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***Surface and Depth:  
Studies in American Legibility***

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## Introduction

This project had its genesis in a puzzling historical convergence. I had written a book on the cinema as a quintessential American art form and had noticed, as many people have, that the motion pictures originated at the same time Sigmund Freud devised psychoanalysis, in the 1890s. A technology of visual surfaces arose contemporaneously with a technique for sounding the human depths. Further reflection added a detail of special interest to me as a student of American culture: the two inventions had been welcomed in the United States as nowhere else. Not that they had been pioneered here (though an argument can be made for the movies), or developed important innovations on these shores, or found their most subtle practitioners among Americans. But it was precisely the circumstance of their eager and relatively uncritical adoption--the acceptance of both of them--by Americans that piqued my curiosity. After all, they would appear to have little or nothing in common. Freud himself regarded the effortlessly ingested cinematic image as the antipodes of his demanding intellectual discipline. The joint compatibility of film and the talking cure with the United States was the catalyst that led to Surface and Depth.

To solve the puzzle, I felt it necessary to look back from the 1890's to the nation's past. I thought it might be possible to locate a disposition or cultural dynamic, something that antedated the movies and psychoanalysis and was capable of illuminating American receptivity to them (and that presumably abides to this day). What I kept finding, as I reviewed documentary staples from the nation's settlement and founding, was an impulse that I am calling the demand for legibility. It seemed undeniable to me that American culture had been preoccupied from its beginnings with the wish, the requirement, to know

and to make accessible. I saw this imperative at work in early religious writings dedicated to the formation of a translucent Bible Commonwealth; in blueprints for ideal cities and for the organization of the landscape; and in political manifestoes that established a written moment of origin for the polity and mandated public oversight of governmental decision-making.

The three illustrations I have just mentioned can be related to a single historical circumstance: the absence of a feudal tradition. As a result of its tardy birth, the New World did not have to be dragged into modernity, and it would be possible, in a general way, to describe the subject of this book as America's precedence as the first modern society, a culture that has always been "enlightened" and entrepreneurial. Two theorists of the modern, Karl Marx and Hans Blumenberg, offer implicit support for this view. Both regard the transition from the medieval past as a process of disenchantment. Marx, in The Communist Manifesto (1848), speaks of capitalism as an economic system without illusions. The bourgeoisie, he writes in a famous sentence, "has played a most revolutionary part" in stripping away the naturalized "ties" with which the feudal order veiled competition between the classes. As the cash nexus displaced mystifying hierarchies, man was "at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind."<sup>1</sup>

Blumenberg reaches a similar conclusion about "the legitimacy of the modern age" (the title of his 1966 book). The spirit of inquiry that swept Europe in the Renaissance claimed as one of its first casualties traditionalism's deference to "the forbidden and the reserved." According to Blumenberg, the optical revolution of the telescope and the microscope inaugurated a new era in humanity's relationship to nature,

and untrammelled curiosity, a delight in seeing and learning everything, emerged as the defining disposition of the modern.<sup>2</sup>

I might have followed Blumenberg and denominated my subject “American Visibility.” The phenomenon itself has been remarked on by specialists in various disciplines and given a myriad of names. Availability, publicity, transparency, and “the paranoid style” are some familiar ones. Although at times I employ all these categories, and others too, I decided to foreground the concept of legibility because it conveyed the idea of putting into language or writing. (Blumenberg is also the author of a book titled Die Lesbarkeit der Welt [1981], as yet untranslated, which can be rendered as The Readability of the World.) The first dictionary definition of legible is “capable of being read, esp. with ease,” and this dictate seemed to encompass the disparate domains I was examining. Americans did not simply seek to canvass the surfaces and depths; they strove to give tangible, enunciated form to that ambition. They wanted to hear narratives about the operations of the Holy Spirit; to order the continent into lines and squares; and to afford citizens the opportunity to peruse a public enumeration of their rights and of the state’s powers and limitations. They dreamed of a readerly, writerly world (to crib and conflate two terms from Roland Barthes). But they also craved ocular mastery over the physical environment, as exemplified, in a later day, by the moving pictures, and “legible” had the advantage of communicating this expectation as well. The second meaning given in the dictionary is “capable of being discerned or distinguished.” In the American desideratum, visibility was to complement and facilitate ease of understanding, and a recurrent concern in this book is with the relationship between images and words as ways of knowing.

Yet ironies attend the choice of “legibility.” They cluster around the uses of literature and other modes of mediated representation to cushion intrusiveness. Writing or print need not function this way, any more than speech has to be a medium of perfect candor. On the contrary, textuality’s distancing can incite exhibitionism. Still, that distancing can also provide a sanctuary from exposure that in some ways is analogous to the quarantined confessionalism of the analyst’s couch. So legibility, as used in this study, carries a third, seemingly contradictory, connotation: it can act as a brake on its own rush toward making known

It should be emphasized that while Surface and Depth begins by considering a series of writings, and moves on to works of both high and popular art, it is not a return to some version of myths and symbols. Its subject is not the circulation of aesthetic tropes. The documents dealt with in Part I initiated and gave shape to aspects of American religion, the American landscape, and American politics. These speeches, pamphlets, and public papers sponsored institutions and practices that have proven remarkably durable, in some cases spanning the virtual entirety of the culture’s life. What interests me is the intersection of these discourses and historical realities with the forging of a national literature. Has legibility been an obsession of this country’s writing? Have American authors over the centuries affirmed the drive for revelation or regarded it with skepticism?

I suggest that literary forms have been both complicit and at odds with the appetite to know. Popular genres, especially those concocted in the United States, have been apt to reinscribe the transparency ethos. The Western, to take a venerable example, exalts ocular dominion over nature. Cooper endows his famous Leatherstocking, Natty

Bumppo, with a preternatural (or, more dramatically, cinematic) ability to vanquish space. The “private eye,” hero of the urban detective story, possesses a comparable clairvoyance in psychology. For Poe’s C. Auguste Dupin, insight into the human interior is a precondition for survival in the increasingly opaque modern metropolis.

Elite literature follows a more ambiguous course. Works such as Melville’s Moby-Dick, or Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, or the fiction of Henry James and Edith Wharton, or Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby, have tended at once to embrace the knowledge wish and to check the urge to “strike through the mask.” High art has sought to comprehend the white whale, to discover the secret of Hester’s lover, to punish the Bellegardes by disclosing the family secret in The American, and to get to the bottom of the enigmatic figure of Gatsby. At the same time it has accepted the frustration of its quest and relinquished the possibility of knowledge or revenge or certainty.

I am only too aware of the fact that I am swimming against the disciplinary tide. With some notable exceptions, the idea of a common or shared American culture has held a distant second place in recent scholarship. The emphasis has been on difference. This focus is a salutary corrective to the grand synthetic overviews of an earlier generation. It has recuperated groups and perspectives marginalized or rendered imperceptible by the master narratives. Gender, race, and, to a much lesser degree, class, have gained a new and welcome prominence in the American studies of the last two or three decades. As will become apparent, I have learned a great deal from these works and could not have conceived this book without them. But attention to the margins should not, in my opinion, preclude awareness of the center or abort attempts to understand the dominant

structures and values that have shaped American experience. Belief in openness has spawned one such set of influential themes, and I would be the first to admit that the imposition of legibility has never been anything else than a contested terrain. It has occluded in the very act of illuminating. American visibility, that is, has necessitated and produced American invisibility from the beginning. It will surprise no one that the major area of struggle has been race.

A second aspect of this study that qualifies as unfashionable is its claim of historical durability. Surface and Depth is diachronic rather than synchronic, and it is more attuned to continuities than to radical breaks. Though I hope I have benefited from Foucaultian and New Historicist scholarship, I cannot describe my work as deriving from those models. I depart from them not solely in my emphasis on persistence over time but also, as I have indicated, in my sense of the literary as multifaceted and sedimented in its engagement with an ideological bias. Rather than positing an unbroken field of discursive interchange, I argue for different responses to legibility by different authors and even by different genres. A certain cultural unevenness, or relative distance from consensual attitudes, seems as inescapable in the nation's past as it is in the present. We are all conscious of its workings in the books we read, the films we watch, and the cable television channels we stop at and surf past (though we may disagree in our assessments). Which is not to say, of course, that one cannot relish the popular without being thoroughly disaffected from the polity, or enjoy problematic works of art without otherwise embracing the doxa.

Moreover, I dissent from the antagonism with which Foucault and his followers have written of visibility. In a celebrated move, the French theorist demonized Jeremy



Bentham's panopticon as an emblem of carceral society. This reading is a disservice to the English reformer. Bentham was no friend of monopolies of either power or knowledge. In contrast to a conservative like Walter Bagehot, who defended "mystery" as integral to the English constitution, Bentham favored opening government to popular scrutiny. He was the author of a famous essay "Of Publicity," in which he advocated unfettered access to information as fatal to the designs of tyrants.<sup>3</sup>

I am quite prepared to admit, however, that the panopticon's institutionalizing of total scrutability, as a figure for the social order, can be as destructive of democratic procedures as obscurantism. Even when information flows are reciprocal and not a unilateral privilege of power, they can lead to excessive violations of individual rights. Panopticonism has been carried to ruinous lengths in American outbursts of political and religious paranoia. I touch on a number of these episodes, and their prevalence raises questions about the damages of legibility as legibility. The knowledge compulsion, that is, can do harm not just because of what it omits or suppresses, as in racial ostracism, but as a result of what it forces into the public forum. The sun's rays are not always wholesome, and they have shriveled the sphere of what is off limits in this country. Americans have turned to the law in an effort to mitigate the damage. Indeed, the arrogance of American publicity has been directly responsible for the prescience of the United States in formulating statutory protections for privacy (as opposed to customary acceptance of the private elsewhere).

Legal interest in secure zones of autonomy coincided with the emergence of the cinema and with Freud's conceiving of his mental therapy. The fin-de-siecle was the crucial moment for all three. I explore how this conjunction at once revitalized and

complicated the American passion for legibility. Film and analysis decisively enlarged visual and introspective mastery, but they did so in cordoned off or impersonal settings that enshrouded revelation in privacy. The proper relation of the public and the private, the accessible and the insulated, a theme constantly being negotiated in canonical literature, entered the lexicon of common culture. (The cinema's spectators formed an anonymous "crowd," said Vachel Lindsay, not the harmonious community of live theater.<sup>4</sup>) I weigh enthusiasm for the two innovations against the historical crosscurrents of massive immigration, urbanization, and the renewed push for openness signaled by Woodrow Wilson's election to the Presidency.

As I noted at the outset of this preface, my wonder at the American welcome to Freudianism and the movies germinated Surface and Depth. But the book is not an interpretation of either film or analytic theory. By training and inclination I am most comfortable with literary texts, and after the historical review in Part I, I concentrate my attention on fiction and non-fiction in the American tradition. Except for Part IV, "Privacy and Renovation" Hollywood and psychoanalysis figure less as direct objects of study than as a background presence or leitmotiv. In one context, they might appear as a kind of proleptic analogue to a literary strategy; in another, as influences and incentives; in a third, as a rival mode of dissecting motivation (which is how that much-abused precursor of psychoanalysis, phrenology, was widely viewed by writers in the nineteenth century.) Where the two systems have perhaps been most compromised by the larger society's dynamic of disclosure and occlusion has been in their repetition of what fails to get seen. Both the cinema and the therapeutic profession have an inglorious history in the United States of racial exclusivity or ostracism.

American banishing of opacity has, in sum, met its undoing in the color line. Even this defeat has its complicating ironies. With a slight shift of vantage, insistence on racial division might be understood as a recycling of the call to clarity (on a quite primitive level, as a wish to get rid of darkness). Nothing is more indisputably “exceptional” in the American narrative than the longevity of prohibitions against interracial mixture. But what stands out starkly, and violently, is the erasure of people of color from visibility. This stigmatizing is a breach in the national commitment to bring into the light. The line stretches from the attempted extermination of the Indians; through the excision of Jefferson’s draft attack on slavery from the Declaration of Independence; to the ghettoizing of blacks under segregation. In literature, white reluctance to see has been thematized in Melville’s and Twain’s disfigurements of the detective story, “Benito Cereno” and Pudd’nhead Wilson, mysteries of race where nothing gets irradiated; and in Ellison’s Invisible Man, as well as in Philip Roth’s meditation on Ellison’s classic in The Human Stain. The corollary to erasure has been the security found by blacks behind the color line and in the blockage that has marked their dealings with whites, as indicated, for example, by Frederick Douglass’s credo, “Trust no man.” So we arrive at another irony: canonical art’s attraction to obscurity has been most perfectly realized, not in high literary culture itself, but in the African-American tradition’s refusal of the war on the illegible.

A concluding word has to be said about the heterodoxy, or perhaps heterogeneity, of the book’s method. In addition to a set of readings of literary texts—some quite detailed, others concise—Surface and Depth brings together a multiplicity of historical and cultural materials. My choices have been broad and protean, and they include

examples that seldom appear in conjunction with each other: Winthrop's "Model of Christian Charity" and the antebellum infatuation with phrenology; prophecy's obsession with dates and numbers and the testing of schoolchildren to measure intelligence; an analysis of the cinema as exemplifying the mind's laws and a call for reformation of the political system. At first glance, readers may find this profusion bewildering. I have been willing to take the risk because I believe that that the data assembled from many sources in Part I (and, to a lesser degree, in Part IV) cumulatively build a strong case for my thesis. The very multifariousness of the evidence demonstrates the diffusion and the persistence of the commitment to publicity.

Even so, there are institutions and cultural habits that plainly do not fit my model, as well as the inevitable ebbings of legibility, periods when its power has been dormant or when it has served as a kind of cover for deception and dishonesty. It would be folly to pretend that such backslidings from openness don't exist. In Part IV I investigate one case from the early twentieth century, Progressivism's campaign to revive the accessibility seemingly obliterated by the dislocations of industrialism. My point is that the trends discussed in this study have been an overweening force in the nation's life for over three centuries, with rededication to the familiar ideal following almost every setback. Counter examples, of which I focus on two--privacy as a refuge from cognitive imperialism, and race as the limit of American knowing—may qualify the reach of the legible. They do not refute the reality of its cultural importance.

## Surface and Depth,

### Renovation and Privacy, at the Fin de Siecle

The visual and cognitive extensions represented by the cinema and psychotherapy were renewals, but they were renewals with a twist. They resurrected some of the legibility that seemed to be fading from the American scene as the nation entered the twentieth century. The chaotic growth of cities had extinguished the clarity of the material environment; the influx of millions of strangers from abroad overwhelmed social uniformity; machine politics and corporate oligarchy threatened democratic openness. Alarmed by these changes, so destructive of the coherence of the past, growing numbers of Americans joined a culture-wide movement to stem the spread of disorder. They rallied to Populism and then Progressivism, and in 1912 they elected Woodrow Wilson as 28<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. Wilson's book of campaign speeches, The New Freedom, compressed their yearnings into a chapter title. He vowed to "Let There Be Light" on unwonted (and unwanted) regions of darkness.

Yet the emergent social landscape had its benefits, and these exerted a complicating pull on the quest for renovation. The metropolitan behemoth, though it may have seemed an unambiguous declension to some, offered an exit from the "familiar society"<sup>1</sup> inhabited by most Americans before the last two decades of the nineteenth century. And gemeinschaft, for all its vaunted intimacy and accessibility, can be an oppressive prison, whereas gesellschaft can bring the liberation of anonymity. The novelist Sinclair Lewis, author of Main Street (1920) and Babbitt (1922), made a successful career out of this recognition.

One benefit brought by the new order was a codifying of the private. The movies and Freudianism occupied an unstable position in this dynamic. In one sense part of a revitalized hunger to know, the two novelties also coalesced with an awareness that—in the words of Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis--“solitude and privacy have become more important to the individual” as a result of civilization’s increasing “intensity and complexity.” The pair of jurists introduced the decade of the nineties with their germinal article in the Harvard Law Review, “The Right to Privacy.” They were the first to formulate a statutory right to protect one’s “inviolable personality” from outside intrusion by agencies of scrutiny.

The cinematic and analytic projects had a reflexive sense of the need for safeguards. They threw open new vistas to detection while at the same time providing refuge, in the seclusion of the darkened movie theater and the physician’s consulting room, from the prying eyes of others. We might even say that the motion pictures and psychoanalysis contained in their modes of consumption an antidote to their own potential for excess. But it was the excess that impressed Warren and Brandeis. They prominently cited instantaneous photography, the technological forerunner of the cinema, as one of those “modern devices” inflicting invasive injuries on the unsuspecting. The “latest advances in photographic art,” by rendering “it possible to take pictures surreptitiously,” left innocent parties no redress but through the law of tort.<sup>2</sup>

Wilson’s Progressive motto “Let There Be Light,” dating from two decades later, suggests in its tardiness that the precedence of politics in setting the agenda for the United States had come to an end with the previous century. The leadership role was passing to mass culture, and to the popular media in particular. This, at least, was the

view of Vachel Lindsay, whose classic study of 1915, The Art of the Moving Picture, acclaimed the makers of the movies as the heirs to Benjamin Franklin and Patrick Henry as shapers of the culture. Whereas the official “leaders of the people,” according to Lindsay, “scarcely know the photoplay exists,” the stars and their vehicle have become as well known to ordinary citizens “as any candidate for president bearing political messages.”<sup>3</sup>

Lindsay did not delude himself about the photoplay’s backwardness on race. This was one area, he noted regretfully, where civic discourse and cinematic art could not be differentiated. (The caveat applied to American psychoanalysis, too.) While crediting D. W. Griffith with directorial genius, he complained of the “poisonous” racism infecting Griffith’s masterpiece, “which could better be called The Overthrow of Negro Rule.” Neither Progressivism nor the two cultural phenomena that developed alongside it escaped the taint of racial exclusion. “Let There Be Light” for some continued to mean enforced disappearance for others. Woodrow Wilson decreed segregation for all employees of the federal government immediately upon taking office in 1913; two years later The Birth of a Nation—reportedly with this southern President’s blessing--ostracized blacks to the filmic margins. (Photography, let us recall, signifies “writing with light.”) And the therapeutic establishment, conflating non-whites with primitive depth and then pronouncing them, in their very primitiveness, incapable of self-understanding, effectively banned racial minorities as either patients or practitioners. By 1946, at the moment the US was asserting its psychoanalytic monopoly, the scandal of American medicine was the “total lack” of treatment for Harlem’s 400,000 residents—

this according to Richard Wright. “[I]t is doubtful,” the novelist calculated, “if there are eight practicing Negro psychiatrists in the entire nation.”<sup>4</sup>

Freud may have seen his first movie in America, but he had no use for either the medium or the country. He refused to collaborate on a plan to make a film about his discovery, W.G. Pabst's Secrets of a Soul (1926), and he rebuffed every overture by studio moguls to recruit him as an expert. The science of mind, he was positive, could never be translated into the superficiality of cinematic figuration.<sup>5</sup> And then to add the United States to the mix compounded the absurdity. The cultural upstart across the Atlantic was utterly unsuited as a laboratory for psychoanalysis. Hollywood ruled there, and Hollywood was the enemy of serious thought.

Freud's polarity—the motion pictures (and America) versus the talking cure—has had a long line of supporters from both sides of the equation. Leo Lowenthal, of Frankfurt School fame, recorded what may be the most unforgettable dismissal: “Mass culture is psychoanalysis in reverse.”<sup>6</sup> Lowenthal meant that the culture industry, which he identified with the US as the apotheosis of kitsch, did not advance self-awareness but instead preyed on people's fantasies in order to drug and manipulate them. Celebrants of the present-day information revolution pretty much agree with Lowenthal, while inverting his emphases. They argue that the process begun with the motion pictures and exemplified today by television, videos, computer games, the internet, etc. has effectively killed off the Freudian legacy. The analyst's high-modernist search for unconscious motivation is an obsolete residue in a post-modern society of surfaces.<sup>7</sup>



Such critiques assume an irreparable disagreement between linguistic and visual representation—an incompatibility, in the terms of this book, between depth and surface.<sup>8</sup> The detractions have more cogency in theory than in historical practice. The movies and psychotherapy were both impure (or mixed) products of modernity. True, early film was silent and included only intertitles as a concession to language. (A far from trivial concession, to be sure.) But the movies hardly disavowed interiority; on the contrary, they boasted of their superior registration of emotion and thought through the close-up. Cinema and psychoanalysis alike professed an imperialism of ambition that comported with the global thrust of the American century. Returning to Worcester and to Freud's 1909 encounter with the New World will illuminate the all-encompassing pretensions of both as carriers—or trailblazers—of outward and inward access.

Those who gathered to hear the great man explain his theories included some of the foremost philosophers and psychologists in the United States. G. Stanley Hall, an authority on adolescence and the president of Clark University, hosted the occasion. The distinguished anthropologist from Columbia University, Franz Boas, attended the conference, as did James Jackson Putnam, America's leading neurologist and a professor at the Harvard Medical School. Also present was the Harvard philosopher William James, whose courage during an angina attack so impressed Freud that he still remembered the episode in 1925, when he described it in his Autobiographical Study. James for his part professed to find the Worcester lectures memorable. "The future of psychology belongs to your work," he told an elated Ernest Jones.<sup>9</sup>

The warm tribute concealed a secret history of which Jones was probably unaware. Probably but not definitely, because Jones had himself conducted several colloquia in

Boston a year earlier, laying out the principles of psychoanalysis for an audience of local physicians and academics. Among the listeners was a professor of psychology at Harvard, a native-born German whom Jones misidentified as "Werner Munsterberg." Munsterberg had little regard for the new doctrine and made no secret of the fact. When Freud came to the United States to speak---in German, as it happened---Munsterberg showed his disdain by staying away. Among the attentive group of Harvard faculty, he was conspicuous by his absence.

The missing professor was really named Hugo Munsterberg, and he had long been feuding with William James over the future of psychology. James was a student of extreme states of religious ecstasy and distress. Though not a convert to psychoanalysis, he had followed Freud's writings with interest and welcomed the development of depth psychology. Munsterberg considered James's fascination with psychics an unscientific indulgence of quackery. Psychology's true business, he believed, lay in its application to law, education, advertising, and business. As for the unconscious, Munsterberg was blunt. In Psychotherapy, a book he published just a few months before Freud's lecture series, he stated: "The story of the subconscious mind can be told in three words: there is none." James, who had lured Munsterberg from Freiburg to Cambridge in the first place, could only shake his head over such pronouncements. He saw Harvard losing ground intellectually while his colleague---American to the core in his entrepreneurialism---bustled about the country selling psychological expertise as an aid to industrial efficiency.<sup>10</sup>

If Munsterberg lagged in his openness to Freudian ideas, in one area he was well ahead of the academic curve: his delight in the motion pictures. He was the first professor to write a scholarly monograph about film, and he did so at a time when the average

moviegoer was still working-class, immigrant, and in search of cheap entertainment. In 1916, the year of Munsterberg's The Photoplay: A Psychological Study, the cinema seemed to many as disreputable in its way as Freud's discovery of the sexual etiology of the neuroses. The movie industry was dominated by uneducated foreigners who spoke poor English and didn't know Ibsen from Oscar Wilde. These parvenus may have been ambitiously eyeing respectability for their medium, but no Harvard professor worth his degree would waste valuable time investigating the phenomenon.

Of course, the absence of native-born Americans among the pioneer generation distinguished both fields. Freud and Munsterberg were representative figures. Both came from Eastern Europe, Freud's family from Moravia and Munsterberg's from what is now the Polish city of Danzig. The two were typical in their Jewishness as well, or, to be more specific, in their often ambivalent relation to their Jewishness. Freud, unlike some psychoanalysts, never disguised or disavowed his ethnicity, but he didn't attempt to publicize it either. Anxious to downplay the large number of Jews involved in the movement's genesis, he assiduously wooed Christians like Jung in order to dilute the Semitism of his followers. In Munsterberg's case, ambivalence shaded into outright rejection. A number of Hollywood studio heads sought to "pass" as other than Jewish. The Harvard psychologist went further and chose the option more favored by European than American Jewry: he converted to Christianity. In Cambridge he worshipped at a Lutheran church.

(An aside on historical confluence and divergence: Jews as the obverse of African-Americans in the two arenas being considered here had European reaction to "thank" for their good fortune. The pogroms that convulsed Russia in the 1880s created millions of

Jewish refugees. Eastern Europe's anti-Semitic outbursts were the equivalent of the post-Reconstruction assault on black rights. Whereas the United States threw open its doors to white newcomers [until the 1920s, at any rate], the nation herded black people ever more tightly into the ghetto of segregation.)

Munsterberg's attraction to film reflected his love of his adopted country and dovetailed at various places with Lindsay's more celebrated analysis. Both authors, for instance, emphasized the new pastime's democratic aspect. (In his writings on American mores, Munsterberg was a loyal follower of Tocqueville and always made much of the determinative influence of equality.<sup>11</sup>) The movies cost less than the theater, Munsterberg pointed out, because like other machine-produced goods they could be copied endlessly and watched by many audiences at the same time. They belonged to the universe of the standardized Model T, not to that of the exclusive horse-drawn carriage. Their soundlessness reinforced their leveling effect. Immigrants ignorant of or just beginning to learn the English language could enjoy the picture shows as heartily as native speakers. (Munsterberg wanted to dispense with intertitles, the written cues that sometimes had to be read aloud to immigrant parents by their school-age children.) Images were a universal tongue that needed no priesthood to interpret them. Lindsay had argued a similar point a year earlier: any "cave-man," he wrote, could judge what appeared on the screen for himself. Lindsay favored turning the cinematic occasion into a rehearsal for democracy (the active involvement that Progressivism, and before that, Populism, were striving to revitalize) by having the moviegoers vote on the screenplay. "The cards with their answers could be slipped into the ballot-box at the door as the crowd goes out."<sup>12</sup>

Where Munsterberg broke fresh territory was in his effort to marry film and psychology. The cinema demanded such a treatment, in his opinion, because unlike previous cultural inventions it subordinated the outer world to mental processes. The moviegoers, on one level democrats, were on another conquerors; sitting in the darkened auditorium, they had the experience of figurative omnipotence. They could see things in the physical creation never before observed with the naked eye, and they could plumb the consciousness of other human beings without the assistance of language. This proved that the moving pictures were not an offshoot of the drama (or even the novel) but an altogether original art; and despite his title, "The photoplay," Munsterberg concentrated on the discontinuities between the two forms of performance.

The theater, he stated, is bound "by the same laws of causality which govern nature."<sup>13</sup> Temporal and spatial limits prevail there just as they do in our everyday lives. An elderly character in a play cannot reverse the course of time and change back into a child. Nor can he or she bid defiance to distance by abruptly materializing in a different location. Such deviations from the real would shatter dramatic credibility. So, too, we see depth and motion on the stage, and they are really there, independent of our activity. Props in the front of the set are nearer to us than those in back, and characters have to raise and lower their legs in order to walk or run. The physical order is undisturbed: "no cause without following effect, no effect without preceding cause" (p. 183).

Stage plays, then, may not give us actuality itself, but they come far closer to capturing the substance of real life than does the cinema. The latter is a subjective medium that glories in its unreality. Film doesn't observe natural laws, it rides roughshod over them, and its ontological insouciance brings it within the purview of the psychologist.

According to The Photoplay, the filmic spectator is no passive tabula rasa but an active participant who has to complete what shows on the screen. The picture is flat, but knowing it to be so, we invest it with depth; the static images cannot be animated without our assistance. Munsterberg rejected the notion, stretching back to Goethe's experiments with color and to the studies of Peter Mark Roget on optical deception, that retinal afterimage creates the illusion of motion when we are confronted with a succession of discrete frames. Not our physiology but our psyches supply the deficiency: movement "is superadded, by the action of the mind" (p. 69). These ostensible flaws of the photoplay are in fact its strengths, for they proclaim the intimate bond between the movies and thought. Anything the human mind can devise, the camera can do. Neither temporal sequence nor space is an obstacle to the filmmaker. "Time is left behind. Man becomes boy; today is interwoven with the day before yesterday" (p. 181). A remote mountain range in one shot becomes an inviting bank of wildflowers at our feet in the next. And then to cap the miracles, the wildflower changes into a girl!

Munsterberg gave special weight to the camera's selectiveness in the close-up, the flashback (or cut back, as he called it), and the flash forward. These mechanically produced marvels---none of them possible on the stage---make visible the mind's capacity for undivided attention, for memory, and for fantasizing and imaginative projection. Take the close-up. On stage a revolver being fired will attract all eyes to itself. But other objects don't simply dissolve into darkness because we focus on the smoking gun: the characters and the furniture on the set linger on the periphery of our vision. The close-up dispenses with all such visual static. By zooming in on the weapon and the hand clutching it, and emptying the screen of unwanted distractions, the proximity shot

reconfigures reality to conform with thought. Whereas matter lords it over the dramatic play, the photoplay bends the cosmos to the structures of human consciousness. It confers absolute “freedom from the bondage of the material world” (p. 183).

Verisimilitude, it will be evident, ranked low among Munsterberg’s priorities; indeed, few modernists could equal him in anti-naturalism. Failure to approximate external phenomena was, to his mind, a quality to cherished, not superceded, and he considered it a plus that the movies came equipped with neither color nor speech. Here, to be sure, the author of The Photoplay misconceived his medium. Mainstream film, the mass entertainment that was his subject, moved as far away as possible from his visionary ideal of a narrative art speaking “the language of pictures only” (p. 200). American film makers in particular were to fetishize representational accuracy and perfect the transparency of story line that became renowned as the Hollywood style. They rushed to embrace the mechanical improvements—sound, color, wide screen—that ratified the genre’s mongrel character as both figuration and discourse.

But American movies, and indeed, fictional film in general, excelled at a special brand of realism, or rather hyperrealism, and Munsterberg was entirely right to characterize the medium as a radical departure from lithographic imitation. While he took pleasure in the motion pictures’ rendering of surfaces—typically singled out as the screen’s forte, its defining aptitude among popular amusements—what entranced him was its double-edged versatility at conveying depth. The cinema flaunted its reach, first, in the tractability of the spectacle. The pictures assume an aggressive and sometimes violent relationship to the actual. They mold, shape, distort, pry apart, and reassemble the physical environment. Penetrating into the invisible that lies buried in the visible, the camera rolls before the

viewer prodigies of sight: blood corpuscles, an orchid slowly blossoming, the African jungle glimpsed from the heart of a concrete city. Moreover, film provides access to social and human phenomena we could not ordinarily witness because they are forbidden or reserved: the lovemaking of strangers, an agonizing death, a woman, alone, weeping in a locked bathroom. (Munsterberg, mindful of the negatives of the camera's trespass into the hidden, warned against the glamorizing of "scenes of vice or crime" [p. 227].) The urban masses found in the picture palaces an affordable spectacle in which desire "remodels the world" (p. 144). As they watched the flickering images, they enjoyed a visual and plastic sovereignty that was beyond their daily experience but answered to their dreams.

Or rather, while the cinema's triumphalism appeared magical, feats only slightly less awesome were becoming identified with the hegemony of the United States in industry, warfare, and the international arena. The movies, with their imperialism toward the actual, could boast of a unique affinity with fin-de-siecle Americans as a people of comparably enterprising scope. If, as Munsterberg's account suggests, the pictures are the expansionist impulse in mass culture, the art form destined more than any other "to overcome outer nature by the free and joyful play of the mind" (p. 233), their provenance in England, France, or even Germany---and all three could lay claim to the honor---was less significant than their migration to the homeland of Hollywood as the nation poised to depose the British as the twentieth century's dominant superpower.

More than this, the cinema's enlargement of optical dominion ties it inextricably to the modern. The movies exemplify the forward-looking spirit of curiosity and technological experimentation that also came to be associated with the United States. Hans Blumenberg, the philosopher of modernity (cited in my Introduction), specified rude peering into nature,



what has been called the "knowledge drive," as the watershed marking off our world from the Middle Ages. First the telescope and then the microscope precipitated the breach. The two instruments made accessible to the human eye objects formerly "invisible on account of their distance or smallness." They were the signs of man's mastery over the earth.<sup>14</sup> The movies constitute the analogue in popular amusement to Blumenberg's scientific apocalypticism. The close-up and the long shot are the cinematic microscope and telescope, bringing the infinitesimal and faraway into the orbit of mass consumption.

Two more Germans, both Jews and both emigres from Nazism, were struck much like Munsterberg by film's power to amplify man's perceptual jurisdiction. Walter Benjamin, in his famous essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," turns to the fine arts instead of the stage for his heuristic counter-example. He contrasts the representation on the canvas to the picture on the screen. "The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, [but] the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web."<sup>15</sup> Siegfried Kracauer offers a related observation in his defense of the movies as "the redemption of physical reality." Cinema, he states, "exposes to view a world never seen before, a world as elusive as Poe's purloined letter, which cannot be found because it is within everybody's reach." Kracauer is especially attentive to the resemblance between cinematic and scientific procedures.<sup>16</sup>

Munsterberg's second crucial insight was to recognize film as a technology of human inwardness. The movies are a psychological art for him because they bare our mental life; the secret of their fascination is that they turn the inside out. Or, to put it in terms that Freud might have appreciated, what is latent in the theater is made manifest on the screen. Although Munsterberg's understanding of depth is neo-Kantian, not Freudian—

innate structures of mind, not drives and desires, interest him--he does inch nearer to the father of psychoanalysis when he speaks of the probing of affect in the facial close-up or expatiates on film's power to visualize a character's longings. I quote the following illustration at length:

There is a girl in her little room, and she opens a letter and reads it. There is no need of showing us in close-up the letter page [recall Munsterberg's dislike of generic alloy] with the male handwriting and the words of love and request for her hand. We see it in her radiant visage, we read it from her fascinated arms and hands; and yet how much more can the photoartist tell us about the storm of emotions in her soul. The walls of her little room fade away. Beautiful hedges of hawthorne blossom around her, rose bushes in wonderful glory arise and the whole ground is alive with exotic flowers (p. 121).

The change in physical setting communicates, more vividly than the stage play, more effectively than words could, the tenor of the girl's feelings. The reference to her "arms and hands," though Munsterberg discounts it beside the picturing of thought, is a telling addition to his catalogue. Yes, moviegoers can grasp emotional subtlety from a smile or the tremor of a lip. But insight does not stop with these perhaps predictable clues. The screen coaches us in the knowingness of a therapist. Its revelatory intimacy enables the viewer to read seemingly mute parts of the body as symptoms of interior states. As Munsterberg summarizes the photoplay's omniscience, "No shade, no tint, no hue of... emotions has escaped us" (p. 122).

Later theorists, for the most part European, have pushed this idea of film's psychological acuity in an even more overtly Freudian direction. Some, stoked by hostility

to American cultural imperialism, have totally reversed Munsterberg's argument for the spectator's activism. They compare the flow of dream-like images on celluloid to the operations of the unconscious and denounce the movies for their power to captivate with narcissistic pleasure. Two prominent members of the psychological school, Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz, assert that "the scopic regime of the cinema" induces a regressive passivity in which the viewer surrenders autonomy to the omnipotent camera eye.<sup>17</sup>

Other critics, more sympathetic, endorse the analogy to the unconscious but find the motion pictures unexcelled as a genre for representing the human psyche. Particularly after the introduction of sound (ca. 1927), film has been held to trump all other media owing to its unique identity as a composite, an aesthetic parallel to the dynamic medley of words and pictures that describes the subliminal associative process itself. The Russian director Sergei Eisenstein has been the most articulate exponent (and practitioner) of this position. He champions montage as a necessary supplement to the "whole arsenal" of surface hints finally deemed "inadequate for the expression of those subtleties of the inner struggle in all its nuances." Citing Joyce's experiments with interior monologue as a textual rival, Eisenstein judges the movies superior not solely because they incorporate the visual but also because they can reproduce the actual rhythm and temporal duration of thought. Stream of consciousness, in his view, "finds full expression... only in the cinema."<sup>18</sup>

The movies' credentials as an art of depth or "truth" have been most refined, on the American side, in acting. In the late nineteenth century, middle-class theaters began to promote a "natural" acting technique that eschewed the bombast and hyperbole of melodrama. This understated approach migrated into and matured on the screen, where the

intense focus of the camera encouraged thespian minimalism. By the 1910s, the subdued brand of performance operative in film was being denominated the "American style." It repudiated the stagy excess that classically-trained Europeans sometimes carried over into motion pictures. The Canadian-born Hume Cronyn, who starred in both the drama and the cinema, touched all the familiar bases in 1949:

In 'closeup' very little becomes very much; a whole new range of expression is opened to the actor. He can register with a whisper, a glance, a contraction of a muscle, in a manner that would be lost on the stage. The camera will often reflect what a man thinks, without the degree of demonstration required in the theatre....<sup>19</sup>

Cultural laconism as an American idol has been abetted by multiple factors, among them the suspicion of imposture integral to a republican polity and the country's history of immigration (which downplayed verbal facility). But rarely has the cult of the genuine been more evident than in the self-exposing acting style popularized as "the Method." Although it originated with a Russian, Konstantin Stanislavsky, and was first applied to the stage, the Method achieved its American apotheosis in the screen's magnifying of internals. It has been copied by a wide range of actors aspiring to authenticity and spontaneity. As one of them, Jack Nicholson, says, if a style is to be effective, it has to come "from the subconscious."<sup>20</sup> By urging the performer not so much to impersonate someone else as to express his or her own personality, Method acting has contributed to making a visual medium subtly exhibitionistic, a revelatory analogue to the couch.

Film's exhibitionism rests on a paradox, though: self-display on celluloid is conjoined with "the right to be let alone" for the spectator. What tended to impress early observers about moviegoing was its drift toward precisely that "solitude and privacy" which

Warren and Brandeis felt had been jeopardized by the camera's intrusive eye. Lindsay as usual invoked the drama as a counterexample, and for him the cinematic experience was at once more individual and more anonymous, a kind of gesellschaft to the theater's gemeinschaft. The stage audience is a "unit" whose members wield communal authority over each other, he wrote. They make known their disapproval of a latecomer by "glaring at" him or her. Movie viewers, on the other hand, arrive singly or "in groups of two or three at no specified hour." Nobody cares, because the spectators constitute a crowd or a "mob" rather than a unified collectivity. And they react as isolated atoms. "The newcomers do not, as in Vaudeville, make themselves part of a jocular army. Strictly as individuals they judge the panorama."<sup>21</sup>

The movies had originated in the peep shows of the Kinetoscope parlors, and Lindsay grasped that the medium's beginnings, apparently belied by the nickelodeon and then the palace, were in actuality integral to its identity. The public venues merely disguised the privatization that represented something new in popular entertainment. Analogues proposed in The Art of the Moving Picture include "Ali Baba's cave" and "half-lit churches"—apt precursors of the warren-like screening rooms of today's multiplexes—but the most common comparisons are domestic and studious. The film spectator suggests a reader, and the auditorium, its transfixed isolatoes seated in "half-light," a library. "Book-reading is not done in the direct noon-sunlight," Lindsay reminds us. "We retire to the shaded porch." Here again the parallel is prescient. The VCR and the videotape have taken moviegoing to their apogee as a non-communal experience, consumable like a book in the sanctuary of the private home.<sup>22</sup>

Munsterberg's approach leads to similar conclusions. His psychological reading of the photoplay gives a theoretical density to the basic insight that the image on the screen is without agency and cannot, unlike a stage performer, return the gaze of the viewer. Filmgoers can have an intimate communion with the image in part because it is insensate. In a sense, they are alone with their own feelings and perceptions, and their absorption can be complete. The spectator's inability to be seen is what connects him or her to that other cultural invention of the period, the analyst. One consumes revelation in a sequestered setting, the other in open assemblage; both are spared the imposition of modern city life, being stared at by multitudes of strangers.

Freud's talks at Clark in 1909 were published, in English as well as German, a year later as Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis. The alacrity of translation underscored not only the positive response at Worcester to the new ideas but also the wider appetite among Americans for information about the therapeutic revolution. Eager for endorsement by his overwhelmingly Protestant listeners, Freud had the Germanic-looking Jung (a clergyman's son) accompany him on his journey and made frequent mention of Jung's contributions in his speeches. He emphasized the success of his science in bringing order and light into the previously unfathomable workings of the unconscious. (This, of course, he would have said to any audience, although he softpedaled his un-American pessimism about the still uncharted [and unchartable] stretches of psychic wilderness.)

The way for Freud's visit had been prepared, both in the long and short runs, by American religion's openness to confessionality. The Emmanuel Movement, based in an Episcopal church in Boston but with a following among all the city's Protestant

denominations, was the latest example of a medical/clerical alliance. Ministers and psychiatrists joined forces to offer counseling to anyone with “moral problems or psychological disorders.” The Reverend Elwood Worcester, a founder of the program, expected a handful of the curious to turn out. He reported with disbelief that “one hundred and ninety-eight men and women, suffering from some of the worst diseases known to man,” lined up for treatment on the first morning. Over two hundred patients were receiving attention within a month.<sup>23</sup>

Freud, hypersensitive as ever to competing developments, had gotten wind of “this combination of church and psychotherapy”—the quoted words are his—and taken note of its irresistible appeal to the public. At Clark, as a further concession to his Protestant audience, he contrived a rhetorical flourish that would not have played nearly so well in his native (Catholic) Austria. “To-day,” he said, “neurosis takes the place of the monasteries which used to be the refuge of all whom life had disappointed or who felt too weak to face it.”<sup>24</sup>

Freud’s trope got at an important truth about the analytic discipline: it was the antithesis of other-worldliness. Psychotherapy engaged with the most mundane details of human experience. It could emancipate its beneficiaries from the monasticism of mental illness because of its attentiveness to the minutiae and plenitude of everyday life. The analyst reached the depths by making a thorough investigation of the surface: to use the formulation of Five Lectures, he grasped the disease through its symptoms.

The speeches at Clark identify three discrete areas of analytic scrutiny. These are hysterical, or more generally, neurotic symptoms; dreams; and seemingly inconsequential actions like slips of the tongue. In each instance, the outward content is a distortion of, and proxy for, an unacknowledged complex or wish, which has been repressed into the

unconscious. The physician treats the patient by overcoming his or her resistance to admitting the wish; but in order to do this, he has to be adept enough as a reader of the real to move from the manifest signs of neurosis to the hidden causes of it. And he has to look almost as much as he listens.

Freud's account of the analyst's charge reminds one of Kracauer's description of the cinema as "the redemption of physical reality." His successful therapist is a close-up mechanism zeroing in on the trifles that elude the careless haste of others. For the therapist, "there is nothing trivial, nothing arbitrary or haphazard." Everything human is worthy of notice; everything, no matter how insignificant, can open vistas of discernment: "playing about and fiddling with things, humming tunes, fingering parts of one's own body or one's clothing and so on." These "small things" give away "[a] man's most intimate secrets." Freud's comparison of choice is to a microscope (physical science's close-up), and he likens his technique's adversaries to those who would ignorantly "reject the results of a microscopic examination because it could not be confirmed on the anatomical preparation with the naked eye." The analyst's trained vision, like the moving picture camera, discovers meaning and value where ordinary eyesight is blind.<sup>25</sup>

Elsewhere Freud was frank about the duality of psychoanalysis as an optical as well as an aural method. He characterized the doctor as a human ear who "must adjust himself to the patient as a telephone receiver is adjusted to the transmitting microphone."<sup>26</sup> But the material rising from the patient's unconscious suggested the images recorded by "a compound microscope or a photographic apparatus."<sup>27</sup> Papers on technique foregrounded the role of physical observation in emotional healing. From his privileged position behind the couch, the analyst could spot the tell-tale sign of a young woman "hurriedly pull[ing] the



hem of her skirt over her exposed ankles." He could note the fastidious care with which a self-proclaimed aesthete straightened the crease in his trousers. According to Freud, these gestures were as self-convicting as any utterance. They broadcast the narcissistic exhibitionism that would occupy the female patient's treatment and the "coprophilia" or anal compulsiveness afflicting the young man.<sup>28</sup>

The psychoanalyst's perceptions were "cinematic," not "theatrical" or reciprocal. The object of study, the reclining analysand, could see nothing of the physician. Freud had abandoned Josef Breuer's hypnosis technique of face-to-face colloquy because it obstructed free association and because, as he admitted, he could not tolerate "being stared at by other people for eight hours a day (or more)."<sup>29</sup> In the security of the consulting room, the therapist and the patient were alone, but the healer did the sufferer one better. He metamorphosed into an ideal type of the privatized modern individual by placing himself outside the circuit of surveillance and, voyeur-like (or moviegoer-like), watching without being observed. Patients who dared to overstep the line of separation paid for it. Those who saved a last thought for the moment when they rose and turned toward Freud were cured of the indiscretion by having their parting words raked over mercilessly at the next session.

The talking cure's alertness to exteriors complements the movies' diving beneath the parade of surfaces. Both projects honor the visible and are at the same time capable, in the phrase of Walter Benjamin, who was attuned to both, of a revolutionary "deepening of apperception."<sup>30</sup> Moreover, like the cinema, the analytic paradigm can be related to the imperial design of the twentieth century. In this case, the target of conquest is internal space, and the United States succeeded to the mantle of a colossus even closer to extinction

than the British. America as the therapeutic citadel supplanted the Hapsburg Empire, in whose aging capital city of Vienna—once home to Mesmer and to Gall (the father of phrenology)—Freud devised his treatment for mental illness.

Additionally, in its transportation across the ocean, the Freudian enterprise acquired the democratic coloration of the environment. Freud for certain did not see his creation this way. In public statements if not always in practice, he portrayed the therapeutic relationship as a strict hierarchy. (This is not even to mention the travesty, as he considered it, of conscripting his method to promote “the pursuit of happiness.”) And there does appear to be a dissonance between the structure of psychoanalysis, where the troubled individual comes to learn about his emotional make-up from a stranger, and democratic egalitarianism. The analytic dyad, with its priest of consciousness and suffering supplicant, seems galaxies away from the direct apperception of the cinema.

Yet if we take a more historical look, we can see how the therapeutic configuration represents a this-worldly climax of the Protestant sentiment Freud appealed to in his Clark lectures. It culminates the drive toward self-textualization that began with the Reformation. In the seventeenth century, the Bible was known as the “Paper Pope” because reading it enabled believers to bypass the authority of the Church and imbibe the Word of God from His text. The believer was to be alone with the Scriptures; that was why the emigrant Puritans gave such importance to literacy. Two centuries later, the New England Transcendentalists, led by Emerson, pressed Protestant anti-institutionalism to a further level. They fired off an attack against books as an impediment between the individual and his encounter with Divinity. One was still a “reader,” in Emerson’s conceptualization, but the text was no longer a piece of writing: it was God in Nature.

Emerson urged his listeners to study this volume directly, not “other men’s transcripts of their readings.” As he put it in “The American Scholar” (1837), “I had better never see a book than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system.”

The last quotation suggests that Emerson’s real subject was the self, and at times he came near to admitting as much. In “The Divinity School Address” (1838), he praised Jesus for teaching the eternal truth, distorted by the Christian churches, that “God incarnates himself in man.” Spirit lies within us as well as inhering in Nature, Emerson insisted, and the seeker in the woods is also conning his own biography. “[T]he ancient precept, ‘Know thyself,’ and the modern precept, ‘Study nature,’ become at last one maxim.”

From the Catholic Church to God’s Word in the Scriptures to God in the natural environment to the God within: psychoanalysis at once secularized and added a new self-reflexivity to this Dissenter line of literary-theological development. Is it any wonder that Freud first caught on in the state where the Puritans landed and Emerson made his residence? The “text” to be read, mulled over, deciphered, struggled with, and interpreted this time was the individual self; the analyst, so authoritative in one respect, was in another but the paid co-worker, the fellow exegete, in the process of discovery. A search that had been steadily bending homeward had finally completed its journey. It had reached its destination on the couch, where--in Emerson’s phrase—it was always “the age of the first person singular.”

This spotlight on the self points to another sense in which the analytic hour--and the movies--are democratic. They annul the determination of the past: the hold of birth

and family. Jay Gatsby stated the democratic credo in extremis when, in an exchange with Nick Carraway, he exclaimed, "Can't repeat the past? Why of course you can!" To repeat the past is to have the power to control it, to undo it and remake it. The conviction that one is not the prisoner of one's origins is, of course, what the American dream is all about; it is also the premise of the cinema and of psychoanalysis. Let us recall Munsterberg's psychology of the photoplay: mind triumphs "over the unalterable law of the outer world," so that "[t]ime is left behind" and "[m]an becomes boy" (p. 183). (The technical possibilities of the flashback have been elaborated thematically in films like Back to the Future [1985], The Terminator [1984], and Pleasantville ([1998].) One could even say that the visual bias of film, being spatial rather than temporal, militates against the very idea of a history.<sup>31</sup> It is all the more striking, then, that the talking cure, with its accent on language, shares a similar faith in time's plasticity. The patient on the couch revisits the past in order to escape from bondage to it and to master it. The goal is to live fully in the present without (as Freud wrote of hysterics) "suffer[ing] from reminiscences."<sup>32</sup> Psychological well being, in the analytic system, emancipates us from the ascriptiveness of emotional feudalism, from the beginnings into which we are born, which constrain us, and which we gain the strength and resourcefulness to leave behind.

I want to end with an excursus on Frank Norris's McTeague, a novel that closes out the American nineteenth century. (It was published in 1899, the same year as The Interpretation of Dreams.) McTeague provides still another angle on the sources and convolutions of the country's romance with the cinematic and the psychotherapeutic. This story of an Irish miner turned dentist turned murderer illuminates the transition to a

consumer society that at once trafficks in images and abstractions and overheats the needs of the body. Norris plots the action as a rise and fall. His hero, a near “caveman” (Lindsay’s epithet for the moviegoing slum dweller) spends the first half of the story advancing into a “civilized,” middle-class existence. A fight with his best friend at the exact midpoint halts his upward progress; soon afterward, the protagonist receives a letter informing him that he can no longer practice dentistry without a degree. He loses his job, and the novel’s second half chronicles his disintegration into atavism and bestiality.

Norris’s fiction has palpable connections to both the photoplay and the Freudian worldview. McTeague is constructed as “a series of pictures.”<sup>33</sup> Erich von Stroheim, the screen actor and director, was so taken with its filmic potential that he used the book as the basis for his costly and controversial Greed (1924), one of the greatest silent movies as well as one of the last. Norris was steeped in late-nineteenth-century psychology, especially the theories of Joseph LeConte, whom he had studied with at Berkeley. In the novel, he presents his subjects as human “animals,” prey to inner urges and recidivistic pulls over which they have minimal control. Norris makes only passing reference to film and mentions Freud not at all. But on the evidence of McTeague, the age of psychoanalysis could only have been the age of the cinema, because both regimes were erected on a calculus of desire.<sup>34</sup>

The 1890s experienced a prolonged economic downturn, known, in precedence to the Crash of 1929, as the “great depression.” Observers differed on the causes, but one culprit, all agreed, was the vast over-production of commodities that, thanks to corporate consolidation and improvements in technology, had been building for a decade. With the recovery of 1897, a consensus began to develop that more effort would have to be paid to

consumption as an engine of growth. A revision in societal ethos, a shift from making things as the center of life to a greater emphasis on expending them, held the key to forestalling further depressions. Not that an appetite for goods, or even an embryonic “consumer revolution,” hadn’t flourished earlier. What qualified as new was the magnitude of the reorientation, along with the widespread acceptance of its economic rationale. (It was apparent as well that the domestic population couldn’t handle the task alone. “Free-trade” imperialism would have to pry open the world’s markets as another emporium for the American products that would otherwise rot in warehouses.)

McTeague alludes to this transition in at least three ways, and the first helps to clarify the change in degree. The story gives an unusually prominent role to Zerkow the junkman. Rag collectors had always existed. But the Polish Jew makes his living from the detritus of consumer society, from the plenitude of “things of iron and cloth and wood... that a great city sloughs off in its daily life.”<sup>35</sup> Maria Macapa visits his shop with a pillowcase of items to sell: old dental tools and gold fillings, stone jugs, whiskey flasks, a cracked pitcher, half-worn silk shoes, cast-off garments, magazines, sacks, bottles, and bits of iron. Never before has there been such a volume and bewildering array of junk, of quickly used up and discarded objects.

The second piece of evidence is the pivotal event of Trina’s winning five thousand dollars in the lottery. This miraculous news signals the supercession of productionist values. Easy money obtained through luck underscores the fact that hard work and saving have lost their ideological rationale. And finally, the prevalence of consumption reveals itself on the very first page, where McTeague eats his Sunday dinner of “thick, gray soup; heavy, underdone meat, very hot, on a cold plate; two kinds of

vegetables; and a sort of suet pudding, full of strong butter and sugar.” He washes down the meal with a pitcher of steam beer and drops off to sleep while “smoking his huge porcelain pipe” (p. 5). The hero’s tastes will be upgraded a bit by his wife, but this scene sets the tone for the novel: the mouth has moved ahead of the hands as the primary human organ in a social order of incorporation.

Has there ever been a novel in which so many things are thrust into people’s mouths and eaten, drunk, smoked, licked, munched, sucked, masticated, and swallowed? Picnics, wedding feasts, stories of gold plate, a gilded tooth—these are the least of it. McTeague, as a dentist, constantly services characters’ mouths with his fingers and operating instruments. When he anesthetizes Trina, he is seized by lust for the defenseless girl and leans over to kiss “her grossly, full on the mouth” (p. 28). (In Greed, which reproduces this moment cinematically, it looks as though Zasu Pitts is being devoured alive by Gibson Gowland—a prophecy of what is to come.) The hero performs a trick of stuffing a billiard ball into his mouth, and when he and Marcus Schouler have their fight, Marcus takes a bite out of his ear. Later, during his descent, McTeague regularly tortures Trina by chewing on her fingers, and she grows so fond of her gold coins that she puts the smaller ones “in her mouth and jingled them there” (p. 238). Not to consume, in this novel, is to die: Marcus and McTeague, their useless hands cuffed together, perish in the desert because they have nothing to drink.

The tale’s obsession with ingesting orally contrasts to another function of the mouth that seems on the path to obsolescence: speaking. Or rather using language as a tool of communication and truth telling. “No speech,” “No speech,” McTeague mutters at the impromptu party to celebrate the lottery winnings (pp. 95-6); and this turns out to be

an accurate description of many of Norris's characters. The dentist, whose head is "quite empty of all thought" (p. 18), can scarcely form a coherent sentence. His proposals to Trina consist of a series of repeated importunities: "Will you?" "Will you?" and "Ah, come on!" (pp. 29-30, 69). For most of the novel, Old Grannis and Miss Baker conduct a silent courtship, sitting nearby each other in their adjoining rooms and never uttering a syllable. Those who are more ambitious linguistically turn words into empty ciphers. Maria's recitals of family riches are pure fantasy, and Marcus gets a reputation as a politician despite (or because of) the disconnect between his "empty phrases" (p. 13) and his actions. The high incidence of first- and second-generation foreigners speaking heavily accented English further diminishes the importance of language in Norris's San Francisco.

As words recede, images move to the forefront. The reason is simple: visual representations are more easily consumed than verbal ones, requiring no education and relatively little intelligence to appreciate them. McTeague, "too hopelessly stupid," to get anything out of his dentistry books (p. 6), has a soft spot for engravings, lithographs, colored prints, and other pictures, and he and Trina move into a photographer's studio when they marry. (The apartment, writes Norris, "was prolific in pictures" [p. 125]). With Trina's family, the hero attends one of the first movie shows in American literature, a kinoscope exhibition that is part of a vaudeville program and that features a cable car speeding toward the astonished audience. (Mrs. Siette, Trina's Swiss-German mother, shrieks in disbelief, "It's all a drick!" [p. 85]).

Significantly, it is a letter regarding his lack of a diploma—pages of writing about a page of writing—that brings McTeague's "visual"/consumerist idyll to an end. (His



incomprehension is typical: “I don’ know,” “I don’ know,” he keeps muttering about the notice, whose meaning has to be explained to him [p. 200]). Once he loses his practice, and with it the possibility of continued indulgence, the protagonist and Trina are forced to give up the photographer’s suite and to sell almost all their cherished possessions, including the “framed photograph of McTeague and his wife in their wedding finery, the one that had been taken immediately after the marriage” (pp. 218-9). McTeague slips back into his former habits—steam beer instead of bottled, etc.—but the erosion of middle-class standards is merely a stage in the gradual relinquishing of consumption itself.

And here is where the psychological dimension of the novel takes over. (LeConte’s thesis about reversion to animality may have inspired Norris, but his insights are solidly “Freudian.”) Desire, once awakened, does not disappear just because the characters are no longer able to satisfy it through the usual channels. It has to be addressed in other, less normal, ways. As the frustrations endured by the McTeagues accumulate, their unmet desires mutate into pathology and seek ever more perverse outlets. The boundary line between persons and objects or consumable goods—a line never very secure in the text anyway—begins to collapse altogether. The dentist gnaws on his wife’s fingers, “crunching and grinding them with his immense teeth,” until they become infected and have to be amputated (p. 239). Trina, for her part, develops an erotic attachment to her lottery winnings. She withdraws the gold from her uncle’s business and, heaping the coins into a pile, whispers endearments to them: “Ah, the dear money, the dear money, ...I love you so!” (p. 238). (These are scenes to rival Freud’s case studies.) Later she actually spreads the gold pieces between her sheets and climbs into

bed with them, and when McTeague manages to steal some of the money, she weeps over the empty bag “as other women would weep over a dead baby’s shoe” (p. 273). Note the reductionism at work here: Trina’s hoarding is not the antithesis but the summit of consumerism. She commits the category mistake of consuming the gold itself, treating a medium of exchange as a source of bodily pleasure in its own right, rather than as a means of acquiring other things to consume

The couple is reduced to renting the rooms formerly occupied by Maria and Zerkow, the very site where the junkman had stored his debris. The shop is “the last abiding place, the almshouse, of such articles as had outlived their usefulness” (p. 39), and Trina and McTeague have themselves become the junk, the waste product, of urban society. In a curious interlude, the dentist tries to wean himself from consumerist habits, practically from civilization itself. Unemployed and penniless, he goes for walks along the ocean and spends hours fishing for perch, cooking them over an outdoor fire and “eating them without salt or knife or fork” (p. 257). There is no returning to the past, though, and McTeague’s experiment in subsistence fails. Starving, he crawls back to Trina for help; when she refuses, he murders her for the gold.

What is often overlooked about the hero’s degeneration is that it quickens his intelligence. This might seem an impossibility with a character whose mental shortcomings are so conspicuous. McTeague, Norris says more than once, “never went to the bottom of things” (p. 150). Yet under the duress of his suffering, this creature of limited interiority proves capable of surprising flashes of insight. He starts to speak “with an unwonted rapidity, his wits sharp, his ideas succeeding each other quickly” (p. 230). When he is flight from the posse, he reveals an intuitive consciousness of danger

that is part brute instinct but also part heightened sensitivity, and that “stirred and woke and roweled him to be moving on” (p. 316). He has dreams that warn him to make haste. Not by accident does the protagonist end up back in Placer County, digging into the bowels of the earth as he had as a boy. It is as though, in this “primordial” landscape (as Norris describes it), McTeague has gotten into touch with something deep in his psyche.

The brute thinks. He recognizes the similarity between his boring into the mountains and his aborted career as a dentist:

Once it even occurred to him that there was a resemblance between his present work and the profession he had been forced to abandon. In the Burly drill he saw a queer counterpart to his old-time dental engine; and what were the drills and chucks but enormous hoe-excavators, hard-bits, and burrs? It was the same work he had so often performed in his Parlors, only magnified, made monstrous, distorted, and grotesqued, the caricature of dentistry (p. 298).

McTeague now successfully goes to the bottom of things. He befriends the scientifically-minded Cribbens, who can tell from the outward signs of a rock formation whether it contains a lode of precious ore. Together the two men hit pay dirt in the ravines of Gold Gulch.

What are we to make of this strange accession of awareness in Norris’s dim-witted hero? One way to read the change, ahistorical but highly suggestive for this argument, would be as an omen. Near the end of the novel, as McTeague hurries on through Death Valley with the posse in pursuit, Norris compares “the infinite reaches of dazzling-white alkali” to “an immeasurable scroll unrolled from horizon to horizon” (pp. 326-7). Space and writing page, text and white screen are one here, just as Norris’s

caveman is both a moviegoer, a consumer of images, and someone suddenly beginning to think about himself, hungry not only for things to eat and drink, to put into his mouth, but for insight into his existence. The hints of McTeague's mental growth are fragmentary, and they shouldn't be exaggerated. But they are present as an intimation of the popularizing—or is the better word vulgarizing?—of therapies among Americans during the next century. (Recall the huge turnout for the Emmanuel Movement's first advertised sessions.) For the system of consumption would not only define all people—men, women, and children too—as desiring beings, it would make available to them, as one more object to be purchased and possessed, the self-understanding that Emerson found in nature and Freud in the interaction of patient and physician.

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase is from Robert H. Wiebe's The Search for Order: 1877-1920 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> Warren and Brandeis, "The Right to Privacy," Harvard Law Review 4 (December 1890), 193-220; quotations from 196, 211.

<sup>3</sup> Lindsay, The Art of the Moving Picture (rev. ed., 1922; rpt., New York: The Modern Library, 2000), p. 124.

<sup>4</sup> Lindsay, *ibid.*, pp. 47-8; Wright, "Psychiatry Comes to Harlem," Free World 12 (September 1946), 49-51. On the psychoanalytic tendency to equate black people with the unconscious, see Joel Pfister: "On Conceptualizing the Cultural History of Emotional and Psychological Life in America," in Pfister and Nancy Schnog, eds., Inventing the Psychological: Toward a Cultural History of Emotional Life in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 17-59; and Pfister, Staging Depth: Eugene O'Neill and the Politics of Psychological Discourse (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> On Freud's dislike of the US, see Peter Gay, Freud: A Life for Our Time (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1988), p. 56. Stephen Heath notes Freud's suspicion of the moving pictures in "Cinema and Psychoanalysis," in Janet Bergstrom, ed., Endless Night: Cinema and Psychoanalysis, Parallel Histories (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1999), pp. 25-56.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Martin Jay, The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 173.

<sup>7</sup> Partisans of this point of view are legion. A good example is Mitchell Stephens, The Rise of the Image and the Fall of the Word (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> The best treatments of image/text heterogeneity are by W.J.T. Mitchell. See his books, Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986) and Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Jones, Years of Maturity 1901-1919 (New York: Basic Books, 1953), p. 57. This is the second of Jones's three-volume The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud.

<sup>10</sup> Munsterberg, Psychotherapy (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1909), p. 125. For information on Munsterberg, I have consulted Matthew Hale, Jr., Human Science and Social Order: Hugo Munsterberg and the Origins of Applied Psychology (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1980) and Phyllis Keller, States of Belonging: German-American Intellectuals and the First World War (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979), esp. pp. 5-118. An excellent discussion of Munsterberg on the movies, which I discovered after drafting my own treatment, appears in Friedrich A. Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, California: Stanford Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 160-172.

<sup>11</sup> See, for an example, his study titled The Americans, trans. Edwin B. Holt (New York: McClure, Phillips and Co., 1904).

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- <sup>12</sup> Lindsay, Art of the Moving Picture, p. 133..
- <sup>13</sup> The Photoplay: A Psychological Study (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1916), p. 183. Additional citations are identified by page number in the text.
- <sup>14</sup> Blumenberg, The Legitimacy of the Modern Age trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983), pp. 364, *passim*. "Knowledge drive" is Ludwig Feuerbach's phrase.
- <sup>15</sup> In Benjamin, Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn, with an introduction by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 233.
- <sup>16</sup> Kracauer, Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality (1960; rpt., Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997), p. 299, for the quotation; pp. 50-52, on science and cinema.
- <sup>17</sup> For examples of these positions, see Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema" (1975), in Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy, eds., Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings (4th ed., New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 690-707; and Christian Metz, The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema, trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1982).
- <sup>18</sup> From "A Course of Treatment" (1932), in Eisenstein, Film Form: Essays in Film Theory, trans. Jay Leyda (San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1949), pp. 103, 105. Also see Bela Balazs, Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art, trans. Edith Bone (New York: Roy Publishers, 1953), esp. pp. 118-138.
- <sup>19</sup> Quoted in Bert Cardullo, Harry Geduld, Ronald Gottesman, and Leigh Woods, eds., Playing to the Camera: Film Actors Discuss Their Craft (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1998), p. 196. On the theatrical origins of filmic restraint, see Michael R. Booth, Theatre in the Victorian Age (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), and Randall Knoper, Acting Naturally: Mark Twain and the Culture of Performance (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 55-95.
- <sup>20</sup> Quoted in Playing to the Camera, p. 307. I have previously discussed some of these issues in Differences in the Dark: American Movies and English Theater (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 62-4.
- <sup>21</sup> Art of the Moving Picture, pp. 111-2, 139.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 166-7.
- <sup>23</sup> The quotations are in Eric Caplan, Mind Games: American Culture and the Birth of Psychotherapy (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), p. 122; see pp. 117-48 on the Emmanuel Movement's importance.
- <sup>24</sup> The first quotation appears in Nathan G. Hale, Jr., Freud and the Americans: The Beginnings of Psychoanalysis in the United States, 1876-1917 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 226. The second comes from Five Lectures, trans. James Strachey (1909; rpt., New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1961), p. 56.
- <sup>25</sup> Five Lectures, pp. 39-41.

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26. "Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psycho-Analysis" (1912), in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958), vol. 12, p. 115.
27. The Interpretation of Dreams, trans. James Strachey (1899; rpt., New York: Avon Books, 1965), p. 574. Freud's accent on the visual declined over time, and in later pieces, most famously in the "Note on the Mystic Writing Pad" (1925), linguistic metaphors more or less supplanted optical ones as the signifiers of the psychic mechanism. The shift to a trope of writing has been noted by Jacques Derrida, among others (see "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in his Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978], pp. 196-231).
28. "On Beginning the Treatment" (1913), in Standard Works, vol.12, p. 138.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
30. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production," in Illuminations, p. 235.
31. Paul Morantz Cohen proposes an argument like this one in her Silent Film and the Triumph of the American Myth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
32. Five Lectures, p. 12.
33. Norris, "The Mechanics of Fiction," in The Responsibilities of the Novelist (1903; rpt, New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), p. 254.
34. For relevant readings of Norris' novel, see Walter Benn Michaels, The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Fiction at the Turn of the Century (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 137-180; and Mark Seltzer, Bodies and Machines (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 25-44. On desire and Freudianism, see Lawrence Birken, Consuming Desire: Sexual Science and the Emergence of a Culture of Abundance, 1817-1914 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988). On the historical background, a good study is Nell Irvin Painter, Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919 (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1987).
35. Quotation from the Signet Classic reprint of McTeague (New York: New American Library, 1981), p.37. Subsequent page numbers are cited in the text.