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The Sociological Significance of Contemporary Popular Culture in a Postmodernist Context

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Chapter 1.

Introduction.

Postmodernist sociology is concerned with contemporary society and the nature of human behaviour within society. On conducting any focused research into postmodernist theory, the fundamental difficulties of establishing the accuracy or otherwise of its assertions become evident. The metaphysical, and somewhat metadialectic nature of postmodernist writing is not conducive to any logical reasoning which could substantiate its claims. For example, the discourse of French writer Jean Baudrillard alleges that contemporary social patterns have led "to a state of terror proper to the schizophrenic ; too great a proximity of everything and to a loss of the 'real' ."[1] His notion is that we no longer live in a world of 'real' objects or 'real' time but in a realm in which objects and events no longer have consequence. The problematic nature of this type of theoretical work is that it can neither be effectively *confirmed* nor *denied*.

However, if we accept for the moment the truism that popular culture "can be compared to lifting the lid on a time capsule – one that revealed not only an era's artefacts but conveys a sense of its cultural and social moods as well,"[2] then we must trust that the accurate contentions of postmodernist theory and sociology will be reflected in the popular culture of its contemporary society. Therefore, if German theorist Martin Heidegger can legitimately claim that we have become a society without a homeland or sense of past, then we can expect to find homesick undertones in the work of current popular culture. Likewise the claims of Jameson, Jencks and Harvey that we live in a society "characterised by an absence of the experience of

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temporal continuity"[3] should be reflected in popular culture of a temporally confused nature.

Over the course of this thesis, some of the most significant works of contemporary popular culture will be analysed in parallel with some of the most important sociological artefacts of the same period. The purpose of this is not to critically evaluate any of the authors or artists involved but to assess whether any correspondence or opposition can be drawn between the popular culture and intellectual sociology of a given period.

Chapter 2. Popular Music

Introduction to Contemporary Popular Music

At the height of summer 1995 British pop band Blur released the fanfare single, "Country House," from their eagerly awaited fourth album. In the greatest media pseudo-event [4] of popular music's ephemeral existence, Blur were pitted against fellow 'Britpop' band Oasis in an intensely hyped 'Battle of the Bands' to establish which was the most popular contemporary band in Britain. Against a background of self-fulfilling tabloid headlines[5] and television news features Blur managed to pip Oasis to reach number one in the British single charts.

Amidst the hysteria, the mass media completely overlooked the music itself, and saw "Country House" as no more than the facetious tale of a reclusive character retiring to a rural home. Its musical arrangement comprising comical 'oohs' and 'aahs' and a video clip which owed much to the CARRY ON… series of films seemed to seal its fate as a disposable summertime sing-along. Yet from a sociological point of view the song offers much more depth than the tabloids were willing to concede. Its seemingly frivolous nature is betrayed when a background vocal emerges, quietly singing "I am so sad, I don't know why." This initially insignificant line slowly grows in volume until the song is consumed by this whining world-weary mantra, submitting to some vague and wholly intangible sadness. In an article on the song the Melody Maker wrote that "it includes that intriguingly melancholy couplet that makes you wonder whether there's more to the song than meets the ear."[6] By the time this article ran, Blur had already scheduled the release of the second single from the album, "The Universal."

"The Universal," greeted with the same public acclaim as "Country_House, " was the outward face of the misery to which its predecessor had subtly alluded. Opening with the bizarre temporal paradox, "This is the next century, " the song seems a distant and alienated observation on contemporary society. Couplets such as "no-one here is alone / Satellites in every home" show a disturbed pessimism which is further perpetuated by the delivery of the chorus-line, "it really, really, really could happen." The line is sung in a tone which undermines the actual narrative of hope and faith in the existence of random events and chance happiness.

If this band were exceptional in their confusion and despair, they could be dismissed as one man's depressed creation made popular by the chance adoration of some subversive subculture. However, in the months preceding and following the release of these songs a series of seemingly unrelated and commercially successful releases from both Great Britain and America appeared to point to an underlying 'Culture of Despair' in contemporary society. In February 1995 British band, Radiohead, released a seemingly simple song called, "You Never Wash Up After Yourself." Played on a single acoustic guitar, it begins to tell of a simple domestic argument. The song's lyrics betray its initial whim and suggest a much greater despair in which the dirty dishwater is merely a scapegoat. Simultaneously, America's Smashing Pumpkins issued a song called "Soothe" which portrayed the notion of utter insatiability with the repeated line "Hungry , hungry again." The British 'trip-hop' artist Tricky released a single, "Christiansands" featuring a series of rhetorical questions, ultimately asking, "Always', what does that mean?", while "Australia" by The Manic Street Preachers was a homage to pure escapism that began with the lyrics,

"I don't know if I'm tired and I don't know if I'm ill." Subsequently, they got to number three in the British Singles Chart with "A Design for Life". This song outlined a bizarre enforced vagrancy in the chorus, "I wish I had a bottle / Right here in my dirty face / to wear the scars / To show from where I came." These lyrics hint at an almost nostalgic search for a homeland or origin which will subsequently be discussed.

These feelings of sadness, alienation and despair have been identified and discussed by several key writers working within the area of postmodern sociology. However, before continuing, it is necessary to consider the sociology of popular music and the effect that popular music has on our lives.

Introduction to the Sociology of Music

Why do we like the music we like? Though we cannot expect to find any *definitive* or exhaustive answer to this within a general overview of popular culture, establishing an outline of the sociology of music may lead to a greater understanding of music's role in contemporary culture, and, subsequently, a better knowledge of how we can judge a society based on the music it produces.

The themes found in studying the sociology of music tend not to deviate greatly from other areas of sociological thought. The key to these is the idea of *socialisation*, the process by which we become integrated into our society, or to use Althusser's phrase "interpellated as subjects," ;

> The ways of thinking, acting and feeling which we assume are normal and natural are, in fact, the results of a lengthy and complex operation in which we *learn* to operate in accordance with prevailing conventions.[7]

The idea of society shaping the individual is central to sociological thought. Karl Marx believed that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary it is their social being that determines their consciousness"[8] and Emile Durkheim wrote that "society is prior to the individual"[9] . The most obvious example of this socialisation is in the language we speak.

In learning a language as children, we are accepting the limits of that language and the limits imposed by the patterns of thought which are inherent in it. We are

accepting with this language what Erich Fromm describes as the 'social filter';

through which only certain ideas and concepts can pass. Thoughts that cannot pass through the social filter of a certain society are unthinkable, and of course, also unspeakable[10].

It may follow that the 'unspeakable'[11] is also 'unthinkable'. We restrict ourselves to thoughts for which we have words, otherwise we must solve "an insoluble problem: to express the new thought in words that do not exist." [12] However, we accept the socially recognised method of communication regardless of the fact that it presents fundamental limits to our ability to communicate accurately. [13]

Just as we conform to codes of speech, so too we obey implicit codes of music. At a very fundamental level there is conformity to a rule of diatonic scale (do, re, mi etc.). No matter how ignorant of musical theory, people have learnt to recognise this diatonic as the 'language of music'. There exists also subtle social rules guarding the hierarchy of music in our society and these serve to create a further implicit 'language of music'. The example used to demonstrate this attribution of values dates back to the eighteenth century, where Classical music was the cultural preference of the social elite. This social elite represented only a small percentage of the population, but because they exercised economic and political control they were regarded with a superiority not demographically deserved. So it emerged that "even if people don't learn to love classical music, they are none the less imbued with a sense of its greatness and superiority over other forms"[14]. As a result of this, we still hold classical music in a disproportionately high esteem, overlooking that behind the ceremony of the event,

classical music is formed of the same building blocks as any other Western musical format.

In the sociology of music there exists the same prejudices and signs for many genres of music. A Blues guitar can signify melancholy, in that there is within this genre the residual trace of Negro oppression. Similarly we attribute hedonism as inherent in guitar based *rock'n'roll* and woe as inherent in the strumming and gentle lilting of folk music. As the American theorist Marshall McLuhan would have it, in music the medium *is* the message.

This last statement requires clarification. Almost all music subscribes to one of a number of musical genres. Each genre can be seen as a medium. Through the conventions of society we attribute to each genre preconceived notions of hierarchy, sadness, hedonism or other. These become 'signs' in music. Society expects these 'signs' to be in keeping with the lyrical or musical content of any piece of music. Therefore a song depicting great sadness will typically be at a slow tempo, often played in minor key on an acoustic guitar or piano. The 'sign' of the slow tempo and stark arrangement points to 'sadness', and we therefore expect the lyrics to be sympathetic to this sign. From this we see how we have created a further social 'language of music', based upon the signs given by the chosen musical style. The deceptions of this language require further analysis.

Imagine a song written and delivered in the style of the Irish Rebel Song, with a lyrical content that, perversely, offered sympathy towards some Unionist cause to unite Ireland under British rule. Were this to be played in a Nationalist surrounding, it would be interesting to observe how long it would take for the message to overtake the

medium. How long would it take for the audience to stop clapping their hands and tapping their feet to finally realise that the medium was in complete contradiction to the message? This case illustrates the ambiguity of the sign in music sociology. Similarly, attempts to convey pacifist 'gun-control' messages in the genre of American 'rap' music have failed because the pacifist message becomes lost in the medium of loud and very aggressive drumbeats, a medium which is designed stir feelings of anger and intensity.

The final sociological question that must be outlined before studying the implications of contemporary music is that which asks, "Where does society stop and the individual begin?" It is clear that although society generates the rules that *guide* our lives, these rules are not so strict as to generate a fixed automation of society. The central question is how can individual expressionism be compatible with society? For the purpose of this essay we need to accept the truism that "expressionism is paradoxically yoked to convention."[15] No individual can rise above the society to which he subscribes, and no expression, however subversive or 'individual' it may seem, can truly breach the boundaries of the society in which the expression was conceived. As Fromm outlined, we are all subject to the 'social filter' and can only speak that which is 'speakable'.[16] Therefore we must accept that an individual's expression arrives to him from within his society and that this expression is a feeling shared by others within this society.

In the case of music we have to accept a few further issues. The politics of the music industry are such that a large number of songs are composed to express precisely

nothing. These empty and unchallenging songs are *designed* to satisfy a market known as 'musak' and are typically played as background music in supermarkets and elevators. By contrast there exists an 'alternative' music genre, which has recently risen to mainstream status, comprising artists for whom music is the deliberate expression of perceived individuality. While it may be interesting to speculate upon what sort of society would demand music that intentionally expresses nothing, it is the latter area of 'alternative' music which provides us with the most relevant contemporary analysis of today's society.

'This is the Next Century' – An Analysis of Contemporary

Popular Music in a Postmodernist Context

In the introduction to this chapter, a number of songs were identified as being representative of a despair that emerged in the musical culture of the mid nineteen nineties. These songs were selected, prior to any focused research into the area of postmodern or sociological theory on the basis that they serve to express this general feeling of despair in a manner that is both intelligent and articulate. Also considered in their selection were critical acclaim and commercial success. The chosen songs were then placed within the context of key postmodernist texts in an attempt to objectively examine any similarity or inconsistency that occurs between the two.

Many of the musical selections are marked by a common cold, alienated observational style. Blur's wide-eyed approach makes reference to housing estates, satellite dishes, town parks and tabloid newspapers. Contrasting this are the detailed narratives of Radiohead and Sleeper who note that "down in the shadows the worms dig / The spiders crawl over the bed,"[17] and describe characters "Dancing to the sound of [their] corduroy flares."[18] Despite their differences, both styles of narrative abandon the tradition of the 'observational song' in failing to follow a distinct temporal line, draw a conclusion or even identify a cause. So, in "The Universal" Blur simply relate that "every night we're gone to some Kareokee song." No further qualification is given to this commentary, either in the form of justification or condemnation. Similarly Radiohead fail to truly recognise the cause of depression in "You Never Wash Up

After Yourself ." The singers initial identification of the dirty dishes as the source of his despair is undermined by the degree of despondency in the line, "I must get out once in a while / Everything's starting to die" which alludes to a sadness far beyond the domestic. Similarly Sleeper's "What Do I Do Now?" and The Verve's "The Drugs Don't Work" portray only an indistinct understanding of their misery.

This vague despair is symptomatic of a condition that has been identified in the work of German theorist Martin Heidegger whose 1973 address, "Messkirch's Seventh Centennial" focuses on alienation, apathy, *ennui*, and the loss of 'homeland' within contemporary society.

The metaphor of the satellite dish in "The Universal" is immediately remarkable upon reading Heidegger who offers similar observations regarding "the TV and radio antennae that we see in rows on housetops."[19] Heidegger sees these aerials in a different light to the popular understanding of them, offering that "[the aerials] point out that men are precisely no longer at home where they seem to dwell." [20] Both Heidegger and Blur see the satellites as transporting us *away* from our homes, to a place where everything exists at once. What Marshall McLuhan described, somewhat benevolently, as 'the global village' is now recognised as a 'universal' herd, where Blur see loss of character and adoption of prevailing conventions.

Heidegger's academic analysis provides a more explicit *explanation* than the inherently implicit, though equally relevant *observation* offered by Blur. Heidegger

isolates the situation in which man cannot resist the lure of technology ;

> captivated and absorbed by all this, man ... moves from his Home into the alien. The power of the alien seems to so overpower man that he can no longer prevail against it.

It is not just the existence, but the very nature of this alien that is problematic. The 'global village' is based upon "the frantic change from the newest to the newest of all."[21] The global village came equipped with a built in obsolescence as new technologies were created at a pace which exceeded their own usefulness.

The most significant move in the 'frantic change' that Heidegger describes, was the migration from a consequential and linear temporal existence to a perpetual present, which as part of the frantic change, leads to an acceptance that we are now living in the future. This last concept is best expressed by Blur's temporal paradox "this is the next century."

Time and its perception by contemporary society is a major issue in postmodernist writing. The key writers all theorise on the significance of 'the moment' in the face of an increasingly ephemeral and distracted society. The key to linear temporality is maintaining a divide between the sensation, "which feels the moment in the moment"[22] and cognition "which recognises the moment only after the moment."[23] This posits that we require a moment of reflection or 'cognition' before we become aware of sensations and events that have just occurred. This fleeting moment of reflection allows us to recognise and prioritise each event in relation to previous

lifetime experiences, enabling us to react appropriately to a given event. As such, traditional society has always lived in that space of time *immediately* following an event.

In Fatal Strategies Baudrillard explained how the speed and bulk of information in this electronic age violates this sequence of sensation and cognition. In the information soaked world we live in, this idea of cognition is no longer viable. Too much information is now travelling too fast for it to carry any social 'inertia'. Bombarded by information and sensation we can no longer afford the moment of 'cognition' needed to prioritise events. The vast scale of information, transmitted worldwide twenty four hours a day, renders itself useless and creates an alienating affect because of our inability to prioritise. In this climate it is impossible to designate relative importance to any given event, resulting in every piece of news being treated with equal disposability.   Much of Baudrillard's writing is dedicated to the creation of his self-styled 'hyper-real'– a place without sequential cause-and-effect. This hyper-real into which we have slipped, unable to return to our 'real' world is filled with shallow images in place of 'real' articles. As a result, the event and its sensation become the ecstasy of themselves, which leaves us in an automated state of 'perpetual present'. In cinema history, those living in the perpetual present have typically been depicted as androids. In Ridley Scott's BLADERUNNER (1982) it is the search for a history and identity that brings the replicants back to their 'maker'. By contrast the advanced android, Rachel, who has been pre-programmed with a sense of a personal past, is unaware that she is an artificial lifeform.

The degree of over-information in the media can be likened to the nuclear arms race. The farce of a nuclear arsenal that could destroy the world several times over defused its own threat. As Baudrillard points out, the scale of the arms race removed the possibility of 'exchanging warfare'[24]. So too the scale of information available today is impossible to 'exchange'. The Internet is a prime example of this. Such is the democracy of the Internet that any person can say whatever they wish on an equal billing with all others. How can 'truth' exist in an environment of perfect democracy? A topic search can return hundreds of thousands of documents, which is *information* not *knowledge*. Nobody could ever even *read* all this information, let alone assimilate it as knowledge.

The 'global village' concept provides further problems which lead to the increased isolation that is underlying popular culture. Many of the main theorists have addressed the idea of 'hyper-specialisation' in contemporary culture. The sheer bulk of information in the media and its specialised nature has brought about a fragmentation of society resulting in

> each group coming to speak a curious private language , each profession developing its private code or idiolect, each individual coming to be a kind of linguistic island, separated from everyone else [25].

This creates an environment full of hyper-specialised goods and persons, "having long since exceeded the limits of functionality." [26] The alienating effect of this is in creating a society that can never even hope to gain even the most tentative idea of the workings of itself. "The hypertrophying of historical research, the delirium of explaining everything, of ascribing everything, of referencing everything"[27] pushes all

except the most educated in their respective field aside. No-one can hope to truly understand anything without specialising in it, and no-one can specialise in anything without dedicating a life's work solely to it.

This idea of over-specialisation and automation has its roots in the 'Arts and Crafts' movement of the late 19th century. This movement, at the hands of Ruskin, Pugin and Morris, was a reaction against the unsightly manifestations of the Industrial Revolution and aimed to instil aesthetic values into mass manufactured products and liberate man from the 'automation of labour' that had begun in this era. Inadvertently[28] it began the type of 'assembly line' process that Henry Ford was later to perfect in his car manufacture plants. On the assembly line, each worker is responsible for only one task in the manufacture of a product. This hyper-specialisation alienates the worker, reducing him to the role of a machine. He is no longer the proud creator of a product, but merely the automated executioner of a process among processes, to the extent that he may not even understand the workings of the product he is thought to be 'creating'.

Another trait recurrent in the selected songs is that of 'time wasting', meaninglessness and drunkenness. Blur outline the nightly excursions to the Kareokee, "even though the words are wrong," and the peculiarities of 'Parklife' and weekend breaks. Radiohead identify boredom in the habit of eating all day ("You Never Wash Up After Yourself")and in "Lying in the bar with my dripfeed on / Talking to my girlfriend, waiting for something to happen" ("The Bends"). The use of the word 'waiting' here indicates a passive society. The narrator makes no effort to 'make' something happen, but prefers his apathy, willing only to *react* to outside stimuli. Sleeper, in "What Do I Do Now?" speak of indifferent nights out "To a nearby pub

[to] watch a couple of bands / Draining the glass [then] walk home at last." The Manic Street Preachers bluntly note, "We don't talk about love / We only want to get drunk" ("A Design For Life"). This complies with Eco's theory of meaninglessness in society. The overuse of certain terms in contemporary society has reduced their value to meaningless cliché. However, Eco points out that through irony it is possible to return the meaning to overused terms. So we can return meaning to the phrase, " I love you", by saying, "As Barbara Cartland would say, ' I love you."

Heidegger has diagnosed this chronic indifference, this time-wasting as '*ennui* ' – a boredom in, and with, life ;

> nothing appeals to us anymore, everything has as much or as little value as everything else, because a deep boredom penetrates our existence to the core…this deep boredom in the form of the passion for killing time, is the hidden, unavowed pull of the homeland …the hidden homesickness[29].

This theory maintains that in our alienated state, brought about by the nature of contemporary society, we feel out of place and submit to killing time until we find a place where we may belong. The ultimate end of this time-wasting is questionable, as it is thought we cannot escape the global village, that we can no longer penetrate Baudrillard's 'hyperreal' to return to our 'homeland'. We can note here that one of the most identified anthems of recent years has been Radiohead's "Creep" with its simple refrain "I don't belong here."

The theme of drunkenness in popular music is in keeping with Heidegger's theory of time wasting. As mentioned earlier with regard to BLADERUNNER, a sense of 'memory' and 'past experience' separates man from machine. Drunkenness,

however, is a means of erasing memory, thereby reducing us to the level of the automaton.

Among the selected songs were factors which provide for further sociological analysis. An excellent understanding of the arbitrary link between the 'signifier' and 'signified'[30] was evident, notably in the lyrics of 'trip-hop' artist Tricky, whose song "Christiansands" asks ;

> 'Always' , what does that mean?
> 'Forever' , what does that mean ?
> 'You and me', what does that mean?

And concludes in his doubting the basis of the language he speaks ;

> It means we'll manage,
> Master your language
> And in the meantime
> Create my own

Elsewhere, The Verve show an understanding of the type of 'lifestyle' shopping which "as the consumer experiences it, *is* a pursuit of happiness."[31] This complies with the view that we purchase in order to gain happiness and not an actual or functional object, that "a product is just an inducement to buy the advertising."[32] This idea of media deception translating products to emotional quantities was put forward in the song "A Northern Soul" as "I was buying feelings, from a vending machine." Similarly "Soothe" seems aware of the reality of media manipulation. The repeated line, "hungry, hungry again" identifies with Lacan's assertion that desire cannot be satisfied amidst media manipulation that leaves us always wanting more.

One further work, Radiohead's 1997 album <u>OK Computer</u> , shows an almost subconscious understanding of contemporary society, and was met with unprecedented acclaim and sympathy.

Fitter Happier - The Society of <u>OK Computer</u>.

This album shows such depth in its subtle understanding of contemporary society that it warrants special consideration apart from its peers. Showing themes of loss of homeland and *'ennui'* in "Let Down"[33] temporal dislocation in "Airbag"[34] and abjection[35] in "Fitter Happier"[36] , <u>OK Computer</u> is also adept at recognising automated and media-led lifestyles that echo everyone from Karl Marx to Lyotard, and Baudrillard to Robins.

Most notable is the 'song' "Fitter Happier", the lyrics of which are read out in disjointed form by a computer synthesised voice. Upon first reading, the theme of "regular exercise at the gym" and "eating well" suggest a sensible, socially correct lifestyle. However, further analysis detects the extent to which this lifestyle is fake and media-led, developing the Marxist concept of Automation of Labour into a new 'Automation of Leisure'.

Classically, Marx put forward the idea "that the worker sinks to the level of the commodity."[37] This, according to Marx, has an alienating effect upon the labour-force, creating what he described in 1844 as a "split into the two classes of *property owners* and propertyless *workers.* "[38] Some 150 years later, this observation is no longer relevant. Instead of the source of power being land, the source today is information, and the divide is between 'those' who *inform* and those who are being *informed.* This corresponds to the relationship between the informing media and the informed society which results in similar alienation to that outlined by Marx. The media are constantly

feeding us news 'McNuggets,'[39] brief and insubstantial news features, advising that a lifestyle of moderation, of "not drinking too much" will bring us to a fulfilled life. Continuing the theme of automation, the voice in "Fitter Happier" describes a lifestyle of "charity standing orders," of being "careful to all animals" and a diet of "no more microwave dinners and saturated fats". The detail with which this lifestyle is described is alarming. The song invites us to believe in the narrators new happiness, and share in his desire for it, before delivering the final line which serves as a judgement on his true freedom of choice ;

" a pig, in a cage, on antibiotics."

This one line, delivered in the same calm and disjointed manner as the rest of the narrative describes "the illusion of freedom"[40] and the development of a new 'Automation of Leisure'. This level of automation is addressed elsewhere in the album, on the song "Let Down", which recalls Heidegger's *ennui* theory. The opening lines , "Transport, motorways and tramlines / Starting and then stopping, taking off and landing / the emptiest of feeling's" serve as an objective observation of society. While the media may try to motivate us about the excitement that this era holds, about supersonic travel and the space-age, these lines return to the alienated feeling of our being no more than 'a pig in a cage on antibiotics'. The key line, "when it comes it's so-so" highlights another media-manipulation technique ; the pseudo-event.

The media's ability to create 'pseudo-events' perpetuates the misery of society. Everything is hyped to 'be the best ever' and 'new and improved'. In the case of MacArthur's return to the USA in 1951, the "biggest and warmest [welcome] in the

history of the middle west"[41] was promised. MacArthur's return is significant as one of the first analysed pseudo-events in sociological history. A team of sociologists studied the public reaction to this event in comparison to the media reaction. As 'predicted' by the press, huge crowds gathered to see MacArthur. The whole event was televised, cameras focusing on every move MacArthur made. In reality those who actually attended the scene complained that they "waited for hours and then were lucky to have even a fleeting glimpse of the General," [42] and observed that they "should have stayed home and watched it on TV." [43] In further contrast, the media were telling the public about the excitement of actually 'being there' for the event, rather than 'just watching it on TV'. This illustrates the nature of being 'Let Down' by the pseudo-event . In the era of 'pay-per-view' television, events are hyped to such an extent that they inevitably fail to live up to expectations. The media create simulacra of the events by pre-match analysis and speculation. This perpetuates the social *ennui* – following the disappointment of the actual event in comparison to its anticipation, time is killed until the next event, which promises to be 'better than ever'. This is isolated in the line, "disappointed people clinging on to bottles...crushed like a bug in the ground."

A point that must be discussed in relation to the sociological significance of this album is the "the avoidance of unpleasure" as described by Freud. This speculates that "the avoidance of unpleasure may be a more significant motivating force in human behaviour than the obtaining of pleasure"[44] and "protection against stimuli becomes more important than their reception." [45] This complex idea is simply summarised in the line "no alarms and no surprises please."[46] Alluding to Marxist 'automation of labour' again, the narrative describes "a job that slowly kills you." So he opts to "take a quiet life...such a pretty house, such a pretty garden." He continues to nullify all stimuli

that are out of his control, "This is my final fit / My final bellyache…a quiet life, a handshake [the least compassionate show of affection] / Some carbon monoxide." These ideas seem to be in accordance with Freud's idea that we 'blandify' our lives in order to prevent us from the shocks of modern life. However in the final lines the song changes, resulting in the singer screaming wildly, "get me out of here!" If avoidance of displeasure *is* a greater incentive than the pursuit of pleasure, why is the narrator so upset, now that he has the perfect insulated lifestyle? The answer is best provided by Baudrillard in the line, "If you wish to escape the world's insanity, then you must sacrifice all of its charm."[47]

The lifestyle described in "No Surprises" is exactly as Baudrillard explains, devoid of all charm. While the possibility of some uncontrolled catastrophe has been nullified, the life is now without meaning, once again highlighting the transparency of this media led lifestyle;

> never could [society] imagine a system capable of complete prevention of catastrophes : everyone would in fact have to prefer catastrophes, which at least with its miseries, corresponds to…a violent end.[48]

At this point, there seems to be an incompatibility between these two arguments. However, **both** Freud and Baudrillard are correct in their respective assertions. Society genuinely fears that which is beyond its control – our inadvertent creation of the Baudrillard 'hyper-real' is a result of this. We will tend to chose the pseudo-event over the 'real' spontaneous event. Yet, as Baudrillard says we do not wish the charmless life of a safe synthetic environment. How then are these compatible?

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A major factor of <u>OK Computer</u> is coping with what I will call the 'pseudo-catastrophe'. As well as our helplessness before catastrophe such as earthquake or tornado, there is danger also in their prediction ;

> experts have calculated that a state of emergency declared on the basis of a prediction of seismic activity would trigger off a panic whose consequences would be more disastrous than the catastrophe itself [49].

Contemporary society needs to feel that we are avoiding 'unpleasure'. To appease us the media create 'pseudo catastrophe', which are fully within our control. This media creation is alluded to in the line "tyres that grip in the wet (shot of baby smiling in back seat)...a safer car." These products – 'side-impact bars', 'passenger side air-bag' and 'rolling cage' – are portrayed in the media in such a way that the guilt of *not* having them far outweighs the safety provided *by* them. What we are purchasing is not 'life-saving' equipment, it is 'guilt-saving' equipment. We are purchasing 'peace of mind'. The media create the 'pseudo-catastrophe', the potential danger of not having these products, by presenting news 'McNuggets' on road safety. In purchasing these safety features we remove the pseudo-catastrophe and feel we have regained control of the situation.

The deep empathy with which <u>OK Computer</u> was met reveals that these emotions are felt by a large sector of society, and suggests that contemporary society is becoming aware [50] of the limits imposed by its social patterns. Although no solutions are offered to any of the issues raised, the clarity with which they recognised indicates

that society may be beginning to work towards liberating themselves from the media-led 'Automation of Leisure'.

Chapter 3. Contemporary Cinema

Introduction to the Sociology of Cinema

> What films reflect are not so much explicit credo as psychological dispositions - those deep layers of collective mentality [51].

The sociology of film has been the subject of intense psychological and sociological debate since the birth of cinema over 100 years ago. Theories regarding the cinema as a 'mass social event' emerged and there was Freudian debate over the significance of sitting in the dark watching a 'light at the end of a tunnel.' At the core of all debate on cinema is the question of how much can we tell about a society from the cinema it observes.

> The showing of a film can be compared to lifting the lid on a time capsule - one that revealed not only an era's artefacts but conveyed a sense of its cultural and social moods as well .[52]

Although this sweeping truism is problematic in its nature, it is in the interest of this thesis to accept the idea that a film ultimately shares a consciousness with its contemporary audience. The success of cinema suggests that films "connect with some aspect of the experience of the general public"[53] and therefore that we can find in the context of film clues to the nature of society at the time the film was created.

Three contemporary mainstream films were selected based on box office success, critical acclaim and an intelligent communication of core sentiments. As with the musical selection, these were placed in the context of postmodern texts to identify any comparison or contradiction between them. Certain themes were consistent in all three films but are analysed only in the film which portrayed them most accurately. So

while the theme of the fall of the hero was consistent throughout all three, it was most vividly shown in SEVEN, and therefore it is in the interest of clarity to focus on its depiction in this film alone.

SEVEN : The Fall of the Hero and rise of the 'Smart Villain'

SEVEN (Kopelson, 1995)is a disturbing serial-killer film set in a nameless American city. Homicide detective William Somerset (Morgan Freeman) is joined, a week prior to his retirement by his replacement David Mills(Brad Pitt)[54](Fig.1) Having discovered the bodies of a man who has apparently been force-fed until he 'burst' and a wealthy lawyer who has been bled to death, Somerset suspects that a serial-killer is choosing his victims according to the Seven Deadly Sins. The film's plot, as Somerset and Mills try to apprehend the killer, is pre-occupied with despair, injustice and apathy, and shows an excellent understanding of the 'sign' as language.

The opening scene provides us with a referent back to Heidegger's theories of homeland and Baudelaire's view of modern city life. Neither character in SEVEN seems to 'belong' in this city. Mills, over-casually dressed and chewing gum, has just moved there with his wife. Somerset, always depicted in shirt and tie, has lived there all his life and plans to move "anywhere the hell away" upon his imminent retirement.

Each murder in SEVEN serves as a 'sign'. As Somerset notes, the murders are pointless, "unless the act itself has meaning". There is no significance to *who* has been killed, just *how* and *why*. The crimes are notable only for their 'sign value.'[55] The serial-killer (Kevin Spacey) is a character who has changed his name to 'Jonathan Doe', a title usually applied to anonymous corpses. At one point Somerset notes, "He's John Doe by choice, " implying that the rest of us are John Doe by nature. Again, the sign value of this name is significant, as it implies that the killer is just another member of society.

Fig. 1 David Mills (left) and William Somerset.

The central theme in the film is the role of the 'hero' in contemporary society and the hero's ability to affect justice by protecting the innocent and punishing the guilty. As such, SEVEN serves to define its own type of hero. In one scene Somerset

notes, "People don't want a champion ; they want to eat cheeseburgers, play the lotto and watch television - apathy *is* a solution." This fallen 'cheeseburger hero' is exactly the kind of empty 'hero' that Mills becomes.

The undermining of the hero, a main concern of SEVEN, is an established theme in film sociology. Prior to SEVEN, Roman Polanski's 1974 film CHINATOWN served as the definitive illustration of the fall of the hero. It is in the interest of this thesis to compare these two films and their respective heroes, to the end of showing how contemporary society is willing to let their hero fall to a new low.

In respect of his geographical setting and physical demeanour CHINATOWN's 'hero', Jake Gittes, (Jack Nicholson) is consistent with the 'hard-boiled' detective of 40s noir-thrillers. In keeping with cliché, Gittes is a private investigator and former member of a police force. As such, he operates on the margins of society, highlighting "the ambiguity between institutionalised law enforcement and true justice"[56] theoretically being better able to solve crime and affect justice.

By contrast, David Mills in SEVEN is *still* a member of the police force. However, Mills is in constant conflict with his superiors and operates in utter defiance of his partner. This leaves Mills marginalised within his own environment. He is shown to be inept as a police officer. His work methods are shoddy and his attitude is often of complete indifference. So, while Gittes must leave the force in order to better serve the cause of justice, Mills can operate *independently* within the force, suggesting an indiscipline within the ranks. Ultimately it is this independent streak that leads to Mills downfall, and the perverse emergence of the evil John Doe as overall hero.

30

Just as in the great noir-thrillers of the 40's, Mills emerges as a player in a larger game. Traditionally, the hero becomes pawn to a client who hires him under false pretences, usually for generous sums of money. This is evident in CHINATOWN as Gittes accepts money from two members of the crooked Cross family. Mills, however, becomes the pawn of Doe while his wages are paid by society. In SEVEN it seems that the tax-payers money is crooked, that *we* have hired him – that society itself is crooked.

Throughout CHINATOWN Gittes stance as a hero is demeaned . For a large part of the film, he is shown wearing a ridiculous nose bandage, which serves to highlight his overall impotence. His ineffectiveness is most notable when compared with the dominant evil of Noah Cross. Similarly in SEVEN we witness the demeaning of David Mills, as the villain exercises complete control. In one scene Doe has Mills at his mercy, but chooses to spare his life. Doe eludes Mills so emphatically that he must give himself up in order to complete his scheme. Also Mills' inability to show his obvious affection for his wife and his inability to provide a good home for her highlights an emotional handicap within him that is contrasted by Somerset's immediately affectionate *rapport* with her.

In their respective conclusions both heroes fail to serve justice and ultimately let the guilty go unpunished. In CHINATOWN Noah Cross walks free, while his daughter-mistress, the 'innocent' object of Gittes affection lies dead. Mills', however represents a much more pathetic figure of the fallen. Having given himself up to Mills, Doe offers to plead guilty only if taken to a desert location where the remaining two

victims can be found. Despite his suspicion that "[just two more bodies] wouldn't be shocking enough - we've got newspapers to think about," Mills allows Doe, once again, to be dominant over him. On the journey, a conversation develops between Mills and Doe in which Doe offers a parallel with Baudrilliards 'hyper-real' theory. He says of the media, "you can't just tap them on the shoulder any more, you have to hit them with a sledge hammer." He then reveals that the sixth victim has been Mills' wife, murdered by Doe on the grounds of his envy of their happy marriage. To complete his scheme, Doe must be murdered by Mills on the basis of wrath. At this point Mills has suffered the same fate as Gittes in CHINATOWN. He has lost the innocent subject of his affection but, unlike Gittes, has the satisfaction that Doe can now be punished by the system. However, Mills proves incapable of relinquishing his wrath, and proceeds to kill Doe, thereby declaring Doe as victor in their game of cat-and-mouse and launching the media frenzy that Doe so greatly desired.

John Doe's killings exist in a grey area between justice and crime. His victims (Mills wife apart) all lived highly immoral lifestyles, which in contemporary society, go utterly unpunished. The most notable example of this is the murder of a wealthy lawyer, "a man who dedicates his life to making money by lying." In the wake of the O.J. Simpson and Louise Woodward trials, society has become very aware of the dubious nature of the legal profession. Similarly, one finds it hard to justify either the wasteful lifestyle of the obese 'couch potato', or the fashion model who would rather die than go through life with her nose severed. The 'evil' John Doe is carrying out a moral justice that, while undeniably 'wrong', is somehow understandable in its effort to affect a moral justice.

This further blurs the hero/villain axis. While we pain to see the true 'hero', Mills, losing the game to Doe, we find ourselves vaguely sympathetic to Doe's crusade, although we recognise its evil nature. This then asks us to question our own moral values and our society's ability to effectively punish the guilty. Throughout the film we see the police force as floundering uselessly in contrast to Doe, who is impeccable in his delivery of his own brand of 'justice'.

The New 'Smart Villain'

Gittes investigation in CHINATOWN leads him to discover a large corporate and political conspiracy. By contrast, Mills' evidence just leads out to society . In fact, Mills initial effort to apprehend Doe brings him instead to the residence of a victim, a man whose description and criminal record seemed to identify Doe. This blurs the villain-victim axis almost beyond distinction and is indicative of a new 'Smart Villain' that emerged in Hollywood productions such as SILENCE OF THE LAMBS, SPEED, and HENRY: PORTRAIT OF A SERIAL KILLER in post Gulf War America.

The Gulf War introduced new terms of 'smart' missiles and 'surgical strikes' and a new warfare which valued surveillance and technology over brute force. Unprecedented media attention in the Gulf brought the war to our televisions as it unfolded, depicting the cold horror of this technological warfare. Each mission into enemy territory was recorded by pilots who subsequently analysed the videotape on their return to base. Apache helicopter pilots were seen "slapping each other on the

back" [57] as they watched images of their mission's death and destruction. "The Gulf War was to purify America by exorcising an evil that was projected as being 'outside," [58] however what America was seeing was American pilots describing the adrenaline rush of 'blowing this up, blowing that up', like a glorified video-game.[59]

The idea of the 'evil outside' was undermined in the wake of the Gulf War. While the public could stomach the hunting of Hussein, the near-sadism of the American pilots and the destructive use of American technology sat uneasily with the viewing audience. In this context it became more and more difficult for society to distinguish 'them = evil' from 'us = good.' These pilots with a murderous glint in their eyes had come from American soil and the question arose as to how they might satiate this blood-thirst on their return.

Furthering the fear of the 'evil inside' was the emergence of religious cults such as that in Waco, Texas and the bombing of government offices in Washington. This bombing was first thought to be the work of Middle Eastern terrorists but was later found to be carried out by an American. Similarly, America saw the rise of right wing militia groups, such as the National Rifle Association. The evil was no longer 'outside', instead it was in the heart of America. The fear of the evil inside quickly

became obvious in cinema, most notoriously in THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS as *1960.* the serial killer Hannibal Lecter stared out across our screens ;

> Like the 'smart' weapon, Lecter is characterised by his brilliance, he is
> programmed to strike precisely and at will. We cannot hide from the serial

killer ; the victim is simply the wrong person in the wrong place at a particular time [60]

Nowhere is this more evident than in the evil of John Doe in SEVEN. He coldly strikes with maximum effect using his great intellect to elude capture and execute his ingenious plan. More notably, he exists unnoticed within society, and so eludes recognition that he must give himself up to Mills. This character is the perfect depiction of a new 'smart villain' born of American paranoia of the 'evil inside'.

Terry Gilliam's 1995 film 12 MONKEYS is the temporally dislocated tale of time traveller James Cole (Bruce Willis) sent from a future where a man-made plague has forced earth's remaining population into underground shelter. The purpose of his travels back to 1996 is to determine the identity of 'The Army of the 12 Monkeys', an extremist animal rights movement suspected of initiating the plague. However, the true sociological value of the film is in its ambiguous depiction of binary opposites such as 'real' and 'unreal', 'now' and 'then', and most notably, what is 'sane' and what is 'insane.'

Upon arrival into our 'present' (his 'past') Cole is arrested and diagnosed as schizophrenic by psychiatrist Dr. Kathryn Railly (Madeleine Stowe). As the film progresses Railly becomes increasingly convinced that Cole's 'meticulous fantasy' of time travel is, in fact, true. She therefore faces the difficulty of having to erase her education, at one point receiving a warning from a colleague, "you're a trained psychiatrist, you know the difference between what's real and what's not!" Simultaneously, Cole tries to convince himself that he *is* insane and therefore the plague and its horrors were imaginary. This sets up an antagonism between the two as she tries to accept, and subsequently convince him, that her initial diagnosis was incorrect.

This ambiguous positioning of sanity against insanity is helpful in our understanding of the writings of Baudrillard and his controversial 'Disneyland theory'

which was first put forward in <u>Simulacra and Simulations</u> ;

> Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' America which *is* Disneyland. Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all surrounding it are no longer real[61]

Although this theory seems ridiculous in its hyperbole, 12 MONKEYS goes some way to lending it credibility. The film shows how society has created imprisoning mental institutions in which those deemed 'insane' are kept isolated from the rest of society. This creates the illusion that the rest of society is 'free' and, most importantly, 'sane'.

The character of Jeffrey Goines (Brad Pitt) – a hyperactive patient at the mental hospital, is key in putting forward the argument that is to support Baudrillard's theory. His brilliant babbling monologues show that the patients at the hospital seem aware of their 'madness' and accept that their 'insanity' is only in the interests of protecting the perceived 'sanity' of society. His key line, in explaining the workings of the hospital to Cole is, "Crazy is 'majority rules'. There's no 'right', there's no 'wrong', there's only popular opinion...you're here because of the system." This argument proves more substantial than any counter-argument the doctors have to offer. In fact, throughout the film, the doctors' arguments in diagnosing 'insanity' seem inconsistent and insubstantial. In one scene Railly explains to Cole how he has meticulously created a fantasy world. As she says this, she stands before a huge shelf of psychology books and articles . This highlights the degree of 'meticulous creation' that has gone into the development of her 'reality'.

Goines continues to show a deep and sane understanding of the media and society as a whole in saying, "buy a lot of stuff, you're a good citizen, if you don't you're mentally ill." He then makes the initially ridiculous statement that, "germs are a plot *they* made up to sell you disinfectant." Given the invisible, undetectable nature of germs, Goines is not insane to doubt their existence, in fact it is society who should question our unerring belief in the existence of something it cannot prove. This highlights the way we have been programmed to function socially, and our need to verify our sanity by labelling others as insane.

The opening scene sets the tone for the antagonism. Dr. Railly is shown attending a mythology lecture in a huge classical hall. Standing before a renaissance painting of classical archways the lecturer quotes, "Yesterday this day's madness did prepare." She is applauded by those present for her knowledge on this subject, and thus accepted by society as sane. "Yesterday this day's madness did prepare" is the very idea that Cole is trying to relate to Railly upon his arrival. In a scene at the mental hospital, we see Cole trying to convey this idea in front of classical archways, identical to those in the background at the lecture hall scene (Fig. 2).
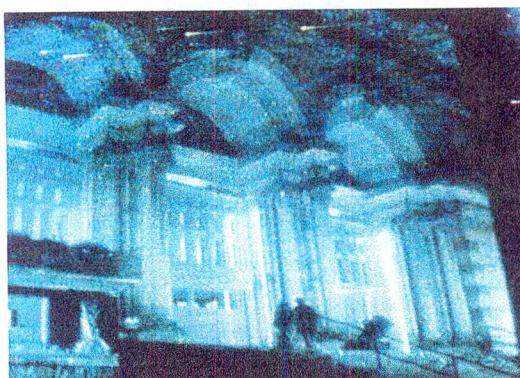

Fig. 2 The Classical styling of the lecture theatre (left) and the mental institution

In the same lecture theatre Railly is giving an address on 'Apocalyptic Visions'. Later in the film we see a shoddily dressed vagrant standing on a wooden box in the street preaching the same words that Railly spoke(Figure x). However, because the preacher's lecturing occurs outside the socially accepted realm of the university hall, and because he exists outside the idea of a salaried 'professor', it is more convenient and reassuring for society to label him as 'insane'(Fig. 3)

Fig.3 Dr. Kathryn Railly (left) and the vagrant preacher

The most notable point of the film is that we are never ultimately told whether or not Cole *was* a time traveller from the future. Although the ending does seem to support Cole's story, the ambiguity of the finale leaves us open to conclude that the entire event was indeed a 'meticulous creation'. This seems to support the idea of a society who must regularly ask themselves, "Is this real or am I insane ?" without ever reaching a conclusion that is anything more than just socially acceptable.

STAR TREK : FIRST CONTACT : The Paradoxes of Protection.

STAR TREK : FIRST CONTACT (Frakes 1996) depicts the conflict between the Borg, a collective of half-organic half-mechanical drones and the United Federation of Planets. Having been almost destroyed in battle with Federation ships, the remaining Borg create a temporal vortex and escape back through time to the year 2063 to assimilate the Earth. They are pursued through the vortex by the Federation ship USS Enterprise which destroys the Borg escape pod before it enters the Earth's atmosphere. However, some Borg successfully board the Enterprise and begin assimilation of the crew.

The Borg are depicted as the Federation's most lethal enemy and their mission to assimilate Earth as the greatest threat to humanity. We are drawn to believe that the Federation aim of preserving the sanctity of the individual is in complete contrast to the Borg philosophy of automation and collective consciousness. As the conflict intensifies, the distinction between these ideologies begins to fade and we recognise the ambiguous portrayal of the 'good' Federation against the 'evil' Borg ;

> Piece by piece the difference between the Borg, whose drones are dispensable, and the Federation fighters who will sacrifice their lives for their own philosophy of self-determination becomes less distinct.[62]

The Borg, a multi-cultural collective in techno-organic uniform, fail to contrast with the Federation, a multi-cultural collective in Starfleet uniform (Fig. 4). Similarly the 'evil' Borg system of 'assimilating' cultures could be seen to correspond with the Federation motto of "seeking out new life, new civilisations". The Federation's

opposition to the Borg creed of 'superiority through techno-organic' interdependency is undermined by the fact that the Captain of the Enterprise is "by his very existence, supporting [this] Borg motto…his heart is prosthetic and he cannot exist without it"[63] Similarly, the Enterprise' chief engineer can only see with the use of cybernetic implants. These examples demonstrate how the Federation is slowly coming to resemble that which it fears most, a collective of half-organic half-machines.   This blurs the hero / villain axis in a manner never previously seen in the STAR TREK series

> Captain Kirk and crew seldom had any self-doubts that they were in the right. Picard et al, on the other hand, are racked with doubts. If STAR TREK is a kind of ongoing American epic, it would seem to be entering a self-questioning phase here[64]
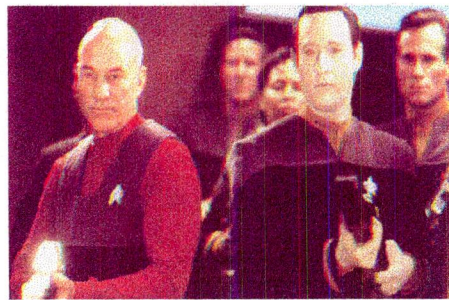

Fig.4 The Federation crew (left) and the Borg.

The most interesting aspect of the Borg is their similarity to our contemporary society, "[they] have emerged from the future to represent our present. The Borg are what we are."[65] There is never mention of a 'Borg homeland' or place of origin. In fact the idea is inconceivable as the nature of assimilation is in giving up homeland and history and accepting collective consciousness. Their time travelling capability shows a temporal vagrancy which further perpetuates their homelessness, and their unerring obedience to their Queen may correlate to the relationship between society and the media. The Borg motto of 'superiority through techno-organic interdependency' is one shared by contemporary society which perceives technological advances as inevitably

improving living standards. The revulsion of flesh, a trait of STAR TREK : FIRST CONTACT (and also of SEVEN) is a common theme in cyperpunk fiction, as the body is seen as extraneous to the world of virtual reality and the Internet.

A central aspect of the film is the relationship between the Borg and Captain Jean-Luc Picard (Patrick Stewart) which helps explain a series of contemporary paradoxes outlined by Langdon Winner in "Three Paradoxes of the Information Age". As he was once assimilated by the Borg, Picard is represented as a futuristic Captain Ahab, twisted with vengeance and "relentless in his mission to retake the Enterprise."[66] As the film progresses his fear of the Borg paradoxically leads him to become more like them. Memories of his previous assimilation haunt his existence and lead him to become cold, calculating and automated, qualities associated with the Borg. He ignores his emotions and feels no compassion as he sends his men on a suicide mission to "stand [their] ground, [and] fight hand to hand if [they] have to."

The Paradoxes of Protection

Langdon Winner's "Three Paradoxes of the Information Age,"[67] shows how the technological developments of society, perceived to enrich our lives can have opposite effects to those intended.

'The Paradox of Intelligence' challenges "the belief that technological development and the enhancement of human abilities move forward together."[68] As such, it addresses the contemporary view that 'smarter' technology will bring about a

more educated society. However, the paradox is that as computers in educational institutions get 'smarter' or more advanced, education standards actually drop. To combat this, the institutions buy 'smarter' computers, which perpetuates the paradox. In this case the moves to protect education standards from falling have contributed to the decline.

Similarly 'the paradox of lifespace' addresses the failed attempt to protect our leisure time by creating new technologies of bleepers, fax machines and mobile phones. Initially these technologies were perceived to be beneficial in that they facilitate productivity and improve our leisure time by providing us with peace of mind that we are never out of contact with society. In fact, these technologies violate our leisure time to the extent that our 'lifespace' or 'free time' has become a secondary workplace. Once again, preventative or protective moves have had the opposite result to that intended.

Finally, 'the Paradox of Electronic Democracy' disputes the belief that new communication technology, such as increased television coverage will benefit democracy by educating its audience on political issues and furthering communication between a government and its people. In reality, democracy has had to adapt to the medium of television in which "viewers have become acclimatised to a frantic pulse and become impatient"[69] with slow political debate. American politicians have accepted that in this climate any address longer than a sentence is too difficult for the television audience to endure.

These three paradoxes highlight a situation evident from STAR TREK : FIRST CONTACT that preventative moves can often result in our moving closer to that which we are trying to avoid. In the film, Picard's moves, though perceived by him to be in the best interests of the Enterprise brought him to a Borg-like state of emotionless automation.

Chapter 4. Conclusion

At the outset the aim of this work was to consider without critical assessment whether or not there existed any parallels between the major works of postmodernist sociology and the most significant pieces of popular culture.

It has been shown how the themes which are explicitly detailed in postmodern writing, have been succinctly portrayed in contemporary popular music. The coincidence of the satellite metaphor in Blur's "The Universal" and Martin Heidegger's "Messkirch's Seventh Centennial" provides particular insight into contemporary society's perception of television as taking them *away* from their dwelling places. Temporal dislocation was recurrent in much of the selection, alluding to a society that fails to enjoy the moment of cognition needed to prioritise events and subsequently struggling to operate in a perpetual present. In keeping with this, the topic of drunkenness endorses a society intent on wasting time and erasing memory, furthering its automated state.

In particular, OK Computer most accurately conveyed the feelings of alienation analysed by Marx and Jameson, and the media led lifestyles described by Robins, as well as identifying new areas of 'automation of leisure' and pseudo-catastrophe not explicitly investigated by the postmodernists.

Even the most extreme postmodern concepts found parallels in the area of contemporary cinema. 12 MONKEYS depiction of the perceived opposition of the

mental institution with 'sane' society corresponds to Baudrillard's Disneyland theory. The character of Jeffrey Goines subtly challenged the nature of our media led lifestyles in the phrase, "buy a lot of stuff, you're a good citizen, if you don't you're mentally ill." The unresolved temporal dislocation of James Cole continues the loss of 'cognition' in society. SEVEN's theme of the fallen hero supports its own idea of the 'cheeseburger hero' and substantiates the claims that a new 'smart villain' has emerged in post Gulf War America. STAR TREK : FIRST CONTACT also shows the fall of the hero, particularly in comparison with previous STAR TREK films. STAR TREK : FIRST CONTACT is by far the darkest film of the STAR TREK series in its implicit depiction of contemporary society in the form of the Borg, and in the dubious portrayal of the Federation as they show signs of self-doubt.

The presence of postmodernist themes throughout popular culture suggests that the explicit academic work of the theorists and the implicit narratives of the artists are in unison in accurately observing the workings of contemporary society.

Endnotes

[1] Hans Bertens *The Idea of the Postmodern,* (London: Routledge 1995) p.150

[2] Quart L., & Albert, *American Film and Society since 1945* (London : MacMillan 1984) p. 1

[3] Bertens, 1995 p.162

[4] The pseudo-event is a non-spontaneous event often orchestrated, though not necessarily dictated by the press. It is always 'staged' and often rehearsed. The most notable recent example was the funeral of Princess Diana.

[5] John Fiske has identified three genres within the news media. These are outlined as 'quality' press ; those media perceived to present mainstream news in an accurate and wholesome manner, the 'alternative' press which presents a variant to that view evident in 'quality' press, but in a similarly accurate manner, and the 'tabloid' press which is concerned with presenting news articles in a manner which values the spectacle over the social significance of the story. As such the 'tabloid' press can be seen as a subversive force in contemporary media in that it will favour the sensational and popular view over the relative significance of the event. This was highlighted in 1997 as a rumoured split in the pop band Oasis took precedence over Iraq's impending nuclear capabilities.

[6] Paul Lester, "Colditz a Knockout" in *Melody Maker* September 9, 1995, p.33

[7] Peter J Martin, *Sounds and Society* (Manchester : Manchester University Press 1996) p.4

[8] Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (London : Penguin 1975) p.3

[9] Martin, 1996 p.4

[10] Erich Fromm, *Greatness and Limitations of Freud's Thought* (London : Abacus 1982) p.2

[11] In this context, the term 'unspeakable' refers to concepts for which a language has no word, and not taboo terms. Taboo terms are generally 'not spoken of' but clearly are 'speakable' in that words exist to express them.

[12] Ibid. : 2

[13] The language of the Eskimo facilitates them with words to describe 14 different types of snow. By comparison we can only use vague comparative and hybrid terms to express this. This example highlights the degree to which our language impairs our communication skills.

[14] Ibid. : 10

[15] Ivo Supicic in Martin 1996 p.3

[16] However, Fromm concedes that the creative thinker, while still subjected to the rules of his social filter, can push the boundaries of his society and create 'a new thought'. "This new thought as he [the creative thinker] formulated it, is a blend of what is truly new and the conventional thought which it transcends" (1982 pg.3). As popular culture is based upon the innovation of the 'creative thinker', much of the works analysed in this essay are what Fromm would call 'new' thoughts; that is, expressions which manipulate existing words to express new concepts.

[17] From "You Never Wash Up After Yourself"

[18] From "What Do I Do now?"

[19] Martin Heidegger "Messkirch's Seventh Centennial" in *Listenig* Vol. 8 (1973) p.43

[20] Ibid. : 43

[21] Ibid. : 47

[22] Leo Charney, *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley : University of California Press 1995) p.279

[23] Ibid.

[24] Mark Poster (Ed.), *Jean Baudrillard : Selected Writings* (Cambridge : Polity Press 1988) p.191

[25] Frederic Jameson in Peter Brooker (Ed.), *Modernism / Postmodernism* (London : Longman 1992) p.167

[26] Poster, 1988 p.189

[27] Ibid.

[28] While the Arts and Crafts movement *was* a reaction against the mechanisation of man brought about by the Industrial revolution, it inadvertently give birth to the 'assembly line' process. In William Morris' printing workshops it was common for one operator to print only the red area of wallpaper, another to print the yellow area and another to print only the blue.

[29] Heidegger 1973 p.51

[30] In language, every object consists of a 'signifier' which is a material element, and a 'signified' which represents the mental concept to which the word refers. Combined, the signifier and the signified form what Saussare called the 'sign'. Taking the signifier 'apple' , one assumes that the signified is a red or green sweet fruit. However, the signified could as easily be a brand of computer. Advertising media try to manipulate this arbitrary link between the signifier and signified. In an advertising campaign for gold engagement rings, the words 'love' and 'forever' featured prominently. In this way the ring transcends its own meaning. The signified is no longer just a ring of precious metal, it has become a symbol of love and loyalty.

[31] Kevin Robins, *Into The Image* (London : Routledge 1996) p.111

[32] In Gary Wolf ,"Channelling McLuhan" , *Wired* , January 1996 p. 51

[33] "the emptiest of feelings, clinging on to bottles...one day , one day you'll know where you are"

[34] "in the next world war...in a fast German car, an airbag saved my life

[35] A place where meaningless collapses – the abject is that which is outside the self and threatens to engulf the subject to a place where meaning collapses.

[36] "like a cat, tied to a stick, that's driven into, frozen winter shit"

[37] Marx, 1975 p.322

[38] Ibid.

[39] A phrase coined by Ritzer in describing the 'McDonaldisation' of society

[40] Robins, 1996 p.108

[41] Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image : A Guide to Pseudo Events in America* (New York : Atheneum 1987) p. 27

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid. : 28

[44] Robins, 1996 p.112

[45] Ibid.

[46] From "No Surprises"

[47] Poster, 1988 p.198

[48] Ibid. : 196

[49] Poster, 1988 p.196

[50] This album can be seen to be part of a culture of 'knowledge and denial' that is emerging in very recent popular culture. With films such as TOMORROW NEVER DIES, society is showing itself to be aware of the potential dangers of allowing the media such dominance over our lives. The 'escape exit'– or barely plausible 'happy ending' of these films is not sufficient to overturn the vulnerability exposed by the evil in the film.

[51] Joseph O'Connor & Jackson (Eds.), *American History / American Film,* (New York : Frederick Ungar Pub. 1979) p. XI

[52] Quart L. & Albert , 1984 p. 2

[53] Ibid. : 3

[54] This pairing of the almost retired black detective with the inexperienced white officer is familiar from the more superficial LETHAL WEAPON series.

[55] In the Saussarian concept of the sign, an object or act has two values. On one hand the material value of the object is set by economic factors. The sign value, however, is set by the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Using the previously established example, the material value of a golden ring can be set financially according to purity and craftsmanship. The sign value of the ring, as explained, is of love and loyalty. The act of throwing away the ring is significant therefore, not for the material value which is lost, but as a sign that the love and loyalty it represents are abandoned.

[56] John G Cawelti, "Chinatown And Generic Transformation in Recent American Films", *Film Genre Reader,* Barry Keith Grant (Ed.) (Austin : University of Texas Press 1974) p.185

[57] Kevin Robins, "The New Smartness" in *Culture on the Brink : Ideologies of Technology ,* Bender, G., & Drucker (Seattle : Bay Press, 1994) p.306

[58] Ibid. : 308

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid. : 306

[61] Poster, 1988, p. 196

[62] Ibid.

[63] Mark Stuart, *The Hero : Organic and Synthetic* (Unpublished dissertation, National College of Art and Design : 1997) p.32

[64] Leslie Felperin, "Star Trek : First Contact", *Sight and Sound*, Vol.7 Issue 1 Jan. 1997 p.48

[65] Stuart, 1997, p.43

[66] Ibid. : 30

[67] Langdon Winner "Three Paradoxes of the Information Age", *Culture on the Brink : Ideologies of Technology* , Bender, G., & Drucker (Seattle : Bay Press, 1994) pp. 191-197

[68] Ibid. : 193

[69] Ibid. : 195

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