Thus, in line with this project's research objective to forward a deconstructive critique of independent film, this project will (initially) work within dominant periodizations.

Finally, in positing a conceptual relocation of independent cinema, a few words must be spent clarifying this complex methodological and theoretical gesture and its manifestation in this project's close-textual readings. As suggested in the introduction, this thesis' analyses do not (principally) constitute a deconstruction of case-study films (although they are guided by a constant process of methodological self-interrogation). Rather, they are read as deconstructive critiques of specific socio-cultural structures explored within those films; their representations of American culture are riddled with conceptual paradoxes that undermine a totalised metaphysics of national identity. It would be tempting to consider this deconstructive potential as a textual attribute, as this argument relies upon the construction of case-study films as carriers of a latent deconstructive potential. However, it must be emphasised that this attitude is not one that is held by the author of this thesis; to consider these texts as *inherently* deconstructive furnishes them with a single, unified, and privileged meaning, a significant lapse into the metaphysical logic this form of analysis ostensibly critiques.

Rather, this thesis utilises post-structuralist reading strategies as a means of pulling apart existing structures of meaning, metaphysical cultural narratives that are (incompletely) evoked within cinematic case-study texts. Thus, whilst it is suggested here that independent texts are particularly fruitful for this form of reading (a result of the category's common discursive positioning), this conceptual relocation merely abets specific interpretative methodologies. In doing so, this project builds upon certain observations made in the recent constitution of (new) punk cinema; in elucidating this area, Rombes suggests that cinematic categories and codes can be grasped as much as "way(s) of seeing" as they are (objective) groups of textual criteria, as they are (in part) constituted by "the expectations that we, as viewers, bring to the material."[191] Rombes' arguments mirror overtly Derridean approaches to the act of readership, insofar that he troubles discrete divisions between text and context, film and viewer. Paul Bowman neatly summarises this perspective, demonstrating how post-structuralist theory challenges reductive conceptualisations of reading as the subjective uncovering and interpretation of inherent textual meanings: "the connections we make and things we 'discover in' a text are actually being produced by the act of reading itself: as if

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[190] Tzioumakis, "'Independent', 'Indie' and 'Indiewood,'" 33.
[191] Rombes, "Sincerity and Irony," 84.

reading is inevitably a kind of rewriting."[192] Finally, such observations are given an explicitly Derridean bent in the work of Bernadette Guthrie and Dana Polan. In his discussion of Derrida and Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, Polan notes a shared desire to "challenge any notion of textuality as fully constituted before the intervention of the critic and therefore of textuality as forcing the critic into a passive role as transcriber."[193] In similar terms, Guthrie clarifies that

> in Derrida's theory of readership, the reader holds a complex and dangerous role within the texts he or she encounters…the text calls to the reader, it invites the reader inside itself…. The reader is always inside the text and implicated within the text.[194]

This thesis does not approach the deconstructive potential of its case-study analyses as simply an *internal* textual property or an *external* interpretative framework. Rather, it is treated as a product of an active dialogue between text and critic; the act of reading necessarily re-writes the text being analysed, as it pro-offers an iterative re-marking of the critical discourses that contribute to the text's constitution.

Thus, this form of analysis will be considered as one way of engaging with (and thus re-writing) these texts; no attempts are made to treat these interpretations as canonical or static in a fruitless search for a single, transcendental signified. However, such readings are undertaken in a manner that opens up alternative textual engagements, as they are constructed as a direct challenge to metaphysics' totalising gestures. Thus, in providing interpretations that stress a heterogeneity of potential cultural significations, this project's case-study analyses reflexively acknowledge the possibility of limitless other textual perspectives and engagements. Indeed, in actively dismantling a number of restrictive American identity narratives, these readings aim to enable a more fluid freeplay of cultural *différance*; this unbounded semiotic economy abets the construction of diverse, unfixed, and non-proscriptive textual engagements.

Yet, this methodological justification does not completely ameliorate the problematic project of utilising a deconstructive methodology to construct a coherent subjective reading of cinematic texts, even if one consistently highlights the arbitrary structural choices and assumptions at play. This methodological caveat equally applies to the cultural narratives that these films ostensibly critique. In treating this project's case-study

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[192] Paul Bowman, *Deconstructing Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 39.
[193] Dana Polan, "'Desire Shifts the Differance': Figural Poetics and Figural Politics in the Film Theory of Marie-Claire Ropars," *Camera Obscura* 12 (1984): 73.
[194] Bernadette Guthrie, "Invoking Derrida: Authorship, Readership, and the Specter of Presence in Film and Print," *New Literary History* 42, no. 3 (2011): 529.

themes as distinct textual objects that can be described, divided, and subsequently deconstructed, one is complicit in granting them an *a priori* metaphysical wholeness, a model of structural closure that I openly set out to problematize. Nevertheless, my mobilisation of coherent textual readings and distinct cultural narratives amounts to a structural necessity predicated by a number of contributing factors: the entrenched metaphysical character of all Western discourse, the need to construct a readable scholarly argument, and the specific principles that constitute deconstruction as a critical gesture. Firstly, Derrida continually noted the futility of attempts to escape metaphysical complicity, even for the critic who frames their project as an explicit attack on such discursive assumptions. To provide a clear example from myriad instances across his work,[195] Derrida argues in *Of Grammatology* that it is impossible to simply dispense with metaphysical structures; as he states, "it is not a question of 'rejecting' these notions; they are necessary and, at least at present, nothing is conceivable for us without them."[196] Thus, logocentric assumptions are so deeply entrenched in Western thought, their (qualified) retention is required if one is to present a legible argument. Yet, Derrida proceeds to argue that the nature of this complicity, and the extent to which it undermines a critic's work, is dependent on the degree to which one acknowledges and reflects upon this discursive paradox:

> There are several ways of being caught in this circle. They are all more or less naïve, more or less empirical, more or less systematic, more or less close to the formulation – that is, to the formalization – of this circle.[197]

Above, Derrida demonstrates the inevitable coexistence of the critique and the critiqued, and the responsibility of the critic to constantly ruminate upon this ontological self-contradiction. In turn, the French theorist applies this principle to his own work, where he stresses the usefulness of certain binary structures *if* their mobilisation is accompanied by a thorough discussion of their reductive assumptions: "these oppositions remain very useful and even productive, but even as one uses them and puts them to work, one has to be aware of their limitations. Their pertinence is restricted."[198] Thus, the critic must not exempt his or her own work from deconstructive interrogation; they must produce a mode of scholarship that "constantly deconstructs its own conceptual oppositions…. For me, a reading is bearable

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[195] For other examples, see Derrida, *Positions*, 12; Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 14.
[196] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 13.
[197] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), 355-356.
[198] Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*, trans. Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 130.

only when it does that work."[199] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak neatly summarises this dynamic, treating Derrida as an exemplary case of a critic who highlights and interrogates his moments of metaphysical implication; noting his tendency to deconstruct the work of those philosophers to which his deconstructive project would appear most indebted, Spivak contends that:

> Perhaps the entire argument hangs on who *knew* how much of what he was doing. The will to knowledge is not easy to discard. When Derrida claims for himself that he is within yet without the clôture of metaphysics, is the difference not precisely that he *knows* it at least?[200]

Therefore, in a manner pioneered by Derrida himself, this project does not hide its moments of metaphysical complicity, or its reliance on logocentric structures as a condition of its possibility. Rather, I foreground and interrogate the structural assumptions and reductions that allow me to construct and communicate my textual readings and arguments, with this brief discussion being an indicative example of such a reflective process.

Deconstructing Identity: From the Personal to the National

Having outlined this project's re-inscription of independent film, this chapter concludes by demonstrating its practical potential as the foundation for a deconstructive form of textual analysis within film studies. Specifically, this is achieved by shifting focus to a series of interrelated cultural themes and narratives that have been left largely untouched by previous critical work on independent cinema, all of which contribute to discourses of American national identity. As alluded to earlier, "identity politics"[201] categories have been used as a dominant framing device for studies of independent film and socio-cultural representation. However, such readings largely avoid any direct interrogation of American *national* identity, arguing that independent cinema should be primarily defined by "the space it offers – potentially, at least – for the expression of alternative social, political and/or ideological perspectives."[202] Importantly, this potentially nebulous conception of "alternative visions" has frequently been divided into discrete sub-cultural identities, commonly linked to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and clearly-defined political movements. In the

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[199] Jacques Derrida, "The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*, eds. Peter Brunette and David Wills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 31.
[200] Spivak, Preface to *Of Grammatology*, xxxviii.
[201] Pribram, *Cinema & Culture*, xxi.
[202] King, *American Independent Cinema,* 199.

remainder of this chapter, I examine how these categories have been mobilised in existing independent film scholarship. Specifically, it is argued that while these accounts usefully elucidate certain models of subjective experience, their position as a prevailing critical orthodoxy restricts the range of cultural meanings that can be read from independent texts. Furthermore, whilst such readings implicitly critique constructions of an homogeneous national character, they do so by inaugurating yet another rigidly oppositional, metaphysical framework; a shared, monolithic American identity is contrasted with a series of (equally) self-coherent cultural "others," a theoretical move that replicates the pervasive oppositions and ontological certainties such categories were initially constructed to challenge.[203] Finally, this critique is used as a foundation to outline this project's shift to a focus on American national identity; simultaneously, this gesture inaugurates a deconstructive method that problematizes the reductive truth claims that sustain both national and sub-national subjectivities.

Before looking more closely at the mobilisation of specific identity categories in existing scholarship, it is prudent to consider how independent cinema has been more closely aligned (both in terms of industrial practices and textual themes) with individualist discourses of the personal than with collective models of the social or national. King cogently summarises this view, asserting that "independent cinema remains primarily an individual-centred cinema"; indeed, he argues that this property "limits its capacity to present radical alternatives to dominant American ideologies," noting their mutual veneration of "the freedom of the individual."[204] In Newman's study of indie as a distinct film culture, a focus on the personal is presented as a key point of differentiation from mainstream media practices: "'Indie' connotes small-scale, personal, artistic, and creative; 'mainstream' implies a large-scale commercial media industry that values money more than art."[205] Finally, links between this textual category and the personal are reified by the assumption that independent texts reflect a singular perspective, vision, or worldview; this discursive link renders independent film as "the cinema of the 'Other' America,"[206] a "cultural site" replete with "competing voices."[207]

Finally, contentions of an inherent focus on personal identity within independent cinema are also reflected in a number of commonly-recognised textual attributes. For example, independent narratives have been frequently approached as "character-driven," a

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[203] For approaches that treat independent film's pluralistic representations as a challenge to dominant social images, see Newman, *Indie*, 222; Mayshark, *Post-Pop Cinema*, 11-12; Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*, 56; Brereton, *Smart Cinema, DVD Add-Ons and New Audience Pleasures*, 51, 79-80.
[204] King, *American Independent Cinema*, 250.
[205] Newman, "Indie Culture," 16.
[206] Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*, 52.
[207] Pribram, *Cinema & Culture*, xxii.

property utilised as a marker of distinction from Hollywood's purported "plot-driven" focus; this been attributed to both the influence of art cinema norms and budgetary restrictions on independent productions.[208] Indeed, Newman locates a focus on character subjectivity at the core of the "rhetorical" strategies that constitute indie film culture. To begin, he superficially rejects bifurcated arguments that construct Hollywood and independent film as textual models with diametrically-opposed narrative foci: "a distinction between plot-driven blockbusters and character-driven indies is a somewhat misleading and unsophisticated simplification."[209] However, he then goes on to argue that this "rhetoric of difference" still plays an important function in indie discourse, and in particular informs a pervasive "indie realism," which he establishes as both a discursive construct and an identifiable style of storytelling that deviates from "canonical, mainstream narrative practice."[210] In doing so, he concludes that independent texts "foreground and emphasize character," embodying a storytelling style that "function(s)" to "orient attention…to topics or themes raised in indie films, and in particular to issues of social experience and identity."[211]

Newman's focus on characterisation provides a useful bridge to the beginning of this discussion, where readings of independent film as a personal cinema were postulated as the foundation for more widespread critical evocations of identity politics categories in making sense of indie socio-cultural representations. Indeed, Newman argues that indie realist characters "stand as emblems for their social identities"; in clarifying the terms of this statement, he asserts that "social identities are those identities shared among significant and well-recognized groups of persons, such as sexual and gender identities; racial, ethnic, national, and regional identities; and identities of age or generation."[212] Whilst national identity is listed as one of the potential classes to be explored, it is the other minority categories that form the primary focus of academic studies of independent film; as Newman notes, "the value of indie cinema is often located in the ethnic/racial and gender/sexual identities of filmmakers and characters."[213] Newman's comments exemplify a pervasive

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[208] Ibid., 55. Sickels, *American Film in the Digital Age*, 40. Other scholars have argued that independent films construct their characters in more "realistic" or "complex" terms; see King, *American Independent Cinema*, 74, 123; Murphy, *You and Me and Memento and Fargo*, 18-19.

[209] Newman, *Indie*, 90.

[210] Ibid.

[211] Ibid., 90-91; Sconce and Perkins discern a similar focus on personal (over national) identity in their theorisations of smart; Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism, and the new American 'Smart' Film," 352, 354-355, 364-368; Perkins, *American Smart Cinema*, 8-9.

[212] Newman, *Indie*, 91-92. Numerous scholars construct independent film as a regionalist cinema, providing another *oppositional* challenge to national culture; see Molloy, "Introduction," 181; Donald Lyons, *Independent Visions: A Critical Introduction to Recent Independent American Film* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), xii; Annette Insdorf, "Ordinary People, European Style: or How to Spot an Independent Feature," in *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, eds. Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (London: Routledge, 2004), 29-30; Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*, 12-13, 152; King, *American Independent Cinema*, 181.

[213] Newman, *Indie*, 92.

trend in studies of independent film and cultural representation. Arguing that "Indie cinema is committed to cultural diversity," Levy suggests that many independent filmmakers are themselves "outsiders," figures "whose voices have been unheard or ignored in dominant culture"; importantly, these are principally delineated as "members of ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, and women."[214] Embedding American cinema within broader socio-cultural debates surrounding multiculturalism, Brian Neve notes that a text's intervention into identity politics debates has often been used to evaluate its worth and status within independent film:

> A template was formed early on that saw the independents as playing a political as well as an aesthetic role, broadening the range of representations of contemporary America, and in particular enfranchising those groups and minorities whose voices were largely unheard in mainstream film.[215]

In turn, Neve tacitly downplays the potential for independent texts to engage with national identity: they express an emphasis on a "decentered multiplicity of localised struggles," avoiding any direct interrogation of "large ideologies."[216] Finally, definitional texts have also used identity politics categories to structure discussions of independent film's political functions. King's exploration of "alternative visions" is abetted (and ordered) by these normalised cultural classifications: "the American indie sector has also provided an arena hospitable to a number of constituencies generally subjected to neglect or stereotypical representation in the mainstream, the most prominent cases in recent decades being black- and gay-oriented cinema."[217] These taxonomic accounts of specific minority cinemas share a common oppositional thrust; independent film is continually constructed as an arena of cinematic expression where specific identity groups can challenge pervasive stereotypes commonly located in mainstream media culture, signifying more "authentic" representations of their own members.[218]

Consequently, one can perceive an orthodox deployment of identity politics discourses in independent film scholarship, focused specifically upon personal experience and the theorisation of distinct minority subjectivities. However, by closely analysing how

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[214] Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*, 52. Pribram offers a similar reading through her sub-categorisation of "identity cinema"; see Pribram, *Cinema & Culture*, xxii, 69-73, 81-82.
[215] Brian Neve, "Independent Cinema and Modern Hollywood: Pluralism in Cultural Politics?" In *American Film and Politics from Reagan to Bush Jr*, eds. Philip Davies and Paul Wells (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 123. Also see Hillier, "Introduction," ix; Kleinhans, "Independent Features," 307.
[216] Neve, "Independent Cinema and Modern Hollywood," 137.
[217] King, *American Independent Cinema*, 199, 197-260.
[218] Ibid., 203. Also see Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, 184; Ortner, *Not Hollywood*, 63.

such structures have been used to frame indie film's representational strategies, a number of theoretical limitations become apparent. In fulfilling a purported pluralising function, independent texts have been read as a direct challenge to a broader socio-cultural homogeneity implied in constructions of a mainstream popular culture or national identity; embodying metaphysical properties of self-presence and structural fixity, homogeneous images of American socio-cultural life are challenged by a cinematic practice that values diversity and personal expression. However, as has already been demonstrated, such readings replicate a number of the logocentric principles they ostensibly aim to critique. In focusing upon a limited range of self-identical minority cinemas, existing scholarly literature necessarily relies upon their construction as conceptual monoliths; in doing so, they disavow any conception of identity as an (often self-contradictory) intersection of a greater number of attributes or classifications. Thus, whilst superficially disturbing American cultural self-coherence, such approaches rely upon a series of equally discrete, oppositional categories, and as such mobilise their own metaphysical, totalising gestures. Finally, these classifications regulate and disavow a more radical freeplay of cultural *différance*, a model (outlined in this thesis' introduction) that precipitates a potentially limitless multiplicity of complex, contradictory, and co-present modes of identification.

As noted above, there has been limited critical self-reflection upon the use of these categories in independent discourse, and the few methodological self-interrogations that can be discerned attempt to qualify (rather than critique) their application. For example, Pribram warns against the disavowal of differences and divergent cultural experiences *within* identity categories themselves, challenging their frequent treatment as unified, homogeneous or essential. Indeed, Pribram suggests that the retention of these structural assumptions can perpetuate rather than challenge stereotypes, fixing representations upon one (often clichéd) aspect of minority identity.[219] Nevertheless, this assessment merely provides a self-interrogative caveat that precedes an analysis based entirely on gender, a fact that undermines the deconstructive potential of her otherwise astute theoretical observations. Furthermore, the construction of legible minority identities is often a pre-condition of their conceptual positioning within the broader American cinematic landscape. Located within a hierarchical, binary opposition with a cultural or cinematic mainstream, readings of independent film as a "Cinema of Outsiders" (to use Levy's term)[220] necessarily assembles and accommodates a broad range of singular texts; their complex differences are effaced in the act of defining them as a homogeneous, oppositional deviation from fixed American

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[219] Pribram, *Cinema & Culture*, 82-86.
[220] See Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*.

socio-cultural norms. Thus, as Wyatt notes, a focus on specific identity categories "replicates and reinforces dominant notions of cultural difference."[221]

Additionally, as alluded to briefly by Pribram, the construction of self-coherent identity categories denies the more complex cultural experiences of subjects living in a "multiply identified" society.[222] As a result, the application of such categories to independent film relies upon the reception of texts as expressions of one specific identity, to the exclusion of other cultural inputs. This process has been outlined effectively by Judith Butler in her post-structuralist critique of "woman" as a stable category within feminist discourse; Butler notes that essentialist theorisations of gender and sex disavow a reading of identity as a heterogeneous intersection of multiple, fluid attributes:

> The masculine/feminine binary constitutes not only the exclusive framework in which that specificity can be recognized, but in every other way the 'specificity' of the feminine is once again fully decontextualized and separated off analytically and politically from the constitution of class, race, ethnicity and other axes of power relations that both constitute 'identity' and make the singular notion of identity a misnomer.[223]

The above quote eloquently summarises the problematic logic that this study also discerns within independent film discourses; even if minority cinematic categories have been theorised for "emancipatory purposes" (as Butler puts it), they necessarily posit a reductive conception of a stable subject that is coercive, exclusionary, and metaphysically complicit.[224]

Although identity politics discourses provide a near-universal frame within which to consider independent film's cultural politics, a limited number of studies have tentatively pointed towards fruitful discursive overlaps between this cinematic category and American national identity. Most prominently, Sherry B. Ortner contends that independent film constitutes a "critical cultural movement, an attempt to critique the dominant culture (represented by 'Hollywood') through their films."[225] In such a formulation, Ortner argues that the indie scene constructs itself in direct opposition to both Hollywood and the "hegemonic American culture" that it represents and perpetuates.[226] Indeed, in identifying

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[221] Wyatt, "Marketing Marginalized Cultures," 61. Auteurist discourses within independent film scholarship arguably reify discrete identity categories by constructing filmmakers as "delegates" for specific cultural groups; see Pribram, *Cinema & Culture*, 82.
[222] Pribram, *Cinema & Culture*, 82-86.
[223] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd Ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 6.
[224] Ibid.
[225] Ortner, *Not Hollywood*, 2, 29.
[226] Ibid., 2.

indie texts as "counter-hegemonic," Ortner argues that their aim and role is to "deconstruct"[227] conventional cinematic and cultural narratives; in this reading, her model of "independent filmmaking" is focused on "'talking back' to the stories that are already out there in the public culture."[228] In doing so, Ortner contextualises her study within a specific socio-historical moment, which she describes as "the end of the grand narrative of American culture, the so-called American Dream."[229]

Thus, Ortner ostensibly provides a direct, critical engagement with American national identity, positioning independent film as a multifaceted critique of specific forms of cultural narration. However, the manner in which Ortner characterises this challenge diverges significantly from the deconstructive approach adopted by this thesis, ultimately reifying a number of reductive metaphysical principles. To begin, independent challenges to dominant cinematic and cultural forms are established in relation to shared (and interlinked) textual properties of "darkness" and "realism." Ortner suggests that independent texts distinguish themselves as an authentic palliative to the distortive socio-cultural messages of Hollywood texts: "independent films perform cultural critique by way of embracing a kind of harsh realism, by making films that display the dark realities in contemporary life."[230] Thus, Ortner notes a common perception that "independent films seek to tell the truth about contemporary society," an assumption she partly internalises in her assertion that "independent films are explicitly meant to show the world 'as it really is'";[231] this contrasts with constructions of Hollywood as a sector that is adept at "telling lies" and is reliant upon a pervasive "fantasy," attributes that render such texts as "false pictures of the real world."[232] Finally, Ortner again utilises specific identity politics approaches in characterising the source of independent film's implicitly critical stance, treating the independent sector loosely as the cinema of Generation X.[233] Therefore, although Ortner provides the most consistent engagement with independent texts and their representations of national identity, she does so by appealing to self-coherent constructions of identity and social verisimilitude. Conversely, it is precisely these structural and ontological assumptions that are directly questioned in the deconstructive textual readings that form the main body of this thesis.

In contrast to Ortner's approach, a greater number of accounts read prominent independent texts as elaborations and endorsements of national identity structures. For example, whilst Levy characterises independent film as a pluralist movement representing

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[227] Ortner uses the term "deconstruct" in an idiomatic rather than Derridean sense; Ibid., 9.
[228] Ibid., 71.
[229] Ibid., 15, 83.
[230] Ibid., 29.
[231] Ibid., 50, 271.
[232] Ibid., 3-4, 9.
[233] Ibid., 69.

marginalised cultural perspectives, he qualifies this reading by downplaying the possibility of an overtly subversive engagement with dominant American values in such texts. Levy continually reaffirms that indies tend to lack "radically political and avant-garde visions," ensuring that such texts pose no "serious challenge to dominant culture."[234] Thus, Levy concludes be suggesting that independent films actually perpetuate hegemonic American structures of meaning: "most indies have functioned as soothing entertainment, reaffirming rather than questioning basic values."[235] Finally, several texts implicitly locate independent film within homogenising identity discourses by noting its potential position as an "alternative" American national cinema, a view that implicitly challenges aforementioned links between this area of cinematic practice and cultural pluralism. For example, Maltby notes that "Independent low-budget or 'boutique' productions" lack the international appeal of Hollywood blockbusters, instituting an industrial insularity that confers upon independent film "the status of an American national cinema."[236] Newman diagnoses a more complex and contradictory relationship between indie film and American socio-cultural narration. Positioning it as a "vanguard subculture," Newman argues that indie cinema adopts a "critical stance toward the dominant culture" whilst simultaneously reproducing several of its structural effects, specifically through its elitist rejection of pop cultural forms. Indie is seen to fulfil "two contradictory missions of resisting and perpetuating the dominant ideology."[237] In justifying his limited focus upon texts produced within USA, Newman argues that "indie cinema in the United States has functioned as an alternative American national cinema," a claim that he grounds in the prevalence of national institutions (festivals, print media, blogs, distributors, and exhibitors) within the infrastructure of the indie scene.[238] However, he is careful to note that this productive background *does not* promote a complementary textual focus on national identity: "All of this suggests that indie culture is to some significant extent a national culture, even if it is not essentially concerned with thematizing national identity."[239]

Conclusions

It is the above contention that this thesis aims to fundamentally challenge, through a demonstration of how independent case-study texts can be fruitfully read as (deconstructive) meditations on American national identity. As elaborated upon earlier, this shift in focus is

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[234] Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*, 5, 6.
[235] Ibid., 495.
[236] Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema,* 223.
[237] Newman, *Indie*, 3.
[238] Ibid., 17.
[239] Ibid.

abetted by the application of specific reading strategies and their role in *re-inscribing* cinematic meaning; therefore, this thesis challenges assertions that independent film's cultural representations stem from a limited range of in-built textual attributes and thematic preoccupations. Indeed, a number of this project's case-study texts have been analysed previously in relation to aforementioned identity politics categories; for example, *Wendy and Lucy* and *Gerry* have been approached as complex representations of gender and sexuality, *Happiness* as a meditation on personal politics, and *George Washington* has been read in relation to race, youth, and regional identity. In this sense, the shift in focus to national identity provides a conceptual framework that complements existing readings of independent texts, elucidating areas of cultural knowledge that have been left relatively unexplored in existing critical literature.

Furthermore, in focusing specifically on national identity, this study reconceptualises numerous theoretical trends outlined in recent independent cinema discourses; rather than ignoring a range of thematic connotations that have built up around the concept of independent film, many of these are re-examined in relation to national (rather than personal) identity. In his largely industrial account of recent American film, Schatz describes a specific type of independent text that is useful in explicating this process; comparing "passion projects" with more "mainstream independents," Schatz argues that the former are "films driven by character and a sense of place."[240] As has been demonstrated, *character* and *place* have been utilised by scholars as a means of anchoring indie cultural representations within personal or regional identity categories, drawing attention towards minority or sub-national cultural discourses. Conversely, these concepts are re-appropriated as a means of framing this thesis, demonstrating how they can equally be used to explicate a range of American national narratives; *individualism*, the *nuclear family*, the *small-town* and *wilderness* can be approached as complex, deconstructive meditations on American character and place, subject and object. However, the integrity of such oppositions is fatally compromised as the central argument of this study unfolds; these interpretative couplets are strategically used to construct specific textual analyses, cultural readings that ultimately precipitate their structural subversion.

This shift in thematic focus also brings methodological and theoretical advantages, facilitating an overtly Derridean critique of American national coherence. Whilst identity politics approaches implicitly challenge homogeneous cultural narratives, they do so through the construction of their own monolithic categories, each carrying within itself a series of exclusionary definitions and essentialist truth claims. Conversely, through the overt visualisation of textual self-contradictions and conceptual fissures, the representations of

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[240] Schatz, "Conglomerate Hollywood and American Independent Film," 136.

American national identity observed in case-study texts undermine any attempt to seamlessly rationalise a plethora of potential cultural significations. In doing so, this approach allows for a fluid, ungrounded freeplay of cultural *différance*; this non-proscriptive model facilitates myriad expressions of emergent, transformative cultural identities that exceed static, totalised sub-categorisations of American subjectivity. Thus, this deconstructive gesture subverts normative modes of cultural narration, without constructing or privileging a series of similarly totalised minority identities in the process.

Chapter Two - Ragged Individualism: Deconstructing the Goal-Oriented Protagonist

American Individualism: Contradictions and Complexities

Described in scholarly texts as a "quintessential American value,"[1] an "American Ideology,"[2] and a "symbol of national identification,"[3] *individualism* has been consistently defined as a thematic and narrative locus of a shared national character. Addressed by figures as diverse as Herbert Hoover, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Alexis de Tocqueville,[4] individualism constitutes a key term within a plethora of socio-cultural and identity discourses. Indeed, Chuck Kleinhans argues that the analogous conception of "the success myth" (based upon a "prevailing ideology of individualism") is "so pervasive in U.S. life that it needs little description."[5] In similar terms, Julie Levinson suggests that individualist narratives of success and the American Dream are often treated as a core constituent of American cultural meaning and national identity; for her, such stories "function allegorically to fulfil our belief in the promise of America, with the hero's individual self-making and accomplishment standing in for national self-determination and exceptionalism: for the fundamental essence of America itself."[6] Nevertheless, other theorists suggest that the prominence of individualism in American culture can be explained through its association with a range of amorphous and potentially paradoxical meanings. This argument is clearly demonstrated by Yehoshua Arieli, whose post-civil war definition of American individualism encompasses various socio-political, religious, historical, and economic factors:

> The concept of individualism was closely related to the Jeffersonian ideas of self-government, free society, and the rights of man…It endowed democracy with a philosophic dimension, closely related to religion and to the philosophy of History.

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[1] Irene Taviss Thomson, *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 85.

[2] Yehoshua Arieli, *Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 2-4.

[3] Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), 38.

[4] Ibid., 37-40.

[5] Chuck Kleinhans, "Working-Class Film Heroes: Junior Johnson, Evel Knievel and the Film Audience," in *Jump Cut: Hollywood, Politics, and Counter-Cinema*, ed. Peter Steven (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1985), 66.

[6] Julie Levinson, *The American Success Myth on Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 22-23.

It was intimately connected with the theory of laissez faire and described as well the patterns of behaviour typical of the American way of life.[7]

Rather than endorsing this passage as a coherent individualist definition, Arieli is quoted here to demonstrate the complexities inherent in any study of American individualism. Arieli's use of the term does not simply connote a range of historically-specific values, charting the development of a single, cogent ideal. Rather, individualism is presented simultaneously as a philosophical premise, a political principle, a narrative of social behaviour, and an economic system.[8] Thus, whilst cultural critics have constructed a number of discourse or discipline-specific individualist meanings,[9] its use within an American context opens up a heterogeneous web of cultural connotations, associations, and references.

As a result, in approaching individualism as a narrative of national identity, it is vital to establish which discourses such a reading engages. This is not to suggest that individualism can be neatly divided into a number of discrete cultural formulations, elucidating different areas of cultural knowledge. Rather, it is suggested that scholarly readings employ the term to rationalise and regulate an amorphous network of socio-political concepts in relation to a fixed centre, the figure of the individual American "agent."[10] This process is touched upon by James E. Block in his reading of America as *A Nation of Agents*: emphasising the importance of liberty and autonomy in the "American narrative," Block asserts that discussions of American identity must be placed within an overarching "discourse on freedom."[11] Irene Taviss Thomson adopts a similar attitude as she positions individualism within contemporary "culture war" debates, a dichotomous discourse that will be returned to throughout this thesis; she contends that "in the American cultural lexicon, individualism is always good," an assumption that explains the term's appropriation by a variety of socio-ideological groups.[12] Thus, whilst individualism appears to be predicated upon the continuing relevance of an autonomous, active American subjectivity, the manner in which this liberty is theorised varies greatly within critical texts. Yet, despite these observations, recent scholarly readings have drawn distinct dividing lines between particular manifestations of individualism. Therefore, even accounts that highlight the term's potentially fluid, diverse connotations appear to constitute these meanings as self-coherent presences. For example, Robert Bellah et al segregate American individualism into

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[7] Arieli, *Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology*, 192.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Lukes explores individualism within diverse academic disciplines; Lukes, *Individualism*.
[10] Arieli, *Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology*, 192.
[11] James E. Block, *A Nation of Agents: The American Path to a Modern Self and Society* (London: Havard University Press, 2002), 1.
[12] Thomson, *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas*, 84.

numerous sub-categories, dependent on the context of the term's utterance; "mythic" individualism is contrasted with "bureaucratic," "conformist," and "expressive" uses of the term.[13] Thus, the conceptualisation of various discrete individualisms is reinforced by their prescription as viable, distinct objects of critical analysis.

Consequently, this exploration of individualism necessarily entails a radical deconstruction of its previous uses, relocating the term within a Derridean economy of spatio-temporal *différance*. In turn, this strategy fuels this chapter's primary theoretical objective; the exploration of how cinematic texts can challenge individualism as a self-coherent metaphysical narrative form, drawing upon considerations of the term in contemporary film theory. In turn, I explore how this particular manifestation of individualism thematizes *and* enacts causal linearity, demonstrating that maxims of "success,"[14] "upward mobility,"[15] and the "self-made man"[16] connote and embody forward narrative momentum to rationalise a disparate field of cultural experiences. Finally, these theoretical premises are explored in case-study readings of *Wendy and Lucy* (2008) and *Sure Fire* (1990). In these, it is argued that both films strategically evoke a number of individualist structural principles, but only as a means of demonstrating and dismantling the concept's formal reductions and internal contradictions.

Individualism, Cinema, and Cultural Narration

As alluded to above, this chapter observes within specific case-studies a focused, cinematic deconstruction of individualism as a form of cultural narration, a socio-cultural configuration that accommodates disparate experiences and identities into arbitrary, homogenised cultural schema. Therefore, this observation extends beyond a simplistic prescription of any fixed definitional content for American individualism; rather, the various manifestations of individualism mentioned above are considered as complementary narrative configurations that *reinforce* the logocentric repression of cultural *différance*. Whilst previous scholarly accounts have been largely concerned with reductive definitional gestures, a number of sociological studies allude to individualism's role as a structure of cultural homogenisation and regulation. For example, Arieli briefly considers individualism as a narrative of American everyday experience:

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[13] Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 2nd Ed (London: University of California Press, 1996), 142-164.

[14] Irvin G. Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1966), 3.

[15] Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 59-102.

[16] Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America*, 6.

Individualism supplied the nation with a rationalization of its characteristic attitudes, behaviour patterns and aspirations. It endowed the past, the present and the future with the perspective of unity and progress. It explained the peculiar social and political organisation of the nation-unity in spite of heterogeneity.[17]

Thus, whilst Arieli makes this point as a pre-cursor to solidifying individualism as a fixed object of study, this process of harnessing cultural heterogeneity feeds into the reading of individualism utilised throughout this chapter.

Approaching individualism as a form of cultural narration necessitates the rejection of any rigid ontology, as such a project would be implicated in the totalising logic that sustains previous discursive accounts. Nevertheless, in reading this chapter's case-study texts as deconstructive interventions into this metaphysical economy, one must clearly establish which of the term's connotations the films critique, drawing particular motifs and formal principles from previous scholarly and cultural discourses. Therefore, my analyses are concerned with a limited range of individualist significations, exploring a number of cultural and cinematic discourses relating individual agency with principles of personal progress and forward causal momentum. Specifically, it is argued that this particular aspect of individualism reflexively unveils its role as a narrative structure; themes of progress, upward mobility and the self-made man intractably tie individualism to the dynamic (linear) self-realization of a narrative protagonist. Structural affinities between individualism and causal narration can be further explicated in reference to Jacques Derrida's deconstructive critique of historical linearism. In "Positions," Derrida links the application of causal logic to metaphysical notions of presence, continuity and truth, asserting that "the word history doubtless has always been associated with the linear consecution of presence."[18] This critique appears equally applicable to aforementioned constructions of causal individualism; tying events or experiences into a forward-looking chain of succession, metaphysical readings of history reaffirm central principles of progress, linear motion, and the self-determining narrative protagonist.

Explicit references to logocentric linearity are legible in various scholarly constructions of individualism. In his broad thematic and geographical study, Steven Lukes exemplifies a reading of American individualism rooted in notions of wealth accumulation and personal success: Lukes establishes a number of cultural connotations, focusing clearly upon "the belief in free enterprise" and "the American Dream."[19] In similar fashion, theorists have drawn direct links between the individualist agent and certain patterns of socio-

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[17] Arieli, *Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology*, 345-346.
[18] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone Press, 1987), 49.
[19] Lukes, *Individualism*, 37.

economic behaviour. For example, David Riesman defines a foundational American subjectivity as "inner-directed," constituting self-reliant, task-based individuals whose social actions are primarily focused towards the fulfilment of narrow, personal objectives: "the inner-directed person is oriented early in childhood towards very clear goals in life – it may be money, fame, power, goodness or a blend of these."[20] In linking this character type to the completion of social tasks, Riesman suggests a primary self-interest in "their social mobility, their ambitions."[21] Finally, Levinson notes that individualist conceptions of the American character construct a national identity that draws upon a dynamic model of subjectivity: "at the heart of the American dream and at the center of classic success myth stories lies the promise of mobility and self-making…. We are active subjects rather than compliant objects of our personal destinies."[22]

Thus, this narrative of social mobility is encapsulated in writings on the "self-made man," a concept consistently evoked in American identity discourses.[23] Irvin G. Wyllie identifies the self-made man as a cultural archetype, symbolising ideals of equal opportunity and personal improvement: "the legendary hero of America is the self-made man.... He represents our most cherished conceptions of success, and particularly our belief that any man can achieve fortune through the practice of industry, frugality, and sobriety."[24] Here, the American subject is once again oriented towards the achievement of personal goals and material success. Furthermore, figurative evocations of narrative motion pervade countless readings of American individualism: to provide but one example, Nathan Glazer identifies an "age-old individualist thrust in American life, one that has given it so much of its distinctive quality."[25] Thus, individualism is not merely constructed as a cultural narrative, but one that collapses any clear distinction between form and content; in narrativising cultural events and experiences, it self-consciously alludes to the underlying structural principle of linear causal momentum.

This reflexive narratology of individualism forms a perceptible object of study in contemporary film theory. A number of critics have drawn parallels between individualism and "dominant" forms of cinematic narration, arguing that normative narrative structures directly reflect overarching "mythico-realistic" storylines.[26] For example, Levinson acknowledges how individualist tropes of upward mobility and self-reliance engender

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[20] David Riesman, "From Inner-Direction to Other-Direction," in *Individualism and Conformity in the American Character*, ed. Roger Rapson (Boston: Heath, 1967), 41-43.
[21] Ibid., 43.
[22] Levinson, *The American Success Myth on Film*, 21.
[23] Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America*, 3-7.
[24] Ibid., 6.
[25] Nathan Glazer, "Individualism and Equality in the United States," in *On the Making of Americans: Essays in Honor of David Riesman*, ed. Herbert J. Gans (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 138.
[26] Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: the Key Concepts*, 3rd ed (London: Routledge, 2006), 74.

specific cultural (and cinematic) narrative structures: "the protagonist's upward progress from one social and vocational level to another defines the basic plot movement of success myth stories."[27] As a result, "the narrative momentum of such movies…revolves around individualist yearnings for self-realization."[28] Furthermore, in his study of *The American Dream and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, J. Emmett Winn notes similar cinematic, thematic, and cultural correspondences that crystallize around the figure of the individualist protagonist; his study is predicated upon the assumption that "the pursuit of the American Dream is a common plotline in Hollywood films," ensuring that a "simple rag-to-riches storyline is the basic plot for dozens of Hollywood films."[29] Finally, in their prominent study of classical Hollywood narration, David Bordwell, Kristen Thompson, and Janet Staiger note a unique affinity between filmic and cultural narratives:

> It is easy to see in the goal-oriented protagonist a reflection of an ideology of American individualism and enterprise, but it is the peculiar accomplishment of the classical cinema to translate this ideology into a rigorous chain of cause and effect.[30]

David Bordwell relates this initial observation to classical cinema's "pattern…of forward momentum,"[31] another factor shared with previous constructions of individualism.

Bordwell utilises this analysis as a basis for his formalist model in which motion pictures are delineated into a limited number of restrictive cinematic modes.[32] Although he clearly approaches individualism as a socio-cultural construction, his tacit acceptance of essentialist cultural ontologies is demonstrated by its accommodation within reductive theoretical categorisations. Therefore, whilst Bordwell acknowledges the artificial codes that underlie specific narrative configurations, he proceeds to replicate their totalising logic, grounding a relatively stable set of aesthetic, formal, and spectatorial norms within fixed institutional and productive contexts. The metaphysical tenor of Bordwell's observations is explored directly by Peter Brunette and David Wills in their sustained Derridean critique of formalist film theory; using Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger's study of classical Hollywood as an indicative example, they note that "'Hollywood' as a category is essentialized from the very beginning…recourse to the idea of a self-identical, coherent

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[27] Levinson, *The American Success Myth on Film*, 22.
[28] Ibid., 51.
[29] J. Emmett Winn, *The American Dream and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London: Continuum, 2007), 6.
[30] David Bordwell, Kristen Thompson, and Janet Staiger, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*: *Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 15, 60.
[31] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconson Press, 1985), 158.
[32] Ibid., 147-155.

system is frequent, along with a concomitant desire for totalization."[33] Bordwell's homogenising tendencies are augmented by his suggestion that the (totalised) classical mode acts as the dominant term against which all other cinematic forms are defined. This metaphysical attitude is encapsulated in his exposition of the "canonic story": Bordwell suggests that the classical mode conforms closely to a homogenised narrative structure "which story-comprehension researchers posit as normal for our culture."[34] As a result, this model reaffirms the perceived inherence of individualist cultural narratives, positing linear, goal-oriented structures as a universal norm.

This relationship between cultural narration and cinematic structure has also been explored by Gilles Deleuze, in his discussion of the "action-image."[35] In *Cinema 1*, Deleuze coins the action-image as a cinematic form, characterised by a dynamic protagonist who institutes narrative momentum through the creation and fulfilment of clear, personal goals:

> The milieu and its forces...act on the character, throw him a challenge, and constitute a situation in which he is caught. The character reacts in his turn…so as to respond to the situation, to modify the milieu, or his relation with the milieu, with the situation, with other characters.[36]

Thus, in denoting a structure where characters react dynamically to their surroundings, modifying their milieu and instituting new situations, the action-image is founded upon a linear causal chain, a clear point of comparison with individualist narratives. In turn, Deleuze draws direct parallels between this narrative form and individualist structures, engaging with the euphemistic concept of the American Dream. In the Deleuzian action-image, the cinematic protagonist symbolises "a man of this nation who knows how to respond to the challenges of the milieu as to the difficulties of a situation."[37] This relationship between individualism and the action-image is reaffirmed by David Martin-Jones, who suggests that "the individualist ethos (is) exemplified by the action-image (in which the individual's ability to alter his or her situation was beyond doubt.)"[38]

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[33] Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1989), 41.

[34] Ibid.,157.

[35] Perkins engages with the action-image to read smart cinema as a reflexive critique of classical narrative structures. However, her approach diverges from mine through her Deleuzian focus, and her conclusions that smart case-studies intensify narrational norms; see Claire Perkins, *American Smart Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 49-75.

[36] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Continuum, 2005), 146.

[37] Ibid., 148.

[38] David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity: Narrative Time in National Contexts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 22.

One could easily draw superficial parallels between Bordwell and Deleuze's investigations of individualism and cinematic narration. Indeed, Martin-Jones notes several superficial similarities, suggesting that "to those unaware of his philosophical project, Deleuze's work undoubtedly smacked of the reductive binary previously proposed by such works as David Bordwell's 'Art Cinema as a mode of Film Practice.'"[39] However, rather than constituting a cohesive cinematic mode, the action-image appears as a potential quality signified from a plethora of interchangeable cinematic styles and aesthetic devices, shorn from their simplistic association with discrete movements or national cinemas.[40] Additionally, Deleuze does not appear to construct the action-image within a codified stylistic mode or productive infrastructure, treating it instead as an elaboration of metaphysical thought. This is demonstrated in Deleuze's discussion of cinematic naturalism, in which he identifies the action-image as a "realist" form of presence: "When qualities and powers are apprehended as actualised in states of things, in milieu which are geographically and historically determinable, we enter into the realm of the action-image."[41] Thus, taken alongside aforementioned formal attributes, potential comparisons between individualism and the action-image are reaffirmed; akin to an individualist narrative, it is established as a causally-coherent configuration of discrete, actualised experiences, a form of cultural rationalisation. Furthermore, this observation mirrors Derrida's aforementioned exploration of metaphysical history; in considering linear causality as a configuration of presence(s), the action-image mimics logocentric narratives of historical knowledge, reaffirming its applicability to individualist discourse.

Individualism and Independent Film

Drawing upon aforementioned developments in film theory and narratology, this chapter undertakes a comprehensive reading of *Wendy and Lucy* and *Sure Fire* as complementary deconstructive representations; whilst seeming to synthesise linear, causal structures centred on identifiable individualist protagonists, the films simultaneously lay bare textual contradictions and paradoxes that disturb the unity and closure of the narratives that they evoke. This reading departs radically from previous critical discussions of narrative in independent film, a gesture necessitated by my rejection of existing categorical definitions. As suggested in chapter one, studies of independent film frequently utilise Bordwellian categories, locating independent cinematic narratives in relation to prominent modes of classical Hollywood and art cinema narration. Geoff King typifies this trend,

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[39] Ibid., 7.
[40] Ibid., 7-8.
[41] Deleuze, *Cinema* 1, 127.

analysing independent texts in reference to classical "norms": "one of the key identifying features of many American Independent films is the extent to which they depart from the familiar conventions of the classical Hollywood variety."[42] In turn, King suggests that these narratological deviations often signify an explicit rejection of the individualist cultural narratives they purportedly embody:

> To portray characters as heroically lifting themselves out of their difficulties, triumphing through adversity, and so on – is to impose a typically American-capitalist ideological framework, rooted in the notion that America is a society in which even those from the lowest reaches can achieve the dream of prosperity.[43]

Here, King appears to suggest that independent texts utilise narrative innovations to challenge individualist ideologies. However, this process does not take the form of a reflexive narrative critique; rather, he postulates an oppositional rejection of goal-oriented structures, a logocentric gesture that tacitly canonises classical form as a normative standard. As a result, King ultimately reifies an inherent structural relationship between causal cinematic narratives and American cultural narratives; Bordwell's mode of classical narration is unproblematically endorsed as the embodiment of American individualism, reinforcing the structural integrity and centrality of these forms of cinematic and cultural storytelling.

      Thus, whilst King highlights a range of potential narrative configurations within his construction of independent film, they are primarily classified within the structural (and ideological) terms established by Bordwell's dichotomous model. For example, in noting a trend for "decentred," "relaxed," or static narratives, King associates such configurations with "international 'art' cinema,"[44] another discrete mode theorised by Bordwell in opposition to a homogenised "classical" standard.[45] E. Deidre Pribram also supports this reading of independent films as a dynamic blend of antagonistic narrative forms, suggesting that "a potentially rich means of conceptualizing independent film...is as an undertaking that modulates the oppositional framings of prevailing and alternative narrative practices."[46] Thus, whether viewed as a reinforcement of Hollywood convention, an elaboration of an alternative art cinema, or a merging of the two, discussions of narrative in independent films are consistently framed within oppositional formalist models.

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[42] Geoff King, *American Independent Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 59.
[43] Ibid., 67.
[44] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 205-273.
[45] Ibid.
[46] E. Deidre Pribram, *Cinema & Culture: Independent Film in the United States, 1980-2001* (New York: P. Lang, 2002), 140.

Reading *Wendy and Lucy* and *Sure Fire* as deconstructive texts, my approach rejects this interpretative framework, discussing the texts in a manner that attempts to dismantle pervading binary structures. In doing so, these analyses provide useful textual observations that diverge sharply from those made by King and Pribram: that which has been previously assumed as a merging or negotiation of mainstream and marginal qualities will instead be treated as a reflexive interrogation of linear causality, and its relation to previous constructions of American cultural knowledge. Therefore, these analyses will not consider the films' narrative structures as elaborations of their location within discrete cinematic modes, drawing arbitrary links between the films' narrational, aesthetic, and contextual properties. Rather, they will be read simply as critiques of metaphysical knowledge-structures, cultural narratives that both constitute and enact the concept of American individualism.

"I'm Just Passing Through": Constructing *Wendy and Lucy's* Individualist Narrative

Released in 2008, *Wendy and Lucy* provides a fruitful text within which individualism can be addressed in a contemporary American context. To begin, it is prudent to establish a general outline of the film's key events. Importantly, in reading a film as a piece of narrative cinema one sustains several dominant structuring principles, assuming the primacy of narrative causality and spatio-temporal coherence.[47] Nevertheless, this analysis offers a reflexive displacement of cultural narratives; only by establishing *Wendy and Lucy* as the product of inter-related cultural and cinematic discourses can one explore how the text destabilises and exceeds their structural unity. Yet, this methodological justification does not completely ameliorate the problematic endeavour of presenting a subjective interpretation of the film's plot as an objective summary of events, as an *a priori* source material for close textual analysis. Therefore, in reading *Wendy and Lucy* as a (superficially) individualist scenario, it is vital to demonstrate the links and assumptions made in constructing the text as a linear, causal narrative.

Bearing this in mind, the film begins with a series of static shots of a railway junction; freight trains slowly move on a variety of directional planes, the camera placed at various disparate angles to the tracks. In the following sequence, we are presented with a continuous tracking shot in which Wendy (Michelle Williams) plays "fetch" with her dog, Lucy. This sequence intersperses diegetic and non-diegetic sounds; whilst Wendy shouts instructions at her dog, she simultaneously hums a tune, a motif that repeats throughout the

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[47] See J.J. Murphy, *Me and You and Memento and Fargo: How Independent Screenplays Work* (London: Continuum, 2007), 1-23.

film. Following the titles, Wendy comes across a gathering of young people, sat around a campfire. From her brief conversations, we become aware that they are travellers, resting for the night. It is also in this scene that the film establishes Wendy's name and purpose; she is headed to Alaska, seeking temporary cannery work. The following morning Wendy is awoken by a security guard (Walter Dalton), having spent the night in her car. Instructed to move the vehicle from an empty parking lot, she realises that it has broken down. This is assumed, in this reading, as a key narrative turning point; as we are already aware of Wendy's wider journey, we become conscious of an impending barrier to her mobility. Following this discovery, Wendy attempts to find food and a mechanic. A nearby garage appears closed, but Wendy locates a supermarket, tying Lucy to a bike rack outside. Wendy picks out a selection of foodstuffs and tins of dog food, placing these in her pockets in a seemingly surreptitious manner. Wendy leaves the store to talk to Lucy, but is apprehended by a young employee (John Robinson). She is then taken to the store's manager (John Breen), and the police are informed, despite her protestations. Wendy is taken away in a police car; Lucy remains behind. At this point Wendy is separated from her dog, providing another perceived narrative goal: the reuniting of the pair. In jail, the protagonist is forced to undergo repeated procedural acts before being allowed to leave, paying a $50 fine. Here, Wendy's forward-mobility is reinforced; she asserts that she is "not from round here," and is "just passing through." Returning to the store, Lucy is gone, and any immediate attempt to ascertain her whereabouts prove fruitless. Wendy's quest to reclaim her dog comprises the bulk of the film's remaining scenes. Wendy reaches the local dog pound the following day, but Lucy is not there. Filling in an administrative form, we are granted further snippets of Wendy's back story; her surname is Carroll, and she comes from the state of Indiana. Additionally, we are encouraged to read substantial detail from *absent* information; her lack of a phone number and fixed abode appear to signify groundlessness and isolation.

Following an unsuccessful trip to the pound, Wendy pursues further futile attempts to locate Lucy. In a series of repetitive sequences, Wendy calls for her dog, creates and then distributes "missing" posters, and checks back continually with the pound, using a mobile phone provided by the security guard. Wendy also acts upon one piece of the guard's advice, as he informs her of a method his father once used to locate a lost hound. This leads Wendy to return to the woods, where she scatters her belongings in the hope that Lucy will return to their scent. Sleeping the night in a clearing, Wendy is awoken by a man who incoherently and threateningly rants; after an abrupt cut Wendy runs to the toilets by a local petrol station, where she washes and sobs loudly. Although there are no physical signs that suggest a violent act has occurred, the scene evokes the aftermath of a traumatic event. Calling the pound once more, Wendy is informed that her dog has been located, having been rehomed on the day of her arrest. Nevertheless, this revelation is offset by the news that her car is

severely damaged, requiring repairs that would cost $2,000, far in excess of the vehicle's worth. Taking a taxi to an unknown location, we find that Wendy is visiting the address given to her by the pound. Lucy is in the back garden, and Wendy begins to play "fetch" across a mesh fence, an apparent re-inscription of the film's opening sequence. Wendy soon breaks down, leaving without Lucy. Having spoken about her predicament, as well as complementing Lucy's new home, one could read this decision as a benevolent sacrifice, made for the good of her canine companion. Promising to return, Wendy walks away, sobbing as she follows the railway line. Hopping aboard a freight train, the film ends with Wendy humming her recurring tune.

Intertextual Realism

Approaching *Wendy and Lucy* as a critique of American cultural life isn't an original critical approach in and of itself. Indeed, film reviews and scholarly texts often treat the film as a subversive representation of economic and cultural decay, a realistic exposé of American social marginalisation and disempowerment.[48] This reading of Wendy as a metonym for a "forgotten America"[49] fundamentally re-evaluates ideals of individualist opportunity; discussed in relation to cycles of poverty, youthful apathy, and personal loss, prevailing critical texts place Wendy's experiences in stark contrast to narratives of individual empowerment and social mobility. For example, King approaches the film as a direct challenge to individualist ideals; he notes that *Wendy & Lucy's* underlying premise has been framed by the film's director as "a fictional test of one of the most fundamental of American-capitalist ideologies: the notion that individuals, in whatever difficulty, can pull themselves up by their own bootstraps."[50] Thus, whilst King suggests that the film provides a potentially "radical" challenge to the widespread "myth" of the "American Dream," he argues that this is achieved through an act of thematic displacement; rather than interrogating the contradictions embedded within individualist cultural narratives, he argues that *Wendy and Lucy* shifts focus from myths of *individual* agency to a more accurate portrayal of "systemic" *social* inequalities and impediments.[51]

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[48] A.O. Scott, Review of *Wendy & Lucy*, dir. Kelly Reichardt, *New York Times*, December 10, 2008: http://movies.nytimes.com/2008/12/10/movies/10wend.html; Michael Atkinson, Review of *Wendy & Lucy*, dir. Kelly Reichardt, *Sight & Sound* 19, no. 2 (2009): 81.
[49] David Jenkins, Review of *Wendy & Lucy*, dir. Kelly Reichardt, *Time Out (London)*, March 5, 2009: http://www.timeout.com/film/reviews/86019/wendy-and-lucy.html.
[50] Geoff King, *Indie 2.0: Change and Continuity in Contemporary American Indie Film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 204.
[51] Ibid., 204-206.

Thus, King's account notes *Wendy and Lucy's* "realist credentials,"[52] arguing that the film's premise can be directly related to "real-world socio-economic events."[53] In doing so, he demonstrates a popular ontological assumption that pervades existing analyses of the film; King reifies a dominant reading of *Wendy and Lucy* that centres on the authentic representation of social experience, suggesting that it is possible to unproblematically depict contemporary American social reality. This trend is typified by Michael Atkinson: "this is the reality of 99 per cent of United States communities: decaying infrastructure, Wal-Mart sustenance, gone-to-weed neighbourhoods, lives ruled by petty commerce. There's not a fake moment or image on the programme."[54] In turn, these suppositions also inform readings of *Wendy and Lucy* that highlight key intertextual links; several critics compare the film formally and stylistically with Italian neo-realism, a cinematic movement constituted around perceived aims of documenting life in a minimalist, naturalistic fashion.[55] Indeed, A.O. Scott uses *Wendy and Lucy* to introduce his prominent notion of "neo-neo realism," a cycle within contemporary independent film that self-consciously evokes neo-realist aesthetics and its thematic preoccupation with social verisimilitude; these films "offer…bracing, poetic views of real life" through a series of "local, intimate narratives."[56] Rather than using these intertextual markers to establish the text as a cinematic construction, reviews enlist such references in supporting claims for the film's inherent social verisimilitude.

Therefore, whilst many readings treat the film as the antinomy of narratives of individualist social mobility, they do so by constructing a series of alternative truth claims. In doing so, they reify metaphysical structures of meaning, disavowing a multiplicitous "play of difference"[57] in favour of a concrete reading of narrative events. In this manner, attempts to view the film as a more realistic portrayal of cultural experience are highly problematic; the textual strategies that help sustain cultural narratives are not dismantled but re-affirmed, based as they are upon a stable, unified transcendental signification or structure. This methodological problem extends beyond the interpretation of this particular text, as

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[52] Ibid., 196.

[53] Ibid., 203. Other readings also draw direct links between the film and the contemporaneous socio-economic downturn; see Elena Gorfinkel, "Weariness, Waiting: Endurance and Art Cinema's Tired Bodies," *Discourse* 34, no. 2 (2012): 333; J.J. Murphy, "A Similar Sense of Time: The Collaboration between Writer Jon Raymond and director Kelly Reichardt in *Old Joy* and *Wendy and Lucy*," in *Analysing the Screenplay*, ed. Jill Nelmes (London: Routledge, 2011), 166.

[54] Atkinson, Review of *Wendy and Lucy*, 81.

[55] See Cosmo Landesman, Review of *Wendy & Lucy*, dir. Kelly Reichardt, *The Sunday Times*, March 8, 2009:
http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/film/film_reviews/article5853409.ece.; Scott Foundas, Review of *Wendy & Lucy*, dir. Kelly Reichardt, *Variety*, June 2, 2008:
http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117937319?refcatid=31.; Jenkins, review of *Wendy and Lucy*.

[56] A.O. Scott, "Neo-Neo Realism," *New York Times*, March 17, 2009:
http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/22/magazine/22neorealism-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

[57] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), 363-364.

these assumptions pervade critical readings of independent cinema as a whole. For example, Emmanuel Levy considers the truthful rendering of social reality as a defining independent characteristic: "the portrait of America drawn in (independent film) is both more idiosyncratic and more realistic than that evident in mainstream Hollywood fare."[58] In turn, a preoccupation with cinematic and social realism is diagnosed (and largely reinforced) in various studies of independent film, including the work of Michael Z. Newman, Sherry B. Ortner and, as already demonstrated, King.[59]

Wendy as the Goal-Oriented Protagonist

Conversely, any attempt to read *Wendy and Lucy* as a deconstructive text must fundamentally reject any pretensions that the film holds a privileged relationship to representing an objective social reality. Instead, the film is approached here as a text that visualises the instability of logocentric narrative structures associated with individualism. Thus, this analysis begins by reading *Wendy and Lucy* as the incorporation of various signs, formal devices, and narrative configurations associated with this specific cultural discourse. In turn, it is then argued that the film challenges the very foundations of the individualist narrative it evokes, reflexively criticising the binary formulations and structural assumptions that ground this account of American identity. Whilst deconstructive methods vary in relation to the structures they are disrupting, *Wendy and Lucy's* reflexive criticism will be achieved through a series of textual shifts, substitutions, repetitions and ellipses.

The most explicit way in which *Wendy and Lucy* (superficially) endows its protagonist with an individualist subjectivity is through the establishment of a series of goal-oriented narrative threads. Firstly, the figure of Wendy's journey appears to place the film's events within a broader causal structure: she is headed to Ketchikan, Alaska in search of work. This can be read as the protagonist's overarching (economically-motivated) goal; as J.J. Murphy suggests, this is cast as the character's sole long-term aim, one she is "hell-bent" on achieving.[60] Wendy reinforces this totalising narrative structure through her consistent assertions that she is not staying in Oregon, but is rather just "passing through." Furthermore, Wendy's journey appears to symbolise both a spatial and socio-economic ascent; with the events of the film located in Oregon, it can be inferred that she is travelling north, meeting up with the Pacific West coast before continuing *upwards* to her eventual

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[58] Emanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film* (London: New York University Press, 1999), 52.

[59] See Michael Z. Newman, *Indie: An American Film Culture* (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2011), 87-137; Sherry B. Ortner, *Not Hollywood: Independent Film at the Twilight of the American Dream* (London: Duke University Press, 2013), 3, 29; King, *Indie 2.0*, 169-215.

[60] Murphy, "A Similar Sense of Time," 166.

destination. Building upon these thematic and structural attributes, Paul Cooke and Rob Stone evoke the character of the travelling "hobo" to locate Wendy directly within discourses of individualist autonomy; she is cast as "a figure of exclusion and somewhat self-destructive defiance."[61] Finally, whilst composing just one aspect of a complex, liminal reading of Wendy as a fatigued, "wearied female bod(y)," Elena Gorfinkel argues that her subjectivity is partly constituted by her "desire to work, the drive to be employed from a position outside it."[62] As a result, she briefly suggests that the film's premise superficially engenders an individualist scenario, although this observation does not precipitate a sustained discussion of American cultural narration: "the story – which at first appears to be couched as a road film, a genre of mythic, masculinist American mobility and individualist adventure – stalls, never leaving this unnamed town."[63]

In turn, this reading of Wendy's journey as an individualist struggle is emphasised by the use of transport in the film's opening and closing sequences. Firstly, the evocation of long-distance travel figuratively reinforces a regulation of contingency through the application of a pre-determined narrative causality. Thus, in travelling by road to Oregon, Wendy's journey is controlled by a series of externally-imposed routes (the surrounding road network). As such, this provides a metaphorical representation of individualist motion; once a route has been chosen, it must be followed to its causal conclusion (a specific goal), at which time the next objective must be ascertained, mapped, and pursued. This spatial economy is reinforced by a series of prominent cultural associations; personal goals are frequently granted spatio-temporal representation through the appropriation of a lexicon derived in travel and movement (a person's "route" through life). Additionally, the methods of transport used in these sections of the film reinforce principles of individualism and self-determination. Firstly, Wendy arrives by automobile, which figures as the most prominent of her few personal possessions (with the exception of her pet). Wendy thus enters the film's diegetic frame under her own volition and agency, having seemingly driven herself to the parking lot. In doing so, she embodies a figurative evocation of individualist agency; as Levinson argues, "in many quintessentially American stories, physical mobility is equated with individual autonomy."[64] Furthermore, following the breakdown and unsuccessful attempts to repair her vehicle, she is forced to leave by hitching a ride from a passing freight train. This once again locates her actions within a discourse of private enterprise; using her

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[61] Paul Cooke and Rob Stone, "Transatlantic Drift: Hobos, Slackers, *Flâneurs*, Idiots and Edukators," in *Impure Cinema: Intermedial and Intercultural Approaches to Film*, eds. Lúcia Nagib and Anne Jerslev (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 83. Murphy also relates Wendy to the "mythic figure of the hobo"; see Murphy, "A Similar Sense of Time," 166.
[62] Gorfinkel, "Weariness, Waiting," 323.
[63] Ibid., 334.
[64] Levinson, *The American Success Myth on Film*, 32.

initiative to overcome her temporary stasis, Wendy's actions are mirrored in her use of non-public modes of transportation.

Finally, a reading that grants pre-eminence to goal-driven causal structures is solidified by Wendy's experiences in the unnamed Oregon town. Early in the film two potential goals are established, each related to the successful continuation of the protagonist's journey. Firstly, Wendy discovers that her car will not start, a barrier that must be overcome if she is to reach Ketchikan. Soon after, her arrest for shoplifting marks her impending separation from Lucy. These provide two clear aspirations for Wendy, which she pursues sporadically throughout the film. To further reinforce this link between cultural and cinematic narrative structures, these goals appear inextricably tied to the importance of Wendy's socio-economic ascent. For example, the need to fix her car is vital to her future journey, as without a means of transport she appears physically trapped in her current location. Equally, the manner in which she loses Lucy attests to the importance of wider individualist goals; as her theft appears motivated by necessity, it is cast as a symptom of the socio-economic marginalisation she is actively attempting to escape.

Linear Frames and Narrative Recurrence

As demonstrated above, it is possible to read *Wendy and Lucy* within a series of conceptual frames relating to individualist struggle, postulating a dualistic relationship between individualist narrative themes and cinematic narrative structure. However, rather than unproblematically endorsing (or rejecting) these rationalisations of cultural experience, this analysis argues for a complex reconfiguration and dismantling of these frames throughout the filmic text. The first of these spatio-temporal challenges occurs in the film's reformulation of linear causality, specifically in relation to the protagonist's pursuance of narrative goals. Aforementioned readings of causally-coherent cinematic forms place a strong emphasis on an irreversible forward motion: for example, in utilising this form to support his classification of "classical narration," Bordwell argues that the succession of related sequences "advance the causal progression" and institute a pattern of "forward momentum."[65]

In *Wendy and Lucy*, however, this sense of linear narrative propulsion is undermined by a variety of narrational, stylistic, and plot-based devices. This is not to say that Wendy is lacking in goals, or even fundamentally deficient in fulfilling them. Rather, in the act of pursuing these aims the temporal register of the film shifts from narrative progression to

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[65] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 158.

stasis, or more accurately, recurrence.[66] This is achieved through a tapestry of interwoven repetitions and ellipses, occurring on both formal and stylistic levels. As Wendy attempts to find her dog, it becomes clear that her search will not be comprised of the consistent unravelling of a series of causally-related clues. Having exhausted her only substantial lead (that Lucy may have been taken to the pound), Wendy is forced to wait for further news, robbing her of productive agency; as a result, she is forced to endure what Gorfinkel refers to as a "desolate stillness."[67] This experience of temporal stasis is reflected in the film's formal properties, which have been described as overwhelmingly "episodic";[68] once the central premises of the film are established, scenes unfold alongside frequent ellipses, lacking any rigidly defined textual order. This is primarily achieved through the operation of a circular, rather than linear temporality. For example, Wendy continually returns to the parking lot, where the security guard provides her with sporadic advice and assistance. This narrative repetition is reinforced by a number of cinematographic recurrences. Firstly, as Wendy returns to this location several times, certain shots are continually recycled. A clear example of this concerns the security guard, who is framed in a similar manner at different occasions in the film, looking directly at the camera (Figs.1.1-1.3):

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[66] Gorfinkel motions towards this complex temporal register in her reading of Wendy's fatigue; a "muted, understated aesthetic of slowness, stillness and arrest" directly challenges the film's "own explicit narrative drives towards (its) protagonist('s) employment as (its) successful goal." However, her account does not discuss the overtly Derridean or deconstructive potential of this strategy. Gorfinkel, "Weariness, Waiting," 324.

[67] Ibid., 333.

[68] Murphy, "A Similar Sense of Time," 166.

130
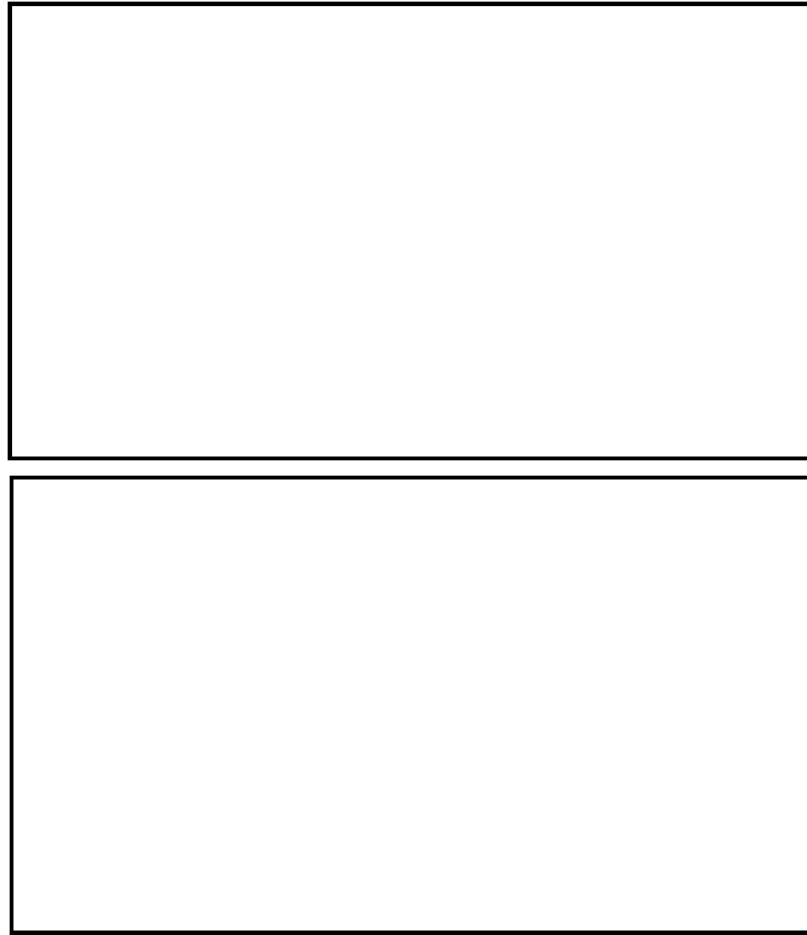
Figs.1.1-1.3

Whilst this could be read as a reference to the monotonous, uneventful nature of the guard's profession (protecting a disused parking lot), it also draws close attention to the repetitive nature of Wendy's search; although she utilises numerous strategies in her pro-active search for Lucy, she is doomed to return to the same spot, checking on the progression of an investigation which is ultimately out of her hands.

Further sequence shots highlight a pervading sense of narrative repetition. Throughout the film, Wendy is commonly framed through a series of close-ups, the camera focusing clearly on particular aspects of her figure (usually her face).[69] However, there are notable occasions in which Wendy is framed not in close-up, but rather through long tracking shots. These images often coincide with the protagonist exploring a new area for signs of her lost dog, and bear striking compositional similarities (Figs.1.4-1.5):

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[69] Grey argues that this provides the viewer with privileged access to Wendy's emotional responses. See Ian Grey, Review of *Wendy & Lucy*, dir. Kelly Reichardt, *Baltimore City Paper*, February 4, 2009: http://www2.citypaper.com/film/review.asp?rid=14402.
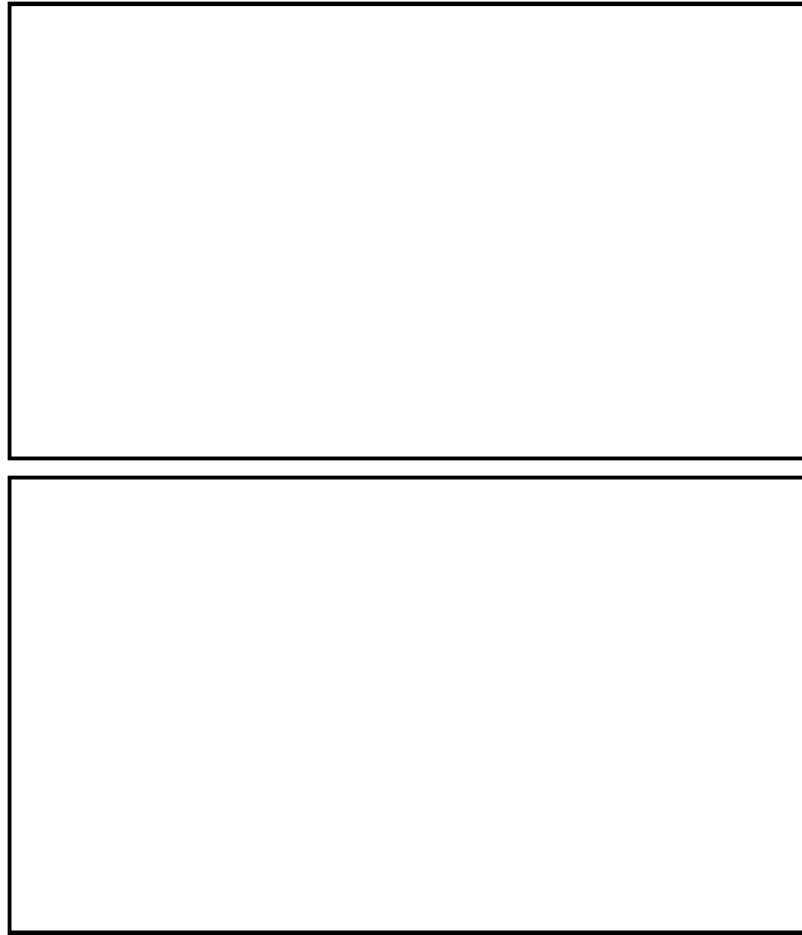
Figs.1.4-1.5

Firstly, these shots can be read as a direct evocation of one of the film's opening sequences, an extended tracking shot of Wendy playing "fetch" with Lucy (Fig.1.6):
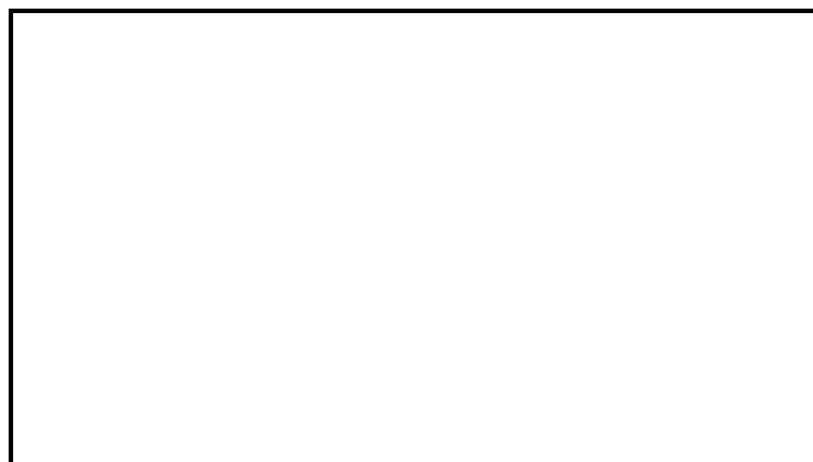
Fig.1.6

As these appear to be the only occasions in which this stylistic device is utilised, one can draw clear parallels between their applications; the later shots are drawn into a discordant

syntagmatic relationship with representations of Wendy's bond with her dog. Importantly, this reinforces the effect of their later application; the repetition of these shots attests to the stagnation of Wendy's continued attempts to find Lucy. By juxtaposing these stylistic devices with the opening sequence, their position as commentaries on the wider search for Lucy is reaffirmed.

This construction of a predominant narrative circularity is further augmented by a series of repetitions of content. The first of these are Wendy's calls, which punctuate large sections of the film; following her dog's disappearance, Wendy continually resorts to calling her name, using declarative demands in the hope of attracting her attention. These aural devices reinforce the aforementioned deconstruction of causal relations in two ways. Firstly, they can be viewed as heavily redundant, involving a high degree of internal repetition; each instance is comprised of a string of related commands, shouted in various iterative reconfigurations ("come Lou," "Lucy come," "come out Lucy.") Secondly, this strategy is repeated heavily throughout the film's remaining scenes. Thus, they provide yet another meta-commentary on Wendy's search: striving for Lucy without any concrete leads, her calls come to signify the despairing paradox of a denarrativised, episodic goal-oriented search. One further aural element elaborates *Wendy & Lucy's* engagement with narrative repetition. In the film's opening tracking shot, we are introduced to a simple tune, hummed by Wendy. This tune is repeated twice more; firstly, as a muzak-jingle in the supermarket, as well as being hummed over the movie's final shot. These elements reinforce this reading of other aural elements within the text; embracing a repetitive internal structure as well as a recurring textual role, the tune provides a further destructuring device, drawing attention to a stasis based in repetition rather than a causally-driven momentum.

Taken together, these stylistic and textual devices problematize the constitution of an inherently goal-oriented, causal representation of cultural experience. Destabilising many of the elements within an overtly individualist premise, the structural unity of this cultural narrative is fundamentally breached. Through the use of elliptical cuts, episodic sequences, and formal and stylistic repetitions, the realisation of Wendy's goals are rendered inconsequential: whether achieved or not, they are severed from their role as the pinnacle of causal structures that are initiated but are then broken down. This is particularly clear in reference to the conclusion of the film, when Wendy finally locates Lucy. Whilst Wendy actively attempts to locate her dog, it appears that this achievement in born more out of contingency than causality, as by this point the search is largely outside of her control. This represents a distinct rupture between the goal-oriented protagonist and the goal itself, as Wendy no longer plays the role of a chief causal agent. The final sequences of the film attest to this narrative reconfiguration. Upon discovering Lucy, Wendy decides to leave her with the new foster family, displacing her dog as a constituent part of her wider journey; it is a

"break with…the sense of the film's own narrative drive."[70] Therefore, Lucy's retrieval no longer centres the meaningful rationalisation of the film's events. In doing so, this forms a direct attack on one of individualism's underlying binary structures. The discrete, exclusive division of success and failure is violated as the *successful* realisation of Wendy's goal *fails* to provide the reconciliation that is the assumed narrative *telos* embedded within the goal's pursuance.

The Journey: Erasing Wendy's Origins

The film's elaboration of a circular narrative logic is further exemplified by the structure of Wendy's wider trip. As suggested earlier, it is possible to read Wendy's journey to Ketchikan, Alaska as a figurative representation of individualist upward mobility. However, if one considers the content of Wendy's travel narrative, it can be argued that the basis of this structure is problematized in a similar manner to her short-term diegetic goals. For example, whilst the job in Alaska comprises the primary aim for Wendy's travails, her prospective position working at a fishery appears inherently seasonal. This is reinforced in a scene early in the film, where Wendy meets a series of fellow travellers. In conversing with a number of these, the alignment of Wendy with impending socio-economic betterment starts to unravel. To begin, the camera pans to show a number of these travellers, each one represented in an extreme close up (Figs.1.7-1.8):
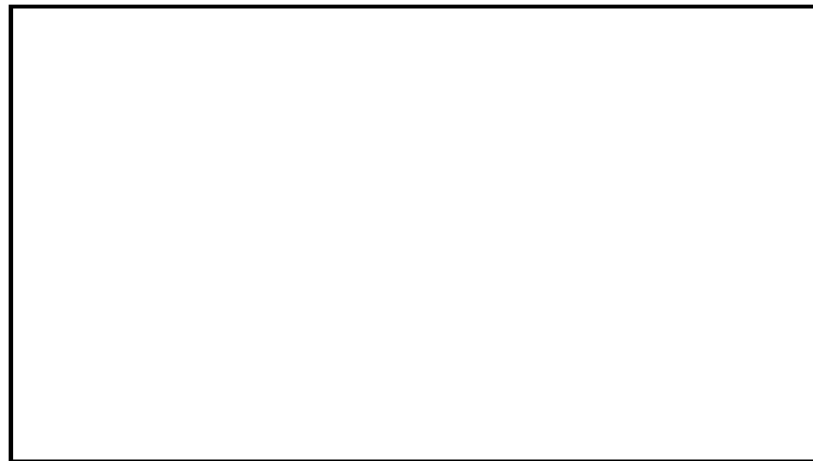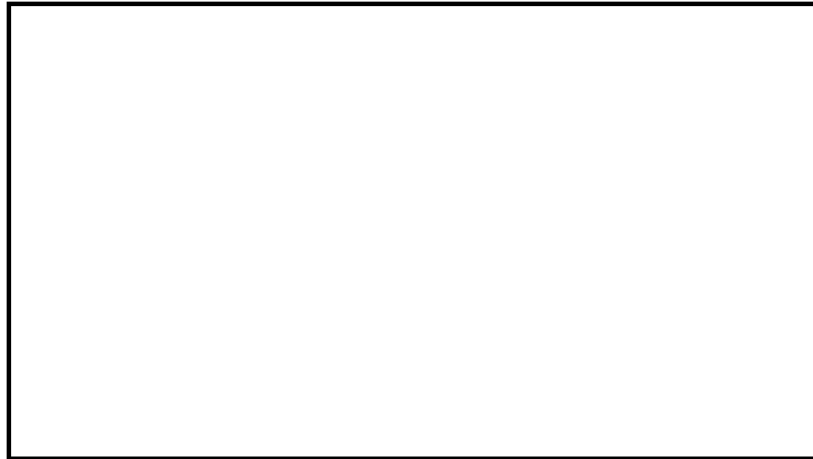
Figs.1.7-1.8

In doing so, each figure is located as an atomised individual, an agent capable of embarking upon their own narrative journey. Their affinity with Wendy is reinforced through stylistic mirroring. In a shot directly preceding this sequence (split only by the film's titles), Wendy is framed in much the same way, in extreme close-up, facing the camera (Fig.1.9):

Fig.1.9

However, it soon becomes apparent that her engagement with the group facilitates a dislocation of any individualist potential. Firstly, in speaking to another young woman, she finds that she is travelling in the opposite direction, "headed south," undermining the geographical alignment of Wendy's journey with economic elevation. Secondly, a conversation with a named traveller, Icky (Will Oldham), highlights the transitory nature of her plans. Icky has also worked in Alaska, and endorses Wendy's decision; recommending employers and areas with favourable conditions and pay, he provides anecdotal evidence for potential financial rewards in her chosen destination. Yet, as they talk around an Oregon campfire, it is clear that the prospect of this work is only temporary; like Icky, Wendy will

return to this spot, undermining any chance of lasting personal progression. This sense of a circular, transitory journey is reinforced by another of the film's recurring motifs, the image of birds in flight (Fig.1.10):
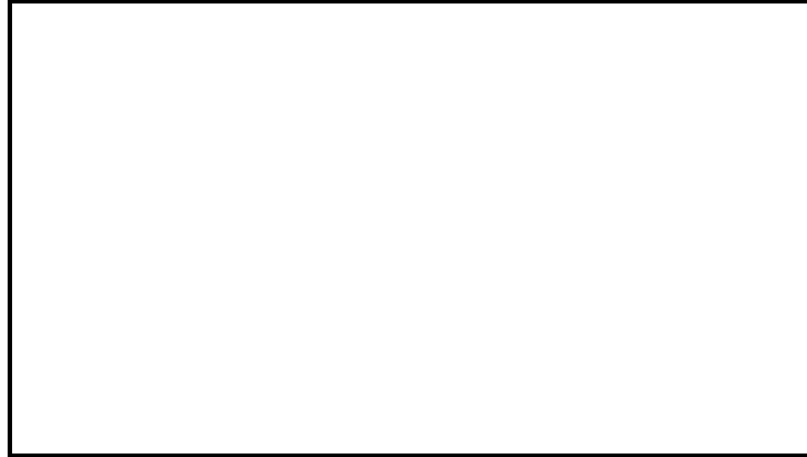
Fig.1.10

By consistently drawing attention to wildlife in migratory formations, a clear parallel can be constructed; as the birds undertake a temporary, seasonal journey, Wendy's narrative can be read as a similar repetitive cycle.[71]

Looking backwards through the architecture of Wendy's journey provides another means of deconstructing the closed narrative it appears to embody. This is due to the importance of an originary point from which the specific goals of a causal agent can stem; for the appearance of a unified structure towards a certain goal, a fixed starting point is required for progressing aspirations. Whilst this observation is relevant to any narrative form, the role of the origin appears particularly explicit in individualist discourse. As Levinson notes, "success myth" stories rely upon a protagonist that desires to escape their humble (or even poverty-stricken) beginnings; describing the (gender-coded) individualist agent, she asserts that "as he advances to the top, he overcomes his origins."[72] It is argued here that *Wendy and Lucy* engages directly with this particular aspect of individualist form, explicating the paradoxical status of this cultural narrative's structural opening. Indeed, one can read Wendy's journey as an example of what Derrida refers to as a "decentering," a moment "that in which, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse."[73] This is achieved through the ambiguous treatment of Wendy's own origins. Throughout the

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[71] In contrast, King argues that the repetitive structure of Wendy's journey signifies a "vicious cycle" that traps individuals in poverty and deprivation; see King, *Indie 2.0*, 206.
[72] Levinson, *The American Success Myth*, 22.
[73] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 354.

film there are allusions to the geography of her journey; maps, plans, number plates, and administrative forms all point to Wendy's travels beginning in Fort Wayne, Indiana. This fact is highlighted by references to her starting point from other characters; when noticing the Indiana plates on Wendy's car, the mechanic remarks that Wendy is "a long way from home." Wendy's itinerary and an annotated road atlas clearly mark her prospective route, establishing a fixed point of departure (Figs.1.11-1.12):
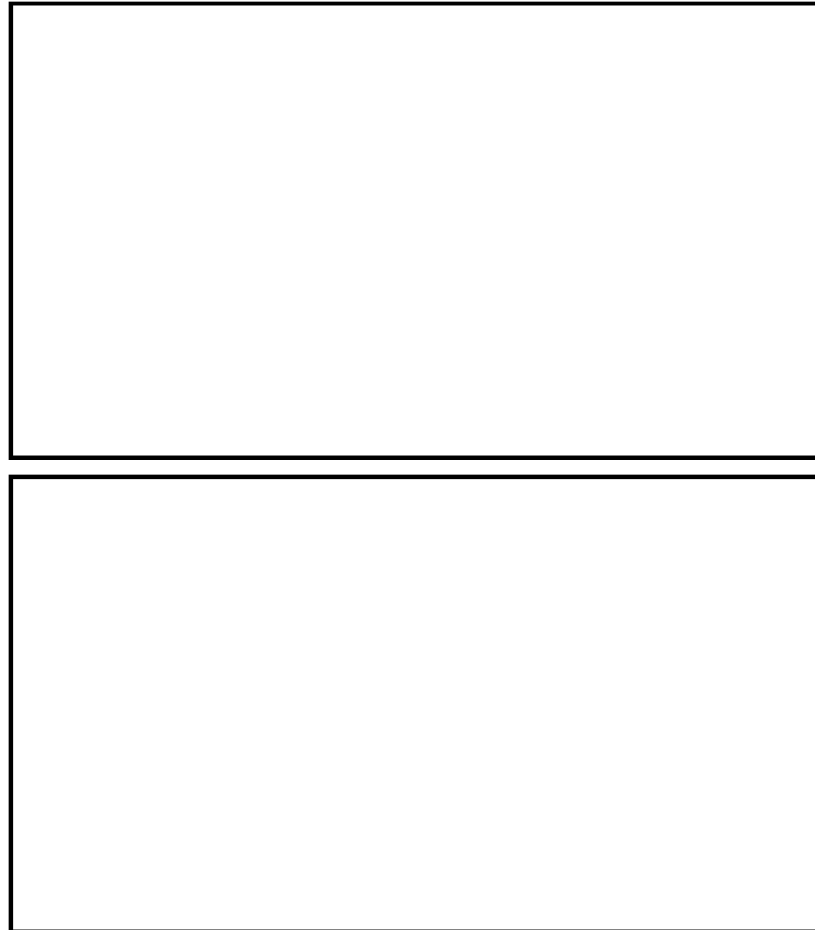
Figs.1.11-1.12

Nevertheless, the precision with which Wendy's journey is traced back is seemingly contradicted by the deferral of the origin's totalising role. As the origin (or centre) is prescribed to "orient, balance and organise" a fixed structure, it is tasked with drawing together myriad elements into a stable, unified meaning.[74] In this case, the origin is vital in producing a coherent understanding of Wendy's journey; the details, motives, and choices relating to her travels can only be understood in relation to her own personal context, a start-point that defines the unfolding of her journey as a causal structure. Yet, any further details

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[74] Ibid., 352.

of this contextual origin are elided; besides the geographical basis of her journey, we are provided with minimal details regarding Wendy's social, cultural, or economic beginnings. Other than a quick, dismissive phone call to her sister, we are provided with no information regarding her educational, social, or family background. In short, *Wendy and Lucy* remains silent about the varied socio-cultural discourses that could constitute its protagonist's subjectivity, rendering her attempts to "overcome" her origin a structural impossibility.[75]

Thus, whilst the film clearly evokes Wendy's origins as an organisational device, they are demonstrated as ultimately intangible and open to limitless substitution (or freeplay) with other potential centres of meaning. For example, Indiana clearly acts as a stable geographical referent, relating to a fixed locale. Yet, we are barred from any of the connotative values associated with this location, unable to locate the potential role it has played in Wendy's life (home, community, family) or in precipitating her journey. Thus, *Wendy and Lucy* visualises the contradiction that governs structuration in "classical thought"; as Derrida suggests, it represents the paradoxical notion that "the concept of centred structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground."[76]

"Two Sides of the Coin: Win, or Lose" - *Sure Fire*

> Every morning I wake up – boom! – shot full of energy...I just can't wait to get to work, I'll tell you why, because – boom! – every job I do – boom! - wants to get me on to the next one.

In this quote, *Sure Fire's* Wes (Tom Blair) articulates a similar role as an individualist "American archetype,"[77] driven by a desire to fulfil pre-planned economic aims. Through a direct engagement with individualism as a goal-orientated narrative, the film complements the deconstructive theoretical trends observed within *Wendy and Lucy*. Thus, rather than problematizing foundationalist notions of the protagonist's origins (as in *Wendy and Lucy*), *Sure Fire* focuses more clearly on narrative closure. In doing so, a number of aforementioned individualist narrative principles are reconfigured, undermining their presumed structural purposes within the cinematic text: the film provides a seemingly unequivocal conclusion, the murder-suicide of Wes and his son, Phillip (Phillip R. Brown).

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[75] Murphy also notes that "we know almost nothing about Wendy"; Murphy, "A Similar Sense of Time," 166; Gorfinkel suggests that Wendy has "few origins and no roots"; Gorfinkel, "Weariness, Waiting," 333-334.

[76] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 352.

[77] The Official Site for the Artist Jon Jost, Sure Fire, Accessed April 29, 2011, http://www.jon-jost.com/work/surefire.html.

Therefore, the underlying individualist impulse to rigidly define cultural experience (expressed by success/failure dichotomies) contradicts its own structural principles, abruptly terminating the plot's cause-effect chain; the film concludes with a necessary (but paradoxical) *destruction* of narrative goals, a fatal trajectory that ironically highlights the film's structuring processes. Additionally, rather than focusing purely on the reconfiguration of the protagonist's narrative arc, *Sure Fire* reflexively challenges a variety of formal attributes and procedures utilised in the rationalisation of smaller units of cinematic meaning (shots, scenes, sequences). Therefore, whilst *Wendy and Lucy* questions the process within which individualism narrativises disparate experiences, *Sure Fire* undermines the initial establishment of these experiences as discretely and internally self-coherent, present, or actualised.

Wes as the Goal-Oriented Protagonist

As with *Wendy and Lucy*, limited critical readings of *Sure Fire* place the film closely within individualist socio-cultural discourses. For example, Philip Kemp reads Wes as an "ideal citizen – supportive husband, solicitous father, generous friend and keen entrepreneur."[78] Kemp then positions Wes as the product of a number of "national myths": "Manifest Destiny, the frontier, go-getting, men and a man's world, and so on."[79] Levy considers the film within writer-director Jon Jost's wider forays into Westerns, a series of texts that openly explore American individualism through a series of iconic and generic reconfigurations: "Jost examines the inheritors of the mythic cowboys, left adrift after the closing of the frontier and the demise of the code of honor, living with false hopes of expansionism and individualism."[80] This judgement ties-in with other prominent constructions of individualism, observable within American studies scholarship. Bellah et al establish the cowboy as a "mythic individual hero" of American life, a heroic outsider working on behalf of a collective society within which he can never fully reside.[81] In contrast, Levy's reading of *Sure Fire* appears to locate Wes as a decadent inversion of these nostalgic frontier virtues. Expansionism and individualism remain, but are transformed into selfish impulses that occur to the detriment of the communal and relational structures that surround the central character.[82] This attitude represents a key deviation from normative narratives of individualism, upward mobility, and the self-made man; rather than venerating

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[78] Philip Kemp, Review of *Sure Fire*, dir. Jon Jost, *Sight & Sound 3*, no. 7 (1993): 51-52.
[79] Ibid., 52. Here, Kemp teases out discursive links between individualism and wilderness.
[80] Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*, 60.
[81] Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart*, 145.
[82] Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*, 60.

a moderated economic individualism, it is placed within a discrete oppositional hierarchy, as a deviation from the selfless ideal of serving a social "greater good." Therefore, whilst Levy's reading notes Wes' role as a negative exemplar of a rugged individualist, this cultural trope remains critically untouched.[83] By considering Wes' self-reliant individualism as an antithetical corruption of an idealised, selfless individualism, the former's role in structuring American cultural experience is disavowed rather than dismantled.

Readings of Wes as a debased former ideal are problematized by the film's formal and narrational properties. Rather than being viewed as an oppositional portrait of excessive egoism, one can place *Sure Fire's* representation within wider critiques of individualism as a means of structuring and retelling cultural experience. Akin to Wendy, Wes is located within cultural discourses that relate concepts of wealth accumulation, upward mobility, and self-determination with principles of narrative linearity, forward momentum, and causal coherence. Again, this radical proposition collapses arbitrary divisions between content and form, exploring the ways in which narrational properties shape (and subvert) our reception of the film's individualist scenario.

To begin, it is important to clarify how the film can be read as an individualist text. Unlike *Wendy and Lucy*, *Sure Fire* does not appear to be solely structured around the immediate pursuance of a specific character's narrative goals. Whilst Wes displays an essentially goal-oriented subjectivity, the film's plot is not a single narrative thread that can be elucidated in the same manner as *Wendy and Lucy's*. Instead, the narrative appears discordant and fragmentary, drawing together isolated scenes through modest plot and thematic connections. Thus, interspersed with Wes' plans are disjointed depictions of domestic life; we are provided insights into his friend Larry's (Robert Ernst) marital troubles, the loneliness of Larry and Wes' wives (Kristi Hager and Kate Dezina), and overhear seemingly irrelevant conversations in a local coffee house. Therefore, whilst *Sure Fire* systematically explores Wes' individualist subjectivity, this occurs within a wider exploration of other community relationships.

Nevertheless, playing the part of a ruthless, self-interested real-estate agent, Wes' goal-oriented actions clearly relate to a single, complex money-making plan, hinging on the sale of houses in his home state of Utah to rich Californians. The majority of Wes' activities appear directly connected to this overarching ambition. The extent to which Wes focuses on the achievement of this goal dictates a number of his interpersonal relationships: he views his friends as potential investors or employees, bores his wife with his elaborate plans, and enlists his son in preparing a house for a viewing. Additionally, Wes is clearly aware that his

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[83] Ibid.

ultimate goal rests upon a successful causal chain; the scheme is meticulously constructed in advance, demonstrated by Wes' assertion that he is "one year ahead of schedule."

Wes' characterisation as a self-made man is also established through his lexical choices in communicating with others. This is epitomised in one particular scene, a long-take conversation between Wes and Larry during a night-time drive (Fig.1.13):
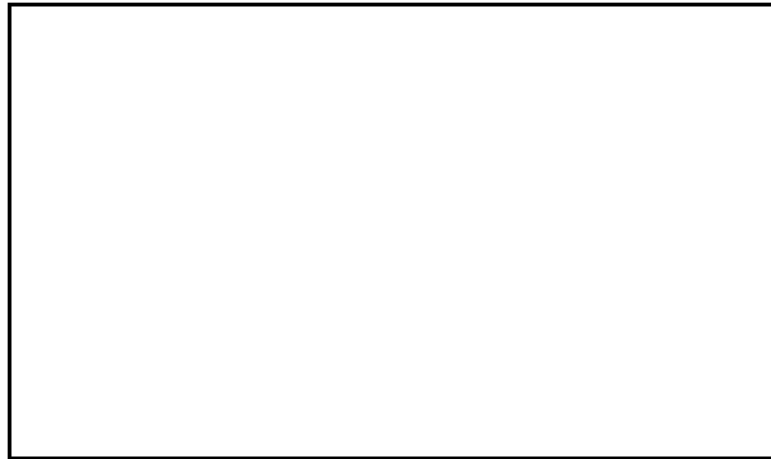
Fig.1.13

Utilising both interior monologue and external verbal communication, Wes systematically extols a personal philosophy that draws clear attention to the role of causal logic in his actions and conceptualisations of experience. Noting Larry's financial troubles, Wes firmly places the blame upon his friend's malaise, admonishing him for not replicating his own forward-thinking mind-set: "You're talking about the past, and I'm talking about the present, and you have to start thinking about your future." Conversely, in this section's opening quote, Wes describes the swift process by which he completes a task and moves onto the next, stating that "every job I do wants to get me on to the next one." This evocation of a forward momentum that links events or experiences is mirrored in the sentence structure that conveys and constitutes this message: Wes' repeated use of the word "boom," punctuating the description of his work ethic, comes to signify specific moments of causal progression, tying this description to an explosive motive force. Finally, a short soliloquy of Wes' from the beginning of the same scene attests to his embracing of a success/failure binary opposition that underlies this form of individualist discourse. As Wes again articulates his entrepreneurial attitude, he establishes two potential outcomes for his travails, "two sides of the coin": win, or lose. This discrete dualism elucidates the metaphysical tenor of Wes' thinking: individualism is sustained upon an absolutist, foundational success/failure dichotomy, a structure Wes uses to make sense of his actions and experiences.

The Figure of the Path

Thus, Wes' goal-orientated protagonist places *Sure Fire* within discourses of individualism as an American cultural narrative, collapsing distinctions between thematic and formal properties. This heightened reflexive self-awareness is built upon by a number of visual motifs, signifying (but then challenging) the principles that Wes directly espouses. The most prominent of these is the figure of "the path." As highlighted in *Wendy and Lucy*, one can identify the use of spatial metaphors for personal advancement and character causality, drawing upon pop-culture conceptions of an individual's "route" or "path" through life. Nevertheless, this motif is rendered within the two case studies in very different fashions. In *Wendy and Lucy*, the path eludes literal representation. Wendy's route is only displayed through plans and maps, as signs stripped of any material significance: individualism has no inherent foundation, a route with no root.

In comparison, literal representations of "the path" are utilised throughout *Sure Fire*. This is particularly clear in one extended sequence, an uninterrupted long-take of a highway journey (Fig.1.14):
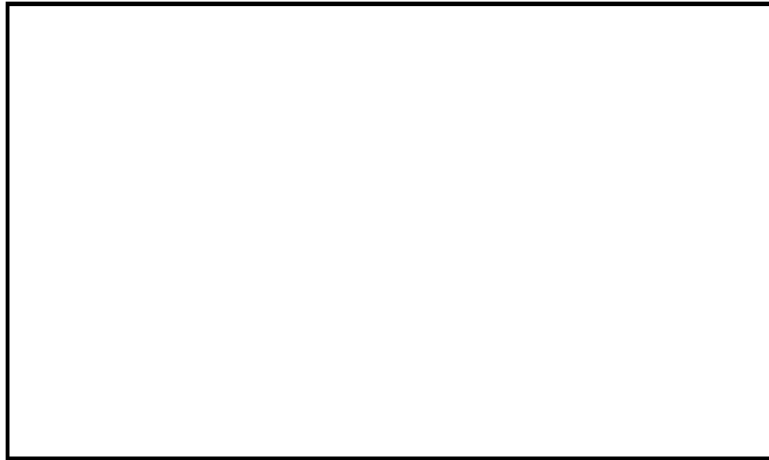
Fig.1.14

Travelling through an arid landscape, the shot begins on a straight road, a linearity punctuated by continuous road markings that bisect the image. The road then begins to wind through a mountain pass, oscillating between areas of glaring sun and darkened shade. As the sequence continues to unfold, it is augmented by a horizontally scrolling line of superimposed biblical text (Fig.1.15):
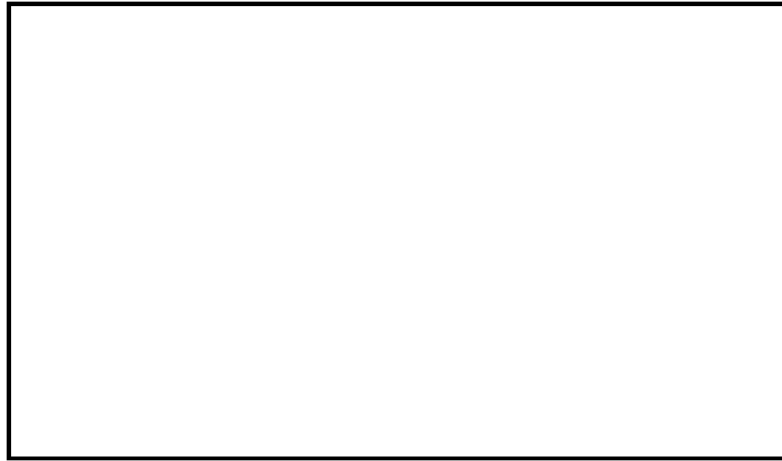
Fig.1.15

This evocation of the road as "path" draws attention to a constructed linear causality in a number of ways. Firstly, whilst the road stretches out in front of the spectator (the possibilities the route represents), the camera is actually travelling in the opposite direction, away from the horizon. Thus, whilst the road can symbolically represent an individualist potential for mobility and forward momentum, the direction of this motion is reversed. This individualist image is further problematized by the layout of the route. Whilst the shot begins with a lengthy period of travel on a straight road, the way soon begins to wind and camber, shifting direction in a manner that emphasises smooth curves and turns. This creates a circular, rotational effect, a clear contrast to "the path" as a figure for linear causality.

Finally, this interplay of causal linearity and figurative circularity is articulated in religious subtitles that move across the screen. The quote, taken from the Book of Mormon, directly references goal-fulfilment and causal linearity:

> The works, and the designs, and the purposes of God, can not be frustrated, neither can they come to naught, for God doth not walk in crooked paths; neither doth he turn to the right hand nor to the left; neither doth he vary from that which he hath said; therefore, his paths are straight and his course is one eternal round.

Superficially, this line of scripture reinforces a number of aforementioned structural principles. Nevertheless, the final line problematizes individualist linearity in a manner complementary to the visual metaphor that it accompanies. The quote "his paths are straight and his course is one eternal round" can be read as self-contradictory; although the clauses that precede this allude to narrow, pre-set goals, the notion of an "eternal round" evokes repetition and recurrence, an atemporal path that constantly returns the traveller to its starting point. As a result, this sequence augments the deconstructive repetitions utilised

143

throughout *Wendy and Lucy:* seemingly linear, individualist scenarios are subjected to diegetic recurrence, denying the progression of their supposed causal chains. In turn, this problematization of linear succession echoes Derrida's reconceptualization of metaphysical history. In exploring the possibility of a "history" that eschews logocentric assumptions, Derrida calls for a "'monumental, stratified, contradictory' history, a history that also implies a new logic of repetition and of the trace."[84] In basic terms, this attitude appears to inform both *Wendy and Lucy* and *Sure Fire's* deconstructions of causal narrative. The interplay of linear succession and circular motion constructs a paradoxical temporal logic, embracing principles of recurrence and repetition through the interplay of the "straight" and the "round."

Deconstructing the Event

Sure Fire's deconstructive cultural critique can be extended to the very experiences individualism links and rationalises, demonstrated by formal and editing choices that punctuate the film's representations of personal interaction and domestic space. In recent analyses of *Sure Fire*, formal properties have garnered extensive attention, overshadowing studies of the film's thematic content. King dedicates a sizeable section of *American Independent Cinema's* chapter on form to the film's director, using sequences from *Sure Fire* as examples of Jost's auteurist formal idiosyncrasies.[85] In his analyses, King notes that the film consistently fragments on-screen and domestic space, arguing that "conventional framing and editing regimes are frequently abandoned or undermined."[86] However, in King's adoption of Bordwellian categories, these devices are inevitably motivated by thematic or character-based factors, as a means of expressing "a pervading sense of disconnection and alienation."[87]

This scenic fragmentation is reinforced by the manner in which characters communicate throughout the film. In a sequence involving Wes and his wife, the former explains a plan he has devised to lure Californian customers to the area. Throughout the scene the camera stays rigidly fixed on Wes, only cutting to an image of his wife after he has finished his extensive soliloquy (Figs.1.16-1.17):

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[84] Derrida, *Positions*, 50.
[85] King, *American Independent Cinema*, 139-144.
[86] Ibid. 140-141.
[87] Ibid. 139.
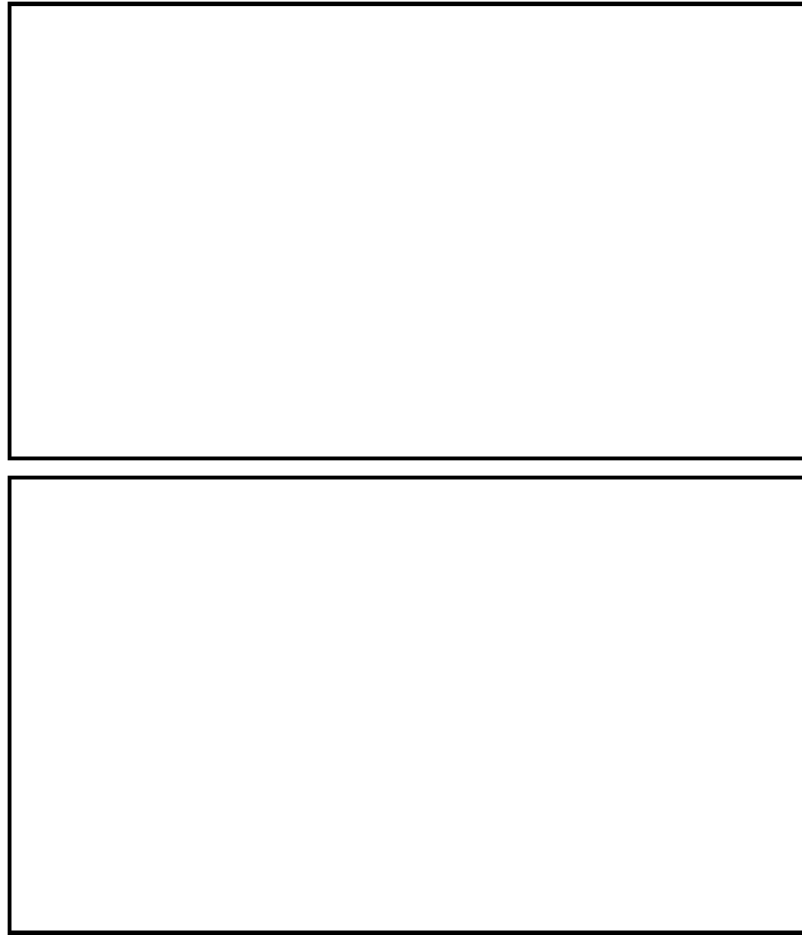
Figs.1.16-1.17

This separation of onscreen space is reinforced by the lack of a clear establishing shot at the beginning of the interchange; during Wes' speech, the fact that he is addressing his wife can only be discerned from the content of his instructions.

Importantly, King's reading of the film's formal innovations relies upon accepting an *a priori* set of conventional aesthetic values from which they can deviate. Thus, sequences like the one above can only be read as thematically-motivated if one accepts a specific construction of spatio-temporal coherence as denoting a normative representation of reality. Therefore, even as he suggests that *Sure Fire* radically departs from classical norms,[88] their dominant structural role is reaffirmed, providing a fixed base from which any formal innovation derives its meaning. Conversely, the formal attributes of *Sure Fire* can also be read as a further elaboration on the film's engagement with the narrativisation of cultural experience; specifically, they call into question the structural coherence of the scenes they convey, undermining the constitution of discrete and actualised events required to sustain an individualist causal chain. A striking example of this can be viewed in the

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[88] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 157.

editing of a sequence set in Larry's farmhouse. Returning home, he discusses financial matters with his wife, who is cooking dinner for the pair. When she reveals that Wes has been providing financial assistance with their mortgage payments, an argument ensues, and Larry is slapped around the face. Superficially, this can be read as a cogent scenario, in which Larry appears emasculated by his wife's knowledge of Wes' aid, loses his temper and is struck when he raises his voice.

Nevertheless, this coherence is undermined by the manner in which the sequence is assembled, through a series of overtly foregrounded cuts. As the scene unfolds, the narrative described above is constructed from a range of shots that follow Larry around the house. However, each shot is accompanied by an abrupt cut to black, being followed eventually by proceeding action. In a typical neo-formalist textual analysis, such cuts would primarily be read as signifying narrative ellipses; in Bordwell's model of classical narration, the cut to black would likely represent the occlusion of superfluous time, uneventful moments that detract from the construction and reception of a temporally cogent scene.[89] Thus, in this model the application of such techniques would require consistency with an overarching principle of "continuity editing,"[90] in which an intelligible sequence is formed from the ordering of spatio-temporal fragments.

This role of editing and form in constructing discrete narrative events has been explored by a number of film theorists, a notable example being Mary Ann Doane. Theorising a direct relationship between early film and the rationalisation of contingency, Doane stresses cinema's privileged (indexical) relationship with the unfolding of events as "aleatory, stochastic, contingent."[91] Therefore, as with Bordwell's exploration of "continuity editing," the occlusion of what Doane refers to as "dead time"[92] is vital in providing these experiences with a meaningful structure, as "the condition of a conceptualization of the 'event,'" where "time is condensed, and becomes eminently meaningful."[93] Nevertheless, for Doane the event is a structure that remains internally unstable, containing the seeds of its own destruction: the event is considered "the most condensed and semantically wealthy unit of time," yet remains "the site of intense internal contradictions."[94]

Doane broadens this notion of regulated contingency and paradox to a wider study of editing procedures. Although noting that editing "generates its own anxieties about discontinuity and absence," Doane reaffirms that "editing – as the possibility of departure

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[89] Representations of temporal ellipses are discussed in Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 44-45.
[90] Ibid. 45.
[91] Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, (London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 140.
[92] Ibid. 140-171.
[93] Ibid., 160.
[94] Ibid., 141.

from temporal and spatial continuity – is consistently perceived as the sine qua non of cinematic signification."[95] Therefore, editing is portrayed as another form of metaphysical structuration. Yet, Doane also suggests that such procedures contain their own self-contradictory critique, structuring on-screen actions whilst simultaneously fragmenting them.[96] Despite Doane's observations being rooted in the study of "early actualities,"[97] her judgements provide useful insights for recent conceptualisations of cinematic structure; formal and editing procedures are placed on the cusp of narrative and contingency, shaping cinematic meaning whilst simultaneously alluding to its inherent structural instability.

In the textual sample presented above, editing procedures draw close attention to their structural role, demonstrating an inadequacy in constructing a fully coherent representation of contingent events. For example, throughout the sequence the cuts to black do not appear to occlude uneventful narrative information, rather bisecting moments of narrative importance; in one shot Larry is positioned by the fridge, and after a cut he is shown to have walked a small distance, where he kisses his wife at the cooker. Thus, Larry has moved during the interstice, an action that occurs in real time, despite the presence of a cut. Whilst an image of this movement has been removed, the action unfolds as if the editing technique had not been employed, with no re-ordering of diegetic time. The redundancy of this cut, in which no real-time information has been occluded, is reinforced by the audio track for the scene, as it continues uninterrupted over the aforementioned rupturing of the image.

Therefore, *Sure Fire* ultimately adopts these structuring processes as a means of demonstrating the arbitrariness of their function: rather than producing a classically consistent representation of domestic life, the cuts to black produce a discordance that prevents the reception of the scene as unified or internally coherent. As the on-screen content appears to unfold in real-time, we are provided with an edited, fragmented image that nevertheless retains an unedited, continuous duration. This visualises the very purpose of event-construction posited by Doane, in which "the concept of the event provides a limit...and reinvests the contingent with significance. The contingent, in effect, is harnessed."[98] Thus, *Sure Fire* actively draws attention to the manner in which continuous, contingent experiences are granted significance by their assimilation into homogeneous, logocentric structures, be it a single event, or a narrative series of events.

Derrida also interrogates the concept of the event in *Archive Fever*. Using the archive as an illustrative example, he draws attention to the manner in which events are

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[95] Ibid., 185.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid., 164.
[98] Ibid.

formally produced by the act of their representation, providing contingent experiences with an arbitrary presence:

> The technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event.[99]

Thus, the quote above appears particularly relevant to studies of both cinema and individualism; Derrida's discussion of a temporal structuring element (the "relationship to the future") acknowledges the necessity of structured events in sustaining linear causal logic or anticipation.

Derrida's subsequent critique of the metaphysical event appears to reinforce the deconstructive editing schema employed in *Sure Fire*. Whilst noting the structural value of the archive, Derrida consistently articulates a radical unfixity of the event it produces. Geoffrey Bennington notes that iterability (repetition and re-evaluation) ensures that the event remains fundamentally contingent, open to new and unexpected transformations upon every occasion of its retelling,

> dividing its uniqueness and giving rise to the possibility of different versions and accounts of the 'same' event...but iterability also entails alteration and difference, so that something new, a new event, also takes place in every account of an event.[100]

This structural elusiveness ensures that the event can never be grasped as a static, self-coherent whole, a vital precursor to its incorporation into causal (and by extension, individualist) narrative structures. It is this transformative potential that is articulated by *Sure Fire*; the aforementioned scene continually escapes the attempts at rationalisation implied by foregrounded editing procedures, bridging and subverting interstitial gaps in representation.

This provides one final challenge to causal individualism: for Derrida, the event is constantly rewritten by that which follows it, always open to re-inscription.[101] Derrida himself notes the implausibility of a complete archive (and hence, a totalised representation of an event):

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[99] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans Eric Prenowitz (London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 17. Emphasis in original.
[100] Geoffrey Bennington, "In the Event," in *Derrida's Legacies: Literature and Philosophy*, eds. Robert Eaglestone and Simon Glendinning (London: Routledge, 2008), 33.
[101] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 68.

By incorporating the knowledge deployed in reference to it, the archive augments itself, engrosses itself.... But in the same stroke it loses the absolute and meta-textual authority it might claim to have. One will never be able to objectivise it with no remainder. The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out of the future.[102]

By its assimilation into a causal chain, the event is inevitably altered and recontextualised by other events to which it is tied. Thus, whilst this manifestation of individualism appears predicated on the successive achievement of identifiable, fixed goals, the unity of these goals is erased the moment they are positioned as events (the act of their fulfilment) within a causal relationship with one another.

The End of the Path

This contradictory dynamic of inextricably tying together amorphous, fluid events is reinforced by a wider narrative critique, undertaken in the film's concluding scenes. This appears as the inverse of the narrative interrogations of *Wendy and Lucy*, in which the film problematizes the unity of Wendy's origins. Conversely, *Sure Fire* utilises the film's shocking conclusion as a means of highlighting a key contradiction within individualist narratives: the very causal structure of goal-fulfilment must be terminated as a means of articulating its successful completion. This is figured literally, as the film concludes with the suicide of Wes, after he murders his son. Therefore, although individualism is conceptualised as a forward-oriented progression of goals and events,[103] the desire to rigidly demarcate narrative elements evokes an antithetical stasis, a temporal contradiction demonstrated through the concept of narrative closure.

Throughout *Sure Fire*, there are references to an upcoming event, which ultimately marks the end of the film's narrative: "the big hunt." During the film, references to hunting are common, both visually (Wes is shown practicing his aim on a target) and verbally, in which Wes uses related terminology in conversation with others. Indeed, Wes often employs these references to articulate his individualist aims, utilising violent hunting metaphors in explaining his plans to his peers. This is encapsulated in the film's title: *Sure Fire* can refer to a bullet that flies straight and true (another reference to causal linearity). However, the

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[102] Ibid.

[103] Levinson explores this tension, noting that mobility implies "perpetual motion and continuous betterment" that causes a "spiritual motion sickness." Levinson, *The American Success Myth on Film*, 34.

title also alludes to Wes' entrepreneurial use of the phrase, as he suggests to potential investors that his plan is a "sure fire winner."

   This reading is reinforced by several sequences that construct a wider variety of visual and lexical connections, inextricably tying hunting to individualism. Firstly, the importance of targets draws parallels between Wes' financial goals and his gun-sight, as both involve identifying and fulfilling specific aims. This is epitomised by the sequence in which Wes practices with his rifle. Several gunshots are presented in a similar pattern of camera shots; there is a close-up of Wes' finger on the trigger, followed by another of the target. This basic model is repeated several times, varying the frequency of trigger and target shots. After a number of close-ups on Wes' hand, there is finally a long shot depicting both Wes and the target (Figs.1.18-1.20):
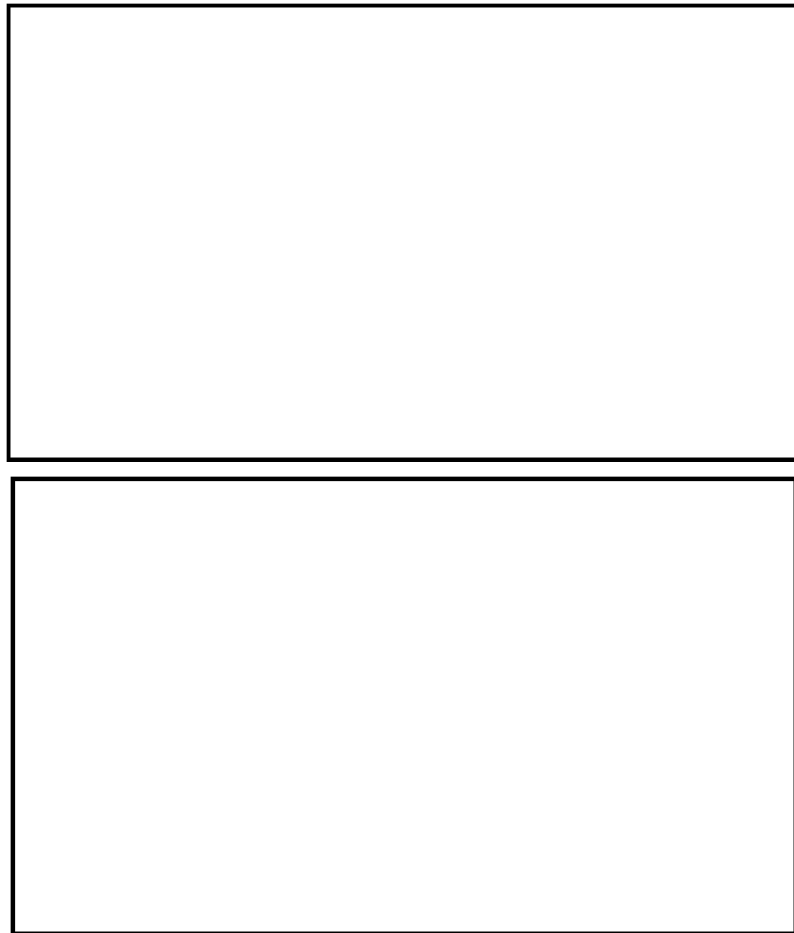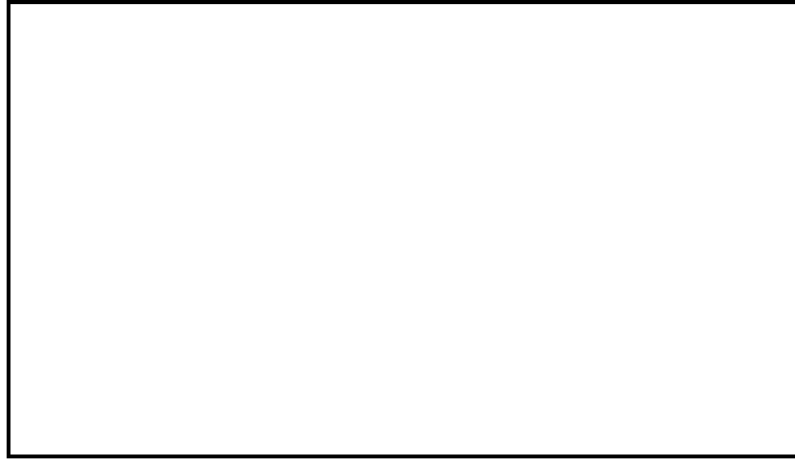
Figs.1.18-1.20

Firstly, it is important to note that the act of shooting is not framed as one continuous, totalised movement. Instead, it is constructed through a series of close-ups, emphasising specific moments in a causal chain: the act of pulling the trigger (the cause), and the shot of the target (the effect). These two moments are drawn into a relationship of temporal succession, producing a seemingly cogent, causal narrative of action.

This representation of constructed goal-fulfilment is amplified by the scene's repetitive temporality. Although the action seems to precipitate an unequivocal cause-effect relationship, it is one that is repeated a number of times, continuing in a loop as Wes fires off shot after shot. This constructs a contradictory temporal logic akin to the aforementioned "eternal round"; straight, causal lines are juxtaposed with a repetitive circularity. Additionally, as the sequence continues to repeat, strict cause/effect delineations appear increasingly blurred; robbed of any structural self-coherence, each shot is rendered a constituent of a terminal loop, a cyclical event with no discernible beginning or end.

This complex representational critique is further elucidated during "the big hunt." As the sequence begins, Wes presents his son, Phillip, with a new gun, following the gift with a hunting safety lecture. During this monologue, Wes draws yet another parallel between hunting and economic individualism: speaking of his responsibility to provide a clean kill, Wes discusses an "implied contract" between hunter and prey, adopting entrepreneurial jargon to make his point. However, soon after hunt begins, Phillip informs him that Wes' wife is considering a move to California, and that he intends to go with her. Once Wes and Phillip are secluded from their hunting companions, Larry and Dennis (Dennis Brown), two gunshots ring out. From the reactions of Larry and Dennis, it is assumed that Wes has murdered Phillip, before turning the gun on himself. However, the actual shootings escape direct representation; the gunshots occur off-screen, and when their companions arrive, only Wes and his son's legs are visible.

To begin, the apparent cause of Wes' actions (the revelation about his wife's plans to leave) represents an inversion of Wes' spatialised goals; whilst he is attempting to attract rich Californians to move to Utah, she threatens to move in the opposite direction. This appears as a direct challenge to the alignment of his plans with socio-economic reward and upward mobility, as the northward geographical movement associated with his scheme is counteracted by her plans to make this journey in reverse. Wes' reaction to this challenge can also be read as a moment in which his individualist narrative lapses into internal contradiction. As suggested above, Wes and his son's deaths effectively conclude the film's plot. In marking the end of the film, it also provides the epitome of closure, as the causal chain centred on Wes as a narrative agent is abruptly and unequivocally finished. Indeed, the finality of this event is reinforced by the accompanying death of Wes' son. Not only has Wes been rendered terminally static, but Phillip cannot inherit and carry on his father's work, stunting any potential patriarchal succession.

Therefore, in providing a sudden conclusion to Wes' narrative, the two deaths seem to stand in direct opposition to his individualist aims, robbing the protagonist of agency, abruptly rupturing the cause-effect chain that sustains his goals. However, it can be argued that this effect is itself a product of the metaphysical foundations of individualism, the desire to imbue experience with discrete, fixed meanings. Derrida appears to proscribe a similar structuring dynamic to death itself, which he describes as a marker of an "irreplaceable singularity."[104] Indeed, Nicholas Royle notes that in utilising Derrida's notion of plenitude (given as "the 'desire for absolutely actual and present intention")), the purest manifestation of "presence" would indeed be death.[105] This "double bind" is clearly demonstrated by Derrida himself, punning on the word "end": "plenitude is the end (the goal), but were it attained, it would be the end (death.)"[106] Therefore, whilst death provides a fundamental rupture, a termination of narrative goals, it also provides the purest form of presence, a transcendental unity that underlies and sustains the operation of causal linearity. *Sure Fire* encapsulates this contradictory dynamic within its closing scenes, and their relation to the narrative as a whole. Death prevents the fulfilment of Wes' aims, yet is written into the very structure of cultural rationalisation that constitutes a cogent individualist form. This device exemplifies *Sure Fire's* potential as a deconstructive text: the structural foundations of individualism are used to communicate the arbitrary and self-contradictory status of its narrativisation.

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[104] Jacques Derrida, *Aporias: Dying---Awaiting (One Another at) the* "*Limits of Truth*", trans. Thomas Dutroit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 74.

[105] Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2003), 67.

[106] Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*., ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 129.

Conclusions

As demonstrated through close-textual readings, *Wendy and Lucy* and *Sure Fire* provide a variety of complementary deconstructive effects, primarily focused on structural properties associated with American individualism. Principles of causal linearity, forward momentum, and the goal-oriented protagonist are actively engaged, comprising the formal and thematic premises of the two texts. In doing so, the two films share a number of vital commonalities. Firstly, both texts utilise a variety of visual motifs that reinforce their engagements with linear narratives of cultural experience. Thus, the sequence of Wes' shooting practice and the shots of Oregonian freight trains embody similar symbolic values: both provide clear figures of causal narrative logic, evoking complementary values of cause/effect and linear motion, integral to individualism as a cultural narrative.

Furthermore, whilst instituting a set of clear narrative goals for the two main protagonists, these texts are primarily cast as static or episodic. This contradictory temporal dynamic, in which character goals are radically detached from the causal momentum they imply, is achieved primarily through a combination of narrative ellipsis and formal repetitions. This is typified by *Wendy and Lucy*, in which a number of shots and motifs are continually recycled throughout the course of the film, stymieing any sustained causal progress. Thus, linear progression is fundamentally undermined as it is juxtaposed with a pervasive evocation of narrative recurrence and stasis. The resultant sense of narrative circularity also appears to be figuratively replicated in both films, shown in Wendy's "calls" and in *Sure Fire's* evocation of "the path." As a result, both texts fundamentally dismantle any absolute opposition between form and content; a subversive narrative recurrence is reflected not only in the ordering of the films' scenes, but in their visual and figurative content. Thus, this appears to reinforce a theoretical proposition suggested in this chapter's introduction: namely that individualism self-consciously elucidates its narrational function, internalising principles of causal rationalisation within its thematic and symbolic content.

Finally, the two films provide complementary explorations of the limits and bounds of individualist narratives, problematizing the self-coherence of their protagonist's story arcs. Importantly, both *Wendy and Lucy* and *Sure Fire* achieve this through a shared, paradoxical effect: the incorporation of a seemingly ceaseless narrative momentum within a clearly demarcated, rationalised structure. In *Wendy and Lucy*, the origins of the protagonist are problematized and effaced; portrayed only through secondary denotations (maps, forms), Wendy's origins are simultaneously foregrounded and immaterialised, shorn of any wider significance in informing our reading of her journey. Conversely, *Sure Fire* focuses more clearly on the issue of narrative closure; mimicking Derrida's reading of death as an

"irreplaceable singularity,"[107] the film's terminal conclusion destroys Wes' goals whilst simultaneously replicating the metaphysical logic of self-presence that sustains his goal-orientation.

Therefore, through close-textual analysis, one can observe in *Wendy and Lucy* and *Sure Fire* complementary deconstructions of individualist cultural narratives. Undermining a range of structural principles and oppositions, the two films elaborate a contradictory narrative logic: both films provide goal-oriented, linear, causal structures that contain the seeds of their own destruction. Additionally, this reflexive emphasis allows for a more active form of cinematic reading, noting a clear dependency between theoretical methodology and textual content. Thus, this reading forms a dynamic engagement with the two texts, teasing out moments of contradiction that shape the film's thematic explorations of individualism as deconstructive.

Finally, in forwarding this reading of the two films, numerous concepts (linear causality, narrative momentum) are severed from their prominent association with the "classical mode"[108] of Bordwellian film theory, providing a significant departure from previous readings of narrative in independent cinema. Indeed, this appears to vindicate the broader aims of this project in deconstructing the oppositions that constitute contemporary independent film as a coherent classification. Rather than positioning the films within *a priori* cinematic categories or modes, textual and structural qualities are considered in reference to wider conceptual and theoretical schema, allowing a re-reading of the films in relation to themes of cultural narration and national identity. Therefore, a fundamental critique of existing formalist definitions is displayed as a vital methodological precursor, opening up the possibility for diverse (and previously inhibited) textual engagements.

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[107] Derrida, *Aporias*, 74.
[108] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 156.

Chapter Three – Deconstructing the American Nuclear Family: Challenging Domestic Whole(some)ness

The American Nuclear Family as Cultural Centre and Origin

In the previous chapter, critical and textual analyses focused upon dislodging an individualist subject from his purportedly indelible position as the heroic protagonist of American national narrative. Unencumbered by oppressive social ties, the atomised individualist figure is embedded within causal narratives of upward mobility. However, further theorisations of American identity have utilised similar structural tenets to locate the nation's cultural centre on a different social scale. Rather than focusing specifically upon an individualised subject, such discourses have argued that a coherent national self is constituted within a self-contained cultural milieu: the *nuclear family*.[1] Thus, in analysing familial scholarship alongside discussions of individualism, it is apparent that they utilise analogous terminology to root a homogeneous national character within specific autonomous structures. Described as a "mythical entity,"[2] a "sacred place,"[3] and a vital anchor to the American "way of life,"[4] critical discourses continually position the nuclear family as an eminent socio-cultural nexus.

In intractably tying the family to broader constructions of national identity, scholarly accounts focus primarily on a specific nuclear ideal. Judith Stacey succinctly summarises homogenised pop-culture familial representations, suggesting that in an American context there exists a "family form that most Americans now consider to be traditional – an intact nuclear unit inhabited by a male breadwinner, his full-time homemaker wife, and their dependent children."[5] Joseph M. Hawes and Elizabeth I. Nybakken provide a similar outline of a national nuclear norm, constructing it as a pervasive model to which American families aspire: "the nuclear family consisting of father, mother, and children living together within a privatized household has often served as the model of the American family."[6] As a result,

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[1] As Shapiro summarises, "the current proliferation of family values discourses reflects… an attempt to defend a nationalist narrative of undivided and coherent citizen subjectivity." Michael J. Shapiro, *For Moral Ambiguity: National Culture and the Politics of the Family* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 125.

[2] Ibid., 5.

[3] Mary Bernstein and Renate Reimann, "Queer Families and the Politics of Visibility," in *Queer Families, Queer Politics*, eds. Mary Bernstein and Renate Reimann (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 2.

[4] Emanuel Levy, "The American Dream of Family in Film: From Decline to Comeback," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 22, no. 2 (1991): 187.

[5] Judith Stacey, *In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 6, 38.

[6] Joseph M. Hawes and Elizabeth I. Nybakken, *Family and Society in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 1.

academic studies reaffirm the predominance of a particular *image* of the family in American cultural discourse, a specific value-laden model described as "conjugal, patriarchal (and) heteronormal."[7]

Broad readings of the family as a universal socio-biological origin provide a structural model for more focused theorisations of the family's unique status within American culture;[8] Ruth Cavan describes the family as "a deeply rooted institution in the United States."[9] Prominent early theorists of American national identity (such as Alexis de Tocqueville) have suggested that "democratic" aspects of the American character are microcosmically encapsulated within the structure of the nuclear family, ensuring a vital correspondence between domestic and national cultures: a "spirit of equality" can be discerned "around the domestic hearth."[10] In turn, value-judgements regarding the importance of the family in American life frequently appeal to abstract notions of cultural suitability: numerous scholars have reinforced a common-sense discourse that stress a "goodness of fit"[11] of the nuclear family to American society, a structural relationship that "makes sense" and precipitates a coherent experience of national being.[12] In doing so, such readings typify what Michael J. Shapiro refers to as a "universalizing political discourse that valorizes the traditional family as a foundational and moral condition of possibility for national political coherence."[13]

Readings of the family as a structural foundation for cultural order are reinforced by explicit references to its position as a cultural centre. Brigitte and Peter Berger's *War over the Family* analyses this common structural motif, describing conventional readings of the American family as an unchanging "intimate core." [14] Betty G. Farrell espouses a similar view, which she uses to account for the role of the family in a various societal discourses and issues: "the family in American history has always been at the center of social life and has served to refract many social concerns."[15] In summarising 1980s "family values"

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[7] Shapiro, *For Moral Ambiguity*, 5.
[8] For readings of the family as a fundamental and natural human structure, see Betty G. Farrell, *Family: The Making of an Idea, an Institution, and a Controversy in American Culture* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1999), 7; Diana Gittins, *The Family in Question: Changing Households and Familiar Ideologies* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 0; Bert N. Adams, *The American Family: A Sociological Interpretation* (Chicago: Markham Pub. Co., 1971), 1; Jean Bethke Elshtain, "The Heart of the Matter: The Family as the Site of Fundamental Ethical Struggle," in *Family Transformed: Religion, Values, and Society in American Life*, eds. Stephen M. Tipton and John Witte (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 212; John Sirjamaki, *The American Family in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 4.
[9] Ruth Shonle Cavan, *The American Family* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1970), 1.
[10] Alexis De Tocqueville, quoted in Shapiro, *For Moral Ambiguity*, 89.
[11] Adams, *The American Family,* 59.
[12] Cavan, *The American Family*, 15.
[13] Shapiro, *For Moral Ambiguity*, 53.
[14] Brigitte Berger and Peter Berger, *The War over the Family: Capturing the Middle Ground* (London: Penguin, 1984), 3-4.
[15] Farrell, *Family*, 164.

discourse, Sarah Harwood appends this perceived social centrality with a moralistic dimension: "the family…became the moral centre for political and cultural rhetoric; a family which was held as metonymic, explicable and responsible for the social formation *in toto*."[16] Finally, Jean Bethke Elshtain utilises a bodily metaphor to communicate the family's position as a vital organ in the functioning of a healthy nation, describing the nuclear domestic unit simply as the "heart" of America.[17]

Discourses of American family centrality do more than simply reinforce the pre-eminence of the family in constituting a specific national identity. Rather, the centre also connotes distinct structural properties, allying popular discussions of the family wholesomeness with logocentric conceptions of wholeness, order, and presence. As a pre-cursor to his fundamental displacement of the centre in metaphysical discourse, Jacques Derrida notes that it is commonly furnished with ontological attributes of absolute fixity and self-coherence: its role "was not only to orient, balance and organize the structure…but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure."[18] In making this claim, Derrida establishes the centre's specifically logocentric function; in aligning all structures with a *telos* of absolute self-identity, it regulates and arrests a dynamic play of spatio-temporal *différance*: "it is the point at which substitution of contents, elements or terms is no longer possible."[19] However, Derrida notes that this logocentric economy produces a structural paradox, a rupture that fatally compromises the centre's metaphysical solidity: for the centre to be legible it must be ontologically unique, and if this is the case, it cannot be assimilated within the structure it orients:

> It has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality. This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it.[20]

Here, Derrida discerns within Western metaphysics a necessity to think of the centre as both inside and outside of the structure, a contradiction that contravenes logocentric principles of totalised presence and oppositional difference: "the concept of centered structure – although

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[16] Sarah Harwood, *Family Fictions: Representations of the Family in 1980s Hollywood Cinema* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 3.
[17] Elshtain, "The Heart of the Matter," 223.
[18] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), 352.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid. Emphasis in original.

it represents coherence itself…– is contradictorily coherent."[21] Thus, in positioning the family as a national centre-point, the domestic structure adopts a purportedly essential unity, fixity, and self-coherence. Yet, this theorisation simultaneously produces the possibility of the family's critical displacement, a deconstructive gesture undertaken by this chapter's close-textual analysis.

The static coherence of nuclear family form is solidified through the figurative imagining of the family as an elemental structure from which a larger societal fabric is assembled. In propagating this assumption, popular and academic discourses continually describe the nuclear family as a social unit that carries a self-identical meaning within a rigidly bounded structure. John Demos and Arlene S. Skolnick both utilise architectural metaphors to demonstrate this relationship between the family "unit" and the nation, describing families as the "building blocks" from which American society is assembled.[22] Images of the nuclear family as an enduring cultural totality or "center of stability"[23] are further evidenced in Vivian Sobchack's study of domestic representations in Hollywood film; she approaches the nuclear unit as a self-contained signifying economy, describing the "American bourgeois family" as "an ideological as well as interpersonal structure characterized…by its cellular construction."[24] Finally, it is possible to discern an antonymic structural opposition within scholarly discourses that spatialises the family's totalising semiotics. Located within oppositional discourses of the public and private, the American family is presented as a personal realm impervious to broader social changes, a hermetically-sealed, static structure opposed to a tumultuous public world.[25] Constructions of the nuclear family as a private entity thematize its formal and structural properties; described as a "haven in a heartless world"[26] and a "nest of domesticity,"[27] familial definitions reify connotations of privacy, isolation, reassuring stasis, and totality. Therefore, whilst recent

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[21] Ibid.

[22] John Demos, "Images of the Family, Then and Now," in *Changing Images of the Family*, eds. Virginia Tufte and Barbara Mayerhoff (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 46-47; Arlene S. Skolnick, *Embattled Paradise: The American Family in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 48.

[23] Cavan, *The American Family*, 37.

[24] Sobchack, "Bringing it all Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange," in *American Horrors*, ed. Gregory A. Waller (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 176. Also see Lee Drummond, *American Dreamtime: A Cultural Analysis of Popular Movies, and their Implications for a Science of Humanity* (London: Littlefields Adams Books, 1996), 257.

[25] For privatised readings of the nuclear family, see Elshtain, "The Heart of the Matter," 212-3; Demos, "Images of the American Family, Then and Now," 50-51, 55; Tamara K. Hareven, "Family Time and Historical Time," in *The Family*, ed. Alice S. Rossi, Jerome Kagan and Tamara K. Hareven (New York: Norton, 1978), 68.

[26] Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Beseiged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 6.

[27] Mark Poster, *Critical Theory of the Family* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), xii.

scholarship has attempted to challenge the distinctiveness of these dualistic categories,[28] the metaphysical structural assumptions associated with privatised readings of the nuclear family still play a vital role in framing its socio-cultural representation.

Dual images of family wholeness and wholesomeness further engender familial self-presence by representing static, timeless domestic structures.[29] Farrell treats these temporal properties as integral constituents of idealised family images, arguing that American culture is dominated by a "romanticized and static image of the family."[30] Stacey observes similar suppositions within recent (polemical) discussions of the family, suggesting that a "dubious assumption of the family-values campaign is that (family) truth is timeless as well as singular."[31] In accordance with this suggestion, Shapiro also notes that in recent "culture wars" discourses the family has been approached as "a historically stable, noncontingent result of natural inclinations and morally appropriate choices."[32] Finally, Harwood focuses closely upon temporal stasis in filmic families: discussing the usually totalised resolution of familial narratives, she contends that the family is "invoked in a bid to fix time and secure stasis in a period of great flux."[33] Thus, Harwood concludes that a central aspect of familial discourse is a purported "claim to timelessness" that naturalises and universalises specific models of cultural fixity: "the moment of representation – the imaging of the family – was thus a temporal elision which collapsed past, present and future into an always-already, has-been and ever-shall-be, model for social organisation."[34] In treating the American family as a transcendental signified, these discourses tacitly construct it as a "natural" configuration; in turn, this evokes prominent discursive debates that centre on whether the nuclear family is "genetically determined"[35] or a "primary social construct."[36] However, whilst perceptions of familial naturalness clearly reify its purported spatio-temporal fixity,[37] antithetical

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[28] Readings that challenge delineations of private/public include Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 127, 145; Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 31-55; Clifford E. Clark, *The American Family Home, 1800-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1986), 46; Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family* (London: Verso, 1991), 89.
[29] See Skolnick, *Embattled Paradise*, 3.
[30] Farrell, *Family*, 14.
[31] Stacey, *In the Name of the Family*, 98.
[32] Shapiro, *For Moral Ambiguity*, 2.
[33] Harwood, *Family Fictions*, 2.
[34] Ibid., 36, 39.
[35] Allan Carlson, "Liberty, Order and the Family," in *The Family: Is it Just another Lifestyle Choice?* ed. Jon Davies (London: IEA Health and Welfare, 1993), 30.
[36] Murray Pomerance, "The Look of Love: Cinema and the Dramaturgy of Kinship," in *A Family Affair: Cinema Comes Home*, ed. Murray Pomerance (London: Wallflower, 2008), 295-296.
[37] See Elshtain, "The Heart of the Matter," 216; Poster, *Critical Theory of the Family*, 79-80. For "ideological" critiques of this discourse see Nicola Evans, "The Family Change Colour: Interracial Families in Contemporary Hollywood Film," *Screen* 43, no. 3 (2002): 274; Barrett and McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family*, 35; Poster, *Critical Theory of the Family,* xv.

perspectives mobilise a similar logocentric rhetoric in their reading of the nuclear family as *essentially* cultural.[38] Thus, antonymic familial readings grant the nuclear family with an inherent cultural meaning, regardless of which specific ontology is vehemently espoused.[39]

In positioning the American family directly within the closure of metaphysics, it is cast as a "normative entity"[40] that disavows differences and regulates diverse cultural experiences and meanings. This process of cultural homogenisation is explicated in more complex, reflexive scholarly conceptualisations of the nuclear family. Returning to Shapiro, he directly attacks representations of the family as an eternal, hermetically-sealed textual body; "the 'family' is a contingent form of association with unstable boundaries and varying structures."[41] As a result, "conservative appropriations of historical and contemporary family values" are rendered an oppressive "regulative fiction," a "weapon against a politics of multiplicity."[42] In similar terms, Stacey frames idealised family rhetoric as a coercive discursive force, a regulatory form that imposes a "deceptive unity" upon a "contested term."[43] In contrast to this restrictive representational norm, Stacey suggests that "like postmodern culture, contemporary Western family arrangements are diverse, fluid and unresolved."[44] In doing so, she theorises a "postmodern family condition": stripped of its regulative narrative status, this family model exhibits "features of improvisation, ambiguity, diversity, contradiction, self-reflection and flux."[45]

This chapter constructively builds upon these recent theoretical critiques, discerning similar representational challenges to the nuclear family within a specific cinematic case-study. The rest of this introduction provides a critical survey of American familial discourses, hinging on a reflexive discussion of how domestic representations have been accommodated within rigid dichotomous categories; conflicting images of the American family frequently oscillate between idealisation and vilification, utopian and dystopian poles. Indeed, it is suggested that several recent studies have constructed a historically-specific, oppositional familial discourse, commonly framed as a partisan "war over the family."[46] Finally, I conclude with an investigation of cinematic family scholarship, culminating with a specific examination of domestic settings in independent film. Thus, this

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[38] For examples of this rhetoric see Evans, "The Family Changes Colour," 274-275; John Demos, *Past, Present, and Personal: The Family and the Life Course in American History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), x; Farrell, *Family*, 3; Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 6; The Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, quoted in Barrett and McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family*, 35.

[39] For a brief discussion that superficially questions this dualistic economy, see Barrett and McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family*, 26.

[40] Harwood, *Family Fictions*, 9-10.

[41] Shapiro, *For Moral Ambiguity*, 2.

[42] Ibid., 3, 6.

[43] Stacey, *In the Name of the Family*, 38.

[44] Ibid., 7.

[45] Ibid., 143.

[46] See Berger and Berger, *The War over the Family*.

again provides a medium-specific context for the textual analysis that follows, allowing a case-study exploration of deconstructive aesthetics to be considered in relation to broader debates surrounding the family in popular media.

Oppositional Families

As explored above, prominent images of familial coherence are commonly founded upon a series of interrelated binary structures (private/public, natural/cultural); in turn, these dualities furnish the American nuclear family with an essential spatio-temporal solidity. However, recent studies of the family have observed this binary logic on both micro- and macro-structural levels; totalised familial representations have themselves been divided into antithetical, value-laden categories, judged as either positive or negative, idealised or debased, utopian or dystopian. In broad terms, studies of the family in American culture have focused on a traditionally dominant image of the nuclear household as an idyllic milieu positioned at the heart of a shared national character. Describing the pre-eminence of nuclear structures in American cultural discourses, Berger and Berger note that these representations carried near-universally positive connotations: "the taken for granted definition of the family in American culture, of course, was not merely descriptive but charged with positive value."[47] Similarly, Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh argue that normalised familial representations throughout Western culture are predominantly idyllic: "the imagery of idealized family life permeates the fabric of social existence and provides a highly significant, dominant and unifying, complex of social meaning."[48] Enlarging upon these abstract descriptions of familial exceptionalism, Harwood provides a detailed taxonomy of idealised nuclear icons, identifiable (positive) tropes observable in Hollywood texts: "These ideal family types are authentic inheritors and embodiment of the American Dream – white, middle-class, affluent, beautiful, mid-American, affectionate, permanently laughing/happy, untouched by external events and upwardly mobile."[49] Finally, although the idealised American family has often been treated as a timeless structural form, recent studies have located contemporary familial representations as self-conscious evocations of a specific socio-historical context, the 1950s. The pervasiveness of idyllic familial images is attributed to a collective "cultural nostalgia"[50] for a lost origin or *a priori* plenitude against which all familial representations are negatively judged.

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[47] Berger and Berger, *The War over the Family*, 59.
[48] Barrett and McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family*, 29, 77.
[49] Harwood, *Family Fictions*, 67-68. Also see Poster, *Critical Theory of the Family*, 140.
[50] Skolnick, *Embattled Paradise*, 98.

In turn, positive familial images can be directly contrasted with a similarly homogenised counter-view of the American family as a seat of unrealised ideals or inherent negative value. In many cases, such perspectives endorse aforementioned narratives of a lost "golden age,"[51] as contemporary social trends are viewed as an index of familial "decline." Arguing that such rhetoric has been a stable element of familial discourse throughout American history, Demos notes that "for at least a century now the American family in particular has been seen as beleaguered, endangered, and possibly on the verge of extinction."[52] Bryce J. Christensen, a conservative exponent of this sociological discourse, delineates a broad range of societal changes as causes *and* symptoms of a breakdown of the heterosexual, nuclear family ideal; Christensen condemns high divorce rates, falling marriage rates, single-parent families, and intergenerational conflicts, citing these as determinants and consequences of "grievous tears in our national social fabric."[53] Whilst such views approach the American family as a structure in material and moral disarray, they retain a glorified image of the nuclear family as a privileged cultural foundation. A dystopian reality is contrasted with a utopian ideal, and the source of this discrepancy is located within an external social context; such flaws are not considered innate deficiencies of the nuclear family itself.

Lamentations of familial decline are frequently positioned as a response to oppositional discourses that approach the family itself as inherently oppressive. Stephanie Coontz typifies such attitudes, arguing that "beneath the polished facades of many 'ideal' families, suburban as well as urban, was violence, terror, or simply grinding misery that only occasionally came to light."[54] Skolnick suggests that images of a repressive, "dark side of the family" originated in the context of greater social openness in the 1970s:

> Formerly taboo topics – from homosexuality to abortion to incest – could now be
> openly discussed. Family violence was "discovered": child abuse and wife battering
> became important topics for research as well as significant public issues.[55]

Finally, Berger and Berger provide a detailed outline of shifting familial values in a similar historical context, charting how perceptions of the family transformed from being inherently

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[51] Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1989), 178.
[52] Demos, "Images of the American Family, Then and Now," 44.
[53] Bryce J. Christensen, *Divided We Fall: Family Discord and the Fracturing of America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 1-9.
[54] Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 35.
[55] Skolnick, *Embattled Paradise*, 130. Also see Marilyn Coleman, Lawrence H. Ganong and Kelly Warzinik, *Family Life in 20th-Century America* (London: Greenwood Press, 2007), 241-244.

idyllic to innately destructive or "sick."[56] Accounts of family dystopia are particularly prevalent in feminist scholarship, in which domestic oppression is experienced primarily by women and is attributed to the nuclear family's patriarchal structure. Barrett and McIntosh summarise this perspective, contending that "the women's liberation movement has drawn attention to the violence and degradation hidden within the walls of the nuclear household, and to the broader social and economic inequalities connected with it."[57] Furthermore, whilst significant attention has been given to the family as a seat of misogynist violence, others have focused on a more mundane (but also repressive) image of the family as a stifling, conformist model. Skolnick elaborates upon this perspective, arguing that academics, artists and social critics constructed a "myth of suburbia" that played a prominent role in shaping and representing 1950s socio-cultural life; this "nightmare vision of family life…portrayed disintegrating families and rotting marriages," set to the backdrop of ruthless capitalist competition, domestic loneliness, and social conformity.[58]

As demonstrated above, popular ideals of the American nuclear family have been confronted by pessimistic, dystopian representations; these relate a range of superficially antithetical meanings to the family's inherent ontological properties. However, as has been implicitly suggested, these contestatory images reinforce the structural logic of the familial discourses that they purport to challenge. For example, aforementioned judgements of "the decline of the family" simplistically celebrate (rather than critique) the American family as a nuclear cultural model; although the domestic home is cast as a broken, ineffective social setting, this judgement is only achieved by juxtaposing it with a static, homogenised ideal. Furthermore, narratives of failing families assume a broader social reality as the origin for familial strife; the family itself retains a cogent structure and positive value, properties that are undermined and dismantled by *external* pressures rather than internal incoherences.

Conversely, inherently damning judgements of the American family provide (on face-value) a fundamental challenge to its enduring cultural worth and centrality. Yet, such views again solidify the nuclear family's logocentric foundations, reinforcing positive representations as coherent presences against which alternative images are hierarchically defined. For example, negative family portrayals are frequently discussed as deviations from normative cultural images, a hidden "dark side" defined by the degree to which it differs from a homogeneous and idyllic cultural model; thus, idealised family images are retained as a norm against which other representative modes are constructed in standardised opposition. Furthermore, discrete challenges to familial ideals tacitly recreate their underlying

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[56] Berger and Berger, *The War over the Family*, 16.
[57] Barrett and McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family*, 19.
[58] Skolnick, *Embattled Paradise*, 50, 57-60. Also see Clark, *The American Family Home, 1800-1960*, 226.

logocentric properties; value judgements are simply reversed, as representational alternatives retain pretensions of structural unity, ontological self-identity, and cultural truth. The metaphysical properties that abet the construction of the whole(some) nuclear family are not dismantled but restated.

These preliminary critical appraisals elucidate a discourse replete with simplified, dualistic oppositions; a plethora of potential representations are ghettoized into discrete positive and negative categories, sustained in an antagonistic opposition of self-identical presences. Demos explicitly observes the operational correspondences between seemingly divergent familial representations, arguing that positive ideals are joined by an inverse "anti-image" of the American family, representations that are "opposite faces of the same coin."[59] In attempting to theorise an effective feminist intervention into nuclear family debates, Stacey also notes the simplistic nature of such oppositional conflicts: "we cannot counter the flawed, reductionist logic of family-values ideology, however, unless we resist using knee-jerk, symmetrical responses."[60] Thus, whilst the family may be perceived as a positive or negative structure, its integrity and centrality are rarely challenged.[61]

Finally, the oppositional tenor of familial discourse has been granted significant cultural visibility in recent years due to aforementioned theorisations of a "war over the family." Contextualised within supposedly divergent reactions to social changes in the 1960s and 1970s, popular responses to the family have purportedly crystallized into two specific camps, commonly cast as "critical" and "neo-traditionalist"; the former hail the breakdown of the nuclear family's "nest of oppression and pathology," the latter lament the "erosion" of the American family as cultural and moral ideal.[62] Stacey argues that such formulations entrench partisan categories within family discourse, reflected in the antagonistic form of related popular debate: "outside the embattled groves of academe, a right-wing profamily movement rapidly polarized popular discourse on family change into feminist vs. antifeminist, left vs. right, and fundamentalist vs. secular humanist camps."[63] Similarly, Christensen accounts for recent familial discourses as a "new kind of civil war," a cultural stand-off he claims is "fracturing America."[64] Thus, whilst numerous texts account for a multiplicity of potential familial perspectives, these are frequently accommodated within readings of the family as a bifurcated "battleground" between self-identical antagonists; in doing so, they reflect a broader "culture wars" rhetoric that dominates discussions of

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[59] Demos, "Images of the American Family, Then and Now," 58.
[60] Stacey, *In the Name of the Family*, 76.
[61] See Farrell, *Family*, 7.
[62] Berger and Berger, *The War over the Family*, 3-23.
[63] Stacey, *In the Name of the Family*, 90.
[64] Christensen, *Divided We Fall*, ix-xii; Skolnick utilises a similar term, see Skolnick, *Embattled Paradise*, 179-197.

American national identity itself.[65] Reading this chapter's case-study film as a deconstructive intervention into this conceptual economy, I demonstrate how textual representations of the American family interrogate and dismantle these simplistic, arbitrary structural principles. However, before doing so, it is prudent to briefly explore how these broad cultural trends have shaped studies and representations of the family in the mass-media, and in particular, cinema.

Publicising the Private Family

Sociological and cultural studies scholarship continually reaffirms the significance of popular media in framing perceptions of both personal domestic experiences and the American family's socio-cultural centrality. For example, Barrett and McIntosh argue that "the media, advertising and popular entertainment" are saturated by "familial ideology," rendering familism a trope that "pervades virtually every cultural genre."[66] Furthermore, such readings stress the pre-eminence of specifically *positive* images as a normative cultural baseline;[67] historians Stephen Mintz and Susan Kellogg stress the role of cultural artefacts in shaping idyllic familial perceptions, with particular emphasis on the aforementioned association between nuclear ideals and the 1950s, "the golden age of the American family, a reference point against which recent changes in family life can be measured."[68] In turn, Farrell argues that the presence of utopian familial representations has endured over a broad range of historical and media contexts, providing a shifting but ever-present discourse of nuclear veneration.[69] Finally, the role of myriad popular forms in mediating and structuring broader cultural experiences is reflected in Shapiro's assertion that "people tend both to live in a family and to process information about families from diverse genres – novels, television dramas and sitcoms, and feature films, among others."[70] He concludes that media families operate as regulatory *a priori* models, used by Americans to render their own cultural experiences intelligible.[71]

Whilst televisual representations form the central focus for studies of the family in American popular culture,[72] significant recent scholarship has analysed cinematic images of

[65] Christensen, *Divided We Fall*, 3; Marcia Landy, "Very Far from Heaven: Todd Haynes' Cinematic Family," in *A Family Affair: Cinema Comes Home*, ed. Murray Pomerance (London: Wallflower, 2008), 205.
[66] Barrett and McIntosh, *The Anti-Social Family*, 31, 130.
[67] Coleman, Ganong and Warzinik, *Family Life in 20th Century America*, 241.
[68] Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, 178.
[69] Farrell, *Family*, 109.
[70] Shapiro, *For Moral Ambiguity*, 5.
[71] Ibid.
[72] See William Douglas, "Subversion of the American Television Family," in *Television and the American Family*, eds. Jennings Bryant and J. Alison Bryant (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates,

domestic structures. Indeed, several theorists have paralleled the development of cinema's narrational, formal, and representational properties with dominant familial paradigms in Western culture; Nick Browne asserts that the "development of the cinematic language was, from the very start, linked to a particular subject matter. This subject was the family."[73] Robin Wood expands upon this observation in a specifically American context, positioning Hollywood representations of the family "as the projection of a national psyche": "the concept of family – a motif that cuts across all genres in Hollywood cinema, informing and structuring westerns, musicals, comedies, gangster films, melodramas alike is obviously basic to American ideology."[74] Murray Pomerance similarly argues that the family's presence in all Hollywood genres indicates its cinematic and cultural vitality: "in virtually every film family makes some sort of appearance, marginal or central, stated or implied."[75] Finally, Nina C. Leibman notes that the family offers an enduring theme that has pervaded American cinema from the coming of sound to the present day: "the family and its domestic anxieties had long been a dominant narrative focus for feature film."[76]

In turn, studies of cinematic familial representations again stress the role of the medium in disseminating (and thus perpetuating) idealised domestic tropes. Returning to Pomerance, he notes a tendency for filmic families to be cast as "a glowing paragon to behold, an image to which we can in some way aspire."[77] In broad accordance with this observation, Harwood intractably links Hollywood cultural representations with the perpetuation of certain domestic structures: "reproducing the ideological form of the nuclear family always has been the underpinning goal of classical Hollywood cinema."[78] Finally, in introducing a study of how the horror genre has subverted idealised family models, Tony Williams juxtaposes these generic texts with more widespread utopian representations; in Hollywood cinema the family is "generally revered as a positive icon of 'normal' human society," accounting for the presence of "normal idealised family images in mainstream

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2001), 231, 241; Billie J. Wahlstrom, "Images of the Family in the Mass Media: An American Iconography?" in *Changing Images of the Family*, eds. Virginia Tufte and Barbara Mayerhoff (London: Yale University Press, 1979), 198-199, 218; Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 8, 31; Stacey, *In the Name of the Family*, 101-2; Nina C. Leibman, *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 1, 5-6, 9, 12.

[73] Nick Browne, "Griffith's Family Discourse: Griffith and Freud," in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI Publishing, 1987), 224. Also see Leibman, *Living Room Lectures,* 5-6.

[74] Robin Wood, *Personal Views: Explorations in Film*, Revised ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), 201.

[75] Murray Pomerance, "Introduction: Family Affairs," in *A Family Affair: Cinema Comes Home*, ed. Murray Pomerance (London: Wallflower, 2008), 5.

[76] Leibman, *Living Room Lectures,* 5-6.

[77] Pomerance, "Introduction," 7-8

[78] Harwood, *Family Fictions*, 7.

American film."[79] Nevertheless, Williams ultimately argues that horror opens up a representational space for subversive family portraits, an observation that elucidates countervailing representational trends; in such texts the family is not represented as a caring, supportive milieu, but rather as a "material cause of horrific events."[80] Similarly, Pomerance outlines a series of negative familial depictions that invert normative, nuclear representations; these range from 1950s images of the middle-class family as a "seat of disease and corruption" to more recent challenges to heteronormative familial structure in terms of gender and sexuality.[81]

Aforementioned theorisations of the cinematic family as an entity that shifts over a range of socio-historical contexts forms the basis of Emanuel Levy's broad historical study of the concept in "New American Cinema." Embedding a series of distinct familial images within a dynamic socio-cultural context, Levy delineates six discrete cycles, each responding to "a decisive moment, an ideological shift, in Hollywood and by implication in American culture": these range from "decline of the family in the late 1960s" to "a return to traditional family values in the late 1980s," covering a range of critical ("troubled and tormented" families) and "alternative" representations in the interim.[82] However, in suggesting that diverse images of the family can be mapped onto broader socio-historical trends, Levy groups a plethora of films into a reductive series of monolithic, totalising cycles. Rather than questioning the integrity of fixed familial representations, this approach constructs a chronological succession of equally homogeneous cultural truth claims; furthermore, the very discussion of "alternative" familial images defines them as ontological deviations within a logocentric opposition with foundational nuclear norms, reinforcing the hierarchical authority of the latter.

Usefully, several scholars have noted that the suburban nuclear family offers a particularly prominent thematic focus and setting within recent independent film. For example, Jeffrey Sconce, Peter Hanson, and Jesse Mayshark respectively locate the nuclear family as a central preoccupation of "smart," "Generation X," and "post-pop" cinema;[83] as demonstrated in chapter one, each of these groupings incorporates texts that are more commonly located within independent film definitions. However, such texts appear (superficially, at least) to replicate aforementioned readings of the nuclear family as an

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[79] Tony Williams, *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), 13.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Pomerance, "Introduction," 3-4.
[82] Levy, "The American Dream of Family in Film," 190. These mirror a similar taxonomy of familial images in American popular culture; see Skolnick, *Embattled Paradise*, 187.
[83] Jeffrey Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism, and the New American 'Smart' Film," *Screen* 43, no. 4 (2002): 358; Peter Hanson, *The Cinema of Generation X: a Critical Study of Films and Directors* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002), 43; Jesse Fox Mayshark, *Post-Pop Cinema: The Search for Meaning in New American Film* (London: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 9.

essentially fallen locale; case-study films purportedly communicate a "sense of domestic life as a nexus of abandonment, alienation, and frustration,"[84] casting the family as "crucible of miscommunication and emotional dysfunction."[85] Thus, whilst arguing for heightened levels of ambiguity, nuance, and irony in their textual representations, prominent analyses of these themes in independent cinema largely focus upon unequivocally negative readings of the nuclear family as a conflicted, abusive realm.[86]

Despite the metaphysical tenor of these normative scholarly approaches, some recent critics have focused more sharply on complexities and contradictions embedded within seemingly cogent family formulations.[87] Indeed, one recent scholarly work has laid the foundation for a more complex, deconstructive engagement with the nuclear family in independent film; Claire Perkins' nuanced expansion of smart retains Sconce's aforementioned focus on American familial representations, contextualised within a wider discussion of suburban life. However, Perkins explicitly argues that smart disrupts dualistic frameworks that characterise suburban and, by extension, familial discourse: she understands her case-study films' aesthetics "as something that in fact overcomes the representation of suburbia as utopian *or* dystopian."[88] Mobilising a more reflexive notion of "anti-utopia" that self-consciously alludes to its utopian opposite, Perkins argues that smart textual critiques of the nuclear family exceed simplistic dualistic definition.[89] In doing so, Perkins attempts a radical challenge to the metaphysical logic of suburban family discourse, a theoretical aim to which this thesis wholeheartedly assents.

Nevertheless, Perkins' mobilisation of the anti-utopian genre still appears to ultimately portray the family in an *essentially* negative light; as she suggests, smart texts invert "ideal utopian solutions into nightmare possibilities."[90] Indeed, her taxonomic description of smart suburban representations bears a striking resemblance to aforementioned dystopian renderings: "the comfortable, educated life that suburban-utopianism imagined is represented as stultifying and destructive, leading only to violence, unhappiness and abuse."[91] In doing so, Perkins inaugurates an ontological closure that denies her texts overtly deconstructive value, restraining a heterogeneous, generative play of

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[84] Mayshark, *Post-Pop Cinema,* 9. For a similar reading, see Hanson, *The Cinema of Generation X*, 50.

[85] Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism and the New American 'Smart' Film," 358-359.

[86] See Sherry B. Ortner, *Not Hollywood: Independent Film at the Twilight of the American Dream* (London: Duke University Press, 2013), 128-129.

[87] For example, Williams notes that film families are often cast as "contradictory entities containing good and bad features"; see Williams, *Hearths of Darkness,* 14, 16.

[88] Perkins' scholarly use of "utopia" and "dystopia" to address the family diverges from idiomatic uses discernible in other scholarship in this area. See Claire Perkins, *American Smart Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 137.

[89] Ibid., 139.

[90] Ibid., 140.

[91] Ibid., 141.

cultural identities; as she notes, these "broadly anti-utopian visions" are "negations that don't reconstruct."[92] Finally, although she argues that anti-utopian images refer indirectly to absent utopian possibilities, she largely ignores the deconstructive ramifications of this unsettling co-presence; rather, she appears to treat this phenomenon as a culturally complicit projection of a utopian image of the "traditional nuclear set-up."[93] Thus, whilst offering an invaluable critique of dualistic family discourses, potential moments of radical undecidability are neutralised within a self-coherent (and conventionally negative) reading of the nuclear family.[94]

In contrast, a more sustained deconstructive approach can be found in Sobchack's study of the child in horror, science-fiction, and melodrama.[95] Again, the family is established as an incoherent, divided milieu: "the *visual site* of horrific attraction and repulsion, of utopian wonder and dystopian anxiety, was redirected back toward that domestic structure of social relations – the nuclear family."[96] However, in considering familial representations in these genres since the 1960s, Sobchack demonstrates that bifurcated domestic oppositions have begun to unravel, embodied in the figure of the deconstructive child:

> Not only has the bourgeois distinction between family members and alien Others, between private home and public space, between personal microcosm and sociopolitical macrocosm been exposed as a myth, but also the family itself has been exposed as a cultural construction, as a set of signifying, as well as significant, practices. The family and its members are seen, therefore, as subject to the frightening, but potentially liberating, semiotic processes of selection and combination – and their order, meaning, and power are perceived as open to transformation, dissolution and redefinition.[97]

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[92] Perkins explores how *Donnie Darko* transcends the binary logic of suburban discourse and opens up a transformational Deleuzian difference; however, she treats this film as an exceptional case in smart film. Ibid., 139, 149-55.

[93] Ibid., 149.

[94] Characterisations of the family as a site that mediates cultural contradiction are more clearly discernible in studies of melodrama. See Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI Publishing, 1987); Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI Publishing, 1987), 31-33, 37. Finally, Hueng notes a similar dynamic in her study of the nuclear family in 1980s Hollywood; see Marina Hueng, "Why E.T. Must Go Home: The New Family in American Cinema," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 11, no. 2 (1983): 79, 82.

[95] Harwood also treats 1980s film families as "a site of struggle," but ultimately accommodates structural contradictions on a spectrum between utopian/dystopian extremes; see Harwood, *Family Fictions*, 6-7, 60-61, 71, 175.

[96] Sobchack, "Bringing it All Back Home," 176. Emphasis in original.

[97] Ibid., 178-179.

Sobchack's generically-specific comments provide a useful jumping-off point for a sustained deconstruction of the cinematic nuclear family, an objective realised here through a case-study analysis of *Happiness* (1998). It is important to clarify that such a project extends beyond a simplistic overturning of an homogenised, whole(some) cultural image in favour of a dystopian alternative, an assumption perceptible in existing critical readings of the film. Furthermore, such an approach extends beyond simply defining the family as a self-contained milieu of contradiction, mixing a series of distinct, antagonistic elements within a bounded domestic space. Rather, representational oppositions are exposed as arbitrary forces of cultural regulation, metaphysical frameworks imposed upon a boundless freeplay of familial images and meanings. In turn, these categorical monoliths are toppled, as textual ruptures and paradoxes expose their foundations as intangible, amorphous, self-effacing.

Deconstructing the *Happiness* and Whole(some)ness of the Nuclear Family

"I wish I had your life…Husband, kids, car pool…" These aspirational words, uttered by Helen Jordan (Lara Flynn Boyle) to her sister Trish (Cynthia Stevenson), embody a familiar familial cliché. However, by the conclusion of *Happiness*, the much-desired nuclear household has been upturned, displaced, and dismantled. Trish's husband, Dr. Bill Maplewood (Dylan Baker), has been exposed as a paedophile, precipitating her (and their children's) flight from the family "nest." In *Happiness'* final scene, Helen promises to find Trish a new man, a matchmaking role she assumes for all her family (her other sister, Joy [Jane Adams], is single, and her parents, Mona [Louise Lasser] and Lenny [Ben Gazzara], are separated). This "landscape of failure,"[98] in which stable families appear either unobtainable or doomed to disaster, has frequently been cast in dystopian terms; inverting the middle-class family's positive connotations, *Happiness* superficially represents suburbia as "a type of peripheral hell, a moral darkness on the edge of town."[99]

However, upon closer analysis, the film's representations offer a more complex, fundamental critique of the American family as a cultural centre or presence. Rather than simply reversing the family's conventional utopian ontology, *Happiness* deconstructs this polarising dynamic, subverting the tendency to cast familial representations as either wholly idyllic or debased. In doing so, *Happiness'* domestic settings are inhabited by traces of seemingly contradictory elements, values, and meanings; this strategy is embodied within the head of the superficially idyllic nuclear household (Bill), who is simultaneously cast as a

[98] Chris Chang, "Cruel to Be Kind: A Brief History of Todd Solondz," *Film Comment* 34, no. 5 (1998): 73.

[99] Xan Brooks, Review of *Happiness*, dir. Todd Solondz, *Sight & Sound* 9, no. 4 (1999): 44.

loving father and violent paedophile. In this manner, the nuclear family is rendered as an undecidable milieu of conceptual co-presence, within which potentially paradoxical significances are indiscernibly weaved throughout its semiotic structure. In doing so, this Derridean gesture challenges the structural closure of any totalised, metaphysical reading of the nuclear family, be it positive or negative.

Retelling *Happiness* and the Utopian/Dystopian American Family

Described in critical and academic texts as an "episodic"[100] or "ensemble" work,[101] *Happiness* charts the experiences and relationships of seemingly disparate New Jersey residents, signifying a broad variety of interpersonal relationships and familial structures. Nevertheless, they are drawn together by an overarching familial commonality; they are all members, spouses, friends, neighbours, children, workmates, or pupils of a single family, the Jordans. Thus, this specific family (parents Mona and Lenny and their adult daughters Joy, Trish and Helen) provides a structural core to the film's multiple narrative arcs, a centre that orients and relates each character with one another.[102] Whilst relying upon a single family as an ordering nexus, the film unfolds through a series of seemingly discrete sequences, each focusing specifically on one or two of the film's numerous figures. Importantly, each character's narrative segments are scattered throughout the film's broader structure. *Happiness* opens with Joy nervily breaking off a short-lived relationship with Andy (Jon Lovitz), who cruelly rescinds a personalised gift he had given her. Soon after, Joy herself is shown in tears of guilt, as she is told that Andy has committed suicide. This scene sets the tone for many of Joy's later encounters. She quits her telemarketing job to teach English to immigrants, where she meets Vlad (Jared Harris), a self-confessed thief from Russia with whom she shares a brief sexual liaison. Just as Joy is failing to achieve a lasting, romantic relationship, her parents (Mona and Lenny) are newly separated, although neither will formalise this by filing for divorce. Whilst Mona expresses a desire to find someone new at the film's conclusion, she lacks confidence in her chances, remarking that she will now require "another fucking facelift!" Although Lenny appears to have a ready-made partner in the more stereotypically glamorous Diane (Elizabeth Ashley), he is gripped with malaise and

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[100] Dean Defino, "Todd Solondz," in *Fifty Contemporary Filmmakers*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2002), 317.

[101] Andrew Lewis Conn, "The Bad Review Happiness Deserves, or: The Tyranny of Critic-Proof Movies," Review of *Happiness*, dir. Todd Solondz, *Film Comment* 35, no. 1 (1999): 72.

[102] Wilson explores the film's representation of social interconnections, arguing that this theme contextualises Bill's child abuse within a wider social context; Emma Wilson, *Cinema's Missing Children* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 52-53.

171

just wants to be left "alone"; although they do have a brief sexual encounter, Lenny finishes unsatisfied as he "cannot feel anything."

Another of their daughters, Helen, is a critically-acclaimed writer who is bored with her work and the opulent lifestyle that goes with it; she fantasizes about being raped as a child to provide a real-life justification for her transgressive poetry, which she deems fraudulent. She lives down the hall from Allan (Philip Seymour Hoffman), a sexually-frustrated IT technician who makes obscene phone calls to random women and fantasizes about subjecting Helen to violent sexual acts. When he finally locates her in the phone book, his sexualised threats appear to be the answer to her malady, but when he arrives at her door she is unimpressed with his physical appearance, and asks him to leave. Just as Allan lusts after Helen, he is in turn desired by another of his neighbours, Kristina (Camryn Manheim). After numerous awkward interactions, they eventually go on a clichéd date, slow-dancing in front of a jukebox and eating at a retro diner. However, any potential romance is denied when Kristina informs Allan of her repulsion to sexual intercourse. Kristina attributes this to a recent traumatic experience, in which she was raped in her own home by the doorman to their apartment building; she informs Allan that she broke his neck in self-defence, chopped up his body, and now has him stored in her freezer.

Whilst these varied narrative threads present seemingly atomised individuals incapable of forming coherent domestic groups, there is one further story arc that visualises a stable, nuclear family unit. Trish is married to Bill, a professional psychiatrist and father of three (Billy [Rufus Read], Timmy [Justin Elvin], and Chloe [Liza Glantzman-Leib]). Superficially, the nuclear family provides an idyllic contrast to the tales of social dislocation and alienation described above. The film utilises a variety of aesthetic and stylistic devices to imbue the Maplewood family home with connotations of positivity and exceptionality, portraying their suburban house as a vibrant locale; the Maplewoods reside in a well-lit, detached dwelling with a distinct décor of bright colours, replete with signs of familial activity and childhood play. Additionally, we are introduced to its constituent members as they undertake traditional domestic roles, replicating the gendered division of labour associated with American nuclear norms. Trish is introduced in the kitchen, completing household tasks; Bill arrives home after fulfilling his role as the family's breadwinner, and is greeted with a kiss by his appreciative wife (Fig.2.1):
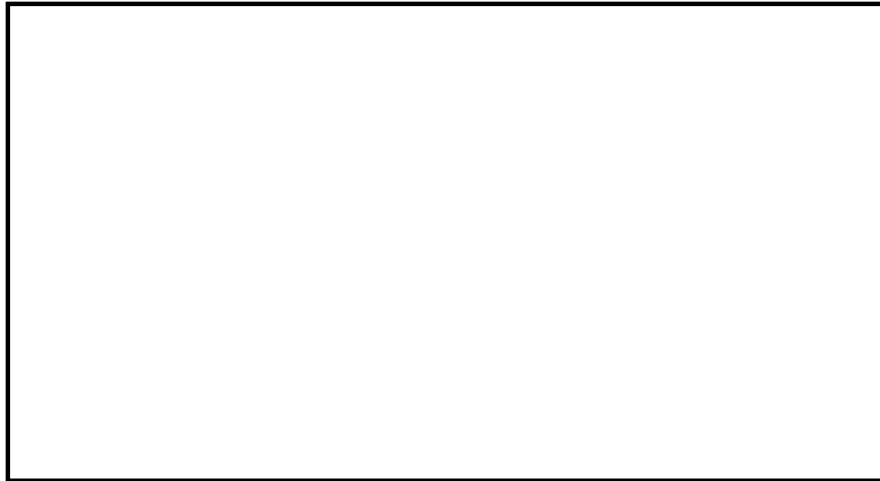
Fig.2.1

Perceptions of the Maplewood family as a clichéd domestic ideal pervade academic and critical readings of *Happiness*. For example, Greg Tuck suggests that:

> On the face of it, the Jordans' oldest daughter, Trish Maplewood…has the perfect upper-middle-class existence with her large house, uniformed maid, three children and a husband, Bill Maplewood…who is a successful therapist.[103]

Thus, as Adam Wadenius summarises, "on the exterior, the Maplewood's fit the ideal patriarchal mould."[104] The individual members of the family have been described in similarly positive terms; Chris Chang suggests that "Trish is seemingly the perfect homemaker,"[105] a judgement that echoes Xan Brooks' assertion that Bill is "an outwardly upstanding suburban dad."[106] Similarly, Mike King judges Trish as the only commendably positive character in the piece, describing her as the film's "touchstone of 'normalcy.'"[107] However, these idyllic representations are subsequently problematized by a series of thematic inversions. Bill, the father, is secretly racked with paedophilic desires; whilst these are initially channelled into masturbatory fantasies, he eventually acts upon them, raping two of his son's classmates. Bill is arrested, but not before admitting his actions to his son; he tells him that the experiences were "great," before Billy asks him "would you ever fuck me?" Bill's response is in the negative: "no, I'd jerk off instead." The final scenes of the

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[103] Greg Tuck, "Sex, Dialectics and the Misery of *Happiness*," *Film-Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2011): 35.
[104] Adam Wadenius, "The Monstrous Masculine: Abjection and Todd Solondz's Happiness," in *Kidding Around: The Child in Film and Media*, eds. Alexander N. Howe and Wynn Yarbrough (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 36.
[105] Chang, "Cruel to Be Kind," 75.
[106] Brooks, Review of *Happiness*, 44.
[107] Mike King, *The American Cinema of Excess: Extremes of the National Mind on Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 105.

Maplewood family depict Trish and the children swiftly fleeing their suburban home; the house has been defaced with prurient graffiti, bluntly reading: "SERIAL RAPIST PERVERT."

In this context, initially utopian renderings of the Maplewood's family life can be read as a "façade,"[108] a pleasant surface that obscures a destructive, abusive interior reality. Jason Bainbridge reads *Happiness* as an exemplar of this dualistic cultural logic: "(*Happiness*) presents a veneer of suburban life which it then goes on to soil, particularly through the Maplewood family (whose story provides the climax for the film)."[109] Similarly, Douglas Muzzio and Thomas Halper treat the film's representation of nuclear family ideals as a superficial cover, a semiotic cloaking device observable in a range of 1990s American films: "a serene façade often conceals human relationships that fail at everything, except breeding shame, guilt, pain…and worse."[110] Thus, in the specific case of *Happiness*, the film follows "the intertwined blighted lives of the members of a contemporary suburban family…the film tells sinister stories of alienation, betrayal, humiliation, and perversion."[111] Finally, Jason Lee firmly links Bill's transgressive desires to both the local and national milieus within which he operates; his abusive tendencies are a product of "his position, his lifestyle, and his peculiarly American culture."[112] Thus, whilst such images contrast two potentially polarised interpretations of the family, they tend to settle upon a reading of the film's family as ultimately dystopian; positive familial images merely conceal a debased, destructive essence.

In reaching this conclusion, critical readings invert the polarities of familial discourse, presenting an unequivocal image of domestic deviance; negative portrayals are raised to a position of ontological superiority, a gesture that ensures the retention of bifurcated domestic discourses. Whilst Perkins' aforementioned work on the "suburban smart film" ostensibly problematizes discrete representational dualities, she approaches *Happiness'* cultural environs as a negative "anti-utopia." Describing the film's image of suburban life as "unflinching," Perkins contends that *Happiness* remains "unambiguously within" its "nightmare scenario"; as a result, it "(satirises) the original values of suburbia, exposing the false assumptions of this specific brand of utopianism."[113] Robert Beuka self-

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[108] Douglas Muzzio and Thomas Halper, "Pleasantville? The Suburb and Its Representation in American Movies," *Urban Affairs Review* 37, no. 4 (2002): 550.
[109] Jason Bainbridge, "Soiling Suburbia: Lynch, Solondz and the Power of Dirt," *M/C Journal* 9, no. 5 (2006): 10, http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0610/11-bainbridge.php.
[110] Muzzio and Halper, "Pleasantville?" 550.
[111] Ibid., 551. Also see Casey McKittrick, "'I Laughed and Cringed at the Same Time': Shaping Pedophilic Discourse around *American Beauty* and *Happiness*," *The Velvet Light Trap: A Critical Journal of Film and Television* 47, no. 2 (2001): 3.
[112] Jason Lee, *Celebrity, Pedophilia, and Ideology in American Culture* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2009), 147.
[113] Perkins, *American Smart Cinema*, 140.

consciously unpacks the metaphysical underpinnings of such readings, arguing that negative suburban representations merely overturn existing hierarchical binaries. In doing so, he cites *Happiness* as an exemplar of this reductive anti-image; postulating a "continued cultural reliance on a restrictive, binary system in defining the suburban milieu," Beuka argues that suburbia tends to be rendered as a "harmonious model of community…or the inversion of that dream vision as it appears in any one of a number of recent films set in the suburbs (Todd Solondz's *Happiness*…etc.)"[114] Acts of simplified structural inversion are also perceptible in interpretations that focus on the juxtaposition of normal and abnormal family portrayals within the film. To provide one prominent example, Stella Bruzzi argues that *Happiness'* depiction of the father relocates the abnormal as a cultural and textual centre, inverting the metaphysical role of the idealised family model: "*Happiness* offers little sense of a normative, safe image of fatherhood. In fact, what *Happiness* constructs is a mosaic of sexual perversity that renders perversity 'normal' – simply by virtue of its prevalence."[115]

Just as aforementioned conceptualisations of a suburban façade engender structural antinomies and oppositions, certain readings attempt to subvert this metaphysical economy by focusing on the film's perceived representational ambiguity;[116] as Bruzzi suggests, in *Happiness* "there is…a diminished sense of the difference between good and evil."[117] However, whilst numerous scholars observe countervailing tendencies within the filmic text (particularly Bill's rendering as both "monstrous" and sympathetic),[118] they commonly cast these as distinct, definable attributes; in such interpretations, *Happiness* oscillates between discrete representational poles, *a priori* presences that merge and overlap in a manner that necessitates their essential theoretical separation. In contrast, whilst Shapiro also describes Bill as a morally ambiguous character, he lays the foundations for a more radical "critical, semiotic displacement" of "family values."[119] Taking as a subject the seemingly paradoxical position of Bill as a supportive father *and* paedophile, Shapiro argues that "it's hard to dismiss Maplewood as simply a moral monster, because his pedophilia does not exhaust his

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[114] Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 10-11.
[115] Stella Bruzzi, *Bringing Up Daddy: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Post-war Hollywood* (London: BFI Publishing, 2005), 185.
[116] *Happiness'* ambiguity has been cast in numerous ways; for many, it stems from the presence of seemingly contradictory textual elements; see Chang, "Cruel to Be Kind," 75; Brooks, Review of *Happiness*, 44; Ortner, *Not Hollywood*, 127; Muzzio and Halper, "Pleasantville?" 551. For others, the film provokes paradoxical audience responses; see Bainbridge, "Soiling Suburbia," 10-13, 16; Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism and the New American 'Smart' Film," 361; Wadenius, "The Monstrous Masculine," 33.
[117] Bruzzi, *Bringing Up Daddy*, 185. Tuck bucks this trend by suggesting that the film reinforces the heteronormative, Lacanian model of sexual difference; Tuck, "Sex, Dialectics and the Misery of *Happiness*," 57.
[118] See Wadenius, "The Monstrous Masculine," 44-46.
[119] Shapiro, *For Moral Ambiguity*, 9.

personality. He also shows great caring and sensitivity as he speaks to his coming-of-age son about male sexuality."[120] This contradictory ontological dynamic is described by Shapiro in explicitly post-structuralist terms, as a shift in attention "from signified to signifier": "because (Solondz) disrupts the inclination to apply unambiguous moral terms to Dr. Maplewood, he turns attention away from Maplewood as an object of scorn and towards the discourse of sexual morality."[121] Thus, whilst Shapiro arguably separates Bill's behaviour into discrete caring and abusive modes, he does provide a useful theoretical elucidation of Bill's undecidable subjectivity. However, I contend that this dynamic is not embodied solely within the figure of the father, but rather can be discerned as a broader textual principle, governing the film's sustained, subversive engagement with domestic structures.

Whilst American domesticity is a clear discussion point in critical readings of *Happiness*, very few explicitly focus on how the film reflexively interrogates the structural properties of the nuclear family. Furthermore, those few readings that have considered the Maplewood home in greater detail have tacitly reinforced the dualistic underpinnings of American familial narratives. Emma Wilson provides a rare systematic engagement with the film's representational strategies and how they intervene within broader cultural discourses. Again, *Happiness* is approached as an ambiguous text; noting the viewer's uncomfortable complicity and identification with morally dubious behaviour, Wilson argues that the film "(domesticates) the child molester and show(s) him within the range of familiar (and family) experience…*Happiness* takes as its subject the grotesque and pathetic imbrication of paedophilia and family dynamics."[122] However, Wilson shifts focus specifically towards cinematic ethics and the representation of child abuse; this is achieved through an analysis of *Happiness'* human "inter-relations" that contextualise paedophilia within American socio-cultural life. Furthermore, brief observations regarding the film's "blurred boundaries" again signify the encroachment of two countervailing tendencies; whilst child abuse and parenthood may "queasily merge," to do so they must carry within themselves a discernible *a priori* significance.[123] This partial retention of reductive binary frames is further reinforced by the film's perceived respect for "the excessive horror of its subject."[124] Discerning a textual rejection of "equivocal values," Wilson argues that *Happiness* "represents a more generic suburbia, a filmic cliché re-presented and a dystopic space of home, childhood and domesticity";[125] ultimately, *challenges* to fixed familial significances

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[120] Ibid., 8-9.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Wilson, *Cinema's Missing Children*, 41-42.
[123] Ibid., 53.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Ibid., 42. Niall Richardson also relocates the "other" within a "dystopian" family setting; Richardson, *Transgressive Bodies: Representations in Film and Popular Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 182.

are cast as coherently dystopian. The structural values of the nuclear family are not displaced, but rather simplistically reversed, a deconstructive precursor that is never followed through.

Radicalising these existing readings, I argue that *Happiness* provides a sustained, destructive engagement with the American nuclear family and its perceived cultural centrality. To begin, this analysis demonstrates how *Happiness* superficially figures the family's position as a conceptual core, providing a normative model against which other characters and social arrangements are initially compared. However, the family is subsequently displaced from this position of textual and cultural centrality; it is rendered simultaneously a kernel of presence and absence, a hauntological paradox abetted by the film's simultaneous representation and occlusion of scenes of child rape. Finally, the film disrupts the simplistic utopian/dystopian binary opposition frequently associated with cinematic and cultural images of the American family. Rather than reading Bill as a figure who embodies conflicting abusive and caring tendencies, these are treated as potential significances that can be simultaneously attributed to a variety of his actions; this radical undecidability ruptures existing oppositional frames, constructing the Maplewood father as a textual fissure who exceeds and destabilises antonymic structural totalities. Finally, this deconstructive aesthetic is discerned in a wider variety of the film's familial elements, demonstrating how the domestic milieu itself subverts the metaphysical certainties upon which the nuclear family is founded.

Constructing the Maplewood Family as a Cultural Centre

Happiness' engagement with familial discourse can be initially discerned by the pervasive presence of domestic settings throughout the text. We are shown a wide variety of households, a multiplicity of homes for the film's large ensemble of characters: Bill and Trish's suburban nuclear household; Mona and Lenny's retirement condo in Florida; Joy's house (belonging to her parents); Christina, Helen, and Allan's apartments; the flat Mona is shown around by an estate agent; the apartment belonging to Vlad and his significant other; the Grasso family home. Each of these settings appears intractably tied to its inhabitants, providing a plethora of potential biographical details; indeed, several of these figures (such as Lenny, Helen, and Trish) spend the vast majority of their on-screen time rooted in their specific household environments. Furthermore, as suggested earlier, the use of the Jordan family as an ordering structure embeds American family centrality within the film's narrative premise; each character shown on screen interacts (either directly or indirectly) with at least one member of the Jordan clan.

Despite the variety of domestic settings listed above, *Happiness* reflexively privileges the nuclear family as an idyllic, aspirational cultural model against which all other social forms are defined. This textual hierarchy is highlighted by the manner with which Trish and Bill's familial life is explicitly constructed as an exemplary social arrangement against which the other sisters compare their own lives unfavourably. After breaking down during a conversation about her upsetting personal circumstances, Joy suggests that she is at her most content when visiting Trish's domestic milieu: "I'm so happy…yeah, I mean, being around you and the kids." However, this comment belies a comparative discordance between Joy's own arrangements and her sister's; it is implied that she is really lamenting her own failure to emulate Trish's model existence. This antagonistic juxtaposition is reinforced by the visual representation of the sisters' kitchen conversation. The camera centres on the table, with the two sisters facing each other; an invisible dividing line places Trish, her dog and child on one side of the frame, all looking in the same direction, while Joy is isolated on the other (Fig.2.2):

Fig.2.2

Similarly, in the quote that opened this analysis, Helen tells Trish over dinner that she envies her suburban domestic lifestyle, despite Helen's own artistic, financial, and sexual successes. Trish also narcissistically contrasts her own situation with her siblings', lamenting their inability to form their own nuclear families; talking to Bill about Joy's increasingly depressive state, Trish remarks "I'm concerned. She's not like me, she doesn't have it all." Finally, when Mona decides to move out of her and Lenny's apartment, an estate agent interrogates her regarding her personal circumstances, unwittingly reciting a checklist of nuclear family components that she no longer possesses; tellingly, these could accurately provide a taxonomic description of the Maplewood family as it is depicted at the film's beginnings. Asking whether she will be living with her husband, her kids, or any pets,

Mona answers each query negatively; the estate agent concludes by insensitively stating "just you alone, all by yourself." The effect of these interchanges extends beyond the simple signification of the family as an idealised cultural image. In the act of comparison, it is positioned as an exemplary social model, a static centre against which other domestic forms are unfavourably defined.

Additionally, aforementioned discussions of the film's episodic structure establish a narrative framework that alludes to prominent televisual representations of nuclear family life. For Niall Richardson, *Happiness* is a product of Todd Solondz's "televisual cinema"; the film evokes medium-specific formal properties through, amongst other things, "a focus on domestic settings."[126] Furthermore, Chang notes the film's focus on "suburban angst and familial pain," suggesting these provide a thematic correspondence with negative family portrayals in TV sitcoms.[127] Finally, Wilson suggests that *Happiness* adopts an unobtrusive cinematographic style, upbeat music, and suburban settings partly as a means of replicating the stylistic properties of "American sitcoms," a televisual form she refers to as "an ironic point of reference."[128] Familial pre-eminence is thus reinforced through a web of intertextual references, replicating formal properties frequently associated with more widespread media representations of the American nuclear household.

Furthermore, *Happiness* solidifies images of the family-as-centre by replicating prominent forms of nuclear household representation, achieved through the recurrence of totalising textual tropes. For example, *Happiness'* evocation of nuclear family whole(some)ness is figured by periodic representations of the familial group at the dining table. Such images symbolise familial fullness through their aesthetic composition; these scenes are initially framed from a medium or long shot, allowing the family to be established as both unified and symmetrical (Figs.2.3-2.4):

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[126] Richardson, *Transgressive Bodies*, 181.
[127] Chang, "Cruel to Be Kind," 74.
[128] Wilson, *Cinema's Missing Children*, 45.
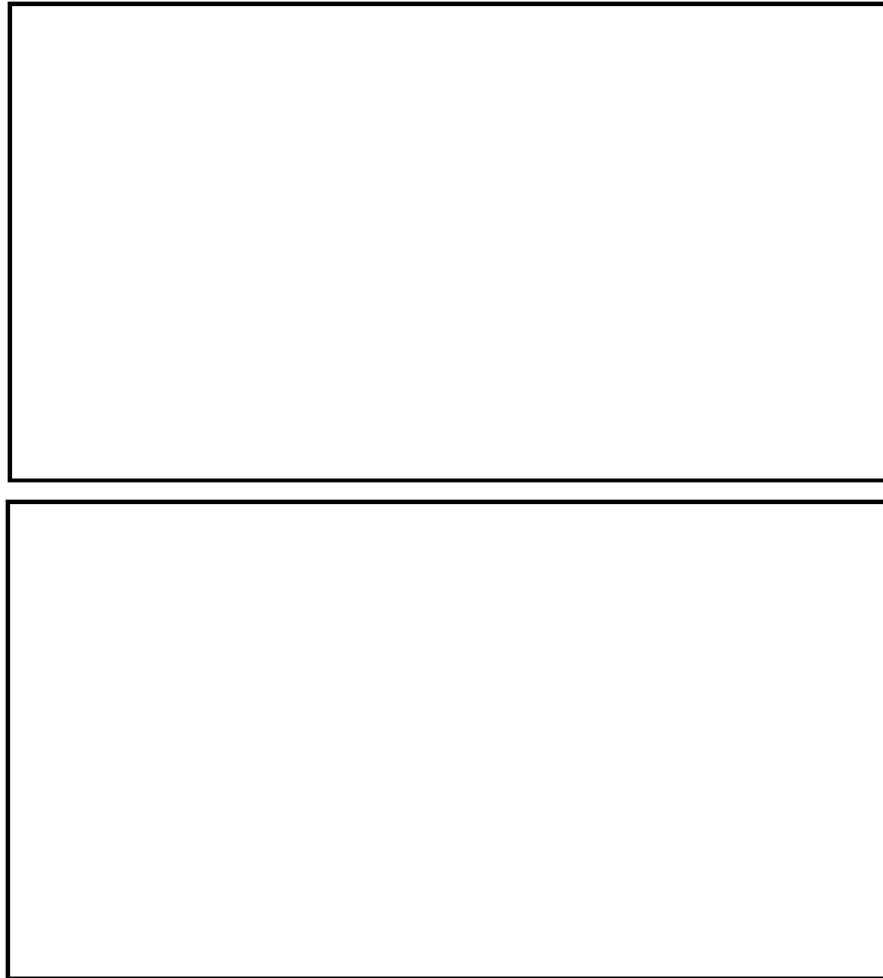
Figs.2.3-2.4

These representational strategies cogently communicate a set of structural assumptions embedded within normative familial discourses; the Maplewoods are shown as an internally-consistent social unit with static boundaries and, accordingly, a fixed, essential meaning. The dinner table is not the only representational structure used to foreground images of the Maplewoods as a totalised cultural entity. Additionally, *Happiness* includes a lingering shot of a family portrait, an image that is juxtaposed with an act of shocking child abuse; it fills the screen moments after Bill has drugged Johnny (Evan Silverberg), who he proceeds to rape (Fig.2.5):
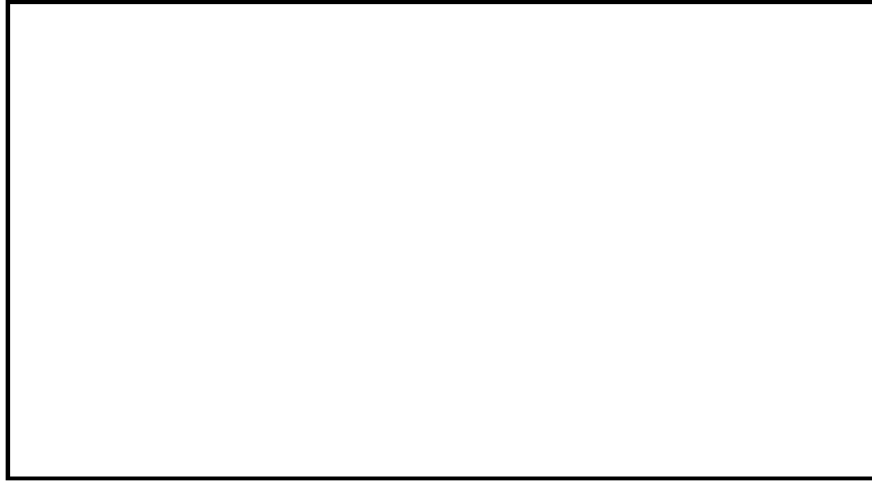
Fig.2.5

Wilson perceptively notes that the presence of the photograph is mirrored in some of the
film's formal properties. The predominant use of a static camera, "simple cuts" and a
"straightforward" mise-en-scène can themselves be read as allusions to "the aesthetic of
family photography"; in turn, the family portrait is established as "a space of renegotiation
of family history and of ideals of the family as structure."[129] As a result, this formal and
thematic correspondence also positions the American family as a self-contained centre of
cultural orientation. As Wilson concludes:

> Solondz's use and abuse of the structure and image, both literally and in his still
> *mise-en-scène*, work to signal the ways in which the family is central to his analysis
> of contemporary interrelations and the ways fractures in the structure of the family
> will be figured in the form as well as the content of his films.[130]

This observation neatly reinforces earlier allusions to familial unity, plenitude, and presence.
Happiness continually imbues the nuclear household with the properties of the metaphysical
centre; this illusory self-coherence is then undermined through deconstructive textual
strategies.

Decentering Nuclear Family Narratives

Just as *Happiness* introduces a seemingly self-coherent image of family
whole(some)ness, the solidity of this idealised structural paradigm is fundamentally shaken.
Principally, a deconstructive dynamic can be discerned in the film's signification (but then

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[129] Ibid., 45-46.
[130] Ibid., 46.

displacement) of the suburban family as a literal centre to *Happiness'* narrative events. As suggested earlier, the film's ensemble structure necessitates consistent cutting between different domestic milieus and subjects, constituting a formally episodic text that avoids focusing on a single protagonist or setting. Yet, numerous critics have reaffirmed the heightened centrality of the Maplewoods to the film's unfolding story, arguing that the inhabitants of the nuclear family (and specifically, Bill) form *Happiness'* clearest narrative emphasis; Brooks exemplifies this reading in his assertion that "at the heart of Solondz's intersecting train-wreck of lifelines sits psychiatrist Bill…an outwardly upstanding suburban dad who masturbates to pre-teen magazines and romps off in dogged pursuit of his son's classmates."[131] Similarly, King locates Bill as the film's core obsession, an observation that simultaneously ties him to discourses of American identity and locates him as a monstrous figure: "the central character of *Happiness* (Bill) is perhaps the sickest product of the madness of the American mind."[132] Thus, specific members of the Maplewood clan are consistently forwarded as the film's central protagonists, reinforcing the perceived pre-eminence of the nuclear family unit to which they belong.

Furthermore, one of the longest unbroken sequences featuring a spatio-temporally contiguous location and cast revolves around the planning, unfolding, and aftermath of Johnny's assault in the Maplewood family home; we are shown Bill's introduction to Johnny at a "little league" baseball game, Johnny's sleepover with Billy, Bill's implied assault on Johnny, Bill and Trish waking up the morning after, Johnny's sickness at the breakfast table, his journey home, and finally a father-son discussion between Bill and Billy. This whole sequence lasts over 12 minutes, and concludes almost halfway through the film's total pre-credit runtime; in this regard, it can be approached as a functional narrative centre-point. Furthermore, the sequence appears to fulfil the centre's role as a node of structural organisation; the events build upon character behaviour and trends instigated in the film's opening scenes, and initiates a number of interrelated narrative threads that converge at the text's conclusion. Firstly, Bill's actions materialise his previously latent paedophilic desires; in earlier scenes he is shown masturbating to a boy's magazine, and possible abusive intentions are foreshadowed when he offers to show Billy how to do the same. Similarly, Bill's assault of Johnny directly precipitates his arrest and the eventual breakdown of the family unit; in the film's final scene he is conspicuous by his absence at the table, as the Jordan family eat lunch.

However, the sequence's role as a fixed narrative centre fractures when put under close stylistic and aesthetic scrutiny. Whilst Bill's assault is undoubtedly positioned as a

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[131] Brooks, Review of *Happiness*, 44. In contrast, Billy is treated as the film's central character in Wadenius, "The Monstrous Masculine," 34.

[132] King, *The American Cinema of Excess*, 99.

significant narrative event, it is already inhabited by an elliptical absence. Johnny's rape acts as both an origin and culmination of plotlines weaved throughout the broader structure of the film, yet is signified primarily by textual occlusion. After Bill drugs Johnny (and his own family) there is a sharp fade to black, a transition that is held for a number of seconds. As a result, the sexual assault is only heavily implied, and is never directly shown. This erasure of Johnny's (and later, Ronald's) assault has been commented on by numerous academic critics; the viewer is "forced to imagine what happens next,"[133] as the act is replaced by an "ominous fade to black."[134] Additionally, the film's removal of the abusive moment becomes a central preoccupation for Wilson; discussing the two instances of paedophilic assault in *Happiness*, she suggests that "two fades, or elisions, mark the point of the film's refusal to represent."[135] Thus, Wilson positions these aesthetic ruptures as a constituent of the film's broader interrogation of child abuse's representational ethics. In leaving the rape invisible, "the film avoids reproducing images which can themselves be mishandled"; paedophilic acts are established as "the unseeable and unsayable."[136] Yet, later narrative developments draw attention to that which escapes visual representation; "these two scenarios of abuse are missing from the film visually, yet they structure its affect and determine its outrage."[137] Johnny is sick the next morning, and after closer medical inspection is instructed to recount what happened. He is unable to fulfil this request, answering "no" when asked whether someone has hurt him; this response prompts his father (Dan Moran) to scream "what do you mean no? You've been fucking raped!" Furthermore, Bill eventually discusses his actions with his son; by this point he has raped another of his classmates, an act which is again rendered by an elliptical cut. After this, Bill is arrested, an event that again occurs off-screen; the police are shown arriving at the Maplewood home, before the film cuts to another, unrelated shot.

Wilson reads this process as an occlusion of that which is repressed and cannot be "assimilated" into the "surface world of the Maplewoods' family reality."[138] Conversely, it can be argued that the act itself constitutes a textual aporia that challenges not only the representability of sexual abuse, but also the centrality and coherence of the American family; as the act occurs within the domestic realm, it is not only the rape that is effaced, but also the nuclear household within which it is perpetrated. The act of child sex abuse positions the family as a significant *narrative* core, yet it also obliterates the metaphysical unity of the nuclear household; Trish, Billy, Timmy, and Chloe are figuratively erased,

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[133] King, *The American Cinema of Excess*, 102.
[134] Wadenius, "The Monstrous Masculine," 37. Also see Bruzzi, *Bringing up Daddy*, 185.
[135] Wilson, *Cinema's Missing Children*, 48.
[136] Ibid., 48-49, 52-53.
[137] Ibid., 49.
[138] Ibid.

rendered unconscious by spiked chocolate fudge sundaes. Thus, the assault of Johnny embodies an ontological paradox observed by Derrida in his critique of the metaphysical centre; it is simultaneously present and absent, inside and outside the structure:

> The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center.[139]

This epistemological contradiction is replicated in the aforementioned representation of the Maplewood and Jordan families at the film's conclusion, set six months later. Here, the families are shown, but Bill is conspicuous by his absence. Importantly, Bill's occlusion from the family unit amounts to a further act of microcosmic dislocation. As has been mentioned earlier, critical readings have explicitly established Bill as an initial centre-point of the Maplewood family structure; Lee describes him as "the ultimate patriarchal authority, a pillar of the community, a PTA man, a father, and a psychotherapist."[140] Thus, just as the nuclear family is displaced as a narrative centre, Bill is displaced as a patriarchal centre to the family itself; his *absence* is signified by the *presence* of an empty chair. Whilst this gap has a narrative motivation (Billy is away from the table, voyeuristically watching a woman by the pool), it provides a figurative contrast to the film's aforementioned use of the full table setting as a denotation of nuclear family wholeness (Fig.2.6):
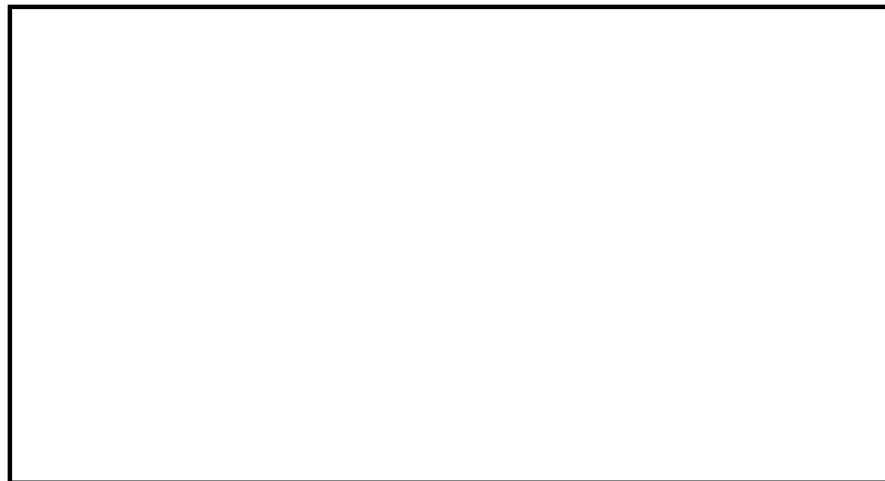
Fig.2.6

The displacement of the nuclear family as a narratological centre is mirrored by the eventual occlusion of the family's own structural centre-point, a missing father who is highlighted in

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[139] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 352.
[140] Lee, *Celebrity, Pedophilia and Ideology in American Culture,* 144.

the very process of his own omission. Thus, the decentering of the Maplewood family precipitates a figurative critique that obliterates the solidity of the nuclear family as a static centre of American national identity.[141]

Deconstructing Dualistic Family Images

As suggested in introducing this analysis, one can read Bill as a deconstructive figure, connoting seemingly contradictory values and meanings from his myriad behaviours. However, unlike existing readings of the film, I do not treat this tendency as a neat, discrete splitting of the subject into two conflicting halves, one monstrous, one fatherly. Rather, the character's actions can be simultaneously read as caring and abusive, deviant and normal. This conceptual co-presence closely resembles Derrida's aforementioned discussion of "undecidables," which he refers to as "unities of simulacrum, 'false' verbal properties…that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, but which, however, inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganizing it."[142] Thus, the undecidable inhabits metaphysical dichotomies, yet challenges their bifurcated economy by transgressing the strict delineation of the two terms that the dualism regulates; it exhibits a radical logic of "Neither/nor, that is *simultaneously* either *or*."[143] Exemplifying this deconstructive concept, Bill exceeds (and thus) escapes the oppositional categories of familial discourse as an undecidable textual fissure, a filmic element that elucidates the arbitrary, reductive nature of this specific binary model. In doing so, Bill typifies a broader strategy discernible within the text's representations of the nuclear family as a whole; a variety of familial images, icons, and elements can be simultaneously read in seemingly paradoxical fashions, rejecting assimilation into utopian/dystopian familial frames.

As alluded to by Shapiro, the most prominent example of this deconstructive textual strategy can be discerned in the numerous interactions between Bill and his eldest son. To begin, these sequences have frequently been treated as an ironic reference to earlier media portrayals of "father-son talks," specifically evoking 1950s family sitcoms; Brooks casts them as "a paedophilic pastiche of the father-son chats in Leave it to Beaver."[144] Established in their first discussion, Billy's narrative arc focuses on his growing concerns about sexual development, centred on his inability to ejaculate. On face value, Bill is reasonably successful in assuaging his son's angst; he debunks Billy's classmates' fictitious boasts, and reassures him that "you'll come, one day." Furthermore, the overtly sexualised nature of the

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[141] Perkins provides a counter-argument, suggesting that in spite of Bill's absence, the family's "blind and indomitable spirit" remains; see Perkins, *American Smart Cinema*, 84.

[142] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone Press, 1987), 43.

[143] Ibid.

[144] Brooks, Review of *Happiness*, 44.

exchanges does not itself render his behaviour deviant; as Wilson points out, they can also be read as elaborations of a traditional paternal role: "Another side of adult/child sexual negotiations is the parent's responsibility to offer some reasonable sexual education to the child."[145] Furthermore, the manner in which Bill responds to Billy's sexualised questions does not appear *aggressively* predatory; again, as Wilson notes:

> The film avoids any sexualisation of the visual presentation of the scenes…. Despite the film's black humour manifested in the matter of fact tone of Bill's patient questions and answers with Billy, the exchanges still belie his excess sexuality.[146]

Thus, whilst the initial sequences display a pre-adolescent child in conversation with a sex offender, they can also be read as an expression of a caring, fatherly function normalised within the nuclear family.

However, as these discussions cannot be separated from the paedophilic context within which Bill is introduced, they also signify paradoxical connotations of danger and abuse. For example, whilst Bill fulfils a paternal role in divulging sexual information, he extends his instruction to offers of demonstrative sexual touching. When Billy informs him that he does not know how to masturbate, Bill offers to show him how; similarly, when Billy reveals insecurities about the size of his genitalia, his father asks to measure his penis. As Wadenius argues, such gestures exceed an acceptable platonic intimacy, as Bill "violates the borders of responsible fathering";[147] these references to sexual abuse are reinforced by the pair's final chat, in which Bill admits to his son that he raped his two classmates. Thus, the pair's recurring conversations elude a simplistic definition as either caring or abusive, normal or abnormal; furthermore, they do not appear to contain discretely caring and abusive elements. Rather, these oppositional interpretations are cast as co-present possibilities, an undecidable textual logic that fatally compromises any discrete difference between antonymic familial images.

Corresponding representations of other actions further elucidate conflicting connotations of care and abuse attached to Bill's fatherly behaviour. For example, after drugging his family in preparation for Johnny's rape, Bill carries the comatose Billy up to his room; here, he tucks his son in, checking that he is asleep (Fig.2.7):

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[145] Wilson, *Cinema's Missing Children*, 52.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Wadenius, "The Monstrous Masculine," 40.
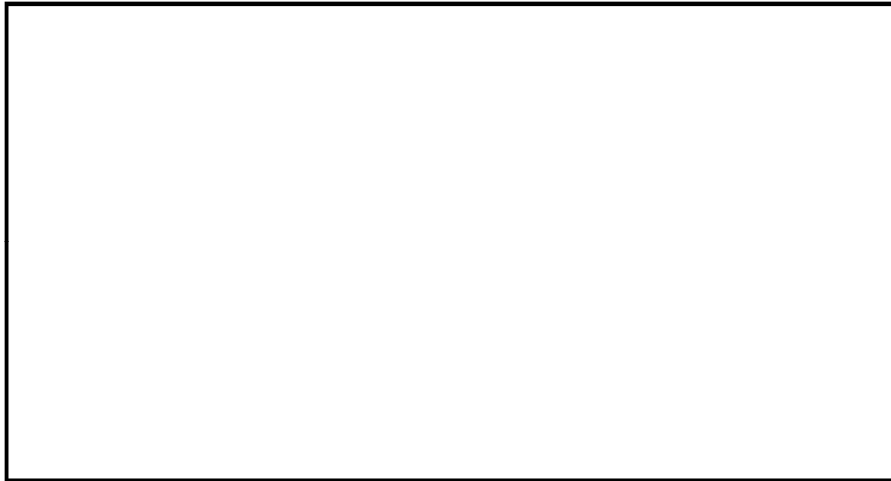
Fig.2.7

Evidently, this action is directly motivated by and precipitates a deplorable act of abuse. However, it also visually evokes an idealised image of fatherhood: "tucking in" his son so as to ensure his comfort as he sleeps, Bill's behaviour also resembles one of the father's most sentimentalised caring duties. Furthermore, after a later abusive act, Bill is again shown at Billy's bedside, counselling his troubled son; Billy is awake, and shares with his father that he nearly achieved his central narrative goal, ejaculation (Fig.2.8):

Fig.2.8

Here, an oppositional difference of caring and abusive behaviour is rendered structurally insufficient; Bill's fatherly actions cannot be neatly accommodated into this binary structure as it simultaneously connotes self-contradictory values.

Happiness reinforces this co-presence of divergent connotations by signifying a series of textual repetitions, each presenting a specific mode of character behaviour or family icon in both positive and negative lights. To begin, the aforementioned representation of the

Maplewood family dining table can be read as a key elaboration of semiotic undecidability. As demonstrated earlier, the family's dining room superficially operates as a metaphor for nuclear family wholeness, an assumed structural totality that underlies any essentialist representation. However, in figuring ontological solidity, it is also rendered a location of potentially conflicting meanings, as it is depicted in both positive and negative contexts. As knowledge of Bill's guilt is slowly uncovered, the representation of the family changes from one of close, communicative intimacy to one of silent estrangement; each member is hunched over their meals, eating in silence. Whilst the characters' body language conveys the differing moods of the two scenes (the children now sit further away from Bill), the setting is framed in a similar manner, established in long shot. Thus, whilst the mise-en-scène reproduces this setting's essential structural form, it is again granted seemingly opposed significances. Furthermore, the film's strategy of showing the same signifier in positive and negative *lights* is figured literally by the shifting ambiences of the two images; the former scenes are evenly lit (Fig.2.3-2.4), whereas the latter has Bill's figure casting a dark shadow over his domestic counterparts (Fig.2.9):

Fig.2.9

Finally, a recurring textual undecidability is also embodied by an edition of "Kool," a pre-teen magazine that is presented in two startlingly different contexts. We are first introduced to the magazine when it is purchased by Bill at a petrol station; he returns to his car and uses it as a masturbatory aid. However, later in the film we are shown the magazine again, this time in his son Billy's bedroom (it is unclear whether this is the same artefact or another copy). Thus, the magazine connotes two seemingly opposed values; whilst it is a symbol of impending abuse when placed in Bill's hands, it also functions as a signifier of Billy's childhood innocence (Figs.2.10-2.12):
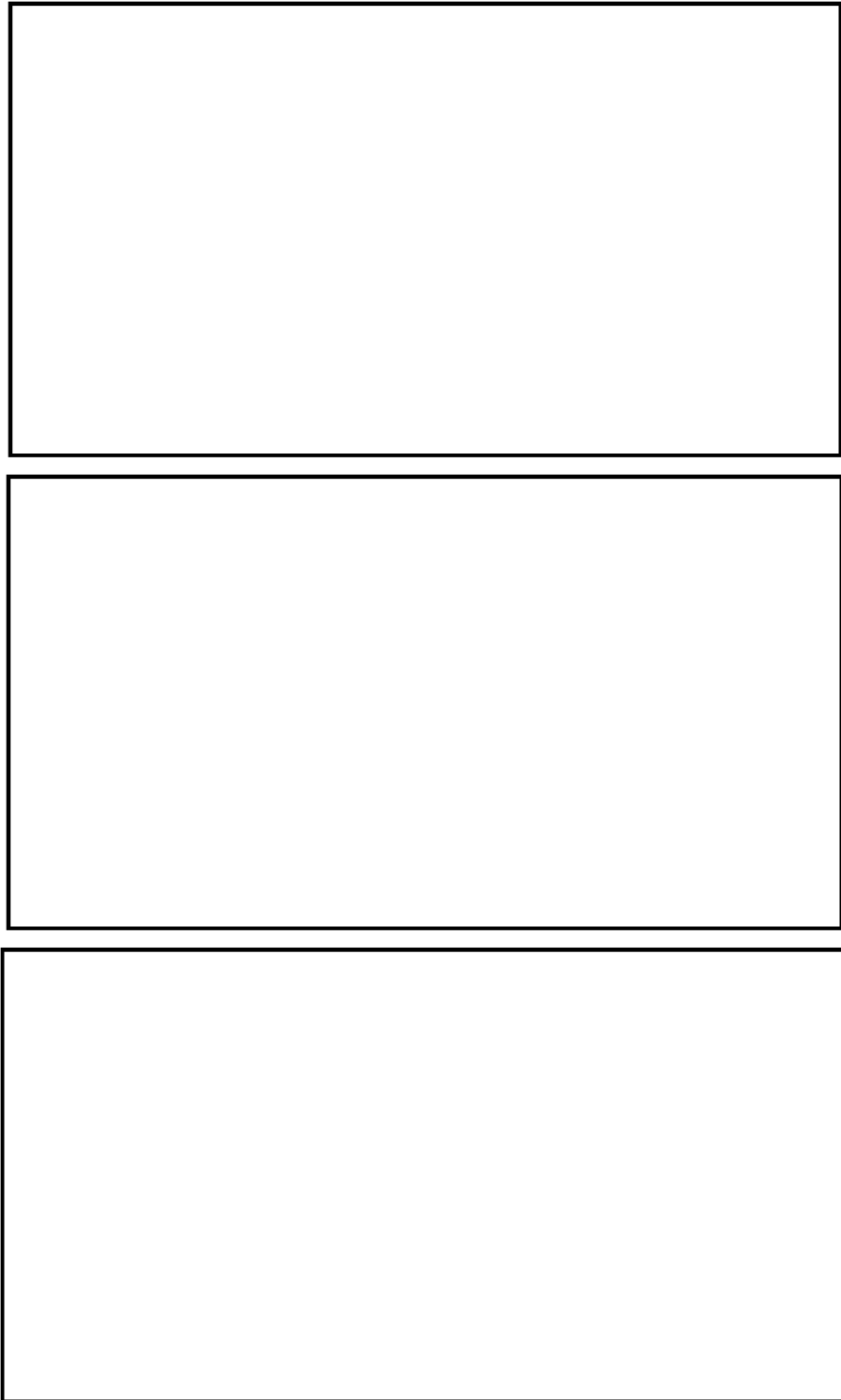
Figs.2.10-2.12

Indeed, the fact that this magazine can be symbolically read in different fashions is reinforced by the conflicting ways in which it is *literally* read by these two characters. For Billy, it is an age-specific text providing suitable entertainment and information. Conversely, Bill approaches it as an object of desire, a stimulus for masturbation. Thus, the possibility of applying different reading strategies to a single text is embodied by "Kool's" position as a

paradoxical cultural form. The conflicting familial values that can be projected onto the magazine are mirrored by the different meanings that characters inscribe onto its pages.

Conclusions

In the analysis above, *Happiness* offers a sustained textual challenge to the nuclear family's assumed role as a self-identical origin and centre of American national culture. Thus, whilst the film initially signifies a clichéd representation of familial whole(some)ness, images of idyllic nuclear norms are confronted with a twofold deconstructive re-imaging. Firstly, the film provides a critique of the metaphysical centre that operates on numerous textual and thematic levels; the cultural centrality and coherence of the nuclear family is erased as it is cast as an absent centre for the film's narrative structure, a process mirrored by Bill's displacement as the patriarchal centre of the family itself. Secondly, this implicit challenge to familial integrity is expanded upon by an undecidable textual logic that calls into question the solidity of discrete domestic images. The common representational division of utopian or dystopian families is effaced, as readings of the Maplewood family as idealised and debased, caring and abusive become textually indiscernable.

Therefore, a number of domestic actions, icons, and settings are imbued with contradictory significations, disrupting the logocentric status of fixed familial representations (positive or negative) as well as their positioning as discrete, oppositional antinomies. To cite a prominent deconstructive elucidation from Derrida's own oeuvre, the radical co-presence of paradoxical connotations lays bare the status of any binary opposition as a metaphysical reduction, a process that is violent, arbitrary, and always incomplete; each one of *Happiness'* undecidable familial elements "is something which escapes these concepts…" (the "concepts" here being discrete positive and negative familial representations) "…and certainly precedes them – probably as the condition of their possibility."[148] Representations of the nuclear family in *Happiness* exceed a strict dualistic economy of utopia and dystopia, motioning towards an originary *différance* that pre-exists (and makes possible) these bifurcated presences. Thus, one cannot theorise the Maplewood's domestic realm as a site that accommodates and mediates conflicting (yet ontologically stable) elements and categories. Rather, the very act of framing the American family in discrete, oppositional terms is called into question; any attempt to furnish the nuclear unit (or any of its constituent elements) with a legible, essential significance is undermined by traces of potentially paradoxical connotations.

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[148] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 358.

This Derridean logic is demonstrated in one final figurative image, returning us to the site of Johnny's assault: the nuclear family home. In his frantic attempts to sedate the child, Bill laces a tuna sandwich with a date-rape drug. As the malevolent substance mixes with the sandwich's viscous filling, it can no longer be discerned as separate from the foodstuff in which it is contained, visualising a contamination of paradoxical, co-present traces; it is rendered simultaneously as sustenance and threat, care and abuse, dismantling the oppositional difference between these categories. In doing so, this object embodies ontological properties that align it closely with Derrida's deconstructive interpretation of the *pharmakon*, which he argues is roughly analogous to his theorisation of the trace.[149] Derrida's subversive re-reading of Plato establishes the *pharmakon* as an entity that embodies seemingly paradoxical attributes; it as "at once medicine and poison…a 'good' and 'bad' *drug*";[150] in *Dissemination*, he notes that:

> When a word inscribes itself as the citation of another sense of the same word, when the textual center-stage of the word *pharmakon*, even while it means *remedy*, cites, re-cites, and makes legible that which *in the same word* signifies, in another spot and on a different level of the stage, *poison*.[151]

In the passage above, Derrida demonstrates the undecidable logic at work in *Happiness'* rendering of the nuclear family. Opposed significances do not coexist discretely alongside one another but reside "*in the same word*" (or element); furthermore, to deny either of these paradoxical potentialities amounts to a gesture of metaphysical reduction. Ultimately, this radical form of conceptual co-presence is evidenced in the child's response to the tuna sandwich; whilst it allows Bill to sexually violate him, Johnny also describes it as "really good"; similarly, whilst Trish's drugging is a symptom of an abusive act that will tear her family to pieces, she (unwittingly) remarks "I haven't slept so well in so long." Precipitating the co-presence of a positive reaction and a catastrophic consequence, this single element exemplifies an undecidable Derridean economy; this conceptual logic underlies *Happiness'* deconstructive engagement with the American nuclear family.

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[149] Derrida, *Positions*, 40.
[150] Simon Morgan Wortham, *The Derrida Dictionary* (London: Continuum, 2010), 41. Emphasis added.
[151] Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Continuum, 2004), 100-101. Emphasis in original.

Chapter Four – Decentering the Heartland: Revisiting the American Small-Town

The Small-Town as a Geographical and Cultural Centre

"The history of a nation is only the history of its villages written large." Ima Honaker Herron begins her influential study of *The Small-Town in American Literature* with this quote from former US president Woodrow Wilson, who constructs the American small-town as a socio-cultural microcosm.[1] Pronouncements like Wilson's demonstrate key ontological links between national identity and everyday rationalisations of American existence; local communities (described as small cities, villages, or most commonly, small-towns)[2] appear intractably tied to broader constructions of a shared national character. As a result, images of the American small-town have been understood by scholars as enduring narrativisations of a shared national culture, cementing the small-town's position as one of "the most powerful, persistent, and pervasive myths shaping many Americans' sense of their past and national identity."[3] Thus, whilst representing a limited social scale, the small-town operates as an index or reflection of broader cultural values or experiences; it purportedly encapsulates either a core set of national norms, or else typifies a shared American socio-cultural reality.

These interrelated assumptions are often granted a specific figurative significance within academic discourse. Although numerous critics stress the heterogeneity of American towns and their popular representation, such readings still return to a foundational assumption regarding the small-town that vindicates their continued study. Herron notes in her account of the literary town that despite significant regional variations, "all of these towns are American, bound together by something strangely homogenous."[4] Thus, described as a "truly American place," the small-town's heterogeneous renderings are not considered a sign of cultural fragmentation, but rather a symptom of the town's pervasive relationship with "so many cogent ideas fundamental in our culture."[5] Just as the small-town assumes a normalising role in shaping and articulating individual American experiences, it is

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[1] Woodrow Wilson, quoted in Herron, *The Small-town in American Literature*, xiii.

[2] Ima Honaker Herron, *The Small Town in American Literature* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1971), xiii, 3.

[3] Jane Marie Pedersen, *Between Memory and Reality: Family and Community in Rural Wisconsin, 1870-1970* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 3; quoted in Lyn Christine MacGregor, *Habits of the Heartland: Small-Town Life in Modern America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010), 6.

[4] Herron, *The Small-town in American Literature*, 3.

[5] Ima Honaker Herron, "Changing Images of the American Small Town - Fair Verna to Peyton Place," *English Journal* 47, no. 9 (1958): 538.

metaphorically positioned as the very locus of a shared, cohesive national culture. Whether described as a centre, heartland, or as the residence of Middle America,[6] the small-town's dual role as location and cultural narrative is reflected in its conceptual (and geographical) positioning.

Constructions of the small-town as a cultural centre can be discerned in countless sociological, historical, and literary texts. Max Lerner suggests that the size of the small-town ensures an inextricable relationship with core American values, a reading he bases upon histories of demographic development: "the American place started with small population units…traditionally, the small-town has been held to embody the American spirit better than the larger frame."[7] Don Martindale and Russell Galen Hanson identify this traditional view of small-town pre-eminence within early social science studies of American community, describing orthodox readings of the location "as the permanent and unchallengeable heart of American life."[8] Here, Martindale and Hanson make explicit the key constitutive role played by academic readings in solidifying images of the small-town as a cultural core. This trend is exemplified by Robert and Helen Lynd's 1929 study of Muncie, Indiana; often lauded as the formative sociological illustration of small-town life, it is significant that the pseudonym they chose for the settlement was "Middletown."[9]

Despite suggestions that small-town centrality has waned over time, a more recent study by Rob Kroes notes persistent perspectives that locate it at the very core of an American "sense of self." Punning on the phrase "dead center" (as an exact *and* deceased locus), Kroes demonstrates a general paradigmatic shift (or "decentering,") drawing scholarly attention away from the town and towards the study of "borderlands" and "blurred identities."[10] Nevertheless, Kroes admits that the town's wider socio-cultural centrality is harder to extinguish: "the center refuses to give, and so does the small-town. It is always there, as so many places on the map, as so many remembered Americas, as so many points linking Americans to an America as they feel it."[11] A similar understanding of the town as an ahistorical, transcendental presence is expressively elucidated in Richard R. Lingeman's

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[6] See Rob Kroes, "The Small Town: Between Modernity and Post-Modernity," in *The Small Town in America: A Multidisciplinary Revisit*, eds. (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1995), 7-8; MacGregor, *Habits of the Heartland*; Mary Helms, *Middle America: A Cultural History of Heartland and Frontiers* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975).

[7] Max Lerner, *America as Civilization: Life and Thought in America Today* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 148.

[8] Don Martindale and Russell Galen Hanson, *Small Town and the Nation: The Conflict of Local and Translocal Forces* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1969), 10.

[9] See Robert Lynd and Helen Lynd, *Middletown, A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1929).

[10] See Kroes, "The Small Town," 7-8. The term "decentering" is also used by Derrida in his deconstructive engagement with metaphysical "structure"; see Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), 354.

[11] Kroes, "The Small Town," 7-8.

history of the small-town in American culture. Discussing Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town* (1938), Lingeman approaches the text's "archetypal New England small town" setting as a concrete, static centre, embodying and condensing American ideals:

> Not only was this little town timeless, a synecdoche for the universal experiences of mankind; it was also located at the center of a stable cosmos, like the ancient astronomers had located the earth in the center of the solar system.[12]

Thus, positioning the town as a locus of human experience, Lingeman reifies aforementioned constructions of American national identity as a metaphysical cultural nexus. Theorisations of the town as a socio-cultural foundation are reiterated by Walter Hölbling in his study of Mid-West settlements in American literature; despite regional variations, the small-town is still treated as "the true base of the great American society," a foundation of core beliefs and values upon which a broader American character is constructed.[13] Again, Lingeman argues that it is the small-town's centrality that ensures its pop-culture persistence; whether it is accepted as a model for contemporary American experience, he argues that it still serves a "relevant cultural need," as a durable figurative anchor that cannot be erased regardless of socio-economic context.[14] Conversely, sociological studies that perceive a contemporary "marginalisation" of the small-town base their conclusions upon the assumption that it once constituted an effective cultural centre; Richard O. Davies' assertion that the town has recently been "shunted to the margins of national life" alludes to its original, *a priori* ontology as America's heartland.[15] Thus, whether endorsing or challenging the pre-eminence of the small-town in contemporary cultural discourse, myriad approaches perpetuate its foundational function as a singular heart of American national culture.

Readings of the small-town as a fixed cultural centre-point tacitly reinforce the assumed self-coherence and concreteness of the identities and meanings it connotes. As a result, it can be argued that the small-town fulfils structural functions commonly proscribed to the metaphysical "centre"; these logocentric attributes, and their critique within Derridean

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[12] Richard R. Lingeman, *Small Town America: A Narrative History, 1620-The Present* (New York: Putnam, 1980), 260.
[13] Walter Hölbling, "From Main Street to Lake Wobegon and Half-Way Back: The Mid-West Small-town as a Literary Place in 20th Century U.S. Literature," in *The Small Town in America: A Multidisciplinary Revisit*, eds. Hans Bertens and Theo D'Haen (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1995), 99.
[14] Richard R. Lingeman, "The Small-town in America: The Recent Past, the Near Future," in *Change and Tradition in the American Small Town*, eds. Robert Craycroft and Michael Fazio (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983), 14-15.
[15] Richard O. Davies, *Main Street Blues: The Decline of Small-Town America* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 99.

thought, have already been discussed at length in the previous chapter's analysis of the nuclear family. Indeed, the American family and small-town's shared status as a nexus of national being is reinforced by a series of perceptive discursive correspondences. For example, in D.W Meinig's exploration of "symbolic landscapes" he outlines a series of positive, wholesome small-town associations that closely mirror idyllic constructions of the family, which he subsequently erects as a centre of American community: "the image of the New England village is widely assumed to symbolize for many people the best we have known of an intimate, family-centered, Godfearing, morally conscious, industrious, thrifty, democratic *community*."[16] Furthermore, in Kenneth MacKinnon's study of *Hollywood's Small Towns*, he notes a tripartite figurative economy that intractably links the two cultural narratives to broader constructions of American national identity. Thus, the American family, small-town, and nation are shown to evoke similar collective identities on ever-increasing conceptual scales:

> A similar appeal to an ideal Small Town is made at a higher or wider level in these melodramas, and, as we shall see, in many others, so that at first glance it could appear that there might be a case for seeing the small town itself as macrocosm (standing for a still greater macrocosm, the United States) to the microcosm of the small-town family.[17]

Thus, in treating the nuclear family and small-town as harmonised figurations of national wholeness, their potential treatment as complementary cultural centres are reinforced; furthermore, in basing this equity around logocentric structural principles, their role in constituting a metaphysics of American identity is illustrated.

In introducing this chapter I argue that treatments of the small-town as a fixed, rigid centre have been used to normalise specific, self-coherent constructions of the small-town in American culture. Most prominently, popular and scholarly accounts of the small-town have probed links between the location and certain socio-cultural concepts, hypothesising the universality of specific American virtues: community, local democracy, and "face to face relations."[18] For many, the town provides an eternal space within which core, enduring national values structure everyday existence, their essential, fixed position within American culture perfectly realised. Thus, whilst American sociologists have hypothesised a "decline

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[16] D.W. Meinig, "Symbolic Landscapes: Some Idealizations of American Communities," in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*, ed. D.W. Meinig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 165.
[17] Kenneth MacKinnon, *Hollywood's Small Towns: An Introduction to the American Small-Town Movie* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1984), 49.
[18] Lerner, *America as a Civilisation*, 151.

of the small-town" in post-war American life, this only reaffirms the location's position as the site of an idyllic cultural uniformity.[19] This tension between the ideal and actual, in which a perfect, homogenised small-town model is contrasted with a flawed, fallen social reality still unproblematically grants the town a coherent, idyllic significance; the town is established as a fixed archetype with which more authentic, debased representations can be compared. Thus, regardless of historical and economic shifts, many continue to locate the unambiguous essence of American identity (whether literal or metaphoric) within the small-town's tree-lined streets.

However, the second section of this introduction focuses more clearly on recent challenges to the national centrality of a bucolic small-town model. Numerous commentators (critical, popular, and artistic) have accounted for conflicting small-town representations, highlighting the potential for antonymic readings of the town as a setting that is "emotionally stifling, intellectually suffocating and sexually repressive."[20] The possibility of paradoxical small-town images is particularly important to recent studies of the geographical setting within American cinema. Both Emanuel Levy and MacKinnon structure their readings of the cinematic small-town within a series of binary frames, demonstrating how screen depictions have oscillated between opposed, value-laden representational poles. As a result, whilst demonstrating subtly different theoretical and conceptual emphases, the pair elucidate similar ontological judgements; rather than simplistically epitomising idyllic American socio-cultural experiences, the small-town provides a venue of "dialectical"[21] contestation, crystallising around a number of discretely delineated cultural dichotomies.

Nevertheless, these approaches still emphasise the unity and inherence of key cultural concepts associated with the small-town. Rather than accounting for a heterogeneous multiplicity of differing cultural representations and identities, such methodologies rationalise cultural difference within restrictive interpretative couplets, treating both positive and negative portrayals as discrete, logocentric presences. In turn, this process reinforces the hierarchical and conceptual dominance of prominent small-town ideals (community, local democracy, pastoralism and so on).[22] Typified in Levy and MacKinnon's structuralist readings, representational diversities can only be accounted for as deviations from a pre-existing dominant term. Thus, whilst arguing that cinematic small-towns engender mythic contrasts, this very methodology perpetuates the self-same dominant meanings and fixed, differential economies they superficially seek to problematize.

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Emanuel Levy, *Small-Town America in Film: The Decline and Fall of Community* (New York: Continuum, 1991), 256.
[21] Ibid., 20.
[22] Ibid., 255.

Mapping the Small-Town Ideal

In post-war sociological and cultural discourses, discussions of the American small-town focused largely on the extent to which it fulfilled its presumed role as a positive epitome of core American values. Thus, whilst appraisals of small-town verisimilitude vary, its socio-cultural importance remains largely unquestioned. [23] This is succinctly demonstrated in Lerner's reading of the "decline of the small town"; whilst noting key economic and demographic challenges to local communities, he suggests that "the fact that the small town is dwindling in importance makes Americans idealize it all the more."[24] Therefore, despite the widespread desire to (unfavourably) compare small-town life with an idealized socio-cultural model, this very dynamic demonstrates the continuing importance of the town in constructing and narrating American national identity. The notable veneration of the small-town in American life is demonstrated by its pervasive presence in myriad academic and popular discourses. For example, literary critics Jean Bethke Elshtain and Herron describe broadly positive representations that recur within wide historical cycles; the small-town is approached by both as a "seedbed," a point of origin for American "democracy"[25] and "the republican spirit and the source of our cultural vigor."[26] Sociological readings of the town frequently cast it as the manifestation of an ideal community, a transcendent structure of ontological wholeness and cultural coherence; for example, Lingeman treats the small-town as a conceptual exemplar, arguing that "the small town myth exists and persists at a deeper stratum of American culture: the small town makes up our image of community."[27] The author then quotes James Oliver Robertson, who reaffirms this link between community and totality, arguing that popular images of the small-town are grounded in socio-cultural uniformity: "the imagery of homogeneity provides a sense of secure, unchallenging rootedness in a society of the uprooted."[28] Finally, a number of texts that provide taxonomic descriptions of small-town virtues focus on attributes commonly associated with community forms. Kroes describes the ideal town as a "safe haven of social integration,"[29] a judgement echoed by Meinig's study of the New England village's "connotations of continuity...of stability, quiet prosperity, cohesion and intimacy."[30]

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[23] Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Our Town Reconsidered: Reflections on the Small Town in American Literature," in *Political Mythology and Popular Fiction*, eds. Ernest J. Yanarella and Lee Sigelman (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988), 117.
[24] Lerner, *America as a Civilisation*, 151.
[25] Elshtain, "Our Town Reconsidered," 117.
[26] Herron, "Changing Images of the American Small Town," 539.
[27] Lingeman, "The Small-town in America," 3.
[28] James Oliver Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980), 218. Quoted in Lingeman, "The Small-town in America," 3.
[29] Kroes, "The Small Town," 7-8.
[30] Meinig, "Symbolic Landscapes," 165.

In examining the small-town film as a cinematic genre, MacKinnon also establishes its central role within American "public sentiment"; characterised as a utopian community, the town encompasses ideals of democracy, "Christian love," fairness and kindness.[31] Furthermore, MacKinnon notes a continuing conceptual importance for the small-town divorced from any root within his perception of American socio-cultural "reality," suggesting that "it is the image of the ideal, rather than its realization, which ensures the place of the small town in the American imagination."[32] This prescription of the town as an archetypal (and idyllic) cinematic setting is further discussed by Levy, positioning "Small-Town America" as both an "ideological construct" and a "distinctly American" mythology.[33] Akin to Elshtain's treatment of literary representations, Levy observes changing small-town images in different periods of film history, linking these shifts to economic and socio-cultural factors. Nevertheless, he concludes by demonstrating enduring continuities that form key conceptual links between protagonists of small-town films and what he coins "basic American values": individualism, pragmatism, common sense, resourcefulness, self-assurance, determination, "control over one's fate" and optimism.[34] Furthermore, in introducing his study, Levy demonstrates that notable tenets of small-town existence encapsulate an ideal American "way of life"; these are demonstrated through dualistic themes of "work and public life; love and marriage, family and friendship; sex and leisure; politics and community life."[35] Thus, commentators from disparate disciplines carefully note a potentially shifting correspondence of small-town principles with socio-historical reality; yet, an intractable structural relationship between the small-town and a coherent national identity underpins these seemingly more nuanced criticisms.

The Ideal or Actual? Small-Town Binary Oppositions

As suggested above, increased sociological attention has been granted to perceived disparities between ideals of small-town life and contrary representations of everyday experience. This foundationalist, metaphysical opposition underpins both Levy and MacKinnon's cinematic studies. The pair fundamentally differ in their characterisations of the small-town within filmic discourses; MacKinnon approaches the small-town film as a cogent generic tradition, whilst Levy characterises the small-town as a recurring setting perceptible in numerous generic and historical contexts, entailing myriad thematic and

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[31] MacKinnon, *Hollywood's Small Towns*, 2, 3, 153.
[32] Ibid., 3.
[33] Levy, *Small-Town America on Film*, 251-252.
[34] Ibid., 264.
[35] Ibid., 15.

In examining the small-town film as a cinematic genre, MacKinnon also establishes its central role within American "public sentiment"; characterised as a utopian community, the town encompasses ideals of democracy, "Christian love," fairness and kindness.[31] Furthermore, MacKinnon notes a continuing conceptual importance for the small-town divorced from any root within his perception of American socio-cultural "reality," suggesting that "it is the image of the ideal, rather than its realization, which ensures the place of the small town in the American imagination."[32] This prescription of the town as an archetypal (and idyllic) cinematic setting is further discussed by Levy, positioning "Small-Town America" as both an "ideological construct" and a "distinctly American" mythology.[33] Akin to Elshtain's treatment of literary representations, Levy observes changing small-town images in different periods of film history, linking these shifts to economic and socio-cultural factors. Nevertheless, he concludes by demonstrating enduring continuities that form key conceptual links between protagonists of small-town films and what he coins "basic American values": individualism, pragmatism, common sense, resourcefulness, self-assurance, determination, "control over one's fate" and optimism.[34] Furthermore, in introducing his study, Levy demonstrates that notable tenets of small-town existence encapsulate an ideal American "way of life"; these are demonstrated through dualistic themes of "work and public life; love and marriage, family and friendship; sex and leisure; politics and community life."[35] Thus, commentators from disparate disciplines carefully note a potentially shifting correspondence of small-town principles with socio-historical reality; yet, an intractable structural relationship between the small-town and a coherent national identity underpins these seemingly more nuanced criticisms.

The Ideal or Actual? Small-Town Binary Oppositions

As suggested above, increased sociological attention has been granted to perceived disparities between ideals of small-town life and contrary representations of everyday experience. This foundationalist, metaphysical opposition underpins both Levy and MacKinnon's cinematic studies. The pair fundamentally differ in their characterisations of the small-town within filmic discourses; MacKinnon approaches the small-town film as a cogent generic tradition, whilst Levy characterises the small-town as a recurring setting perceptible in numerous generic and historical contexts, entailing myriad thematic and

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[31] MacKinnon, *Hollywood's Small Towns*, 2, 3, 153.
[32] Ibid., 3.
[33] Levy, *Small-Town America on Film*, 251-252.
[34] Ibid., 264.
[35] Ibid., 15.

iconographic references.[36] Nevertheless, in attempting to read a wider variety of socio-cultural representations within specific case-studies, the two approaches both stress the heterogeneity of potential cinematic small-town images. For example, whilst diagnosing a "generally favourable attitude of film (and dominant culture) towards small towns," Levy argues that "there have been variability in concept and diversity in image. Culturally conditioned, in each of the six decades under consideration, small-town films have embodied different symbols and projected different meanings."[37] Thus, notwithstanding the problematic project of dividing representations into arbitrary historical periods, Levy notes a representational complexity largely absent in sociological readings. This impulse to explore a wider diversity of socio-cultural messages also underlies MacKinnon's study. For example, in discussing the potential pitfalls of delineating a cogent small-town genre, MacKinnon warns against imposing homogenised readings within which thematic or structural similarities are stressed to the detriment of the peculiarities of specific texts.[38] Thus, superficially at least, both scholars self-consciously attempt to complexify readings of the small-town and its cinematic rendering.

However, when the methodological foundations of Levy and MacKinnon's works are considered in detail, it is clear that their aim is not to study a heterogeneous economy of singular small-town images; rather, they focus on the ways in which representations of the small-town can be rationalised and restricted. This is particularly clear with recourse to the aforementioned tension between the ideal and the actual, a binary framework central to MacKinnon's arguments; mirroring prominent sociological accounts, representations are discretely divided into two self-coherent categories, contrasting a consistent ideal of the small-town "as Utopia"[39] with a more negative actuality or "reality." MacKinnon utilises this dualistic dynamic to structure his overarching generic categorisations: "the principal antithesis which emerges, more or less overtly, in every small-town movie is that between ideal and actuality or, perhaps more accurately, between the image of the ideal and a perception of the actuality."[40] Thus, varied small-town representations are not considered on their own terms, but are rather defined by how closely they match up to a cogent cultural ideal. MacKinnon elaborates upon this method, cementing a specific model as the centre-point of small-town discourse: "the small town in movies seems forever to be looking

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[36] MacKinnon, *Hollywood's Small Towns*, 1; Levy, *Small-Town America on Film*, 15-17.
[37] Levy, *Small-Town America on Film*, 255.
[38] MacKinnon, *Hollywood's Small Towns*, 151.
[39] Ibid., 2.
[40] Ibid., 152.

upwards at some Platonic ideal of itself, congratulating itself on its close approximation to it in actuality or castigating itself for its failure to match practice with inspiration." [41]

"The Bright and Dark Sides"

Oppositional, hierarchical contrasts between diametrically divergent small-town representations are explored in greater detail and complexity in contemporary readings of American popular culture. Specifically, several recent historical and literary studies have self-consciously interrogated such binary formulations to uncover their discursive assumptions, challenging the structural coherence of either an intangible ideal or a flawed actuality. For example, Elshtain notes a dichotomous logic that orients explorations of the small-town in literary representations; the quintessential town "exists in narrative, whether 'history' or 'fiction', always 'in contrast to.'" [42] Whilst noting the common interpretative couplet of real vs. imagined, Elshtain challenges the authenticity of either illustration; rather, both positive and negative images are treated as contrasting (but equally constructed) representative poles, performing similar roles in arbitrarily rationalising a heterogeneous matrix of cultural experiences. Conversely, James F. Barker utilises conflicting small-town representations to diagnose a potential co-presence of seemingly contradictory cultural values. Thus, rather than identifying a range of discrete representational alternatives, Barker suggests that

> a number of us possess a subtle schizophrenia concerning the small town image. We love it for its picturesque qualities and its sense of community, but we hate it for its narrowness of thought and its slowness to respond to change. [43]

Thus, whilst Barker appears to treat such discursive elements as tangible, essential properties, he theorises a potential challenge to the structural coherence of discretely opposed representations; whilst positive and negative elements remain ontologically distinct, their "schizophrenic" coexistence implies a superficial questioning of the conceptual supremacy of either term.

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[41] Ibid., 153. Stein offers an interesting contrast, in which he reads negative representations of the small-town as "falsehoods." See B. Stein, "Whatever Happened to Small-Town America," *Public Interest*, no. 44 (1976): 18, 24.

[42] Elshtain, "Our Town Reconsidered," 115. For a similar reading of diverse, shifting small-town representations, see Lingeman, "The Small-town in America," 3, 5.

[43] James F. Barker, "Introduction: Order and Image in the American Small Town," in *Order and Image in the American Small Town*, eds. Michael W. Fazio and Peggy Whitman Prenshaw (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981), 4.

Levy replicates these discursive interrogations in his conception of the "dark side of small-towns."[44] In his reading, a consistent structural feature of small-town discourse is the antagonistic contrast of wholesome images with debased (and purportedly more authentic) representations of the small-town as "hell," a bigoted setting defined by the absence of idyllic values. However, Levy does not locate these antagonistic tendencies within discrete representational ontologies; rather, they are demonstrated as two complementary (and interrelated) sides of the town, treated as "the bright and dark sides."[45] Thus, as Levy demonstrates, the desire to juxtapose a darker, more realistic rendering with an idealised small-town model underlie complementary negative (yet, equally constructed) cultural representations. For example, in reading *Fury* (1936) as an exemplar of this textual strategy, Levy notes that the film's "condemning" view of the small-town self-consciously explores elements disavowed by idyllic small-town representations: these include "ignorance, hypocrisy, bigotry, and provincialism."[46] Thus, dealing with the "delicate balance between the normal and abnormal, order and disorder," Levy argues that several small-town movies utilise a dialectical approach that treats the "normal and familiar life…as the starting point for an understanding of the deviant and unfamiliar…. These narratives…use the strategy of defamiliarization, displacing the commonplace to reveal submerged patterns of meaning in life."[47] As with scholarly readings of the nuclear family, seemingly contradictory images are located within a single setting or text, with the idyll read as a superficial cover for a sordid social reality; elucidating differing layers of socio-cultural meaning, such representations unveil "dark anxieties operating beneath the surface register."[48]

Importantly for Levy, this strategy of stark thematic contrast is central not only to his reading of small-town America, but of popular film itself. Adopting a structuralist methodology influenced by the work of Claude Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, Levy analyses movies "as cultural myths, narratives arising from society's underlying issues and basic structures...as transformations of *basic dilemmas* or *contradictions* that in reality cannot be resolved."[49] As a result, the retention of a binary logic is integral to Levy's equation of popular film with discourses of myth. The presence of seemingly contradictory representations encapsulates his characterisation of small-town films as a stage for semiotic contestation: "the best small-town narratives have contained dialectical conflicts, through which ideological-mythic resolutions are explicitly provided. Such films have dealt with the

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[44] Levy, *Small-Town America on Film*, 74.
[45] Ibid., 75, 77.
[46] Ibid., 56.
[47] Ibid., 260.
[48] Ibid., 78.
[49] Ibid., 20. Emphasis in Original.

delicate balance between the normal and abnormal, order and disorder."[50] Thus, whilst allowing for the potential co-presence of divergent cultural meanings, Levy rationalises these representations within an oppositional *either/or* structural economy, tacitly retaining small-town ideals as a comparative centre. The potential erasure of structural boundaries between discrete representations is undermined by the replication of logocentric formal assumptions; for conflicting representations to be juxtaposed, their *a priori* coherence and plenitude is vital. Additionally, in suggesting varying representative layers of superficial order and hidden disorder, this visualisation relies upon treating this discursive veneer as illusory or intangible; as a result, the image of life "beneath the surface register" is granted a hierarchically superior status of greater (or even inherent) authenticity. Thus, whilst superficially overturning the value-laden dichotomies that favour idealised images of American small-town life, this line of argument fundamentally reifies the restrictive presences and dualities that constitute small-town discourse.

MacKinnon and Levy's application of a strict opposition between positive and negative small-town portrayals is replicated on a syntagmatic register; both writers observe clusters of conceptual comparison that both underlie and mirror the central opposition of conflicting small-town significances. As a result, a broad stratum of values, themes and concepts are accommodated within a further sub-set of interpretative oppositions, a trend observable more broadly in scholarly small-town discourses; Levy lists these as *individual vs. community*, *community vs. society*, *nature vs. culture*, *stability vs. change*, *integration vs. isolation*, the *sacred* and the *profane*, and finally, *public vs. private*.[51] On one level, this approach is useful in highlighting pervasive forms of discursive regulation; for example, Levy and MacKinnon make explicit a number of the reductive methodological assumptions that have shaped popular and critical small-town discourses. However, in unproblematically utilising these oppositional categories to structure their readings, a number of these suppositions are replicated and perpetuated; foundational concepts such as community and stability are treated once again as self-contained totalities, inherent and self-identical small-town concepts that assume a position of hierarchical supremacy within the "dialectical conflicts" they purportedly contest. Finally, scholars like Levy and MacKinnon ensure that the texts and themes that they encounter are forcefully homogenised within these restrictive, cogent classes; their discrete juxtaposition relies upon a fundamental definitional coherence, inhibiting a more radical displacement of their totalising boundaries and binary frames. The difference that MacKinnon attests to in his exploration of the small-town genre can only be understood within the arbitrary oppositional framework he erects and applies. Thus, critics

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[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid., 24-26. For similar taxonomies see MacKinnon, *Hollywood's Small Towns*, 151-174. For a critical discussion of these cultural oppositions, see Elshtain, "Our Town Reconsidered," 115.

do not trouble the small-town's fundamental ontological solidity; antonymic conceptual differences continue to regulate the dynamic, heterogeneous *différance* that operates *within* every small-town representation as a condition of its possibility.

It is my contention that this theoretical critique of existing cultural discourses facilitates an illustrative cinematic deconstruction of the American small-town. In constructing a case-study reading of *George Washington* (2000), I argue that the text fundamentally destabilises structural metaphors and hierarchical oppositions that are diagnosed in (and reinforced by) critical readings of the small-town. However, this does not simply take the form of a heightened textual and representational undecidability, within which the discrete, artificial difference between polarised small-town images is reversed and then displaced. Indeed, such a process is outlined at length in the previous chapter of this thesis, in which a comparable deconstructive method is applied to similarly bifurcated nuclear family discourses. Rather, *George Washington* is approached as a text that carries complementary deconstructive potentials, which coalesce around the sustained decentering of the small-town as a conceptual and cultural core. Thus, this metaphorical challenge stems from a filmic fragmentation of small-town space, place, and architecture, problematizing the structural integrity of the town as a fixed cultural totality; this dynamic is reinforced by a narratological decentering, as key events are shifted from central locations to the town's spatial (and conceptual) margins. Thus, *George Washington* undermines a figurative representation of geographical certitude that encapsulates the small-town's similar reliance on rigidly defined, self-coherent cultural meaning.

"It's a Nice Town": Decentering the Heartland in *George Washington* (2000)

In one of *George Washington*'s concluding scenes, we are provided with a subjective taxonomy of heroic attributes, presented in the form of a television interview with one of the film's central characters, a 12-year old boy named George (Donald Holden). Adopting a superhero persona, the child revels in the attention given to him following his successful rescue of a drowning boy. George believes he is a hero because he is "wise, strong and very talented": as he summarises, "I'm a hero because I like to save people's lives." Yet, George's self-aggrandizing public persona starkly contrasts with a tragic secret that forms a central plot-point for the film; another child, Buddy (Curtis Cotton III), lies dead, fished from a nearby river, a victim of a fatal head-wound inflicted (accidentally) by George. Buddy's death occurs after an ill-advised game of "shove" in a disused toilet-block, one of many activities the film's youths undertake as they drift from location to location, all but invisible to the town's (limited) sources of community or parental authority.

Focusing upon the aimless lives of unsupervised children in a decaying Southern small-town, *George Washington* constitutes its setting as a venue of social fragmentation and structural *différance*. In arguing that the film offers a primarily figurative challenge to small-town discourses, this reading deviates sharply from its limited existing scholarly and critical discourse. For example, a number of critics have focused closely upon the film's alleged "realism," arguing that *George Washington's* cultural representations embody heightened values of social authenticity. Indeed, in Justin Horton's sophisticated scholarly reading of the film, he establishes a superficially realist interpretation, before ultimately problematizing this simplistic analysis:

> On some levels, (*George Washington*) surely fits the customary realist criteria: if so
> inclined, a viewer could easily apply the 'naive' writings of Bazin and, by focusing
> on the film's depiction of poverty, location shooting, and nonprofessional players,
> mount a critique from the familiar and well-beaten path.[52]

Exemplifying this normative discourse, Edward Lawrenson suggests that *George Washington* presents an archetypal social realist scenario; however, he then clarifies that these narrative and thematic attributes are not matched by a complementary aesthetic verisimilitude.[53] Nevertheless, other critical commentators construct a more explicit link between the film's subject matter and an identifiably realist aesthetic. For example, Armond White directly matches *George Washington's* social verisimilitude with realist cinematography and style, noting both the film's "authentic dailiness" and "poetic realism."[54] Finally, as noted by Horton, A.O. Scott treats the film as a pre-cursor to a cycle of American films influenced by the aesthetics of Italian neorealism; in doing so, Horton outlines a series of aesthetic properties that superficially complement the film's subject matter: "Green's film adheres to the customary checklist of the neorealist inheritance: long takes, deep-focus cinematography, episodic narrative, a cast of nonprofessionals, and so forth."[55]

Superficially, these pervasive aesthetic and thematic judgements appear to position *George Washington* within a normalised oppositional economy that characterises American small-town discourse. In establishing the film's social realist ontology, critical readings

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[52] Justin Horton, "Mental Landscapes: Bazin, Deleuze, and Neorealism (Then and Now)," *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 2 (2013): 31.

[53] Edward Lawrenson, "Slow Train Coming," *Sight & Sound* 11, no. 9 (2001): 10.

[54] Armond White, "*George Washington*: These American Lives," *The Criterion Collection*, Last Modified March 11, 2014, http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/189-george-washington-these-american-lives.

[55] Horton, "Mental Landscapes," 24.

engender an ostensibly authentic critique of idealised cultural representations, achieved through a textual exposé of small-town decay, disorder, and deprivation. However, whilst some readings of the film reify this discursive link, many others *do not* construct an essentialist correspondence between *George Washington's* thematic or aesthetic properties and negative small-town images. Indeed, several prominent reviews argue that *George Washington's* apparently more authentic images of small-town life actually reflect or embody idealised cultural values, identities, and communities. Interestingly, such judgements are frequently framed in response to another recent independent text that has been treated as a more explicitly "nihilistic" attack on small-town cultural narratives: *Gummo* (1997). For example, Ben Thompson argues that *George Washington's* engagement with small-town place provides a reassuring palliative to *Gummo's* setting of Xenia, Ohio, described by another critic as a "stretch of hell":[56] "in its benign - not to say lyrical - depiction of the eccentricities of the American backwoods, *George Washington* seems to be working to heal the wounds Harmony Korine's *Gummo* inflicted on American ideals of small-town life."[57] These critical comparisons attest to the difficulty of positioning *George Washington* exclusively within aforementioned dichotomous categories of ideal or adverse small-town representations. Whilst other recent texts have been read as an unequivocally chilling visions of small-town deprivation and perversion, *George Washington* draws out seemingly conflicting critical attitudes that escape rigid bifurcations of idyllic model vs. fallen reality. For some it constitutes an exposé of rural poverty and social disorder; for others, it demonstrates the triumph of small-town community over socio-economic depression.

In contrast, Horton's aforementioned analysis of *George Washington* teases out latent discursive contradictions to disrupt the ontological certitude of existing readings. Locating the film within Deleuze's re-reading of Neorealism, he argues that *George Washington* utilises the complex narrational strategies of "free indirect discourse" to problematize metaphysical divisions of subject/object, real/imaginary, and actual/virtual; in doing so, the film exemplifies the Deleuzian notion of the "time image" and "the powers of the false" that it embodies.[58] Thus, Horton's "neo-Bazinian" approach repositions *George Washington* within a Neorealist paradigm precisely because of pervasive textual paradoxes and narrative ellipses.[59] Specifically, properties of photographic and social verisimilitude

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[56] Felicia Feaster, Review of *Gummo*, dir. Harmony Korine, *Film Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (1998): 41.

[57] Ben Thompson, "Neighbourhood Watch," *The Independent*, September 7, 2001: 12. For a similar reading, see J. Hoberman, "The Children's Hour," Review of George Washington, dir. David Gordon Green, *Village Voice*, October 24, 2000, http://www.villagevoice.com/2000-10-24/film/the-children-s-hour/.

[58] Horton, "Mental Landscapes," 33, 37, 44.

[59] Ibid., 26.

merge with an exploration of character interiority and subjective "realism," in which the "filmmaker enters into a mimetic relationship with the character's way of seeing."[60] Thus, noting the "dreamlike quality"[61] of many sequences, Horton argues that *George Washington* offers a radical experience of "becoming" that subverts the colonialist division between self and other:[62] "the free indirect mode puts the film's maker and its subjects into an oscillation, one that serves to obliterate the distinction between subjective and objective, for though the two are distinct, they are indiscernible."[63] Horton concludes that this narrational dynamic inaugurates a "calling into existence" of the marginal identities of a "'missing' people," a "collective enunciation" that constitutes the film's characters beyond constructions of America as a "white- and male-dominated nation."[64]

Shifting focus from the film's narrational complexities to its fragmentary mise-en-scène, I exploit a similar reading of discursive ambiguity and socio-cultural rupture to dismantle the small-town as a logocentric structure of cultural presence. Specifically, this analysis elucidates the film's interrogative challenge to the small-town's spatial, architectural, and structural coherence, visual tropes which solidify the location as an ontological and sociological unity. Firstly, with reference to *George Washington's* opening sequences, it is argued that the film's North Carolinian setting is depicted as a fragmentary cultural topography, a range of contingent locations excised from any broader geographical order. This is understood as a figurative challenge to the small-town as a formalised cultural totality; a lack of geographical wholeness symbolises a related lack of conceptual plenitude. Thus, previous attempts to delineate essential small-town structures or meanings are challenged by the absence of a foundational visual unity. This deconstructive attack upon small-town self-coherence precipitates a fundamental decentering of the town's perceived exceptional position in articulating American cultural experience; specifically, the text provides a microcosmic shift in representing the town as a conceptual centre to a setting of architectural ruin and marginality.[65] In noting that the majority of the film's integral scenes unfold in indiscernible, derelict spaces, one can observe a further figuration of conceptual and structural breakdown articulated through an increased focus on material detritus, disorder, and decay. Thus, the narrative ultimately draws attention away from town's centre to its margins, a move that mirrors a more fundamental displacement of the small-town as a definitional centre of American national identity. The final section of this chapter considers the fleeting moments in which *George Washington* explicitly represents the central spaces of

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[60] Ibid., 35.
[61] Ibid., 44.
[62] Ibid., 40-43.
[63] Ibid., 44.
[64] Ibid., 43.
[65] Kroes, "The Small Town," 7-8.

small-town community, typified by Main Street and the local church. However, the manner in which these are presented (simultaneously vibrant and depressed, full and empty) provides a bridge to the previous chapter's analyses; the undecidability of these socio-cultural environs is reinforced by their depiction as locations of paradox, spaces lacking the distinct structural coherence that their assumed centrality necessitates. Finally, this holistic challenge to architectural and ontological certitude encourages expressions of a multifarious cultural heterogeneity that inaugurates and exceeds the small-town and national identities it solidifies. In doing so, this chapter recasts and relocates Horton's Deleuzian notion of *George Washington's* "'missing' people" as but one manifestation of a Derridean cultural *différance*, focusing more closely upon how a deconstructive reading of American (small-town) identity makes a boundless range of "collective enunciation(s)"[66] possible.

Community and Conversation

Before exploring these strategies of textual displacement, it is useful to consider how these fit within *George Washington's* broader narrative structure, and how the film can be superficially located within small-town discourse. To begin, whilst the film contains a seemingly pivotal moment of violent narrative transformation (Buddy's death), it is primarily characterised by meditative moments of conversation and personal exploration; this aspect is directly noted in Martha P. Nochimson's assertion that *George Washington* "does not focus rigorously on its central story, but rather weaves among the lives of the people in the town."[67] As a result, the film's brutal centrepiece is subsumed within broader formal strategies (described by Jonathan Rosenbaum as "episodic"[68]) that focus upon character subjectivity (typified by the personalised narration of Nasia [Candace Evanofski]), and conversational exchange (the myriad bilateral discussions that provide insights into the characters' lives and personalities).

Nasia's voiceover consistently relates her observations to friendship or community groups, extolling the virtues of the town's cohesive adolescent population: "when I look at my friends, I know there's goodness." Additionally, the film regularly returns to a range of different social groupings, represented as contrasting forums of mundane discussion; several teenage girls engage in clichéd discussions about their male counterparts, and the manual workers on the railway line converse about health and diets over their communal lunch breaks. Furthermore, previous critical readings have highlighted the film's avoidance of

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[66] Horton, "Mental Landscapes," 43.
[67] Martha P. Nochimson, Review of *New York Film Festival 2000*, *Film-Philosophy* 4, no. 25 (2000): http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol4-2000/n25nochimson.
[68] Jonathan Rosenbaum, Review of *George Washington*, dir. David Gordon Green, *Film Comment* 36, no. 5 (2000): 75.

explicitly highlighting socio-cultural divisions amongst the town's residents. For example, the children are predominantly black, apart from Sonya (Rachael Handy), who is white; in an inversion of this demographic makeup, the group of workmen is predominantly white, with the notable exception of Damascus (Eddie Rouse), George's uncle. However, Philip Kemp notes a constant deferral of explicit racial tensions: "in general, racial concerns seem to float smokily around the periphery of the action, but never coalesce into anything tangible."[69] Perhaps more tellingly, Rosenbaum addresses the cast as a single whole, in spite of their potentially divergent cultural subjectivities: "George Washington boasts…a racially mixed cast of characters, working-class and southern."[70] Thus, such comments evoke homogenising discourses of Americanization and the melting pot, key concepts in the constitution of national togetherness. Although noting a diverse range of potential identity forms (race, region and class), these are rendered insignificant by the presence of a structure of shared national meaning, in this case, the small-town.

Nevertheless, this seemingly clear endorsement of an organic communal cohesion is problematized by the complex manner in which the film depicts myriad social relations. Whilst Nasia's opening narration highlights her affinity with the other local youths, she is continually seen in conversation with a number of "anti-male girlfriend(s),"[71] harshly evaluating several of the friends she previously praised. Indeed, the role of gossip within the film, a recurring theme within sociological accounts of the small-town,[72] reaffirms the perception that social and emotional attachments are limited and transient; for example, after George adopts his superhero persona, he is discussed mockingly by Sonya and Vernon (Damian Jewan Lee), two characters with whom he initially appeared to share a close social bond. Furthermore, on the few occasions that the friends are seen "hanging out" they appear isolated and bored. Sonya, Buddy, Vernon and George loiter in an "abandoned miniature golf range";[73] Buddy and George glumly discuss the former's break-up with Nasia; Vernon admonishes Sonya for using a stick to write on a wall with animal faeces. It is in the next scene that Buddy meets his violent end, as the group move on to a similarly dilapidated toilet block; he slips on a puddle during a session of innocent play-fighting, and cracks his skull on the floor. The group take Buddy's body and place it in a dilapidated house, his broken head obscured by a lizard mask. This is the last time the four of them are seen together as a group.

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[69] Philip Kemp, Review of *George Washington*, dir. David Gordon Green, *Sight & Sound* 11, no. 10 (2001): 49. Also see Nochimson, Review of *New York Film Festival 2000*.

[70] Rosenbaum, Review of *George Washington*, 75.

[71] Ibid.

[72] For an analysis of small-town "gossip," see Arthur J. Vidich and Joseph Bensman, *Small Town in Mass Society: Class, Power and Religion in a Rural Community*, Revised ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 41-45.

[73] Cynthia Fuchs, "'The Whole Fucking World Warped around Me': Bad Kids and Worse Contexts," in *Bad: Infamy, Darkness, Evil, and Slime on Screen*, ed. Murray Pomerance (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), 281. Emphasis added.

The adolescents' failure to realise idyllic, enduring communal relations is further reinforced by the film's prominent depictions of personal conversation. Thus, rather than focusing on "an interracial *group* of 12- to 15-year olds living in rural, underclass North Carolina"[74] (as Cynthia Fuchs suggests), the film charts fleeting *bilateral* relationships between members of that group and with other residents. Indeed, many of our major character insights stem from the conversations they have with others, providing a frank, personal discourse that is absent from shared discussions. For example, Buddy and Rico (Paul Schneider) speak about painful moments in past romantic relationships, prompted by the failure of the former's relationship with Nasia; Buddy also talks to Euless (Jonathan Davidson), a health-conscious worker, about his mother's insomnia; later on, Vernon and Sonya share a self-deprecating conversation about their perceived personality flaws. As a result, the film institutes a fundamental questioning of the presumed opposition between community and social isolation. On the one hand, the text relies almost entirely on social relations to convey its slow-burning story, as plot points and character information can be primarily discerned from one-on-one conversations, Nasia's reflective voiceover, and character monologues. Simultaneously, these conversations undercut readings of a cohesive community within the film's small-town setting; such dialogues are transitory and fleeting, as characters operate as temporary sounding boards for the discontents and negative self-perceptions of others.

This dynamic is clearly demonstrated in a particularly prominent conversation between Vernon and Sonya. Returning to the scene of Buddy's death, Sonya finds Vernon sat on the floor of the toilet block, and after a cursory interchange, Vernon shows his frustration at their predicament. The scene is dominated by Vernon's extended soliloquy, a device used throughout the film's social interactions; sustained, mutual communication is eschewed in favour of detailed litanies of personal grievances. In this case, whilst a series of shot-reverse shots frame the pair within a back and forth conversational dynamic, Vernon monopolises the interaction. Sonya stands over him, listening silently as he rants about a series of incoherent, frustrated desires; for example, he proclaims "I just wish I had my own tropical island, I wish I was. I wish I could go to China, I wish I could go to Outer Space man." The film's use of conversational settings as unequal venues for personal expression is also reflected in the fluidity with which these dialogues shift. Individuals are seen conversing privately with a wide range of characters throughout the film, often discussing other members of the cast; for example, Rico is seen comforting Buddy early in the film after Nasia turns her romantic attentions to George, but later walks around Main Street, admiring George's work directing traffic (he dons a fluorescent jacket and helps). In *George*

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[74] Ibid., 274.

Washington, the characters do not appear socially isolated; however, their diverse and one-sided interactions call into question the strength of the bonds that purport to tie the characters into coherent, identifiable communities. This reflexive dynamic, in which characters are both socially active and personally introspective, initiates a structural paradox that disturbs the self-coherence of small-town ontology. The remainder of the chapter explores this textual incongruity in reference to the town's spatial representation. However, it must be noted that the fragmentation of *George Washington's* small-town setting does not figure a simplistic division of a pre-existing communal presence. Rather, it initiates a deconstruction of the town itself, visualising a fundamental, originary difference that contests the unity of any *a priori* representation and its oppositional, metaphysical constitution. Ultimately, *George Washington's* signifies an incoherent setting that is always already structurally dispersed, where fragments of existence escape reassembly into any representational whole.

Small-Town Fragmentation

In his discussion of the cinematic small-town, Levy stresses the importance of a film's formative moments in establishing the cultural milieu as a coherent setting or theme. By providing an introductory overview of the town's inhabitants, topography, and architecture, the small-town can be solidified as a holistic socio-cultural and textual entity. In such circumstances, the viewer is not only provided an image of the different elements that form the town's internal structure, but also how these fit together:

> The typical beginning of a small-town film was an establishing (tracking) shot of the town, often from the point of view of an outsider…or a bird's-eye view….
> According to conventions, it became customary to begin a film with a pan across town (often an aerial shot) or of Main Street, which conveyed rapidly the town's size, location, territorial boundaries, "nature" sights (lake, river, hill), train station, and stratification system.[75]

Therefore, we are not provided with a series of discrete images, but rather a continuous elaboration of a self-coherent small-town space; whilst we are presented with the peculiarities of a particular setting, these are defined by their spatial (and ultimately, symbolic) ties. Meinig provides a strikingly similar description of the small-town's symbolic landscape; his taxonomy also focuses on spatial and architectural relations, including:

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[75] Levy, *Small-Town America on Film*, 258.

A courthouse, set apart on its own block, may be visible, but it is not an essential element, for the great classical columns fronting the stone temple of business proclaim the bank as the real seat of authority. This is Main Street, and parallel with it lies Church Street, not of *the* church, but many churches.[76]

Thus, in the small-town's cinematic and cultural rendering, diverse architectural forms and land uses are introduced as constituents of a harmonious cultural unity.

Elaborations of small-town wholeness are also perceptible in sociological readings. For example, Donlyn Lyndon notes that the unique character of the small-town is reflected in how the varied elements of the location are placed within close geographical proximity, creating a place that is "distinct," totalized, complete:

Small towns have the great advantage that their elements are few, their extent limited…. In a few minutes you can traverse a cross section of the place and its diversity is readily accessible to view. Being few, and readily grasped, its various elements make a recognisable pattern, a place often of distinction.[77]

Lyndon's perception of a "recognisable pattern" within the small-town suggests a coherent, rationalised setting, a conceptual entity that imposes order upon a diverse and heterogeneous topographical difference. In turn, physical or material cohesiveness purportedly reflects a related socio-cultural plenitude. Drawing direct links between physical and social structure, Barker suggests that the small-town offers an "abundance of order" in "American minds," before clarifying that "physical order originates from the union of topography, architecture, social structure, land values, and political decision-making."[78] This observation is indicative of wider readings of small-town structure, in which physical, social, and conceptual unities are intractably intertwined.

In contrast to such images of small-town equilibrium, the opening sequences of *George Washington* signify a setting that exists as a series of irreconcilable fragments. In many ways, it is possible to read the scenes occurring before the opening titles as a subversive re-imagining of small-town film's aforementioned geographical overview. Accompanied by Nasia's voiceover, we are provided with snapshots of the film's setting, yet these are presented with no coherent spatial or thematic connection. This disjointed visual

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[76] Meinig, "Symbolic Landscapes," 167.
[77] Donlyn Lyndon, "Order, Investment and Appropriation," in *Order and Image in the American Small Town*, eds. Michael W. Fazio and Peggy Whitman Prenshaw (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981), 9-10.
[78] Barker, "Introduction," 3.

effect is heightened by a variety of aesthetic choices. Firstly, the images shown are tightly framed; whilst we can discern a number of characters and actions, the scenes' cinematographic qualities effectively excise their content from any identifiable context. For example, the film begins with a shot of a child walking along an iron girder, demonstrated by an extreme close-up on the characters' feet; no other details are shown (Fig.3.1):
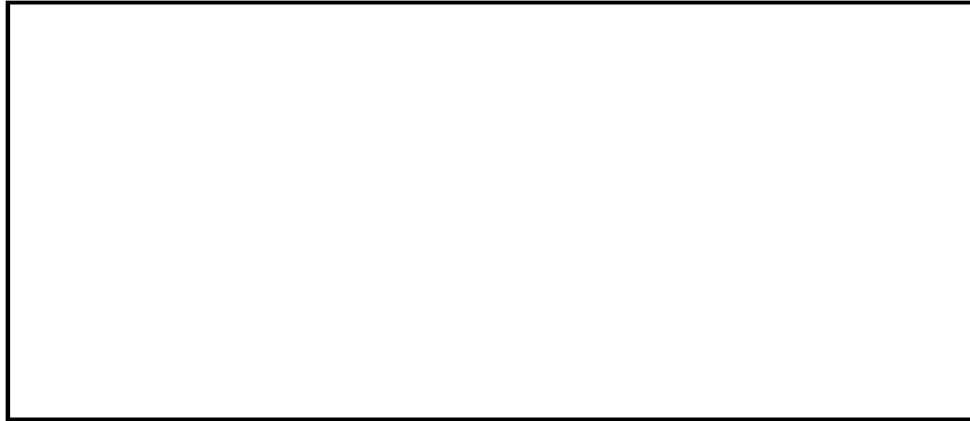
Fig.3.1

The framing of the film's opening image initiates an aesthetic that relies upon the representation of decontextualized, contingent, arbitrary details. As this shot fades to black, we are shown a brief scene in which two of the film's central characters end a relationship; Nasia breaks up with Buddy, admonishing him for acting "like such a little kid." Whilst the characters' dialogue provides an intelligible narrative event, the location of this scene is impossible to distinguish; although it appears that this may be occurring within a shed or playhouse, the abrupt cut from the previous image grants no coherent geographical link (Fig.3.2):

Fig.3.2

Furthermore, the tight framing of the scene (enclosed within the walls of the room) heightens the sense of a self-contained interior excised from a wider diegetic universe.

These stylistic strategies are replicated in later representations of the small-town, providing no clear link between the settlement's various sights and sites. Superficially, the viewer is shown a series of features that closely resembles the taxonomic small-town descriptions provided by Levy and Meinig; fast-paced cuts provide a stream of typical small-town landmarks. For example, a shot of a local factory is immediately followed by a similar image of a railroad crossing (Figs.3.3-3.4):

Figs.3.3-3.4

However, the cinematography and editing of this sequence again reaffirms an overriding logic of fragmentation and spatial ellipses. Both images are tightly framed, ensuring that neither feature is fully visible (the factory's foundations are out of shot, as is the base of the crossing sign). Consequently, these landmarks are framed as standalone icons, impossible to place within an overarching topographical (or conceptual) map. Furthermore, the use of sudden cuts between the two images introduces a violent textual rupture; in turn, this form of editing undermines any spatial continuity between the two features, as each image is clearly demarcated.

213

Finally, a subtle fragmentation of small-town topography is even perceptible on the rare occasions where *George Washington* depicts spatially-contiguous diegetic locations. There are two notable examples of this; in the first Rico rides his motorbike through town, held in a medium-length shot as he travels towards a moving camera (Fig.3.5):
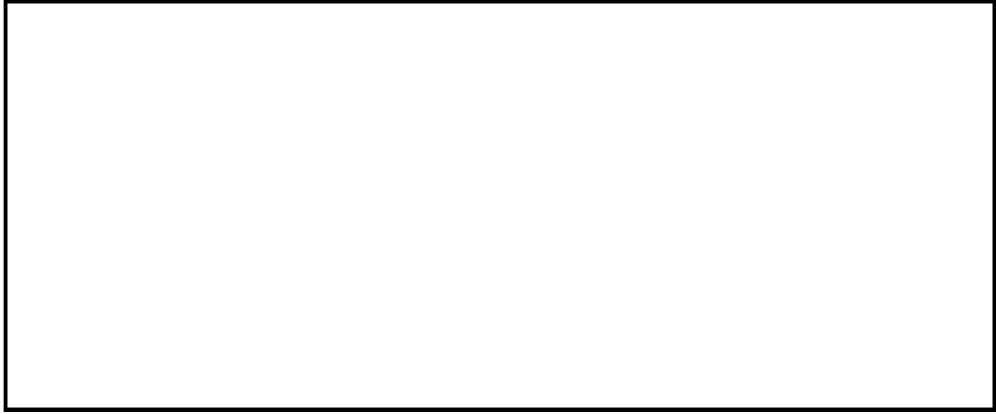
Fig.3.5

In the second, George runs along a sidewalk, escaping a news crew who have come to document a car crash involving Vernon and Sonya, who try to skip town at the film's conclusion (Fig.3.6):

Fig.3.6

In the first example, Rico's bike is framed head-on, providing a detailed image of the road but with little focus on the surrounding streets and minimal contextual details. Furthermore, the editing of the sequence highlights a fragmentary spatio-temporal logic; a series of jump-cuts segment the on-screen action, ensuring that his journey does not unfold as a single, continuous movement. In George's case, his movements are tightly framed, effectively isolating the figure within a wider geographical setting; the shot above provides even less background information than Rico's sequence. The absence of any clear

geographical orientation delivers the illusion of the subject running on the spot; whilst he covers a lot of ground, it is impossible to determine where he is, where he is going, and what he has passed on the way.

Which Side of the Tracks?

As has been argued in the two preceding sections, *George Washington* can be read as an interrogative engagement with the small-town as both a unified cultural *and* spatial entity. The film's problematization of communal cohesion is mirrored by its geographical fragmentation, constructing a discursive link that collapses clear distinctions between small-town form and meaning. As a result, this multifaceted subversion of small-town certitude furnishes material disintegration with a figurative significance, in the form of an equivalent denial of socio-cultural uniformity. Thus, any sustained challenge to the town as a unified place evokes the possibility of a more layered engagement with small-town character; a fragmentary on-screen geography spatialises a shattering of the internal cohesiveness that engenders uniform socio-cultural identities.

However, it is important to note that logocentric readings of small-town order do not necessitate a totalitarian perception of absolute social uniformity; indeed, in broader critical discourses on the small-town, it has been argued that limited social divisions are an integral element in representing this locale as an idealized community. As implicitly suggested earlier, constructions of the small-town as a cogent whole often rely upon a drawing together of disparate spaces or identities into a singular topography or community. Returning directly to Meinig, his account of Main Street as a symbolic centre epitomises this reading of the town, in which spatio-communal cohesiveness is only legible through a moderated awareness of socio-cultural difference: there are

> no great extremes of wealth or poverty, with social gradations but no rigid layers, a genuine community but not tightly cohesive; in size – not so small as to be stultifying nor so large as to forfeit friendship and familiarity.[79]

Similarly, Levy argues that cinematic small-towns often draw attention to structures of cultural distinction, such as class, religion, and ethnicity. Listed amongst the many identifiable small-town tropes is the settlement's "stratification system," treated with a similar importance to other iconic images and locations; for Levy, this aspect of small-town

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[79] Meinig, "Symbolic Landscapes," 167.

discourse pertains to its perceived position as the embodiment of "democratic" values.[80] Furthermore, whilst MacKinnon also notes the prevalence of "class divisions" within many cinematic small-towns, these differences are again reconciled; "the lower-middle- and working-class characters tend to be acquiescent, and to confirm the status quo."[81] Thus, the presence of discrete divisions often reinforces preconceived notions of communal plenitude; a heterogeneous cultural freeplay is fixed within binary oppositions that are then integrated and neutralised within a broader geographical and conceptual totality. Ultimately, this process of demarcating and fixing an amorphous *différance* exemplifies metaphysical aspirations towards a static *telos* of coherent cultural being.

Furthermore, discrete divisions are also used to characterise opposed (yet similarly homogeneous) representations of small-town decline or disunity. For example, such a view is reinforced by Meinig's discussion of small-town socio-cultural exclusion; listing a variety of cultural groups that deviate from the supposed general population of "middle-class White Anglo-Saxon Protestants," Meinig argues that "such people and their habitations and facilities show up marginally if at all in the symbolic landscape…they certainly are not part of the idealized community which was considered representative of basic American virtues."[82] Figurative representations of rigid social divisions are perceptible within cinematic portraits of the small-town as a divisive realm, defined by broad inequalities that stratify the experiences of the setting's varied inhabitants. As MacKinnon notes, these detachments are often symbolised by physical partitions: "the communality of the small-town…is split by the division between classes, particularly in the sense of rich and poor, a division often given physical expression by the railroad tracks."[83] In explicitly highlighting factors that inexorably divide small-town inhabitants, critics like MacKinnon cast these divisions as regulated differences between discrete alternatives, a prominent example being the aforementioned binary opposition of rich vs. poor. Thus, such portraits do not challenge the essential, logocentric structural unity of the small-town. Whether presenting a harmonious, idealized community or a divided locale rife with jingoism and inequality, such representations posit the small-town as a self-coherent cultural concept that carries an essential significance.

Directly interrogating these bifurcated small-town divisions, *George Washington* separates socio-cultural boundaries from their presumed connotative values. Thus, rather than presenting the town as a legible (but divided) whole, such faultlines are shorn of their presumed figurative significance; instead, they demarcate meaningless fragments, operating

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[80] Levy, *Small-Town America on Film*, 73, 258.
[81] MacKinnon, *Hollywood's Small-towns*, 162.
[82] Meinig, "Symbolic Landscapes," 178.
[83] MacKinnon, *Hollywood's Small-towns*, 161.

as empty borders that cannot be located within a geographical or conceptual totality. In turn, such divisions are recast as hollow markers of the oppositional logic with which the small-town is constructed. Rather than drawing attention to figurative divisions, they highlight the act of division itself; the small-town's dichotomous rationalisation of *différance* is explicitly foregrounded and defaced through the close visual interrogation of its conceptual borderlines. This strategy of semiotic displacement is exemplified in the film's representation of an aforementioned small-town symbol, the railroad tracks. In *George Washington*, the railway forms a recurring location, as many of the film's characters carry menial jobs on the line. However, the tracks are never given a definite spatial location; shown first in an overgrown field, they meander past factories and roads with no consistent direction or clear destination. We first see the tracks in the film's opening sequence, as a handheld camera bumpily follows their route towards the top of the frame (Fig.3.7):

Fig.3.7

In the shot above, the camera examines the route of the tracks, closely inspecting this potential conceptual division. Running vertically through the centre of the shot, the tracks evenly bisect the surrounding area, separating both their diegetic setting and the cinematic frame. However, whilst this sequence may allude to the presence of a potential figurative border, it is impossible to ascertain that which it divides. Once again, tight framing excises the shot from any broader location or context, with only brief glimpses of what exists beyond the twin rails. Furthermore, whilst the camera eventually pans up to give a more privileged view of where the rails are headed, this is immediately undermined by an instantaneous dissolve into the next sequence, allowing inadequate time for spatial acclimatization (Fig.3.8):
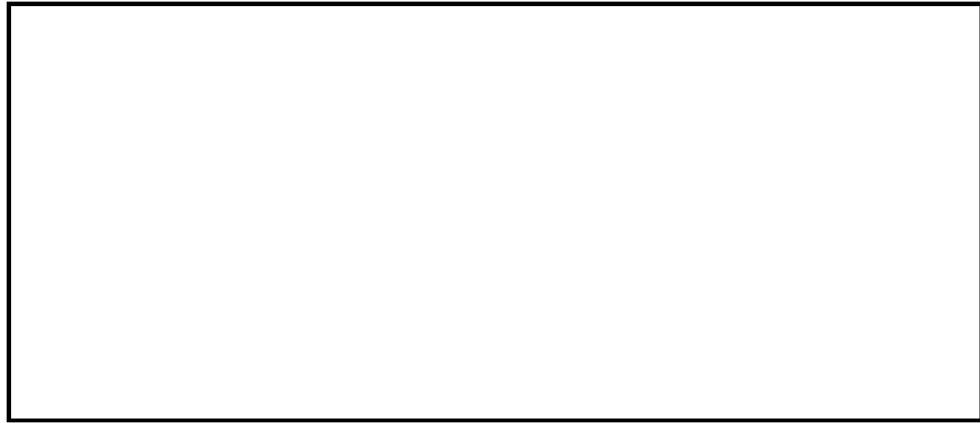
Fig.3.8

This disorientating effect is further demonstrated in the sequence's editing. As the mobile camera follows the line of the track, shots of the railway are intercut with images of the tops of trees, a visual motif that recurs in a brief but regular pattern (Fig.3.9):

Fig.3.9

Again, such parallels are suggestive of a boundary, this time conceptual, reiterating prominent divisions of nature and culture that recur within (and orientate) American identity narratives. This shifting focus from cultural to natural elements is reinforced by the accompanying narration; Nasia eulogises the virtues of nature as the sequence cross-cuts between images of rails and trees, proclaiming that "I like to go to beautiful places, where there are waterfalls and empty fields...places that are nice and calm and quiet." Finally, a shot from later in the film reinforces this perception of the railway as a potential nature/culture frontier. As the kids play aimlessly at a nearby train station, the line is shown in a medium-length shot, again at the frame's centre (Fig.10):
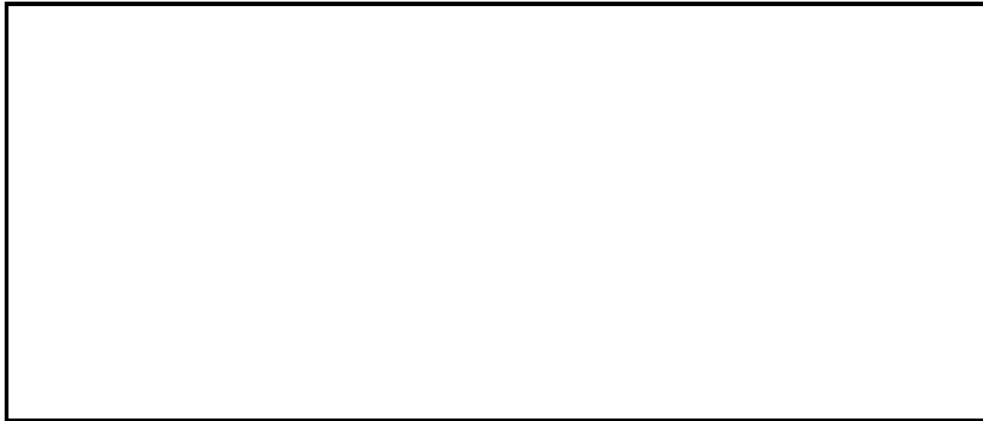
Fig.3.10

This shot of the line differs from those incorporated into the film's opening sequence, as the frame's composition allows for some level of spatial contextualisation; we can see the track's limited surroundings. Furthermore, noticeable differences between the two sides of the track superficially reinforce its potential appraisal as an ontological faultline. To the left of the frame there are overgrown fields and woodlands; to the right, the image is dominated by the architecture of the station, casting a shadow over the lines. Thus, the shot superficially delineates natural and cultural space; the differences between the each side of the track allows their incorporation into apparently opposed categories.

However, upon closer inspection this clear division begins to disintegrate. Staying with the image above, subtle elements of opposed values permeate purportedly self-contained purities. For example, whilst the electricity pylons on the left of the image denote specific cultural functions, they rise above the area of greenery, a natural space. In turn, their appearance problematizes their own position within an exclusively cultural visual economy; the pylons also resemble the tall tree trunks they stand beside, connoting a specifically natural form. This undecidable textual economy is further reinforced by a close examination of the station building; within the shadows, one can see bushes and foliage, interrupting the uniformity of the architectural structure. This economy of conceptual co-presence reinscribes the "other" within ostensibly coherent spaces, challenging the homogeneity of each category. This visual device can be further demonstrated in the aforementioned opening shots of the railway line at the beginning of the film (Figs.3.7-3.10). Between the track's wooden sleepers weeds are sprouting, growing over the rusted and disused girders. The dynamic merging of natural and cultural spaces into emergent, indiscernable formulations is neatly encapsulated by Lawrenson's description of the sequence: "the rusting girders are wrapped by wiry weeds, as if in the process of being reclaimed by nature."[84] Finally, this

[84] Lawrenson, "Slow Train Coming," 10-11.

mutual conceptual contamination is noted by Horton, who suggests that the landscape's "natural and man-made elements seem to have fought one another to a draw"; this observation is then considered within the context of the film's "contamination of outside and inside," a theoretical insight that calls into question the purity of any metaphysical presence.[85] Thus, as the film directly interrogates conceptual boundaries and theoretical oppositions, it simultaneously problematizes the very divisions with which they are commonly aligned within small-town discourses. In this example, images of the film's train tracks symbolise a wholesale deconstruction of a figurative borderline between nature and culture; these two values are reinscribed within their opposite, making it unclear which encroaches upon the other. Therefore, this illustrative case demonstrates how geographical space can be allied with the Derridean concept of the "undecidable,"[86] transforming the text's potential figurative function into a theoretically subversive tool.

Dumps, Derelicts, and Marginal Spaces

Briefly reiterating this chapter's introductory remarks, one can draw clear conceptual links between readings of the small-town as a distinct totality and as a cultural centre; treatments of the small-town as a heartland, an indicative apotheosis (or antithesis) of American identity encapsulates and engenders aforementioned structural assumptions that furnish it with a cogent, essential, fixed significance. Interpretations of the small-town as a centre of national being are in turn solidified by microcosmic readings of the town's own ontological structure. Just as the small-town is located as an identifiable centre of American cultural life, the town itself is granted a similar nodal point, based on a prominent iconic location: Main Street. For example, Meinig's description of popular Main Street images positions it directly as a centre of the small-town, drawing clear parallels with its proscribed role as a point of national orientation:

> (Main Street) is 'middle' in many connotations: in location – between the frontier to the west and the cosmopolitan seaports to the east; in economy – a commercial center surrounded by agriculture and augmented by local industry to form a balanced diversity.[87]

Thus, in playing a number of seemingly vital socio-economic roles, Main Street assumes a figurative position as the small-town's heart. This reading of Main Street is reinforced by

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[85] Horton, "Mental Landscapes," 32.
[86] See Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone Press, 1987), 42-43.
[87] Meinig, "Symbolic Landscapes," 167.

Richard V. Francaviglia, who argues that "as both a place and a concept, Main Street is ubiquitous and characteristically American"; he then locates this "cherished icon" as the "heart" of the small-town, incorporating numerous communal and commercial functions.[88] Similarly, Miles Orvell suggests that "Main Street is not only an actual physical place, but, more generally, a symbol of core values in American society: community, democracy, and family."[89] This conceptual centrality is then mirrored in a spatial description of Main Street; returning once more to discourses of Main Street as a figurative heart, Orvell asserts "every town or settlement has a central artery running through it, and in the United States that road or avenue is known as 'Main Street': it is the essence of the small town and synonymous with it."[90] However, several other readings of small-town coherence posit the Christian church as an alternative conceptual locus for American models of small community (and in turn, national identity). For example, Page Smith's influential *As a City upon a Hill* draws attention to what he refers to as "the covenanted community"; arguing that popular images of the small-town found their "original and classic form in New England," Smith suggests that "at the heart of the Puritan community was the church covenant, forming it, binding it, making explicit its hopes and its assumptions."[91] Thus, by positing the New England village as a foundational small-town archetype, Smith universalises the centralising role of religious doctrine, again adopting a lexicon that locates the church as a cultural centre or heart. Again taking the New England village as an iconic precursor to more generalised cultural representations, MacKinnon also stresses the integral role of religion in structuring cinematic images of the town, contending that "the community had at its center the church," ensuring that any defiance towards this image was tantamount to blasphemy.[92] Thus, in casting both Main Street and the church as (complementary) small-town cores, scholars replicate and reify the logocentric functions that Jacques Derrida attributes to the "center" of Western metaphysics, a fixed "point of presence" that works to "orient, balance, and organize" any totalised structure.[93]

As demonstrated above, numerous readings of the small-town construct a microcosmic interconnection, in which the town simultaneously comprises and contains a symbolic centre-point. Derrida notes that this meta-structural dynamic is a common attribute of metaphysical discourse; in discussing how the "center" forbids the "permutation or

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[88] Richard V. Francaviglia, *Main Street Revisited: Time, Space, and Image Building in Small-Town America* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996), xix.
[89] Miles Orvell, "Constructing Main Street: Utopia and the Imagined Past," in *Public Space and the Ideology of Place in American Culture*, eds. Miles Orvell and Jeffrey L. Meikle (New York: Rodopi, 2009), 97.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Page Smith, *As a City upon a Hill: The Town in American History* (London: M.I.T. Press, 1973), 3.
[92] MacKinnon, *Hollywood's Small-towns*, 2
[93] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 352.

transformation of elements," he argues that such components "may of course be structures enclosed within a structure."[94] This observation is particularly pertinent to the conceptualisation of a fundamental decentering of the small-town in *George Washington*. Namely, the text displaces its narrative emphasis from normative small-town centres (such as Main Street), as these are depicted sporadically and fleetingly; instead, the film focuses on derelict, marginal spaces, as ruined houses, dumps, and boarded-up streets provide the backdrop for most of the film's key events and interactions.[95] In turn, this textual strategy actively exploits aforementioned discursive links, ultimately figuring a wider decentering of the town itself from its position as a national cultural heartland.

These interrelated tendencies are well illustrated by a sequence that immediately follows Buddy's violent death. Here, we are shown a brief three-minute sequence, beginning with a series of repetitive shots of the town junkyard; bulldozers push pieces of garbage and architectural waste into amorphous piles. Set to first a dissonant, dirgeful soundtrack, the sequence returns frequently to similar shots of heaps and bulldozers, engendering a seemingly endless loop (Figs.3.11-3.14):

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[94] Ibid., 352.

[95] Horton briefly discusses the film's rendering of marginal locations, reading each as a Deleuzian "any-spaces-whatever: deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste ground, cities in the course of demolition and construction." Gilles Deleuze, quoted in Horton, "Mental Landscapes," 32.

Figs.3.11-3.14

Although these shots play no clear narrative purpose, they characterise representative strategies that extend throughout the film. The film obsesses over marginal spaces, places that often remain hidden or repressed in representing the small-town as a cogent, uniform totality. There are other clear examples of this; we see George wandering around empty car parks, we frequently return to the workers on the railway line, and Buddy's death, a pivotal narrative moment, occurs in a disused toilet block. Thus, the film returns again and again to these marginal spaces, places where waste is disposed, where workers fulfil menial tasks on the periphery of the community.

The repositioning of narrative events to the margins of the town is reinforced by a complementary focus on structural dereliction. This device, in which small-town geography is characterised by architectural decay, internalises an aforementioned topographical fragmentation into the very material structure of the location. Rosenbaum notes this dynamic in his suggestion that *George Washington* is "fascinated by ruins and junkyards,"[96] a reading that is reinforced by Kemp's assertion that "the camera lingers on scenes of industrial dereliction, finding beauty in junkyards and rusting machinery."[97] *George Washington's* continual meditation upon derelict spaces is exemplified by a scene that directly follows the aforementioned junkyard sequence. Having travelled back into town by taxi (with Buddy's

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[96] Rosenbaum, Review of *George Washington*, 75.
[97] Kemp, Review of *George Washington*, 49.

lifeless body slumped on the backseat), Vernon and Sonya hide the corpse in a dilapidated house. The shot begins by tightly framing an expansive architectural hole, before zooming out to reveal a collapsed roof, cutting soon after to Buddy's corpse (Figs.3.15-3.16):

Figs.3.15-3.16

Whilst the exact location of this makeshift burial ground is again obscured, the ruined house can be treated as a marginal space as it remains largely hidden from the town's residents. Indeed, the peripheral status of this particular area is reinforced by Vernon's parting words to his dead friend, "ain't nobody gonna find you here, Buddy, don't nobody come here"; this observation clearly rationalises the choice of the building as an acceptable place to dump a body. However, the use of this specific derelict location does not appear to be motivated solely by narrative necessity. Instead, it is presented as merely one amongst dozens of equitable sites, as the vast majority of the film's scenes play out against similar backdrops of architectural disassemblage. Returning to the example of *George Washington's* myriad one-to-one interactions, these conversations do not appear intrinsically related to the spaces within which they unfold; nevertheless, they are linked by their frequently run-down settings. Thus, dereliction provides an omnipresent diegetic backdrop; the broken sleepers and rusting rails where the young men work (described by Lawrenson as a "sun-scorched

patch of wasteland"[98]); Damascus' disordered front yard which George deems unsafe; the miniature golf range that Vernon himself comments upon, noting its untidiness ("look at this place…it looks like two tornadoes came through here.")

Previous critical readings of the film have treated such aspects of the mise-en-scène as exemplars of the film's engagement with themes of rural poverty and deprivation.[99] However, when considered within the context of *George Washington's* broader stylistic and formal attributes, this strategy takes on a deeper figurative significance. As part of a general shifting of the film's integral scenes from more identifiable small-town settings to marginal, indiscernible spaces, it reinforces the film's decentering of the town's presumed cultural significance. The constant evocation of ruins and material decay also strengthens observations made regarding the town's representation in the film's opening scenes: the fragmentation of the small-town as a unified construct is figured both externally (through elliptical editing) and internally within the very material fabric of the town's buildings, roofs and so on. Furthermore, this deconstructive reading of *George Washington* as a complementary decentering and dismantling of the small-town is reinforced by theoretical links between these textual strategies and aforementioned post-structuralist critiques of the metaphysical centre. Noting its apparently "fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude," Derrida treats the centre as a logocentric structure *par excellence*: the term has "always designated an invariable presence – *eidos*, *archē*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *alētheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth."[100] As such, clear parallels can again be drawn between this reading of metaphysical structure and the small-town's common construction as a definite, anchored centre of American cultural life.

However, in further exploring the relationship between centre and structure, Derrida demonstrates a number of conceptual paradoxes that call into question the essential coherence and fixity of the former term. For example, in noting the necessary uniqueness (and absolute presence) of the centre, Derrida demonstrates that whilst playing a distinct structural role, the centre itself "escapes structurality";[101] as a unique, self-coherent singularity, it exceeds the structure's imposed organisational edicts. As already noted in the previous chapter, Derrida views the centre as simultaneously present and absent, "within the structure and outside it."[102] Thus, "the center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center*

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[98] Lawrenson, "Slow Train Coming," 10-11.
[99] For example, Kemp suggests the film can be read as "aestheticizing social deprivation…rob(bing) *George Washington o*f any political dimension. Kemp, Review of *George Washington*, 11.
[100] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 352-353.
[101] Ibid., 353.
[102] Ibid.

elsewhere."[103] This aspect of deconstructive thought has been fittingly elucidated by Derrida through the application of architectural metaphor. In an allegorical statement that is equally applicable to the fragmented topography of the small-town and the microcosmic disarray of its buildings, Derrida summarises the enterprise of deconstruction as the uncovering of marginal, faulty blocks or pieces that undermine the solidity of any metaphysical structure:

> One first locates…in the art of the system, the 'neglected corners' and the '*defective* cornerstone,' that which, from the outset, threatens the coherence and the internal order of the construction. But it is a cornerstone! It is required by the architecture which it nevertheless, in advance, deconstructs from within. It assures its cohesion while situating in advance, in a way that is both visible and invisible (that is, corner), the site that lends itself to a deconstruction to come.[104]

I contend that these Derridean notions of "elsewhere" and "neglected corners" encapsulate *George Washington's* decentering of the small-town. The film's central scenes paradoxically unfold in peripheral, indiscernible spaces ("both visible and invisible" to the film's characters) that nevertheless play key practical functions as "cornerstones" to an ordered small-town existence. Thus, as the film challenges the integrity of small-town structure, the centre is always already elsewhere; in marginal corners of the map that escape absolute structuration, in places that belong within the small-town yet simultaneously escape its homogeneous significances and structural impulses.

Erasing the Centre

The film's relative focus on derelict, marginal spaces is only legible insofar that it also provides fleeting images of traditional centres of small-town life. As has already been established, it is possible to approach both Main Street and the church as complementary community centres, core spaces that structure and orientate myriad small-town discourses. Importantly, it is these two locations that provide the rare moments in which *George Washington* shifts focus back to geographical or conceptual centre-grounds. To begin with Main Street, there are scenes in which it appears to superficially fulfil its idealised function as a bustling socio-cultural nexus. The most prominent of these depicts the 4th of July parade, a commonly cited symbol of small-town social cohesion: as discussed earlier,

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[103] Ibid. Emphasis added.
[104] Jacques Derrida, *Memoires: For Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 72; For a discussion of the role of Architecture in Derridean thought, see Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (London: M.I.T. Press, 1993).

Francaviglia notes the "community parade" [105] as one of Main Street's most prominent associations, and Esther Romeyn and Jack Kugelmass place this event within the context of a broader tradition of "small-town pageantry."[106] In this sequence, Main Street is shown as a vibrant, communal space; the brightness of the mise-en-scène reinforces the pervasive sense of positive communality, as crowds of people watch as the parade passes by (Fig.3.17):
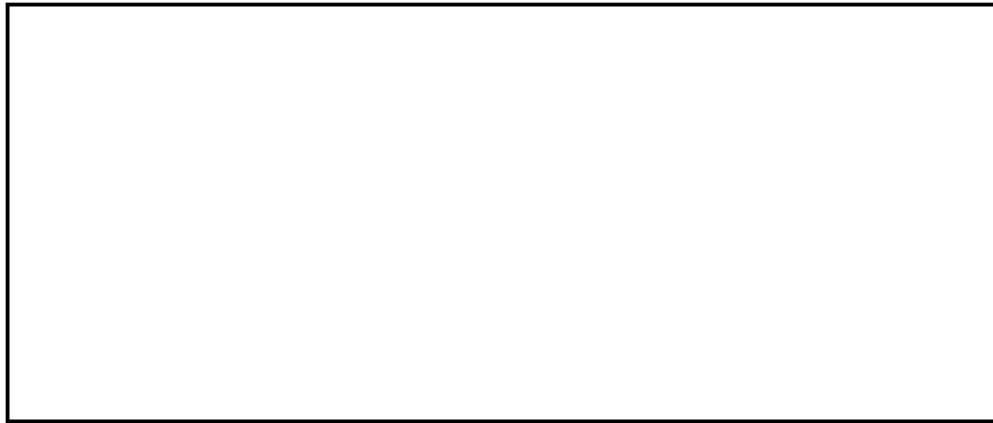
Fig.3.17

Thus, packed with national icons (Uncle Sam, Cowboys, Beauty Queens) and contented families, the street is represented as a venue of national (and local) togetherness.

Furthermore, in readings of the symbolic and Main Street, the linearity and direction of the central road is highlighted as an integral constitutive figure; Meinig argues that "the basic order is linear: Main Street running east to west, a business thoroughfare aligned with the axis of national development."[107] Thus, it can be argued that Main Street's figurative role as the town's "central artery" is reliant itself upon a consistent and contiguous linear direction, commonly associated with the expansionist national rhetoric of Manifest Destiny. The aforementioned scene superficially appears to embody this integral compositional consistency; varied camera angles still provide a largely homogeneous directional flow, as the general orientation of the parade unfolds from the right of the frame to the left. However, the cinematographic rendering of this sequence pulls against any attempts to establish absolute spatial continuity. Whilst it is clear that the procession is located on a central avenue, the scene's editing again separates and isolates the subjects of the parade from this specific geographical context. Thus, shot primarily in medium-length, the sequence represents the parade not as a continuous movement, but as a series of stand-alone icons;

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[105] Francaviglia, *Main Street Revisited*, xix.
[106] Esther Romeyn and Jack Kugelmass, "Community Festivals and the Politics of Memory: Postmodernity in the American Heartland," in *The Small Town in America: A Multidisciplinary Revisit*, eds. Hans Bertens and Theo D'Haen (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1995), 198.
[107] Meinig, "Symbolic Landscapes," 167.

rather than using a long-take to demonstrate the passage of the parade's attractions, the film employs a series of quick cuts, seemingly mimicking the changing focus of a single observer, George. Therefore, Main Street is constructed as an internally paradoxical space; on the one hand the parade appears to embrace a figurative "east to west" movement, whilst simultaneously being reduced to a chain of discrete, fractured, disseminative images.

This reading of Main Street as a site of internal contradiction is reinforced by its aesthetic rendering throughout the film. Whilst the parade depicts Main Street as a lively, celebratory locale, other moments of the film represent this space very differently; fleeting glimpses of the street cast it as materially depressed and deserted (Fig.3.18):
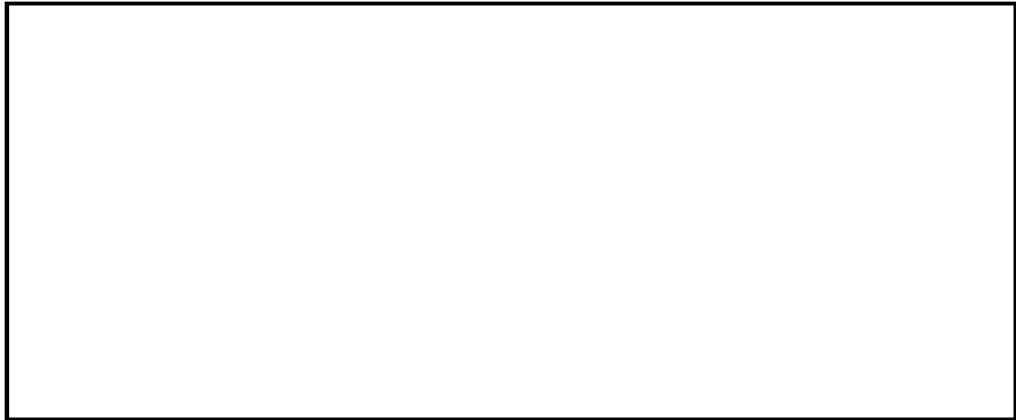
Fig.3.18

Thus, in this shot from early in the film, George walks his dog down the street, passing a series of boarded-up shops and business premises. Importantly, this image of Main Street appears to contradict that which is shown later in the film. Here the street is robbed of its perceived communal or structural role, that of an economic or retail centre; the physical emptying of this central space figures a semiotic emptying of the small-town sign, draining Main Street of its cultural connotations. As a result, seemingly opposed representations of Main Street are accommodated into a single text; it is simultaneously a socio-cultural hub and a deserted wasteland. Furthermore, this extends beyond prescribed judgements of good and bad "sides" of the town that pervade small-town discourse and are referenced in the text by Rico: "It's a nice town. I mean, it's like any other place, I guess. It's got its good parts, and then, on the other side of the corn, there are the bad parts too." Yet, in *George Washington* these values are not separated but coexist within the very fabric of a single location, Main Street offering a clear example. Thus, as the centre "is by definition unique,"

"a point of presence, a fixed origin,"[108] the coexistence of paradoxical images amounts to a deconstructive attack on Main Street, robbing it of an essential, totalised significance.

Finally, this contradictory visual economy is replicated in the film's representations of the church. Akin to Main Street, the church is one of the few settings in the film that appears superficially ordered; we are provided a glimpse of a tidy interior as George and Buddy chat through a hymn (Fig.3.19):

Fig.3.19

However, this image of a neat, tidy religious structure can be contrasted directly with a strikingly similar scene from earlier in the film. In this, Buddy, wearing a Dinosaur mask, stands on the stage of a similar (but dilapidated) church building, reciting a seemingly scriptural passage (Fig.3.20):

Fig.3.20

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[108] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 352.

As can be seen, the two shots share several compositional similarities; both frame the stage at a perpendicular angle, concentrating on the human figure(s) in the centre of the image. However, the mise-en-scène of the two buildings are extremely different; whilst the first (Fig.3.19) is bright and ordered, the second (Fig.3.20) is marked by signs of abandonment; graffiti adorns the stage, there are significant holes in the walls, and a tree emanates from the centre of the building. Thus, whilst stylistic and cinematographic traits draw the two images together, the spaces are represented in near oppositional terms; bright/dark, ordered/disordered. Although this contrast can be explained in narrative terms (it is a different church), these contrasting images still produce a striking discordance; the provision of two seemingly oppositional representations within the same conceptual space calls into direct question the unity or coherence of either depiction. Once again, this observation evokes Derrida's critique of the metaphysical concept of the centre: "the concept of centered structure – although it represents coherence itself...is contradictorily coherent."[109] Thus, such theoretical links draw *George Washington's* representations of centres into broader strategies that stress the decentering and fragmentation of the small-town as a cogent cultural form.

Conclusions

In this chapter, *George Washington* has been approached as a systematic dislocation, deconstruction, and decentering of the small-town as a privileged cultural site and narrative of American national identity. Feeding upon vital figurative links between architectural, topographical, and conceptual structures, the film evokes small-town space and community only to cast these as radically disjointed; subverting key discursive properties of geographical and cultural homogeneity, small-town wholeness is shattered into a series of irresolvable textual fragments. Furthermore, noting common constructions of the small-town as a cultural centre, this reading mobilises a specifically Derridean critique to postulate a multifaceted structural re-orientation. Thus, in shifting key narrative events to marginal, indiscernible, disordered locales, *George Washington* visualises a microcosmic decentering of small-town space that figures a broader dislocation of the town itself as a centre of American cultural life. Finally, whilst traditional epicentres of small-town experience are occasionally depicted, these are integrated within the film's broader strategies of textual fragmentation and conceptual undecidability, challenging their ontological and structural self-coherence.

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[109] Ibid.

However, *George Washington's* use of architectural and topographical metaphors to posit a radical dismantling of small-town structure should not be approached solely as a destructive act of semiotic sabotage. Instead, this chapter's decentering and deconstruction of the small-town is presented as a precursor for an affirmative economy of cultural *différance*; from the town's conceptual rubble and figurative fragments, a more fluid, dynamic and diverse reading of American identity can be assembled. Importantly, such an act of theoretical production is alluded to by Derrida in further discussions of deconstruction through architectural metaphor. Indeed, he argues that deconstruction operates as a necessary pre-cursor to any inventive act of construction, typified by this thesis' call for a radical re-inscription of cultural undecidabilty:

> Deconstruction does not consist simply of dissociating or disarticulating or destroying, but of affirming a certain 'being together'…construction is possible only to the extent that the foundations themselves have been deconstructed…. If the foundations are assured, there is no construction; neither is there any invention. Invention assumes an undecidability; it assumes that at a given moment there is nothing…. Thus deconstruction is the condition of construction, of true invention, of a real affirmation that holds something together, that constructs.[110]

Hence, only by deconstructing and dislocating reductive conceptualisations of the small-town as a fixed national centre can a more heterogeneous, non-proscriptive model of American cultural experience be erected in its place. Utilising *George Washington* as a textual launching-pad for a radical gesture of structural disassemblage, this chapter initiates a call for new (non-metaphysical) acts of cultural construction that embody this thesis' more general theoretical objectives and principles.

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[110] Jacques Derrida, "The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*, eds. Peter Brunette and David Wills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 27.

Chapter Five - Denaturalising Nature: Reconsidering the American Wilderness

Wilderness and American National Identity

Environmental historian Roderick Nash positions wilderness at the very centre of a developing American character, dating back to the earliest sustained settlement of the New World in the late 17th century. Introducing the 2001 edition of *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Nash contends that "Wilderness was the basic ingredient of American culture…with the idea of wilderness they sought to give their civilization identity and meaning."[1] Whilst following this statement with an exploration of the idea's contestation and transformation throughout American cultural history, Nash notes its enduring significance to myriad national identity constructions. Suggesting that "the American attitude toward wilderness is much older and more complex than we customarily assume,"[2] Nash implies that changing perspectives on wilderness have actually reaffirmed its cultural importance. Simplistically summarising a perceived shift from treating wilderness as an "adversary" to an "asset," its recent appreciation is itself attributed to a heightened perception that "uncontrolled nature…had a lot to do with American character and tradition."[3]

Nash's influential study of wilderness discourse demonstrates a series of intellectual assumptions that have cemented the concept as figuratively and culturally significant. Described as a "the nation's most sacred myth of origin,"[4] the "breeding grounds of a particular type of American national character,"[5] and "an article of cultural nationalism,"[6] untamed nature pervades diverse academic engagements with American identity. Whether summarising, reaffirming, or critiquing previous constructions of nationhood, wilderness (and its relation to civilisation) is consistently treated as a vital conceptual locus. This discursive pre-eminence is supported by more general critical trends that theorise American culture as uniquely and closely related to nature. Drawing upon readings of the continent as

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[1] Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed. (London: Yale University Press, Nota Bene, 2001), xi.
[2] Ibid., xiv.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (London: W.W. Norton, 1995), 77.
[5] Denis E. Cosgrove, *Geography and Vision: Seeing, Imagining and Representing the World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 114.
[6] Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (London: Belknap, 1995), 14.

an untouched "virgin land,"[7] "arcadia,"[8] or potential "garden,"[9] perceptions of the New World landscape reinforce the socio-cultural importance of wilderness terrains. Applying a rhetorical device referred to by Lawrence Buell as "the America-as-nature reduction,"[10] numerous popular and theoretical texts reinforce Emersonian ideals of America as "nature's nation."[11] Furthermore, Catrin Gersdorf argues that these conceptual links retain their originary national importance: "the idea of wilderness as conceptually definitive in the formation of an American national identity survived well into the 20th century"; wilderness provides "a semiotic frame of reference for defining America as a nation."[12]

Accordingly, the presence of diverse natural discourses attests to the function of wilderness as a cultural narrative, as disparate attitudes are rationalised within a series of totalised conceptual constructs. This narrational function is reflected in Leo Braudy's assertion that "the implicit but official American view of nature is…a fundamental, even fundamentalist search for master myths through which nature can be both revealed and conquered by story."[13] Furthermore, readings of wilderness as a cultural narrative draw upon recent scholarship that locates "wild nature" as a primarily socio-cultural construct. William Cronon provides a radical example of this approach in his assertion that "far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, (wilderness) is quite profoundly a human creation – indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history."[14] In turn, he notes that perceptions of wilderness as a natural entity disguise its status as a cultural product: "Wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural."[15] This view is reinforced by Neil Evernden, who notes that connotations of "the real" or "essence" are frequently attached to the concept of nature.[16] Thus, such observations reinforce the wilderness' metaphysical function in an American context; it is rendered a structure of semiotic regulation, effacing its rootedness within specific thought systems and cultural contexts.

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[7] See Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: the American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970).

[8] Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 39.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 15.

[11] Leo Braudy, "The Genre of Nature: Ceremonies of Innocence," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 280.

[12] Catrin Gersdorf, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America* (New York: Rodopi, 2009), 158.

[13] Braudy, "The Genre of Nature," 280.

[14] Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 69.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Lorne Leslie Neil Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 18.

Aforementioned scholarly studies chart a rich historical and intellectual tradition of exploring the significance of wilderness to American national self-coherence. Indeed, wilderness and the related conception of the frontier underpin notable formative accounts of the United States' cultural development; the most prominent exponent of this intellectual trend is Frederick Jackson Turner, who directly correlates perceived American values to the material "wilderness condition" of frontier life and a shared national project of civilising an alien wild nature.[17] Furthermore, esteemed 19th and 20th century American writers and activists (such as Henry Thoreau and John Muir) have been credited with both transforming and cementing the prominence of wilderness in American popular discourses.[18] In doing so, conventional historical narratives suggest "transcendentalist" or "romantic" figures shifted the perceived relationship between man and nature. Rather than providing an adversarial geographical "other" against which to forge national meaning, wilderness has also been theorised as a realm of psychic enrichment and even a signifier of human (and national) consciousness.[19]

This simplified, foundational summary of American wilderness thought is expanded upon further in this introductory section. However, it is important to note the manner in which these categories structure existing readings of wilderness and national identity; in turn, such observations underlie this chapter's resultant displacement of these self-same classifications. This economy of two dominant, relational paradigms between wilderness and American identity is neatly summarised by Nash. Whilst suggesting that "from the raw materials of the physical wilderness Americans built a civilization," he paradoxically notes that "the roots of the story lie in the fact that civilization created wilderness."[20] Although Nash suggests that it is impossible to separate America's physical and mental relationship with wilderness, a shift in emphasis between the two forms of association encapsulates the differences between existing constructions of American wilderness identity. This dichotomous logic can be explicated by first returning to the work of Turner. Whilst the experience of frontier wilderness is often viewed as a key constituent of a (dynamic) American character, for Turner it engendered a distinct national ontology by locating

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[17] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and Other Essays*, ed. John Mack Faragher (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 31-60. For discussions of the "frontier myth," see Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 24; Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 1-26.
[18] See Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (London: Yale University Press, 1991), 97-204.
[19] David Melbye, *Landscape Allegory in Cinema: From Wilderness to Wasteland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 35; John R. Short, *Imagined Country: Environment, Culture and Society* (London: Routledge, 1991), 10.
[20] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, xi.

American subjects at "the meeting point between savagery and civilisation": "This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character."[21] Thus, while frontier settlers forged civilisation from wilderness, the very project of westward expansion provided the necessary material conditions to engender a uniquely American identity.

Conversely, romantic readings of wilderness place greater emphasis on the conceptual worth of nature and its relation to human subjectivity. For example, Max Oelschlaeger characterises romantic wilderness engagements as sharing a "poetic view of nature," gravitating "towards its wild and mysterious aspects, the felt qualitative rather than measured quantitative dimensions of experience."[22] Whilst this is attributed to wider European theological and intellectual trends, changing attitudes to wild nature are also discussed in relation to shifting conceptions of American identity.[23] Thus, in postulating the influence of the romantic "sublime" on American wilderness attitudes, numerous theorists note that these ideas infiltrated cultural and artistic representations of a perceptible national character. For example, although Cronon postulates a convergence of frontier and sublime images of the American wilderness, he suggests that this synergy has encouraged the "freighting" of wilderness with "cultural symbols," loading wilderness "with some of the deepest core values of the culture that created and idealized it."[24] Furthermore, this shift in emphasis from a denotative to connotative wilderness is further expressed in his assertion that "the romantic legacy means that wilderness is more a state of mind than a fact of nature."[25]

Thus, wilderness does not merely provide a physical basis for forging American civilisation; it is simultaneously rendered an intellectual construct and a psychic mirror, an existential basis for reformulating theistic human-nature relations and American social ideals. Whilst addressing these aforementioned themes with varying degrees of reflexivity, numerous readings mobilise dualistic formulations to reconcile differing conceptions of nature and wilderness in an American context; antinomies of "classical" vs. "romantic,"[26] "modernist" vs. "romantic,"[27] and "classical humanist" vs. "progressive"[28] characterise this binary logic. Oppositional framings of discordant wilderness views are further grounded in normative historical accounts of their development. As suggested by Oelschlaeger,

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[21] Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 32.
[22] Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 99.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 72-73, 88.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Short, *Imagined Country*, 6.
[27] Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 68-132.
[28] Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature*, 35.

"romantic" attitudes to the wilderness are frequently considered as a direct critique of existing views that constructed the American environment as an "other" to be overcome and subjugated.[29] Nevertheless, certain critical accounts demonstrate a co-presence of seemingly antithetical values. For example, Michael L. Johnson posits a foundational "double attitude" held by settlers first entering the American west, simultaneously conceptualising the new territory as Eden *and* hell.[30] Discussing contemporary cultural perspectives, Buell explores a similar conceptual concurrence: "for more than a century the United States has been at once a nature-loving and resource-consuming nation."[31] Thus, whilst American natural discourse has oscillated between purportedly paradoxical trends of wilderness exploitation and veneration, contemporary critics frequently position such views as structurally interrelated aspects of a shared national narrative.

Evidently, any deconstructive engagement with the wilderness necessitates a fundamental questioning of these reductive, bifurcated theoretical frameworks, in which myriad cultural attitudes are homogenised within antonymic terms. However, in this critical overview of American wilderness discourse these conceptual frames are strategically utilised to structure the following discussion. This does not constitute an acceptance of the integrity of pre-existing representational categories; rather, only by mobilising normative classifications can their underlying binary logic be shaken. In the following analyses I demonstrate not only the dichotomous relationship between differing American conceptions of wilderness, but also the dualistic foundations of the very representations themselves. Namely, such attitudes tacitly mobilise an ordering logic based upon metaphysical oppositions of nature/culture and wilderness/civilisation, perceptible even in readings that ostensibly question such dichotomies. Therefore, similar theoretical assumptions can be observed within seemingly disparate popular *and* academic responses to the American environment, accounting for their supposed coexistence in contemporary cultural debates. Finally, drawing upon recent "ecocritical" scholarship, I use these discursive analyses as a basis for textual readings that dismantle pervasive conceptual bifurcations.[32]

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[29] Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 99.
[30] Michael L. Johnson, *Hunger for the Wild: America's Obsession with the Untamed West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 3.
[31] Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 4. Also see Michael Lewis, "American Wilderness: An Introduction," in *American Wilderness: A New History*, ed. Michael Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.
[32] For discussions of ecocriticism, see Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, "Introduction: From Literary to Cinematic Ecocriticism," in *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*, ed. Paula Willoquet-Maricondi (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 2-3; Gersdorf, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert*, 22.

From the "Howling Wilderness" to the "Garden of the World"

      Normative accounts of New World settlement theorise a primarily adversarial relationship between the human subject and natural landscape. Nash suggests that the pioneers faced a continent of material and figurative danger; confronted with the "vast blankness" of a "boundless wilderness," Euro-Americans viewed the landscape as a "dark and sinister symbol," an acultural realm signifying "a moral vacuum, a cursed and chaotic wasteland."[33] Subsequent theorists have noted the enduring importance of such attitudes to prevailing American images of wild nature, arguing that Americans construct wilderness as a "negative"[34] or "generic, blank space."[35] Such readings endorse a simplistic, totalising semiotics of American landscape, as it is deemed to signify a lack of cultural meaning itself; wilderness represents the unrepresentable, an empty inhuman void. In turn, by characterising the wilderness as essentially acultural, absolutist distinctions are drawn between wilderness and civilisation. This dualistic gesture is coherently elucidated by Michael Richardson in his observation that "'America', both as a place and an idea, was founded in an encounter with what was other to itself," an "alien" wilderness;[36] as Gersdorf cogently summarises, "wilderness is the metaphoric domain of the other."[37]

      Whilst Puritan images of a "howling" nature have been linked to pre-existing cultural and theological discourses,[38] wilderness has frequently been considered as a vital marker of American difference. The sheer scale of seemingly uncultivated land purportedly demarcated formative American experiences from European socio-cultural conditions, confronting settlers with a wilderness that had no identifiable "old world" equivalent.[39] Thus, the clear delineation of wild and civilised spaces is commonly perceived as a structural foundation for a uniquely expansionist American identity. This interplay of cultural and physical forms is again summarised by Gersdorf, who argues that: "the transformation of nature into civilization, land into landscape, landscape into text, and text into a social and political tool for producing and reproducing a nation's cultural identity is a process foundational for our understanding of America."[40] Readings of American cultural development do not posit a static relationship between equitable but opposed values of

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[33] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 24.

[34] Mark Stoll, "Religion 'Irradiates' the Wilderness," in *American Wilderness: A New History*, ed. Michael Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 36.

[35] David E. Nye, *America as Second Creation: Technology and Narratives of New Beginnings* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 301.

[36] Michael Richardson, *Otherness in Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 18.

[37] Gersdorf, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert*, 159.

[38] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 13-22, 26; Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 68-97 Cosgrove, *Geography and Vision*, 106.

[39] Gersdorf, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert*, 14-15.

[40] Ibid., 13.

civilisation and wilderness; rather, their separation facilitates a logocentric, hierarchical dynamic of subjugation, "a call for expansionism."[41]

Narratives of an American identity forged from the civilising of wilderness provide the central thesis for a variety of influential historical and American studies texts. As suggested previously, Turner's prominent notion of a "frontier thesis" intractably ties the development of a national character to a continual process of westward expansion.[42] As Henry Nash Smith comments, this conceptualisation of a moveable frontier materialises ontological divisions; for Turner, "the outer limit of agricultural settlement is the boundary of civilization," whilst "the wilderness beyond the frontier" is "the realm of savagery."[43] Richard Slotkin observes a similar bifurcated economy in broader constructions of the frontier as a "national myth," positioning wild nature (and its inhabitants) as the opposite (and enemy) of American culture: "the moral landscape of the frontier myth is divided by significant borders, of which the wilderness/civilization, Indian/White border is the most basic."[44] Thus, expansionist theses of American development also reinforce the hierarchical implications of a foundational nature/culture distinction. In characterising the frontiersman as "the agent of civilization," Nash notes that "civilizing the New World meant enlightening darkness, ordering chaos, and changing evil into good."[45] This argument is replicated in John R. Short's generalised analysis of New World states: "nation-building has been intimately related to conquering the wilderness…the transformation of the wilderness has a special place in their national identity."[46] In turn, Buell claims that nature has been "otherized" in modern thought,[47] paradoxically symbolising both empty wilderness and an untapped and exploitable region of material wealth.[48]

As alluded to previously, historical accounts of the civilising of wilderness frequently stress theological antecedents. For example, the expansionist conception of Manifest Destiny furnished an overtly nationalist project with religious justification. In such arguments, holy scripture provides an overarching aim for settlers, a call to continue God's work in fashioning Eden from an "unredeemed wasteland"; as Short notes, "transforming the wilderness was a sacred act of redemption as well as a secular act of survival."[49] In drawing together the theological and national, wilderness discourse has also been linked with constructions of American "pastoral ideology" and "the Myth of the Garden."[50] Whilst

[41] Melbye, *Landscape Allegory in Cinema*, 47.
[42] Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 31.
[43] Smith, *Virgin Land*, 251.
[44] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 14.
[45] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 24.
[46] Short, *Imagined Country*, 19.
[47] Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 21.
[48] See Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 4; Smith, *Virgin Land*, 6-11.
[49] Short, *Imagined Country*, 13.
[50] Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 6; Smith, *Virgin Land*, 259.

certain theorists argue that American wild nature itself has been perceived as an earthly paradise, prominent American discourses venerate a "middle landscape" of cultivated wilderness, "a rural nation exhibiting a happy balance of art and nature."[51] In turn, American idealisations of pastoral life are frequently tied to the cultivation of a singular cultural identity; Thomas Jefferson attributed America's formative democratic ideals of freedom and individualism to experiences with agrarian land, typified in his veneration of the "yeoman farmer."[52] Importantly, such an idyll, whilst frequently treated as an implicit critique of urban civilisation,[53] is predicated upon the technological advances of western culture.[54]

Thus, American agrarianism superficially challenges strict delineations of cultural and natural space, positing a civilised wilderness as a national "master symbol."[55] Indeed, Leo Marx suggests that the "pastoral ideal" engages with (yet escapes) dualistic theorisations of nature and culture: "it is located in a middle ground somewhere 'between', yet in transcendent relation to, the opposing forces of civilisation and nature."[56] However, the agrarian middle landscape is fundamentally sustained by the self-same binary structures that it mediates and (purportedly) eludes. As Richard Lehan demonstrates, "Adamic books" (such as Marx's *Machine in the Garden*) "upheld a dialectic or binary system of meaning" that set out a series of dualistic structures before endorsing one side of the opposition.[57] Furthermore, noting the difficulties of defining wilderness and civilisation, Nash argues that differing subjective images of wilderness should be approached as a "spectrum of conditions or environments ranging from the purely wild on the one end to the purely civilized on the other – from the primeval to the paved."[58] In suggesting that this model accounts for a "shading or blending" of natural and cultural landscapes, Nash locates the agrarian middle landscape as a centre-point: "in the middle portions of the spectrum is the rural or pastoral environment…that represents a balance of the forces of nature and man."[59] However, as suggested in chapter one, continuum models can only operate if their conceptual endpoints maintain essential, *a priori* ontologies that can be subsequently merged or balanced. Thus, American wilderness thought can be approached as fundamentally logocentric, even in those cases that it reflexively challenges its dualistic foundations.[60]

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[51] Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 226.
[52] Ibid., 128-129.
[53] Ibid., 138-140.
[54] See Nye, *America as Second Creation*, 289.
[55] Smith, *Virgin Land*, 123.
[56] Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 23.
[57] Richard Lehan, *Literary Modernism and Beyond: The Extended Vision and the Realms of the Text* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 285.
[58] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 6.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Buell also notes that metaphysics sustains ecologically destructive attitudes; see Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 2.

The "Romantic" Wilderness

Whilst the subjugation of wilderness is treated as a foundational national pursuit, scholarly accounts of American identity often posit a "romantic" counter-attitude that arose as its historical antonym. As suggested earlier, views that superficially venerate wilderness landscapes are usually formulated as an antithesis to those that treat American nature as a conquerable acultural other; as Nash argues, the spread of "romantic" aesthetic ideas led to "a striking change in the concept of wild nature," which "by the middle decades of the nineteenth century" had ensured "wilderness was recognized as a cultural and moral resource and a basis for national self-esteem."[61] This statement implies a radical, ongoing change in American wilderness thought, in which the logocentric subjugation of nature comes under fundamental critique; indeed, as Nash writes in 2001, "American wilderness appreciation and preservation must be understood as recent, revolutionary and still incomplete."[62]

Superficially, a number of prominent ideas associated with cultural "romanticism" destabilize the classical delineation of civilisation and wilderness. For example, romanticism ostensibly stresses the theological interconnectedness of cultural and natural worlds, a moral imperative calling for direct human experience of the wilderness. Whilst Nash claims that defining romanticism is fraught with difficulty, he notes that the movement engendered a general "appreciation" of wilderness by intractably associating nature with a heavenly creator.[63] If wilderness now signified God's work, the deity provided a unifying structure that granted humanity and nature the same ontological essence; "the romantics had a pantheistic vision, a belief that god was everywhere."[64] Thus, as Oelschlaeger summarises, "nature was not alien but rather kindred to human spirit," a product of God's unifying presence as "first cause of all"; "God was the identity of mind *and* nature."[65] By extension, any absolute separation of humanity from nature disavows their fundamental spiritual relatedness; the connection between "humans and nature" is established as vital "to the Romantics in their critical reaction to Modernism."[66]

The romantic association of God with nature is closely linked to contemporaneous theorisations of the sublime. Explored by 18th century philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, experience of the sublime ensured that "nature and wilderness began to

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[61] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 45, 67. Also see John Wreford Watson, "The Image of Nature in America," in *The American Environment: Perceptions and Policies*, eds. John Wreford Watson and Timothy O'Riordan (London: Wiley, 1976), 1.
[62] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, xiv.
[63] Ibid., 44-45, 47.
[64] Short, *Imagined Country*, 16.
[65] Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 117. Emphasis added.
[66] Ibid., 113-116, 122, 126.

take on meanings of reverence and awe,"[67] precipitating an aesthetic response of "exultation, awe and delight" at the spectacle of wild nature.[68] Furthermore, the sublime is posited as the product of an unmediated experience of the divine residing in the wilderness; Oelschlaeger notes that "the feelings of the sublime were, in the tradition of physico-theology, contemporary evocations of the same feelings humankind experienced in the prelapsarian condition when God manifested himself directly."[69] In this sense, the sublime encapsulates the perceived transformation of wilderness from a negative to "a sacred space."[70] In doing so, the sublime also appears inextricably tied to romantic theorisations of Man's spiritual connection with wilderness. The sublime experience actualises attempts "to correlate the processes of the human mind to the surrounding natural universe."[71]

American manifestations of romantic wilderness appreciation exemplify this idealised integration of natural and cultural forces. Stressing the experiential connectedness of nature and the sublime, romantics established a wilderness experience that "brought about not a bewilderment but a renewed contact with deeper psychological truths and a more pronounced spiritual awareness."[72] Typified by Thoreau's assertion that "in wildness is the preservation of the world," romantic ideals provide the apparent source of a prominent American ecological trope, the "beneficial retreat to the wilderness."[73] Here, the human subject utilises the seclusion of nature to learn fundamental existential truths, a greater understanding of the human soul or psyche; wild nature provides "contemplative encounters, occasions for human beings to reflect on life and cosmos, on meaning and significance."[74] In positing the potentially enriching power of wilderness, such narratives draw upon "primitivist" discourses typified by the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau; "wild nature was idealized as an oasis free of the ills of civilization," allowing a potential return to a "natural existence" that placed humanity in a unmediated relationship with the environment.[75] In this sense, wilderness "became a symbol of an earthly paradise, the place of before the fall where people lived in close harmony and deep sympathy with nature."[76]

Finally, romantic ideas of an "intense personal involvement with and aesthetic response to nature" have been read as a reaffirmation of wilderness as central component of

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[67] Carolyn Merchant, *American Environmental History: An Introduction* (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2007), 35.
[68] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 45.
[69] Oeschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 112.
[70] Short, *Imagined Country*, 10.
[71] Melbye, *Landscape Allegory in Cinema*, 35
[72] Short, *Imagined Country*, 10.
[73] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 48.
[74] Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 2.
[75] Ibid., 111.
[76] Short, *Imagined Country*, 10.

American national identity.[77] As Nash notes, the supposedly virgin continent of "pathless forests and savages" appeared to closely encapsulate ideals of mysterious nature engrained in the "romantic imagination."[78] Furthermore, the romantic re-inscription of holy wilderness is established as an important source of social cohesion and national pride: "if, as many suspected, wilderness was the medium through which God spoke most clearly, then America had a distinct moral advantage over Europe, where centuries of civilization had deposited a layer of artificiality over His works."[79] This construction of wilderness as a "cultural and moral resource and a basis for national self-esteem" dominates discourses on contemporaneous representations of nature.[80] Typified by the work of artists like Thomas Cole, pictorial representations of the American landscape cemented idealisations of wilderness as a "source of nationalism";[81] this marked a historical "shift from a primarily religious to a national, psychological, and literary significance of wilderness."[82] Thus, the multifaceted romantic discourse of wilderness as a theological realm, an environment of human and natural synergy, and a site of national exceptionalism are drawn together in the positioning of wild nature as a centre-point for a developing American character.

Whilst romantic views are historicised as an overt critique of existing wilderness formulations, recent ecocritical work has demonstrated their shared foundation in metaphysical binary logic. For example, J. Baird Callicott diagnoses a structural affinity between seemingly distinct wilderness attitudes, which he groups under the term "the received wilderness idea."[83] Stressing the links between perceptions of wild nature and puritan theology, Callicott argues:

> To the first generations of Puritans in America, man was created in the image of god and, if not good, at least the Elect among men were put in the service of a good God to enlighten a benighted, dismal and howling wilderness continent. To later generations of Puritans, the positive and negative poles of the dualism were reversed…. Nature became a foil for man's sins and depravity. It was transformed into the embodiment of goodness.[84]

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[77] Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 111.
[78] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 49.
[79] Ibid., 69.
[80] Ibid., 67.
[81] Ibid., 85.
[82] Gersdorf, *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert*, 165.
[83] See J. Baird Callicott, "Contemporary Criticisms of the Received Wilderness Idea," in *The Wilderness Debate Rages On: Continuing the Great New Wilderness Debate*, eds. J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (London: University of Georgia Press, 2008).
[84] Ibid., 368.

Rather than fundamentally dismantling classical wilderness narratives, romantic views are treated as outgrowths of the same philosophical and theological systems. Both attitudes rely upon a strict, hierarchical opposition between nature and culture; as Evernden notes, conflicting views of nature as "pure" and "bestial" are "flip sides of a semantic coin that was minted in our distant past."[85] Thus, the frequent positioning of romanticism as a critique of cultural modernity structurally reifies a strict binary opposition between natural and cultural environments initiated in more adversarial conceptualisations of wilderness.[86] For example, although Thoreau theorised "an organic connection between Homo sapiens and nature," such a correspondence can only be experienced through an absolutist rejection of human civilisation; as Oelschlaeger argues, "Thoreau believes that the essence of freedom resides not in culture but in nature."[87] In this manner, wilderness/civilisation oppositions are retained in a simplistically inverted form; as Sean Cubitt notes, "the Romantics sang up the resistance of wilderness to 'improvement', reinforcing the sense that the forests and mountains were the other of the factories and tenements."[88]

Finally, the logocentric tenor of these critiques is further cemented by addressing perceived currents of "resourcism" and "preservationism" in contemporary wilderness thought. Oelschlaeger intractably ties "resource conservation" with "the intense homocentrism of Judeo-Christianity and the alchemy of Modernism," echoing foundational American ideals of nature as an entity that "exist(s) solely as means in terms of which human ends might be fulfilled."[89] Thus, foundational definitions of nature as a human resource reaffirm an outlook in which "Human life takes place outside of nature, and the boundaries between wilderness and civilisation are definite."[90] Conversely, preservationism is perceived as a direct challenge to resourcist aims, arguing for the protection of certain natural areas as dynamic, singular ecosystems, an acultural world under threat from human intervention. Although environmental preservation appears diametrically opposed to conservationist aims, they are both predicated upon the clear, modernist delineation of civilisation and wilderness.[91] Noting a dominant premise that "nature, to be natural, must also be pristine – remote from humanity and untouched by our common past," Cronon argues that environmentalist discourse appeals "to wilderness as the standard against which to measure the failings of our human world."[92] Thus, in directly opposing debased

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[85] Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature*, 22.
[86] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 47.
[87] Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 151, 165. Also see Gregg Mitman, *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Wildlife on Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 108.
[88] Sean Cubitt, *Eco Media* (New York: Rodopi, 2005), 120.
[89] Oeslchlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 286-287.
[90] Ibid., 287.
[91] Ibid., 287-290.
[92] Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 80, 83.

civilisation with pure nature, "wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural."[93] For Cronon, preservationism reinforces the same essentialist economy that underlies nature/culture antagonism and "environmentally irresponsible behaviour": "to the extent that we celebrate wilderness as the measure with which we judge civilization, we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles."[94] As a result, romantic currents in American wilderness operate within closed systems of logocentric antinomy, tying them closely to metaphysical meaning-structures and the specific national identity discourses they sustain.

Cinematic Nature

In relating this chapter's case-study texts with a deconstructive reading of American wilderness, this project can be contextualised within recent scholarly attempts to reconsider the relationship between nature and cinema. Numerous theoretical texts have approached the cinematic representation of wild landscapes as a visual iteration of an antagonistic (and destructively anthropocentric) relationship between demarcated cultural and natural spheres. For example, whilst eventually challenging such totalising assertions, Derek Bousé ironically inflates common arguments that liken cinematic representations of the environment to the material exploitation and subjugation of wilderness; he bemoans that wildlife films are often viewed as "attempts to exert a sort of god-like control over nature."[95] Such attitudes are critically interrogated in David Ingram's more detailed work on wilderness cinematography. In arguing that a variety of stylistic, aesthetic, and formal processes have been used to construct natural settings as free of human artifice, Ingram notes that this trend reinforces a hierarchical human subject/natural object division; "the cinematic construction of natural landscape as pristine is based on an aesthetics of exclusion."[96] Citing ecocritics like Karla Armbruster and Andrew Ross, Ingram then unpacks recent academic discourses that have intractably related the cinematic apparatus to a multifaceted domination of wilderness, enacting a figurative despoiling, exploitation, and occupation of natural space and resources.[97] Finally, Ingram notes a medium-specific argument that cinematic landscapes are often relegated to an auxiliary narrative role, operating as (in Jhan Hochman's words) "a two-dimensional backdrop to the human drama."[98]

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[93] Ibid., 80. Also see Callicott, "Contemporary Criticisms of the Received Wilderness Idea," 356.
[94] Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 80-83, 87.
[95] Derek Bousé, *Wildlife Films* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 191.
[96] David Ingram, *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 26, 34-35.
[97] Ibid., 33-34.
[98] Jhan Hochman, quoted in Ingram, *Green Screen*, 33.

However, this seemingly inherent representational subjugation of landscape has been questioned in several recent works of film theory. Indeed, Ingram ultimately questions the validity of such readings by noting an "implicit formalism" that is "problematic."[99] Thus, basing his counter-argument on the premise that "the meaning of a shot is context-dependent," Ingram observes that "there is…nothing in a shot of an empty landscape that inherently signifies the separation of human beings from nature, or the desire to master and exploit nature."[100] Linking this issue to a specifically American national context, he then notes that "images of sublime landscapes in American popular culture have served the interests of both preservationism and development, depending on the context of their reception."[101] Similarly, Braudy suggests that "nature films" turn popular cinema into a prominent discursive arena within which aforementioned wilderness dualisms can be critically interrogated: "the nature-culture continuum has a major thematic and structural force in the films, especially in terms of tensions between civilization…and primitivism."[102]

These observations underlie new trends in film scholarship that account for a greater variety of cinematic landscape representations. Most prominently, recent texts theorise a shift in the significance of environment in relation to the film's narrative protagonists. For example, several critics have constructed "ecocentric" textual analyses that treat nature as the primary repository of cinematic meaning, extending beyond its assumed role as a denotative backdrop. For example, Pat Brereton has hypothesised a growing emphasis on wilderness in recent Hollywood film, in which sublime spectacle elevates the natural world from a role as setting to one which figures a plethora of complex ecological ideas. Ultimately, Brereton postulates the possibility of a direct address between landscape and audience; "raw nature" speaks "unmediated" through spectacular visual excess, "foregrounded" in its own terms.[103] As a result, rather than being defined in relation to human or cultural activity, images of sublime nature carry their own appeal and significance, allowing them to act as potential conduits for utopian ecological themes; indeed, Brereton argues that in many popular films the environment itself determines the actions of the human protagonists.[104]

Conversely, David Melbye approaches the natural environment in cinema neither as background object or foreground subject, but rather as a reflection of "inner subjective states of the principle character or protagonist."[105] Thus, Melbye's reading problematizes previous

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[99] Ingram, *Green Screen*, 34.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid, 35.
[102] Braudy, "The Genre of Nature," 290.
[103] Pat Brereton, *Hollywood Utopia: Ecology in Contemporary American Cinema* (London: Intellect Books, 2005), 65.
[104] Ibid., 38-44.
[105] Melbye, *Landscape Allegory in Cinema*, 1.

considerations of environment as pristine and acultural; instead, such an approach alludes to the interrelations between nature and culture in constructing a "landscape of the mind," a process frequently related to broader cultural tendencies of constructing meaningful "place" from natural "space."[106] P. Adams Sitney also argues that "the landscapes of narrative cinema" should not merely be approached as blank backdrops; rather, they "are latent expressionistic theatres, confronting or echoing the minds of the human figures within them."[107] Finally, engaging with similar issues in a narrower (but relevant) corpus, Scott MacDonald specifically explores the role of cultural landscapes in recent American independent cinema. Whilst MacDonald's text focuses almost exclusively upon existing categories of experimental or avant-garde film, it once again demonstrates the pervasiveness of natural space in recent film criticism. Specifically, MacDonald's study links cinematic images of nature to prominent constructions of American place, a focus that both informs and augments the aims of this thesis.[108]

Yet, whether theoretically privileging the spectacle of nature above narrative action, or locating it as a reflection of personal or national subjectivity, this growing emphasis on cinematic landscape does not challenge anthropocentric delineations. Whilst rejecting the strict exclusion and subjugation of the environment as pristine, the integrity of nature and culture as coherent categories is ensured; as with romantic challenges to the classical wilderness, the conscious foregrounding of natural over cultural content constitutes a simplistic inversion of bifurcated theoretical frames. Similarly, whilst the attribution of cultural meaning to the natural landscape may suggest an interrelation of natural and cultural realms, they remain practicably separate. For nature to reflect culture both concepts must remain distinctly definable and self-coherent; a static conception of nature signifies particular, unified cultural meanings ("allegoriz(ing) the mindset of a particular nation.")[109] Nevertheless, such approaches provide a rich critical discourse within which the following analyses can actively intervene. Rather than reading this chapter's case-study films as further reformulations of a static relationship between nature and culture, they will be approached as overdue deconstructive engagements with the metaphysics of American wilderness.

The first case-study, *Dead Man* (1995), provides a sustained disruption of the nature/culture dualism that underlies diverse wilderness constructions. Primarily read as an idiosyncratic western, the film's relationship with American cultural narration has been

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[106] Ibid., 1-4.
[107] P. Adams Sitney, "Landscape in the Cinema: The Rhythms of the World and the Camera," in *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, eds. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 125.
[108] Scott MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films About Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), xx-xxi.
[109] Melbye, *Landscape Allegory in Cinema*, 153.

contextualised within broader interrogations of this genre's attributes, icons, and oppositions. However, whilst readings of the text as a deconstructive Western are common, any sustained analysis of the film's representation of wilderness has been largely sidelined. Thus, refocusing existing generic interpretations of the film, this reading suggests that *Dead Man* elucidates a number of broader theoretical tensions that precipitate intense debate in ecocritical discourses. Conceptual couplets of nature/culture and wilderness/civilisation are radically effaced by a consistent logic of undecidability, a Derridean gesture already established in this thesis' earlier analyses. Finally, I conclude with a close-reading of the film's re-mapping of linearity and horizontality in logocentric cinematic and cultural landscape depictions.

As explored earlier, popular and literary discourses treat the wilderness as a theoretical and material foundation of American culture; however, wild nature is simultaneously read as a socio-cultural construct of an American national imagination. In recent critical readings of *Gerry* (2002), a similar paradoxical economy is legible, as the text's wilderness setting is interpreted as either an acultural "other" to the protagonists or as the product of their shifting and chaotic subjectivities. In contrast, I argue that the film reflexively questions the very project of establishing *any* fixed meaning from *Gerry's* landscape setting. By focusing specifically on the formal and stylistic rendering of wilderness terrains, this chapter locates within *Gerry's* landscape(s) a reflexive critique of normative wilderness cinematography; the film's setting is rendered as a terrain of ontological undecidability, evidenced by the fraught attempts of *Gerry's* protagonists to interpret and escape the wilderness. Thus, *Gerry's* wilderness environs evoke a variety of semiotic and structural processes that motion towards (but ultimately defer) any intelligible cultural significance, rendering it a heterogeneous landscape of *différance*.

Dead Man and the Western Wilderness

"Look out the window. Doesn't this remind you of when you were in the boat, and then later
that night you were lying looking up at the ceiling, and the water in your head was not
dissimilar from the landscape. And you think to yourself, 'Why is it that the landscape is
moving, but the boat is still?'"

The above quote, uttered by a train's fireman (Crispin Glover) to William Blake (Johnny Depp), institutes *Dead Man's* central narrative arc and its consistent engagement with wilderness/civilisation antinomies. Leaving behind his Cleveland home for accountancy work in the frontier town of Machine, Blake travels across a transformative western landscape. On the journey, he is confronted by disparate characters and natural

vistas, punctuated by foreboding, violent scenes; he observes locals shooting Buffalo through the windows of the carriage, and is warned by the fireman that he is as likely to "find his own grave" as he is prosperity.[110] Arriving at the end of the line, Blake steps with trepidation through the town's central thoroughfare, surrounded by steer skulls and other signifiers of death.[111] Reaching his prospective employer, Blake is told that he is too late, and that his job has already been filled. He demands to see the plant's owner, but upon entering Mr. Dickinson's (John Hurt) office he is threatened with a shotgun and retreats to a nearby saloon. Outside the tavern Blake meets a woman named Thel (Mili Avital). Blake spends the night with her, before their entente is interrupted by Charlie, her ex-boyfriend (Gabriel Byrne). Aiming a pistol at his rival, Charlie accidently shoots Thel dead, the bullet passing through her and into Blake; Blake retaliates by killing Charlie, before escaping on a stolen horse.

Awaking in the wild garden beyond Machine, Blake finds he is being treated by a Native American who goes by the moniker "Nobody" (Gary Farmer); he unsuccessfully attempts to cut the bullet out of Blake's mortal wound. When told that he is talking to William Blake, Nobody is aghast, confusing the wounded Easterner with the famous British poet; he is aware of the writer's work from his English education, following his capture, deportation, and exploitation as a circus act. From this point, Nobody assumes an overarching narrative goal, to guide Blake to the western shore; Blake's expiring form will be set out onto the Pacific Ocean, a spiritual ceremony designed to send his soul to "the next level of the world." The film's remaining scenes are structured around the pair's travels across the wilderness, as they are stalked by marshals and bounty hunters (Lance Henriksen, Michael Wincott and Eugene Byrd) eager to cash in a reward for Blake's capture or death (offered by Mr. Dickinson, Charlie's father). Encountering (and extinguishing) these threats, Blake gradually transforms into a "proficient killer."[112] Blake and Nobody's journey finally ends when they reach a Makah settlement on the Northwest coast; by this point Blake is near death. In the film's final scene, Blake floats out to sea on a canoe; as he looks back at the

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[110] This chapter avoids analysing this sequence due to an abundance of existing readings. For interpretations that elucidate the scene's negotiation of nature and culture, see Mary Katherine Hall, "Now You Are a Killer of White Men: Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* and Traditions of Revisionism in the Western," *Journal of Film and Video* 52, no. 4 (2001): 9-10; Melinda Szaloky, "A Tale N/nobody Can Tell: The Return of a Repressed Western History in Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man*," in *Westerns: Films Through History*, ed. Janet Walker (London: Routledge, 2001), 54-56; Gregory Salyer, "Poetry Written with Blood: Creating Death in *Dead Man*," in *Imag(in)ing Otherness: Filmic Visions of Living Together*, eds. S. Brent Plate and David Jasper (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1999), 28; Roger Bromley, "*Dead Man* Tells Tale: Tongues and Guns in Narratives of the West," *European Journal of American Culture* 20, no. 1 (2001): 51.
[111] Szaloky, "A Tale N/nobody Can Tell," 57.
[112] Ibid., 53.

shore for a final time, he sees a gunfight between Nobody and one of the bounty hunters, a shootout that ends fatally for both participants.

Unsurprisingly, existing readings of *Dead Man* contextualise the film within generic discourses of the western. Importantly, the establishment of landscape as prominent focus in recent film scholarship appears partially indebted to prominent studies of this genre; as Cubitt summarises, "the old Western, as myth of origin of the nation-state in the USA, was characteristically interested in westward expansion, in the civilising of the wilderness, and the preservation of wilderness values into the newly civilised."[113] Addressed explicitly in structuralist genre studies, a series of binary oppositions have been used to elucidate the western's semantic composition;[114] these antinomies are cast as mythic contradictions, mirroring the conceptual tensions embedded within broader discourses on wilderness and American national identity.[115] Nevertheless, structuralist approaches reify the metaphysical arrangements they interrogate: as demonstrated in the previous chapter on small-town films, such approaches solidify the antonymic terms they study, rationalising a potential multiplicity of representations into restrictive conceptual monoliths.

Bearing in mind this discursive context, readings of *Dead Man* ostensibly redress the conceptual paradoxes present in foundational genre studies; in doing so, they forward a purportedly deconstructive assault upon the western. Whilst an exhaustive survey of these readings is impossible, it is interesting to note that the film has been universally located within a series of western sub-categories, each suggesting that the text reconfigures the foundational attributes of a recognisable cinematic form; it has been referred to as an "anti-western,"[116] a "revisionist western,"[117] and a "post-western,"[118] amongst other tags. These varied interpretative structures tacitly cement the film's reception within specific generic frames, despite ostensibly challenging its tropes; as Gregg Rickman notes: "even as *Dead Man* erases its genre it confirms its ongoing vitality, dependent as this very interesting film is in so many ways on the genre's form and conventions for its very existence."[119]

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[113] Cubitt, *Eco Media*, 127.

[114] Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Poststructuralism and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2000), 78. Short, *Imagined Country*, 178-179.

[115] Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*, 76-78.

[116] Jens Martin Gurr, "The Mass-Slaughter of Native Americans in Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man*: A Complex Interplay of Word and Image," in *Word and Image in Colonial and Postcolonial Literatures and Cultures*, ed. Michael Meyer (New York: Rodopi, 2009), 353.

[117] Gregg Rickman, "The Western Under Erasure: *Dead Man*," in *The Western Reader*, eds. Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight, 1998), 381-388.

[118] Jason J. Wallin, *A Deleuzian Approach to Curriculum: Essays on a Pedagogical Life* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 43.

[119] Rickman, "The Western Under Erasure," 401.

Rickman's observation demonstrates a reflexive self-awareness indicative of his reading of the film as a "western under erasure,"[120] an approach informed by his assertion that the film's textual properties can be fruitfully elucidated by Derridean theory. Indeed, Rickman's analysis sustains an explicitly deconstructive emphasis upon *Dead Man's* "evident hostility to fixed meanings," rendering the film a "nihilist statement of protest."[121] Thus, utilising a reading of deconstruction as a "double gesture" of "reversal followed by displacement," Rickman argues that the film disrupts western narratives, tropes, and icons; generic conventions are "inverted," whilst the film's narrative "forms a series of cancelling operations."[122] Justus Nieland also utilises an explicitly Derridean methodology to analyse how the film reflexively interrogates processes of inclusion and exclusion implicated in the construction of popular western narratives. His account concludes that the film simultaneously defamiliarizes the genre and reintegrates marginal perspectives into the "western archive," leaving such forms open to future transformative iterations.[123] Themes of wilderness and national identity are frequently implicit within these post-structuralist readings; such subjects are discernible in *Dead Man's* perceived subversion of westward expansionist narratives and ethnocentric constructions of a natural or savage Native American "other."[124] Furthermore, in engaging frontier discourses, the genre again evokes an image of a pristine wilderness that is implicated in theorisations of American national identity; arguing that "it is widely believed that the Myth of the Frontier constitutes the single most important frame of reference for America's self-understanding," Melinda Szaloky suggests that this cultural narrative "depicts the territory lying beyond the frontier as an abundant and unappropriated land that is simply there for the taking."[125]

However, aforementioned deconstructive scholarly approaches have avoided a sustained consideration of the film's wilderness representations; only Nieland and Szaloky offer brief discussions of the formal and cinematographic strategies used in representing the film's landscapes, analyses accommodated into a broader re-inscription of western

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[120] Ibid.

[121] Ibid., 396, 398; Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Dead Man* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 55-56. Also see Salyer, "Poetry Written with Blood," 21; Richardson, *Otherness in Hollywood Cinema*, 201-202.

[122] Rickman, "The Western Under Erasure, 398-399.

[123] Justus Nieland, "Graphic Violence: Native Americans and the Western Archive in *Dead Man*," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 1, no. 2 (2001): 171-200. Similarly, Szaloky reads Dead Man as a "return of a repressed western history"; Szaloky, "A Tale N/nobody Can Tell," 47-49. Other post-structuralist readings utilise the work of Lyotard and Deleuze; see Bromley, "*Dead Man* Tells Tale"; Wallin, *A Deleuzian Approach to Curriculum*.

[124] See Richardson, *Otherness in Hollywood Cinema*; Gurr, "The Mass-Slaughter of Native Americans in Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man*"; Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999); Salyer, "Poetry Written with Blood"; Nieland, "Graphic Violence," 181.

[125] Szaloky, "A Tale N/nobody Can Tell," 49.

history.[126] Thus, direct interrogations of the film's natural environment have been frequently occluded in favour of Blake's shifting subjectivity, the representation of Native Americans, and other generic themes (such as violence, masculinity, and capitalism). Crucially, the critical foci of these readings reflects another trend in western scholarship outlined by Deborah A. Carmichael, who asserts that "in studies of the Western, the importance of the landscape itself, the idyllic or treacherous environment negotiated in these films, often receives supporting-role status, yet without the land, American national mythmaking wouldn't exist."[127]

Whilst sidelined in academic readings, antonymic themes of wilderness and civilisation have received greater prominence in *Dead Man's* popular and critical reception. Accordingly, they provide a useful jumping-off point from which to construct a sustained theoretical challenge to American wilderness narratives. For example, Kent Jones' review makes general observations regarding the diversity of the film's landscapes, suggesting that "the film moves through many types of terrain, far more than in most Westerns…. In *Dead Man*, the disjunction between people and place…bloom(s) into full flower."[128] Here, Jones implicitly engages a number of interesting tensions embedded within wilderness discourse; whilst he implies that *Dead Man* constructs the landscape as vast and acultural, it is then qualified by the observation that such "wide-open spaces" connote "lonely unease," ensuring that there is "no mastery here among the white men."[129] However, such comments do not trigger a more detailed deconstruction of the text's wilderness representations; whilst the connotations attached to civilising conquest are inverted, the adversarial relationship between nature and culture is retained in representations of humanity's "violently aggressive dominance" of nature.[130]

Dead Man's thematic interest in wilderness/civilisation oppositions becomes a more explicit focus of Jacob Levich's semi-academic review, as he argues that the film's setting "acknowledges no bright line between Civilization and Wilderness, but only a continuous material reality, one in which the substance of nature and the works of man are inextricably intertwined."[131] Thus, Levich prefigures his discussion with a potentially radical observation: "Jarmusch flatly rejects the bipolar symbolism of traditional Westerns, most obviously where Civilization and Wilderness are concerned."[132] However, Levich again

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[126] Nieland, "Graphic Violence," 177-178; Szaloky, "A Tale N/nobody Can Tell," 54.
[127] Deborah A. Carmichael, "Introduction," in *The Landscape of Hollywood Westerns: Ecocriticism in an American Film Genre*, ed. Deborah A. Carmichael (Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah Press, 2006), 1.
[128] Kent Jones, Review of *Dead Man*, dir. Jim Jarmusch, *Cineaste* 22, no. 2 (1996): 46.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Jacob Levich, "Western Auguries: Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man*," *Film Comment* 32, no. 3 (1996): 41.
[132] Ibid.

sustains an antagonistic, expansionist division between nature and culture. Specifically, his assertions reinforce American ideals of Manifest Destiny at the same time he purports to challenge the purity of its underlying concepts: "far from wallowing in the romantic concept of 'virgin territory,' the film depicts a mid-19th century America in which capitalism has already embraced and transformed the farthest reaches of the continent."[133] As a result, whilst Levich argues for a merging of the civilised and wild, this mixture resembles a simplistic reversal of the engineered middle landscape that stands as the idealised *telos* of expansionist narratives. Furthermore, in reading the film's natural setting as polluted with "the detritus of westward expansion," the integration of the two concepts evokes a discrete, hierachical imposition of "the works of man" upon a previously pristine wilderness landscape.[134] The pollutive artefacts of civilisation are merely scattered on the surface of the wilderness scene, rendering *Dead Man's* landscapes as the juxtaposition of discrete substances that carry static, unchanging ontological properties.

In summary, several critics have superficially observed in *Dead Man* a reflexive challenge to wilderness/civilisation dualisms. However, these accounts demonstrate problematic methodological limitations that my analysis attempts to redress. Firstly, Jones and Rickman only offer limited analysis of the stylistic and formal strategies utilised in representing wilderness landscape in the text; furthermore, whilst Levich does analyse of the film's natural representations, these are supportive of a totalised interpretation in which discrete notions of wilderness and civilisation are "intertwined" rather than deconstructed. Conversely, this reading of *Dead Man* is inaugurated by an explicitly Derridean desire to fundamentally rupture this pervasive logocentric economy.

Destabilising Nature and Culture in *Dead Man*

Returning to this analysis' open soliloquy, *Dead Man* institutes a problematic nature/culture economy from its very beginnings. As the train's fireman reminds Blake of a time when "the water in your head was not dissimilar from the landscape," a clear semiotic link is constructed between two seemingly antonymic substances: the human subject and natural object. Jonathan Rosenbaum touches upon this in his monograph on *Dead Man*; for him, the fireman's words imply an "inability to distinguish between inner consciousness and external reality," a theme he discerns throughout the film.[135] Rosenbaum diagnoses this discursive preoccupation throughout director Jim Jarmusch's wider oeuvre: "he returns repeatedly to the notion of looking at the same thing in different ways – or looking at

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[133] Ibid.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Rosenbaum, *Dead Man*, 83.

different things the same way."[136] Yet, this sequence is equally readable as a direct interrogation of a *specific* structural antinomy, challenging the crystallization of nature and culture as discrete, hierarchical alternatives. In the fireman's monologue this strategy of collapsing interiority and exteriority is provided a specifically biological figuration; his words introduce a natural textual motif ("the water in your head") that figures their semiotic fluidity. Rather than postulating a simplistic correspondence between two discrete conceptual elements, this brief remark inaugurates a reflexive, undecidable dynamic in which the cultural subject is presented in terms of the natural object, and vice-versa.

  The encounter between Blake and the fireman is often read as a future echo, prefiguring Blake's death at the film's conclusion. Rickman exemplifies this reading of the film's "circular" structure, arguing that a series of narrative allusions and repetitions imprison the protagonist in an "endlessly repeating cycle."[137] However, the scene does not simplistically actualise the words uttered in the film's opening sequence. Rather, it also re-signifies the ontological fluidity and indiscernibility those same words connote. In the film's final moments Blake is laid out in a canoe, looking towards the heavens in a point-of-view shot (Figs.4.1-4.2):

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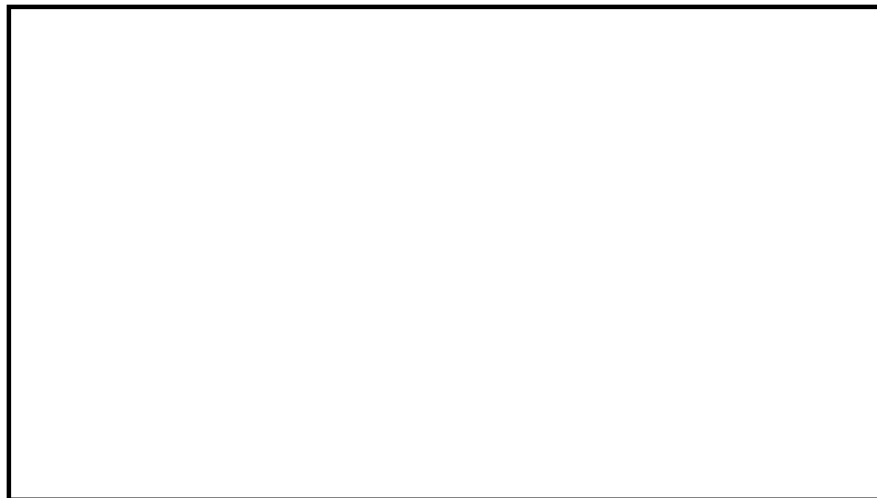
[136] Ibid., 13.
[137] Rickman, "The Western Under Erasure," 401.
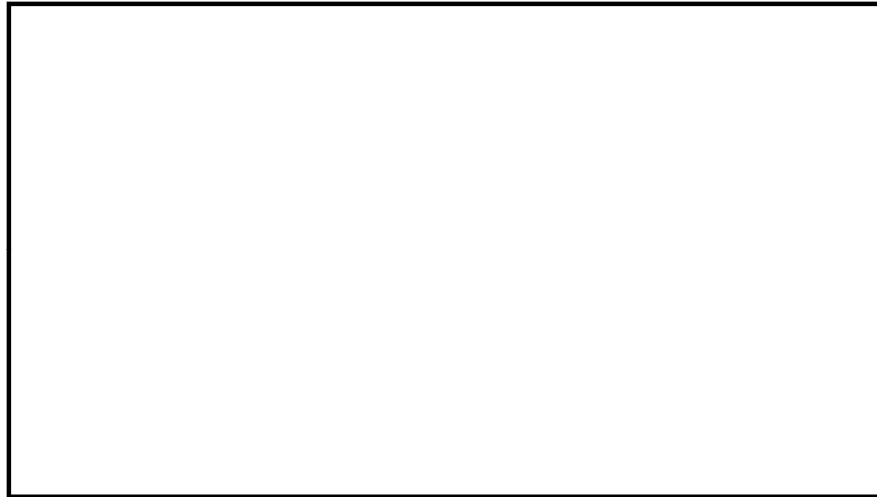
Figs.4.1-4.2

This particular sequence bears striking similarities with a particular line of the aforementioned monologue: "Doesn't this remind you of when you were in the boat, and then later that night you were lying looking up at the ceiling?" Yet, when visualised in the film's final moments, "the ceiling" is the sky itself, a counterpart to the "mirror of water" upon which the boat now floats. In figuring two natural realms (the sea and the sky) through cultural metaphor (the mirror and the ceiling), *Dead Man* provides a further representational challenge to the self-identity of natural and cultural spaces.

This strategy of contaminating textual elements with traces of paradoxical meanings is replicated in the film's final shot. Drifting in the Pacific Ocean, Blake's canoe is gradually assimilated into the surrounding waves; it is subsumed by the natural environment it navigates (Fig.4.3):

Fig.4.3

Here, the scene is represented through an extreme-long shot, a cinematographic choice that conventionally contextualises the human figure within a vast, empty landscape. Indeed, Rosenbaum endorses this normative reading, suggesting that "the film ends with a wide expanse of cavernous sky and ocean conceived as an empty stage."[138] However, this interpretation reinforces aforementioned constructions of natural purity, ensuring its continuing perception as profoundly acultural. Alternatively, the apparent integration of the boat into the landscape suggests a more complex deconstructive gesture; as the canoe is no longer visible upon the sea, the oppositional concepts these two elements signify are no longer *di*visible. The canoe is simultaneously present *and* absent, drifting in a choppy, dynamic milieu of fluid conceptual relations.

Another recurring image that collapses a dualistic nature/culture economy can be found throughout the film's central journey, as Blake discovers "Wanted" posters advertising a reward for his death or capture. Blake first encounters the posters within the natural landscape itself; he tears down multiple sheets when he finds them nailed to tree-trunks (Fig.4.4):

Fig.4.4

Superficially, the presence of these posters can be read as a signifier of nature/culture antagonism; infiltrating the landscape of Blake's escape, the posters demonstrate the potential reach and power of an omnipresent human culture, free to enter and inscribe the wilderness at will.[139] Indeed, the presence of the printed word is itself often represented as the apotheosis of civilisation. As a technology foregrounded within the diegesis, it embodies the destructive being of western civilisation; like metal (typified by knifes, trains, and guns)

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138 Rosenbaum, *Dead Man,* 82.
139 Levich, "Western Auguries," 41.

it "leads to alienation and death."[140] However, the manner in which the posters are incorporated into the text suggests a more complex structural relationship between wilderness and civilisation. Specifically, the placement of these posters on trees encourages us to ruminate on the natural constituents that form a base for this supposed cultural signifier; just as paper contains traces of wood in its genetic composition, the cultural status that the paper connotes is also re-inhabited by traces of its natural "other." Furthermore, this formulation invests seemingly natural objects with cultural functions; used as a frontier noticeboard, the trees themselves are granted an ancillary purpose as a civilised medium, a humanised form that disseminates a universal linguistic code. Thus, trees and posters are presented as undecidable signifiers of *both* culture and nature; traces of antithetical terms are perceptible within the very substance of specific textual elements.

Finally, the dual status of these substances within the film is further demonstrated in the "paper flowers" manufactured by Thel. Observing her harassment outside the town's saloon, Blake approaches her, ostensibly to help pick her up (and her belongings, a basket filled with flowers). Upon reaching her, Blake realises that the flowers are artificial, made of paper. After walking Thel home Blake enters her bedroom, and they discuss the flowers further; she eventually hopes to replicate the flowers' natural scent by adding perfume to her creations, which she also intends to make out of silk once she can afford the endeavour. The artificiality of the flowers has often been interpreted as an example of the frontier town's unequivocal status as civilisation's destructive apotheosis: as Szaloky remarks, "the only flowers that grow in the slush and mud of Machine are made of paper."[141] Conversely, for Rickman this is a sign of Blake's deficient imagination, a theme used to construct intertextual links between *Dead Man* and William Blake's poetry; unable to suspend disbelief, the protagonist cannot look beyond the surface appearance of the synthetic organism, a fatal character flaw that ensures his westward journey will end in "puzzled defeat."[142] Building upon this observation, it can be extrapolated that his discordant response to the flowers is itself a sign of the impossibility of accommodating them within existing logical paradigms. As discussed earlier, the status of paper as an artificial, cultural artefact is undermined by its clear juxtaposition with a natural source. This dynamic is replicated in the sequence where Blake helps Thel outside the saloon, and is further displayed as Blake escapes her room following the shootings; both sequences include static shots that fixate on the flowers lying on the surface of mud, as if plants protruding from the soil (Figs.4.5-4.6):

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[140] Salyer, "Poetry Written with Blood," 27-30.
[141] Szaloky, "A Tale N/nobody Can Tell," 58.
[142] Rickman, "The Western Under Erasure," 387
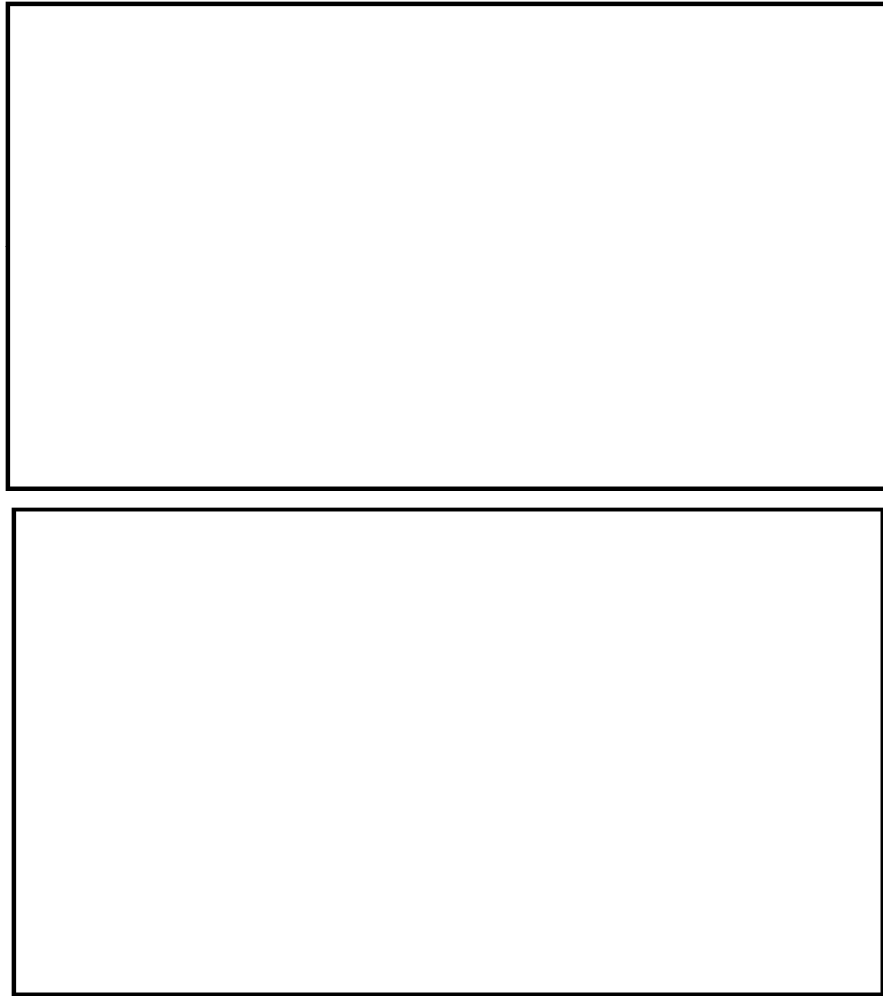
Figs.4.5-4.6

Yet, this image is immediately shattered: as Blake attempts to pass them back to Thel, she comments that those that have communed with nature are "ruined." Furthermore, Thel's attempts to augment the flowers' natural verisimilitude appeals to the further addition of synthetic processes; silk and perfume are suggested as improvements to her creations, yet these reinforce the flowers' status as products of human artifice. Therefore, the flowers comprise a further destabilising motif, embodying a state of semiotic flux and alterity. Whilst accompanying images and dialogue furnish the flowers with either a natural or cultural status, they are almost instantaneously re-written by further textual elements that stress a diametrically opposed ontology. Thus, the flowers are always already inhabited by traces of meanings that are necessarily disavowed by a metaphysical structural violence.

Dead Man, Circularity, and Wilderness Geometry

As suggested previously, studies of landscape in *Dead Man* have been limited in comparison to anthropocentric foci; landscape is usually addressed as a brief addendum to

broader discussions of the film's engagement with the western. In turn, when issues of environmental representation have been discussed, they have drawn myriad antithetical responses. For example, Gino Moliterno draws direct comparisons between the film's landscape and earlier forms of magisterial landscape depiction, suggesting that the film's black and white cinematography is "reminiscent of the nature photographs of Ansel Adams."[143] Conversely, purportedly revisionist readings suggest that *Dead Man* actively avoids presenting wilderness as a spectacle, focusing on landscapes that diverge from the western's normalised expansive vistas. This interpretation is typified by Nieland, providing a rare close-reading of the film's setting:

> Jarmusch radically reframes the natural landscape, offering neither the limitless panoramic shots of natural sublimity that offer the land up for colonization and conquest, penetration and possession, nor the "tabula rasa" shots of the desert, in which, as Jane Tompkins has observed, the West becomes "a white sheet on which to trace a figure…on which a man can write, as if for the first time, the story he wants to live." Instead, Jarmusch places his central characters always already within natural scenes, surrounded by fauna that obscure and confound mastery rather than confer it.[144]

Szaloky forwards a similar (but less complex) reading of the film's denial of sublime spectacle, specifically in relation to *Dead Man's* opening train journey:

> Instead of grand vistas of vast and overpoweringly beautiful landscapes in Technicolor, the film opens with claustrophobic images in monochrome…. High-contrast black-and-white cinematography bleaches out any inherent spectacle.[145]

Such observations are useful in locating the film directly within ecocritical discourses, demonstrating how the text fruitfully challenges constructions of natural purity and the hierarchical oppositions that underlie such representations. However, these brief observations stop short of an extensive, detailed exploration of the film's formal and stylistic rendering of wild nature. Conversely, this analysis demonstrates that a close-reading of myriad textual elements can inaugurate a thorough critique of wilderness and its underlying topographical precepts. Specifically, certain stylistic choices construct motifs of circularity

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[143] Gino Moliterno, Review of *Dead Man*, dir. Jim Jarmusch, *Senses of Cinema* 14 (2001): http://sensesofcinema.com/2001/cteq/dead_man/.

[144] Nieland, "Graphic Violence," 177-178.

[145] Szaloky, "A Tale N/nobody Can Tell," 54. Also see Patricia Lombardo, "Memory and Imagination in Film: *Gerry* and *Dead Man*," *Ekphrasis* (2009): 22.

and multiplicity within the film, challenging the pervasive horizontality and linearity frequently associated with metaphysical landscape depiction.

In Yi-Fu Tuan's *Topophilia*, he argues that "modern" perspectives of nature are intractably tied to concepts of scenery and landscape, leading to the conflation of the natural with certain "axial" modes of representation.[146] As a result, rationalist, metaphysical constructions of landscape are figuratively associated with geometric values of horizontality and linearity. Utilising as a foundation the Newtonian precept of "the straight line as the natural path of all moving matter," Tuan contends that linear conceptions of time contributed to the replacement of earlier cyclical models of spatio-temporal relation.[147] Importantly, wilderness discourses internalise these directional trends within dominant representational modes; Tuan notes that American landscape painting (a vital disseminator of American cultural narratives) reified horizontal conceptions of nature and landscape, embodying a perspective that showcases wilderness as a vast, pristine realm of "open space."[148] As established earlier, this aesthetic preference is discernible in Turnerian engagements with wilderness and the frontier: American development is explained by "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward."[149] Thus, Turner mobilises a rigid ontological framework that antagonistically separates wilderness from civilisation, a dualistic relationship that is mirrored in the landscape's rigid geometrical properties.

Engaging directly with the spatial foundations of wilderness constructions, *Dead Man* provides a reflexive critique that extends beyond the simple occlusion of sublime natural vistas. Rather, in the act of constructing the film's wilderness setting, the landscape is framed in a way that downplays linear horizontality, instead stressing verticality and circularity. Thus, rather than absenting the natural landscape altogether, it is represented as a deconstructive topography; whilst thematically locatable within wilderness debates, it signifies seemingly antithetical spatial principles. To begin, the protagonists are shown entering new terrains and areas in a manner which immediately orients those settings on a vertical plane. This denial of geographical horizontality is augmented by the use of camera angles that frame the human figure from either slightly below or slightly above the perpendicular; this device is discernible in the vast majority of establishing shots (Figs.4.7-4.8):

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[146] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values* (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1990), 133-148.
[147] Ibid., 148.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 31.
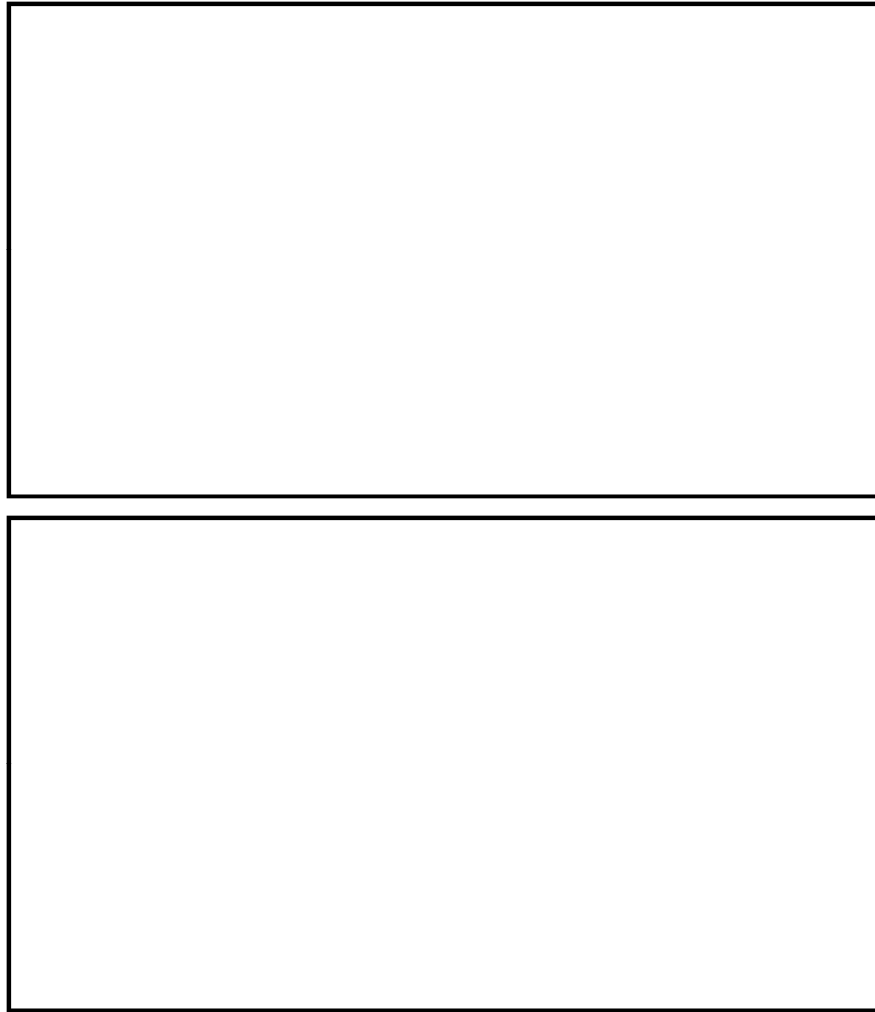
Figs.4.7-4.8

As shown in the examples above, the camera shoots the human characters from variable positions, engendering a spatial relationship between figure and frame that stresses vertical (rather than horizontal) relations.

The geometrical planes upon which the film's characters travel through the landscape further problematize perceived associations between wilderness, horizontality and linearity. As Jones implies, the movement of Blake and Nobody is infrequently presented as a horizontal journey, from one side of a static (or tracking) shot to the other; rather, "the film is punctuated by twisting journeys on horseback through rocky terrain."[150] This focus upon non-linear, rounded movements is produced by both the film's cinematography and mise-en-scène. Firstly, several settings depict winding paths, preventing horizontal motion; examples of this can be discerned in sequences following Blake and Nobody, as well as their myriad pursuers (Fig.4.9):

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[150] Jones, Review of *Dead Man*, 46
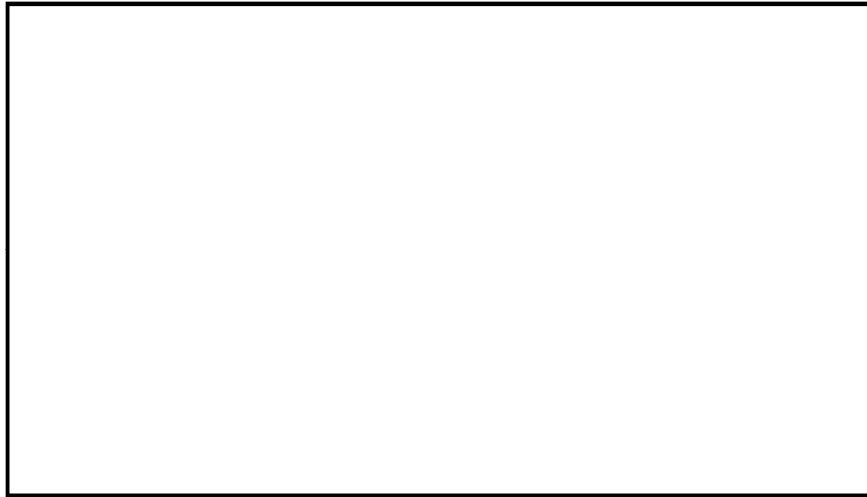
Fig.4.9

Furthermore, the employment of disparate camera angles and shot lengths undermine the construction of a static, linear, self-coherent environment. As Nieland notes, the film frequently uses point-of-view shots stemming from the stricken Blake, as he is dragged through the wilderness atop a horse;[151] these are often signified by unsteady, moving cameras, continually shifting our perspective of the surroundings as Blake moves in his saddle. A prominent example occurs early in the film, immediately after Blake's first encounter with Nobody (Fig.4.10)
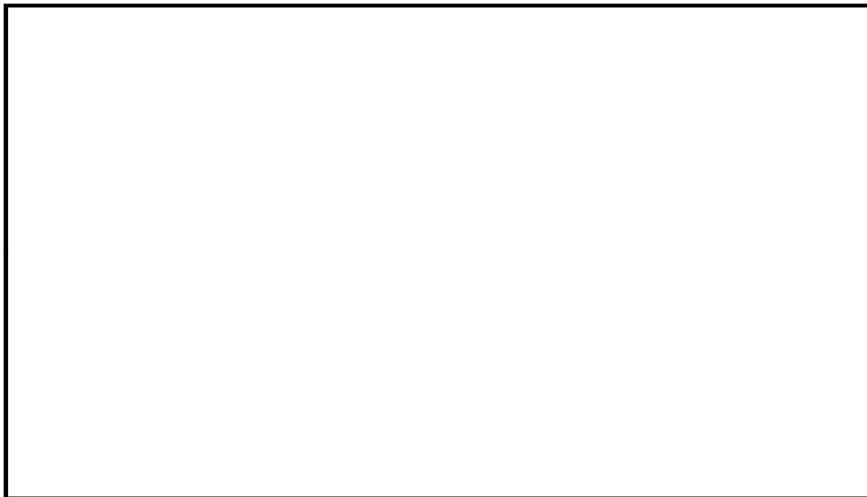
Fig.4.10

Furthermore, even those fleeting sequences in which the landscape is horizontally traversed simultaneously signify a conflicting sense of compositional verticality. For

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[151] Nieland, "Graphic Violence," 182.

example, as Blake and Nobody ride through a forested area, the direction of their movement (perpendicular to a tracking camera) is contrasted with the irregular vertical lines of tall trees (Fig.4.11):
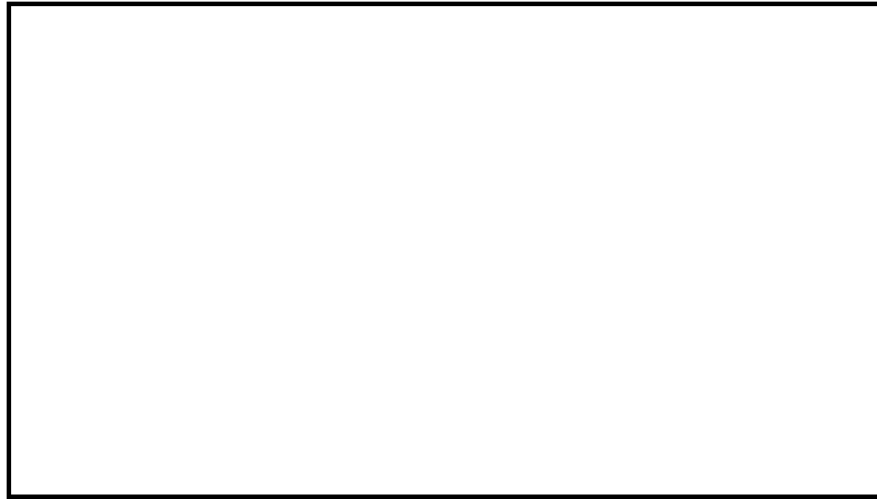
Fig.4.11

Whilst this sequence ostensibly conforms to metaphysical landscape geometries, elements of the mise-en-scène problematize the topographical regimes they institute. Here, the role of perspectival horizontality in constructing wilderness as a wide-open space is not simply undermined by the cluttered frame; rather, the shapes and dimensions of the trees establish a pervasive verticality that discourages the perception of landscape as a simplistically horizontal composition.

Finally, one can also read Blake and Nobody's journey as a broader juxtaposition of the linear and circular. As suggested by various critics, the pair's quest appears superficially horizontal in its spatial and geographical orientation; they are headed directly to the western seaboard, to allow for the mortally-wounded Blake's ceremonial return to his spiritual origins. This reading is legible in Roger Bromley's account of the film, as he argues that Blake is (initially) "rehearsing the archetypal white American experience of the Westward journey."[152] Thus, the film's central trek ostensibly enacts narratives of expansionism and colonization, figuring a linear motion that mirrors an ever-expanding civilisation headed by the frontier's westward movement. However, whilst Nobody and Blake's journey can be interpreted as a typical East to West voyage, it is problematized by the simultaneous circularity embedded of *Dead Man's* narrative form. For example, whilst the journey is oriented towards a clear location, it is presented as a sporadic trek punctuated by repetition and ellipses; as Rosenbaum observes, "throughout Blake and Nobody's trek through the

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[152] Bromley, "*Dead Man* Tells Tale," 56. Also see Rickman, "The Western Under Erasure," 390.

wilderness…we see practically every location twice, first with them, then with the bounty hunters or marshals following behind them."[153] In many cases, this narrative doubling is reinforced by stylistic doubling; in one sequence Blake and Nobody are framed in an extreme high-angle shot, a camera positioning that is identically replicated moments later as two bounty hunters follow their trail (Figs.4.12-4.13):
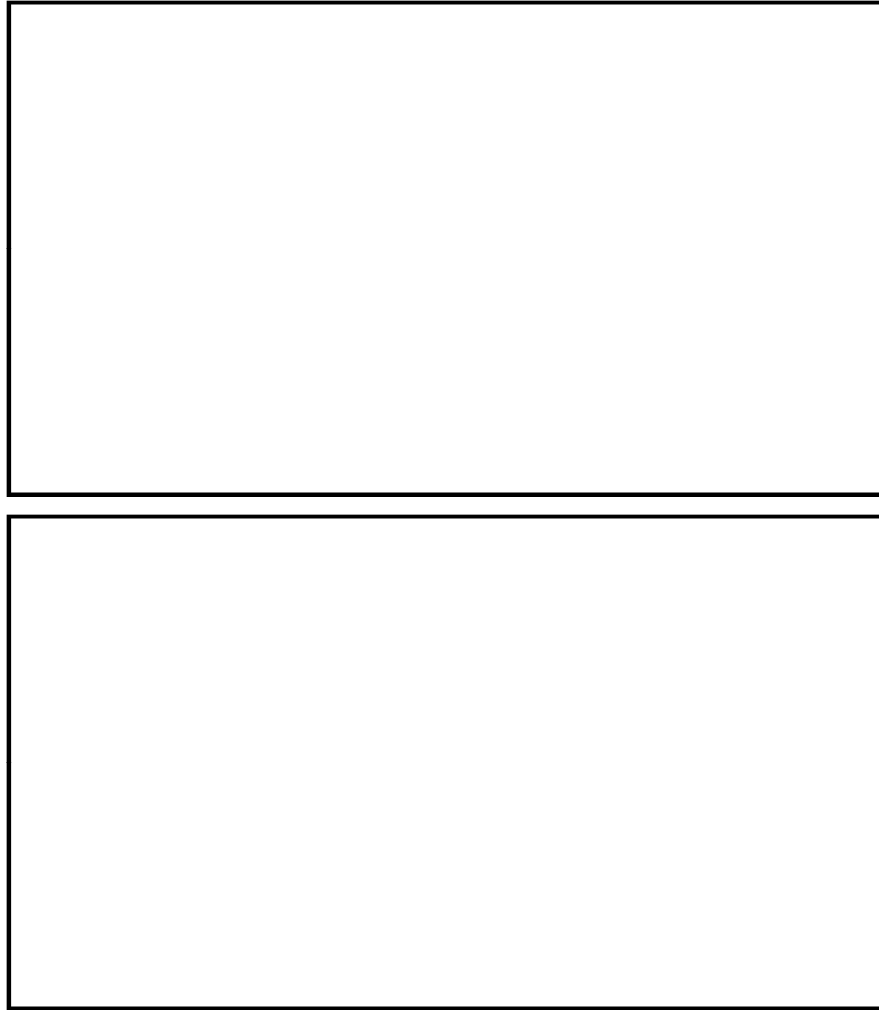
Figs.4.12-4.13

As alluded to earlier, a more general structural circularity has also been observed in a series of narrative foreshadowings. The aforementioned conversation between Blake and the fireman evokes Blake's demise; his final moments are accurately described, rendering his life journey an "endlessly repeating cycle."[154] Furthermore, narrative mirrorings are observable in Blake's experiences of Mobile, and his later arrival in the Makah village. As Szaloky notes, Blake's introduction to the two settlements are framed in similar ways; the

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[153] Rosenbaum, *Dead Man*, 76-78.
[154] Rickman, "The Western Under Erasure," 401.

use of furtive subjective shots in the Indian village signify a "point of view…comparable in its bleakness to the Main Street in Machine."[155] Such correspondences underlie a deconstructive reading of the western genre's "search for origins": "clearly, the white and Native-American settlements mirror each other. Their near-isomorphic duplication brings together the beginning and end of the narrative converting the seemingly linear, forward-directed trajectory of the journey to a circularity or even stasis."[156] Szaloky's insightful analysis provides an exhaustive challenge to the perceived conventions of western narratives, locating *Dead Man's* juxtaposition of linearity and circularity within a specific generic context. Ultimately, her observations can be extrapolated further to initiate a wholesale critique of nature, landscape, and wilderness as metaphysical constructs. The film's signification of contradictory geometries does not merely disrupt American western and frontier narratives; it also challenges images of wilderness as pure, vast, and acultural, displacing the prominent topographical principles upon which they are founded.

Gerry and the Frontier Wilderness

Like *Dead Man*, *Gerry* begins with a travel sequence; we are presented with an extended long-take of a car driving down a desert highway. The camera position shifts from behind the moving vehicle to directly in front of it, before cutting to a medium-shot of two young men through a dirty, reflective windshield. The camera enters a disorientating spin as the car pulls into a roadside car park. Exiting the vehicle, the two eponymous protagonists (Matt Damon and Casey Affleck) embark on a "Wilderness Trail"; the aim of their jaunt is an indiscernible geographical landmark referred to simply as "the thing." After an energetic sprint across the flatland terrain the pair decides to abort their hike, but cannot relocate their path. The Gerrys quickly become lost as they trudge through a series of arid, inhospitable landscapes; their attempts to retrace their steps prove ultimately fruitless as they unwittingly travel deeper into the remote desert environment. Spending several nights in the wilderness, they become exhausted and dehydrated; after a seemingly endless trek across salt-flats they hallucinate and collapse. Lying on the crystalline ground, Damon's character throttles Affleck's, an apparent mercy killing. The surviving Gerry is finally rescued as the film concludes, picked up by a passing car as he serendipitously stumbles across a desert road.

Aside from its consistent critical positioning within wilderness discourse (a trend addressed momentarily), *Gerry* is frequently cited as a film that abets a multiplicity of potentially divergent textual engagements. Thus, prominent critical readings of *Gerry* focus

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[155] Szaloky, "A Tale N/nobody Can Tell," 64.
[156] Ibid.

not only on its prospective meanings, but also the difficulty encountered in attributing a single, fixed significance to the cinematic text; to provide one example, Geoff King argues that "it is possible to read a variety of implications or 'meanings' into the film, but this is not something it appears overtly designed to encourage."[157] However, unlike *Dead Man*, the film's perceived textual openness has not manifested an explicitly post-structuralist critical discourse. As a result, such observations have not spawned significant readings of *Gerry's* thematic and aesthetic qualities as overtly deconstructive.

Indeed, statements regarding the film's textual opacity usually precede attempts to accommodate the film's scenic and narrative qualities within a single, totalised interpretative framework. Specifically, readings of *Gerry's* wild setting oscillate between its positioning as an acultural "other" to the human protagonists, and its construction as a psychic reflection of the character's fraught subjectivities. Importantly, these seemingly oppositional interpretations of the film's setting mirror contrasting classical and romantic theorisations of wild nature and its specific relationship to American cultural identity. Whilst these aforementioned accounts of the film may appear superficially antithetical, they share a structural foundation in rigidly discrete nature/culture dichotomies; whether positioned as humanity's absence or a reflection of it, the wilderness landscape is necessarily approached as a discrete entity, a realm that requires a fundamental separation from culture to remain legible. In this manner, existing readings of *Gerry* retain an ontological tension that persists within broader metaphysical constructions of wilderness; the film's natural setting is positioned as both outside of culture and a product of American cultural discourse.

Locating *Gerry* within American Wilderness Discourse

Before exploring how existing readings have interrogated *Gerry's* natural setting, it is vital to clarify how the film superficially evokes American wilderness discourses. To begin, the film's location within such debates is ensured by explicit references to unspoiled nature. This textual strategy is exemplified by an information sign shown at the very beginning of the film, naming the protagonists' path as a "WILDERNESS TRAIL" (Fig.4.14):

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[157] Geoff King, "Following in the Footsteps: Gus Van Sant's Gerry and Elephant in the American Independent Field of Cultural Production," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 4, no. 2 (2006): 84. Also see Emanuel Levy, Review of *Gerry*, dir. Gus Van Sant, *Screen Daily*, Last Modified January 14, 2001, http://www.screendaily.com/gerry/407985.article.; Devin McKinney, Review of *Gerry*, dir. Gus Van Sant, *Film Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2003): 43.
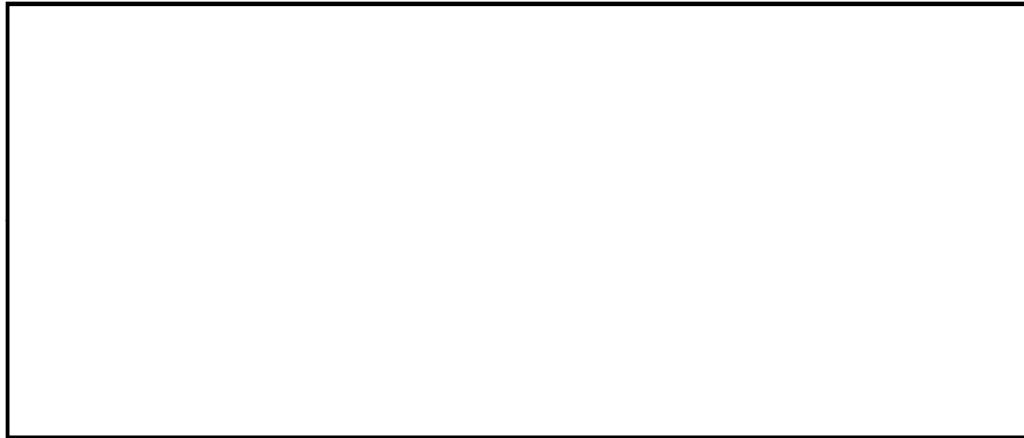
Fig.4.14

In turn, the film's varying geological vistas are frequently rationalised as a blanket "wilderness" in critical accounts of the film. Thus, whilst existing readings frame the film primarily as a hike across a desert setting, its environment is referred to as "the wild(s),"[158] and "an American desert and mountain wilderness landscape."[159] Additionally, the common constitution of wilderness as the conceptual opposite of civilisation is signified by the film's incorporation of extended images of roads. Providing an overtly civilising space, the asphalt track provides a bookended juxtaposition to the natural milieu that sustains the majority of the diegetic action. The role of the film's opening and closing sequences (both long-takes of moving vehicles on a highway) in defining the protagonist's objectives is remarked upon by several commentators; for example, Amy Taubin notes that a return to this seemingly "uninhabited and undifferentiated" setting has become the narrative goal of both Gerrys: the pair search "with increasing desperation and failing strength, for the highway, their car, a way out."[160] Thus, the film's narrative arc is not characterised as a mere escape from wilderness, but also as a return to civilisation; by evoking a contrasting signifier of humanity, the film ostensibly defines its natural setting as specifically "wild." If treated as material opposites within the film, the two sites can equally be located as divergent conceptual poles, constituting one another within a pre-existing socio-cultural economy of wilderness vs. civilisation.

The presence of the highway also provides a semiotic link to American frontier discourses. As noted throughout this chapter, the frontier provides a prominent historical narrative that ties the development of a uniquely American identity to the subject's

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[158] Martin Drenthen, "Fatal Attraction: Wildness in Contemporary Film," *Environmental Ethics* 31, no.3 (2009): 301; Lee Knuttila, "Where Do We Go From Here? Confronting Contingency with *Gerry*," *CineAction* 80 (2010): 38.
[159] King, "Following in the Footsteps," 76.
[160] Amy Taubin, "First Look at 'Gerry', Gus Van Sant's Latest Film," *Film Comment* 38, no. 1 (2002): 14.

experience of wilderness conditions. Like the highway, the frontier embodies a figurative borderline; expansionist discourses replicate metaphysical delineations that pervade existing readings of the film's landscape setting. Tellingly, the frontier itself forms a key focus in several academic engagements with *Gerry*; for example, Lee Knuttila argues that the characters' responses to the "contingent" wilderness re-enacts constructions of "hegemonic masculinity" embedded within "mythic imagined narratives" of western expansion.[161] Thus, identifying explicit references to the American frontier, critical readings of *Gerry* mobilise a series of foundational conceptual oppositions integral to popular wilderness discourses. Furthermore, these interpretative frameworks reify an antagonistic relationship between nature and culture based upon the film's perceived premise, the struggle for human survival in an inhospitable wilderness environment.[162] Indeed, Luis Rocha Antunes bases her phenomenological reading of the film on this reductive, antonymic foundation: "*Gerry* is the overwhelming experience of man vs. nature."[163]

Gerry's Oppositional Critical Landscapes

As demonstrated above, *Gerry's* basic narrative scenario initiates a superficially oppositional relationship between the human characters and natural setting, establishing the former as a cultural protagonist and the latter as an acultural antagonist. More detailed analyses of *Gerry's* setting appear to figure a more complex (yet equally metaphysical) evocation of American wilderness discourse. Myriad readings of *Gerry's* wilderness setting explicitly approach it as an acultural realm devoid of human signs and meanings. For example, Martin Drenthen positions *Gerry's* wilderness as a critique of socio-cultural and moral orders: "(*Gerry*) shows the grandeur of wild nature is deeper and more profound than merely human, although it also stresses that this wildness is utterly indifferent towards the fate of humanity and as such ultimately amoral."[164] The trials of the film's dual protagonists can thus be accounted for by their "failure to appreciate the radical otherness and indifference of wild nature."[165] Drenthen's reading does demonstrate a heightened level of ontological self-interrogation, complexifying adversarial "man vs. nature" readings of the film's central narrative arc; he explores the semiotic paradoxes of a "wild ethic" that is fundamentally cultural at the same time that it constructs wild nature as a transcendent,

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[161] Knuttila, "Where Do We Go From Here?" 38, 40-41. Also see King, "Following in the Footsteps," 84.
[162] Ibid., 41.
[163] Luis Rocha Antunes, "The Vestibular in Film: Orientation and Balance in Gus Van Sant's Cinema of Walking," *Essays in Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (2012): 537.
[164] Drenthen, "Fatal Attraction," 301.
[165] Ibid.

chaotic absence of cultural values.[166] However, whilst Drenthen self-consciously notes this structural contradiction, it is sustained in his close reading of *Gerry*. On one level, his reading of the film's landscape subverts nature/culture dualisms; as he concludes, wildness "conveys an utterly reflexive moral meaning that questions morality itself."[167] Yet, in the film's rendering of wildness as a "silent protest against the arbitrariness of the modern human-centered world," a fundamentally oppositional separation of nature from culture is tacitly reaffirmed; as wildness is "ultimately amoral," Drenthen argues that its cinematic depiction critiques its common association with "clear narrative structures and human perspectives and values."[168] As a result, his reading tacitly reinforces the traditional positioning of wilderness as "the outside or the other of culture."[169] Finally, Tiago de Luca's reading of *Gerry* explicitly constructs the film's landscape as ultimately "meaningless"; noting a "disdain for anthropomorphic dimensions," de Luca argues that *Gerry's* "vast landscapes assume a central importance, calling attention to their own physicality and asking to be contemplated for their own sake."[170]

Conversely, other scholarly readings argue that the subjectivities of the protagonists and the material conditions of the external wilderness are inextricably linked, casting the latter as a psychic product of the former. For example, Devin McKinney understands *Gerry* as a film that sets about "finding human psychology signaled in the semiotics of physical landscape"; he perceives "surfaces and terrain which, viewed from a certain skeejawed angle, seem magically molded after the human body, or stoically representative of the oblique mental states being delineated by our actors."[171] In such a reading, the wild environment provides a figurative representation of the protagonists' troubled, changeable subjectivities, a psychological landscape fashioned and shaped not by natural processes but cultural forces.[172] Melbye also reads *Gerry* as an attempt to construct a "landscape allegory," although he concludes that the film fails in this regard; it still "demonstrates an ineffective juxtaposition of psychological struggle with a scenic but inhospitable wasteland."[173]

Whilst the two interpretative frameworks outlined above may appear to constitute ontological opposites, they share a fundamentally metaphysical basis, a mutual reliance on rigid definitions of nature and culture. To begin, allegorical readings replicate the absolutist conception of presence observed in readings of the film's wilderness as pristine: whilst a

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[166] Drenthen concludes that *Gerry* does not construct an "explicit wilderness *ethic*"; Ibid., 299, 315.

[167] Ibid, 301.

[168] Ibid.

[169] Ibid., 298. A similar tension is perceptible in Martin Lefebvre, "On Landscape in Narrative Cinema," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 20, no. 1 (2011): 63, 66.

[170] Tiago de Luca, "Gus Van Sant's Gerry and Visionary Realism," *Cinephile: The University of British Columbia Film Journal* 7, no. 2 (2011): 46-48.

[171] McKinney, review of *Gerry*, 43.

[172] Ibid.

[173] Ibid.

broad range of cultural connotations can be drawn from the natural environment, such approaches are predicated upon the assumption that such meanings remain coherent and legible. Furthermore, although scholarly readings propose an interdependence of natural and cultural realms, the fixity of these oppositional terms remains unchallenged. As the landscape simplistically reflects the protagonists' mental states, it is rendered a static representational canvas; for nature to reflect culture, both must retain stable discursive boundaries and an essential conceptual plenitude. Finally, in ostensibly locating *Gerry's* setting as a psychic construct, McKinney perpetuates metaphysical, anthropocentric privilege; the landscape is only granted value in its potential elucidation of character subjectivity, rendering it the inferior term of a rigid structural dualism.

Finally, in interpreting the film's wild setting as either an exterior acultural "other" or an interior human construct, prominent readings of *Gerry* can be mapped onto similarly paradoxical discussions of wilderness and American national identity. As demonstrated earlier, Nash introduces his study of wilderness with a pair of seemingly antithetical statements, in which wilderness is treated as both an oppositional source of national self-definition and an American cultural construct;[174] in this regard, divergent treatments of *Gerry's* landscape directly mirror Nash's dichotomous discussion of the American landscape as both a "howling wilderness" and "a state of mind."[175] Whilst the presence of these conflicting accounts superficially problematizes discrete American wilderness ontologies, their constitution within the film's critical discourses cements their position as a pair of equally logocentric alternatives. Conversely, the next section of this essay argues that *Gerry* can be read as a radical dismantling of the underlying metaphysics of wilderness, establishing the film's setting as a terrain of ontological undecidability.

Excising the Human from the Natural Environment

As mentioned above, several prominent readings of *Gerry* position the film's wilderness as an acultural "other" against which the eponymous protagonists must struggle to survive and retain their humanity. Whilst the film does meditate for prolonged periods on landscapes devoid of human habitation, *Gerry* does so in a way that reflexively highlights the process of occluding human figures from the natural environment. Thus, rather than reading the film's wilderness setting as a pristine realm distanced from civilisation, *Gerry* visualises the logocentric logic that allows this dichotomous formulation to be constructed in the first place. An indicative example of this reflexive aesthetic occurs early in the film's

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[174] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, xi.
[175] Ibid., 5.

narrative frame. Having discovered that they are unable to retrace their steps, the protagonists begin their doomed trudge into the wilderness. The sequence frames the characters in an extreme-long dolly shot, before the camera zooms out and pans to the left, revealing more of the landscape whilst removing the characters from view (Figs.4.15-4.16):
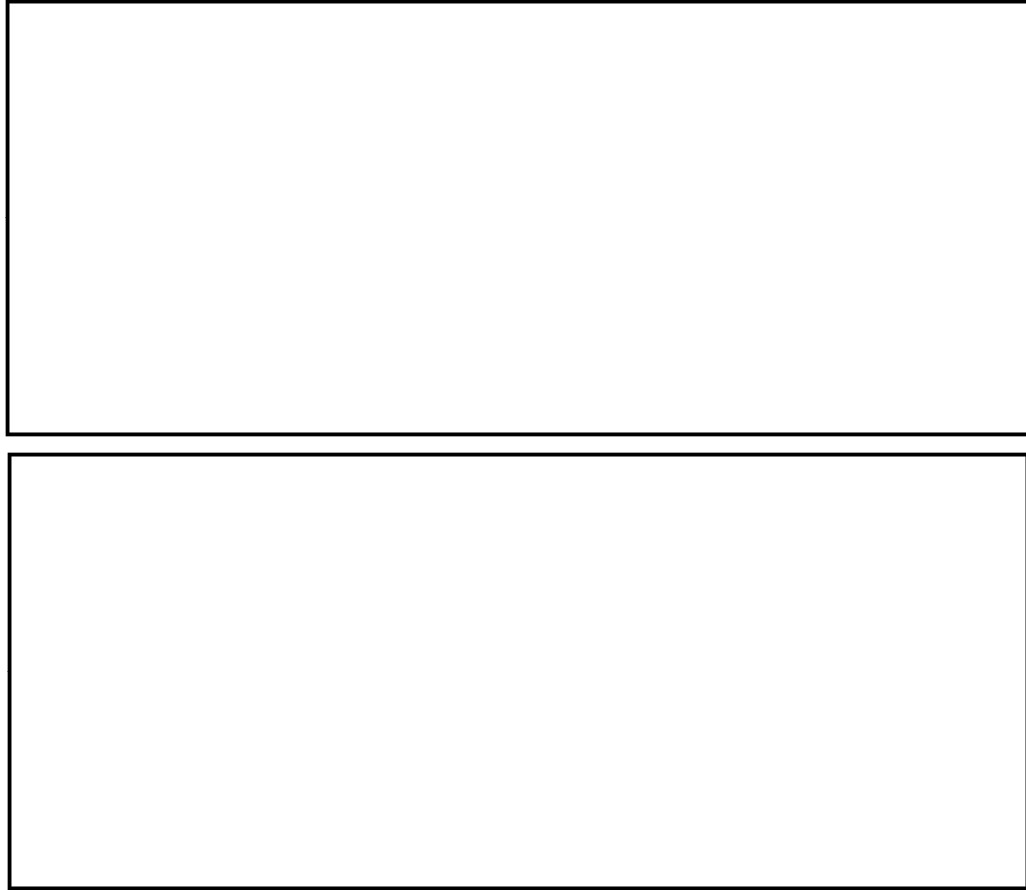
Figs.4.15-4.16

In existing readings, such shots are frequently read as simplified expressions of a spectacular natural sublime. In his exploration of Gus Van Sant's "minimalist" films and their appeal to niche audiences, King argues that *Gerry's* landscape setting offers a site of visual pleasure that precedes any figurative or narrative significance; indeed, he suggests that the film's landscapes act as a palliative for "difficult" formal strategies: "the potentially alienating qualities of abstraction might be contained by the fact that it can be enjoyed to some extent at the level of pictorial landscape beauty."[176] This reading, in which the wilderness forms a pleasurable object of cinematic spectacle, is superficially reinforced by the film's stylistic regimen, which arguably showcases the desert setting to the detriment of character-based

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[176] King, "Following in the Footsteps," 82. Others also observe a focal shift from character to landscape; see Taubin, "First Look at 'Gerry', Gus Van Sant's Latest Film," 14; Knuttila, "Where Do We Go From Here?" 41.

narrative; the use of extreme long shots, long takes, static cameras, and slow pans encourage prolonged attention and meditation upon the film's environmental backdrop.[177] The positioning of the wilderness landscape as an object of ocular pleasure in turn evokes the "magisterial gaze" commonly associated with American landscape painting.[178] The equation of certain cinematographic devices with anthropocentric modes of landscape depiction is explored by Ingram, who notes that: "the aerial tracking shot in a film…may be considered the cinematic equivalent of the elevated viewpoint in many nineteenth-century landscape paintings."[179] The conceptual ramifications of this observation are unpacked by Melbye, who notes that "landscape depiction without human presence refers more directly to a realm of imagination and mythmaking, which in the case of American culture was manifest destiny."[180] Therefore, Melbye concludes that sublime images of nature exclude the human figure to construct the wilderness as a "realm of uncharted space" to be subsequently possessed and tamed.[181] De Luca also draws explicit parallels between *Gerry's* desert images and American landscape painting; arguing that "*Gerry* resonates with a landscape painting tradition," he contextualises the film within Van Sant's broader "landscape sensibility," which attempts a "foregrounding of the United State's (sic) infinite expanses."[182] Again, this American representational mode clearly replicates the aforementioned cinematic "aesthetics of exclusion" explored by theorists like Ingram,[183] reinforcing the construction and objectification of nature as a vast, separate realm to be either subjugated or venerated.

Nevertheless, the dynamic camera movement that characterises the aforementioned long-take undermines simplistic readings of the sequence as a showcasing of pristine nature. Rather than presenting a completely empty terrain, the shot begins with a (diminished) locus of human activity; the pair are visible at the bottom of the frame, providing a cultural presence that questions the landscape's essential purity. Scenes like this are often approached as establishing shots, formal devices used to locate the protagonists within a seemingly endless wilderness, orienting the viewer and communicating the scale and nature of their surroundings. For example, Sitney's elucidation of cinematic long shots positions them as a tool to both locate and dwarf characters in natural landscape settings:

The long shot is long, or distant, in regard to the center of human activity. Thus a long shot often has an "establishing" function, locating an individual, a group, or

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177 King, "Following in the Footsteps," 76-77.
178 Melbye, *Landscape Allegory in Cinema,* 39-40.
179 Ingram, *Green Screen*, 33.
180 Melbye, *Landscape Allegory in Cinema,* 36.
181 Ibid.
182 de Luca, "Gus Van Sant's Gerry and Visionary Realism," 46.
183 Ingram, *Green Screen*, 26.

even a municipality in a wider landscape. While it can emphasize human

dominance…more frequently it serves to diminish the human scale.[184]

In the case of *Gerry*, Knuttila similarly argues that "by juxtaposing the plethora of long shots of the Gerrys' actions with long takes of the empty surrounding vistas, fauna and clouds, the film centers on displaying them in a larger social context."[185] Finally, de Luca notes that *Gerry's* wilderness actively diminishes the importance of the human protagonists, as "landscapes dwarf human presence to the point where Damon and Affleck occasionally appear as insignificant dots within the frame…calling attention, by contrast, to the enormity of the deserts they traverse."[186]

      In noting how this sequence grounds the protagonists in a material environment, existing readings evoke Ingram's broader discussions of wilderness cinematography. For Ingram, establishing shots can be distinguished from pristine landscape images, yet are produced by the same metaphysical, hierarchical dualisms. In doing so, he notes a common argument pertaining to texts that locate human protagonists within a wild environment, despite their contrasting geographical scales: "films tend to subordinate nature to the centrality of their human dramas, thereby promoting an ideology of anthropocentric *mastery and possession of the land.*"[187] Here, Ingram utilises an almost identical phrasing to the one used earlier in his description of the "magisterial gaze," a representational device usually associated with landscapes devoid of human presence.[188] In a similar exploration of the work of Thomas Cole, Nash notes that he "broke with landscape painting tradition by either omitting any sign of man and his works *or reducing the human figures to ant-like proportions,*" communicating the "grandeur" of wild nature as it "dominated the canvas."[189] In doing so, the diminished presence or total absence of the human form communicates the massive size of the American continent, a factor used to underpin "American nationalism" as both an expression of a theological sublime and a call for civilising expansion.[190] Thus, representations that highlight the diminished (yet continuing) presence of human figures in the realm of wild nature reinforce the same antagonistic and anthropocentric dichotomies proposed by those that establish the landscape as a pristine vista or a background setting.

      In contrast, the dynamic manner in which the sequence shifts from inhabited to uninhabited space can be read as a fluid visualisation of conceptual processes that sustain

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[184] Sitney, "Landscape in the Cinema," 108.
[185] Knuttila, "Where Do We Go From Here?" 40.
[186] de Luca, "Gus Van Sant's *Gerry* and Visionary Realism," 46. Also see Drenthen, "Fatal Attraction," 301.
[187] Ingram, *Green Screen*, 33. Emphasis added.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 79. Emphasis added.
[190] Ibid., 81; Melbye, *Landscape Allegory in Cinema*, 40; Ingram, *Green Screen,* 35.

distinct nature/culture oppositions. Here, the panning movement away from the human subjects is positioned not as an unproblematic signifier of their separation from an empty wilderness; rather, it visualises how wilderness is constructed as pristine, through the active occlusion of cultural signs (in this case, the protagonists). This interpretation is sustained by the cinematographic and formal procedures that compose this long-take; having shown the human characters in its opening seconds, the shot highlights their later absence as it pans away from them as a constituent of the frame's content. Furthermore, the process by which they are removed from the frame is attributed to the camera movement itself, a product of the cinematographic and formal choices enacted in this sequence shot; the protagonists are not physically removed from the environment they are traversing, but rather the film's perspective on the landscape is shifted so to exclude visual signs of their presence. In this sense, cultural images of pristine wilderness are exposed as heavily mediated, products of American socio-cultural discourse and (in this case) the cinematic apparatus.

Assimilating the Human into the Natural Environment

Just as *Gerry* visualises the construction of natural landscapes as necessarily uninhabited, the environment is simultaneously tied to the narrative protagonists through a series of formal and stylistic devices. In this manner, the film's setting is not fundamentally separated from the characters in a way implied by writers such as Drenthen; neither is it simplistically rendered a psychic landscape, as McKinney argues. Instead, the film instigates co-present strategies of reflexive estrangement *and* ontological assimilation, undermining the rigid conceptual delineations required to attribute any holistic significance to its wilderness setting. The aesthetic assimilation of human subject and natural object is exemplified by striking pictorial parallels. In several scenes human figures appear to merge into the landscape they traverse, becoming increasingly indiscernible from the wilderness whilst remaining diegetically present. In one of the film's many long-takes, the camera smoothly tracks from left to right (and then, right to left), scanning the terrain as the two Gerrys come into view sequentially. As the pair descend a shallow slope in fading light, their figures are engulfed by the silhouette of the hillside, their shoulders almost perfectly aligned with the ridge that provides the scene's distant backdrop. The protagonists' heads are framed directly beside the rocky protrusions of mountainous peaks, providing clear visual correspondences between the human figure and natural relief (Figs.4.17-4.18):

Figs.4.17-4.18

Importantly, the human figures are not formally removed from the scene; rather, they are collapsed into it. Whilst this could signify their dwindling humanity as they are slowly devoured by a mountainous landscape, it also provides a theoretical complication to earlier images of wilderness as acultural and empty. Here, the protagonists become an indiscernable constituent of the landscape itself, suggesting a deconstructive re-inscription of the human within (rather than exclusion from) the purportedly alien natural environment. The characters are thus rendered as undecidable textual fissures, a formulation that erases antonymic divisions of nature/culture that sustain national (and cinematic) wilderness narratives.

Gerry's **Transformative Landscape(s)**

As suggested throughout the preceding analysis, reading *Gerry* as a deconstructive text challenges the frequent critical definition of the film's landscape as a static, knowable entity. Whether replete with subjective meaning or figuring an absolute semiotic lack, the landscape itself is established as a fundamental presence; the very act of attributing meaning to the onscreen wilderness implies that its varied representational qualities can be

274

accommodated into a coherent cultural narrative. However, it can equally be argued that the landscape in *Gerry* foregrounds a transformative discordance, undermining a metaphysics of the film's wilderness setting. This radical geographical disunity is again exemplified by a particular sequence, in which successive shots of disparate geological landscapes construct a disjointed environment of difference and flux. As the two Gerrys trek across the wilderness landscape, a series of medium and long shots locate them within several natural scenes. Unobtrusive editing and geometric commonalities within the mise-en-scène tie these shots together into a thematically contiguous sequence: they are shown walking from left to right in the first shot (Fig.4.19), with this direction of movement continued into perpendicular long shots of their continuing journey (Fig.4.20 and Fig.4.21):

Figs.4.19-4.21

However, whilst these shots are sutured together through continuous character movement, the landscapes they cross differ vastly and change suddenly, undermining diegetic geographical coherence. In the first image, the pair are framed in a medium shot, walking across a rocky plateau. In the next shot they emerge in a desert environment, negotiating a tall sand dune. In the final shot of the sequence, they traverse a prairie, the presence of vegetation starkly contrasting with the previous two scenes' aridity. Accordingly, any attempt to establish a fixed landscape meaning is undermined by close analysis of the geographical variations used within the film; the environment cannot be approached as a single landscape, as it is constructed from a series of discordant frames or vistas. Thus, whilst the wilderness provides a narratalogically consistent setting, the film's representation of natural landscapes itself connotes an economy of difference, alterity, and incoherence.

In Martin Lefebvre's reading of *Gerry*, one can find a rare theoretical discussion of the film's dynamic and disparate scenery. His approach, which argues that the film challenges the subjugation of nature as human setting, is demonstrated in relation to *Gerry's* diverse vistas, intractably tying the representation of geographical difference with ecocentrism:

> The landscape formations that succeed one another in diegetic continuity form an impossible geography. Once noticed, such implausible variations in terrain morphology create a space that defies, resists or exceeds strict diegetic motivation or subordination as well as real world referentiality. As a result, the narrative function of *setting* may momentarily fade and the depiction of space acquires, in the spectator's gaze, the kind of autonomy traditionally required by pictorial landscape imagery.[191]

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[191] Lefebvre, "On Landscape in Narrative Cinema," 66.

Whilst Lefebvre's reading suggests that *Gerry* challenges the anthropocentric subordination of place to character, it does so by reinforcing the objectification of nature as pristine and acultural. Critically building upon Lefebvre's observation of the film's "impossible geography," it can be argued that geographical fragmentation actually figures the very arbitrariness of granting the film's landscape an identifiable essence or presence. The unbounded visual heterogeneity of *Gerry's* world signifies a natural space composed of disparate vistas that undergo a constant process of redefinition and re-presentation, a dynamic, Derridean landscape of *différance* itself. Thus, not only does the natural environment embody spatial differences that exceed restrictive nature/culture binaries, but it also alludes to a (ceaseless) temporal delay of meaning, a key constituent of Jacques Derrida's remodelling of textual signification: *différance* contends that "spacing is temporization, the detour and postponement by means of which intuition, perception, consummation – in a word, the relationship to the present, the reference to a present reality, to a *being* – are always *deferred*."[192] This continual suspension of meaning as it passes along a ceaseless chain of signifiers is figured by a wilderness in endless flux; a cogent meaning for the film's setting can never be stabilised as it is constantly re-determined and revised by the landscape's ever-changing properties.

This temporalized process of establishing textual meaning is demonstrated further in properties relating to the film's form and mise-en-scène. It has been noted that the film ostensibly downplays the use of static camera positions in framing the natural landscape, a device commonly associated with wilderness cinematography due to links with antecedent photographic and painterly landscape depictions.[193] In contrast, the film relies heavily upon tracking shots and pans, erecting a stylistic regime within which landscape is continually framed through motion: Antunes cogently demonstrates this point, remarking that the camera in *Gerry* "is not merely recording the action, nor is it following a formal or established visual practice in cinema. It has its own life and is in permanent interaction with the characters."[194] Ingram has previously commented on the role of movement in cinematic depictions of nature, describing such examples as "kinetic landscapes": "the widespread use of tracking shots in Hollywood landscape cinematography contributes to an aesthetic appreciation of nature as movement."[195] However, whilst Ingram associates this loosely with devices that evoke "consumerist thrills of speed and immediacy, enacting a vicarious sense of mastery over the natural environment,"[196] the use of a moving camera in *Gerry* subverts

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[192] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone Press, 1987), 28-29. Emphasis in original
[193] See Ingram, *Green Screen,* 26.
[194] Antunes, "The Vestibular in Film," 533.
[195] Ingram, *Green Screen,* 30.
[196] Ibid.

this oppositional economy. Rather than providing a kineticised, dominating perspective of static landscapes, the camera-in-movement represents natural scenes in a continual state of transformative redefinition. As a result, landscape itself is not received as a fixed, immovable, material object, but rather is represented as a vista in motion; it frames the movement of the film's characters whilst it is simultaneously reframed by the dynamic camera.

This landscape temporalization is further elucidated by *Gerry's* representation of weather. Whilst this analysis has focused primarily upon physical landscapes, images of the wilderness environment are frequently juxtaposed with low-angle shots of the sky, showcasing weather patterns associated with *Gerry's* desert environs (Fig.4.22):[197]

Fig.4.22

The film's formal procedures further impart these shots with a sense of dynamic changeability; as Ryan Gilbey notes, many of these shots are achieved through the use of time-lapse photography, accelerating the movement of the clouds beyond their natural speeds and patterns.[198] For Stephen Holden, these shots exemplify the film's pervasive landscape "discontinuity," ensuring that "the weather in *Gerry* is in continual flux."[199] Thus, meteorological depictions can be accommodated within broader strategies that ally the film's natural landscape with spatio-temporal difference and transformation. The dynamic elusivity of meaning is foregrounded by the film's self-conscious negotiation of temporal alteration, typified by the shifting qualities of landscape and climate.

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[197] For examples, see Knuttila "Where Do We Go From Here?" 40.
[198] Ryan Gilbey, Review of *Gerry*, dir. Gus Van Sant, *Sight & Sound* 13, no. 10 (2003): 50-51.
[199] Stephen Holden, "Playing Desert Solitaire with a Friend," Review of *Gerry*, dir. Gus Van Sant, *New York Times*, February 14, 2003, http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9905EED8143AF937A25751C0A9659C8B63.

The Indiscernibility of Wilderness Landscape

Drawing upon this discussion of *Gerry's* desert environs as a figuration of geographical *différance*, the final section of this analysis explicates how this reading is reinforced by the protagonists' engagement with the film's setting. Specifically, the construction of a landscape replete with elusive, deferred significances is clearly demonstrated in the Gerrys' inability to interpret and escape their wilderness prison. Importantly, this ontological undecidability is not attributed to a landscape that is pristine, inhuman, and culturally empty. Indeed, the film self-consciously evokes a range of potential signifiers with which the protagonists can rationalise their fraught situation. However, no coherent meaning is signified by these semiotic prompts; the protagonists' attempts to read the landscape are rendered a fatal failure. Thus, *Gerry* visualises the process of attributing fixed meaning to the natural landscape, a project that is rendered ultimately useless as it points towards a signified that remains forever absent and deferred.

The indiscernibility of *Gerry's* wilderness is encapsulated in the characters' overarching aims. For example, the initial object of their hike is never explicitly defined; whilst they are clearly searching for a specific geographical location, it is simply referred to as "the thing," a label that lacks definitional clarity and stresses indeterminacy. Thus, the hike itself appears to be directed at a point of paradoxical presence and absence; their geographical goal is emptied of any discernible significance, as the precise nature of this destination is never explained. Indeed, it is even unclear whether the protagonists understand "the thing"; when they decide to stop searching for it, Damon's Gerry proclaims: "fuck the thing. It's just going to be a fucking thing at the end of the trail." The film's narrative shift from leisure hike to survival mission also reflexively underlines the environment's unsteady ontological status. The characters' desire to read the landscape around them is internalised within their newly-developed narrative goals; they must interpret their environment as a means of plotting their escape. This change in narrative circumstances draws attention to the potential meaning of the surrounding natural landscape, and the processes of reading upon which the two characters now rely. Furthermore, as the protagonists are striving for a return to civilisation, their attempts can be positioned as a search for culture *within* the wilderness. Thus, the aims of their quest render the significances they seek as overtly cultural, even as they inhabit an environment that (superficially) appears essentially acultural; the very act of seeking a fixed meaning within the landscape is utilised to demonstrate the paradoxical foundations of wilderness discourse.

Ultimately, as two figures lost in the wilderness, the protagonists' plight comes to represent the very unknowability of the world surrounding them. The notion of being lost (that is, an absence of needed information) encapsulates this subtle distinction between

deferred knowledge and absolute meaninglessness; it is assumed that there is a potential path out of the wilderness, yet it is one that neither character can clearly discern from a seemingly infinite range of alternative routes. The status of being "lost" forms a key thematic focus of Knuttila's reading of *Gerry*. Whilst his article concentrates on culturally-constituted (and mythic) modes of gendered response, the alliance of the film's central premise with the experience of frontier contingency cements a sense of environmental indiscernibility within the text's narrative setup: "the process of getting lost is dependent on encountering the contingent."[200] Importantly, this premise is used to stress a potential multiplicity of paths and modes of interaction with the film's setting, undermining constructions of wilderness as fixed or fundamentally knowable: "each moment opens to a multiplicity of possibilities," as "the film stresses the Gerrys facing the unforeseen…and highlights – through long-takes and character movement – the rising number of possible courses contingency opens."[201]

The film's construction of a multifarious landscape is demonstrable from the very beginning of *Gerry's* narrative arc. As the Gerrys leave their car and begin their journey, it is provided a clear narrative status through the presence of a way-marker, establishing their chosen path as a "Wilderness Trail." However, this tautological term exposes the paradoxes that inhabit both *Gerry's* environs and broader constructions of wilderness; whilst the word "wilderness" implies an empty, acultural space, the word "trail" suggests a man-made route fashioned within the surrounding landscape. Thus, the path the characters intend to follow appears simultaneously cultural and acultural, a product of wilderness and a sign of civilisation. Superficially, this may reinforce American narratives of western conquest; a wild environment is converted into a useful, navigable cultural form. However, the manner in which their journey later unfolds demonstrates the protagonists' inability to read this specific path, questioning its positioning as a legible cultural signifier. Whilst they soon become immersed in the wilderness landscape, they jokingly depart from the safety of a man-made route (a clear juxtaposition with the figure of the road, present in the preceding sequence). Upon searching for the original trail, the pair discover that it is no longer visible; as Gilbey summarises, "they find the path has disappeared beneath their feet."[202] Thus, whilst the route to "the thing" appears to be mapped out for them in advance, the characters are unable to follow it, and are soon stranded in an indeterminate scene.

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[200] Knutilla, "Where Do We Go From Here?" 38.
[201] Ibid., 39.
[202] Gilbey, Review of *Gerry*, 50-51.

Searching for a Sign

Gerry's landscape of semiotic indiscernibility is further demonstrated in the overt figuration of "signs" at key narrative moments; these are granted a paradoxical materiality in the presence of way markers, road signs, and information boards. However, drawing upon post-structuralist critiques of the metaphysical sign, the film elucidates a discursive disruption within which a legible signifier and a static signified do not inherently correspond. Thus, the aforementioned presence of actualised signs further constructs the wilderness as a setting replete with potential meanings that nevertheless remain unintelligible. This semiotic emptying of physical signs is demonstrated explicitly in a vital sequence taken from the protagonist's narrative quest. Now severely dehydrated and exhausted, the Gerrys make yet another attempt to mentally retrace their steps. In doing so, their frantic deductions are accompanied by a figurative representation of a traveller finding a route, a spatial metaphor for their current predicament; whilst the sequence includes several extreme close-ups of the two protagonists' faces, these are interspersed with inserts of fast-motion point-of-view shots of a vehicle on a winding road (Figs.4.23-4.24):
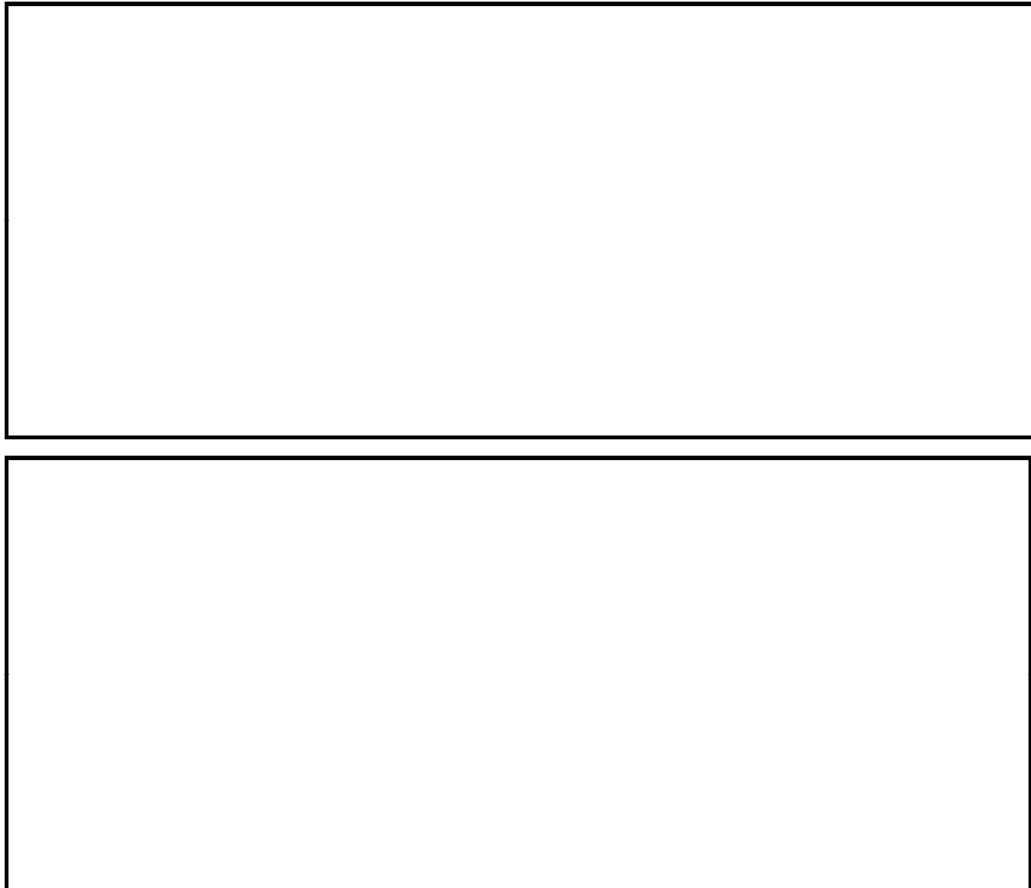
Figs.4.23-4.24

Firstly, the frantic movement of the camera evokes a sense of panic and disorientation, reflecting the characters' near-delirious states. This is also demonstrated in sudden panning movements of the camera, as it quickly shifts from side to side, as if uncertain of which route to take. The scene also makes significant use of road signs to further demonstrate the characters' thought processes; in the cutaways to the highway that accompany the pair's deductions, these guides literally *signpost* their discussions. In utilising these pictorial signifiers, this sequence also mirrors the film's opening long-take, in which the pair arrives by car, passing many road signs that flank the monotonous motorway (Fig.4.25):
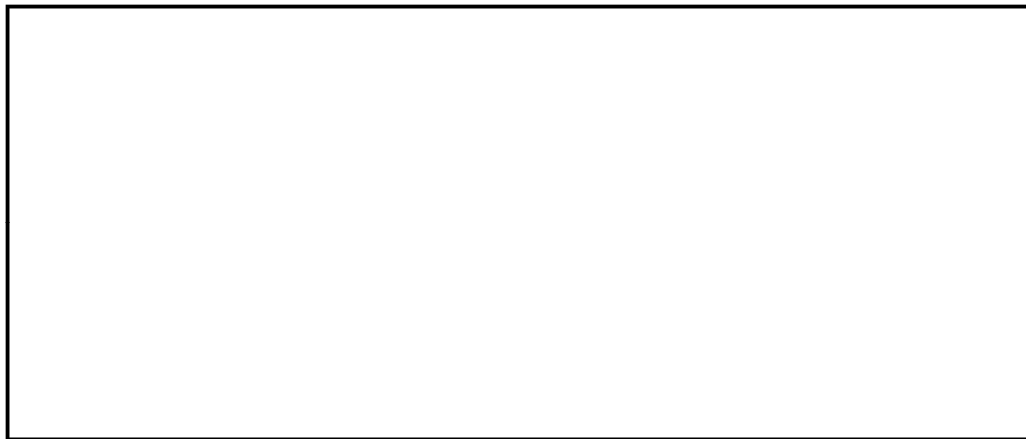
Fig.4.25

In the film's opening shot, the signs are narratologically motivated, operating as cultural signifiers with a seemingly static, legally-determined meaning. Returning to the later sequence (Figs.4.23-4.24), the signs are used in a superficially similar fashion, denoting a fixed, intelligible significance; at moments of supposed clarity, we are shown a sign (such as the right-turn [Fig.4.24]) which we assume the pair will follow. However, the sporadic, changing, arbitrary nature of their deductions already implies that their interpretations of these signs are open to contestation. This is later confirmed as this scene does not mark a successful narrative reorientation; rather, they walk further into a wilderness from which only one of them will emerge.

Signposts and way markers are not the only denotative elements used within the film to challenge perceptible connections between reference and referent. The film also makes extensive use of natural symbols and signs, markers that the characters interpret in their quest to escape the wilderness landscape. For example, in one sequence the two Gerrys focus their attention on the potential significance of a set of "animal tracks." In the first instance, they infer that they lead to water; this is particularly important to the pair as they are significantly dehydrated. However, in working through a plan to exploit this discovery, they employ an elaborate logic that depends upon intensive, specialist knowledge of both

their surroundings and the species that reside within it; they discuss migratory and drinking patterns, mating behaviour, and animal sociability. Nevertheless, the protagonists' assumptions do not appear to be rooted in relevant experience, skills, or understanding; King refers to this conversation as "nonsense."[203] Their inability to exploit the imprints is played-out in the film's unfolding narrative; these clues never lead to the successful location of a water source. This interpretative failure on the part of the protagonists exemplifies the film's deconstructive intervention into American wilderness discourses. Any meaning attached to the landscape is arbitrary and fleeting, a product of binary oppositions that are consistently destabilised; any discrete or fixed significance for the wilderness is unobtainable as it is continuously transformed and deferred.

Conclusions

In the textual analyses presented above, I have constructed complementary readings of cinematic wilderness that systematically unveil, overturn, and efface its logocentric constitution within American cultural discourse. In *Dead Man*, evocations of the Western genre allow the film's wilderness landscape to be explicitly tied to prominent narratives of American national identity. However, this act of generic framing simultaneously draws critical attention away from specific landscape images to more anthropocentric foci. As a result, my reading relocates *Dead Man's* natural landscapes as an *analytical* centre, at the same time that it disturbs the position of wilderness as an American *national* centre. As numerous textual elements operate as Derridean undecidables, the film fundamentally challenges any discrete, essentialist division between nature and culture; in doing so, it problematizes a metaphysical dichotomy that orients the American wilderness (and more broadly, national identity). Finally, by analysing the geometric properties of the film's natural vistas, I conclude that *Dead Man* reflexively subverts principles of linearity and horizontality that underlie logocentric constructions of wilderness as a pristine, wide-open space.

Conversely, this chapter's reading of *Gerry* constructs the film's landscape as a complementary terrain of *différance*. This approach begins with a systematic exploration of existing analyses of the film's natural environs, a critical endeavour that demonstrates discursive similarities between specific textual readings and superficially opposed classical and romantic wilderness images. In contrast to this interpretative orthodoxy, I argue that *Gerry* superficially evokes both forms of landscape depiction before laying bare their shared metaphysical assumptions, a gesture that denies their essential ontological fixity. Thus,

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[203] King, "Following in the Footsteps," 84.

whilst the film often depicts its landscape as vast and empty, it does so through a reflexive stylistic economy that actually draws attention to the process of expunging the cultural from the natural. In turn, the film also foregrounds the wilderness' potential role as the signifier of diverse cultural meanings; however, these signs remain forever unintelligible, demonstrated by the Gerrys' inability to interpret and escape their surroundings. Thus, the film's landscape is established as a transformative realm of *différance*, an environment within which any potential significatory endpoint is constantly deferred.

However, it is important to note that the textual readings of this chapter also stand as broader observations and conclusions pertaining to this thesis *as a whole*. In deconstructing logocentric antinomies of wilderness/civilisation and nature/culture, these analyses simultaneously connote a broader opposition between *character* and *place* that has ordered this project. In exploring cultural narratives of *individualism*, the *nuclear family*, the *small-town*, and *wilderness*, this thesis' structure superficially enacts a metaphysical continuum of American national identity; each chapter provides a structural opening onto the next as the thesis addresses oppositions of character and place on increasing conceptual (and geographical) scales. However, as established in this project's introduction, this structure is strategically evoked as a means of deconstructing the specific narratives in question *and* their reliance upon discrete definitions of American character and place. Just as the totalised ontologies of each cultural narrative are radically effaced, their position within a regulatory, logocentric economy of character and place is equally shaken. Thus, this thesis' overtly deconstructive structure is rounded-off with a specific thematic focus (wilderness) that stands as its conceptual and cultural apotheosis. The Derridean disruption of wilderness and civilisation operates as a microcosmic exemplar of this thesis' wider disturbance of a metaphysics of American national identity.

Conclusion: Culture Wars and Cultural *Différance*

As detailed in this project's introduction, my thesis hypothesises and enacts a fruitful practice of Derridean film analysis. Drawing upon a deconstructive re-inscription of independent film (itself a radical destabilization of existing definitional models), I demonstrate how cinematic case-studies can be approached as meta-textual critiques of specific thematic structures; in this case, a corpus of independent films are approached as deconstructive renderings of American national identity. However, these textual readings should not merely be treated as exemplars of a methodological intervention. Rather, their challenge to totalised national identity discourses offers a timely, subversive dialogue with relevant scholarly and popular debates. Thus, each chapter provides a detailed commentary upon specific national identity structures and their constitution within previous academic studies, a gesture that facilitates their subsequent deconstruction. Furthermore, by challenging the self-presence of American identity, one confronts it with an ungrounded freeplay of subjectivities and experiences; this radical economy of *différance* initiates a non-proscriptive discourse that encourages diverse, fluid forms of cultural identification. Finally, the unfolding of these discursive and textual readings destabilises one final logocentric ordering structure, the discrete delineation of character and place. These reductive bifurcations are problematized by both the form and content of my arguments, as their undecidable co-presence is discerned in numerous scholarly and cinematic texts; this process reaches its apotheosis in my final chapter's exploration of the American wilderness.

The elucidations outlined above are primarily scholarly, as they provide deconstructive engagements with a variety of *academic* discourses. Yet, the insights offered by this project's case-study analyses also provide a means of intervening directly within popular socio-political debates. As is increasingly noticeable in this project's discursive analyses, numerous critics have detected dualistic divisions within narratives of American subjectivity and social experience; exceptionalism's external, regulated difference is re-inscribed *within* American culture itself, a move that superficially questions the nation's totalized ontology. Yet, these internal divisions are frequently cast as discrete, oppositional struggles over shared structures of cultural meaning. Indeed, one can observe a metaphysical contestation of distinct presences in many of the cultural discourses that I address and dismantle; for example, antonymic structures are perceptible in contrasting idyllic and dark small-town images, divergent representations of a wholesome and debased nuclear family, and in adversarial and romantic wilderness attitudes. Thus, ruptures in national discourse are rationalised within a dichotomous "culture war," a fixed economy that pervades both

academic and popular debates over American socio-political life.[1] Furthermore, such approaches often entail the hierarchical juxtaposition of a collective subjectivity with equally discrete, self-coherent identity sub-categories, drawing heavily upon discourses of "multiculturalism."[2]

This conclusion outlines how the theoretical and textual insights of my thesis provide a challenge to these metaphysical paradigms, demonstrating the potential impact of my arguments outside of a specifically scholarly context. Having utilised this project's earlier textual readings to confront American national identity with a boundless freeplay of *différance*, this heterogeneous economy is used to challenge the arbitrary regulations that allow culture wars and multiculturalist discourses to operate.[3] In doing so, the theoretical innovations of this project are put to work on a series of discursive constructs that orient popular socio-cultural debates; self-contained partisan or sub-national subjectivities are displaced in favour of the freeplay of identities that this project has systematically unshackled. Finally, this conclusion demonstrates the worth of this thesis in abetting and provoking future cultural engagements. In dismantling American identity's regulatory structures, I encourage a less restrictive range of singular cultural gestures. In this regard, my Derridean approach does not aim towards the total annihilation of logocentric presence. Rather, it focuses upon the emergent cultural heterogeneity that deconstruction brings to the surface, a dynamic process that encapsulates the generative politics of Derridean theory.[4]

Culture Wars and American Difference(s)

As alluded to above, critiques of a self-coherent national character are often accommodated within readings of American cultural fragmentation, commonly attributed to the growing prominence of other (sub-national) identities.[5] Samuel P. Huntingdon's

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[1] For a preliminary discussion of culture wars rhetoric, see James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 50.

[2] For a discussion of American multiculturalism, see Samuel P. Huntingdon, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 11-13.

[3] This thesis' challenge to American culture wars debates is influenced by Bhabha's critique of multiculturalism; see Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 314.

[4] For Derrida's discussion of this aspect of deconstruction, see Jacques Derrida, quoted in Paul Bowman, *Deconstructing Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 152.

[5] Some scholars read an *essential* disunity in American culture (and national identity more generally); see Erik Erikson, quoted in Michael G. Kammen, *People of Paradox: An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of American Civilization* (New York: Knopf, 1972), 101; Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991), vii, 7, 17; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 5; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 53. However, these are often neutralised or accommodated within fixed metaphysical oppositions; see Kammen, *People of Paradox*, 89-92, 107, 280; Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 178.

prominent work in this area is predicated upon the assumption that the United States is currently undergoing a "Crisis of National Identity"; he outlines numerous cultural forces that have cumulatively "erod(ed)" American cultural homogeneity: "Globalization, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, immigration, subnationalism, and anti-nationalism."[6] He continues by arguing that specific cultural interest groups have succeeded in shifting the ideal *telos* of cultural discourse, from an "emphasis on what Americans had in common" to "the celebration of diversity."[7] Thus, Huntingdon tacitly positions multiculturalism as the antithesis of a unified American subjectivity: "the notions of nation, national identity, and national interest may be losing relevance and usefulness."[8] In more theoretically nuanced terms, S.E. Wilmer understands American multiculturalism as a self-conscious critique of totalised national meaning: "In the late 1980s and 1990s, multiculturalism provided an answer to the accusations of essentialism embedded within identity politics."[9] Thus, whether treating such developments as lamentable or liberatory, scholars have identified a thriving state of American cultural diversity. However, in arguing that American cultural life has recently been fractured, they tacitly reinforce an idealised state of national plenitude that (until recently) governed American experience.

In turn, studies of American cultural fragmentation have engendered antagonistic, binary theorisations of identity discourses; the United States is recast as the venue for a dualistic socio-political culture war, a bifurcated economy that forcefully regulates cultural difference. In such models, American identity is positioned as the object of hostile semiotic contestation; different cultural attitudes, values, and experiences are homogenised into two self-coherent camps, each espousing a distinct reading of American national meaning. James Davison Hunter's analysis of this cultural conflict emphasises its metaphysical structure; his study is predicated upon the simple premise that a value-laden, discursive battle pervades all areas of cultural life: "America is in the midst of a culture war that has had and will continue to have reverberations not only within public policy but within the lives of ordinary Americans everywhere."[10] However, Hunter clarifies that it is the desire for a cohesive national identity that animates this debate. Analysing a specific interchange over a particular topic (the issue of abortion), Hunter concludes that such cultural clashes are indicative of a deep-rooted antinomy: "we come to see that the contemporary culture war is ultimately a

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[6] Huntingdon, *Who Are We?* 4.

[7] Ibid., 4-5.

[8] Ibid., 13, 16. Also see Stanley A. Renshon, "America at a Crossroads: Political Leadership, National Identity, and the Decline of Common Culture," in *One America? Political Leadership, National Identity, and the Dilemmas of Diversity*, ed. Stanley A. Renshon (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2001), 7.

[9] S.E. Wilmer, *Theatre, Society, and the Nation: Staging American Identities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 14.

[10] Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 34.

struggle over national identity – *over the meaning of America*."[11] Thus, whilst Hunter delineates a number of specific socio-cultural battlegrounds, he ultimately treats the culture war as an ontological struggle over American collective identity. Similar readings of contemporary American cultural discourse are perceptible in a range of other studies. Stanley A. Renshon describes America as a "land of paradox,"[12] before suggesting that a contemporary culture war is submerging diverse identity groups and areas of national discourse: "this conflict's primary focus is not being waged between one section of the country and another, but rather in *every* section of the country."[13] In turn, Renshon assents to Hunter's perception of "a conflict over the viability of American culture and identity itself."[14] Thus, culture wars discourses explicitly mediate divergent values and perspectives that crystallize around American national identity; a heterogeneous body of differences are subsumed into a polemical debate concerning the validity of specific models of American cultural togetherness.

On face value, aforementioned commentators diagnose a multifaceted conflict involving myriad cultural antagonists. Much like Renshon, Hunter discerns a heterogeneous range of cultural attitudes within national debates: "though competing moral visions are at the heart of today's culture war, these do not always take form in coherent, clearly articulated, sharply differentiated world views."[15] However, Hunter clarifies that the culture war amounts to a stand-off of two entrenched "polarities," between which stretches a continuum of values where individual Americans can be located:

> These moral visions take expression as *polarizing impulses* or *tendencies* in American culture. It is important, in this light, to make a distinction between how these moral visions are institutionalized in different organizations and in public rhetoric, and how ordinary Americans relate to them. In truth, most Americans occupy a vast middle ground between the polarizing impulses of American culture.[16]

Here, Hunter argues that specific individuals do not identify solely with one attitude or the other, instead expressing more complex blends of differing views; however, as has been demonstrated, continuum models still reify binary divisions between self-coherent, antagonistic extremes that can subsequently be mixed. Furthermore, naming these

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[11] Ibid., 50. Emphasis added.
[12] For similar readings, see Kammen, *People of Paradox*, 89-96; Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 178.
[13] Renshon, "America at a Crossroads," 3-4. Emphasis in original.
[14] Ibid., 4.
[15] Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 43.
[16] Ibid. Emphasis in original.

"polarizing impulses" as the "Orthodox" and the "Progressive," they are described as "*formal properties* of a belief system or world view."[17] Hunter's detailed taxonomy of the "Orthodox" perspective, for example, closely mirrors the metaphysical yearning for static, totalized meaning; orthodoxy entails a theological "*commitment on the part of adherents to an external, definable, and transcendent authority.*"[18] Furthermore, Hunter then argues that the progressive tendency carries its own transcendental signified, granting the two elements a shared ontological grounding; a religious deity is replaced by an equally metaphysical source of "moral truth", such as "natural law."[19] Thus, Hunter outlines the shared logocentric foundations of both "camps," and how they engender socio-political antinomies:

> The orthodox and progressivist impulses in American culture, as I have described them, contrast sources of moral truth…. They also express, somewhat imperfectly, the opposing social and political dispositions to which Americans on opposing sides of the cultural divide are drawn.[20]

In such arguments, the amorphous play of *différance* that inhabits American identity is externalised, fixed, and regulated through the construction of a culture war, a closed, static binary economy. As a result, the purported self-coherence of national belonging is protected and a heterogeneous field of potential cultural identities and experiences is disavowed; this superficial challenge to national unity actually reifies its underlying metaphysical logic.

This form of conceptual complicity, in which critiques of cultural homogeneity reinforce its ontological closure, can be observed more broadly in an underlying discursive assumption; this is the contention that a previously totalised national identity has become increasingly fragmented due to the rise of multiculturalism. Whilst pluralist models of demographic diversity superficially problematize a monolithic American identity, they do so by confronting a cohesive national culture with a range of totalized identity categories, self-present contestatory "others." For example, Michael G. Kammen argues that the assimilative process of Americanization has left legible and distinct sub-national identity groupings intact: "as immigrant groups were transformed by diverse influences in American society, they lost many of their original attributes, were re-created as something new, but still remained discrete, identifiable groups."[21] In similar terms, recent studies of American culture on film have endorsed multiculturalism as the basis for analysing cinematic subversions of a coercively normative national identity; this issue has been addressed at

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[17] Ibid., 44.
[18] Ibid., 43-44. Emphasis in original.
[19] Ibid., 43, 45.
[20] Ibid., 45-6.
[21] Kammen, *People of Paradox*, 294.

length in chapter one, as identity politics discourses provide a near-universal means of framing independent cinema's socio-political representations.[22] Finally, aforementioned culture wars approaches directly cite multiculturalism as a prominent source of varied antonymic ruptures within American cultural life. For example, Renshon argues that antagonistic debates regarding national togetherness thrive upon multicultural difference:

> The new danger lies in conflicts between people of different racial, cultural, and ethnic heritages, and between those who view themselves as socially, culturally, politically, and economically disadvantaged and those who are viewed as privileged.[23]

In this reading, the war over American identity are fought on discrete and definable cultural faultlines; whilst stressing an overarching *dualistic* cultural logic, it is played out in a series of antonymic tussles that reinforce the integrity of specific socio-cultural groupings.[24]

Homi K. Bhabha provides a detailed interrogation of the metaphysical logic that structures multiculturalist rhetoric, a set of logocentric foundations that prevent the realisation of radical, liberationist claims. Lamenting the tendency to "polarize in order to polemicize," [25] Bhabha refers to a pervasive cultural binarism that constructs discrete socio-political minorities in (a hierarchically-inferior) opposition to an equally homogenised national norm. This process, by which a fixed cultural centre is challenged by equally totalised "minority discourse(s),"[26] is eloquently described by Peter Brunette: "currently, too many leftists seem to combat the absolute presences of oppressive systems with other absolute presences which are seen merely as their opposites, and therefore involved in the same constricting economy."[27] Thus, ostensibly liberatory structures are often theorised in the image of their subjugators; this tendency renders such categories complicit with the metaphysical systems they aim to undermine.[28] In turn, any attempt to subvert the

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[22] For a broader example, see Burgoyne's study of American cinema and its negotiation of national identity and "the contradiction posed by race"; Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3.

[23] Renshon, "America at a Crossroads," 3.

[24] Hunter provides a complexification of this model, arguing that the contemporary culture war "cuts across the old lines of conflict." Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 43.

[25] Homi K. Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," in *Questions of Third Cinema*, eds. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (London: BFI Publishing, 1989), 111.

[26] Bhabha, "DissemiNation," 301.

[27] Peter Brunette, "Toward a Deconstructive Theory of Film," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 19, no. 2 (1986): 60.

[28] Willemen and Baker provide critiques of multiculturalism in relation to national cinema and American identity, further demonstrating the antonymic construction of self-coherent "others" and monolithic national cultures; see Paul Willemen, "The National Revisited," in *Theorising National Cinema*, eds. Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen (London: BFI Publishing, 2006), 31-32; Lee D.

hierarchical dominance of metaphysical national identities by elevating its minority "others" leaves this underlying dualistic logic in place; as Bhabha notes, all this achieves is "the simple inversion of the relation of oppressor and oppressed, margin and periphery, negative image and positive image."[29] In contrast, he calls for a fundamental displacing of a binary cultural logic; this gesture frees cultural difference from its regulated, metaphysical form, relocating it *within* the national subject as a heterogeneous agent of structural subversion. If this reorientation of cultural resistance is accepted, one must endorse an identity model that is "more hybrid in the articulation of cultural differences and identifications – gender, race or class – than can be represented in any hierarchical or binary structuring of social antagonism."[30] In questioning the bifurcated solidity of logocentric identity discourses, Bhabha challenges any attempt to reconceptualise the nation as an assemblage of discrete, self-contained groups; this deconstructive re-inscription of cultural difference exceeds and overflows the multicultural model of the nation "as the admixture of pre-given identities or essences."[31] In doing so, Bhabha unpacks a hybrid "third space" that inaugurates an originary "discourse of emergent cultural identities, within a *non-pluralistic* politics of difference": [32]

> For a willingness to descend into that alien territory…may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualising an *inter*national culture, based not on the exoticism or multi-culturalism of the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*.[33]

Thus, Bhabha demonstrates that many challenges to national homogeneity replicate its "totalising Utopian vision of Being and History";[34] as with national identities, they are oriented towards an idealised state of metaphysical self-presence and structural closure. In turn, these logocentric assumptions can only be displaced by a deconstructive re-orientation of cultural *différance*, a heterogeneous model that ultimately undermines the self-coherence of national identity *and* its varied multicultural "others."

Importantly, American pluralist and culture wars discourses provide exemplary case-studies with which to elucidate this Derridean intervention into identity politics. In these interrelated discursive examples, ruptures within the national body are regulated in

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Baker, "Introduction: Identity and Everyday Life in America," in *Life in America: Identity and Everyday Experience*, ed. Lee D. Baker (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 3.
[29] Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," 111.
[30] Bhabha, "DissemiNation," 292.
[31] Ibid., 314.
[32] Ibid., 305. Emphasis added.
[33] Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," 131. Emphasis in original.
[34] Ibid., 111.

antagonistic, binary forms; a heterogeneous field of identities and experiences are assimilated into a series of self-coherent definitional categories. Thus, whilst the subject positions implied by multiculturalism superficially fracture the national whole, they instead function as a range of distinct, denigrated cultural "others," defined against a national mass culture whose solidity they structurally reinforce. Furthermore, attempts to subvert this hierarchical, dualistic economy are shown to be problematic in theory and doomed in practice; such liberatory political gestures still rely upon logocentric models of presence and ontological discreteness, perpetuating the immovable binary architecture that originally engendered their subservient position. As with the externalised difference of American exceptionalism, multicultural models coercively regulate a freeplay of references and substitutions. Their illusory coherence can only be shaken by a radical cultural *différance*, explored in this thesis through detailed discursive analyses and put to work in the reading of cinematic case-studies.

The Politics of Deconstruction

As stated at the beginning of this conclusion, I have discussed at length how this thesis intervenes within and reshapes varied scholarly fields. However, the enduring value of the project also hinges on its potential to precipitate a practical intervention into American cultural life. Thus, whilst I have systematically outlined this thesis' endorsement of a Derridean cultural *différance*, it is as important to consider how it can challenge popular discursive orthodoxies. A tentative example of this theoretical model's potential impact outside of the academy stems from its aforementioned ability to disrupt the restrictive conceptual frameworks that shape prominent social debates. Importantly, this discussion brings into clearer focus a key critical charge that is persistently levelled at Derridean scholars: that deconstruction is an abstract exercise that avoids distinct political position-taking and, at worst, precludes any practical application. Jacques Derrida debates this common criticism in his discussion of *différance*, noting that the concept "has often been accused of privileging delay, neutralization, suspension and, consequently, of straying too far from the urgency of the present, particularly its ethical and political urgency";[35] this charge is succinctly summarised in Peter Brunette and David Wills' suggestion that deconstruction is frequently attacked for being "apolitical and ahistorical."[36] Thus, as Brunette summarises, critiques of deconstructive politics stem from its necessary

[35] Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*, trans. Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 10.
[36] Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1989), 21.

questioning of all social, cultural, philosophical and political discourses: "some on the left have denounced deconstruction because it tends to call *all* thinking into question, even that which presents itself as progressive and liberatory."[37] Finally, at its most extreme, anti-deconstructionist rhetoric entails accusations of "moral relativism"[38] and nihilism; this is perceptible in the common assertion (particularly outside of academia) that deconstruction denies *any* meaning whatsoever.[39] Whilst the precise terms (and vehemence) of these critiques vary, one can perceive a common scholarly and popular assumption; Derridean thought is derided as an anathema of political, moral, or ethical engagement.

Conversely, my thesis is predicated upon the contention that deconstruction offers a useful basis for decisive interventions into cultural politics. Many Derridean theorists have convincingly challenged charges of apoliticism, arguing that deconstruction's *raison d'etre* is to question the hierarchical inequalities that coercively regulate all Western structures. To begin, Derrida continually opposed purported misreadings of his work as essentially nihilistic; he notes that many activists struggle to understand that deconstruction is *primarily* political: "on one side and the other, people get impatient when they see that deconstructive practices are also and first of all political and institutional practices."[40] Thus, Derrida positions the radical worth of deconstructive thought in its ability to exceed and challenge repressive socio-cultural orthodoxies; it amounts to "an act of cultural resistance" that cannot be normalised or neutralised.[41] Similarly, Brunette argues that deconstruction's political function hinges on its disruption of a metaphysical discursive system that closes down debates that arise amongst a plethora of ideological positions: "Derrida's writings can be seen as thoroughly political in nature when they are properly understood as a critique of the outmoded 'logocentric' thinking that has led to numerous political impasses in the past."[42] Extrapolating this view to its potential apotheosis, the political value of deconstruction could reside in its rejection of any fixed ideological position; Dana Polan eloquently argues this reading, suggesting that a "progressive" politics is abetted by deconstruction's refusal to privilege a single, coherent reading of socio-historical reality:

[37] Peter Brunette, "Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction," in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, eds. John Hill and Pamela Church-Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 91. Emphasis in original.
[38] For descriptions of these charges, see François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort, Josephine Berganza, and Marlon Jones (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 121; Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton, *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters* (London: Routledge, 2010), 109.
[39] For a critical summary of these vehement attacks, see Nicholas Royle, *After Derrida* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 1.
[40] Jacques Derrida, quoted in Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 27.
[41] Jacques Derrida, quoted in Bowman, *Deconstructing Popular Culture*, 47.
[42] Brunette, "Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction," 91-92.

Is progressive politics then engagement in and commitment to a position, based on the analysis of an ultimately interpretable historical situation? Or is progressive politics the refusal to be positioned at all, the realization that a new political situation demands a new language no longer tied to old representations and old modes of representation?[43]

In such a reading, the radical potential of deconstructive politics comes from its rejection of any essential stance, revolutionary or conservative; as Derrida puts it, deconstruction is "inherently 'nothing at all.'"[44]

In turn, other critics have located Derridean theory's political function in the deconstruction of logocentric dualisms. As has already been established, Derrida's reading of metaphysical binarism perceives a "violent hierarchy" at work in all oppositional structures.[45] Bearing this in mind, the overturning and displacing of discrepancies in discursive authority embeds a radical political potential within deconstruction's underlying methodological principles. Brunette and Wills endorse this perspective, drawing upon Derrida's own assertion that deconstruction seeks "to comprehend…what strategies, interests, and investments are at work in play."[46] In turn, Brunette and Wills elucidate how deconstruction probes the political hegemonies sustained by Western discourse, interrogating

the ways in which authority and power constitute themselves through logocentric, oppositional hierarchies that a deconstructive strategy may then seek to reverse and displace. As long as politics has anything to do with structures of power and the workings of economies, Derrida's work has been addressing political questions.[47]

Thus, Brunette and Wills argue that the explicitly political themes of Derrida's later work (such as South African apartheid) merely foregrounded a latent radical function that has always inhabited the act of deconstructive reading.[48]

Finally, accusations of nihilism can be countered by focusing on the productive possibilities of Derridean theory. Whilst critics argue that deconstruction aims towards a

[43] Dana Polan, "'Desire Shifts the Differance': Figural Poetics and Figural Politics in the Film Theory of Marie-Claire Ropars," *Camera Obscura* 12 (1984): 72.

[44] Jacques Derrida, quoted in Patrick McGee, *Cinema, Theory, and Political Responsibility in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 169.

[45] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone Press, 1987), 41.

[46] Jacques Derrida, quoted in Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 14.

[47] Brunette and Wills, *Screen/Play*, 23.

[48] Ibid., 27-28. See Jacques Derrida, "Racism's Last Word," trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 290-299.

total obliteration of knowledge or sense, others have noted that this critical gesture actually facilitates a greater diversity of significances and meanings. Derrida openly espouses this view, asserting that "deconstruction is never concluded because it was never nihilistic, contrary to what they say in *Newsweek*, but rather affirmative and generative."[49] Thus, the invention of meaning relies upon the deconstruction of restrictive metaphysical forms; while logocentric structures continue to regulate the play of *différance* from which all significance stems, any attempt to construct an original political intervention is impossible.[50] Barbara Johnson cogently demonstrates this point, arguing that deconstruction does not posit the impossibility of meaning; rather it challenges the hierarchical pre-eminence of *specific* meanings to the detriment of a multiplicity of others:

> Deconstruction is not a form of textual vandalism designed to prove that meaning is impossible…. If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not meaning but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another.[51]

Wills uses similar insights to argue that deconstruction calls for constant critical reflection, an active process that consistently analyses and refines the ways in which we conduct social, cultural, and political affairs:

> In shaking up our way of thinking, Derrida is, in a very real sense trying to save it; not to save it in any immutable form, but to keep it going, to keep us thinking…in a culture that…is rapidly forgetting or repressing its relation to language and to the word, forgetting how to read, no longer taking the time to read, perhaps preferring the passivity of looking…. Derrida forces us to stop, look, and read more closely.[52]

Wills demonstrates that Derridean theory does not posit a series of abstract strategies that absolve the critic of political responsibility; rather it is cast as the potential saviour of critical thought and, by extension, political action. Importantly, this understanding of deconstruction as the facilitator of diverse meanings, readings, or interventions exemplifies this thesis' endorsement of Derridean theory's political importance; it also underlies the positive,

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[49] Jacques Derrida, quoted in Bowman, *Deconstructing Popular Culture*, 152.

[50] Derrida elucidates this point fruitfully through architectural metaphors already discussed in chapter three; see Jacques Derrida, "The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*, eds. Peter Brunette and David Wills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 27.

[51] Barbara Johnson, "Translator's Introduction," in *Dissemination*, by Jacques Derrida, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Continuum, 2004), xv.

[52] David Wills, "Jaded in America," in *Deconstruction Is/In America: A New Sense of the Political*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (London: New York University Press, 1995), 254.

practical impact of my research upon popular national identity debates. Uncovering and destabilizing forces of cultural homogenisation, this deconstructive intervention opens up an unbounded and non-totalizing freeplay of *différance* within American cultural politics. This Derridean model abets a fundamental reconceptualization of identity discourses; it dismantles restrictive metaphysical orthodoxies, displaces antagonistic structural oppositions, and liberates a plethora of singular cultural gestures. It is this form of dynamic, continuous *political* intervention that this thesis has attempted to facilitate.

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