

1-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Fitzpatrick, Kathleen, "Tune In, Turn On: The Novel, the Family, and the Plug-In Drug" (2010). *Pomona Faculty Publications and Research*. 66.
http://scholarship.claremont.edu/pomona_fac_pub/66

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Tune In, Turn On: The Novel, the Family, and the Plug-In Drug

(forthcoming in an online casebook on Curtis White's *Memories of My Father Watching TV* from Dalkey Archive Press)

“Dad, why do you watch TV every night?”

“I like the TV, Son. I enjoy it. It's very entertaining.”

“You watch TV because it's entertaining?”

“That's right.”

“Oh.” (White 143)

The first, most unavoidable, most painfully obvious thing that a reader discovers about Curtis White's *Memories of My Father Watching TV* is, of course, that the novel is largely about the relationship between the twentieth-century U.S. family and television. To say this is not to say very much; it hardly requires deep analysis to see how fraught the novel's representations of familial relationships are, or how dizzying the novel's uses of television can be. Nor does this discovery reveal much that is unique to White's novel; its desire to represent the ways that television has affected family life is far from unusual. In fact, *Memories of My Father Watching TV* exists within a rich tradition of fiction that attempts to reveal the complexities of the contemporary mediated universe. Such fiction has been explored by various critics under rubrics including the “systems novel” (LeClair) and “cognitive fiction” (Tabbi), the novel of “media assemblages” (Johnston) and of “agency panic” (Melley). These categories include novels by Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, John Barth, and other authors, many of whose texts display, to varying extents, a profound anxiety about the effects that television has had on the political, social, and interpersonal relationships that surround the contemporary American subject.

As I have argued at length in *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of*

Television, the anxiety manifested in such fiction has in no small part revolved around the apparently diminished cultural role of the novel in a world in which television has become the central medium of entertainment and communication. These novels participate in a long history of discourses about new technologies that focus on the often imaginary threat those technologies pose to an existing way of life. Given this history, claims of the novel's marginalization, particularly as made by the novel itself, and particularly those claims that focus their concerns on the dangers posed by rival media, must be explored not simply for their truth value (*whether* the novel is being driven into obsolescence by the numbing effects of television) but rather for their purpose (*why* a novelist might claim that it is so). Repeatedly, in exploring the representations of television in fiction by authors such as Pynchon and DeLillo, one comes to the conclusion that the claims made by the novel of its own obsolescence are first and foremost a writerly strategem, a useful pose that allows the novelist to create a protected space within which the novel's survival is assured — and, not incidentally, within which the novelist's own social privilege is extended. In this fashion, in working to preserve the sphere of influence that literary fiction has for centuries possessed, the novel of television also works (whether intentionally or inadvertently) to preserve the social structures that inspired and supported such fiction, structures that include liberal democracy, free-market capitalism, western imperialism, white male hegemony, and the traditional nuclear family.¹

Such a displacement of a project of cultural preservation (saving the novel from obsolescence) into an unspoken project of social preservation (saving white heterosexual western men and the social structures that have supported them from obsolescence) takes place in part because of a subtle shift in the critique leveled by many of these novels of television. What begins ostensibly as a concern about the

¹. This is, admittedly, a vastly over-large claim for a brief introduction to an essay such as this; please see *The Anxiety of Obsolescence* for further corroboration.

televisual object, its purposes, and its effects, rapidly comes to focus all its satiric force on the audience, those boobs who (presumably unlike the reader of the novel) are weak enough to be held in television's sway. These tele-victims are represented as being not just *easily* but *willingly* manipulated, and thus they are the objects of television's threat: the ability to create a dehumanized, apolitical, massified populace unable to think or act for itself.

Curtis White's *Memories of My Father Watching TV* intersects in a complex fashion with the history of these anxious novels of television. The novel's narrator, Chris, tracks his memories of his family, and particularly of his father, in often painful interconnection with the television set. "The defining childhood memory of my father," he tells us at the novel's outset, "is of a man (but not just a man, of course; it is *my father* — young, handsome, capable!) reclined on a dingy couch watching TV. Watching TV and ignoring the chaos around him" (White 3). The tension visible in this constructed figure of the father — "young, handsome, capable!" and yet flat on a "dingy" couch, in a televisually-enabled fog — sketches out the contours of Chris's conflicted relationship with his father and its mediation by the television set. The failures of that relationship are manifest, but they aren't exactly blamed on the tube. On the one hand, as the focal point of the father's attention and the novel's representations, television seems to be responsible for some portion of the depression, the disconnection, and the alienation experienced by Chris and the other members of his family. On the other hand, television seems perversely to provide a way through that anomie to a new kind of connection amongst the members of the family, even if that connection is temporary or imagined. This trajectory, through despair to possibility, is tracked across the book's two major sections, which take us from "Gloom," in the dim light of the TV room, to "Glee," leading beyond the televisual universe and into the light of day — a light unquestionably colored by television, but one freed from the oppressiveness of the family home, and instead open to imaginative possibilities.

For this reason, reviews of the novel that laud it for its ability to provide an “antidote” to television’s pernicious influence don’t capture the full complexity of the novel’s ambiguities about the younger medium.² For, while television is clearly implicated in the family’s dissolution, the novel’s hostility is less reserved for the medium than for the institution of the family itself. Rather than tearing the family apart, television, in fact, as the mediator of family relationships, becomes one of the forces making the institution bearable. Moreover, rather than working to reinstate the primacy of the institution of the family by focusing upon the technological forces that threaten it, as does the novel of obsolescence, *Memories of My Father Watching TV* finally allows the family to implode, destroyed not by the invasive force of television but by its own internal fragmentation and friction, resulting in what seems to be a spontaneous, extra-televisual combustion. In what follows, I will explore White’s representations of television’s interactions with the family; this exploration first requires, however, a somewhat lengthy detour through the history of the novel of television and the anti-televisual discourses with which it intersects.

* * *

These two forms of writing, in fact, are very much of a piece; the novel of television draws heavily from the anti-television screeds of writers ranging from Marie Winn to Jerry Mander, from Neil Postman to Todd Gitlin. All of these authors, though with varying focuses, lament the ways that television has ostensibly interfered in the functioning of established social and cultural institutions in the United States, institutions including education, politics, religion, and, of course, the family. Winn’s *The Plug-In Drug* set the tone for much of this lamentation, particularly with respect to the effects television seems to have on children and the family. Originally published in 1977 and now available in a 25th anniversary edition, revised to include other forms of screen-based communication, such as video

² See, for instance, Harvey Pekar’s review of the novel in the *Austin Chronicle*.

games and the Internet, within its purview, *The Plug-In Drug* takes a particularly McLuhanesque approach to television, suggesting that *what* one watches is far less important than is *the act* of watching itself and the passive stupor it induces. Winn's concerns about television begin with her sense of its insidious effects on family life: "Even when other family members are lukewarm about television," she asserts, "one avid television fan in a family is sufficient to create a serious television problem. It is more difficult to engage in family activities and maintain a strong family feeling when one member would always rather be watching television" (*Plug-In* 6-7). Winn goes on to argue that television's appeal for many viewers results from the "changed state of consciousness" that it produces, a "trancelike" fog that encapsulates the viewer, keeping him or her suspended somewhere between waking and sleeping (16-17). This state, she suggests, is not unlike "drug-induced states of consciousness," further hinting that "if television viewing can be a trip, then, like the drug experience, it can become an addiction as well" (25). This addictiveness is in no small part attributable to the pleasures of the television watcher's passivity, and particularly the self-absorption induced by the watcher's relationship with the set; as one psychoanalyst quoted by Winn argues,

Parents don't like their kids watching television because it's so entrancing and captivating that it falls into the category of those forbidden, mildly damaging, and enjoyable experiences like masturbation. They don't like to see their kid tune out, sitting in the corner and playing with himself. And just so, they don't like to see him sitting in the corner looking at the google-box for hours on end. It's too pleasurable. (30-31)

There's an unmistakable censoriousness in this description, which makes clear the subtext of Winn's warnings: what's bad about television is the pleasure it induces, a pleasure to be connected with experiences like masturbation and, not at all incidentally, drug use.

In fact, the metaphor of drug use as applied to television viewership has proliferated since the publication of *The Plug-In Drug*. Different critics, of course, have had different responses to Winn's argument. Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, for example, corroborate Winn's sense of

television's potential addictiveness:

The term "TV addiction" is imprecise and laden with value judgments, but it captures the essence of a very real phenomenon. Psychologists and psychiatrists formally define substance dependence as a disorder characterized by criteria that include spending a great deal of time using the substance; using it more often than one intends; thinking about reducing use or making repeated unsuccessful efforts to reduce use; giving up important social, family or occupational activities to use it; and reporting withdrawal symptoms when one stops using it.

All these criteria can apply to people who watch a lot of television. That does not mean that watching television, per se, is problematic. Television can teach and amuse; it can reach aesthetic heights; it can provide much needed distraction and escape. The difficulty arises when people strongly sense that they ought not to watch as much as they do and yet find themselves strangely unable to reduce their viewing. Some knowledge of how the medium exerts its pull may help heavy viewers gain better control over their lives. (76)

By contrast, Jason Mittell unpacks the discourses of the anti-television movement, exploring the cultural — and, not incidentally, social — effects of its deployment of the drug metaphor:

By representing television through the lens of narcotics, groups such as TV-Free America are able to promote television as a public health crisis, requiring social solutions. Through this metaphor, television is understood as having the power to alter the minds of its viewers, causing behavior that would not be fathomable for nonusers. Television is known as potentially addictive, requiring interventions and supportive communities to cope with a viewer's withdrawal and self-denial. The drug metaphor helps frame television as a problem primarily affecting the young, with children as the unwitting victims of a narcotic that can affect their future livelihood. Like drugs, television is located specifically along the axes of race and class, promoting white middle-class fear of a problem that is often articulated with a lower-class non-white identity. Finally, television is known as a drug whose social solution is to be achieved through careful control and potential elimination, as "proper" use is difficult given the volatile nature of the abused substance. (217)

Through this description of its uses, it becomes evident that the drug metaphor cloaks within its apparent concern for the effects of television on children and families a very specific set of ideological interests, and thus the deployment of this metaphor can never be wholly innocent. As Winn correctly points out, however, such metaphors of drug use, and particularly addiction, are rampant in pop-cultural discourse about television: "The word 'addiction' is often used loosely and wryly in conversation.... In these cases the word 'addiction' is used jokingly to denote a tendency to overindulge

in some pleasurable activity” (*Plug-In* 32). Though they’re most often used in an ironic manner, seeking to deflect criticism by pre-emptively describing one’s television consumption negatively, these metaphors nonetheless reveal an underlying anxiety in U.S. culture about television’s effects on both the individual viewer and on the family whose home life now revolves around the set.

These concerns about the deleterious impact of television on family life — both on the behavior of children and on the involvement of parents — form a particular point of pressure in fictional representations of late twentieth-century U.S. culture. Thomas Pynchon’s *Vineland* and Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, for instance, both thematize this anxiety about television’s effects on the family, though in strikingly different ways. *Vineland* is filled with families that have been torn apart by TV; most centrally, of course, the novel focuses on Zoyd and Frenesi, long-estranged due in large part to television’s addictive influence. Zoyd, for instance, misses the moment when Frenesi leaves him, so preoccupied is he by his simultaneous television-watching, joint-smoking, and masturbation (Pynchon 59-60); Frenesi, manipulated into leaving Zoyd by the malignant deceptions wrought by the government’s use of media images, similarly decides to masturbate while watching an episode of *CHiPs*, only to be interrupted by the intrusion of the television into reality, “the primal Tubefreek miracle, in the form of a brisk manly knock at the screen door in the kitchen, and there outside on the landing, through the screen, broken up into little dots like pixels of a video image, only squarer, was this large, handsome U.S. Marshal” (84). These intersections of television and drug use, television and masturbation, television and manipulation, television and divorce, run rampant throughout the novel, perhaps culminating in the revelation that Debbi, ex-wife of narcotics agent and Tubal addict Hector, had named

the television set, a 19-inch French Provincial floor model, as correspondent [in their divorce], arguing that the Tube was a member of the household, enjoying its own space, fed out of the house budget with all the electricity it needed, addressed and indeed chatted with

at length by other family members, certainly as able to steal affection as any cheap floozy Hector might have met on the job... (348)

This confusion about the television's ontological status — “Is the Tube human? Semihuman? Well, uh, how human's that, so forth. Are TV sets brought alive by broadcast signals, like the clay bodies of men and women animated by the spirit of God's love?” (348) — betrays the dehumanized state of nearly all the adults in *Vineland*, a state that has an inevitable effect on the children of these distracted parents, children who are, much as Winn would expect, unable to relate to the world around them except as an oddly three-dimensional form of television program.³ Zoyd and Frenesi's daughter, Prairie, for instance, whose quest forms one of the central plotlines of the novel — a daughter trying to find her mother, in order to reunite her broken family — is built of a pastiche of televisual images. On the run, speeding down the road in an all-but out of control car, Prairie “huddled down in back, hanging on, wishing they could wake into something more benevolent and be three different people, only some family in a family car, with no problems that couldn't be solved in half an hour of wisecracks and commercials, on their way to a fun weekend at some beach” (191). And, in fact, what family reunion the novel allows in the end — the homecoming of the dog thought lost — is so sitcom-like that it's all we can do not to expect the novel to end with a chipper theme song over the closing credits. *Vineland* thus bears out the cultural suspicion surrounding television's intrusions into the institution of the family; moreover, the novel, in calling our attention to this destructive relationship, functions to return a kind of primacy to the institution of the family, focusing on it as something worth saving.

In DeLillo's *White Noise*, similarly, we discover that the family — in the case of the family of the protagonist, Jack Gladney, a blended household composed of two adults with something on the order of

³. Television, argues Winn, “renders other experiences vague and curiously unreal while taking on a greater reality for itself” (*Plug-In* 33).

six failed marriages between them, and four children, none of whom share two parents in common⁴ — only becomes a unit while shopping or watching television. On Friday nights, “as was the custom and the rule,” the family gathers in front of the set, seeking in the communal experience of watching a connection both to one another and to the world around them. That connection, however, becomes most vivid while watching scenes of disasters, during which the children are “not sullen,” and Jack himself is “not bored,” but instead all are “totally absorbed in these documentary clips of calamity and death” (DeLillo 64). Jack is slightly unnerved by this event, but a colleague reassures him: “For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set. If a thing happens on television, we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is” (66). At the same time, however, the fact that such a bond is not simply artificial but in fact destructive can be seen when one member of that family shows up on the television screen. Jack’s wife, Babette, teaching a class on posture in a church basement, suddenly appears on a public-access channel, and the result for both Jack and the children is a low-level panic: “What did it mean? What was she doing there, in black and white, framed in formal borders? Was she dead, missing, disembodied?” (104). Jack’s “disquiet” (105) extends particularly to the youngest child, Wilder, a two-year-old boy who presses his hands against the screen and attempts to speak to his mother, crying when she doesn’t respond. This failed connection, between a mother who is no more than her image and a child who can’t tell the difference between that image and reality, makes clear the novel’s insistence that any sense in which television appears to create connections is misleading, that the televisual spectacle is always destructive, and that, far from bringing the family together, it only

⁴. See Ferraro, who has done the math on this complex family: “Each adult lives with a third or fourth spouse, a son from a previous marriage, a daughter from a different previous marriage, a stepson from one of the latest spouse’s previous marriages, and a stepdaughter from another of that spouse’s previous marriages.... *Each* adult lives therefore with five other people whose average relation to him or her is only 20 percent; *every* child lives with five other people whose average relation to him or her is only 15 percent; and *everyone* in the household lives with five other people, *each of whom* is related on average by no more than (the same) 20 percent to *everyone else* in the house” (17, emphasis in original).

serves to tear us apart.

It is no accident that both of these novels concern themselves focally not just with the effects of television on the late twentieth-century U.S. family but also with drugs and their effects. *Vineland*, of course, has the Reagan-era War on Drugs as its backdrop, as federal agents raid and destroy the marijuana fields of northern California, and *White Noise* includes its central characters' quest for the somewhat illicit, non-FDA-approved pharmaceutical, Dylar. In these parallel plot elements, both novels draw clear comparisons between television-watching and drug-use — *Vineland* most explicitly, of course, through its representations of tubal addiction and its associated detox centers — in which television becomes metaphorized, as it is in Winn's argument, as another kind of substance that dangerously interferes with the individual's functioning in the world. In *Vineland*, television is callously deployed as a means of pacifying and distracting the public from the fascist takeover of the U.S. that is in progress, a maneuver that includes taking away any access to the mind-expanding drugs of the 1960s (marijuana, as noted above, but also, importantly, LSD) and replacing them with the mind-numbing televisual narcotic. In *White Noise*, by contrast, television and Dylar serve the same purpose — distracting the viewer from anxious thoughts of his own mortality — and are, in fact, so intertwined that the subject on Dylar seems to become little more than an extension of the television set, a dehumanized, identityless drone.

In both of these novels, and in many other late-twentieth century U.S. novels as well, human relationships suffer as a result of the intrusions of television. Television is, like the most dangerous kinds of drugs, imagined to be an intruder in the home, disrupting the domestic order and interfering with familial bliss.⁵ There is, however, a cluster of authors who follow Pynchon and DeLillo, who also

⁵. Lynn Spigel demonstrates the particularly lengthy history of such anxieties about television's disruption of the family in her investigation of the popular discourses surrounding television's introduction into the U.S. home during the 1950s. These representations suggest particular concerns

examine the metaphoric connections between television watching and drug use, but from a very different perspective, focusing less on what these substances *do* to their users than on the sources of their users' desire for them. Curtis White numbers among these writers, but as a preliminary point of comparison, we might momentarily look at the work of David Foster Wallace and Rick Moody, each of whom treats television less as a damaging force in the home than as evidence of a previously existing damage, one that causes children, in particular, to seek mediated connections with other human beings, in order to replace the failed human connections of the family. It is possible that the difference between the stance toward television taken in the work of Pynchon and DeLillo and that taken in the work of Wallace and Moody is generational in origin, the difference between those writers whose earliest memories of family life predate television's entry into the home and those writers for whom family and television have always been connected; for these latter writers, television becomes not a threatening invader but instead simply part of the backdrop, like the home itself, against which family dynamics play out. But there is also a clear desire, visible in the work of these younger authors, to destabilize the television-as-drug metaphor, focusing on the home that television has been welcomed into rather than its deleterious effects on that home.

In fact, the interventions of writers such as Moody and Wallace into discourses about television and addiction begin to demonstrate the relationship between the "just say no" understanding of drug use promoted by war-on-drugs activists such as Nancy Reagan and the effects-oriented line of thinking about television use espoused by anti-television activists such as Marie Winn and other post-McLuhan media ecologists such as Neil Postman: both lines of thought are riven by their technological

about television's disruption of gender roles within the family: "Television was depicted as the new patriarch, a threatening machine that had robbed men of their dominion in the home" (60). Further, these representations indicate anxieties about television's interference in married couples' conjugal relations: "television's libidinal imagery, and in particular its invocation of male desire, would disrupt the sexual relationship between man and wife" (119).

determinism. Raymond Williams has described this logical fallacy, which can be seen most clearly in the work of Marshall McLuhan, as a mode of thought “in which uses and relationships are technically determined by the properties of different media, irrespective of the whole complex of social productive forces and relationships within which they are developed and used” (52). For the technological determinist, the shape of society is determined by the tools at its disposal, and thus social ills are directly attributable to the things a society has and uses. Drug problems are given birth by and stem from the drug itself; if we could simply “say no,” those problems would disappear. So with television: the problem is the medium, which is intentionally and maliciously addictive, and which has transformed a nation of active children into semi-autistic, hyperactive, mentally slothful blobs, who can be saved only by switching the set off.

Such a determinist model of mediation is just as unhelpful in thinking through the complexities of the audience’s relationship to television as the parallel model would be in getting to the root of any substance abuse problem.⁶ As anti-determinists such as Williams have argued, television can hardly determine the structure of society when it is that society that has researched, developed, and promulgated television in the first place. Something in the culture *wanted* television enough to invent it and, as with other such substances, something in the user desires its interventions between the self and the reality in which that self is mired. Television, by this way of thinking, becomes less a malefactor than a symptom of something already gone wrong; if television is an escapist drug, after all, there’s clearly something the user is attempting to escape *from*. Winn’s model of television addiction refuses to

⁶. This statement of course perpetuates the implication that television watching and substance abuse are parallel “problems,” a notion that is both ideologically and intellectually suspect, treating a viewer’s interactions with television as a form of passive consumption. It is no accident that early effects-based research in mass media took what has come to be known as a “hypodermic needle” approach, treating the body of the viewer as an inert substance into which media messages are injected. See Mittell for an exploration of the cultural and social uses of the discursive linkage between television watching and drug use.

consider possible origins of psychic trauma other than television; for her, television watching is not considered to be one among many “symptoms of modern ills,” but instead the medium itself is thought of as “a pathogen, a source of such symptoms” (*Unplugging* 14). And in fact this produces some substantive blind spots in her analysis; noting that many children are fussy and agitated after watching television, she suggests that a child “who comes home from nursery school each day in a wretched frame of mind, fussing and demanding attention, may provoke his or her parents to investigate what’s happening at school; often serious problems are uncovered in this way, even though the child may never complain about school or the teacher, and may even claim that everything is fine at school” (*Plug-in* 23). It doesn’t seem to occur to her that the problems that this child is facing may not originate with the school but instead with the home, and that the “wretched frame of mind” the child is in may have less to do with what has just occurred (school) than what may be about to occur (family life). So with her reasoning about television-watching; she does admit that often the television-addicted child in a family “is the very child the parents perceive as having more problems in general — the shy or passive child, or the aggressive child, the child who has trouble getting along with other children. It is not hard to understand why a troubled or vulnerable child might form a deeper attachment to the safe, undemanding pleasures of television viewing” (*Plug-in* 6). Despite that acknowledgment, however, Winn fails to confront the ways that the centrality of the television in the home may be less the *cause* of familial strife than the *result* of it.

In recent fiction, however, representations of television watchers tend to expend less energy on condemning or lampooning the viewer than on representing the environmental and familial causes of his or her desire for television. In Rick Moody’s *The Ice Storm*, for instance, Wendy’s love of television is directly connected to her desperate need for a non-sexualized but nonetheless intimate human interaction, a kind of interaction that is, crucially, unavailable given the drunken, hypersexed behavior of

the adults around her; the judgments that the novel makes are not aimed at her, but at the soulless, self-absorbed grown-ups who make her television-watching necessary. Similarly, in *Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace explicitly connects media spectatorship and drug use via the intertwined plotlines exploring drug-addiction recovery and the Entertainment, a video so completely pleasurable that it renders its viewers inert or insane, unable to support their own basic life functions, a video that comes to be used as a weapon. Each of the substances that the characters in the novel abuse, however, is less the primary cause of their pain than it is symptomatic of pre-existing issues. For Wallace, television is not the cause of our hollowness as human beings, but is rather one of the things we use to attempt to fill the void produced by our loneliness and despair; as he argues in his essay “*E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction*”:

Though I’m convinced that television lies, with a potency somewhere between symptom and synecdoche, behind a genuine crisis for U.S. culture and literature, I do not agree with reactionaries who regard TV as some malignancy visited on an innocent populace, sapping IQs and compromising SAT scores while we all sit there on ever fatter bottoms with little mesmerized spirals revolving in our eyes. (36)

As opposed to the crisis imagined by the novelist of obsolescence, who understands television to be stealing the novel’s audience by dehumanizing, distracting, and otherwise narcotizing the U.S. public, the crisis that Wallace believes television represents for contemporary literature is one faced by the writer himself,⁷ who may become so adept at television’s predominant mode of discourse — irony — that he flinches from dealing honestly with the personal and interpersonal sources of human troubles. While Wallace is, as a more in-depth reading of both “*E Unibus Pluram*” and *Infinite Jest* would show, decidedly ambivalent about television, understanding television’s attractions while simultaneously suspecting that the medium allows its viewers to avoid confronting the social and familial problems by

⁷. Or herself, certainly, though for reasons I explore at great length in *The Anxiety of Obsolescence*, restricting this pronoun to the masculine is a not-insignificant choice.

which they are beset, his writing nonetheless serves to undermine the “just say no” rhetoric of technological determinism that so often surrounds fictional representations of television. Instead, Wallace, like Moody, focuses on the social origins of the desire for escape, regardless of the mind-altering substances used to effect that escape.

* * *

It’s in this anti-determinist mode that Curtis White’s *Memories of My Father Watching TV* operates, ironically enough, given the novel’s apparent focus on what is emanating from the television set. In fact, the novel is even more ambivalent about the medium than is the work of Wallace and Moody. Television, in White’s rendering, is not simply a mode of escape from the real world (though it is clearly that, particularly for Carl, Chris’s dad) but a new lens through which the world can be perceived and understood. Far from representing a failure on the part of the viewer to distinguish between the real and the unreal — as Carl tells Chris, “that’s all just life-on-TV. That’s not real life” (137), clearly drawing a significant distinction between the two — instead this transformation of television into an interpretive framework used by the viewer — life-on-TV — is an active process of meaning-making. The shift from exploring television’s effects on the viewer to exploring the uses that viewers make of television results in a creative tension within the novel, between the desire to reject the medium’s role in the family and the inability to imagine the family’s existence without the medium. On the one hand, as the prologue tells us, television allows Chris’s father to “[ignore] the chaos around him” (3), effectively removing himself from family life, leaving his children alone and desperate for attention. On the other hand, however, television “is an oracle. It is speaking to us. It has something very important to say” (4); to turn away from television, to refuse to examine its pronouncements, would be to miss out on a glimpse into the dark heart of the American family. Paying attention to television’s oracular function, in fact, becomes a productive process — productive most obviously of Curtis White’s

novel, which would not exist without the medium, but more than that, productive of a kind of adaptive fantasy life, one that allows both parent and child the ability to transform often painful human interactions into manageable, though wildly fanciful, narratives.

In fact, the fanciful nature of those narratives, through which Chris explores not simply his father's *spectatorship* but also his father's *participation* in television,⁸ suggests that *Memories of My Father Watching TV* doesn't wholly reject the television-as-drug metaphor, but instead requires that we think more specifically about the nature of the drug that television mimics. "Drugs," after all, is a too-generic category, containing both the licit and the illicit, the pharmaceutical and the organic, the debilitating and the curative, the addictive and the recreational, the depressant and the stimulant, the narcotic and the psychedelic. On the one hand, the torpor we originally encounter in the television watcher might be compared to an alcoholic stupor, in which the mind is deadened and the body depressed. This is the mode in which Chris's father watches television through much of the novel, inspiring Chris to ask "What does it mean that TV achieves its ultimate purpose when it is watched with eyes closed?" (108). On the other hand, though, Chris's experiences of television, particularly in the novel's last sections, become not numbing but psychedelic, bearing far more in common with the experiences of the LSD user than of the heavy drinker.

This would of course be cold comfort for Marie Winn, for whom hallucination is, if anything, more frightening than stupor,⁹ but for a writer such as Thomas Pynchon, such a relationship might make the medium more appealing. While discussing the late-1960s legalization of LSD in Pynchon's *Vineland*, Mucho Maas hints at the drug's real power: "No wonder the State panicked. How are they

⁸. This distinction is made more explicit once one considers that White's original title for the novel was *Memories of My Father On TV*, a title with strikingly different implications.

⁹. See any number of possible citations, including her assessment of the specific dangers of the kinds of hallucinatory transport television offers: "The entry into another world offered by reading includes an easily accessible return ticket. The entry via television does not" (Winn 32)

supposed to control a population that knows it'll never die? When that was always their last big chip, when they thought they had the power of life and death. But acid gave us the X-ray vision to see through that one, so of course they had to take it away from us" (313-14). When Zoyd responds that the knowledge gained from LSD can't be taken away, Mucho disagrees: "They just let us forget. Give us too much to process, fill up every minute, keep us distracted, it's what the Tube is for" (314). In fact, the "war on drugs" in *Vineland* is, contrary to Winn's logic, associated not with the anti-television movement but instead with the promulgation of television, as the medium is represented as a pacifier for a restless, substance-free public in a "timeless, defectively-imagined future of zero-tolerance drug-free Americans all pulling their weight and all locked in to the official economy, inoffensive music, endless family specials on the Tube, church all week long, and, on special days, for extra good behavior, maybe a cookie" (221-22). For Pynchon, television is a narcotic rather than a psychedelic, addictive without being mind-expanding. For White, by contrast, television initially presents itself as narcotic in effect — witness Carl, apparently "in a cataleptic trance before the TV since November of 1963" (21) — but gradually we recognize that the ostensible escape from reality that television provides is not a benumbing but a seeing-through; by entering fully into television's networked space, the viewer's understanding of the world is enlarged, and the underlying connectedness of what seem disparate phenomena becomes visible.

This sense of an occult connectedness is common both to discussions of the experience of living in the contemporary networked world and to the experiences of users of psychedelic drugs, particularly LSD. Steven Shaviro, in *Connected, or What It Means to Live in the Networked Society*, explores this commonality, coming to understand drugs as media, in the McLuhanesque sense — extensions of the self, and particularly of the central nervous system. Drugs function by acting "as agonists or antagonists of the various neurotransmitter receptors," and so, Shaviro suggests, "[t]aking drugs is thus a kind of

biological engineering” (186). Drugs are a means of “remixing” human consciousness, not unlike more technological means of manipulating media, and psychedelics most clearly remix that consciousness into the flow of network culture: “Psychedelic drugs and electronic technologies affect the sensorium in strikingly similar ways... psychedelics are the drugs that resonate most powerfully with the space of flows” (188). Moreover, the experience of the user on psychedelic drugs is that of a new relationship to the self — a phenomenon that Shaviro describes as “short-circuit[ing] the distinction between the observing self (the self as transcendental subject, or subject of enunciation) and the observed self (the self as empirical entity, or subject of statements)” (186) — as well as a reimagined relationship between self and other. Within the “space of flows,” Manuel Castells’s term for the peculiar non-geography of the network, discrete nodes become far less important than the interconnections of those nodes. And thus the argument can be made that the networked experience of watching television, like the user’s experience of psychedelics, can provide access to new modes of consciousness, as well as new modes of connecting with other human beings. If it’s true of our world, as Chris suggests of Paladin’s, that “life is all death because no one recognized anyone else as human like themselves” (White 107), then the possibility presented by television of bridging the gap between self and other might result in new sorts of intersubjective connection rather than the solipsistic inwardness Winn and others fear.

The conjunction of Castells’s “space of flows” with images of technological interconnection leads unavoidably to a consideration of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the machine. “Everywhere *it* is machines,” they famously claim at the opening of *Anti-Oedipus*; “real ones, not figurative ones: machines driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines, with all the necessary couplings and connections” (1). Their concern with the machine, which replaces the Freudo-Marxist interest in the “subject,” allows them to focus their critical attention not on the individual but on its interconnections, both internal, the components of the machine, and external, the couplings that form

machinic assemblages. They argue that the assemblage, due to its multiplicitous nature, “necessarily acts on semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously” (*Plateaus* 23). The result for the representational practices of writing is a radical blurring of the boundaries of the text: “There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author). Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders, so that a book has no sequel nor the world as its object nor one or several authors as its subject” (*Plateaus* 23). The machinic nature of television makes this imbrication all the more delirious: there is no inside or outside the televisual text; there is no distinction between viewer and program; there is no separation among viewers. There are, rather, only flows, and the assemblages that produce, conduct, redirect, stem, and interrupt them. And those flows, in *Memories of My Father Watching TV*, transform television from a mind-numbing, destructive, addictive disruptor of family life into a perversely productive source of revolutionary possibilities, resulting in a new imaginative relationship to the world and a new affective relationship to the others in it.¹⁰

The novel attempts to explore the nature of these televisual flows, and the movement they produce from despair to possibility, both through its appropriated, hallucinogenic narratives and

¹⁰. Nothing in my brief reading of television through this lens should suggest that Deleuze and Guattari themselves regard the medium as revolutionary, or even benign; they argue in *A Thousand Plateaus* that the televisual machine is ultimately a machine of societal capture, rather than release: “one is subjected to TV insofar as one uses and consumes it, in the very particular situation of a subject of the statement that more or less mistakes itself for a subject of enunciation (‘you, dear television viewers, who make TV what it is...’); the technical machine is the medium between two subjects. But one is enslaved by TV as a human machine insofar as the television viewers are no longer consumers or users, nor even subjects who supposedly ‘make’ it, but intrinsic component pieces, ‘input’ and ‘output,’ feedback or recurrences that are no longer connected to the machine in such a way as to produce or use it. In machinic enslavement, there is nothing but transformations and exchanges of information, some of which are mechanical, others human” (458). This rendering of television as a device of machinic enslavement owes much to the line of cultural discourse underwriting the anxiety of obsolescence, which misunderstands the television viewer as a wholly passive recipient of televisual communication. That said, Deleuze and Guattari’s more general theory of assemblages lends itself to the very different interpretation I propose here.

through the surprising final bonding of father and son within those narratives. In the process of this exploration, the reader is led to understand that something in the watching of television is potentially productive, even if that productivity isn't immediately apparent; this productivity seems to have less to do with the content of television than with the connections that it helps the viewer draw:

Make no mistake, to watch *Highway Patrol* at its 'regularly scheduled time' in 1957 was a stupefying waste (just as Newt Minnow's 'vast wasteland' imagined back in 1961); to watch *Highway Patrol* in syndication on cable nostalgia channels in the 1990s is no less deadening (sorry, not a bit; *Mr. Ed* gives you nothing of your life back). It does seem to me true, however, that to watch *Highway Patrol* in the monkish, climate-controlled confines of the Wisconsin Center for Film Research, in the greedy, self-indulgent dark, is to be presented with an opportunity for a meditation on Time worthy of Saint Augustine. Broderick Crawford as Captain Dan Mathews rubs his jaw speculatively. The moment passes. Thirty-five years later I watch him rub his jaw speculatively. The moment passes. I am writing about Broderick Crawford rubbing his jaw. The moment passes. The moment of the moment passing passes. (White 30-31)

The content remains the same — and little if any meaning is to be found in Broderick Crawford's pensive rubbing of his jaw — but as the viewer's position shifts in time and space, and as the viewer comes to understand the act of watching not as a mode of passive absorption but as an active process of study, the watching itself becomes productive, an "opportunity" for deep thought about the interactions between the text and the world it apparently exists within. There is, however, a danger involved in finding this opportunity to create meaning only within the hushed confines of the archive, in assuming that the primary experience of watching Broderick Crawford can only be "deadening." As Chris himself later thinks, during the "Have Gun—Will Travel" section, after having made a comment about Paladin's evident erudition:

But what of my own intellectual performance here? I am writing about a TV cowboy show but I use words like *proairesis*, *figura*, and *exegesis*? As my mom would say, I am "Mr. Smartypants." A snob.

Is this not a way of demeaning popular culture and the entertainment it provides? Do I not seek to demonstrate my own "difference" and thus the distance at which I stand from ordinary people and their world? More to the point, do I not distance myself from my

father, who watched these programs? (106)

This further shift, from intellectualizing the programs, so as to separate himself from his father, to attempting genuinely to understand his father's investments and pleasures in the programs, marks part of Chris's journey from "Gloom" to "Glee."

The first of those investments, as we discover in the novel's first chapter, "TV Scandal," results from the ability of the machinic linkages of television to provide a connection through which Chris's father can imagine himself a participant in historical events. Carl becomes, in fact, in Chris's projection, a central figure in "a pair of famous scandals, both associated with the early traumas of television" (9). These traumas tie together the growing pains faced by television, represented by the quiz show scandals, with the televisual events of the Cold War era, represented by Nixon and Khrushchev's "kitchen debate" and Carl's later encounter with the animatronic head of Mr. K. Chris's father's implication in these scandals transforms him, in his son's recounting, from a cataleptic blob on the sofa into "the moral metaphysician of all postwar cynicism and national self-defeat" (9), apparently an actor in the political maneuverings of the era, though one manipulated by larger, incomprehensible forces. "In the 1950s," Chris tells us, "in the years following the famous McCarthy investigations (which a spellbound America watched unravel in their very own living rooms during the live broadcasts of the Army-McCarthy hearings), my father was thrown, like the rest of America, into a contradictory and futile effort to be something other than insidious" (10). But, as Chris tells us several times, by the early 1960s, any sense that Carl may have been able to affect the course of history had been undone, undermined by "something hypnotic in the Kennedy funeral procession" (21). The ambiguity of this statement is apparent: in the early stages of the novel, Chris clearly means to point to television as the device that has his father so hypnotized; later, however, it begins to appear that the problem is not the machine but history itself, that something in the procession, rather than the televised spectacle of the procession,

produced the despair in which Carl is mired.

Another cause of Carl's despair, of course, is the family, and the desire for a replacement for the failed relationships with his family members produces another of his investments in television. Even within the ostensibly geopolitical encounter with Khrushchev, the reader finds evidence of family trauma: Chris suggests at the chapter's outset that "there is a deeper (and inevitably 'psychological') way of understanding [Carl's] decisions" (White 9), that Carl's problems were produced in large part by his having been abandoned by his father. Carl's dialogue, moreover, with Mr. K., which takes place in the family-oriented simulacrum of Disneyland, is repeatedly "translated" by the animatronic head's cosmonaut companions from the language of diplomacy and international relations into the language of the paternal:

"Comrade," said Joe, "would you like me to translate the Premier's remarks?"

"But he spoke in English!" Dad objected, wiping at the acid spot on his hand.

"If you think so."

"If I think so? Damn it, he spoke in English."

"Forgive me. I merely considered that American fathers and sons never communicate well. They always speak from mutually exclusive positions, one always wholly out of the view of the other. This is not true of you and your father, comrade?"

"Don't call me comrade. And he is not my father. He is the Premier of the Soviet Union. Or at least the head." (26)

But if, as the rest the chapter seems to bear out, the animatronic head of Mr. K. is indeed Carl's long-lost father, their relationship is not best mediated by a cosmonaut translator, but rather by the television.

Khrushchev, Carl tells Chris, "knew all about my life on TV" (21), and Carl knew about Khrushchev from watching TV, and thus it was television that made any connection between them possible. As Mr. K. tells Carl just before they part:

Pinocchio! My own little boy. At last I find you. We have grown lost in the fall and rise of

day. We are confused by the dilemma our ruins present. The outside has disappeared. See there, nothing in the distance but a flat buzzing. That is not life you hear, that's just heavy breathing. So, let us gather where the TV broke down. Shards of our family assemble there. Your burnt legs. My heart. We arrange the pieces in a way that makes us happy. (27-28)

The buzzing may not be life, but only because there is no longer any "outside" to the televisual universe, no "reality" but the ruins that the history of the twentieth century has produced. If anything can save the family, it seems to be the television, broken-down or not; it is only the distant static of life-on-TV that gives Carl the possibility of a reunion, the ability to arrange the pieces of the family as he likes.

But, of course, the television has not broken down; it is rather the barrier between life and life-on-TV that seems to have crumbled in the network's psychedelic flow. The rest of the novel presents repeated images of the dissolution of the family, as played through a series of reimagined televisual narratives: the murder of the father and his replacement by the avenging angel, Dan Mathews, on "Highway Patrol"; the sexual violence and alcoholic depravity surrounding the Cartwrights on "Bonanza"; the transformation of the father into an inanimate object to be blown up on "Combat." Each of these narratives uses the device of television to depict some element of the family's destruction, and particularly the destruction of the father-son relationship, suggesting not television's culpability in that destruction, but rather the ways that television can explain and compensate, if always inadequately, for the loss of such a relationship. On "Highway Patrol," for instance, Carl is killed by an escaped convict who is acting out his Oedipal struggles with respect to Dan Mathews, but who does so at the expense of Chris's ability to enact his own Freudian coming-into-manhood: "Murderers take heed: the man you kill may be somebody's father. Somewhere there is a little boy who needs to kill that father himself in order that he may grow up strong and true" (34). The loss of the relationship with the father is thus not caused by the televisual narrative, but perhaps hastened by it; the murder, or at least the violent separation of father and son, would have happened anyway.

What television provides is a kind of replacement parentage, one that never quite suffices but at least holds out the potential of a workable family relationship. Dan Mathews eventually kills the father's killer, but "my sisters and I find it difficult to take pleasure in this revenge, even though we own the episode on video and may watch it as often as we like. Because nothing can bring our father back to us. Unless of course Dan Mathews would be willing to be our father" (34). Such a transference of fatherhood becomes possible within television's network, such that a German pontoon bridge on "Combat" can become Chris's father, and when that bridge is blown up, Sargeant Saunders, who wired the explosives, becomes him in turn: "My father's essence could not be destroyed; it had to reside somewhere. It must have flowed back up the wires to the detonator at the moment of his death. Like me, Sargeant Saunders is now possessed by my father. The undead. They walk among us" (78). As with the Thanatoids of Pynchon's *Vineland*, television is here productive of a kind of life-after-death, but in contrast to the zombie-like state of the Thanatoids, Chris's father, through Sarge, explodes into bloom:

38. The riddle of the Sarge is undone when, to the astonishment of all (especially my father who pops up from his suburban recliner in awe), Sarge removes his helmet. Under his dirty, dented GI helmet with the chin straps hanging down most sloppily is not the familiar blonde hair but a small patch of garden, mostly grasses and bright wildflowers. This grows out of the top of his head. The bright colors of the wildflowers make it appear that his brow is aflame.

39. "How did I do it? I took my bayonet and prepared the topsoil and then I sowed the seed. No, it didn't hurt too much. I didn't go very deep. Why? Don't you like it? Don't you think it's a nice idea to have a little garden on top of your head?" (79)

That bloom, which not only brings the head of Chris's on-screen father to life, but also brings his off-screen father to life as well, transitions Chris and the reader from "Gloom" into "Glee," and into the true flowering of television's hallucinogenic potential.

Throughout the next chapters of the novel, it becomes evident that the problems Chris experiences are problems derived not from television-watching, but rather from the dynamics of the family. On "Sea Hunt," for instance, Chris presumes his father to be dead, despite his mother's

insistence that he's just gone "under the water" (86), and worse, that he's gone underwater to escape a sadness somehow caused by Chris himself. This is, however, one of a very few appearances that Chris's mother puts in before the novel's very end, and her regular disappearances during the chapter lead the reader to question what's happening behind the façade of this apparently faithful, waiting wife. This sense that what's wrong originates with familial relationships only grows at the chapter's end, when Chris's father reappears, "emerg[ing] from the sea"; that he emerges carrying "a large black cannister" (99) containing nitroglycerin, obtained in the "Sea Hunt" episode's plot, suggests that television may in fact provide Chris's father with the ammunition necessary to blow up the family, but the desire, it seems, stems from elsewhere.

Further, having blown the family up, things look up a bit in the following chapter, "Have Gun—Will Travel"; as the narrator begins, "The return of sexual appetite is a sign that depression has begun to lift" (100), and this chapter is in large part about that sexual appetite. The narrator proceeds to perform a careful explication of the episode, presenting, for each scene, the *proairesis*, or the literal sequence of events, the *figura*, or a second narrative that bears some symbolic or figurative relationship to the episode, and the *exegesis*, or the critical interpretation of the scene. Throughout, the *figura* focuses on the intensely sexual relationship between a recently divorced man and his new girlfriend. The relationship between this second narrative and the continuing story of Chris's family's life-on-television (which surfaces primarily in the *exegesis*) remains somewhat unclear. Is the recently divorced man Chris's father, having succeeded in blowing up the family at the end of "Sea Hunt"? This seems unlikely given the narrative's assertion that the man found his ex-wife's television watching "contemptible" (101). More likely, if requiring a significant leap into the narrative future, is the possibility that this man is in fact Chris, who, through the uncontrollably libidinal nature of his new relationship, discovers the potential interplay between sexual desire and television. While the man and woman have sex in front of

the television set in her parents' home, a black-clad man, presumably the patriarchal figure of Paladin, emerged from the episode of "Have Gun—Will Travel," appears to be standing in front of them, holding a gun. The apparition of the threatening father causes the man to lose his erection, disrupting their intercourse. In the next section, however, when the young woman goes along with his vision, shooting the apparition with an imaginary gun, he is "astonished by this turn of events. Truly, she was the most amazing lover he had ever known" (113); her participation in his vision transforms the disruption into a bit of play between them, and thus television becomes not a patriarchal force interfering in their relationship, but rather a means of deepening their connection.

Alongside this figural narrative, however, in the *exegesis*, Chris analyzes the events of the *proairesis* through the lens of the Oedipal violence that exists between father and son, and the all-pervasive nature of that relationship: "The essence of the father is fixed nowhere. The father is the son. The father is a 'six-gun for hire.' The father is a prissy mustache or a pack of famous cigarettes. The father is an 'economy,' a set of human relations that works (even if its working is all a process of damaging; damaging the already damaged, a second bullet hole in the shoulder)" (109). The victory of that economy manifests, in the *proairesis*, in the killing of the Primitive by Paladin, the "six-gun for hire" with the "prissy mustache"; in the *exegesis*, Chris interprets this killing by arguing that "[t]he death of the Primitive at the hands of the Civil, touched by the tiny fatality of the derringer, is a deeply encrypted trope. Taken literally, it implies the mean continuation of a culture of violence, alcoholism and inhuman isolation. Taken figurally it means SEE WITHOUT TURNING AWAY. DO NOT FORGIVE THE UNFORGIVABLE. STAY ANGRY. IT IS OUR ONLY HOPE" (114). This "culture of violence, alcoholism, and inhuman isolation" is not a state into which the family has been cast by television, but rather the state that has driven the family to seek out the solace of the television in the first place. Escaping this state requires shifting from a passive spectatorship, in which the images

projected by television produce a “mean continuation” of such familial damage, or even a critical spectatorship, in which the “Mr. Smartypants”-ness of erudition creates a false distance between the father and the self, adopting instead an active, hallucinatory, sexual interplay with television, creating one’s own figural narratives through which one can “see without turning away.”

In fact, it comes to seem that the anger between father and son is based, at least in part, not on the loss of the father to television’s hypnotic force, as the early segments of the novel suggest, but rather on the father’s *control* of the television at the expense of the family’s desires. “After dinner, the real action would begin,” Chris suggests near the opening of “Manic Maverick,” after two pages filled with descriptions of familial sordidness; that “real action” takes place, of course, around

the TV... Poppy would watch “his show”... “my show is on,” he’d say... as if that made it special... the old meany... every hour of every evening was “special” because “his show” was on... this is not something people accept anymore... times have changed!... we’re more democratic... we don’t put up with these tawdry patriarchs... but in his moment he had exclusive claim to watching *Combat*, *Bonanza*, *Highway Patrol*, *Sea Hunt*, *Have Gun—Will Travel*, and many more any time he pleased... (116-17).

That the power of the “tawdry patriarch” is primarily exercised in control of the TV set suggests that the stakes in Chris’s memories of his father watching television are slightly different than what we’ve been led to believe: perhaps the novel is not an attempt to reclaim the father from the set’s control, but rather an attempt to reclaim the *set* from the *father’s* control. After all, the list of programs that Poppy has “exclusive claim to watching” exactly recapitulates the list of shows that the reader has “watched” thus far in the narrative. Perhaps the production of these psychedelically reimagined episodes is Chris’s means of avenging himself, not for the loss of Carl’s attention, but rather for the hurt of Carl’s control of the set. Through the remixing of these narratives, Chris is able not only to undermine his father’s control, but also, as with the young woman in “Have Gun—Will Travel,” to establish new connections with the people around him. In “Manic Maverick,” the blatantly psychedelic narrative — in which Bret

Maverick, who has suddenly and inexplicably turned a blue that “nearly ignites the black-and-white world around him” (118), becomes a Shiva-like figure, the simultaneous creator and destroyer of the universe — awakens Chris’s father:

You can’t imagine the effect this scene has on Poppy... I can’t describe it... he looks blasted back against the sofa cushions... ideas are coming at him with the centrifugal force of a jet... thirty G’s knock him silly... this is a guy who hasn’t had a thought in years... the scales on his eyes have their own scales... the poor guy looks like the Upanishads have just been downloaded into his frontal lobe... he sees it all... worse yet, “his show” is just getting started... (120)

The narrative, replete with mythic violence and incest, drives Chris and his father not simply into a new relationship, in which the father comforts the son’s fears, but finally out of the living room and into the light of day, unearthing a forgotten football in order to play catch, re-establishing the father-son relationship on friendly, if stereotypical, terrain. Such an emergence at first suggests the obvious conclusion — that the father-son relationship can only be salvaged by escaping television’s influence. And yet, as the game of catch begins, the son notices something he’s never quite caught before: “he could be mistaken, but it would appear that the entire sky is the color blue” (139). Far from the truism that it at first seems, this realization is not simply about the nature of the outside world, but about the origins of that nature: the blue is, of course, the blueness of Maverick, emerged from the set and enveloping the universe as a whole. Understanding that universe requires understanding television, and no simple act of turning the set off can produce a life outside its sphere of influence. But Maverick’s — and thus television’s — all encompassing blueness is no threat; in fact, that the child sees it is a sign of his “poetic enthusiasm” (139), and its presence is warm and bright; the televisual universe thus may not be destructive, but rather, surprisingly, creative.

In these ways, *Memories of My Father Watching TV* provides a counter-narrative to the “just say no” rhetoric of the anti-television movement, as well as the television-blaming gestures traditionally

produced by the novel of television. Television is not, in this narrative, the cause of the family's downfall; television is not corrupting and mesmerizing the children; television is not undermining the authority of the parents. Television, instead, produces new ways of seeing the world, with the potential for new kinds of bonds among family members, as well as new modes of coming-into-adulthood for children damaged by familial strife. In the final chapter, "Saturday Night at the Movies," these potentials produce at last an actual, substantive conversation between father and son, one that allows Chris insights into his father's relationship to television, his effective abandonment of the family, and his consumption of alcohol. The answers Carl provides seem at first not to be terrifically enlightening — he watches television because he enjoys it, he doesn't talk to his family because he has nothing to say, and he drinks because he likes the way alcohol makes him feel — but gradually the reader comes to understand that these answers are reflective of the nature of Carl's desires and desperations, something that finally becomes clear when Carl and Chris watch a televised movie together. In this gesture of communal watching, which would seem to Marie Winn a retreat from familial communication, Carl attempts to show Chris the realities of his life, as represented on screen:

"You're in this movie?"

"Bet your bottom dollar!"

"Who are you?"

"What makes you think I'm a who?"

"What else could you be?"

"Maybe I'm a building or a bridge."

"You're a bridge in this movie?"

"I'm kidding you, Son. Why don't you just watch and tell me if you think someone or something is me." (144)

This gesture back toward “Combat” asks the reader to reconsider Carl’s existence on-screen, as imagined throughout by Chris; in fact, when Carl appears in the movie, we realize that Chris’s having cast him as a bridge, just like his having positioned him so centrally in the Cold War events of “TV Scandal,” is driven by an overestimation of his father’s significance. For Carl, in the movie, appears as nothing more than a set of clawing fingers thrust ineffectually through a sewer grate:

We are looking at Harry’s fingers emerging through the grill, cut off from the rest of his body. A dry wind rushes indifferently, as if these fingers really emerged from the floor of a desolate canyon. They wriggle hopelessly, pale worms. Grim cheese squeezed through a cloth. This is the truth, behind the world’s daylight reality; its “business” is this despair. (154)

Carl’s existence is this impossibility of escape, this futility in the attempt; it is not television that he is trapped by, but rather television that makes the truth of his entrapment known, television that transforms his entrapment into a fraction of a moment of a piece of art. Chris finds himself uncertain about whether he should be happy or embarrassed for his father, happy that his father is a part of something larger than himself, but embarrassed that his part in that something larger is so bound in his evident despair. “One way or another,” he concludes,

that was that. We’d had our mythic evening. It was over with the startling and uncomfortable suddenness of emerging from the magic of a darkened theater into the afternoon sun or, worse yet, a suburban shopping mall. We’d shared. We’d talked. I’d discovered things about my father. But Anna’s words kept returning to me: “A person doesn’t change because you find out more.” Too bad. (155)

Regardless of the influence of television on their lives, in other words — whether seen in the darkened living room or in the clear light of day — the family remains the same.

In fact, we know this from the novel’s very last images: *Memories of My Father Watching TV* wraps up, not unlike Prairie’s imagined ending in *Vineland*, with what appears to be a happy family outing. Except that it finally occurs to someone to ask where Chris’s mother is — where she has been “all these years,” in fact (155). Television plays no role in her absence from the family, of course, but on

the other hand, neither can the television-like happy ending protect the kids from harm. “In the nervous dark of our family station wagon’s backseat I could see the telltale glow of my mother’s hair,” Chris tells us. “It was on fire” (156), and, what’s more, that fire has already been passed to Chris’s sisters. Chris at first attempts to tell his father that something’s wrong, but then, finding his mother and sister fairly content even as they go up in flames, lets it go. If the family is destroyed, here at the novel’s end, it’s a fairly spontaneous combustion, one that no technologically determinist viewpoint can help explain. Television and its pleasures, though focal throughout the novel, play no role in this ending, except insofar as it may have been television that previously kept the flames under control.

Memories of My Father Watching TV, then, with its hallucinogenic take on the relationship between the family and the screen, presents a distinct alternative to the tradition of discourses about television’s dangers, discourses prevalent in both fiction and nonfiction written across the late twentieth century. Where the anti-television jeremiads of writers such as Marie Winn and Neil Postman see the downfall of western civilization, *Memories* seems only to see that civilization’s apotheosis. And where novelists like Pynchon and DeLillo depict television’s deleterious influence on the family, Curtis White instead focuses on the family itself as an institution whose damage is, if anything, made bearable by the presence of television. Television entertains and distracts, but it also provides space for the kinds of interaction among members of the family — including both unexpected connections and recast conflicts — that enables the institution to survive, primarily by freeing its members from their overdetermined Freudian psychodynamics and allowing them to imagine new, creative possibilities.

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