

BEFORE THE INTERNET

WHAT 90S CULTURE CAN TEACH USE ABOUT TODAY

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~50k words

Note: This is, I think, a complete draft: I don't anticipate adding much more content, although I intend to go over the whole text at least once more, perhaps adding and removing a paragraph here and there and generally tidying. Although I myself have no intention to make substantial changes, I'm extremely open to suggestions for changes from readers (one possibility is to add a few more references to British politics and culture, of which there are few in this draft.) Thanks for your attention---please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions or comments.

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INTRODUCTION

What is it like to live today? To be the first era to rely on the internet for work, socialising, dating, money, entertainment, and more? To have no long-term prospects of jobs, to be priced out of the housing market, harangued by ironic kekking Nazis, presided over by Trump and an ideology, neoliberalism, that has now been proven to lead to massive inequality and corruption, and not to be the rising tide that lifts all boats?

The Germans have a nice word for what I'm looking for--Zeitgeist, or spirit of the age. What is the spirit of our age? What does living in such a world do to us; how does what it does to us get reflected in the art we produce, the way we communicate, the lives we lead? What is particular and *new* about our experience?

These are the big questions I hope to answer or at least to ask properly. I hope to do so by what might seem initially like a somewhat roundabout way: by considering, in detail, what it *was* like to live yesterday, and in particular to live in the last pre-internet culture, the era of generation x, the 1990s. The thought underlying this is twofold. We can only understand the present if we understand the past, because only then we can see what's *unique* to the present. What's unique to the present is what we get when we subtract from the sum total of present things those which were already there in the past. As we'll see, income equality, precarity, irony--these all are features of the 1990s socio-culturalo-politico-economic scene. Indeed, I will argue that much of what we take as definitive of our age was already around then, and will present a history of these big concepts—how income inequality arose from neoliberal economics starting in the early 70s, how precarity arose with the branding revolution of the late 80s, how irony and detachment arose as a result of political scandal and the omnipresence of the media. We'll come to see that some of the things we think of as definitive of our age aren't, in fact, so.

This can be helpful. If we see how, for example, the great creators--and there are, undoubtedly, a range of great artists in the 1990s--responded to these situations, we can maybe correct for blindspots in our own understanding of them. Moreover, we can then trace the *development* of the thing in question, of irony, for example, and thus not only say what, but ask why. We can try to trace the development of irony from works like Seinfeld and The Simpsons through the so-called new sincerity, through the development of ironic Nazism in encyclopedia dramatica and up to the present day. The hope is we can understand *why* some young people support Donald Trump, or why we like @dril so much.

The 1990s are the perfect period to study for this. It presents to us a neoliberal society in many ways similar to ours, but separated by the era-defining disruptions of the early noughties: 9/11, the mainstreaming of the internet, and the financial crisis of 2008. It is thus simultaneously close to and far from us; we can use its closeness to see its attitudes to our in many respects similar situation, while we can use its distance to track what has changed, and moreover how things have evolved from here to now.

Generation X also has another advantage thanks to their place in time. To see this, recall some basic points of history, to be considered in more detail later: in the 50s and 60s, America was perhaps the greatest powerful economy the world has ever seen, it was, at least when squinted at, something to be proud of, and it was more equal than it's ever been before or since. From 1974, things politically and economically collapsed: it was the year of Watergate and an oil crisis that caused wages to fall. This collapse spurred conservative economic theory by seemingly falsifying a key feature of the opposing economic view (stagflation--all this will be explained in due course), which in turn paved the way for Reaganomics, and the massive inequality that has been our lot for the past 30-40 years. Things didn't improve: we went from the folksy, quick-witted, and cruel Reagan to Clinton, who claimed to feel people's pain but who made the poor poorer, freed the banks from regulation, and who was never far from career ruining sex scandals.

The key point is that, even if, in the 90s, one felt things were socially, politically and morally declining, there was, for the adults of the period, something better on the edge of past time. They could remember, or almost remember, a time before things got messed up. They were thus well placed to analyse neoliberal society, because they had something to compare it to, and this gap, and the nostalgia it generates is, I suggest, one main cause of the cynicism or disaffectedness or ironic distance people tend to associate with the 90s, a fact only compounded by the political and economic developments of the Clintonian third way democrats, which seemed, at least initially, to further show the supremacy of neoliberalism (the seemingly anti-Keynesian recovery from the crisis of the early 90s) but also its inherent cruelty and unfairness (the welfare reforms of 1996, the banking deregulation of 1999, all of which will be discussed in a later chapter.)

It's different for the young adults of today. For most of us, the pre-1974 era of prosperity and equality (prosperity and equality provided one were white and male and straight and middle-class, which must always be born in mind) belongs to history. All young people know is neoliberalism, and so have nothing to compare our current state with: the past is more of the same, and we have never not lived in a world where inequality predominates, where things are patently *unfair*. This is a disadvantage: having no different past in view, the distinctness of the present becomes obscure. Generation X had this advantage; and I hope by attending to its culture, we can come to possess it too.

There's a related point. The 90s were an era of relative stability. Someone looking back to 1983 from 2000 would see, certainly, a different world in many respects, but there would also be a clear sense of continuity. By contrast, if you consider the last 17 year period, there has been so many big events that it can be hard to incorporate them into a coherent picture. One might think that we're in an era that can only be explained by pointing to the exogenous shocks to our political, economic, and cultural system that the noughties brought. And this leads, in a way similar to that just mentioned, to adopting an ahistorical viewpoint. But again, this is to miss out some important things. When faced with the prevalence of precarious employment, we might try to say it's just an after effect of the crash; by pulling back a bit, though, we can see that it isn't.

Because of all this, I think the artists of the 90s perceive more clearly than we do the weirdnesses of neoliberal society, and I intend to show how they do so in the course of the book, and hopefully thereby make those weirdnesses fresh to us.

Let me take an example, to be treated of at much more length later. A brand is a strange thing. It's the driving force of our economy, but it is, almost literally, a distinction without a difference. Set a Nike shoe and a generic one, or Coca Cola and a generic soda; there's very little difference between the two products: bits of material or combinations of chemicals, one of which has a tick on it or comes in a red can, and the other of which doesn't.

We are somewhat numb to this presence of brands, in a way that the 90s from Generation X at the start of the decade to *Fight Club* at its end were not. Try to tell someone of my generation about the wickedness of brands is likely to receive a sarcastic 'yeah yeah Tyler Durden' or 'how profound Melanie Klein'. It's cliché to get worked up about them.

But that's a mistake on our part. Branding is weird, and we should not be blind to it. Moreover, recognising this weirdness, we can look again at features of our own existence which, while we may dimly acknowledge them, we are wont to pass by in silence. We speak mockingly, for example, about 'personal brands' these days, but there *are* personal brands. We are, after all, products on social media, in the sense that it's our activities that cause people to use social media, which in turn allow advertisers to sell advertising on our feed. Slightly less literally, think of the process of filtering that goes on before you post something, or the claim that we're trapped in ideological bubbles, and then think of Hotelling's law, a paradoxical feature of economic behaviour according to which two competing products ought to strive to be as similar to one another as possible (two coffee shops choosing a location for their business, with a whole town to choose from, would be sensible to choose more or less beside one another in the centre of town).

Thinking about 90s work then can get us to focus on the ubiquity of brands, and once we're thus focussed we can see what brands are now, how they've developed, how others look at it them, and thus can make this piece of our social reality a bit clearer.

I will do this for a range of different phenomena. One of the most baffling features of contemporary society is the widespread use of a very confusing irony, exhibited by pepe Donald Trump followers on reddit, or again by leftists on twitter who use scatological humour to respond to the latest right-wing enormity. What's the root of this insincere, distanced, mocking attitude? I will attempt to answer this by looking at the great comedies of the 90s, such as *The Simpsons* and *Seinfeld*.

Or, think again about the widely recognised epidemic of mental illness and, especially in the US, drug addiction. This is a central concern of to my mind the most interesting popular writer of the decade, David Foster Wallace. His work can be seen, I'll claim, as an attempt to make sense of such illness, to give it a meaning beyond the neurobiological picture, now widely accepted by most all of us, that it's a question of neurochemical imbalances correctible by drugs. And I'll claim it retains its force to do so because the concept of mental illness, as I'll show, hadn't become completely mainstream by then—it was the decade of Prozac, but it hadn't yet become received wisdom. We, however, are in danger of being blinded by the received wisdom (which, as we'll see, is based on very bad science), and I'll be concerned to ask what that does to our conceptions of ourself to think that way, to have always a few clicks away a Wikipedia of the DSM to pathologise ourselves with.

So that's the plan—look at some works of art and their ideological context, both for their own sake but also the better to understand our own times. To this end, the book consists of alternating chapters the first of which analyses a work of art, and the second of which describes various important ideas, in economics, politics, philosophy, business, neurochemistry, technology, and so on. I will, in the course of my discussion, alight upon seven concepts I think are important:

- Nostalgia
- Neoliberal economics
- Postmodernism
- Cynicism/Irony
- Branding and the Dephysicalisation of Business
- Political Disaffection
- Mental Illness

And I will end the book by considering how things stand with these concepts today.

Let me end this introduction with two notes. Firstly, you might wonder how I could possibly presume to have the authority to talk about such a wide range of topics. I have training in philosophy, but not in any of the other disciplines. Is this not wildly overambitious and arrogant?

Ultimately, that's for you to decide but my belief is that the world is much more intelligible than we tend to assume and that, even if the advanced research in any given field is beyond the layman, the basics aren't. Moreover, I think one needs to understand mildly technical ideas in order fully to see the big picture they form part of. So if it is wildly overambitious and arrogant, I hope it is for a good reason. Second, I focus entirely on the US in what follows. I could have written about the other culture 90s I know well, that of the UK. Had I done so I would have talked about New Labour and Brit Pop, Brass Eye and Trainspotting (book and film), among other things. But I'm not sure if there's a coherent narrative to be formed out of that pop culture in a way that there is for the US, and, anyway, it would have required a much bigger book than I could expect people to read.

CHAPTER 1: GENERATION X AND NOSTALGIA

On February 28th 1991, the Gulf War ended. This was a war waged by the United States when Iraq's ruler Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, the first war to be broadcast round the clock, and viewers could tune in to hear news anchors praise the technical prowess of the rockets as they watched them destroy foreign cities, and do so, those same viewers might think, in order to protect American oil interests, or, even more cynically, to increase America's faith and confidence in the concept of war itself.

Into such a world—depressing, media-saturated, and politically alienated—was released Coupland's *Generation X*. If you haven't heard of the book, you've probably heard of the term: generation x are those born after the boomers but before the millennials, so maybe roughly from mid-sixties to early eighties. Coupland's book was intending to give a voice to the children of the boomers born after the war, and I think that studying it will give us a better sense of Generation X's millennial children.

With that said, let's turn to the book which gave the generation its name. *Generation X* was published in 1991, and according to Wikipedia it sold poorly at first but, according to an NYT article sourced from the open encyclopaedia, as of 1994 there were 300k copies printed, which, it is fair to say, is pretty good for non-genre fiction.

Coupland was lauded as a voice for a generation and although he wasn't so fond of this (Wikipedia again, but you can follow the links if you wish), going as far as to say there was no such thing as generation x, his novel holds up, 26 years on, as an account of the life of one who grew up in the 1980s and facing the nineties. In particular it holds up because it presents the lives of people less desensitised as we are to some of the weird features of what some call 'post-industrial' capitalism, from whose viewpoint we can learn things important for our lives.

There isn't that much of a plot. It's about three friends, Andy (who narrates), Dag, and Claire, who live in Palm Springs, a town where rich people 'come to buy back their youth' (*Generation X*, Abacus, 1991, p12---all subsequent references are to this) where the

protagonist's dogs, on the second page, get their snouts in a bag of fat removed by liposuction, where 'gray hair gobble[]s up the jewels and perfumes' (p11) at one of the protagonists' work, and where there is 'no weather.... also no middle class' (p12). There is just the affluent and those whom they serve.

They have come here to work jobs that are beneath them, what Coupland calls, in one of the book's many coinages, 'McJobs', that is 'low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future job in the service sector' (p6) which were, indeed, when he was writing, a central prop of the economy, escaping work in soul destroying office jobs among yuppies, of the sort that would be satirised in Mike Judge's still highly watchable *Office Space* of 1994.

Out here, in the desert which in a microcosm is what the the whole US was and still is becoming—a world of poor and rich sharply divided---they spend their lives telling stories, some real and some surreal, about their life or loosely allegorised versions thereof. From the very beginning--the whole book is very readable, but if you want to quickly get at its pith, the first chapter is representative--there's a sense of disappointment, a sense that they are missing out. His friends' smiles

are the same as the smiles worn by people who have been good-naturedly fleeced, but fleeced nonetheless, in public and on a New York sidewalk by card-sharks, and who are unable because of social convention to show their anger, who don't want to look like poor sports (p8)

These are people belonging to a generation who feel *short-changed*. And this is the first thing I want to focus on. To feel short changed or cheated is to feel that you have less than you deserve. And for the protagonists of *Generation X*, the reason they are able to feel that way is for two reasons: the presence in their lives, in the novel magnified, of the older generation, but also by memory.

The former is revealed in their work and in particular by the presence of their luckily successful bosses. The following, from when Dag storms out of his job, could be spoken today:

Do you really think we *enjoy* hearing about your brand-new million-dollar home when we can barely afford to eat Kraft Dinner sandwiches in our grimy little show boxes and we're pushing *thirty*? A home you won in a genetic lottery, I might add, sheerly by dint of your having been born at the right time in history? You'd last about ten minutes if you were my age[...I have to endure pinheads like you rusting about me for the rest of my life, always grabbing the best piece of cake first and then putting a barbed-wire fence around the rest. (p26)

But if this is a reaction most young people today can immediately recognise, the protagonists' *reaction* to this state of affairs is markedly and importantly different to ours. While we look to the future to the hope that Sanders or Corbyn can wrestle politics away from its domination by money and the moneyed, or perhaps UBI or fully automated luxury communism, they look to the past. Because the adults of the era have an advantage or a disadvantage over us: they can see, beyond in the past, something different. That is, they are nostalgic. We aren't nostalgic (we have nothing to be nostalgic for) and that's a major difference between the art of the 90s and that of today, as we'll see repeatedly.

Let's consider some examples of nostalgia in the book. Ostensibly a frame narrative, it consists mostly of the stories the protagonists tell to each other before or after working shifts at their McJobs. There's the story about Texlahoma, for example, the planet stuck perennially in 1974. Andy tells it on a picnic in a ghost town of which you get the impression that in '1958, Buddy Hackett, Joey Bishop, and a bunch of Vegas entertainers all banded together to make a bundle on this place' (p17), but it failed and now all it has are some windmills which 'power detox air conditioners and cellulite vacuums of the region's burgeoning cosmetic surgery industry' (pp117--118). That is, they tell a story about being stuck in 1974, the year when things started getting bad, about a town that got stuck around 1958, when they would have been good.

Moreover, the novel ends as the cross they border, looking to make a new life in Mexico, 'a newer, less-monied world, where a different food chain carves its host landscape in alien ways I can scarcely comprehend...[once across the border] automobile models will mysteriously end around the decidedly Texlahoman year of 1974' (p199--200).

1974--that's twice it's occurred. Coupland tells us explicitly what's important about that year: it's 'the year after the oil shock and the year from which real wages in the US never ever grew again'. We will say a bit more about the economic background in the next chapter, and in general 74 will function as something like a hinge year in my narrative---it's the last time before things got messed up not only economically, but also politically (Watergate), but also culturally (it was around this time that television reached saturation point and television, we'll see, is a destructive force).

That, then, is the first dominant theme I want to pick up--nostalgia, and a closely aligned sense of being cheated, of being swindled out of something which one deserves. The Generation X-ers look back to a time, a time of capitalism triumphant for all, when there were chances for most, and a car, a house, and so on came along with a steady job.

Let me make a brief digression to note that if nostalgia was a central feature of 90s culture---and undoubtedly it was---it isn't a uniquely defining feature of it. As David Sirota, in a book that covers similar ground for the 80s as this does for the 90s (*Back To Our Future*, Ballantine, 2011), points out, nostalgia was already a cultural force in the 1980s. For example, 1985's top-grossing movie, the still fondly remembered *Back To The Future* tells the story of a boy who goes back in time to 1955 and *Happy Days*, which ended in 1984, presented life in the 50s and 60s. Retromania can even be seen in the choice of Reagan as president, who was acting into the 50s and who seemed to represent the golden age of America, before things got ugly in the 1970s.

Reflecting on this more almost thirty years on, we should ask ourselves: should that be what we want? As we think, in 2018, post- (I'm thinking wishfully here) Trump et al. of what our vision of the future should be, should it be that—should we look to recreate the 50s and 60s, albeit one in which the social equalities then rampant were resolved? That seems what a lot of us are de facto doing, in supporting Corbyn and Sanders whose overall goals, as has been pointed out, aren't exactly radical: a decent safety net and some provision for social care. Should that be our goal?

Maybe not. Perhaps we have an advantage over Generation X in not being lured by the promise of a fair capitalism on the edge of memory, and perhaps we can or should use that fact to think about alternative ways to live. I'll later consider to what extent, if any, we see such possibilities realised in the art of our era, and to what extent they rely on nostalgia.

The second theme from Generation X I want to focus on is consumerism, and in particular being offended by consumerism. This is one aspect which, I think, marks a crucial difference between us and them. They remain alive to the ridiculousnesses of capitalism in a way that we can sometimes fail to. We'll see, in the explainer in chapter six, why this is so: they were living through a time in which the rise of megabrands and billion-dollar advertising budgets was new, or at least had recently become more gaudy and central to all aspects of life, but for now let's just look at the text.

Here are some examples of what I mean. There are a lot of passages like the following, where the Narrator is about to storm out his job:

God, Margaret. You really have to wonder why we even bother to get *up* in the morning. I mean, really: *Why work?* Simply to buy *more stuff*? What makes us *deserve* the ice cream and running shoes and wool Italian suits we have? I see all of us trying so hard to acquire so much stuff but I can't help but feel that we didn't merit it.
(p28)

Or like

You mean to tell me we can drive all the way here from L.A. and see maybe ten thousand square miles of shopping malls, and you don't have maybe the *weentsiest* inkling that something, somewhere, has gone *very very* cuckoo? (p69)

Or like

Otis got to thinking: Hey! these aren't houses at all -- *these are malls in disguise*'...Otis developed the shopping mall correlation: kitchens became the Food Fair; living rooms the Fun center; the bathroom the Water Park. Otis said to himself, 'God, what goes through the *minds* who people who live in these things -- are they shopping?' (p80)

For a reader living today, it can be quite hard to *feel* this sentiment. Those of us old enough are tempted to think of Papa Roach and Fight Club, to think that the expression of such sentiment is banal and tired, the province even of dumbass bands and major motion pictures. If such capitalist stalwarts are saying it, then, one might think, we don't *really* have a sentiment in which we should be overly concerned. The deep engrained cynicism towards mass media--to be explored more later--has a tendency to discount ideas that come from it, a sort of (what's known in the philosophy business as) ad hominem argument.

But let's at least try for a moment to resist this urge, in case it may blot out things worth heeding. I again run the risk of sounding trite, but consider the following. In the 1980s and early 90s, gadgets and shoes made money. What makes money now? Well, to a large extent, ads. But what gets people to look at ads? Well, to a large extent, *we* do.

It sounds already trite, but there is a good case to be made for the claim that we, literally, are products on social media. We are what is given, in the sense that without our activity, the adverts which make companies money (allegedly) wouldn't get sold. And given that, we might think about whether this being made into products affects us.

The third thing I want to take about is the *mood*. I've already said something: it's disappointment. But it's more than that. It's a very melancholy book infused with a sense of 'inevitable "what-am-I-going-to-do-with-my-life?" semiclinical depression' (p82). Or again it's a sort of numbness (it's interesting to note that the book contains almost no sex, suggestive of the low libido of one on antidepressants (or perhaps because as a male writer coming after Mailer and Roth and Updike (albeit one both Canadian and gay (and writing about straight people), it just felt done to absolute death, and seldom well)). As we progress through the generation, the mood gradually changes, and from elegaic sadness turns to cynicism, depression, and anger.

But it's important to realise that this is a much *less* cynical book than one might imagine. It has no problem whatsoever expressing non-ironically the genuine feeling the characters have for one another. The characters love each other, they are there for each other, and in their friendship life gets its meaning. And it could be that that—the warmth of feeling that suffuses the novel-- is related to the fact that they've *seen* something beyond. This again ties with the nostalgia. The most sentiment-ful section of the book is perhaps when they discuss 'some small moment from your life that *proves you're really alive*' (p105); they all give moments from their childhood. A time (1974, incidentally) when Dag is filling up his father's gas tank and accidentally spills it everywhere and is scared he's going to get into trouble but doesn't and his father says 'Hey, Sport. Isn't the smell of gasoline great? Close your eyes and inhale. So *clean*. It smells like the *future*' and Dag does so and closes his eyes and sees 'the big orange light of the sun coming through my eyelids' (p107--108) and feels happy; for another it's a spontaneous family breakfast where she 'so close to tears, listening to everyone make jokes and feeding the dog bits of egg [and] feeling homesick for the event while it was happening' (p108). We might note that 'nostalgia' is roughly Greek for homesickness.

As we will see, this sort of sentiment goes somewhat against the grain of what we think of as echt-90s, in particular things like Seinfeld, Tarantino, and The Simpsons, in which a referential playfulness or emotional coldness predominates.

It's this that gives the book its heart and causes it to have aged quite well. Not only is there a mordant awareness of the disappointment of modern life, but there is a sensibility still alive enough to register that disappointment, to really feel it, as opposed to just sardonically noting it. This is I think a distinct point in our phenomenology of the Zeitgeist. As we progress, the awareness, a deep consciousness of the messes of society, won't go, but the vision of beyond will gradually, with some notable exceptions, dissipate.

For now, though, I want to focus on the awareness. Because I think with it we have something truly distinctive of the modern era: the development of people with an extremely high level of intellectual development but with an extremely low level of socio-economic development. People with a lot of learnings in their brain but with little money in their bank account. The people of *Generation X* read Camus and have copies of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung on their tables. They understand the extent to which they exploit and are exploited, the complex interconnectedness of modern life, and are able to bon mot it:

I work from 8 to 5 in front of a sperm-dissolving VDT performing abstract tasks that indirectly enslave the Third World. (p22)

There's a lot here, but what there is especially is intelligence enough to realise what one is doing, and a sense of complicity. We can maybe make the case that the irony and distancedness and cynicism which one thinks of as so typically a late 20th century phenomenon is precisely this combination of being highly intelligent and yet being trapped in a way of life you know is bad which you have no capacity to change and yet which also you know--you can remember, you can see it in your neighbours--doesn't have to be this way. It is, finally, a resignedness that marks out the Generation X attitude from that of earlier

cynicisms and ironies, a resignedness which, arguably, you see in Kurt Cobain's armless dancing in the video for Nevermind, whose central line is 'Oh well, whatever, nevermind'.

Indeed, I'm somewhat tempted to say that this is one of the defining features of our lives: we are fully aware of the badness of the system *and* we don't benefit from it. You might think this is a somewhat unique historical perspective to adopt. At all times, there have been winners and losers, exploiters and exploited. The winners enjoyed the privilege of education to see, if they wished, the extent to which their victory was bought with the suffering of others. But, as winners, they typically had no concern for it. The losers didn't have the education to realise to quite what extent they were being screwed, how unfair the whole thing was. But generation x combined educational richness with economic poverty, and that, perhaps, in the source of the very distinct anomie of the 1990s. At least, it's a hypothesis worth considering, and we can and I will suggest there's a distinct narrative that shows a correlation between one's intellectual awareness of the nature of modern life and one's disgusted or disappointed or merely numb reaction towards it.

So, then, to conclude: *Generation X* gives us a picture of the start of the 90s, a view of the world melancholic about some unattainable past, resigned to socio-economic exile but nevertheless not despairing, or not too much despairing, because of the love that binds friends and family. In the next chapter, we'll have a look at how that unattainable past became unattainable, by tracing the development of economic thought from the 50s and 60s on.

CHAPTER 3: EXPLAINER, THE ECONOMICS OF 46-74

In this chapter I want to try and give a sense of the political and economic climate of the 90s by considering some of the economic history that led up to it. One of the theses of this book is that this climate is reflected in various ways in the works we are examining, and in

particular the triumph of a free market politico-economic ideology determined, to some extent, the cynicism and disaffection typical of the 90s Zeitgeist.

In more detail, I'll claim that the authors of the 90s were a) aware that the prevailing capitalist system wasn't working for most people but b) unable to see an alternative. This provoked various responses, from nostalgia to cynicism to anger, as we'll see. Making the case for a) and b) will require a decent bit of sometimes economic theory and history, which I propose to begin reviewing, but I can actually make the two central points very quickly, by pointing to two important facts crucial to understanding the era.

Firstly, as to a), we've already seen Coupland note 1974 as a key year, and it is generally recognised as the year when economic inequality started kicking in. In the post-war years, 46-74, the productivity of the economy rose sharply, but so did wages. By contrast, from then on, while productivity has continued to rise, average wages haven't, and instead we've seen the ballooning of salaries of the top people and the rise of a rich managerial class while the average salary has stagnated.

This fact is very important to my analysis: even if the authors don't explicitly treat of this fact, I want to claim it's something in the air, that people recognise this inequality is bad. In some, it's explicit, and is manifested, for example, in the nostalgia we see in Coupland and later Lynch. In others, it manifests in other ways. For example, at the later end of the nineties, a work like *Fight Club* has swapped melancholic nostalgia for anger; I claim that this is a consequence of moving further away from the crucial pre-74 period when things were better.

As to point b), this will require a bit more work but I will want to claim that the seeming success, at least according to popular opinion, of a cluster of ideas relating to free markets, combined with the fall of the Berlin wall, caused people to think there was no alternative to small-state capitalism, that greed, indeed, was good, and in particular that selfish self-interest was the best way to be; that the rising tide lifts all boats, and even *if* one fails to see the advantages of growth, under other systems things would be even worse (and anyway one is

already implicated by virtue of the sweatshop Walkman (iPhone) in your hand so to criticise would be hypocritical.).

Let me now spell some of that out in more detail. In a couple of sentences, the economic development of the US since the second world war would go as so. The post war years saw a massive development of the economy, as productivity rose dramatically, unemployment fell, and wages rose. In the 50s, the life of the typical person became something we would recognise as desirable: filled with consumer goods such as technology (television and white goods, for example), houses with adequate plumbing and heating, and cars. If you worked hard, you got rewarded, and seemingly in a fair way: there was no massive variance in salaries, so there was little income inequality. Youth culture developed for the first time: it was no longer the case that children must go straight to work from a young age, and could, for example, go to the movies, eat at drive ins, get a cheap education, have a car, and so on. A golden age, it seems.

At least, that's one way to look at it. Of course, this is to erase a lot. If you belonged to a minority, such as black or gay people, or if you were a woman, things weren't so good, as we'll to some extent see in a later chapter. Moreover, if lives looked somewhat like ours, the security that many of us feel central to a comfortable life--protection against injury, age, and unemployment--wasn't present. This began to change only later in the 60s, when then president Lyndon Johnson introduced his idea of the great society, introducing various aspects of what we would recognise as the modern welfare system, such as health care for the unemployed and elderly, and unemployment insurance. Moreover, in those years, if things were bad for many, they at least *seemed* to be getting better. Johnson claimed to have an interest in securing racial and social justice, and even if progress was slow, there was some progress.

The war in Vietnam which we'll discuss in some detail later to some extent belied this. If America could think of itself as a hero of world war two, and, moreover, as a leader of the free world in the years after (as it, relatively economically untouched by the conflict, was willing and able to inject vast sums of money, in the Marshall plan, to the rebuilding of the war-torn Europe) with the drawn out, ugly, unmotivated war in Vietnam, this self-image took a battering. However, even then, people were fighting, and the voice of the people seemed to

be being heard, Nixon being elected in 1969 on an anti-war platform which he (kind of, as we'll see) carried out.

In sum, then, 46-73, what some call the short American century, was a time of perhaps unrivalled goodness.

Moreover, and this, I think, is very important, what underlay the economic prosperity was a theory of capitalism according to which it was inherently a fair process, or at least one the unfairnesses of which could be assuaged by correct management by government. That capitalism, in some sense, worked best when people, or at least the economic system they formed, were taken care of, and, in particular, that it was in the best interest of the system as a whole that, in hard times, such as the recessions and depressions capitalism has periodically faced, the government intervene to make things easier, either by having more money pumped into the system, or, similarly, by having the government introduce programs to help the unemployed, or simply by creating government jobs for them to occupy (or, indeed, as is sometimes overlooked, by cutting taxes for the rich with the goal of incentivising them to invest, a course of action proposed by democrat Kennedy and later enacted by democrat Johnson in 1964. See Whapshott 239 for this in particular, but my account throughout leans of him).

This is the theory of Keynesianism, whose nature, rise, and fall it is necessary to say a little about. John Maynard Keynes was a British economist whose most enduring contribution was his analysis of what to do when a capitalist society breaks down or otherwise struggles.

The greatest break down in the 20th century was the depression following the stock market crash of the late 1920s. People—ordinary people—started investing in the stock market in a big way, and the stock price of the companies listed began artificially inflated. Eventually, this bubble popped, and an awful chain reaction was set in motion: the value of stocks plummeted, yet because many of the stocks were financed by loans, this essentially meant that people would be unable to pay back their loans by selling their stocks (because, say, they'd taken out a loan to buy stocks at \$x, but now the stocks are worth only \$x/10), and this in turn meant banks would have lost this money. This in turn made people worry about their

savings--if banks have all those loans that they're not going to get back, what if they've loaned out my money? So there was a 'run' on the banks, where people all tried to get their money out at the same time, and when they couldn't, a large number of banks collapsed, bankrupting some and denting the economic confidence of all.

It will be useful, before going on, to explain what I mean by that last sentence: why *couldn't* banks give people their money back? As Milton and Rose Friedman (p73), in a highly influential and accessible account of the early anti-Keynesian theory point out, the terminology, and images from television, are very misleading. We call putting money in a bank 'depositing' it, and have this idea that in so doing, what happens is the teller or the machine takes our money and puts it, behind large doors, for safekeeping, in a vault.

This is not how banks work. After all--you presumably don't pay fees to your bank? If they just sat on your money, where would they get the money from to operate?

Instead, banks use the money they are given to give out loans to others, on which they earn interest. They put your money to work, and then give you a smaller bit of the interest. There is no requirement that they have the cash equivalent of all the deposits made: instead, they have some much smaller amount of cash on hand, say 3-4 percent of the total money deposited in the bank (what is known as 'fractional reserve banking').

This is no problem, under normal circumstances: provided not everybody tries to get their money out at the same time, that 3-4 percent will be perfectly adequate, and no problems will arise. But problems *will* arise when everybody tries to get their money out. The banks won't have the money on hand, and unless they can get it from elsewhere—and if everybody at all banks is asking for their money at the same time, it seems as if this will not be possible—they will be forced to deny their customers their money. And that's what happened.

With that said, let's return to our story. After this, the economy settled into a depression. People didn't trust banks any more, and so were more inclined to hold on to their money rather than deposit it. Moreover, banks were so battered they couldn't offer particularly good interest rates, so it simply wasn't worth the risk to deposit it, in case the bank later collapsed..

But this simple and indeed highly understandable behaviour has large knock-on consequences for the economy as a whole. If people hold on to their money, neither depositing it nor, fearing more unpleasantness later on, using it to buy things, the whole economy clogs up. If they don't buy things, say combs, that means that the demand for combs decreases, and so the comb producers won't be able to afford to keep on their comb-makers. These comb makers now become unemployed, but then *they* will become equally unwilling to buy whatever they want--shoes, let's say. The one person's decision not to buy will have knock on effects.

Of course, one way to get past this problem would be for the comb producer to *borrow* some money to temporarily get over this problem, enabling him to keep making combs in the hope that things will improve. But because our original unemployed person has decided not to put his money in the bank, either, and since the bank depends on deposits to make its loans, that will be more difficult.

This, known as the paradox of thrift, was what caused the depression to be so dramatic, at least according to one theory. The economic vicissitudes had spooked consumers, and the spooked consumers responded by ceasing to desire to spend or invest their money. That is, their *demand*, and thus so-called aggregate demand, decreased.

But then what is to be done? Keynes's big idea is that we need to find some way, when economies find themselves in this slump, to jolt them out of it. He suggested, through the course of his writings, several such methods, but the one most associated with him is the idea that, in such circumstances, the government should in one way or another, put some money in the pockets of our suffering comb and shoe makers, enabling them to buy what they want. And if things are really bad, and one is faced with widespread unemployment, then the government can choose to create public-sector jobs for the unemployed by, say, undertaking infrastructure building or repair.

The key point is that one can't just let nature take its course: because of these quirks of human psychology, this essential irrationality (after all, by not spending, the first person is essentially contributing to a worse economy, which will hurt him), economies will find themselves in these irrational positions from time to time, and it takes intervention to fix them. But the government can come to our aid (introductory presentations of the Keynesian

theory abound; in addition to the works already cited, a reader might like to consult Paul Krugman's accessible history of economics in the post-70s period, *Peddling Prosperity*, 1994, W.W. Norton and Company, chapter one).

Keynesianism was at least in practice the dominant approach up to at least 1970. Even the presidents--of whom there were many--who didn't like the idea, who thought that it smacks of irresponsibility and that a government, like a household, should tighten its belt when times are hard rather than extravagantly spending nevertheless, time and again, resorted to government spending to get out of a recession (again, Wapshott is a good source of presidents' attitude to Keynesianism).

There is something fundamentally nice about the Keynesian theory. If it were true, that would be good: if somber economic rationalism called one to help out those who suffer at the hands of that very economy, that would be a nice feature of reality. And its seeming empirical success in dealing with slumps seemed to suggest that this nice thing was, in fact, a feature of reality. The child of the 50s and 60s—at least the white, middle class child---could well be excused for thinking that capitalism was a fair system.

The 1970s, however, saw arise a problem for the Keynesian theory, and, in turn, saw come to the fore an alternative theory which seemed more fitting to the data. The problem is known as stagflation, and properly to explain it requires some more technical background.

I said above that governments, on the Keynesian theory, put money in the system to stimulate demand during recessions. But now a problem arises. There is more money in the system than before. But there are the same amount of goods and services for sale. That means, at least in theory, that prices will rise too. We put money in the system to recover from depression, to put people back in jobs; but we see that putting too much money in the system will raise prices.

Data suggested that this bit of apriori reasoning tracks an empirical regularity. The New Zealand economist A.W. Phillips collected data that showed, indeed, there was an inverse relationship between unemployment and inflation: lower unemployment, more inflation. A sensible goal of economic policy then, given both unemployment and inflation are bad, would be to find the sweet spot where neither is at an unacceptable level. This gave Keynesian economics a constraint within which to operate: they should seek as high employment as possible that won't give a ridiculous amount of inflation.

However, in the 1970s, this relation was seemingly shown to be false, as we were faced with rising inflation *and*, simultaneously, rising unemployment. This was not explicable according to any feature of the Keynesian theory, but it *was*, however, explicable according to the rival theory of Milton Friedman, and was the first step in the replacement of Keynes by Friedman which, as I suggested above, I take to be of fundamental importance for understanding the 90s and today.

First, though, I need to say some of the basic features of Friedman's theory (I'm relying here on Krugman op. cit. p34ff). The theory associated with his name is monetarism, and is based on the idea that the money supply is a crucial macroeconomic variable apt to explain the big features, such as recessions and depressions, that blight our lives.

The federal reserve¹ can control the supply of money. Indeed, that was one of the reasons it was introduced. As Friedman tells us, in the start of the twentieth century, there were similar bank runs, and so the federal reserve was created to prevent such failures of confidence. In the case of a run, it could simply create more money which it could give to the banks.

The depression was the depression, according to Friedman, because the federal reserve failed to do its job in controlling the supply of money (see his account in the book already cited, especially p90ff). It should try to avoid putting too much money into the system, because that

¹ Need to explain what this is

will cause inflation, but, in tough times, as after the collapse of the stock market, it should be willing to add to the supply. If it had done that, then the commercial banks would have had more money, so they could have loaned it out cheaper and this would have encouraged demand. If money were very cheap, our comb maker wouldn't worry so much about borrowing some and this is how the economy could be jump started. We needn't have the government intervene by dumping in money or creating new jobs: simply make resources available to private enterprises and then rely on the wisdom of markets.

So let's return to the early 1970s. We've been doing the Keynesian thing for a while, and because that involves creating money, things have been mildly inflationary. For the Keynesian, we could cut back on the inflation, if we so wished, at the cost of some jobs. Not so for Friedman. Think of it like this: the comb maker now has money, and he can buy and sell as before. But there's more money in the system, and so, there's going to be more inflation, so goods and services will come to cost more. So, if he's being sensible, he will up his prices. But now think of the shoe maker: he's got some created money, and is up for buying some combs, but then the comb maker ups and raises his prices, and he can't afford them.

According to this logic, the Keynesian solution shouldn't work. On realising that there's more money in the system, people should revise their prices (including the price they charge for labour) up, negating the effects of the stimulus. The only reason this didn't happen, Friedman thought, was because people were ignorant of this logic.

But only for a while: while it might work for a bit, this system will eventually cease working, as our comb maker and shoe maker start to take account of inflation in setting their prices. And once that happens, to retain a constant level of unemployment will require more and more money be pumped into the system, and the Phillips curve will break down.

And this happened: the great thing (from the point of view of the theorist, anyway) is that Friedman *predicted* stagflation, already in 1967. Think of being an American in the early 70s,

watching prices rise and being told, by the government, to eat animals' brains and hearts (cite Perlman here). A theory that told you why this was and how to get away from it--suffer through the unemployment your inflationary policy has caused and then leave the market be, would be attractive. Government intervention can't solve our economic woes.

Note that purports to be a *technical* matter of fact. It's not normative: it just says how things work. It suggests that we ought not do Keynesian economics because it'll lead to inflation and then eventually either more inflation or stagflation. But it doesn't say that that's a *good* thing. It could be that it's a very bad thing, to be bewailed, just as we might think, had Keynesianism been true, it would have been a good thing, to be celebrated.

But this technical, somewhat wonky claim about macroeconomics was and is redolent of more normative, ethical claims. In particular, it seems to support the idea that the government shouldn't butt in to citizen's economic lives, and that the economy will do best left to its own devices, even if that is painful for some.

And this normative claim persisted even as monetarism went out of fashion. That a small state was morally and economically the right thing to do persisted in the supply siders who comprised Reagan's advisors. Kind of. The supply-siders (so named to indicate their differences from the Keynesian theory that economic woes were caused by a failure of demand) thought we could have our economic cake and eat it too. In particular, at the heart of their theory was the idea that lowering taxes rates could actually in the end increase tax income, as well as strengthening the economy in general. The thought was taxing penalises success, so the less taxes, the more people will be willing to work hard. This is a respectable enough idea, although the extent to which it's a panacea is widely doubted. But regardless of its success, it certainly, at the level of ideology, was important. It suggested greed is good, that the way for an economy to succeed was for the government not to stick its nose in and to let the businessmen business (Reagan famously didn't heed in practice this advice, spending an obscene amount of defence spending that no doubt helped the economic performance).

And this ideological point continued. Partly because of Reagan's profligacy, Clinton inherited a massive deficit when he was elected president in 1992, and claiming, the era of big government was over, pledged to balance the books. Not only that, but it appeared that he did well to do so, as the weak economy he inherited improved in the early 90s (for Clinton's financial policies, and how much luck as opposed to underlying sound ideas lead to their success, see Joseph Stiglitz, *The Roaring Nineties*, W.W. Norton and Company, 2003).

That, then, is the economic world the citizens of the 90s inherited and lived in: neoliberalism reigning supreme, greed being good, the rising tide, ostensibly, raising all boats. Over the ocean communism seemed to have failed, and it would have been hard not to think that there were no political places to seek comfort. There was Clintonian third way democrats and republicans, and both seemed to be undergirded by a free market, small state capitalist agenda. Together these gave a sense of a society which didn't particularly care about the unlucky, and which, on the other hand, was happy enough helping the already rich. This depressing state of affairs, I claim, can partly explain the political apathy and cynicism we find in 90s work.

CHAPTER 3 LYNCH AND TARANTINO

This chapter is concerned with arguably the two most interesting film makers of the decade, David Lynch and Quentin Tarantino. My aim here is to introduce a theme that will be central to the rest of the book: the question of realism in art, and what form that must take in the late twentieth century (and, later, in the 21st century). How can we best depict post-industrial life? Must it be postmodern? And what is postmodernism, again?

A brief look at 90s culture and today's suggests that our answer to that question has changed. Much of the best work of the 90s is, to use an expression we'll try to get clear on, postmodern. *The Simpsons* is perhaps the clearest case, a generic nuclear family sitcom is filled with arcane allusions to classical literature or film; a show in which clever parodies of

politics intermingle with abject stupidity and physical comedy, and all presented in primary colours and jerky animation. Here we see many features of postmodernism we'll discuss in detail in the next chapter: a blurring of high and low culture, allusion for its own sake (what Jameson calls 'pastiche'), an interest in mass media (the Baudrillardian 'hyperreal', perhaps), and an obsession, perhaps, with form over content (although Simpsons's die hards, who---bizarrely, to my mind---seem to think the very earliest episodes, which don't shirk sentiment and are less playful, are among the best, would deny this).

By contrast, the best work today is not postmodern. Starting perhaps around the turn of the millennium we've entered the era of so-called 'prestige' or 'long-form' television: shows that are, in a sense (although again this is something we'll question) realistic or classical. What's good about *The Wire*, for example, is just that it has good plots, characters, acting, and so on. It doesn't rely pretty much at all on formal playfulness and allusion. McNulty is a drunk cop who'll sometimes break the rules to get results goddamnit: the ultimate movie cop cliché. But that he's a cliché isn't intimidated or played with at all: that's what not makes the *Wire* entertaining. Examples can be multiplied: *Breaking Bad*, *Game Of Thrones*, and *Westworld* each derive their effects from plot, characters, cinematography: from classical cinematic virtues, and not from clever deconstructions thereof.

It even shows up in comedy. As I'll discuss at more length later, the last fifteen or so years have seen a gradual depostmodernifying of mainstream comedy: from *Arrested Development* through *30 Rock* and *The Office*, to *Parks and Recreation* and *Brooklyn Nine Nine* and *The Last Man On Earth*, comedies have become less formally playful and more straight. One of my central questions here and in the remainder of the book, then, is to try to explain the reason for this evolution in popular culture.

Before doing that, though, it will be useful as well as, hopefully, interesting, to look in some detail at some examples of the best and most memorable 90s dramas. I opt for two that seem representative of the age, which seem apt examples of the 90s playful, allusive genre-bending drama. In each case, though, I want to make a---hopefully---interesting claim. That these works, although they may indeed be well-described as postmodern, actually are, in a good

sense, realist. We typically fail to see this because they each attempt to portray certain aspects of life typically overlooked by classical art.

That Lynch and Tarantino are kinda sorta realists might sound daft. After all, the one is most commonly described as surrealist, and the other's films are a complex web of allusions and stylish genre-defying fun. Neither seem concerned to depict the world we live in, as opposed to the world of extra-dimensional dancing little people and wise-talking gangsters. However, that's a mistake, I'll argue. Lynch, the arch surrealist, is best viewed, to my mind, as a realist, but one hard to understand as such given the history of film and television. And Tarantino arguably presents a realistic account of one who spends all their time watching movies: postmodernism is a form of realism in a media saturated culture, I'll claim. A consequence of this we'll see later is that contemporary art, to the extent that it's neither Lynchian or Tarantino-esque, flees realism, and I think that's borne out: our most popular shows are to a large extent fantasy.

Let's start then with the work of Lynch. I will concentrate mainly on *Twin Peaks*, although I'll take into account also his earlier (1986) *Blue Velvet*, which presents the Lynchian universe arguably in its cleanest form.

Twin Peaks is ostensibly a murder mystery set in a small town in the Northwest. A girl, Laura Palmer, is found washed up dead, wrapped in plastic, and FBI agent Dale Cooper comes to town to resolve the mystery. Its popularity was a result of its quirky humour, lovable characters, and surreal intrusions. *Twin Peaks* is a town where a lady carries around and talks to a log ('the log lady', naturally), where the resident psychiatrist has a strange obsession with Hawaii, where a police interview is interrupted because there's a... fish in the... percolator. The protagonist is a Zen buddhist-inspired, coffee,-pie-and-donut loving FBI agent called Dale Cooper who comes to the town of pillar of the community local doctor types, coffee shops, young lovers and bikers and schools where everyone knows everyone. And all this against a genre-defying and extremely playful soundtrack that conveys whimsy

and melodrama and goes somehow to make up the sense of distance, of the town and its inhabitants living in a world of their own, where slightly different rules apply.

Despite all the superficial charm and eccentricity, though, the story is extremely dark: the murderer is the girl's father who sexually abused her. Even prior to that revelation the show touches on drug addiction, incest, and prostitution. Rewatching the first episode, what strikes one overwhelmingly is not the quirky stuff, but just how much crying there is: how shots linger over Sarah Palmer, or the principle of the school, or Laura's friends, sobbing, to an extent that you come to realise is voyeuristic, and then find yourself mildly surprised that watching the emotions of a fictional character *can* be voyeuristic.

Another aspect of the charm also, one might surely think, is its cute allusions to past works. An inexhaustive list: the actor who plays the one-armed man, for example, is also in a show featuring as a central character a one armed man (other castings are similarly allusive); there's a show within the show, a bad soap named 'Invitation To Love', which at times roughly traces what's happening in the series and the whole work, as with others of Lynch, is studded with allusions to The Wizard Of Oz.

In light of this, one might think we're dealing precisely with the postmodern. We should understand the donut loving, meditative Cooper as defined against the more traditional presentations of law enforcement on TV and in film. We should understand the eruptions of surreal humour as trying to chip away at the mystery genre, or the prime time soap genre, or the cop show.

This can't completely be denied. There is clearly some of that going on, and any analysis must recognise this fact. But, that notwithstanding, I think a strong case can be made that Lynch's vision is, contrary to what it seems, much more classical and realist than we typically think. Lynch is weird in many ways; but so is reality.

To make this point, I want to focus on four aspects that I take to be crucial to Lynch's work, aspects which, taken together, lead him to be branded postmodern or downright surrealistic, and show instead that they are in service of a new sort of realism. The four aspects are: i) a concern with focusing attention on the expression of genuine sentiment, ii) a particular sort of dark humour, iii) an infatuation with disturbing or aberrant sexuality, iv) dream-like surrealism.

So let's take them in order. The first is the straightforward expression of true sentiment. In Lynch's world, we see teenage love and a mother's grief, small town friendliness and family lunches, loving dotty grandmothers and dutiful sons, compassion, bravery, heroism. We see it, for example, in the Hayward family in *Twin Peaks*: in the doctor father asking his daughter if she'll be up for church in the morning, making awkward but ingenuous small-talk with that daughter's boyfriend.

A very neat example of this comes from the final scene of *Blue Velvet* (it's on youtube; I recommend watching it instead of reading the following). Against beautiful Julee Cruise music, Jeffrey wakes from a nap outside to see a robin (which, per a dream of Sandy, symbolises love), and is called in to dinner, stopping to shout over to his dad in the neighbouring garden who, having had a heart attack at the beginning of the film, is now recovering. They share the following utterly banal, utterly realistic dialogue:

Jeffrey: How you guys doing

Friend: Hey Jeffrey

Dad: Hey Jeff. Feeling much better now Jeff.

Jeffrey: Good for you dad.

He goes in where to Sandy's aunts or someone are waiting, tells them lunch is ready and they smilingly tell him it sounds good. In the kitchen, Sandy and her mum are looking at the robbin, who is eating a bug. The gran expresses displeasure at this and they look at her warmly and then, two clean cut American youths, at each other. It cuts to a man on a truck waving, to roses in front of a white picket fence and then to a boy with a conical hat walking upscreen towards his mother, into whose arms he falls, and she smiles, albeit with a slight look of worry.

We should read all this as straightforward: Lynch is concerned to present these nice, happy feelings, a family and a young couple sharing a lunch. It can be hard to read it like this, though: it seems too earnest and overly sincere. It can be very easy, when faced with the first sort of thing, to think that Lynch is being 'ironic'. That all those things are passé in our modern era. That even if at one point people spoke like that, and film makers captured their speaking like that, those times are gone. Those moments of innocent sentiment have been permanently destroyed by, among other things, to repeated presentation of them in the media of the previous era.

There's a famous and very useful quote by Umberto Eco on this that bears reflection:

I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows that he cannot say to her "I love you madly", because he knows that she knows (and that she knows he knows) that these words have already been written by [Barbara Cartland](#). Still there is a solution. He can say "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly". At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly it is no longer possible to talk innocently, he will nevertheless say what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her in an age of lost innocence. (Eco, 1994, pp. 67-68)

Faced with this, consider the following scene with biker James and Maddy, Laura's cousin (from season two episode six):

James: If you really love someone, it's like this bright light is shining on you all the time. You're right in it and it's great. But I just don't think you can be that way all the time.

Maddy: Sure you can.

James: Well, I want to. try to make the way my heart feels last forever. Pretty weird.

James, it seems, hasn't read his Eco. And nor, then, has Lynch. He isn't portraying how people actually talk, because we're all postmodern. We don't say things like that, at least not without Cartlandian prefaces. And so, you might think, that we shouldn't take this sort of talk, or the Blue Velvet scene, seriously. It's instead ironic. Lynch is channelling, by pastiche, Cartland. He doesn't mean it.

I think this is wrong. I think one *ought* to take it sincerely: Lynch does mean it. In an interview with Chris Rodley, he was asked about this very thing:

Q: Some of the dialogue, far from being naturalistic, seems either exaggerated in its naivety or ironic

Lynch: Well, it's only as naive as small-town America

Q: Another non-naturalistic part of Blue Velvet is the opening sequence of shots: an impossibly blue sky, a pristine white fence, redder-than-red flower, etc., through to the dark, wet insect battles beneath that beautifully green lawn.

Lynch: That's the way America is to me. There's a very innocent, naive quality to life, and there's a horror and a sickness as well. It's everything. The look of it was inspired by my childhood in Spokane Washington. (*Lynch on Lynch*, 139)

I think we should take him at his word. These scenes are not ironic pastiches of earlier melodramas, but are meant to be a more or less realistic snippet of life.

And the thing is---Lynch is completely right. Life does have that naivety to it. Young people fall in love and look at each other meaningfully, people love their grandmothers and express that love. People make emotional goodbyes at the airport. Life is naive in that way. The trouble for artists—and indeed people---is that because the dumb, big blockbuster films, tv series and romance novels traffic in this, and we're wont to make fun of such things, we are apt to view any 'serious' work that attempts to portray it as ironic. But that's on us.

It's understandable, though. Because here's a bit more of *Blue Velvet*: the mother of the final scene just been reunited with her child, who was kidnapped by a psychopath who cut off her husband's ear and who sexually abused Dorothy after huffing gas and screaming 'Daddy wants to fuck'.

Not only that, but while he's doing so, the hero Jeffrey is hidden in the closet watching, and later he himself, the small town, wide-eyed boy, will have violent sex with Dorothy. You might think against this backdrop the final scene can't but be ironic: that in the face of such things, innocence is gone irrevocably. I take it is that Lynch's thought is that that isn't true. That innocence can coexist with horror. That beside the abusive house of the Palmer's there's the healthy house of the Haywood's.

Now, obviously there are issues here. It's more than a little glib to end on such moments as opposed, say, to the years of psychological trauma Dorothy and her child will encounter. If there *are* such moments of innocence and joy even in the darkest situations, which there surely are, there are many moments *not* like this, when the dark wins, and you might think that any art which fails to represent this fact is being disingenuous and, in fact, unrealistic. The same thing holds for the exculpation of Leland in *Twin Peaks*: his abuse is transformed too neatly into him being the victim of evil spirits and going peacefully into the Tibetan afterlife. In general, for someone whose work so often turns on sexual violence, Lynch does

nowhere enough to present all sides of it (although I think he does do better than many other, for whom rape seems to function as merely a plot forwarder. Lynch at least does try to take the victim's perspective, as in *Fire Walk With Me*, an almost unbearably hard to watch film).

This is a fair point, and I wouldn't want to claim that the Lynchian world is an adequate representation of the complexity of life. But I do want to make the simpler point that naive sentiment exists, it must find its place *somewhere* in our representation of the world, and Lynch's work provides an example of how to do it (just do it!) and the pitfalls associated with it (it'll be read as ironic).

The second aspect of his work I want to look at is humour. There's a very distinctive sort of Lynchian dark humour, of which the following are merely a couple of examples. In almost the very first scene of *Twin Peaks*, Pete Martell has found the body of Laura Palmer and phones up to speak to the sheriff. His receptionist answers:

Lucy (to the sheriff, right beside her): Sheriff, it's Pete Martell, up at the mill. Im, I'm gonna transfer it to the phone on the table by the red chair--the rec chair against the wall--the little table--with the lamp on it--the lamp we moved from the corner. The black phone, not the red phone.

Harry: Morning, Pete.

Pete: She's dead. Wrapped in plastic.

Or, again, there's the scene in which Cooper and Truman go to visit Ronette Pulaski who in a coma after being attacked by the killer, and whose terrifying flashback/nightmare of Laura's murder had ended the previous episode. They go into the hospital room of the traumatised girl and—they struggle, slapstick style, to manoeuvre the awkward swivel chairs to sit by her beside.

Again, it's just a fact of life that sometimes funny things happen when sad things happen: so-called gallows humour. At least, it does in my life. You learn whatever close family member has whatever terminal illness as you're stuck in whatever foreign city desperately looking for a bathroom in which perform whatever acutely pressing bodily function. This happens.

Art frequently avoids such things, because, typically, there is serious art, and there is funny art, and even in things that can mix them, to mix them in the very same scene is generally not done: it's a somewhat weird fact of the way we perceive art that a funny scene can contain sad things and remain predominantly funny but it's harder for a sad scene to have comedy while remaining sad. But Lynch doesn't care for such facts, and it's to his credit. The key point to note is that what seems aberrant, a divergence from standard drama, is, in fact, something which leads to realism. The point, obvious when you think about it, is that what we call realistic drama isn't so: it isn't filled with the banal clichés and pratfalls that make up our lives. Since Lynch's work does contain banal clichés and pratfalls, it's more realistic in this respect.

Let me now turn to the third feature, the treatment of sexuality. One issue a lot of people have is that women are treated badly in Lynch's work, and it's typically in a fetishised, sex-laden way. He is the auteur who most of all, you think, gives us a direct access to his sexual subconscious, and that's filled with rape, paedophilia, and hot lesbians kissing.

All of this is right. It does seem like we are viewing some male fantasies; these male fantasies are destructive and misogynistic, and, when we get ourselves in the frame of mind that we think art ought to be representative of the range of human life, we have reason to quarrel with Lynch. Presenting, and adulating, these visions of sexuality is ultimately impoverishing and perhaps destructive.

Again, though, I'm kind of tempted to think that it's, in a sense, realistic. Everybody watches porn, apparently. The person sitting opposite you in at a work meeting, the single mum

drinking a coffee in costa, the middle-aged guy in the gym—the quiet solitary moments of their lives are filled with things I typed out but then deleted because it sounded, a bit, well, pornographic (did you know incest porn is one of the breakout trends of 2017? Google ‘what’s up with all the incest porn?’).

We carry about these desires in our head and most of us are very reticent to put our name to them, for obvious reasons. Lynch doesn't have this reticence, and again it's to the benefit of realism. The problem still remains, of course, that it's a realistic portrayal only of one aspect of one old white dude's weird sex stuff, and that's a serious failing, but it is a representation of at least one aspect of it, and that's arguably a good thing.

Finally, there's the surrealism. There are obvious examples and less obvious examples of this. The more obvious ones are things like the black lodge that features first in Cooper's famous dream at the end of episode three of the first season (I recommend youtube again for this), or again the weird substance that Frank huffs in Blue Velvet (which would have been ever more surreal had the idea, which was apparently considered, to have it be helium, which would have made the central scenes all that more weird). These sorts of things show up with increasing frequency in Lynch's work, which come to rely more and more on disjointed hard to understand narratives and bizarre characters (think of the diner monster in Mulholland Drive, or the alien in Lost Highway).

Let me just quickly note two more things notable about Lynch's style that seem relevant here: the use of accident and coincidence, and the rhythm of his directing. It's notable that

That can seem hard to square with the idea that Lynch is a realist, and certainly I don't want to say that my story is perfect. Some of it, especially the later work which experiments with very non-linear inexplicable story lines, doesn't seem in any meaningful sense realist.

But. Here's a feature of our life: dreams. Dreams are a very important part of the human experience; and dreams have that same sense of strangeness. Dreams aren't, you might think, these negligible things: properly to account for a given person's experience—perhaps especially early in the morning—you need to account for their dreams. Most art doesn't do that, or if it does so very inadequately—people tell their dreams which have some sort of obvious intelligible significance and which further the plot in some way.

That's not how surrealism in Lynch's work functions. Think of Cooper's dream. While it does further the plot, its elements, exegetes notwithstanding, have no symbolic significance. Why the little man? Why the talking backwards? There's no answer for this, I take it. But it works—it feels right. It captures something of the weirdness of dreams, and since that weirdness is a part of our lives, it is faithful to that part.

The use of accident is similar. Although it's completely not in accord with classical dictates, according to which any action or character should serve to further the plot, it does have something in common with life. It sometimes happens, for example, that we meet someone fleetingly, without really thinking about it, and later that person comes to have an important role to play in our lives, completely out of proportion to the impact the first meeting made.

Overall, then, I think there's a good case to be made for the claim that the four aspects which we think of as typical Lynchian are, rather than postmodern or surrealist, instead hyperrealistic. They present features of life we tend to gloss over rather than presenting something other than life. We live in a Lynchian world.

Before moving on, however, let's note the consequences of the work of Lynch for the overall argument of the book. His work *clearly* looks back to the 50s as a mythical time, a time of innocence. Twin Peaks, and the Lumberton of Blue Velvet, are typical American small towns: their worlds don't contain rap or Pepsi or yuppies; instead it's milkshakes in diners, gas station owners, and bikers playing guitar. It seems that his idea the world contains beautiful things is the idea that the 50s existed, and in other places in the interview series he

expresses a strong declinist sensibility, that things are messed up now as they weren't then. So Lynch, I would want to say, is another prime example of a nostalgist, but in a sense he goes further than Coupland: Coupland's characters yearn for the 50s, whereas Lynch just transposes the 50s world to the modern day: as he says, Twin Peaks is a fifties/nineties mash up (speaking initially of the music in Blue Velvet Lynch says 'yes, it's a fifties thing. Banal in a way. But it's kind of removed from that also. Misplaced, almost. A fifties/nineties combo was what Twin Peaks was all about' p134 in the book of interviews already cited. Speaking of music, we might point out here Nirvana's music videos also have a similar aesthetic: Nevermind conjures up dated images of cheerleaders in gymnasiums and In Bloom explicitly parodies variety shows from the early 60s).

Now is maybe the time to make a point that needs making. This idea of the small American century as some great time must obviously be qualified to a large extent. It wasn't a great time to the African Americans murdered for peacefully protesting their being prevented from accessing basic human services, nor was it a great time for women. Nor for gay people, and even for the supposed communists targeted by the anti-communist fever of the time. Indeed, even a cursory reading of history will present one with passages like the following: quote Zinn on murders in civil rights movement.

It was a great time for straight middle class white men, and this is something that should check any tendency we might find ourselves having to wish that *we* were back in the 50s or the 60s. Indeed, I will later suggest that one of the few definite cultural advantages we, or at least some of us, have over our 90s brethren is a greater sensitivity to various forms of inequality. That we have moved past the idea that we 'don't see race' and come to think about the structural inequalities minorities face is certainly a good thing, and if very slowly, it seems that the art we consume is becoming more diverse (an account of 2010s art might well include Jessica Jones and Girls and the to a large extent woman-written Parks And Recreation, for example).

So, that's Lynch, on my view: not a surrealist but more like a hyperrealist. The second filmmaker I'm going to consider has some interesting similarities to Lynch: he is also interested

in characters who subvert stereotypes, in the use of music and especially music from the 50s and 60s, and in stylised and frequent violence. Indeed, this has lead David Foster Wallace to be discussed in a later chapter, to say that Tarantino copied the Lynchian style and cleaned it up a bit and made it mainstream (in 'David Lynch Keeps His Head', collected in *Consider The Lobster*).

That's not my view though. If Lynch is a realist, we should think of Tarantino as the theorist of the postmodern par excellence: his work is playful and self-consciously genre-subverting, stylish but ultimately emotionally empty.

In order to see this, let me consider *Pulp Fiction*. It's a story about gangsters and thieves and crooked boxers, filled with drugs and violence. It has a complicated temporal structure: the film, for example, begins and ends in a café, but the action it recounts neither begins nor ends there. The details aren't so important: what is important is the *style*.

There are certain key Tarantino themes. The first is obsessive reference to other films. For a viewer like me, who is not particularly au fait with the French new wave, these go over my head, so I rely on the internet to tell me, for example, that the very first scene, in which two crooks come up with an apparently new scam to make money by robbing places where many people congregate, is straight from one of the earliest films, 1903's *The Great Train Robbery*.² This same page reveals it's absolutely *full* of references to tv programs of the fifties and sixties which again age and nationality mean I haven't seen.

Not only that, but visually we have the same thing. Everyone has a retro look: simple white and white abounds, labels aren't to be seen. There are few gadgets, and the settings include a 50s themed restaurant and a diner, the bastion of small town community, and probably much more. Moreover, and perhaps most effective for a stylistic point of view, is the use of music from the era, perhaps most memorably 1960s 'You never can tell' in the famous dance

² http://wiki.tarantino.info/index.php/Pulp_Fiction_Movie_References_Guide

contest scene (again watching is much better than reading: google Pulp Fiction dance scene if you haven't seen it (recently). A key thing to note is that this iconic scene is pure style, no substance. It furthers the plot in no way but it's compulsively watchable). So, then, a lot of 50s/60s referencing in Pulp Fiction: this is a film of nostalgia too, but like Lynch, it's 'misplaced'.

It's worthwhile performing a thought experiment at this point. Think of the things you watched wore and listened to as a child and now imagine a tv show or movie absolutely packed with references to them. Or, again: look at the tv shows and movies you like these days. Are *these* packed with such references? Some are, no doubt--depending on your age, things like GLOW or Stranger Things may bring back the past to you. But most aren't. It's fundamentally quite odd, we should realise, to have such a form of art. But it's nevertheless a central feature of Tarantino, and the other postmodern highpoint of the decade, namely the Simpsons, and to the extent that these works as seen by many as typical of the 90s, of 90s style in general. Not only do we have nostalgic characters, as in *Generation X*, but we have a nostalgic style.

Let's turn to a second aspect of Tarantino's style. Lynch, I argued above, traffics in genuine feeling. It's somewhat hard to get this--because it is so extreme and one dimensional and moreover because it invariably comes packaged up in the signifiers of the 50s and the small towns of the era, but it is, I claimed, there. Not so Tarantino. Vastly entertaining, Pulp Fiction, at least to this watcher, isn't in the business of making anyone *feel* anything. Then what does it do? It tells an entertaining story, it has funny dialogue, great music, it experiments with form, it subverts convention. This absence of feeling, this hipness, should be seen, I think, as marking a real feature of the 90s mood. As with (some parts of) *Generation X*, and as we'll see with some later works, one gets the sense of a great abstract intelligence, in this case one that has seen and analysed every movie and knows the rules for making them by heart, meeting emotional numbness.

Let me focus briefly on one such aspect, namely the witty dialogue. Here is a famous scene, spoken by Samuel L Jackson and John Travolta, both dressed in sharp black suits, on the way to kill some people:

VINCENT But you know what the funniest thing about Europe is?

JULES What?

VINCENT It's the little differences. A lotta the same shit we got here, they got there, but there they're a little different.

JULES Examples?

VINCENT Well, in Amsterdam, you can buy beer in a movie theatre. And I don't mean

in a paper cup either. They give you a glass of beer, like in a bar. In Paris, you can buy beer at

MacDonald's. Also, you know what they call a Quarter Pounder with Cheese in Paris?

JULES They don't call it a Quarter Pounder with Cheese?

VINCENT No, they got the metric system there, they wouldn't know what the fuck a Quarter Pounder is.

JULES What'd they call it?

VINCENT Royale with Cheese.

JULES (repeating) Royale with Cheese. What'd they call a Big Mac?

VINCENT Big Mac's a Big Mac, but they call it Le Big Mac.

JULES Le Big Mac. What do they call a Whopper?

VINCENT I dunno, I didn't go into a Burger King. But you know what they put on french fries in Holland instead of ketchup?

JULES What?

VINCENT Mayonnaise.

JULES Goddamn!

VINCENT I seen 'em do it. And I don't mean a little bit on the side of the plate, they fuckin' drown 'em in it.

Superficially, this could seem like a Lynchian sort of dialogue. Just as Lynch gives us cops who care about donuts because, wouldn't you know, some cops do like donuts, and it's not inconsistent with tracking a murder that one stop to appreciate the trees, so, surely, some hitmen vacation in Europe and note and discuss the little differences.

But it feels different and has a different sort dramatic purpose. I'm tempted to say that Lynch ignores genre while Tarantino subverts it. If *Lynch's* cops talk about donuts, it's because cops in fact talk about donuts. If Tarantino's hitmen talk about donuts, it's because movie star hitmen *don't* talk about donuts. Lynch looks to reality and records it, and thus defies genre by ignoring it (again, with the caveat that this isn't the whole story; sometimes he does play with genre for playing with genre's sake); Tarantino looks to genre and subverts, and defies genre purposefully. But we get, interestingly enough, something like the same thing: gun-toting people discussing high calorie foods.

Let me end with one other feature typically associated with Tarantino and prima facie similar to Lynch: the use of netherworld things like drugs and violence. There are definite similarities, but again Lynch goes deeper, if not deep enough: he doesn't just murder the girl, he shows, in great detail, the sadness of the mother. And he shows the horror of the abuse brutally in *Fire Walk With Me*. Tarantino's violence, on the other hand, is all surface, no consequence.

And one final point before ending this whole hyperrealism vs genre stuff. I've been claiming that Tarantino is arch-postmodernist, all surface and no content, that it's just a series of either references to other works or subversions of the conventions thereof, and so we should think of it as unrealistic. But there's another way to look at it.

Tarantino belongs to perhaps the first generation that was raised on tv and movies (he was born in 1963; I don't have an exact figure for how widespread television was then, but in 1950 it was in fewer than 10% of houses and in 1959 more than 90%, which gives you its rapid rise to ubiquity). This is an important fact: what might it do to someone to be raised on such things? This might seem an overly simplistic story but think: prior to the invention of television, the voices one encountered, and the things one saw, for the most part, were those of one's family and surroundings. And one's family and surroundings are, typically, not all that entertaining, or at least are markedly different from the families and surroundings on television and in the movies. It's plausible to think, then, that the process of growing up is different for one growing up before and growing up after the mainstreamification of television. One is exposed to more and more different but fictionalised voices which drown out the actual voices of family and friends (in a later chapter we'll see concrete evidence from sociology to suggest that television does indeed play this role as a proxy for human interaction).

Now here's a thought: Tarantino's art simply reflects this fact. If one's life consists to a large extent of watching movies and television, and one wants to accurately present one's life, then one's art should somehow contain a lot of television and movies. But it would be very boring (and presumably difficult from the point of view of copyright) if one were just plunk your protagonist in front of a screen and watch him or her watching, so one makes do with allusion.

Here's another way to put the point. Say you want to convey a particular piece of information in an interesting way. That someone is angry, for example. Back in the day, you might have appealed to some feature of the natural world. After all, before tv, there wasn't much else to do but look at the window at the weather, so it would be natural to describe someone's anger as a storm. But now, it's in 70s, you're probably in some big city, the view from your window is uninspiring, but you have Saturday morning cartoons or movies to entertain you, so it's natural to use them instead. And thus we get, for example, The Simpsons's writers expressing Homer's exasperation with 'D'oh', which itself comes from a character in the Laurel and Hardy shorts.

On this view, the allusion heavy style of the 90s isn't some clever deconstructionist turn away from the goals of art as we've typically considered them, which is to say as a depiction of the world, but just an updating of the means to that goal demanded by the updating in the sort of lives one leads. Rather than a deconstruction of movies, it's an attempt to portray a live lived mediated by movies.

I'll expand upon this theme in more detail later in the book. However, before doing that, I want to consider a more theoretical question. I threw about the term 'postmodern' above, and indeed it seems well applied to many features of 90s work. But it's unclear what I mean---it's unclear what anybody *ever* means when they talk about postmodernism. I'd like to take a look at the opinions of some of the most influential people here, and so in the next chapter I'll dip into what's known as 'theory' to see if we can pin down this important feature of the culture.

CHAPTER 4: EXPLAINER, POST-MODERNISM

Postmodernism is a word that gets thrown around a lot, both when describing 90s culture, and when describing the current culture. Some people, not so seriously, have tried to trace back our current post-truth, alternative facts politics to postmodernists; more pertinently, most of the art I describe in this book would also be described as postmodern, and I will make the case that social media communication, especially memes, is a postmodern way of

communicating but that current, 2017, art is post-postmodern. It will accordingly be useful to say a bit about what this amounts to.

There are a bunch of different meanings for postmodernism, one of the central features of which seems to be its resistance to definition. I'm going to look at the work of some of the most influential theorists in this area, since I think we can excavate from their work some interesting ideas that will help us understand our era.

Let me begin by noting two senses of postmodernism I *won't* so much concentrate on. On one, 'postmodern' is just a temporal designation, to denote the period when modernism ended. On this account any work of art which appeared---very roughly---after the 50s would be postmodern: Burroughs would be postmodern and Scorsese, and The Beatles and Saturday Night Live. This, I take it, is close to maximally unhelpful. Another would be less chronological but equally heedful of etymology and suggest that it's writing that responds to or defines itself against modernism. We'll see a bit about this later.

Let me then turn to the first of our writers, Jean Baudrillard. He is a French sociologist concerned with giving an account of the features of post-industrial society, such as mass media and consumerism. He later travelled to America and most of his more famous analyses involve aspects of American culture in the quarter century or so before the millennium.

He remains influential to this day as one of the key thinkers of postmodernism, and indeed has some popular notoriety: Morpheus's line 'welcome to the desert of the real' in the Matrix is from Baudrillard, and the makers of that film forced their staff (poor bastards) to read *Simulacra and Simulation*, which is the essay we'll discuss.

Baudrillard is interested in what he calls the precession of simulacra. 'Precession' is a technical term from mechanics which, as far as I can tell, Baudrillard uses just as a fancy synonym for 'Preceding'. 'Simulcra' is a fancy word which means, essentially, representation.

To say that simulcra are precessing then is to say that representations have come to have precedence. Over what?

Well, to answer that let me present a picture of language I hope we can all agree on: there are things out there, and there are words which stand for them (Some deny this, holding that there is no such *standing for* relation relating words and things. Words get their meaning not by making contact with some extra-linguistic bit of reality, but by the relations they stand in to other words. 'Sofa' doesn't make contact with some extra-linguistic bit of reality, the sofas. Rather, it makes contact with other (intra-linguistic, obviously) words: 'chaise-longue', 'arm-chair', 'bean-bag', and gets whatever positive meaning it has by its differences with these other words: it is not built for reclining, it is not built just for one, it would not be out of place in a dentist's waiting room, and so on. Regardless of whether or not this is true---which it isn't---something like the model in the text must be presupposed to understand Baudrillard, so let's presuppose it).

The things, for most of us most of the time, are where the action is at. Gold, the metal, is much more valuable than 'gold' the word. There's also a sort of temporal preceding: we have this picture of a pre-existing reality, to the various parts of which we then attach names. Adam named the animals, but the animals were already around.

Baudrillard's big idea is that this idea---that things outvalue and precede representations---is, now, wrong. Here, in his almost incomparably awful style, is how he puts it:

In this passage to a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor of truth, the age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials-worse: by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs, a more ductile material than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalence, all binary oppositions and all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. *It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself*, that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a

metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have to be produced - this is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection which no longer leaves any chance even in the event of death. A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference. (excerpt from 'Simulcra and Simulation' in Leitch ed, *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, W.W. Norton and Company, 2001, p1733. All subsequent references in this chapter are to this book.)

This whole paragraph, indeed pretty much the whole essay, could be reduced to the italicised--by me--line. I know it's kind of old hat to beat up on these guys, but this is truly awful writing, and, moreover, truly awful writing that people are forced to read. This essay is widely anthologised and cited--in fully three different books on my shelf you can find it. Students all over the world read this and, probably, think that there is something that the level of insight is proportional to the verbiage and that their failure to get much out of it reflects on them. But it doesn't: while, as we'll see, Baudrillard has some provocative ideas, mostly it's dross.

But maybe even if the style is bad, the idea is good? Sometimes this is true. Kant has bad style but is interesting. Frege's *Begriffsschrift* has as obscure a typography as one can imagine but reinvented formal logic. So let's continue. The idea that we've substituted signs of the real for the real itself is kind of intriguing sounding, especially in the era where some claim millennials have exchanged sex for porn, and we've got a reality tv boss for boss of the country. Maybe Baudrillard's on to something.

To illustrate his point, Baudrillard points to some features of (then) contemporary culture: Disneyland and Watergate. He thinks that in both cases there's a natural way to think about these features which is, in fact, wrong. The natural way to think of Disneyland is that it's functions as a fictional, unrealistic representation of America: it's a false world within the

real world of the USA. The natural way to think of the Watergate scandal is that it functions as a representation of how politics shouldn't be done---the scandal by its very scandalousness, points to the non-scandalous normal nature of politics. In each case, we have a pair of distinctions: the fictional, unrealistic world of Disneyland as against the real world outside its boundaries, and the scandal and crime of the Watergate break-in as against the normal, honest course of American politics.

But this is wrong, says Baudrillard. Taking Watergate first, his claim is that there is no such thing as the normal, honest course of American politics. For example, take the wiretapping of Democrats Nixon carried out: this has, it's known, long been something done or at least permitted by the political establishment (Kennedy and Truman, for example, both did it). If this is so, then if a scandal is a violation of some norms of conduct then, as Baudrillard says, there is no Watergate scandal (at least as concerns wiretapping).

Instead, the function of Watergate was to convince people there is a normal, honest course of American politics. It served, Baudrillard to impose the idea that it was a scandal, that what Nixon and his gang did was indeed a break with some norms of political behaviour and that therefore there was an order that was being scandalously defied. The scandal which wasn't a scandal caused a scandal, and therefore brought into being the condition for a scandal!

This is an interesting analysis---whether it's in any way borne out by what actually happened is another question (we might note that Americans' faith in their institutions took a nose dive after Watergate; we might note again that Nixon's replacement, Ford, by pardoning Reagan, attached to himself some of the former's guilt). But it at least makes sense, and presents a position worth considering: that representations---the sum total of newspaper articles, books, movies, and so on---about the Watergate scandal served to bring into being what was previously lacking, namely the idea that there was an upstanding political order.

Let's consider his second example, which is a bit less clear: Disneyland. He thinks that its secret is that, although we think of it as a fictional representation of a sort of world, in fact its

purpose is to hide the fact that 'all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real....it is no longer a question of a false representation of reality...but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real' (op cit, 1741). Disneyland doesn't function as an escape into a fantasy world; it functions to distract from the fact that there is no actual world anymore.

What does this mean? In what sense is Los Angeles no longer real? Well, he doesn't really say. A textbook on postmodernism (Best and Kellner 119) suggests that the proliferation of manuals (sex manuals, DIY manuals) makes the same point for Baudrillard: we come to privilege the ideal over reality. We're not concerned with our actual lawn, or relationship or whatever, but with the expert one the specialists will show us how to create. Another example Baudrillard gives himself is of opinion polls: we think of them as registering opinion, but we know well that they form opinion. If you read in an opinion poll that a given party is doing better than you would have anticipated, you might then come to put your support behind the lost cause.

These are all mildly interesting observations. We do seem, in some sense, to live in a time in which representations are very important, and can even sometimes have this reality making power. Again, the tendency to just point to our current political situation is strong: the quick *argumentum ad Trumpum* make lead us to think we are definitely in a Baudrillardian world.

Still, we don't get, from Baudrillard, anything clear enough to give us a sense of postmodernism. It's obviously not the case that LA is no longer real, and we can note that humans have been defining themselves against ideals, and doing something because they think the neighbour does it too, for as long as there have been human beings. Baudrillard doesn't make the case that there is something particularly different about post-industrial society that warrants giving it and only it the moniker of postmodernism. So let's leave Baudrillard, although we'll have occasion to return to his observations as the book progresses.

The next person to consider is another big name, Jean Lyotard. His basic idea is that postmodernism is defined as an 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. In plain English--we don't believe in overarching theories of the world. For example, back in the day people believed in God, and then they believed in reason, socialism, Darwin, Marx, Freud. In general, it was thought that there was something we were heading towards, some ideal, or that at least we were progressing, and that, moreover, we were doing so according to an intelligible process. For Darwinism, or least its popular interpretations, the laws of natural selection caused us to be more adapted to our environment than our ancestors, and that can explain little peculiarities, like why we have useless appendixes or why it's very hard to stop eating something sweet after you start. For Freud, the laws of the unconscious are what gives rise to our behaviours, from small slips of the tongue and dreams to the sort of partner we choose, and understanding these laws can enable us to free ourselves of the neuroses and anxieties with which we are burdened. For Marx, the laws of capitalism itself suggested its downfall, and, for example, for all their sci-fi bizarreness, uber's self-driving cars are just the newest working out of an underlying capitalist logic.

Now, though, what do we believe? Freud is certainly out—we don't assign any deep meaning in our parapraxes, and few would have much time for thinking that the concepts of id and ego and superego limn any psychological reality. While we're all—apart from the many who aren't—still pro-Darwin, we're also very aware of the extent to which science is sometimes irrational or can be misused or is sometimes just false. And Marx—the thought that there is some beyond of the unfettered capitalist system encountering the underside of which in Manchester influenced Engels so—that is hard to see, although it is becoming ever easier.

We are, Lyotard thinks, in an age where the thought that we are progressing in accordance with big picture and meaningful laws ought to be one held with suspicion. In Lyotard:

Neither economic nor political liberalism, nor the various Marxisms, emerge from the sanguinary last two centuries free from the suspicion of crimes against mankind. We can list a series of proper names (names of places, persons and dates) capable of illustrating and founding our suspicion. Following Theodor Adorno, I use the name of

Auschwitz to point out the irrelevance of empirical matter, the stuff of recent past history, in terms of the modern claim to help mankind to emancipate itself. What kind of thought is able to sublimate (Aufheben) Auschwitz in a general (either empirical or speculative) process towards a universal emancipation? So there is a sort of sorrow in the Zeitgeist. This can express itself by reactive or reactionary attitudes or by utopias, but never by a positive orientation offering a new perspective (ibid. 1614)

Less fancily: how can you believe in *anything* after Auschwitz? Not to mention God, but even any sort of belief that humans are progressing---how can it remain? We have given up the thought of progress, the idea that there is one aim towards things tend, and have replaced it with plurality. He uses, vaguely, the notion of a Wittgensteinian language game to try to make this point. At the start of the century came the idea that there was one language which could serve as a pure vessel of logic: a language into which we could translate vague imprecise language that would serve as a universal scientific language. As the century developed, he points out, the number of different logics exploded, each apt to translate a different part of language, with no real concern for there being an underlying language in which everything could be said (a fact which one could, without too much inaccuracy, link to Goedel's incompleteness results and Wittgenstein's passage from the *Tractatus* to the *Philosophical Investigations*). There was no universal language, it seems, but different languages for different purposes: one language for talking about necessary truth, one for talking about responsibility and duty, and so on. That's where Lyotard thinks we are: there are just different local languages, local sets of rules, local ways of behaving, not to be subsumed under some big picture story of reality.

Again, a lot of Lyotard's work is vague and poorly expressed. But nevertheless, and as with Baudrillard, the thought seems worth considering. The thought that definitive of postmodern cultures, and thus at least the 90s, is that its subjects didn't believe in big picture theories of the world has some sort of appeal to it. It is noteworthy, I think, that for a decent percentage of young people the idea of religion is never even considered as an option. And it's also noteworthy that were I writing a hundred or so years ago, there is a decent chance I would be at least receptive to Darwin, Freud, and Marx, each of whom saw an order in things. Does a contemporary, moderately well-informed person, see things this way?

The idea that we're getting better is hard to take with climate change, and Freudianism has been replaced with the medicalisation of the mind. At the moment, our mental lives have been stripped of their *meaning*. For Freud, one's sufferings *said* something, they tried to communicate the kernel of you that makes you unhappy. Even the smallest thing, a little slip of the tongue (a Freudian slip) was indicative of something. Now it's just serotonin and oxytocin and dopamine: we've moved from meaning to neurochemistry. Similarly, Marx had a vision of how capitalism would progress towards its own demise but that vision doesn't seem to have come true and we have come to accept what Mark Fisher famously called 'capitalist realism', the thought that there is no alternative to our current situation (*Capitalist Realism*, zero books, 2011). We can't even find repose in science. The replicability crisis in the social sciences is revealing that whole swathes of research is rotten to its core, the result of researcher inadequately versed in statistics being forced to churn out research papers for tenure or consultancies.

So it's *prima facie* reasonable to think that the mark of the postmodern is this absence of big beliefs. And when we see *The Simpsons*, I'll suggest that that sort of equivocality about metanarratives plays an important role. But it strikes me that it gives us little explanatory purchase in explaining, say, *Pulp Fiction*. It's a long way from Auschwitz and the end of belief to Jules and Vincent. So I conclude that again while an interesting thought, it would be hasty to say that this gives us the essence of postmodernism, or even something especially definitive of our era (people have often been haunted by belief's absence; and is it really true that in our era of the alt-right and the identity politics left we *don't* believe in things? I'll consider this later.)

So let me turn to one last theorist, again often anthologised and mentioned in this context, namely Frederic Jameson. He both writes better and is more immediately helpful in explaining the artists we're considering. He thinks an important thing about postmodernism is the relation between high and mass or popular culture. Noting that an interest in pop culture is, in a sense, already deeply there in modernism (Joyce, for example, wrote a chapter of *Ulysses* in the style of cheap romance novels; Eliot fills *The Waste Land* with current songs

alongside Latin poetry and Shakespeare references), but he thinks it has a different way of using these things.

They no longer 'quote' such 'texts' as a Joyce might have done; they incorporate them, to the point where the line between high art and commercial forms seem increasingly difficult to draw'. (ibid., p1961)

To make this notion of incorporation more precise, he introduces a distinction between pastiche and parody. A parody, roughly, is adopting a voice other than one's own, 'to cast ridicule on the private nature of these stylistic mannerisms and their excessiveness and eccentricity with respect to the way people normally speak and write' (ibid, p1963).

So, Jameson says, this presupposes a sense of a normal voice, against which the parodied is measured, for example the way the Nausicaa chapter is measured against the first few chapters of Ulysses. But now--what would happen if one no longer believed in such ordinary languages? If all there was was a plurality of different voices, with no baseline, then to speak would involve putting on a voice, but it would not be parody. It would be, in Jameson's terms, pastiche.

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry...without that still latent feeling that there's something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. (ibid., p1963)

We have seen and will see again this notion of pastiche. It captures Tarantino's aesthetic as well as the manic style of the Simpsons, as we'll see. It also arguably finds expression in one of the most interesting genres of music of the 90s, namely rap, which relies heavily on sampling older works.

Interestingly for our purposes, he makes the case that nostalgia is an important feature of the postmodern outlook. He points to the film *American Graffiti*, released at the height of Watergate in 1973, and looking back in an idealised way to 1962, and to some other nostalgic films and books of the era, and seems to suggest that nostalgia is a distinctively postmodern thing.

He refers to the film *Body Heat*, an homage to certain film noirs but set in the present day (so the 1980s of his writing). It manages to pull off the homage by using a small town setting, and thus being able to get away without representing the trappings of modern life. I suggest that this is exactly what's going on with *Twin Peaks*. And what he goes on to say will also prove highly relevant:

It seems to be exceedingly symptomatic to find the very style of nostalgia films invading and colonising even those movies today which have contemporary settings: as though, for some reason, we were unable today to focus our own present, as though we have become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience.

He then goes on to consider the stylised representation of the past we find in such works. Again, think of the picturesque picket fences of *Blue Velvet*'s Lumberton, and then recall this was a decade when black people were still forced to sit separate from whites in shops and on buses. Our retro films aren't accurate presentations of the past:

Cultural production has been driven back inside the mind, within the monadic subject: it can no longer look directly out of its eyes at the real world for its referent but must, as in Plato's cave, trace its mental images of the world on its confining walls...we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about that past, which itself remains forever out of reach. (ibid., p1966-67)

This is all very interesting, and will be worth heeding. Jameson, writing in the early 1980s, diagnosed a trend that reached its height, arguably, in the 90s, with Tarantino and Lynch. He sees that nostalgia is a fundamental feature of postmodernism, and taking his suggestion, we can then agree that the 90s are indeed a postmodern decade. Moreover, his idea that art has come to traffic in representations of reality rather than reality itself will become important when we consider the Simpsons. But I think we can suggest in advance a reason for our moving into Plato's cave. It's the same reason I suggested Tarantino was realist: the rise of television. If we're now about representation rather than reality, the reason for that is because representation was reality, for the many Americans who sat around watching television all day.

So, that's a whistle stop tour through postmodernism. I think there's a few things worth thinking about: even though Baudrillard is unforgivably vague, this idea that we spend a lot of time focused on images seems interesting, and, as we'll see, only increases. Lyotard's idea that there's no overlying truth is also something which gets bandied about. Jameson's idea of pastiche, nostalgia, and representation are all very also helpful. There does seem to be something, according to these terms, postmodern about Tarantino and Lynch, even if there's vagueness there.

So we've made, I hope, a little progress. One big question remains, though: if some works of the 90s were indeed postmodern according to what these fancy theorists mean by that, are we still in a postmodern era? On the one hand, overarching ideologies are out and prestige tv has little to do with pastiche. On the other, a lot of us spend a lot of our terms watching porn, voted for reality tv boss trump as boss of America, and communicating in memes which are perhaps pastiche taken to its limit. I will discuss all this later, considering whether we're now post-postmodern.

CHAPTER 5: SEINFELD

NBC's *Seinfeld* (1989--1998) can be described, at least initially, simply. It's a sitcom about four New Yorkers and their lives' mundane ups and downs. It was incredibly popular: Wikipedia tells me that for two years, it was the most watched program, and its finale got almost 80 million viewers, which is to say more than one quarter of Americans. Not only that, it was critically acclaimed, and would today top most critic's lists of best sitcoms ever. This combination of popularity and critical acclaim is pretty rare, and so I think it's worth considering what we can learn about the culture from the show. What is it that attracted both the critics and the everyday watchers so?

I want to suggest that there's two features of *Seinfeld* that are important both for understanding the show but also for our bigger project of understanding the ideology of the 90s. The first concerns cynicism or nihilism, and the second concerns its superficiality.

We've already, to some extent, touched on these phenomena in our discussion. We noted that *Generation X* combined cynicism and disaffection with the absurdities of late 20th century political and economic life with heart, with characters that love each other and yearn for a different era, a fact reflected in the way the book looks back to pre-74 life. My reading of *Seinfeld* is that it marks a development of this spirit in which the cynicism remains, but the love and nostalgia have gone. *Seinfeld* is permeated, self-consciously, with nihilism and with the sense of itself as new. Where the *Generation X* gang look back with longing, *Seinfeld* looks to the current world, putting it under the microscope of the stand-up comedian to analyse its flaws, which leads to the superficiality, which is a great source, as we'll see, of humour.

So, let me turn to cynicism. I asked what brought critics and the everyday watcher together in their enjoyment of *Seinfeld*. And, well, the smart-ass answer is: nothing. Famously, *Seinfeld* is a show about nothing, and it is so in two senses. Sitcoms, as their names suggested, are situated somewhere: *M*A*S*H* was situated in a hospital, *Cheers* in a bar, *Happy Days* in

the 50s, most of the others in some variety of household. Seinfeld has no setting in this way. Although there are certain locations used again and again, such as Jerry's apartment and the diner they frequent, the show tends to follow them around Manhattan as they get in various adventures.

Now, we can quibble to what extent this really makes Seinfeld new, and how much it's really different from, say, Cheers in this respect. Just as Cheers isn't really about anything in the sense that M*A*S*H is about the Korean war, so Seinfeld isn't about anything, we might think. Fair enough: I think there's a decent case to be made that some of the 'show about nothing' rhetoric the makers were fond of wasn't too accurate. Where Seinfeld undoubtedly *does* differ from its predecessors, though, is the way it self-consciously subverts them. Famously, the dictum of Seinfeld is 'no hugging, no learning'. It set itself up explicitly in opposition to family friendly sitcoms like The Cosby Show or Happy Days, or shows with a socio-political heart like M*A*S*H, in which the characters are basically good, and things basically turn out well, and if they don't, lessons are learned.

The characters in Seinfeld are not basically good, and for the people with whom they interact, things do not turn out basically well. Take Susan Ross, George's erstwhile fiancée. She had been living a perfectly happy life before she met him, but when she did, in the space of a couple of years a) got vomited on by Kramer, b) for fired from her job because of her relationship c) indirectly lead to her father's beloved cabin being burned down and d) his secret homosexuality being revealed and finally e) died, licking the toxic glue of cheap envelopes George skimped on for their wedding invitations.

Not only that, but this was the object of more or less indifference to everybody, including and perhaps especially George. When the gang learn of her death, after brief unmeant commiserations, and at George's suggestion, they go for coffee as they always do; the episode plays out with George phoning a woman he's interested in:

Yeah I was just calling 'cos I wanted you to know that I'm not engaged anymore.....well huh, She died....Toxic glue from the wedding invitations.....well we

were expecting about two hundred people. Yeah... Anyway.. hum I got the funeral tomorrow but huh.. my weekend is pretty wide open and I was wondering...(dial tone interrupts George)..... Hello...Hello..

Examples like this could be multiplied at will. Here's an inexhaustive list of things they did: Jerry stole a rye bread from an old lady in the street, snatching it from her arms and running away; when a fire breaks out at his girlfriend's mother's house, George knocks women and children out of the way in a dash for the exit; again George is concerned that his girlfriend might be bulimic not because of her wellbeing, but because it means the dinners he buys her are money down the drain; Elaine, pretending on the phone to be a child's grandmother, and getting sick of the call, pretends she's dying so she doesn't have to keep talking. Jerry's catchphrase is practically 'that's a shame', uttered entirely unfeelingly when someone close to him goes through some misfortune.

Of course, finding humour in cruelty and inhumanity is hardly unique to Seinfeld—generations of stand-up comedians, and things like *It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia*, *Southpark*, and *Family Guy* have made it passé.

But to analogise Seinfeld to these other more uncontroversially 'dark' comedies is not quite right. Firstly, it's not typical dark humour. It avoids the really serious topics, such as murder, drugs, child abuse, and so on, that dark comedy tends to thrive on. There's no profanity, and any talk of sex is very euphemistic. It's filmed like any standard sitcom using multiple cameras, and looks, today, very much a product of its time.

If anything, though, this makes its central lack of heart all the more cutting. We know, for example, that we're not meant to empathise with the cast of *Sunny*; we know, basically, that how Ricky Gervais gets his laughs is a very simplistic taboo breaking. But Seinfeld---these are normal people, just like us. That *they* are like this suggests that *we* are maybe like this—other 'gang of friends' sitcoms of the age do seem explicitly aspirational: you would like to be one of the *Friends* gang. Of course, to a large extent that's just part of the humour. It goes against our expectations of the sitcom genre that its protagonists should be bastards. So that's

one important feature of Seinfeld: it's emotional coldness. To the extent that we associate coldness and cynicism with the 90s, then the massively popular Seinfeld is a sign of this.

If that were it, though, still I don't think Seinfeld would deserve all that much attention (well, apart from the fact that it's still, almost thirty years after it first aired, about the funniest sitcom there's been). What's particularly interesting about the inhumanity of the Seinfeld gang is its source. A recurring theme is *superficiality*: they do things, for example end relationships, for very silly reasons. They don't see the wood for the trees: Jerry, for example, breaks up with a girl because she eats her peas one at a time with a fork; George breaks up with a girl because she beat him at chess. Elaine breaks up with someone because, when leaving a note that a friend of hers had given birth, he didn't add an exclamation point. She even, in another episode, breaks up with someone because he was a 'bad breaker upper':

ELAINE: Right, so, I called my friend, you know - the one who set us up - I found out, he's a bad-breaker-upper.

JERRY: Mmm.. Bad how?

ELAINE: (Fast) Well, you know when you break up, how you say things you don't mean? Well, he says the mean things you don't mean, but he means them.

JERRY: (Nods) I follow. So what are you gonna do?

ELAINE: Dump him. I can't be with someone who doesn't break up nicely. I mean, to me, that's one of the most important parts of a relationship.

For the Seinfeld gang, life swarms with a series of complicated minute rules that guide social behaviour. But, as if they suffer from a strange sort of eye disease that magnifies the small while doing nothing to the big, they can't see beyond these rules which imprison them.

This is the way we should think of the gang: they are sort of like scientists of modern life, people stuck to the microscope who have no life outside the lab. Except they're not trying to understand cell biology to cure cancer, but are working out after how many dates you're required to break up with someone in person:

Elaine: I just don't enjoy being with him.

Jerry: Well that's what's important.

Elaine: I'm meeting him for lunch at Chadway's around the corner, do I have to break up with him face to face or can I just wait and do it over the phone?

Jerry: How many times you been out with him?

Elaine: Seven?

Jerry: Face to face.

Elaine: Seven dates is a face-to-face break up?

Jerry: If it was six I could have let you go, but seven, I'm afraid, is over the limit. Unless, of course, there was no sex.

They are frequently presented as sorts of savants of modern life, knowing precisely what modern etiquette demands:

Jerry: It was a 'thank you' card from Kristin because I'm doing the PBS drive. I mean, how long am I supposed to keep it?

George: The rule is a minimum of two days.

Jerry: You making that up or do you know what you're talking about?

George: I'm making it up.

Or again, on how George can tell if he's got a girlfriend. It depends

Jerry: On many factors.

George: Like what?

Jerry: Well, how long you've been seeing her. What's your phone call frequency? Are you on a daily?

George: No. Semi-daily. Four or five times a week.

Jerry: What about Saturday nights? Do you have to ask her out, or is a date implied?

George: Implied.

Jerry: She got anything in your medicine cabinet?

George: There might be some moisturizer.

Jerry: Ah hah. Let me ask you this. Is there any tampax in your house?

George: (Pause) Yeah.

Jerry: Well, I'll tell you what you've got here.

George: What?

Jerry: You got yourself a girlfriend.

George: Ah, no, no. Are you sure? A girlfriend?

Jerry: I'm looking at a guy in a semi-daily with tampax in his house and an implied date on Saturday night. I would like to help you out, but...

What makes these so funny, though, is the fact that the rules by which they guide their behaviour don't, in fact, exist, but they assume they do. Jerry assumes that a certain phone call frequency together with other stuff implies a girlfriend, but of course it doesn't.

This is what sets Seinfeld apart, I think, from other comedies. After all, observing the foibles of modern life is hardly unique to it: it's a staple of most any comedy. What's different about Seinfeld is that it's not actually, observing features, it's making up features, pretending that they exist, and then watching the clash that arises between the gang that's obsessed with those features and the rest of the world.

Although I was somewhat tepid in my enthusiasm for Baudrillard, some of his fuzzy motivating thoughts seem relevant here: recall he held that the Watergate scandal was self-creating in a strange way. It didn't accurately describe political reality as divided into the regular, moral, law-like functioning that is typical and its rupture in scandal, because there was no such regular functioning to begin with. But by suggesting a scandal, it thereby suggested the law necessary for a scandal.

So, we might think, here: there are no rules governing when one does or doesn't have a girlfriend, but by acting as if there were, one brings them into being: after his conversation with Jerry, George considers himself to be in a relationship and behaves as if he were. In a decent sense, then, we can say that Seinfeld is a postmodern sitcom.

Related to this is one of the other distinctive features of Seinfeldian humour, which is the use of neologisms. Seinfeld has given us the following, which have to some extent become part of common use:

high-talker, close talker, low talker: Respectively, someone who talks with an abnormally high-pitched voice, or who stands right up in your face when talking to you, or who talks very quietly.

sidler: Someone who doesn't make any noise when they move and so can just sneak up on you quickly.

regifter: Someone who gives as a gift something which they themselves received as a gift.

Antidentite: Someone prejudiced against dentists.

Another source of similar humour in the same vein is expressions like the following:

The pop in: When someone is in the area and comes to your house unannounced (see also: the break out pop in, when someone escapes from jail and comes to your house unannounced)

The day date: As it suggests, a date during the day time, involving less pressure, and not requiring wine and showering

The kiss hello: The unfortunate habit of kissing someone hello when you meet them.³

³ JERRY: Yeah. I'm on a kiss hello program with her.

GEORGE: Really?

JERRY: Yeah. Every time I see her, I gotta kiss her hello. I just did it once, on her birthday, somehow it mushroomed. Now I dread seeing her because of it.

GEORGE: You know, I'm down to one kiss hello. My aunt Sylvia.

JERRY: Ah, that's fortunate. I really admire that.

GEORGE: (surprise) Huh. I never heard you say you admire me for anything

JERRY: No, I told you I admire your hearing.

George waves away the compliment.

JERRY: No, don't slough that off, you have great hearing.

The Room-mate switch: when you're dating someone and attempt to replace her with her roommate.

There's an interesting feature of these expressions which has been much studied by linguists: nouns and definite descriptions are presuppositional. We can think of something like 'antidentite' as a sort of name, and names have this feature: if you use it in someone's company, you presuppose that your hearer is familiar with the name's bearer. If Bill is my uncle, but you don't know him and we've never talked about him before, it's very weird for me to say, out of the blue, 'Bill is getting a new car'. It's presupposed that if you use a name, its bearer is familiar. Similarly, if you use a phrase like 'the x', it's presupposed that there is one and only one x. If we're talking about cars and I say 'the guy who fixed my car was nice', you'll come to assume, if you didn't before, that one and only one person fixed my car.

Seinfeld exploits these linguistic devices to make it seem as if 'antidentite' and 'room-mate switches' are familiar things, parts of the world as taken for granted as your friends or the president. That they are, in fact, to most people, including the audience, unfamiliar gives us the impression that the gang live in their own separate world where what's taken for granted is different. As, indeed, they do: we don't recognise high-talkers as features of the social world, and nor is room-mate switching something we are familiar with.

Here's one way to understand this. The world is a confusing and scary place, and to have a name for something, or to think that it's governed by rules, gives comfort. That's why the Greeks thought there was a God of wind whose moods determined whether their sea-crossings would work, and why they gave him a name ('Aelous'). We should view Seinfeld as trying to do the same for the confusing and scary place that is New York City of the 90s. The problem is that that world is as for all intents and purposes indeterministic as is the weather system: there are no rules they can use to bring it under control, just as we can't predict the weather too accurately.

Here's another way of understanding this humour: they are trying to *brand* the social world in which they find themselves, but they fail, because they're trying to draw distinctions where none exist. In drawing distinctions between the high talkers and the low talkers, between being in a relationship with an implied Saturday night date and one without, they are drawing distinctions that don't really make a difference, just as, so the story goes, a given factory might produce one and the same fizzy liquid, slap a Coke label on one and a Smart Value label on the other, and thereby charge different prices for them. Brands are distinctions without differences, and I think we should understand Seinfeld as attempting to take over this logic of brands into the social world, and making it ridiculous.

This might sound like kind of a reach. But it's notable that this sort of linguistic humour is also a central feature of another work we considered, namely *Generation X*. On the bottom of a lot of the pages of that book are little boxes with definitions, like the following:

Boomer Envy. Envy of material wealth and long-range material security accrued by older members of the baby boom generation by virtue of fortunate births.

Bread and Circuits. The electric era tendency to view part politics as corny—no longer relevant or meaningful or useful to modern societal issues, and in many cases dangerous.

Ultra Short Term Nostalgia. Homesickness for the extremely recent past: “God, things seemed so much better in the world last week”

Occupational Slumming. Taking a job well beneath one's skill or education level as a means of retreat from adult responsibilities and/or avoid possible failure in one's true occupation.

Again, most of these aren't of existing terms, and perhaps not existing phenomena. One gets the sense that Coupland is trying, in a sense more plaintive than Seinfeld, to make sense of the features of the world he inhabits, and finds that existing language doesn't cut it.

Once you attend to this, you'll see that appeal to brands is ubiquitous in 90s works: Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* of 1991 derives most of its little humour from juxtaposing detailed accounts of exactly what sort of suits and skin creams its hero wears with extremely graphic descriptions of rape and murder; a similar thing is found, to a similar effect, in David Fincher's *Fight Club*; David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* is set in a future in which even years have brand names and his lit. fic. ancestor Don DeLillo's much lauded *White Noise* is practically set in a supermarket. In the Simpsons, moreover, among many other examples, we find the clown Krusty giving his name to a range of products including: Krusty-brand Home Pregnancy Test, Krusty's sulphuric acid, and Krusty's Legal forms ("hey hey they're legally binding") (I owe this list of products to *Planet Simpson*, Chris Turner, pxx). Or again think of The Notorious B.I.G.'s 1994 Juicy, a paean to consumerism which contains, among others, lines like:

Super Nintendo, Sega Genesis

When I was dead broke man I couldn't picture this

50-inch screen money green leather sofa

Got two rides a limosine and a chauffeur

Talking and joking about brands was everywhere in 90s humour (the next explainer will suggest why—this was a culture coming to terms with the brand as a new and central feature of the economy.), so I don't think it's so implausible to say that something like that's going on with Seinfeldian verbal humour.

Returning to Seinfeld, then, the big thing about it is not that it's a show about the little things that make up our modern life. Rather, and more brilliantly, it's about the non-existent little things that these four *think* makes up our modern life but which don't. It's also, I would suggest, about the deadening effects of knowledge, or at least the microscopic knowledge which they possess, and which seems to distract them away from human feeling. Again, compare *Generation X*: their awareness of their McJobs is tempered with hopes for a beyond,

realised at the end of the novel. Seinfeld is monocular, focused entirely and minutely on the present, with absurd and deadening effects.

In my overall narrative, I would want to suggest that Seinfeld seasons roughly 4-6 mark a distinct point of development in the 90s. The move from Generation X to Seinfeld is marked by the falling away of nostalgia, by an obsessional interest with the here and now of modern life in its minute depths. And with that goes away nostalgia and melancholy, and is replaced by coldness and apathy, with the same keen eye for the ridiculousness of the modern world but without the sympathy and love to make it bearable.

CHAPTER 6 EXPLAINER, BRANDING

I've suggested that a central thread of the humour of Seinfeld and a range of other works ought to be understood in terms of what we could call the logic of branding. The aim of this chapter is to consider that logic, by considering the way the concept of the brand took off in the late eighties and early nineties.

The notion of brand is one which I think the interest of which is dulled, to us, by familiarity: we, even in the smallish town in Northern Ireland I grew up in, are used to high streets with Subways and McDonalds, most likely pestered our parents to buy us expensive branded clothes, sought SNESs or Playstations or Xboxes.

But to the previous generation, this, I claim, wasn't so. The ubiquity of brands is a relatively recent development, understanding which can shed light not only on the works we've just considered, but on numerous features of our life today, from the different online spaces we congregate in, to the preference for craft beer and burgers on slates and jam-jar cocktails, to the burgeoning of gig economy businesses like uber and airbnb. By learning about brands,

and by seeing them reflected in work by people less numb to them than us, we can learn about our world.

And our online, artisanal, techno-libertarian world can be seen as a consequence of what we can call, following Naomi Klein, the spiritualisation of big business, whose *No Logo* (1999, Picador), published around the millennium, I rely on extensively in this chapter. Starting from around the late eighties, companies have done their absolute best to divest themselves of the awkward physical trappings which previously were essential: of full time workers who want benefits and decent wages, of factories which require fixing, and of products which can easily be copied by a low budget competitor. Rather, big companies are now in the image business: a company sells a lifestyle, or an idea, that is, an intangible, immaterial thing. Of course, it can't quite--or couldn't, until recently--get by *entirely* without the physical, but it can ship it out to third world factories, or hire people on 38 hour a week (so not, technically, full time) contracts which can be terminated instantly.

The trend away from matter is inherent to a society in which goods are mass produced, Klein notes. If I'm selling you rice but there's another guy over there also selling you rice, how do I get your business? I can cut my prices, sure, but he can cut his too. I need a way to set my product apart from his, to find a distinction in the absence of a difference. That difference was the brand.

Brands had been around for decades. Uncle Bens, for example, had been selling rice since the mid-40s, aided by the eponymous Ben, a kindly shop-keeper who graced its packages. And advertising, as we all now know from *Mad Men*, is also a venerable institution since pioneered by Eddy Bernays, Freud's cousin, who used his uncle's psychological insights to get people to buy stuff.

Given this, one might think we're not dealing with a phenomenon particular to the nineties. But brands only really came into their own a bit later. Indeed, on Klein's telling, a very concrete sign of this dematerialisation occurred in 1988, when Philip Morris bought Kraft for

six times what it was worth, the thought being all that extra was for the good name of 'Kraft' (Klein, 6). The importance of branding was revealed or perhaps better created---again, obscure old Baudrillard comes to mind---by the money that was spent on it.

But this suddenly discovered value in brands was also reflective of an underlying necessity. Because the underlying economy changed in another fundamental way with the coming into existence of big box discount stores, the prime exemplar of which is Walmart.

A company like Walmart uses economies of scale to crush competition: their stores are so big, and so plentiful, that they can sell things much cheaper. How can I get you to buy *my* soda when Walmart, with their economies of scale, can offer gallon jugs for cents?

Again, branding. In a sense, I cease to sell the soda, and sell instead an idea--perhaps I make an advert showing cool young people around drinking soda, conveying the message that if you drink it, you too could be friends with--indeed, be one of--these cool young people. Economies of scale don't (yet) apply to ideas.

All the big companies realised this: they realised that their product was rather an image than anything physical. Klein collects quotes in which CEO's and industry insiders are disarmingly honest about this. Starbucks tell us that people "don't truly believe" there's a difference between their coffee and others', so they must 'establish emotional ties' with their brand. The owner of Diesel jeans says 'we don't sell a product, we sell a style of life'. Nike claims it's a 'sports company' whose aim is to keep 'the magic of sports alive' (Klein p20,p23, p24, respectively).

This can sound like bullshit, but these *are* very successful companies, and they *are* selling things which can be got much cheaper. The simplest explanation is that a customer buying them is in fact buying something else to account for the higher tag; so why not just call that brand. If it seems a bit metaphysically heavyweight and pretentious--well, that seems to be how reality is.

These companies, anyway, certainly believe this sort of thing. It's reflected in the staggering amount they spend on advertising. Reebok, for example, in the guts of a recession, upped ad spending 71.9% in 1991 (Klein 16). It's reflected in the culture we inhabit, it's reflected in their adventures across the world, and it's reflected in the income inequality that's risen in lockstep with it.

Klein points out facts that can seem to be obscured: corporate sponsorship of events like concerts and sports and even schools first became a really big thing in the 90s. And that era saw the development of brand ambassadors, the most famous example of whom was Michael Jordan, who came to be associated with the product, and things like product placement and sponsored concerts. We're now somewhat inured to stadiums named after shoes and campuses filled with McDonalds, but it's worthwhile looking at things through slightly newer eyes and seeing that this is indeed a bit weird. It's somewhat surreal and unpleasant that our entertainment should be so commercially compromised in this way, and it becomes understandable, I think, that the artists we've been looking at should be so attuned to it. And seeing that, we should focus our gaze on the surreal fact that we live in a society in which Apple launches are *events* and when a decent percentage of the people who watch the Superbowl do so to see the new adverts

And once we've done so, we should return to our current internetful life and be on the look out for the invasion of advertising into our personal spaces, not only in the literal sense that we have to navigate around ads to see content, but also in the more insidious way that, chasing likes and self-censoring, what now makes up, for many of us, the bulk of our interactions, are mediated by certain brand-like constraints. Although we joke about personal brands, actually to embrand oneself, with the rigidity and blandness that that implies, is a very bad thing.

So that's the first take home: branding is important in nineties art because it was relatively new development, and we should remain awake to its weirdnesses today, especially given how brands seem to have integrated themselves into our lives.

There's a second thing, perhaps even more consequential than the first, which arises from this process of spiritualisation. If what you're *really* selling is an idea, then the physical world is an impediment. It's kind of a pain for Nike, if they're selling the mere idea of sport, that they have to be bothered making shoes, a process which involves workers, whom one must pay, in factories which one must provide with electricity and toilet paper and occasionally repair.

The logical step is to try and get rid of these unfortunate physical substrates, and our companies took that step. As is by now familiar, many of the goods we use are made in awful conditions in the third world, where you can pay people a dollar a day as and when you need them, and where the externalities of pollution and illness caused by overwork needn't worry you.

But it's not only that. Again as Klein is at pains to point out, it's not strictly true to say that these companies moved jobs out there--rather, they ceased to get involved in the business of making themselves. Nike don't own any factories which make things; rather, they make a contract with someone to supply them made goods, which they then brand. Nike are just like us--they shop around to get the best value for the products which bear their name (Klein pp197ff).

Of course, not *all* companies can get away with this. We can't have our Starbucks served to us from the Philippines. But still, it must be galling, if you're Starbucks. The coffee you're making is really not what you're selling, but rather it's the Starbucks vibe. The barista does little towards making this idea, so it's somewhat unfair that you should have to pay them properly.

And so they don't. In service industries which, as Klein tells us, have become much more numerous given globalisation, people work non-full time. These jobs offer flexibility, even if they don't offer benefits, a fact which completely overlooks the very large number of people for whom this is their sole source of income. It isn't people in school doing these jobs

anymore, for the most part, it's people struggling on around the minimum wage, working essentially full time without the benefits or protections. Although not of the same order of magnitude, their labour is cheap, much cheaper than it is practicable. A few years prior to Klein's book, this situation was made worse by Clinton's welfare reforms removed support for single mothers, and put them into these precarious service jobs, the degrading and unlivable nature of which Barbara Ehrenreich documented in her highly readable *Nickled and Dimed* of 2001.

Of course, this has only increased, but now it's increasingly rampant. Your current author checks the job market for his area of expertise, contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, and sees adjunct jobs, temporary jobs involving incredibly high teaching loads and incredibly poor remuneration (I was recently rejected for a very vague temporary adjunct position paying 10k euro a year in a top Dublin university. In Dublin! Where it'll be non-easy to find a place for 1k a month). Not only that, but the dephysicalisation has, familiarly, taken a novel turn. Businesses like uber and Airbnb hit upon the clever expedient of having no physical product at all. Their whole business is co-ordination and transmission of information: of matching up people who need a ride with people who have a ride, people who need a room which people who have a room. They are the apotheosis of the brand era: purely informational companies. Capitalism's flight towards the spiritual is, it almost seems, complete; but, crucially, it's a journey that's been in the cards from the beginning. Although it's obviously been made possible by the internet, the rapid change in business we're witnessing is nevertheless an inevitable stage in the logic of the brand, and so we shouldn't think it's a mere accident of history that has come about because of unpredictable technological advances.

There's one more interesting lesson to be got from Klein's book (Klein p129ff). Consider Walmart--the paradigm budget brand--and Starbucks—a—at least let's say---prestige brand. Both adopt the same methods when taking over a market: they bombard the area with stores, thereby forcing other companies out of business. Starbucks, for example, will open a range of stores in an area, even if that involves 'cannibalisation'--profits from any given store being lowered because of the other Starbucks in the area. Once they've moved in, they force other stores out, at which time they have a monopoly. Walmart does the same, only on a state-wide

scale: they only move into a certain area once they're able to open a good number of stores in close proximity, but once they have done so, they are able to essentially takeover whole swathes of the county, as they benefit from massive economies of scale (essentially, as if they had one gigantic store in the territory they occupy) and are thus able to drive smaller stores out of business.

It's notable that this is more or less explicitly uber's strategy at the moment, and once you realise that, then maybe it'll make you think again about the fact that facebook and twitter are free. Are they trying to get a monopoly on the internet?

All of this will be discussed more later. My aim here has been two-fold: to present a bit of the history of branding in order to understand what can seem like a slightly strange and passé 90s art obsession and also the source of some of its distinctive artist manoeuvres, and to understand the nature of brands today. But one final point: I hope that realising that relative recentness of this, well, almost straightforwardly immoral form of capitalism will make us, like the heroes of Generation X, realise that there is an alternative, that things haven't always been this way (they weren't pre-74, so Dag thinks), and given that, they needn't always be this way: it's not an inevitability of the human condition, or perhaps even of capitalism, that things are as they are.

INTERLUDE: THE 90s IN TEN EVENTS

In this chapter, I want to take a step back from my overall argument to consider, briefly, some of the more memorable events of the decade, in order to show how the important concepts we're focusing on revealed themselves in history and at the same time present that history either as a reminder or an introduction.

1990. In the summer of 1990, after a prosperous 1980s which saw consistently good GDP growth, America went into a recession. The causes of it are somewhat contested and obscure, but that summer people started, in the way we've learned happens periodically, tightening their purse strings and holding on to their money. This had two key effects: firstly, they put paid to George HW Bush; in 1992, he was replaced by Clinton whose campaign's unofficial slogan was 'it's the economy, stupid'. But secondly, it forced or at least nudged Clinton towards the policy he took of deficit reduction. The deficit had risen sharply (and ironically) under Reagan (ironically given he at least claimed to want the state to spend less) and Clinton and his advisers thought they had to bring it under control. And they did so, but by another irony, that meant the democrat Clinton adopting the fundamentally conservative policy of reducing government spending. Not only that, but it at least appeared to work: with Clinton, the economy started booming. And this, in turn, would naturally encourage the thought that that conservative foreign policy was the right one, and that Clinton was just more of the same (in fact, it's likely that this rests on a misunderstanding: as Stiglitz, whose account I here rely on, points out, the economy was already recovering when Clinton took office). Regardless of the facts, this recovery must surely have further cemented the ideological domination of neoliberal economics in the citizens of the 1990s.

1991. In February, the Gulf War ended. It had started eight months previously after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, and its purpose was, depending on who one asked, to protect the allied Kuwaitees against the Hitler-esque Hussein or to secure George H.W. Bush's presidency and to reinvigorate American faith in the concept of war, a faith which still hadn't really recovered after Vietnam (this is the cynical line Howard Zinn takes in *A People's History Of The United States*, Twentieth Century Version, 594ff). A particularly note-worthy feature of it was the way it was televised, with live footage airing on the news, of Baghdad at night being lit up with bombs, and the news anchors acting as cheerpeople for the war and its weaponry (one CNN anchor speaking of the 'sweet, beautiful sight' of a rocket.⁴) Again, it's not hard to think of this as epochal: the same device that brings you even the Simpsons brings you jingoistic war footage. How could that fail to cause in one a distanced cynicism?

⁴ <http://fair.org/extra/gulf-war-coverage/>).

1992. History ended on 31 December 1991, when the soviet union was dissolved. The earlier fall of the Berlin wall had prompted conservative intellectual Francis Fukuyama to announce that the Hegelian-esque progress of history had reached its final point with the triumph of democracy over other forms of government like socialism, and he expanded on this thesis in a book *The End Of History and The Last Man*, published that year. In the earlier essay he pointed to the globalisation of culture: television sets in China, McDonalds in Prague, and so on. He could also point to the economic triumphs of the Asian tiger countries and on that basis, his theory wouldn't have seemed too implausible in the early 90s. How it stands up now, with climate change, economic stagnation and inequality, terrorism and radicalism, is another story, but one can easily imagine the informed citizen of the 90s feeling pent in: if this is the acme of history, and this isn't great for me, what can I hope for?

1993. This year saw two events to remind people that even if America was culturally at the vanguard (as in essence this book takes as motivating premise), and---if one believes Fukuyama---even world-historically so, it remained an extremely backward country. Rodney King was a black man who was pulled over by police for drink-driving and subsequently brutally beaten by four LAPD officers. It so happened that someone caught the beating on film⁵, but the subsequent trial of the officers resulted in their acquittal, which in turn provoked the 92 LA Riots. In 1993, King gave testimony at a federal trial and then, at last, at least two of the officers were convicted. A few months later, the continuing plight of gay people was made manifest when Clinton introduced the don't ask, don't tell policy concerning the military according to which, while being discovered to be gay or bisexual was sufficient grounds for being kicked out of the army, provided it never was discovered, there was no problem. If one was gay, one shouldn't let it be known; and others shouldn't ask. Writing in 2017, after Trayvon Martin, Philando Castile, Sandra Bland, Tamira Rice and others, with Trump trying to institute a trans military ban, America seems barely to have become any less backward.

⁵ http://abcnews.go.com/Archives/video/march-1991-rodney-king-videotape-9758031?cid=share_addthis_widget

1994. On April 8, Kurt Cobain, lead singer of Nirvana, killed himself. He had been suffering from heroin addiction and depression, in addition to severe stomach problems the causes of which were unknown. Nirvana's 1991 *Nevermind* had been one of the surprise break-out hits of the early 90s, reaching number one in the charts partly on the strength of its first single *Smells Like Teen Spirit*. The grunge aesthetic of Nirvana and related bands undeniably forms a central part of most people's conceptions of the 90s: the general apathy connotated by ripped jeans, unfussy jumpers and cardigans and lank hair; the armless catatonic dancing in the video from *Smells Like Teen Spirit* and indeed the tagline of that song 'Oh well, whatever, never mind'

What is interesting is the surprise factor: the record company would have been happy with 250,000, but in fact sold over 10 million in America. This would suggest that the Nirvana attitude struck a chord with the young people of the 90s. It's a notable and strange fact, pointed out, for example, by Mark Fisher, that there doesn't seem to be anything like that since at least the millennium.

1995. On August 24, Windows 95 was released. The 90s was the era that the personal computer became a household item. Although the internet wasn't yet mainstream, sales doubled from around 20,000,000 to around 40,000,000 between 1990 and 1994 and then almost quadruped up to 140,000,000 by 2000. Moreover, a range of software that we still use today was first introduced, the most famous example being the various Windows operating systems. These drastically improved the user-friendliness of PCs, which even a few years ago ran only DOS, a command line operating system. In addition, software like Microsoft Word and games like *Doom*, which have gone through different versions, remain popular today. Absent the internet---and that's of course a very big absence---a computer in 1995 would be just about useable to a younger millennial in a way that a computer of a decade ago wouldn't have been.

1996. On August 22, 1996, Bill Clinton signed PRWORA, the personal responsibility and work opportunity reconciliation act. This bill drastically reduced the resources available to

those who were jobless, ostensibly in a bid to get them to work and thus to reduce welfare dependence. It removed, that is to say, the safety net instituted as part of the Roosevelt's New Deal. And remove it it has: it now serves 1/3 fewer people than it did in 1996, and yet the amount of people in poverty has increased by a bit under a third and the amount of people in deep poverty has increased by 50%--so, as a main resource for helping the poor, it doesn't work.⁶ That's kind of hard to appreciate, such big numbers. The fact is that it made more people poor. Poverty itself can be hard to appreciate, and to help understand the effects of the act, which targeted primarily single mothers, and disproportionately black people, the journalist Barbara Ehrenreich went to find work in such jobs, laying out the various paradoxes of poverty: that if you're poor you're forced to pay poor quality things which will break and require you to buy them again. Buy cheap, buy twice: but if you have only the small amount of money, you can't do anything but. Her *Nickled and Dimed* showed the different world the poor inhabit, that the elites are happy to condemn millions too, and arguably, along with Michael Moore and Klein and others whose work appeared around the Millennium, served to make the generation following x more socio-politically aware. Not only that, this bill was enacted by Bill Clinton, a Democrat--the Republicans wanted to pass much crueller reform. In short, it's exactly the sort of move that would disgust a person, to which the only reaction is Simpsonian snarling.

1997. On September 15 1997 a couple of PhD students at Stanford University, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, registered the domain google.com. It wasn't the first internet search engine, and for a while it wasn't the only one---older readers will remember altavista, yahoo, askjeeves, and younger readers probably still know, as an irritation, bing---but it was and remains the best. Moreover, the company that they formed has, as is very familiar, expanded to a multi-billion dollar operation that may well bring about the next evolution of the human animal (or at least so this author, who is an AI believer). Even if this somewhat extreme prediction doesn't come true, nevertheless it remains the case that the next step forward in human history began to be taken around the end of the 1990s. (This book was written without access to a decent university library, and as such depended to a large extent on being able to

⁶ (<https://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/chart-book-tanf-at-20>).

quickly access pdfs of books and newspaper articles that seemed relevant; this chapter, moreover, benefited greatly from Wikipedia. For all its flaws, the internet does seem to represent a quantum leap forward in our ability to carry our research.)

1998. On December 19th, Bill Clinton was impeached (and subsequently acquitted.) The exact details of the story are complicated and somewhat interesting, but it would take us too far afield to go into them (Wikipedia is helpful). Is it remembered (and memorable) for the exposure of Clinton's affair with intern Monica Lewinsky, his lies about which being the only thing the independent prosecutor could get enough evidence to make a case against him with. What is particularly relevant are certain explicit details of that affair which were revealed, along with Clinton's slippery attempt to avoid admitting guilt. As to the former, the report the prosecutor wrote up (easily available online) is replete with semen-stained shirts, cigars in vaginas, and 'brief genital-to-genital contact'. As to the latter, Clinton famously attempted to lawyer his way out of trouble, quibbling semantics. Clinton was asked to consider an affidavit which had Lewinsky saying 'there is absolutely no sex of any kind in any manner, shape or form, with President Clinton' and which Clinton's defense team endorsed but which certainly seemed to be false. Wasn't it false? Clinton replied:

It depends on what the meaning of the word "is" is. If the -- if he -- if "is" means is and never has been, that is not -- that is one thing. If it means there is none, that was a completely true statement.⁷

And this formed the watercooler discussion, like Watergate twenty-five years previously (and like 'grab 'em by the pussy' forms the contemporary equivalent of the watercooler, the twitter thread or the article comments section). It's easy to think that this scandal somewhat inured American politics to bad behaviour, so that once someone really bad came along, the political sensibility was to numbed to really appreciate it (as I write, on the 10th of November 2017, I learn that last night Sean Hannity, speaking about Roy Moore who is alleged to be a paedophile, saw fit to remark that the relationship with 'consensual'.)

⁷ <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GPO-CDOC-105hdoc311/pdf/GPO-CDOC-105hdoc311-3.pdf>

1999. In November of this year, the Gramm-Leach-Bliley act repealed part of the earlier Glass-Steagall act of 1933. This latter act was introduced after the stock market boom and bust of the twenties in an effort to prevent things like the 1929 crash occurring, essentially by separating off the more speculative, high risk/high reward sort of banking, traditionally done by what are called investment banks, from the more mundane banks which deal with the savings of ordinary people. On one telling, this repeal had important consequences for the 2008 crisis: according to Joseph Stiglitz, it led to the commercial banks coming to take more risks (in essence behaving more like investment banks) in order to gain better profits. This is a controversial interpretation of that crisis, but nevertheless is important at least symbolically as one of many deregulatory movements that occurred under Clinton (and his predecessors), which all too often imperilled consumers and workers while strengthening big business and the already rich.

CHAPTER 7. THE SIMPSONS

In this chapter, I consider *The Simpsons*, to my mind the high-point of 90s culture (not that I've done anywhere near experience every work, to be able to make that judgement) and, I think, one of the greatest works in any medium in any time.

Let me just lay present some background facts before trying to make this impossible case. I take it all my readers will have some familiarity with the show but I want to try to make it strange, to enable us to see it as it was seen then, and how we, 20 years on, should see it (I speak in the past tense advisedly: as everyone knows, *The Simpsons* has been bad for ages. It was good roughly from season three to season eight, so 91-97. It's now on season 29; my understanding is that the reason for its continued existence is that it pays the staff's mortgages.)

So, first, it's an enormously popular, mainstream, prime time animated comedy (it's not the first such show, that honour going to *The Flintstones*). It debuted in December 1989, and it follows a nuclear family, consisting of a mother, father, and three children. The father is

impossibly stupid, gluttonous, lucky, sometimes likable, prone to extremes of elation, despair, and anger. The mother is kind, prone to worry, long-suffering. The son is cheeky, the daughter bookish, the youngest daughter still an infant. They live in a small town that nevertheless contains multitudes, and the series is populated with shop-owners, businessmen, doctors, religious people, tv and radio stars, and so on. Homer and Marge are high-school sweethearts, Marge doesn't work and cooks dinner like porkchops or meatloaf every night, they have an old fashioned tv with an aerial on the top of the set. They shop in convenience stores and not megamarts, go to church, and Homer congregates in a local bar with his friends from work.

So far, so ordinary: indeed, so far, so 50s. As we've seen, these are not features of American society any more: the Quik-E-Mart would have been driven out of business by a big box store, Marge would be in work, they would have video recorders and fancy televisions, they wouldn't go to church and Homer would probably spend even more time getting drunk alone in his home. Depressing, yes, but factual.

That notwithstanding, from this by now typical retro-nostalgic conventional premise all of American society is captured (well, a *lot*, at least, of American society. There's isn't much *youth* in the symptoms, with the attendant youthy things of sex, drugs, rock and roll and passion, nor is there any prominent out gay characters, and the only black person is conspicuously middle-class, a takeoff of Bill Cosby's unthreateningly-black doctor in the Cosby Show).

Every postwar American president features in the show, some many times. Indeed, name a political event and it'll be here, in a flashback or a dream sequence, in an old tv show the family watch or in the voice-acting of one of the ancillary characters. Similarly, most every tv show or movie or celebrity also finds themselves, by direct or indirect parody, in it.

Just as---to introduce the unfortunately pretentious but I hope critically helpful analogy I'm going to want to push---Joyce's *Ulysses* captures early 20th century life by capturing a day in

the life of the normal, sane, fully grounded Bloom, so *The Simpsons* captures American history and culture via a twisted version of the traditional family sitcom by means of the techniques of parody and impersonation learned from things like NBC's *Saturday Night Live*, a live action sketch show which regularly featured parodies of events of political and cultural significance.

Hearing this, if one is unfamiliar with the show, you might wonder what the fuss is. It's just a parody of a traditional sitcom with some political material thrown in. But it's so much more. One of the big claims I want to make is that central to its being so much more is the fact that it's animated. This unavoidably sounds overblown, but the rediscovery of animation as a medium for serious art is monumental.

The reason for this is that it allows for an extreme freedom otherwise impossible. Say you want to make fun of a tv show: for example, a show like 1990's *Cops*, a precursor to reality tv which followed police around. There's something, obviously, inherently ridiculous about such a thing, that any commentator—novelist, poet, playwright--on society should want to capture. So how *can* we capture it? Say you're working in prose. You can *try* to write about it.

I was watching *Police Cops*, a show in which we valorise the repressive force...

But that's a bit serious. Trying to funny it up a bit:

I was watching *Police Cops*, that show where they our finest boys in blue around as they raid the poor fucking Hispanic immigrants who do all the jobs we deign not to...

That's not good. Or, let's try to do one of the actual gags about this from the *Simpsons*:

I was watching *Police Cops*, and Springfield's finest were on the trail of a cattle rustler. They came to the address on 844 Evergreen Terrace, and, not confused by the

lowing and hail bails from the adjacent house, broke the door down, to be faced with a reverend saying this is 842 Evergreen Terrace, not 844.

Maybe that's on me, but it seems to me it just doesn't work. It's hard, I think, to try to parody tv in prose. And that's not too surprising---tv is after all a whole other medium. It should strike us as implausible that we could parody tv in prose, just as we think it's implausible that we could parody prose in tv. Try to think, for example, of a tv show that parodies the style of Hemingway or Jane Austen. I just don't think it can be done.

In a sketch show like SNL, on the other hand, it would be reasonably easily doable. Indeed, if you've ever watched a sketch show, you know that such parodies are its bread and butter. Again, it is possible, I suggest, because tv permits one to parody tv.

But, and unlike the novel, it would cost time and money. Any new sentence can transport a reader anywhere. A sketch costs, though. You've got police uniforms, maybe guns, you have to find a place that can serve as the criminal's house, and so on. But if you have to do that, then there's strong economic pressure, having gone to that hassle, to make the most of the scene, and have it play long. So parody is possible on tv, but economics compels one to make the most of it.

For animation, though, there's no sets, no need for actors. To draw a cop is no more complicated than the draw a street. For that matter, it's no more complicated to draw outer space, or Game Of Thrones, or President Trump than it is to draw your protagonist. Like the novel, animation has the freedom to go where it wants.

Unlike the novel, though, animation is a kinetic visual medium. It thus doesn't need to describe, as I attempted to describe, the show. It can merely present it, and because of this economy, it can do so very quickly without having expended huge resources. It can allow Homer to be flicking and to come across Police Cops, show it for a second or two, quickly make fun of it, and then be moving on.

What goes for tv shows goes for anything. Want to portray the moon landing? Easy. Reagan? The Beatles? Easy, easy easy easy. This freedom to go wherever one wants dramatically widens the range of topics economically viable to discuss, and it's this widened range that accounts, in my view, for the range of the Simpsons

Indeed, continuing the Joycean analogy, I would want to say that the discovery of animation is somewhat similar to the use of stream of consciousness in Joyce. Consider this famous passage from the third chapter of Ulysses:

Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane. But he adds: in bodies. Then he was aware of them bodies before of them coloured. How? By knocking his sponce against them, sure. Go easy. Bald he was and a millionaire, maestro di color che sanno. Limit of the diaphane in. Why in? Diaphane, adiaphane. If you can put your five fingers through it it is a gate, if not a door. Shut your eyes and see.

Stephen closed his eyes to hear his boots crush crackling wrack and shells. You are walking through it howsomever. I am, a stride at a time. A very short space of time through very short times of space. Five, six: the nacheinander. Exactly: and that is the ineluctable modality of the audible. Open your eyes. No. Jesus! If I fell over a cliff that beetles o'er his base, fell through the nebeneinander ineluctably! I am getting on nicely in the dark. My ash sword hangs at my side. Tap with it: they do. My two feet in his boots are at the ends of his legs, nebeneinander. Sounds solid: made by the mallet of Los Demiurgos. Am I walking into eternity along Sandymount strand? Crush, crack, crick, crick. Wild sea money. Dominie Deasy kens them a'.

Won't you come to Sandymount,

Madeline the mare?

(*Ulysses*, Oxford World Classics, p37)

It represents the consciousness of Stephen, the novel's young, bookish hero, as he walks along a beach, and Aristotle, Dante, riddles, a German playwright, Blake, and popular songs go through his head. The point is that this flitting of attention is realistic—it marks out the way our mental life goes. Joyce's unconventional method, doing away with standard narrative, enables him more realistically to portray the life of his character.

Animation enables something like the same thing: in the late twentieth century, our minds are as flitting as they were in Joyce's day, but in different ways. Indeed, for Stephen, there was a sense of peace in the external if not the internal world: while he's thinking these thoughts, he's presented with the self-same patch of beach.

However, for the person in the late twentieth century, we can't guarantee this. In particular, for the channel flipper of 90s hundred channel network television, attention is constantly diverted this way and that. Properly to convey that requires a medium that has the same fluidity. And animation is precisely that.

I want to make a similar, and hopefully similarly paradoxical sounding claim that I made for David Lynch: that the Simpsons is *realistic*: it's a realistic depiction of the 90s person who, apparently, watched a staggering television for hours each day. Again, postmodernism collapses into realism, because the intertextuality of postmodernism captures the media-saturatedness of our day-to-day lives.

My argument for the claim that we should view the Simpsons as a form of realism apt for the stereotypical late 90s watcher of a lot of television goes as so. Here are three features it's relatively uncontroversial to attribute to the watcher of a lot of television of the 90s—three states of mind that watching television fosters. Firstly, a sense of detachment and irony—one knows what one is watching is dumb, the plots are formulaic, the emotions mawkish, and so on, and that the shows are mere lures to cause you, a demographically valuable person, to

watch the advertisements which make up a third of each allotted half an hour or hour segment. Yet you still spend all this time doing it. Second: a sense of being drowned by many voices—the sheer quantity of different shows available to someone with cable tv was and is immense: from news reports to comedians, from people going through real to people going through imagined catastrophes, old films and music videos, all laced between advertisements. Third, and related to this, an instability of attention—not only are you exposed to all these different voices, but you are exposed to them rapid-fire, within minutes. Not only could one go from a televised Gulf war to a rerun to M*A*S*H to an advert for a strimmer, one could do so more or less instantaneously, by flicking through the hundreds of channels available.

I'll eventually want to claim that these features are common between the watcher of tv and the user of the internet. But first I want to show that they are mirrored in the style of *The Simpsons*, which thus functions to represent the televisual mind. First, a detached and ironic attitude towards television is as ubiquitous in the *Simpsons* as in the watcher of tv. Examples could be trotted out ad nauseam; but think, for example, of the scene in *The Front* (season 19 episode 4; almost all the examples that follow were found by selecting more or less at random an episode and either watching it or reading the script, and as such could be multiplied). Bart and Lisa are walking through the corridors of a studio which makes cartoons—past water filters, cleaning ladies, and so on—asking a producer about the costs of making animations. The producer says that sometimes they cut corners, for example by reusing backgrounds. As he says this the background of the scene is itself reused—the same water filter and cleaning lady reappear, emphasizing to the audience that what they're watching is just another cheap cartoon like *Itchy and Scratchy*. Or think of *Bart Gets Famous* (s05e12), which begins with Bart walking down the stairs whistling *The Simpsons* own theme. The nature of tv is something the *Simpsons* is concerned with, and in that it is similar to the jaded 90s channel hopper.

The second aspect is the plurality of voices tv drowns you in. I think this is reflected in one of the central sources of humour in the *Simpsons*, in which characters say things that are, well, out of character. Consider the following exchange from *The Day The Violence Died* (s07e18) in which they are, typically, talking about a tv show:

Lisa: It's one of those campy seventies throwbacks to appeal to Generation X-ers

Bart: We need another Vietnam to thin out their ranks a little.

While it's *maybe* possible for overachieving Lisa to produce this sort of cultural commentary, Bart is here speaking like no underachieving eight-year-old on the planet, but rather channelling a disgruntled middle-aged sitcom conservative. *The Simpsons* *constantly* makes this move of having characters speak in voices other than their own. Another example, from the beginning of *Homer Defined* (s03e05):

Homer (reading): Here's good news! According to this eye-catching article, SAT scores are declining at a slower rate!

Lisa: Dad, I think this paper is a flimsy hodgepodge of pie graphs, factoids and Larry King.

This isn't Homer's voice at all (he doesn't care about news, really, he wouldn't say 'eye-catching'). But he says it. Or think, to take a slightly more extreme example, of the monologue when Marge suggests he give up his side venture selling loose sugar (*Lisa's Rival*, s06e02):

Homer: Never, Marge. Never. I can't live the button-down life like you. I want it all: the terrifying lows, the dizzying highs, the creamy middles. Sure, I might offend a few of the bluenoses with my cocky stride and musky odors - oh, I'll never be the darling of the so-called "City Fathers" who cluck their tongues, stroke their beards, and talk about "What's to be done with this Homer Simpson?"

Another with Bart (*Homer's Barbershop Quartet*, s05e01):

Bart: [incredulous] Barbershop? That ain't been popular since aught six, dagnab it.

Homer: [reproachfully] Bart, what did I tell you?

Bart: [abashed] No talking like a grizzled 1890s prospector...consarn it.

Examples like this could be multiplied. Of course, a lot of this is just played for laughs, but I think there's a point behind it: the source of these voices in which the characters speak must, surely, be television. We should think of these strange outbursts as the characters' internalizations of the disparate voices they hear; just as one learns to speak from one's parents, so the 90s person learns to speak from television, and this is portrayed in surreal out of character dialogue like above.

The third feature of the tv addict is their instability of attention. This, I think, is reflected in the fundamentally digressive style of the Simpsons—the way the show constantly cuts away to imaginings or scenes from the past or surrealistic futures, to news reports or a character's imagining.

Think, for example, of the following sequence from Homer Badman (s06e09). Homer has been wrongly accused of sexual assault, and records an interview to clear his name, which gets edited absurdly to make him appear guilty; we then cut to his reaction, which cuts to his famous sung suggestion that the family escape their troubles by going to live 'under the sea'. We then cut to footage filmed outside his house, followed by more tv: Gentle Ben, a talk show like Oprah, the presenter of which is a grizzly bear. Incredibly this all occurs within about 3 minutes, and while this is perhaps an extreme example, this rapid cutting between markedly different scenes is undoubtedly a central feature of the Simpsons' style (evidence for which is the way it was further developed in (clearly obviously Simpsons-influenced) Family Guy and related shows, where it plays an even more pivotal role). It should be taken, I hold, to be a staging of the instability of attention of the person channel hopping. The

Simpsons jumps around because it represents the 90s tv viewer, whose attention itself jumps around.

We should view these features—and, again, this isn't close to exhaustive—as ways in which *The Simpsons*, despite surreal appearances, is in a sense mimetic. It portrays a mind hooked on television, and it is surreal only because to be hooked on tv is surreal. But this shows us something very important: despite the seeming obstacles, you can portray what it's like to live a media saturated, glued-to-your-screen culture. You just need to use non-realistic artistic techniques. *The Simpsons* shows us how.

So that's the first thing that I think is of value. Just as the stream of consciousness lets us see into consciousness of well-read turn of the century Irishman, so the style of the *Simpsons* lets us see into the modern American mind.

Let me at this point take a step back and speak a bit more about the importance of television as a feature of the culture of the 90s. We relate to television differently today. Most notably, we consume it via streaming services like Netflix, but also television itself has changed: it's gotten good. We're in, people always tell us, a golden era of television. Finally, television is familiar. People seldom, at this point, theorise about the perils and pleasures of watching a lot of tv. This is because we realise that it's clearly been usurped as the central object of culture by the internet. Instead, we're today much more likely to ask what spending all this time on the internet is going to do to us. We thus don't think about the dangers inherent in tv, and thus are apt to overlook it as a critical feature of the 90s.

That would be a mistake. I think one more or less can't overestimate the importance of the role television must play in our attempt to give a story of the 90s. I follow in this Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam, whose famous 2000 work *Bowling Alone* (Simon and Schuster) presents a disturbing picture about the destructive role the rise of television played in shaping the fabric of post-war American society.

The take home message is simple: television erodes social connectedness and civic participation. Civic participation takes many different forms, for example voting, running for office, PTAs or neighbourhood watch programs, workers' unions and other professional organisations, playing or watching sports, volunteering or other charity work, or simply hanging out at a bar with friends.

These sorts of things, Putnam tells us, are crucial to the healthy functioning both of society and of individuals. Consider a vivid example he gives (p288): I want to send my daughter to school, but the only school in the area is run-down. I could pay to send her to some private school, or could pitch it to help rejuvenate the local school. If I do the latter, everyone who goes to the school will benefit. But I need other people to help: I can't do it myself. It'll only work if there are strong social connections in my community, precisely the sort fostered by doing the sort of things listed above. That is, having such social connections enables one to do more: in essence, one can reliably count on the strength of your community to do things you yourself couldn't do. Having these social connections, in this particular case, saves the cost and disruption of sending my child to a private school out of town.

Not only that, but one will receive other benefits. Continuing with the example, Putnam goes on: say I, confident in my community's neighbourliness, set up the group, and 17 people join. Then, worst comes to the worst, I make new friends. And maybe then the next time I find myself in tough times, I have people I can rely on. People who'll babysit when my grandmother across country takes suddenly ill, or who'll have leads if I find myself unemployed.

Not only that, but social connections correlate with health. The more connected we are, the less likely we are to experience 'colds, heart attacks, strokes, cancer, depression, and premature death of all sorts' (327). These are well-established findings---'statistically speaking, the evidence for the health consequences of social connectedness is as strong today as was the evidence for the health consequences of smoking at the time of the first surgeon's general report on smoking' (loc. cit.).

Why this digression? Because social connectedness plummeted from the 1960s on, more or less, and it did so just as television became ubiquitous. I refer the reader to Putnam's meticulously documented book for these claims (just one quick fact: in 1950, around 10% of homes had tvs, while in 1959 90% did, a gigantic rise (221)). But not only that, 'in a correlational sense....more television watching means less of virtually every form of civic participation and social involvement...dependence on television for entertainment is not merely a significant predictor of civic disengagement. It is *the single most consistent predictor* that I have discovered' (228...231).

We have here another, perhaps, key part of the puzzle of the 90s. Not only did the economy tank around the early 70s, and not only did Americans lose faith in politics, but they lost faith *in each other*, and came instead to replace time at the bowling alley or the bar or the town hall meeting with nights in front of their tv. And given that, it's a matter of vital importance that an accurate account of twentieth century represent life in front of the television and that, I claim, is why the Simpsons is such a vital work of art.

That's all well and good, I hope, but I fear it doesn't give an accurate sense of the most important thing about the Simpsons, its *funniness*. There are other smart shows out there fail in terms of the wall to wall belly laughter of the Simpsons.

To understand Ulysses, these days, one really has to read it in an annotated edition. Analogously, and always bearing in mind the risk of dissecting humour, I'll try to annotate a somewhat typical episode of the Simpsons. It was picked *somewhat* at random, although not completely (I was looking for an episode that would highlight the extent of the political references in The Simpsons, and used).

It's called 'Sideshow Bob Roberts' and was aired in 1994. Already the title refers to a film of 1990 about a conservative politician's bid for election, and apparently some of the shots in the episode mirror shots in the film. Sideshow Bob is a recurring guest star in the Simpsons,

voiced by the distinctively voiced Kelsey Grammar; his long-term aim is to kill Bart after Bart got him in some legal trouble. The episode begins:

SHOT EXTERIOR, RADIO STATION

No sports, no rock, no information,

For mindless chatter, we're your station!

-- KBBL radio's jingle, "Sideshow Bob Roberts"

This already is very typical. Note the economy point for one. In order to do this on live action, they would have to at least have made up a sign for the radio station, and find a place to film the establishing shot. With animation, there's no problem, and so this quick gag becomes economical.

The scene shifts to Homer eating donuts at the power plant.

Announcer: KBBL talk radio. And now Springfield's favorite conservative and author of the well-selling book, "Only Turkeys Have Left Wings." Ladies and gentlemen, Birch Barlow.

Carl: Ecch! That Barlow's a right-wing crackpot. He said Ted Kennedy lacked integrity! Can you believe that?

Lenny: Yeah, switch the station. I consider myself politically correct, and his views makes me [shivers] uncomfortable.

Homer: Nonononono, guys...I'm not very political -- I usually think people who vote are a bit "fruity" [Lenny and Carl walk off]
-- but for some reason this Birch Barlow really speaks to me.
[chomps, chews]

A couple of things to note: this is about 30 seconds in to running time, and already there's a ton of stuff: making the fun of talk radio, which as far as I'm aware has mostly gone out, but a suitable analogy would be fox news (an even more suitable analogy would be the twitter feed of, say, that Watson guy or Cernovitch or the alt-right person du jour). 'Birch Barlow' is based, I am informed, on Rush Limbaugh, a conservative pundit. Next: Ted Kennedy lacking integrity. The joke here is that Ted Kennedy does indeed lack integrity. Of all the ridiculous things such a person says, Carl picked on the one true one. Moreover, note that Kennedy is a famous democrat, showing that the show is willing to make fun of both sides. Next, is just some classic Homer stupidity--thinking that voting is gay. Again, in the modern day, Homer would offer a ringing endorsement of Bill O'Reilly or whoever (in fact, he probably wouldn't; the political situation has changed too much such that these people have a power unanticipatable in the 90s; now such a thing wouldn't ring funny as opposed to dark. *Maybe* it would work with Alex Jones).

The point is: we're under a minute in and we've already got like 4-5 jokes, along with numerous references to politics as well as the first stages in setting up the plot.

Barlow: You know, there are three things we're never going to get rid of

here in Springfield: one, the bats in the public library --

[scene switch to man opening card catalog and screaming as bats fly out]

-- two, Mrs. McFierly's compost heap --

[scene switch to huge compost pile and Mrs. McFierly rocking nearby with a shotgun, cackling]

-- and three, our six-term mayor,

[scene switch to Quimby watering a marijuana plant]

the illiterate, tax-cheating, wife-swapping, pot-smoking,

spendocrat Diamond Joe Quimby.

Quimby: Hey: I am no longer illiterate.

Again, note the throwaway visual jokes that would be impossible in any other medium. Next, consider Diamond Joe Quimby. His voice and also character (aptly described by Barlow) are based on JFK. Next, Sideshow Bob phones in. He is one of the many regular guest appearances; what you need to know is that he's a well-spoken, well-educated former clown's assistant who has long desired to kill Bart and is currently imprisoned for it.

Barlow: My friends, isn't this just typical? Another intelligent conservative here, railroaded by our liberal justice system, just like [reads lists] Colonel Oliver North, officer Stacey Koons, and cartoon Smokespeson Joe Camel.

[scene switch back to Bart listening to walkman in class]

Well, I've had it! I am going to make it my mission to see that our friend Bob is set free.

Bart: Nooo! [class stops, looks at him]

Edna: Well, *despite* Bart's objections, the people of South Africa can now vote in free democratic elections.

-- Bart's secret pro-apartheid agenda, "Sideshow Bob Roberts"

Barlow: [on the radio] My friends, Bob is a political prisoner. I want every loyal listener to do everything they can to get him out of jail.

Moe: All right, you heard the man. [pulls out a box] One grenade each. [hands them out]

Barney: Moe, I think he meant through nonviolent, grassroots political action.

I won't explain all the jokes: Colonel Oliver North was a key player in the 'Iran-contra' scandal of the mid-80s. We again see, in the perspicuous comment of the drunk Barney (whose catchphrase is a burp)

A TV commercial for Sideshow Bob is shown.

[scene shows prisoners going in a revolving door and coming out immediately]

Voice: Mayor Quimby supports revolving door prisons. Mayor Quimby even released Sideshow Bob -- a man twice convicted of attempted murder.

[scene shows prisoners leaving on escalator and ski lift]

Can you trust a man like Mayor Quimby? Vote Sideshow Bob for mayor.

Ok, apart from the great joke, this is a reference to the infamous Willie Horton ad used by Bush in the run up to the 88 election to imply that his opponent was weak on crime. The campaign is getting tight. They hold a debate.

Quimby groans and drips sweat. Lisa and Bart watch, aghast, then turn to a TV broadcast of the Mayor. A ring of fire appears around Quimby's head with a caption that reads, "Flames added electronically by Channel Six". Quimby's hair, coincidentally, points up in two places, giving

him the appearance of having horns.

This again, is a reference: to a 1960's debate between Kennedy and Nixon, in which the latter's tiredness and distractedness, people claim, won it for the former.

It's election day. Homer steps behind the curtain in front of a voting booth.

Homer: [looks at ballot information] Hmm...I don't agree with his Bart-killing policy, but I do approve of his Selma-killing policy.

[votes for Bob]

Krusty: Well, he framed me for armed robbery, but man, I'm aching for that upper-class tax cut. [votes for Bob]

-- Springfield voters, "Sideshow Bob Roberts"

Homer's line is instructive here. I spoke previously about how some humour is based in reality, especially the sort of dark, Lynchian humour. Much of the Simpsons' humour is not at all based in reality. Homer's behaviour--voting for someone who runs on killing his son--is simply absurd. One of the distinctive features of the Simpsons is that it's not afraid to push physical and absurd comedy alongside smart material, a feature which again the animation probably makes possible (it's hard to imagine a live action series managing these jokes about child killing on prime time tv). Krusty's line, meanwhile, captures in one throwaway absurd sentence the motivation for countless millions republicans. Bob duly wins. But Lisa can't believe it: 'I can't believe a convicted felon would get so many votes and another convicted felon would get so few'. She goes to the register of voters to see if there's any funny business, and is slipped a note by an anonymous stranger.

Bart: So whoever it is who wrote that note wants to meet us here tonight?

Lisa: This is so cool, Bart. We're just like Woodward and Bernstein.

Bart: Yeah, except their dad wasn't waiting in the car reading Archie comics.

Homer: Stuck-up Riverdale punks...think they're too good for me!

-- Homer's greatest failing, "Sideshow Bob Roberts"

Woodward and Bernstein--the uncoverers of Watergate, to be discussed in the next explainer--so twenty years before the air date. Although it's of course an iconic event of American post-war life, it's interesting to note the demands the Simpsons makes of its watcher: we've seen references to politics from the 60s, 70s, and 80s, already. It's a show which requires and trades on a well-informed audience.

The anonymous figure gives them a name if they find whom they will find their answer. But there's no record of this person. They leave the courtroom exhausted and despondent.

Bart: Lis! Lis, come here, I found him! I found Edgar Neubauer.

[points at a tombstone: "Edgar Neubauer: Beloved husband and old grouch (1831-1909)"]

Oh my God...the dead have risen and they're voting Republican.

Lisa: [gasps] No, Bart, don't you see? Dead people can't vote.

[pulls out list, looks at another tombstone]

Prudence Goodwyfe, died 1641. She voted for Bob too. [gasps] So did Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, and the Big Bopper.

[walking] Even the pet cemetery voted for Bob, look! Mr. and Mrs. Bananas, Humphrey Boa-Gart...oh, my poor dead kitty, please not you too...

[checks list, sees "Snowball I"]

[angry] All right, Bob, now it's personal!

-- The Mayor crosses the line, "Sideshow Bob Roberts"

The Springfield Shopper headline reads, "Call for Probe in Bob Flap",
with an editorial on "Why Not Let Dead Pets Vote?".

Bob's plan is foiled, but, when he's going to get into trouble, he is unrepentant:

Bob: Because you *need* me, Springfield. Your guilty conscience may force you to vote Democratic, but deep down inside you secretly long for a cold-hearted Republican to lower taxes, brutalize criminals, and rule you like a king. That's why I did this: to protect you from yourselves. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a city to run.

The police get him, and he is momentarily confused as to why he's being apprehended.

Oh yes, all that stuff I did.

In addition to the joke, does not this nail, a couple of decades early, the research suggesting that there was 'authoritarian' personality type?

Bob: Someday I'll have my vengeance -- someday, when I find my way out of this savage, roach-ridden cesspool --

[camera pulls back to "Springfield Minimum Security Prison"]

Man: Say, Terwilliger's a Yalie.

[shot of men in sculling boat]

Coxswain: Bob! Come along. We need an eighth to row against the Princeton alums.

Bob: Princeton?! [groans]

Coxswain: Stroke! Stroke! Stroke...

And we're back suggesting--albeit surely falsely--that, with the democrats in charge, prisoners are too loose.

This is, I say, paradigm Simpsons: there are *dozens* of episodes of this quality. Allusions to the last thirty years of American politics, quickfire absurdist cutaway gags, snatches of tv, stupidity unsurpassed, and just incredible economy. Moreover, if I'm understanding Nielsen ratings correctly, 8.6% of houses with tvs had it on, which is an enormous number.

Here's something you might wonder about. I've talked up the allusive, sweeping nature of the topics covered in the Simpsons . As I've phrased it, and as I believe, all (most) America is contained in it. But you might deny this for quite a fundamental reason. It's not enough just to allude to something, you might think, for something to be contained in it. Merely referencing JFK is a poor substitute for actually knowing the history and politics in question. It seems superficial. So, you might wonder what's the point in all this allusion. There's fun in recognising, for example, that the Bob/Quimby debate is echoing the Nixon/Kennedy one. One feels smart for recognising it. But is that it? If all there was was this pleasure of recognition, it would be kind of hard to see the value in it.

And this gets to a lot of stuff that's already come up about postmodernism, for example in the discussion of Tarantino where it was suggested that it was all cool and no heart. What is the point of all this cleverness? Is it just showing off?

I'm inclined to return to Joyce. Consider again the passage from *Ulysses* I quoted. Is this just an empty display? Virginia Woolf, famously, thought so. But I think we are inclined to think not because we are inclined to think that it gets at the consciousness of an interesting, if overly bookish, character. That's how some people see the world. It is a realistic portrayal of a bit of life, of a way of seeing the world.

I'm inclined to think that the same thing goes here. What the Simpsons gives us is the perspective of a smarter person than us on the world, someone who knows our world, who has read every paper and seen every movie of the last thirty years, and has the ability to see it reflected in the now. That, finally, is my view: the Simpsons is great because it's a way of seeing the world, casting its eye over the whole of history and tv, discerning its essence and then presenting its ridiculous side.

So that's the Simpsons: a new take on postmodern realism aided by the rediscovery of a new medium, animation, apt for the mass-media-full world of post-industrial society. Awesome achievement as it is, however, The Simpsons is not all good, and I want to end on a negative note, by considering the political stance of the show. As has already been indicated, it's a massively political show. The episode I annotated above is perhaps an extreme but not overly unrepresentative example. Indeed, a webpage has collected up all the references to presidents in the Simpsons, and they are many. It would be hard to think of a political or social event in American history *not* represented in The Simpsons.

The important thing is that these references are treated no more and no less seriously than references to old movies. Indeed, despite its obsessive political allusiveness, it's also, in a sense, a highly *unpolitical* show. You get the sense of someone vastly knowledgeable of American history but paralysed thereby. In the next explainer, I want to suggest a reason for this attitude, but for now I want to notice that it is problematic. The Simpsons has a nihilism problem.

It doesn't have any positive message and, indeed, it scorns positive messages. This results in a very lame both-sidesism according to which holding *any* view passionately puts one at the risk of fanaticism and intolerance.

The logic of the show, of course, demands this. Given that it's the anti-nuclear family sitcom, and given one of the core features of the nuclear family sitcom is the univocal voice of reason and the easy moral, it's necessary that the Simpsons rebel against it.

But this is not only formally demanded, it also seems to reflect the attitude of the showrunners. Having noted that the show is of a liberal bent, Al Jean goes on to say

If I had to say the overriding philosophy of the show, I would say it's probably nihilism, where I tend to think that government and big business are really out to screw the little guy and that, you know, it's more important, you know, to see what the feelings and emotions of a family are. (Quoted in *Planet Simpson*, Chris Turner, 2004, Random House of Canada, p239)

This gets manifest, though, very frequently as the view that in any debate, to fight too strongly for your position is a big thing. For example, in one episode (s02e09), Marge seeks to ban Itchy and Scratchy cartoons because of the effects watching that violence has on children. She succeeds, and the children go on, almost immediately, to eschew the boring ersatz replacement in which Itchy and Scratchy 'love, and share, and love and share and share' and frolic outside joyfully. But then Michelangelo's David comes to town and Marge is portrayed as a hypocrite for not wanting to see it censored. Crucially, Marge *agrees* that she's being a hypocrite and that 'Even if one person can make a difference, they probably shouldn't'.

This is bad. It's not bad only because Marge here seems to be accepting the false idea that free speech is sacrosanct but also because she backs down from her position and is presented as being right to do so. A much more admiral Marge wouldn't back down here, and it's bad

that millions of homes saw this as a paradigm of decent moral commitment. Another example of essentially the same phenomenon comes when Lisa becomes a vegetarian, and becomes hostile to meat eaters, before realising the error of her intransigent ways (s07e05).

The Simpsons much too often ends up on: you're both right. But that's generally false, and this misrepresentation, determined by genre and by taste, is an influential feature of 90s distance, and a bad one.

The Simpsons, then, gives us another attitude towards the modern world. In the case of *Generation X*, cynicism and knowledge were tempered, I argued, by affection for one's friends. In *Seinfeld*, acute understanding of social minutiae seems to fill the gang's head to such an extent that there's no room for feeling, and we see their inhuman relations to one another. The Simpsons, though, with its vast understanding of recent American culture, rests in a political nihilism, exhibits what our friend Lyotard might call an incredulity towards metanarratives, and is the worse for it, despite its many and other virtues.

CHAPTER 8. EXPLAINER, THE MEDIA AND RECENT AMERICAN HISTORY

The Simpsons, I argued in the previous chapter, seems to treat American political history the same way that it treats old movies—as an object solely to make fun of. In this explainer, I want to consider some of the more salient features of that history to get a sense of why its writers might have this perspective, and thereby to show that it is, to some extent, merely a historical contingency, not an approach demanded of one everywhere and always. The flattening of politics into entertainment, and thus the ridiculisation of the former, arose not from some deep necessity, but just because of certain events in post-WWII history.

I will concentrate on one famous aspect of domestic politics, Watergate, and one of foreign policy, the Vietnam war, showing the various ways politics was influenced by the media and

made into a spectacle, and why it could be the object of mockery and apathy which is so salient a feature of *The Simpsons*, but also of our society.

So let me start with Watergate. Watergate, it must be said, is a fantastic story, and has been told fantastically by Rick Perlstein, whose account (in *The Invisible Bridge*) I lean heavily on. Richard Nixon, a social conservative ('You see, homosexuality, dope, uh, immorality in general: These are the enemies of strong societies'⁸), was elected president for the first time at the tail end of the 60s---an era when young people rose up and protested against the various injustices their government perpetrated: the structural injustice and the hatred born towards black people, or gay people, or women, and the war in Vietnam (discussed below).

One might have thought, against such a backdrop, that an establishment conservative campaigning for 'law and order' (which functioned, in 1968, against the backdrop of riots and protests, to at least to some extent as a dog whistle: he is going to protect the values under attack from the young, gay, black protestors), wouldn't have done so well. But he won comfortably, appealing to what was known as the 'silent majority'---the vast swathes of middle-Americans, the ones not on campus or on the news, who shared his conservative values (something like the silent majority arguably reared again their head again with the election of Trump, which served to remind the world that America is in many ways a very regressive place). Thereafter, he seemed to do pretty well in his first term, and in 1972 was easily re-elected for a second term

And then things started to unravel. A few months before the election there had been a break-in at the DNC headquarters in the Watergate complex in Washington D.C. The men who were caught, it was reported, had connections to some people associated either with Nixon's campaign for re-election or with his White House staff.

⁸ From Oval Office recordings (for which see below), available <http://www.csdp.org/research/nixonpot.txt>

Initially, Nixon himself didn't deign to respond to charges that *he* was in some way responsible for it: it just seemed, really, a bit weird. His spokesman said 'I'm not going to comment from the White House on a third-rate burglary attempt' (get p ref), and most people didn't pay much heed.

The country continued to do well: he took office again in January 1973, and, as Perlstein notes, the economy was going well and the Paris deal, putting an end to the war in Vietnam (at least ostensibly), was signed.

But there was still buzzing around the thought that the president had some connection to the break in, and other stories of criminal behaviour associated with Nixon's campaign for re-election caused a committee to be formed to investigate any illegal activity.

Fast forward a bit, and the Watergate would-be burglars duly pled guilty, but at the sentencing, on March 23, was the first bombshell---what a fiction writer might call the inciting incident. James McCord, one of the accomplices associated with Nixon's campaign for re-election, passed a letter to the judge at sentencing, saying that perjury had been committed at the bidding of high up.

Then, Nixon's first television appearance on April 17, where he claims he's looking in to it: he's on the case. 41% of people thought Nixon was in some way guilty. It had gone from a 'third-rate bulgary' to something the president addresses on screen in a few short months.

About two weeks later, the president *reappears* on television. He notes there's been an effort to withhold facts about Watergate from the public and from he himself, and announces that he's accepted the resignations of two of his right-hand men, Haldeman and Ehrlichman *not* because they're guilty, but because being anything not above suspicion is insufficient for public trust (note how standards have fallen!).

Let's just stop a minute and try to say what this must *feel* like, to be someone watching this. Put yourself in the shoes of a 13 year old Doug Coupland, a 20 year old Seinfeld, a 13 year old David Waster Wallace, a 19 year old Groening, getting perhaps your first view into the workings of government, seeing the corruption and bizarreness involved, and moreover seeing it on the same device you watch your sitcoms on. It's unsurprising, I think, that such a person could grow up to write the for the Simpsons.

The parallels for the current day are also worth thinking about. We are perhaps uniquely well-placed to have an intuitive sense of what the audience of 1973 would have thought and felt, as he, after all, have our own new media revealing the inner workings of power. If before it was thrilling to see president on tv defend himself, we're now privileged enough to have access to the president's uncensored Fox News-inspired thoughts.

Returning to our story, things don't let up. In the summer of 73, hearings into the misdeeds associated with the reelection campaign are held, and are televised on all the few channels then in existence. They are what used to be called watercooler tv---the sort of shows everyone watches, everyone talks about.

Again, I think this is something at least the younger of us can only really strain at understanding---the idea of communal experience, and especially of the vast majority getting, in a sense, their first insight to how things work in the echelons of power, must have been overwhelming. Here they see, on one of the very first days, one of the president's men, McCord, admit, brazenly, to doing what he knew to be illegal activities, at the president's bidding (get p ref).

Reaction, counterreaction: Nixon releases a statement saying that he did wiretaps, but that everybody knew it, and that he had a gang who did shady stuff, but that was for national security purposes. It seems that the more exposure there is, the more it's prodded, the more the story changes.

More details came out: how Nixon, even when vastly popular, was obsessed with protestors, how he tried a honey pot with sex workers to trap some Democrats, how he kept a famous 'enemies list', how he had lied in his April televised statement. At this point, though, the narrative is getting a bit tiresome: yes there's all these details, but the drama has been rung out of seeing people give testimony about the government's badness, and it's really just going to end up being their word against Nixon's.

The summer unfolds. The war is ending. The porn film *Deep Throat* has proven to be a surprise hit, and is taken as a symbol of how things are degenerating. A good depiction of this can be found in Philip Roth's 1997 novel *American Pastoral*. One of the book's culminating scene is a dinner party, at which the talk is of 'Linda Lovelace or Richard Nixon or H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman,' at which the protagonist's aging father complains of the baffling breakdown of family values and morality

And where will it end? What is the limit? You didn't all grow up in this kind of world. Neither did I. We grew up in an era when it was a different place, when the feeling for community, home, family, parents, work . . . well, it was different. The changes are beyond conception. I sometimes think that more has changed since 1945 than in all the years of history there have ever been. I don't know what to make of the end of so many things. The lack of feeling for individuals that a person sees in that movie, the lack of feeling for places like what is going on in Newark—how did this happen? You don't have to revere your family, you don't have to revere your country, you don't have to revere where you live, but you have to know you have them, you have to know that you are part of them. Because if you don't, you are just out there on your own and I feel for you (363—364)

There was a feeling in the air of sudden great change, that things were falling down, and quickly (one of the nice touches of the scene is that they're drinking a bottle of wine the protagonist stored to age five years before but which now seems to belong to an entirely different era).

Continuing with our story: a bombshell. It's revealed that Nixon has been secretly taping Whitehouse conversations. That means the key question---what did Nixon know about the

burglary and when did he know it?—should be answerable by consulting the tapes. At this point, a TV show would probably cut to its post-Act II adbreak.

Nixon duly refuses to hand them over: it would undermine future presidents, he says, and anyway, previous presidents had taped conversations too. The investigators push back, Nixon offers to summarise them, the independent special prosecutor pushes back again. They want the actual tapes.

Then out of the blue, October 20, Nixon order the attorney general to fire the prosecutor, that is, the guy looking into his alleged criminality. The acting attorney general refuses and resigns; the next in line does the same thing, but the third in line carries out the order. And then another dramatic reversal: Nixon says he'll give over the tapes.

April next year, and in the intervening time seven of the Watergate burglars and accomplices are indicted, and the tapes are released. The insight into government is now even more magnified: not just how things are done secretly, but the very conversations, printed out: 1308 pages, revealing a cursing president whose f-bombs were expurgated and replaced with [expletive deleted]s. It becomes a bestseller, gets excerpted in newspapers and magazines; the whole country jokes about [expletive deleted].

The media-led intrusion into the president's life reaches its thrilling peak at this point. Not only do we get to see the president give his side of the story in Oval Office speeches; not only do we get to see what people said went on, but we also get to go inside the office itself, to get right up close and hear what our leaders sound like. It must have been uncanny and thrilling: I think even we, in an age in which a presidential candidate can boast about grabbing women by the pussy and then get elected, can appreciate this, can see how that might have a formative effect on one's political outlook.

It ends, somewhat, with a bang not a whimper, like a chess game where the one in a lost position doesn't have the sense to resign. The new independent prosecutor isn't happy with

the transcripts; there are mistakes and some big gaps. More tapes come out, and finally, something decisive: a recording of Nixon and his chief of staff on June 23 1972, just a few days after the burglary. He knew about the burglary and he knew about it early. Game over: Nixon resigns.

What is relevant for our purposes? Note the dramatic ring to it: on one way of seeing it, it's a small, incidental flaw in an otherwise great--at least so the people found him--man that brings him down, like the hamartia of a tragic figure. It's filled with dramatic irony: the moralist revealed as a crook. It has the blending of high and low culture beloved of the postmodernist: it all plays out on television. Finally, it has the absurdity, the nonsensicality that makes fiction true to life: the massacre followed by the giving up of the tapes, the hard to make up coining of 'expletive deleted']'.

It's not difficult to see why the Simpsons writers should treat this as source material of the same sort as Star Wars or A Streetcar Named Desire. It's also, arguably, not difficult to see the future storyesque nature of American politics in the same way. It sounds like one of those things too ridiculous to be true, but doesn't it kind of seem befitting of fiction that the last two presidents should be a reality tv star and a black guy whose middle name is 'Hussein', that before that we should have a guy who got a blowjob in the Oval Office and before that an actor from the 40s hovering around senescence? One might think, all the complexities aside, that Watergate sufficed to shift the behaviour we could expect from politicians in the direction of the absurd and spectacular that leads us where we are today, and where 90s America was.

Let me now turn now to an issue in foreign policy that will help us, I think, further understand the cynicism and disaffection in American political culture of the era.

One could be forgiven for thinking, no matter what one's politics, that Watergate was a good thing. It seemed to show the power of the media to get to the bottom of corruption and to let

the people in on the democratic process by bringing them the evidence in the form of the televising of the proceeding and the transcripts of Nixon's conversations.

An adversarial media, then, would be one of the positive things which one could take away from the whole debacle. Indeed, looking around this positive judgement of the media would seem to be further confirmed by the role the media allegedly played in mobilising anti-war sentiment in the case of Vietnam. A line of thought has it that, if anything, the media went too far: an influential book New York Times and later Washington Post reporter Peter Braestrup (*Big Story*, 1977, Westview Press) suggested that it was partly the media presenting a distorted picture of the events that swung public opinion away from the war, and that losing popular opinion was one of the reasons the war itself was lost.

However, a much more cynical view of the media was presented in a range of important books and articles in the 80s: Howard Zinn's *People's History of The United States* tells the American story in terms of those normally left out of history textbooks, the exploited and minorities, and Chomsky and Herman's 1988 *Manufacturing Consent* presented an account of how the media systematically misleads the public about politics, functioning essentially not as checks to government power but as furthering its official agenda. I want to consider their account of the Vietnam war as an example of how this goes, as I think it's arguable that the negative conclusions it compels one to draw can be viewed as a contributor to the nihilism and distrust of authorities of the Simpsons' writers and other 90s artists.

Here's how a capsule history of the Vietnam war would go. In the post war period, the French attempted to retain control of their colony, and the Americans supported them. They wanted, in particular, to stop the spread of communism from overrunning the Vietnamese people. So they helped out with aid and so on.

However, their aims changed in 1964 with the occurrence of what's known as the Gulf of Tonkin incident. The story that was told was that an American boat in international waters was fired upon by North Vietnamese fighters. Naturally, then, the Americans needed to

respond to this provocation, and so they did. The Americans then waged a war, still with the noble aim of stopping the spread of communism, but now also to respond to the hostilities they were faced with. This continued for a few years, but during this Americans, who saw the fighting on their tv screen, became increasingly unhappy about the cost of and motivation for the conflict. This culminated in the presentation of a particular battle, the Tet offensive. The media, it's claimed, showed the failure of the Americans here, and swung opinion away from the war, and that, in turn, lead to the fall of Lyndon Johnson. Eventually, several years later, Nixon signed the Paris accord, according to which the southern Vietnamese non-communist government's rights over the whole country was recognised; in the aftermath, the North Vietnamese, however, treacherously didn't heed this agreement.

Now, people don't really believe this anymore. But, if you were to have followed the popular media of the period, that's what you would have heard. But it fundamentally rests of false assumptions. In Chomsky and Herman's words, the crucial fact is this:

The United States attacked South Vietnam, arguably by 1962 and unquestionably by 1965...media coverage...that does not begin by recognising these essential facts is mere apologetics for terrorism and murderous aggression....from the point of view of the media, or "the culture", there is no such event in history as the US attack...the US aggression was unrecognised...these facts reflect the overwhelming dominance of the state propaganda system and its ability to set the terms of thought and discussion, even for those who believe themselves to be taking an adversarial stance. (p184)

That's the fundamental fact: the US functioned as the aggressor, and we should view them just as we view, say, Russia invading Ukraine. They document how the American establishment knew that the north Vietnamese, lead by Ho Chi Minh, were popular, and that accordingly they couldn't get rid of him by political means, and so they had to try to create a conflict.

This was the Gulf of Tonkin incident. According to Defence secretary Robert McNamara, a US ship was operating in international waters when it attacked. This is dubious: on August 3, the Maddox was in North Vietnamese waters and, when challenged, was shot at one time. On the fourth, it was claimed that it was shot at again, causing Johnson on the fifth to complain. However, the evidence that anything happened on the fourth doesn't really exist, and yet on the basis of one shot congress passed a resolution to take any measures against it.

Chomsky and Herman go on to say how the American interpretation was furthered in the media, and how some even 'provid[ed] vivid and dramatic accounts of the August 4 incident which apparently never took place' (they note also that it's not like the evidence wasn't out there--international media reported both sides---see p209). The key worry here is not so much the lies of the government (though that is obviously bad), but the failure of the media to account for it, and the suspicion and cynicism this would create in the American learning this.

Moving on, the war continued. People began to get unhappy with it, and this escalated in the Tet offensive. Things get complicated here, but note: the point Herman and Chomsky make is that the media are in the service of the government. However, there was an opposing, conservative voice that said the complete opposite: that the media weakened the war effort by misrepresenting the outcome of the offensive. According to one Peter Braestrup, the incompetent presentation of the war changed people's perceptions about it, and caused them to go off it. Chomsky and Herman show how this is completely wrong, but it goes to show the levels of distrust and suspicion someone growing up at that time would have had.

The final thing to note is the Paris agreement. This was meant to ensure that both north and south have a role to play in the governing of Vietnam but American immediately and obviously interpreted it in a completely different way as saying that only their side has a role. Again, the media didn't push back against this.

It doesn't seem ridiculous to think that Chomsky's anti-imperialist analyses of the Vietnam and other wars, which in 1988 had already been going on since 1962, influenced the

intellectual culture (indeed, he was on Nixon's enemies list) and was a determinant of the apolitical cynicism the period is marked by.

These are but two episodes in a long history, but arguably crucial ones for understanding the 90s: someone around 1990 could look back not to an economic period of tranquillity before 74, but, just at the edge of memory, they would find the 50s and (some of) the 60s, where both domestically and from the point of view of foreign policy things seemed much less corrupt and ridiculous, where they could trust government and the media. Instead, they faced a government which lied about war and extremely close-up portraits of their cursing leaders.

Not only that, but the 1990s were essentially more of the same: the televised Gulf War in the early 1990s, to which one could tune in to hear anchors going into paroxysms about the technical specs of the weaponry, and the pornographically-detailed near impeachment of Clinton a few years earlier, a scandal if anything more lurid than Watergate.

And things have continued: the current worries about fake news, one might argue, are just another instance of a case which shows the importance of controlling the media, and Trump's presidency, which is mostly scandal, mostly spectacle, seem to represent a continuation of a trend in American politics stretching back decades. But here's the key point: even though it's perfectly understandable that one born into and living in such an atmosphere would retreat to nihilism, if we take a step back and view both the 90s and today as merely the outcome of some contingent historical events (it's not like post-industrial society *demand*s a ridiculous, scandalous politics, because many---indeed most---post-industrial societies don't have such politics) , we can realise that the nihilism is also contingent, and things can change.

CHAPTER 8. DAVID FOSTER WALLACE AS RELIGIOUS POET

A theme that has built up over the course of the last few chapters has been the role that intelligence plays in the works we've considered. I suggested when discussing *Generation X* that something distinctive of its generational namesake was a surfeit of intelligence, especially when compared with the low socio-economic status of the McWorker. This, I claimed, was productive of the 90s cynicism. *Seinfeld* we should think of as a paralysing science of the modern, where feeling is gone, replaced by knowledge of precisely how many days one should wait to call someone for a date. And in *The Simpsons*, the panoramic view of the absurdities of post war history lead to nihilism.

This trend reaches its peak, I claim, in the work of David Foster Wallace, who is concerned to show the destructive power of reason not as a tool for understanding the world outside oneself, but as an internal guiding light. Reasoning, Wallace claims, leads one to the horrors of drug addiction and to feelingless cynicism. The only escape is to renounce rationality: human flourishing seems to consist, in his world, in not listening to one's rational self, and instead following the advice of people in substance abuse support groups which makes no sense. Or human flourishing consists in top level athletic performance, of training beyond fatigue and in developing reflexes that work faster than thought. Or yet again, it consists, most simply, in overcoming the tedium of doing one's desk job (dealing with people's tax returns, in his posthumous *The Pale King*).

Another, new trend, very important for understanding our current plight, also receives its most compelling treatment in Wallace's work: the increasing ubiquity of mental illness. Mental illness casts a shadow over 1990s culture. In music, Kurt Cobain's heroin and suicide addiction is just the most remembered example of a definite trend (we could think also of the Smashing Pumpkins, or Nail Inch Nails, or Marilyn Manson), a trend expressed also in the literature and film of the era (we can think of Elizabeth Wurtzel's 1994 *Prozac Nation*, or again of Susanna Kaysen's 1993 memoir *Girl, Interrupted*, or its 1999 film version). Such was its cultural saturation that by 1999, TV's golden era was introduced by a show whose pitch could be given and understood in four words: mob boss on Prozac. In the next explainer I will give a bit of the history of the development of the concept of mental illness and addiction in post war America; for now though I want to consider how it's reflected in Wallace's work.

I will make two claims: his work presents a fundamentally *religious* vision of the world, a Commedia in which the hell is being addicted to drugs or alcohol or whatever, purgatory is finding oneself in rehab or at AA meetings, entirely out of one's own control and yet responsible for the wrongs one committed while high or drunk, and heaven is being in one's own control, being in control of one's body and mind in the way professional athletes or the long-time sober are. Doing something hard very well is the goal, that control of the self most associated with elite athletes is heaven for Wallace. But it's also something like elderly recovering alcoholics, toothless men with disgusting wet cigars in their mouths and no teeth who committed who knows what atrocities, who are not particularly *attractive* people to interact with for the normal person but have attained that same Federian transcendence of their flesh.

This might seem a bit uninteresting, in particular if one doesn't happen to have substance abuse problems or isn't an elite athlete (Wallace, incidentally, had or was both). But I think that we can safely take them non-literally: addiction is just a particularly vivid way of presenting the lack of control that is, in essence, the fundamental ill religions tell us about, whether that be the lack of control of one's urges that St Augustine or Paul get worked up about, or the Buddhist thought that suffering is essentially craving.

But then *that* might seem uninteresting, in particular if one doesn't have any real sympathy for religion. Maybe you're not troubled like the Buddha was or the fathers of the church were. But, well, that seems doubtful. The statistics suggest that we are troubled people indeed—as we'll see in more detail in the next chapter, mental health and drug addiction are epidemic-level problems.

The reason Wallace is particularly valuable, I think, is that he spiritualises our trouble and suffering, but also because he presents ideals: ways to live. This is especially important today when, as I'll show,, the biological model of psychic suffering has won the day. We tend to

think of our sufferings as neurochemical imbalances, but this tends to make us passive with regards to them, and anyway, as we'll see, the neurochemical imbalance theory is based on dubious science (that's not to say one should stop taking any medicines one is taking—it's true that if you're depressed and take an antidepressant, there's a strong chance you'll feel better, which is a good reason to take it, neurochemistry notwithstanding).

That's how I think we should read Wallace. There's hell, and there are creatures above, and we can be either. This is all very interesting, but what *especially* makes him interesting, given the narrative developed in this book, is his diagnosis for what the road to hell is, and what the road out of it is: thinking, and not thinking, respectively. The addict is a fine instance of the irrationality of rationality: what he or she does, after all, is act only to avoid pain, but in so doing, causes massive pain. Moreover, the only way to get over it, for Wallace in *Infinite Jest*, is by attending AA and going through the rituals, even if it makes no rational sense. Similarly, to achieve mastery of tennis or any other athletic activity requires year after year of thoughtless labour, which requires as much mental as bodily control.

Before making these points by considering some texts of his, first let me say a bit more about Wallace and perhaps attempt to mitigate any preconceptions one may have about him. In a sense, he's easy to dislike. He is a super mega genius, and a tortured one at that. He seems pretentious: he uses words like 'prenominate' where 'already mentioned' would do just fine, or 'anent' where 'about' would be fine. His characters often talk kind of similar, as do his narrators: a sort of sitcom wittiness abounds. *Infinite Jest* is way too long.

Moreover his fans are even worse: pretentious without the talent. I was such a few years ago. I was the guy who *insisted* you read him, that here was something fundamentally new that you can't not encounter. That tends to rub people up the wrong way, especially when combined with the other unappealing traits of the affluent young middle-class types who form his fan base.

I also have the sense that he's disliked perhaps because 'confessional' writing has been around for a decent enough time, in people like Plath and Sexton down to the personal essay writers of today, and it's at least to a large extent a female practice, and perhaps these people resent men presenting his work as if he, in talking about feelings, is doing something new.

Which he's not: the new thing in Wallace is the literaryfictionisation of mental suffering. What DFW did is made it okay for uptight highly educated literary sorts of people to talk about, or at least to read about someone talking about, their feelings. And he did that through using big words and Derridean deconstructive techniques and Pynchonian 'big' narratives that told you nevertheless this wasn't *just* talking about feelings but was in fact high quality art. And this might justifiably piss people off by the implication that confessional sort of writing in itself isn't good enough. I sometimes get the sense that he's disliked by people who write confessional things because his fans think he invented talking about sadness, when he just repackaged it for a certain type of man.

All this is by way of preface, and kind of an aside. If Wallace's value were exhausted by the fact that he wrote entertaining books about sadness for sad white men, then it would be exhausted indeed.

But it's not. He has things to teach us about how to think about the world. At least so I'll try to show, by considering first *Infinite Jest*. The plot of *Infinite Jest* is big and complicated, and I don't particularly wish to explain it (there's a decent summary on Wikipedia). It's set in the mild future, in which years of names (like '1942') have come to be sponsored, as in 'Year of Whataburger'. People use somewhat futuristic entertainment devices which play cartridges, one of which cartridge, containing a film known as *Infinite Jest*, is so compelling that watchers are unable to look away. Some people look for it, in order to weaponize it, or deweaponize it. The main action concerns residents at a tennis school and a halfway house for people recovering from addictions to drug and alcohol in Boston: the school and the halfway house are close by, and it tells the story of one such tennis player, a very smart guy but

addicted to marijuana guy named Hal, and several recovering addicts, first among whom is a guy named Gately.

Stylistically, in terms of what we've discussed before, it has some interesting elements. There is a lot of more or less gratuitous violence: cats are killed, congested people with gags in their mouth die horrific asphyxiations, tongues are bitten off by fitting epileptics, and a central scene involves a shockingly brutal fight with the hero. There's a lot, also, of scenes of people in various stages of affliction or depression talking about it, and there is also a lot of witty, sitcom-esque dialogue by many characters who kind of sound the same, and the narrative voice is colloquial and fast paced with a self-conscious tendency to use big words. The overall effect is that it is fun and easy to read, even if the plot is convoluted and the sentences long.

Fundamentally, as I said, the novel is about addiction and the powerlessness of thought. In its first few hundred pages we get the backstories of the addicts: we hear in minute detail of seizures on trains, of a guy desperately waiting for his dealer, of a girl smoking enough crack to kill herself, of a clinically depressed girl taking about the depression, and about the gruesome death that puts him in the halfway house. That is, we get hell in its varieties.

But we learn that all these varieties are, boiled down, the same story:

Fun with the Substance, then very gradually less fun, then significantly less fun because of the like blackouts...then dread, anxiety, irrational phobias...what Boston AA calls losses...seizures...formicative bugs...then eventually a terrible acknowledgement that some line has been undeniably crossed, and fist-at-the-sky, as-God-is-my-witness vows to buckle down and lick this thing for good...then a slip..repeated slips...then unemployability, financial ruin, bloody vomitting, incontinence, neuropathy...and you now hate the substance, *hate* it, but you still find yourself unable to stop doing it...you all of a sudden see the substance as it really is...the substance you thought was your one true friend...has finally removed smily-

face mask to reveal centreless eyes and a ravening maw, and canines down to here, it's the Face In The Floor...You see now that It's your enemy...you're in the kind of a hell of a mess that either ends lives or turns them around. (ibid., p226-228)

And then, you go to a meeting. And in that meeting, 'crocodiles'

old twisted guys...with hideous turd like cigars under a framed glossy of crocodile or alligators sunning themselves on some verdant riverbank somewhere...these old guys cluster together under it, rotating their green cigar in their misshapen fingers...with their varicose noses and flannel shirts and brown teeth (ibid., p235)

Tell their own personal stories of addiction, and tell you the key to sobriety is to go to these meetings, and—a much debated about feature of such prograks---pray. And rationally, you are puzzled by this, because you don't believe in God and what good would going to a meeting do:

You ask the scary old guys How AA works and they smile their chilly smiles and say Just Fine. It just works, is all; end of story...Gately couldn't for the life of him figure out how just sitting on haemarroid-hostile folding chairs every night looking at nose-pores and listening to clichés could work.(p230)

It goes against every rational impulse:

at the start, you just know, deep in your gut, that they[substances]'ll never let you know; you just know it. But they do...And then this goofy slapdash anarchic system of low-rent gatherings and corny slogans and saccharin grins and hideous coffee...this unromantic, unhip, cliché thing... is so lame you just *know* there's no way it could ever possibly work (ibid., p231)

But that's not so bad, because thinking isn't to be trusted:

That 99% of compulsive thinkers' thinking is about themselves; that 99% of this self-directed thinking consists of imagining and then getting ready for things that are going to happen to them; and then, weirdly, that if they stop to think about it, that 100% of the things they spend 99% of their time and energy imagining and trying to prepare for all the contingencies and consequences of are never good...99% of the head's thinking activity consists of trying to scare the everliving shit out of itself. (ibid., p198)

But at this point, thankfully, you've given up on rational impulses, you've given up on the thought of yourself as a locus of control:

you have no faith in your own sense of what's really improbable and what isn't, [and they tell you to pray even though you don't believe in God] and like a shock-trained organism without any kind of independent human will you do exactly like you're told...your personal will is the web your Disease sits and spins in, still...you have to Starve The Spider: you have to surrender your will. (ibid., p231)

And that, apparently, works. And does so just fine.

There are several things I want to note here. First, and just to repeat, this is essentially a religious view of man: Christianity tells you that we are fundamentally broken, fallen creatures, and Kierkegaard tells you that you just have to make a leap of faith to accept its fundamental, unprovable tenet of Christ and Him crucified; Buddhists tell you that the essence of existence is suffering, and its Zen school councils that, to get away from it, one should just sit and attend to meaningless parables. This is Wallace's view. The very core of what it is to be a human, if we follow Aristotle in thinking that human beings are *zoon logon echon*, creatures with reason, is messed up.

That's the second and related point: it's a fundamentally anti-humanist view of the world. For Descartes, there were fundamentally two features of man: the will and the intellect. Wallace's lingering on addiction, as presented in the above passages, suggests that the proper functioning of each of them leads to death: after all, you desire to do fun things, and it pre-eminently rational that if it's okay to do a fun thing on one day, it's also okay to do it the next. But that, pursued in a way that admittedly few people, thankfully, do pursue it, leads to the hell presented above.

The third thing is that even if we are fundamentally warped, nevertheless there is a way to live. It's not by, as an analytic philosopher of action would tell you, consulting one's desires and computing the most rational way to effect them, it's by heeding some simple cliché truths ('why' Wallace asks elsewhere 'Is the truth usually not just un- but anti-interesting?' (p239)) and putting in effort, and in particular doing something you don't want to or don't believe will help.

Now--I don't know. Maybe this picture of the world is wrong. Maybe we're all fundamentally okay, our humanity won't missteer us in most cases; maybe we just need a little tweak, such as can be provided by the right medicine. Maybe our various woes are just chemical imbalances. That's *a* picture of the world, certainly, and indeed it seems like it's kind of the ruling one. But I think it should at least be open to question, and we should ask ourselves whether perhaps this extreme, ill-formed world that Wallace gives us is perhaps the one in which we live.

Wallace's religious way of viewing the world makes him open to seeing the good along with the bad. If there is hell here on earth, then Wallace thinks there is also heaven: indeed I think it's precisely because he's so attuned to hell that he's also attuned to heaven. For him, it's Federer, but more generally I think it's a vision of Things Done Well, the sense that our actions reach towards an ideal. Here's how he puts it. In one of his several essays on tennis, he writes that the the beauty of the athlete encapsulates

human beings' reconciliation with the fact of having a body....Rather like certain kinds of sensuous epiphanies, great athletes seem to catalyse our awareness of how glorious it is to touch and perceive, move through space, interact with matter. Granted, what great athletes can do with their bodies are things that the rest of us can only dream of. But these dreams are important. They make up for a lot...Inspiration is contagious and multiform--and even just to see, close up, power and aggression made vulnerable to beauty is to feel inspired and (in a fleeting, mortal way) reconciled. (ibid., p940)

And the fourth thing is how we should think of all this in terms of the narrative I've developed. I suggested that a key feature of nineties sensibility was a sort of knowledge-induced paralysis: from the Generation X-ers who realised they were indirectly enslaving the third world to the Seinfeld gang and their microscopic science of everyday life to the Simpsons writers trapped in the absurd past. DFW could be seen as this taken to its extreme limit: that looking out onto the world with cleverness and distance fundamentally blinds one to the truth and leads one to hell.

And the fifth thing concerns our old friend realism and sincerity or non-ironicness. This is in fact something Wallace has written about extensively, but we can see the problem already in the above passage. Recall our discussion of Lynch: one of the sources of what I called his realism was that he presents the melodramatic bits that make up our life but that other artists eschew as corny. We can see Wallace wrestling with this in the above: what are we, as thinkers or artists, to do with the fact that the truth is fundamentally banal, cliché, uncomplicated?

It causes a bind. In an essay written three years earlier, he wrote about the dangers of viewing the cliché truth *as* cliché: of taking precisely the sort of distanced stance of a Seinfeld or The Simpsons (interestingly, he views this distanced stance as brought about by too much television, but discussing that would take us too far afield). If the truth is cliché, and we want to avoid cliché, then we're forced to avoid the truth. In another passage from *Infinite Jest*:

what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naive and goo-prone and generally pathetic (ibid. 298)

This is an interesting variation on the theme: just as *presenting* sentiment carries risks for the ironiser, so merely feeling it does to. To be human is to be undistanced and uncool.

Infinite Jest can be seen, in part, as an attempt to get through this problem, to, at times, risk being seen as mawkish or sentimental in order to say the truth. The earlier essay alluded to above ended with this famous injunction for American writers to

dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point. Maybe that's why they'll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today's risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "Oh how banal". To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. (ibid., p707)

This is what Wallace tries to do in *Infinite Jest*, and I will suggest that it's been quite influential.

Moreover, in any event his conclusion, quoted immediately above, remains important. In *Infinite Jest*, there is feeling, the risk of sincerity, the recognition that there is bad in the world and there is good, that the both sidesism of The Simpsons is no world view.

In sum, then, Wallace is the most extreme exemplar of the thought that knowledge leads nowhere good, but by virtue of that extremeness he manages to come out the other side and ends up both recommending and practicing sincerity and anti-irony. In so doing, he is able to inject value and a concern for value back in the world, for the thought that to be human is to be subject to extremes of high and low navigating which gives meaning to one's life. The idea that there is a Good to which we can strive to attain (whether that be tennis, taxes, or sobriety) but which fundamentally requires effort and doesn't come naturally is a useful corrective to the currently popular view that our sufferings are largely function of our neurochemistry with the concomitant idea that when a pill fixes our serotonin levels we'll be fine. In the next chapter, I'll tell the story about how this view came to be popular: how the medical model of psychiatry came to rein supreme in the late twentieth century. I hope in so doing yet again to show that this currently engrained idea is merely the product of contingent historical circumstances.

CHAPTER 9: EXPLAINER, PSYCHIATRY

In this explainer I want to consider the strange history of psychiatry in the 20th century. Its growth, and the direction of it, has been marvellous: worth marvelling at. A century ago, if you were feeling low, you might have attributed it to sin working in you, to your actions being out of step with the omnipotent, omniscient creator of the universe. Half a century ago, a sophisticated New Yorker might have attributed it to a Freudian neurosis: some childhood trauma that you haven't got over, that works itself out of you in even the strangest oblique moments of your life, writing itself over such things as your dreams and the words you struggle to pronounce.

Now, most likely, you're liable to think it's a serotonin imbalance and you will be, almost certainly, very happy to take a pill to correct it. And the pill may well help, some: a lot of people, after taking an antidepressant, do get better.

But there are consequences to this. In biologicising our suffering we risk devaluing it, in the sense of thinking that it's not a value-laden, distinctively human part of our experience. We don't think this about other things: about joy, about courage, about wit and intellect, or cruelty and arrogance. If we're so confident that it's serotonin we're lacking we may become blind to other things we're lacking, that all would be good were it not for our pesky neurotransmitters.

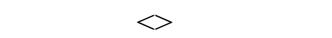
Maybe we should just accept these consequences. Science increasingly holds sway over these parts of our lives, and if we have a good medical theory, then we should accept it. In tracing the development of psychiatry, we'll get to see whether we *do* have a good theory of depression. Spoiler: we do not.

On one telling, the rise of psychiatric drugs is a wonder story. In 1975, in the UK, there were 9 million prescriptions for antidepressants. In 2016, there were 64.7 million.⁹ The same goes in the US. Roger Whitaker, whose 2010 book *Anatomy Of An Epidemic* is one of my primary sources in this chapter, points out that the number of Americans in receipt of disability benefits for mental illness is six times what it was in 1955. 'Prozac' is now, perhaps, the most recognisable drug brand in the world. It has a cultural weight and a raft of associations attached to it such that we can be told that *The Sopranos* is about a mob boss on Prozac and immediately get what sort of show it is. How did we get to here in the last decades of the 20th century? Well, seemingly how we get to most things: by luck and by money.

⁹ http://www.dannydorling.org/wp-content/files/dannydorling_publication_id0901.pdf,

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jun/29/nhs-prescribed-record-number-of-antidepressants-last-year>

To see this, let me introduce the basics of brain science (I rely here on, in addition to Whitaker, *The Emperor's New Mind* pp82ff, and Mitchell *Antidepressants*). The brain is made up of things called neurons, which are like wires which transmit information from one part of the brain to another. There are billions of these spread across the brain, and information is transmitted between them. A neuron transmits information by an electronic signal; however, no neurons touch one another, but rather are separated by a small space called a synapse. We have something like



Where the lines represent neurons and the gap is between the \diamond s. But then we have a problem---how do we transmit the message from the first neuron to the second? How does it get across the synapse?

The answer is that neurons can produce chemicals which can fill up the synapse and transmit information. These chemicals are called neurotransmitters. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter, as is dopamine, both of which you have heard of. Together they, as well as some others, are called 'monoamines'.

So this is what happens: a neuron has a message, it squirts out some neurotransmitter into the synapse which conveys that message, which the other neuron receives. After it has done that, some of the neurotransmitter gets destroyed by enzymes, a process called oxidation, and some goes back up into the sending neuron (reuptake), but some remains.

The prevailing medical model of depression is then simple to state: depression comes about if you don't have enough of a given neurotransmitter in your synapses, and antidepressants work by increasing that amount.

At this point you might wonder--why? What is the connection between our mental suffering (not to mention the many and often bizzare physical symptoms of depression) and these chemicals? Ideally, medical science would proceed as so: we find a problem in the body, and then develop drugs to fix that problem.

That's not what happened with depression though. Rather, what happened was that we found, purely by chance, that some drugs, developed for a completely different purpose, had antidepressant effects, and then we saw what those drugs did, and on that basis we concluded that the bits of the brain changed by the drug must be where the depression is at.

In particular, people noticed the following: that the drug iproniazid, which was developed to prevent tuberculosis, and the drug imipramine, which was developed to treat schizophrenia, both seemed to cure depression.

They then worked back and had a look at what these drugs did, and found the following. Iproniazid prevented the process which causes the neurotransmitters like serotonin from getting removed from the synapse. That is, in the lingo, it inhibits monamine oxidation, hence the name MAO(I), Monamine Oxidation Inhibitor, for a class of antidepressants of which you have a heard.

Imipramine, on the other hand, works by stopping the process of reuptake. So, in both cases, the drugs bring it about that there's more of the neurotransmitters in the synapses, and in both cases it appeared that patients treated with the drugs ceased exhibiting signs of depression, and so, naturally enough, people came to think that depression is the result of not having enough of a given monamine in your synapses.

This seems clean and neat, and in the late fifties and early sixties a range of other psychotropic drugs-- first generation antipsychotics, and tranquilisers—were developed and marketed. The discovery of these together made news--and money. In 1967, we already learn

that one in three American adults filled a description for a "psychoactive" medication, with sales totalling 692 million (Whitaker p62).

Most of these were probably for the tranquilisers: in 1955, Miltown, a barbiturate (something with the same sort of effects as a benzodiazepine but many more side effects) went on sale, and was the subject of news articles, and a run in the chemists, selling out. But the other drugs made the papers too, with Time and New York Times talking about how the recently discovered antipsychotics were changing lives. Things went so far that Salvador Dali was paid 35k to make an exhibit expressing the effects of Miltown (p58).

And the doctors were pretty happy with themselves: some hailed it as "one of the most important and dramatic epics in the history of medicine itself", and "Treatment and understanding of [mental] illness will forever be altered ... and in our own way we will persist for all time in that small contribution we have made toward the Human Venture". (quoted in Whitaker, p62)

It's not difficult to see the appeal here. Is not suffering, in one sense or another, the defining feature of life? It was the buddha's experience of dukkha that made him discover enlightenment. Horny St Augustine was very upset he couldn't stop himself having causal sex and thus developed Christianity. If we could solve that with a pill, well, that would be pretty great, and would more than warrant the doctors' big words.

There were, unfortunately, some problems. All these new drugs had pretty serious side effects. The MAOI type drugs, of which iproniazid was the first, in addition to affecting the levels of serotonin in the synapses, mess with a bunch of other things. They cause, for example, a failure to break down another thing called tyramine. It has no role in the brain but it affects blood pressure: too much tyramine can be very dangerous. Unfortunately, some common foods contain tyramine, such as cheese and wine, and so if you take an MAOI, you must be careful to avoid them. The drugs of the type of imipramine also have some pretty bad

side effects, and can lead to one feeling jittery and restless, as well as having more serious side effects like heart problems.

The tranquilisers had problems too, people realised. In effect mimicking the sedating effects of alcohol, they were similar in another way: they lead to withdrawal symptoms when stopped, because the body comes to expect them. In the 1970s, this led to a reduction in prescribing.

However, the biggest problem was that the science behind them was bad. Recall the theory: If depression were just abnormally low levels of serotonin in the synapses, then one should be able to induce depression in the non-depressed by sucking out their serotonin. And there were drugs which could do that--but, people didn't get depressed. The theory was falsified by experiment.

That would be fine, if regrettable: many theories get falsified, and on that basis we develop new ones. The next stage in the story is when things get messed up. In the late 1970s, the psychiatrists' association, the APA, was going through a dark time. It was their particular *raison d'être* to prescribe drugs, so they were invested in the biological model of mental illness. It's just that their theories were wrong and their drugs only dubiously effective. People lost faith in medicalised psychiatry, and sought other cures, and this led to a two pronged, rear-guard action by the APA.

The first was the creation of DSM-III, the third edition of the diagnostic and statistic manual of mental disorders. This listed a range of putative disorders, as well as diagnostic criteria for them. According to one person, "the ascendance of scientific psychiatry became official ...the old [psychoanalytical] psychiatry derives from theory, the new psychiatry from fact" (quoted in Whitaker p239). This new book was meant to present all the wonderful discoveries of psychiatry, to be a bestiary of all the sufferings we undergo.

You are probably familiar, at least at third or so hand, with the content of this, but let's just consider an example. The entry for major depressive disorder, for example, begins with this wall of prose

The essential feature is either a dysphoric mood, usually depression, or loss of interest or pleasure in all or almost all usual activities and pastimes. This disturbance is prominent, relatively persistent, and associated with other symptoms of the depressive syndrome. These symptoms include appetite disturbance, change in weight, sleep disturbance, psychomotor agitation or retardation, decreased energy, feelings of worthlessness or guilt, difficulty concentrating or thinking, and thoughts of death or suicide or suicidal attempts. An individual with a depressive syndrome will usually describe his or her mood as depressed, sad, hopeless, discouraged, down in the dumps, or in terms of some other colloquial variant. Sometimes, however, the mood disturbance may not be expressed as a synonym for depressive mood but rather as a complaint of "not caring anymore," or as a painful inability to experience pleasure...(210)

Before going on to give a checklist, any four of which, for a period of over two weeks, suffice for a diagnosis

- (1) poor appetite or significant weight loss (when not dieting) or increased appetite or significant weight gain {in children under six, consider failure to make expected weight gains}
- (2) insomnia or hypersomnia
- (3) psychomotor agitation or retardation (but not merely subjective feelings of restlessness or being slowed down) (in children under six, hypoactivity)
- (4) loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities, or decrease in sexual drive not limited to a period when delusional or hallucinating (In children under six, signs of apathy)
- (5) loss of energy; fatigue
- (6) feelings of worthlessness, self-reproach, or excessive or inappropriate guilt (either may be delusional)
- (7) complaints or evidence of diminished ability to think or concentrate, such as slowed thinking, or indecisiveness not associated with

marked loosening of associations or incoherence (8) recurrent thoughts of death, suicidal ideation, wishes to be dead, or suicide attempt.

But this, as many note, is dodgy. What exactly is the discovery here? When you manage to tick off four of the above, when before you only had three, do you undergo some deep change? What the DSM makers did, it seems, is provide a map of the domain of mental suffering. They didn't do anything like give us a neurological basis for this. They didn't say: well, some people exhibit borderline behaviour. Moreover, when we looked at these people, we found this biological malfunction. Instead, they just pointed out the surface phenomenon. That's like a zoologist coming across a range of new species, describing them superficially, and saying they'd developed a theory of them (this line of argument is from Whitaker 239)

The second prong of this attempt to medicalise psychiatry was marketing. The APA set up a marketing division, and spent a lot of money getting the message out there that mental illness was a biological phenomenon. What they really needed, though, was a killer app--a product that would *show* what they said to be true, that would provide some help in taming the bestiary of mental disorders collected in the DSM. Enter Prozac.

Prozac is a different sort of antidepressant to the ones we've considered earlier, but only slightly. It blocks the channel that prevents the reuptake of serotonin by the neurotransmitters, leading to a pile up of serotonin in the synapses. The body realises that this is too much, and so compensates by producing less. At the same time, the serotonin receptors decrease in number, and so fewer messages telling it to produce less get through, and so the brain comes to produce more. So the brain starts to produce more serotonin than before, making up for the lack of it that apparently leads to depression.

The continuing marketing power of psychiatry made sure the public knew about this new discovery, telling people that mental illness was a disorder and not a weakness. On December

1989, the pill graced the front of New York magazine with the title 'A New Wonder Drug For Depression' others followed in other big magazines (258).

After this, the numbers speak for themselves. Prozac became its first billion-dollar drug in 92; from 1987 to 2000 Eli Lilly's value on Wall Street rose from 10 billion to 90 billion. And with that, arguably, we get to where we are today, with the ascendancy of the biological model and the fact of 'prozac' being one of the symbols of the 1990s.

CHAPTER 10: TODAY

Let's summarise the book so far. The 50s and early 60s saw great prosperity and (economic) equality and the beginnings of what we would recognise as modern life: a life of popular culture with more relaxed sexual mores, an increasing concern for social inequality alongside consumer goods, good money for hard work, access to education and the emergence of the young as a distinct demographic, and protection for those who struggled against economic or natural hardship. And all this in a country one could more or less be proud of, or at least anticipate being proud of.

As we progressed further along, though, things gradually fell away: first the good money went with the crises, then the pride with the scandals, and then the security, bit by bit, with the economic theory suggesting that such benevolent interventions in the workings of the polity were neither economically nor morally desirable. Poverty and inequality grew, but consumerism and youth culture multiplied: more and more products, more and more tv shows, and with more and more tv shows, less and less political engagement, charity, friendship.

This, fundamentally, was how things stood at the start of the 90s: a society in which the main goods of the small American century had atrophied while some others had remained and hypertrophied, so we had now mass poverty alongside many choices of stereo and tv show, and, moreover, we had been told this was *right*, economically, that greed is good because of trickle-down theory, and anyway we were told that we ourselves were beneficiaries, because the stereo is only affordable because of the third world labour that makes us. And not only that, but if you feel upset about it, that's not something you need overmuch to attend to: it's

just a chemical imbalance, like anemia: a pill will cure you of your suffering, you don't need to *do* anything about it.

It's with this tale in mind that we should understand 90s culture. And with it in mind, it's not surprising that the artists we considered look about longingly for lost times, or react with a nihilistic cynicism towards any feeling or political movement, or take the fundamentally unsatisfying life to heart and get mentally ill. It's a culture in which metanarratives' decline, we might say, is acute. Moreover, it's not surprising that, as the first generation to be brought up on television, their art should regurgitate it in postmodern pastiche, in animated cutaways that treat history on a par with film and allusions to past films and music.

I hope, accordingly, that we've now got a better understanding of the last decade before the internet, its ideology, how its people felt, and how what they felt was shaped by the ideas in the air and was expressed in the art they produce. Now let's consider how things stand in the present day, in 2017. Here is a list of concepts that we can extract from the above:

- Nostalgia
- Neoliberal economics
- Postmodernism
- Cynicism/Irony/Cruelty
- Branding/Dephysicalisation
- Political Disaffection
- Mental Illness

Let's take these in turn and see how they've evolved, if they've evolved.

First, then, **nostalgia**. Keeping our attention firmly on American non-musical pop culture, I think nostalgia is, to some extent, out (this qualification is important. The British critic Mark Fisher, in his book *Ghosts Of My Life*, argued that something akin to nostalgia was the dominant mode of post-millennium British music---he notes, here, as we have done, the work

of Jameson. I haven't talked, in this book, about music much at all, because frankly my passion for music doesn't extend that widely beyond the pop I hear on the radio, so it could well be that British film and tv, or again American music, are thoroughly nostalgic. I don't think this is so for the former, though, at least.)

Think of the big shows of 2017: Game Of Thrones, Walking Dead, Westworld, and in comedy Last Man On Earth and The Good Place, and one might think that a dominant theme of today's art is not some mythical past, but rather some entirely different, post-apocalyptic, virtual, or fantasy space. This would make, of course, complete sense in terms of my analysis: the artists of today have no pleasant past to look back on, because they're not old enough to see back beyond neoliberalism and, faced with an equally dismal present, escape to fantasy.

Going back in time seems to support my contention: a decent majority of the most iconic shows that have followed the Millennium exhibit no nostalgia, if not outright fantasy; The Wire, The Sopranos, Breaking Bad, Arrested Development, 30 Rock, The Office are none of them nostalgic in the way The Simpsons or Twin Peaks or Pulp Fiction is.

I think the claim that nostalgia is out, then, stands up. But it's important to realise it has some limits: it's not the whole story. The reason for this is that there *are* some nostalgia shows. Of two varieties: there are shows set in different eras like Stranger Things or GLOW and Madmen, and then there are the reboots, such as Twin Peaks and (again) Star Wars. Nostalgia is, in some sense, still around.

But only in a sense. It's noteworthy that period pieces like Stranger Things and Madmen exhibit a different sort of nostalgia than the Simpsons or Pulp Fiction. These latter involve a deliberate mashing of two different eras---modern many-channel America, LA's gangsterville---in a way that our current retro shows don't (this was Jameson's observation about the art of the early 80s). I accordingly think that the distinctive 90s nostalgia is now

gone, and I think we can explain it in terms of my hypothesis about generation x's growing up with a vision of pre-74 life.

Let's turn to item two on our list, **neoliberal economics**. That hasn't died in fact, but it has died in spirit. In the 90s, it was intellectually respectable, if unpleasant to think that it might just be the case that greed is good and the rising tide lifted all boats. That view, now, is surely untenable. Most blatantly, we can point to the fact that inequality has risen, that real wages still haven't got any better, that increasingly most of the money is concentrated in the hands of very few. And we can point to the by now legion failed experiments in neoliberalising in places like Latin America, Asia, Russia (Krugman 2008) or more recently Europe (Stiglitz 2016).

If neoliberal, as a matter of wonky fact, has been shown to be untenable, it has also been shown, in the realm of meaning and value, to be no good. In part, this is kind of *ad hominem*: but it's revealed in the blatant hypocrisies of the GOP who still maintain the supply-side idea that massive cuts for the top 1% will stimulate the economy despite this having been shown false; who, already, for example, with Bush II's tax cuts, showed themselves intellectually bankrupt, having given up the idea that the deficit was bad. And it's been revealed in the bankers who wrecked the economy in 2008 and the neoliberal government that both enabled them to do so with deregulation and then bailed them out at the tax payer's expense. This moral venality accompanied with empirical falsehood means we are, I think, in a distinct era now, and although the Republicans will surely struggle on this path as long as they can (and let's not underestimate how long that could be, if they keep up propagandising and especially if they manage to disenfranchise the poor through gerrymandering), something *must* change, you think.

The failure of neoliberal economics has led to a related difference, for good and bad: the arising of politicians who claim to abjure, or really do abjure, neoliberalism and the political establishment which represent it. We can see this poignantly in Trump, who ran on an entirely absurd anti-globalising ticket of bringing back jobs and revitalising industry; and we

can see it, hopefully, in Bernie Sanders. As Chomsky notes¹⁰, Sanders's success in the 2016 democrat presidential primaries is close to unprecedented, representing as it does the first time in a long time that victory wasn't purely a straightforward function of money: Sanders almost got the nomination, despite having not been well-funded. Similarly, as again Chomsky points out, he did so campaigning with the term 'socialism'. In Sanders we see the possibility of a new non-neoliberal politics. Just as our art looks to new worlds, so does our politics (sort of: as Chomsky points out in that same interview, Sanders's 'socialism' is to a large extent just New Deal liberalism).

And this is reflected, I think, in less political apathy among young people. Things like Jacobin and Chapotraphouse, as well as the large number of young Bernie supporters, suggests that the apathy towards politics which was a notable feature of the 90s might be over. Anecdotally, most of my friends are quite politically engaged, having been reanimated by Corbyn. And it makes sense that it would be: all that's needed was someone to come along with something other than the status quo.

Let's now turn to **postmodernism** and the related question of realism. Here again there have been interesting developments. I want to make the claim that we are now post-post modern.

The popular shows today, and in the past fifteen years, are 'straight'—indeed, one might be tempted to call them classical, relying as they universally recognised hallmarks of narrative art: characterisation, plot, pacing, cinematography and music. Seminal here are works such as *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*. I think the latter is more instructive: *The Wire* is just a fine piece of drama (not for nothing is it sometimes called 'Dickensian'). It doesn't particularly care about subverting the cop drama—it just does the cop drama better than it's been done before. Its characters don't trade self-consciously witty dialogue, for the most part, and there are moments of real feeling and high drama—we feel anger at Marlow's brutality, despair at

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97NYPR-DABs>

Wallace's death, hope when Prez turns good and helps the children. This is, to use Foster Wallace's phrase, 'single-entendre' art.

And it continues in that vein: *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, *True Detective*, each of these are classically solid pieces of work which are reasonably called post-post modern. I'm tempted to say that we reached a high point of postmodernity with things like *Pulp Fiction* such that the only way forward had to define itself against that, and the clearest way to do so is to go back to classical realistic techniques.

We notice the same thing, perhaps even more strikingly, when we turn to televised comedy. The two best mainstream comedies currently airing, in my view, are *Brooklyn Nine Nine* and *The Last Man On Earth*. It's notable about these shows that they too are completely devoid of pastiche or playfulness: indeed, they are pretty much traditional sitcoms. Take some characters, put them in a situation, and make it funny. There's none of the allusiveness of *The Simpsons*, or the cold heartedness of *Seinfeld*.

Not only that, but when we study the evolution of comedy since 2000, we can note a pattern. I claim that the 21st century has seen a gradual move away from *Simpsons* style. There has been a gradual de*Simpsonizing*, a process whereby shows have progressively got less and less similar to the *Simpsons*. *Arrested Development*, for example, in the early 2000s has many cutaways and plays with the notion of itself as television, but doesn't have the striking *Simpsonian* feature of characters speaking in voices other than their own. A little bit later, *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation* move yet further away. These shows can be seen to want to have their metafictional cake and eat it too—by using the mockumentary format, they in essence move the fourth wall into the universe of the show, enabling simultaneously fourth-wall breaking while keeping to a realist, non-self referential premise. We should view such shows, I think, as attempts to slowly wean us off self-referentiality—it can't be done too quickly, or the self-aware viewer would revolt, but by downplaying it it allows the makers to inject genuine feeling into the show in a way that would have been difficult earlier (difficult, not impossible—*Friends* stands out). Finally, the current era has moved yet further, dispensed with the framing, and now presents essentially straight comedies, of which *Brooklyn Nine*

Nine is a paradigm. Such shows are entirely straight, and have gotten away from the Simpsons.

What this suggests to me is the point mentioned above, that the 90s formed the high point in a certain style, that has since gone out gradually out of fashion, has some evidence to back it up, and I feel to some degree confident in saying that if the 90s were postmodern, then we are now post-post modern.

The same thing holds of literature. The people who follow in Wallace's vein seemed to have taken up his injunction against ironic, insincere art. The Jonathans Franzen and Safran Foer, for example, two writers clearly in the Wallace high-brow literary fiction tradition, combine various sorts of formal inventiveness with an attempt to tell stories that will make one feel.

Is this a good thing, that postmodernism has retreated from television and art more generally? I think this is questionable. Recall the extent to which I pushed home the point that postmodern serves as a kind of realism, a realism apt for the television age. And then think about the shows I mentioned above: one can't help but notice that the internet features very little in them. Why is this?

I think precisely because to represent the internet life, the life in which we go from tinder to our work email, to messages from our parents and to memes, would require a postmodern medium, and we both haven't figured out what that would be, and also anyway, at this current point in time, to do something postmodern would be artistically passé.

So I think, just as people we need to think about the pros and cons of the internet, so as artists one of the most pressing questions today is how to represent the internet in art. And with this talk of the internet, let me make one final point about postmodernism: if it has left tv, there's a good case to be made for saying it has simply migrated to the internet. In particular, if we take pastiche to be of the essence of postmodernism, then we can note that meme culture is

essentially pastiche culture. We communicate, to a large extent, by reusing the funny pictures or gifs of others, and putting our own slant on them.

Moreover, to a large extent, internet culture is marked by the fourth item on our list, a sort of **cynicism or irony or distance**. We can see it in the ironic kekking Nazis of 4chan and reddit for whom, at least initially, at least surely, expressions of Nazi sentiment were just an excuse to cheaply shock. Talking about Zyklon B or the 14 words under a pseudonym was a quick and, for a generation brought up on ‘edgy’ stand-up comedy and Family Guy, reliable way to get some attention. And we can see it in the on-twitter-during-the-daytime assortment of academics, writers, and political commentators who posts cosmic brain memes about Sanders or Corbyn. In both cases, you feel, there’s a disconnect between medium and message: the pepe avatars can’t *really* mean it, the PhDs in political philosophy *know* bae-come-over memes aren’t the most fitting way to talk about fiscal policy. In letting what’s meant and what’s said come apart, the Nazis and the commentators ironise. So overall, then, the concept of postmodernism has undergone some interesting vicissitudes: from television to the internet, from what we watch to how we communicate.

Not only that, some of what we discussed when considering television is suggestive here. One of the theses of the book we spent some time on, *Bowling Alone*, was that television was destructive of political spirit, just because television was destructive of every form of community participation. It was, moreover, destructive of mental health. It’s notable that political extremism and mental health have continued to worsen in the time since television has been replaced by the internet. It’s worth thinking about whether the internet has not only taken over the role of television as the bearer of postmodernism, but it has also brought in its train the other socially and personally deleterious effects of the television. Arguably, how things stand today confirms that. If that were so, then that would be big news: one of the things we might think that the internet has over television is that it puts us in contact with people who talk back, it forms relationships. But if internet use has the same consequences as tv use, then we might have to call that in question. More work, of course, needs to be done here; I have merely ventured a speculative hypothesis that actual researchers will have to determine the validity of.

Before leaving irony, let me just make good on a promise I made in the introduction: to explain why we like @dril so much. For those not in the know, he's hard to describe, but it's a twitter account that portrays a remarkably bizarre, but consistent in his bizarreness, character. I don't think selective quoting helps so much, but let me try. There's a sprinkle of surreal sexual imagery and humour:

- theres pills on amazon that make your loads bigger but the guys in the 1-star reviews say they give u diarrhea. dont know whats real anymore
- obliterating my load with a blow torch
- theres never been a horny me,
and never shall i horny be,
And If this sacred vow shall break,
I pray the lord my posts to take

There's a *lot* about posting, forums, internet culture in general (search for "from:@dril post"):

- when my friends on here create promo accounts for whatever side projects theyre doing but dont follow me on them..its fine. im relaxed of it
- a man from botswana is threatening to ddos a picture of my ass if i do not post a list of my favorite pasta shapes by 6am. i will not relent

- issuing correction on a previous post of mine, regarding the terror group ISIL. you do not, under any circumstances, "gotta hand it to them"
- fuck "jokes". everything i tweet is real. raw insight without the horse shit. no, i will NOT follow trolls. twitter dot com. i live for this

He is continually vexed by trolls (again, search "trolls"):

- yes trolls. unlike you, i have a brain. its called a " JOB "
- i was so wound up over trolls this morning i forgot to wipe my ass. i pulled my pants up and the shit coalesced into a wad on my lower back.
- THinking of a "Boy's Day" of twitter..won't post specifics due to trolls, but basically all girls will nicely be asked to log out for 24hrs,
- sorry bartender. if i order the wrong beer the trolls will have a field day. lets play it safe. fiji water for me, with a Hint of pepsi

I could continue indefinitely, but I won't. I have literally gone to the library with a pad of paper and stared at it blankly trying to think why I like dril so much. The answer I've come up with is the following:

@dril is The Person Having A Bad Time Online. In a medium specifically designed for the presentation of our better selves--our more attractive, less sexually frustrated, more literate, less mad selves--he can't help but reveal the bad time he's having. He doesn't carefully craft his online persona, with an air of distance and conscious choice, a fact reflected not only in what he says but in the many spelling

mistakes and grammatical irregularities by which he says it. He's not in control of his personal brand. Moreover, he doesn't have the ironic distance to the internet we do: he doesn't realise that online isn't real life, and so he finds himself tormented by the trolls whom we all know not to take seriously.

Item five is **branding** and the quest for business to vest itself of its physical trappings. Recall Klein's Pauline thought that the body corporate is too expensive and we should concentrate on and promote its soul. Arguably, we see this, today, in the clearest possible way. What, after all, is *really* different about twitter and facebook? Of course, there are *some* differences between them, but for the most part, they perform the same functions, and so, following the logic Klein gives us, we should seek to see how they differentiate themselves, and the answer seems to be, although this may change, that facebook is more for family and close friends and twitter is for with similar interests to connect. That's what makes the brands, the distinctions we carve to occlude the underlying lack of difference.

We should also think about is what *exactly* these sites sell: they are businesses, after all. We noted Nike, for example, downplay as much as possible the shoes and sell the idea of sports. Nevertheless, there does remain a product there--in the end, money must change hands, and it does so for shoes.

It looks, initially, like even this has been sublated. After all, we don't pay facebook or twitter. But then one might wonder about what the hell is going on, given it's very unlikely, in light of what we've learned about modern capitalism, that we would get anything for free.

And, in fact, there's a clear answer available about paying: *we* don't pay, but instead companies who advertise on these platforms pay, and we view the adverts. It would be just as the way network television is free: we 'pay', in a sense, with our attention. Another way to phrase this would be to say that, for the people selling the ads, what they buy is our attention.

So tv makers make tv to buy our attention, which attention they then sell to the ad makers. The problem is updating this to the modern age, and in particular the first bit: what do companies like twitter and facebook *make*? What is it they offer us in exchange for our attention?

And the answer is, well, they offer us each other. We play the role that television used to play in getting attention for advertisers.

Now one can take this idea more or less seriously. That is, one can say yeah I guess that's technically true but really of little importance: that in developing this new form of interacting with one another the structure of financial and personal relationships has formally changed, but we're still recognisably the same sort of humans we were 20 years ago. Although we have this edifice of digitality on which we lavish a lot of attention, you might go on, there's still real life: the life of being with people in the actual world (meatspace) remains the fundamental feature of our lives, and being products shouldn't make any more difference to us than did, say, the introduction of daily post.

Alternatively, one could think it's of very great importance, that spending all this time online shapes us in fundamental ways that we need to focus our attention on. I don't know, really, which of these two perspectives is correct, but I think it's fun to think about the great importance perspective, so let me say a bit about it, in the spirit of exploring possibilities.

In a sense, this is already somewhat old news: we read about how facebook users have increased anxiety and depression because they find themselves faced with images of others at their best, and are prone to judge their own life, the imperfections of which they are acutely aware of, against these constructed lives. In the same vein, people bewail the shallowness of tinder, in which you like a person based mainly on appearance, as being the sort of analogue of online shopping.

I want to consider some other variations on this theme. Consider this question: assuming we are products, do we behave like products? Does what we could call the logic of capitalism invade our interactions?

These are obviously somewhat leading questions, but I think that the answer is yes. Consider 'virtue signalling', that is the act of saying something virtuous just for likes or retweets or whatever. It doesn't even have to be virtue: consider sharing an article, or making fun of someone in a not particularly original way. There are two reasons one might do this: because it expresses one's feelings, or to get likes. Certainly, I think many of us would realise the converse feeling of not saying things in order not to be unfollowed.

Now, this isn't per se a bad thing: tailoring what you say to your audience is a part of the way people communicate (at least, a part of the way people we like to communicate with communicate); ditto not saying something because it might offend. But still we shouldn't downplay the difference between the two phenomena either. I have around 600 twitter followers. For most of history, most of humanity probably never spoke to 600 people throughout the course of their life. But now my every thought is available. Or rather, it's not available: because I attempt to tailor what I say to my audience, I omit things I would otherwise say, and perhaps even say things I wouldn't say. The point is, social media is a very different medium from conversation, and so, if most of our interactions take place on social media, we should become aware that we've essentially moved from being a species which converses to a species which posts. And it strikes me as not at all unreasonable to think this does or will change what it is to be a person, and if it does so in the direction of making us more brand-like, that's not good.

Similarly, a system like twitter in which following is an asymmetric relation means that certain features of the structure of capitalism come to structure of doings. We think that we post something good and get likes, but really the likes and retweets a person gets is---of course---a function of their current follower count. Twitter is thus a very inegalitarian economy, in the sense that those who are already rich receive more. Again, the structure of

economics is infiltrating the logic of conversation, boosting certain voices at the expense of others.

Not only that but, again as is familiar, in uber, Airbnb, and the increasing ubiquity of precarity, the spiritualisation of the brand has almost reached its high point, as companies are learning to manage with as few resources, both of goods and of people, as possible. The important thing to realise, bearing in mind what we've seen in this book, is that while these developments have certainly been aided by technological change and the extended post-2008 economic bust, it's not as if they have come out of nowhere. It's not some historical quirk, but an explicit feature of the business model of these companies that they burden themselves with as few physical trappings as possible. And given that, any strategy to fight against these developments has to bear this in mind. Merely fixing the technological underpinnings and progressing to more historically propitious circumstances is not going to solve the problem itself, because the problem---neoliberal or postindustrial capitalism---predates these changes.

I scarcely need to say anything about item six, **spectacle politics**. This should suffice: reality tv boss Donald Trump is now boss of America. A more Baudrillardian event it's difficult to imagine. He perhaps marks a new evolution in the story that began with Watergate and ran through Clinton's impeachment whereby we (or rather the millions who voted for him) become sufficiently numbed to scandal that, as he says, he could shoot someone on fifth avenue and get away with it. While there is much to say about this recent turn, I am not the person to say it; for the purposes of this book it's sufficient to note that the Trump phenomenon is to some extent intelligible by looking back to the 90s, and beyond.

And **mental illness**, finally, and its biologicisation, has continued apace. This year will almost certainly see the record number of prescriptions written for antidepressants, and poor Americans are dying in large numbers from the opioid epidemic. The APA's medical model of depression has now been sufficiently internalised that many of us think, or at least speak, of our sorrows in terms of serotonin. There has been no discernible rise in people trying to think of mental suffering as instead reflective of, well, a truly mental phenomenon, or arising

out of the sort of fundamental misfit between person and world that religion thinks underlies the passing show, or as a sign of the deep misfit between the sort of lives we ought to live and the sort of lives we're compelled to live in a neoliberal society. I think that's a shame, but ymmv.

So, then, what? I have no overarching conclusion. Some developments have been good, some indifferent, some bad. Increased political options and feelings, and the intellectual failure of economic neoliberalism give hope. Trump and the interfering of the logic of business into our day-to-day should make us worried. Our art needs to learn to walk the balance between simply repeating the old postmodern bag of tricks and being inadequate as a representation of the internet-ful world we live in. And we should, most of all, make sure that the internet isn't pushing us further apart, as it seems television did the last generation.

But if there's no take home lesson, I hope the journey has been interesting, and the overall message is that concepts have history, and that our situation and how we think of it, even in its most immediate and visceral aspects, such as our early morning panic attacks and the pill we use to quash them, are products of complicated and contingent historical circumstances recognising which we can understand ourselves better, see that nothing is immutable, and realise change is possible both in the world and how we see it.