1-1-2002

American Kitsch: Dreams of Vegas and Apollo beyond Aporias

Daniel Gerling
Eastern Illinois University
This research is a product of the graduate program in English at Eastern Illinois University. Find out more about the program.

Recommended Citation
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/theses/1410

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses & Publications at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.
THESIS/FIELD EXPERIENCE PAPER
REPRODUCTION CERTIFICATE

TO: Graduate Degree Candidates (who have written formal theses)

SUBJECT: Permission to Reproduce Theses

The University Library is receiving a number of requests from other institutions asking permission to reproduce dissertations for inclusion in their library holdings. Although no copyright laws are involved, we feel that professional courtesy demands that permission be obtained from the author before we allow these to be copied.

PLEASE SIGN ONE OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS:

Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University has my permission to lend my thesis to a reputable college or university for the purpose of copying it for inclusion in that institution’s library or research holdings.

[Signature]
Author’s Signature

[Date]

August 8, 2002

I respectfully request Booth Library of Eastern Illinois University NOT allow my thesis to be reproduced because:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

[Signature]
Author’s Signature

[Date]
American Kitsch: Dreams of Vegas and Apollo beyond Aporias

(TITLE)

BY

Daniel Gerling

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2002

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

August 7, 2002
DATE

THESIS DIRECTOR

August 7, 2002
DATE

DEPARTMENT/SCHOOL HEAD
Abstract

Aside from a recently published compendium of happy stories by Dan Rather and a few real estate agencies in Florida, the American Dream has been considered dead. The most common poison deemed responsible for this death has been, not the lack of success, but, the “kitschiness” of the reward. Postwar novels such as Henry Miller’s *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* and Edward Albee’s play *The American Dream* declared that the Dream was no longer genuine and, therefore, no longer functional or valid.

Horatio Alger’s blueprint for American prosperity began to lose its momentum to a generation of skeptics who rejected the idea of chasing glamour, riches, and the “beautiful illusion.” Rather than killing the American Dream, however, kitsch works as the saving power which reinvigorates the dynamic of irony at play in the Dream of the contemporary era. A new generation of fiction writers and critics, ideologically powered, in part, by the philosophical postmodernists of the past few decades, have begun to affirm the force that kitsch possesses in our cultural context.

I begin with a brief history of the American Dream, particularly its formation and early progress as rendered by literature. I then utilize Friedrich Nietzsche’s analysis of the life and death of ancient Greek myth and how that particular process reflected his own era. Certain parallels between the Nietzschean-built dialectic of Apollo and Dionysus and the dichotomy I have constructed of kitsch and shit become valuable lenses for the purpose of exploring the development of the American Dream. I use both Milan Kundera’s definition of kitsch as well as kitsch’s etymology to reveal this concept as the lynchpin and source of vital energy necessary to expose the surprisingly healthy face of
the American Dream today. In the age of entertainment, repetition, veneers, parody, and irony, the search for authenticity or genuineness is so often irrelevant. As purported by current fiction writer David Foster Wallace, this simulation is what deserves our sincerity. Kitsch now demands an attentive, earnest analysis of itself; for neither we nor the American Dream can live without it.
Dedication

To my parents Max and Petra Gerling, for whose endless patience and warmth and unconditional support of my every endeavor I owe the world.

To Pilar for opening up my future and ensuring that it will be a beautiful place. Our experiences traveling around America for three months at the onset of thesis and her ability to laugh with me while I tried desperately to disprove her claim that “the American Dream is the Mexican Nightmare” validated this project and made it fun. A good deal of this thesis was subsequently written in Mexico.

To my brother Andreas—for proving that dreaming is worth it—who passed on to me the weirdest and greatest collection of books and movies I now call my favorites.

To my sister Susie and brother Bobby for clandestinely spiking my coffee with undetectable amounts of cyanide since I was five so that now I am immune. Their endearing sarcasm and wit is now shared by us all.

To my close friends Tony, Ian, Brendan, Huck, and Charlie for thousands of hours of drunk and caffeinated banter about philosophy, writing, and life, to our road trips, and most of all, to the dawns we shared having figured everything out.

To Dr. Gary Aylesworth for putting learning first. The chapters about Nietzsche and contemporary philosophy would have been impossible without him.
Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge and thank tremendously Dr. Michael Loudon for his guidance as my thesis director. I could not expect any professor or friend to invest so much time and effort into any of my works. His encouragement, faith, and sincere interest in this project—from the formative brainstorming sessions to the final editing—were inspirational to say the least.

I also wish to express my gratitude and acknowledge Dr. Bonnie Irwin and Dr. Dana Ringuette for serving as my readers.
American Kitsch: Dreams of Vegas and Apollo beyond Aporias

By
Daniel Gerling

All we can hope to do is remove a few
Masks with the roar of our laughter,
Laugh them off the figures of power.

—Dominique Laporte, from the History of Shit

Great historical events have often provided omens for the future, from the telegraph’s pre-orchestrated first message of “What hath God Wrought!” to Lincoln accidentally tearing the American flag at his inauguration (Eyewitness 244). These are chance occurrences for certain, “but,” as Greil Marcus states, “coincidences make metaphors, and metaphors make culture” (Double 190). And culture is what I seek to discuss and explore: culture in the form of fiction, history, criticism, philosophy—both French and German—and, essentially, any form of thought that contributes, positively or negatively, to present and future humanity. To be fair to a topic such as the American Dream, the exclusion of any of these factors hazards avoidable elision of elements that may turn out to be crucial for the Dream’s development.

This having been said, I propose the ceremonial last spike in the Pacific railroad as an introductory metaphor for the American Dream. The event occurred at
Promontory Point, Utah on May 10, 1869. Nearly 700 people attended including several generals, the governors of California and Nevada, and many members of the board of Union Pacific. The connecting tie was made of California laurel, the sledge was made of silver, and the last ceremonial spike was made out of solid gold. There was no shortage of pomp. Telegraph wires were set up so that the rest of the US could be notified at each strike of the silver hammer ("The Last Spike" 298). This final spike was to be the great moment when Manifest Destiny was realized, where the east and the west were joined together and the days of long, treacherous wagon rides were no longer necessary.

For the most part, the event was successful. It was, however, as described by witness General Grenville Dodge, shrouded by awkwardness. Several distinguished men took shortened ceremonial swings at the last spike, but the strange part is that nearly all of them missed (298). Nothing disastrous happened, no one was killed, and the nation probably didn’t stir much about the small mishaps. But then again, what does it portend about the country’s unity and the yet unparalleled symbol for national progress when the governor of California, the President and Vice-President of Union-Pacific, and the engineers miss the target of their honorary (symbolic) taps?

Perhaps nothing. Perhaps Walt Whitman didn’t even notice. Yet maybe the last spike was a sign that progress is rarely as easy as it looks, or that Manifest Destiny is not all that it’s cracked up to be, or, that the American Dream—which for so many in the decades leading up to 1869 revolved around going west to chase the inflated stories of finding the very substance that comprised that final spike—would
at times be brutal; at times, be strange and confusing; and, always, be a protean
vascillation between gold and the grassroots originality of Whitman's America.

In fact, gold is what Dominique Laporte is really after in his History of Shit
quoted above. He chronicles the history of the purification of the French language at
the hands of the Royal Academy and the "semantic atrophy of the olfactory field"
(viii). The dynamism between these two notions—of shit and gold, of substance and
structure—and the possibilities of overcoming these dualities drive my project and
give me faith in the American Dream.

American Dream literature has, with very few exceptions, ascribed to this
dialectic and has overwhelmingly concluded that the American Dream has at some
point in the first half of the century died. Between Edward Albee's "The American
Dream" (1960), Henry Miller's The Air-Conditioned Nightmare (1945), and
Baudrillard's America (1986), three works paramount in their criticism of the
American Dream, the consensus is that the Dream has died a death of shit-
starvation—where shit is a symbol for what is real and human and bodily, versus the
"fake" commercialism of American TV generations. At the end of Albee's play, the
grandmother (representing the old way) is the only character to recognize that the
dumb, shallow, and pretty boy is actually the embodiment of the American Dream.
The title of Miller's travel journal is a metaphor for what he loathes about America—
its sterility. And Baudrillard, who surpasses even Miller in his chastisements of
America, says, "deep down, the US, with its space, its technological refinement, its
bluff good conscience, even in those spaces which it opens up for simulation, is the
only remaining primitive society" (7). He doesn't stop there: "there is a sort of
miracle in the insipidity of artificial paradises, so long as they achieve the greatness of an entire (un)culture” (8). Of the three, ironically, only the Frenchman comes close to affirming the artificiality that stinks up America and its ideal as that of kitsch being some potentially constructive influence.

Horatio Alger has for three generations been considered the demon forger of the conventional American Dream as expressed in fiction. Through a hefty collection of essentially children’s bildungsromans, Alger drafted the blueprint of how one can succeed in America through hard work, self-reliance, integrity, and perseverance. And the Dream, as the god of Genesis proclaimed the world he created to be, was good. This model survived consistent pessimism all the way through the ‘50s when the Beat Generation gained notoriety and, in a move that would prove to become part of the mainstream conscience of the ‘60s, challenged the value of the Dream’s fruits. Since then, the Dream has undergone a barrage of attacks and has effectively become a whipping boy for the early generation of postmodern writers. Pynchon, in his introduction to Slow Learner, writes, “one year of those times [the ‘50s] was much like the other. One of the most pernicious effects of the ‘50s was to convince the people growing up during them that it would last forever” (14). Rather than actually carrying out its Pynchonian heat-death, the American Dream instead shifted forms. So now we can see that one man’s entropy can become another man’s birth of energy. For decades critics have said that the American Dream has become materialistic, plastic, fake, and, therefore, dead. This attitude is inherently connected with the philosophical modernist’s tendency to simplify or to reduce the subject’s terms, particularly in dealing with language and communication, to either restore or negate
its meaning, rather than play with the rhetoric and allow for new meanings. Nietzsche, for example, although announcing the death of god, actually sought for a positing of the idea of god into the realm of human responsibility—thereby upholding the original concept while joining it with traditional human values. Kitsch offers possibilities for language games and ironic sensibility, and it allows for the failure of the dream to be seen as humorous and jocular rather than tragic. But to what end?

Jean-Francois Lyotard, in speaking of postmodernity and the narrative of communication, writes, "It may even be said that the system can and must encourage such movement [self-adjustment] to the extent that it combats its own entropy" (Condition 15). The narrative of the American, as I maintain throughout the essay, is involved in the very same battle. Its readjustments are linguistic by nature and are contingent on the context in which it exists. And this context, the context of postmodernism, does not even allow for the American Dream to be a closed system where entropy could occur. Kitsch is the catalyst and saving power that breaks open the narrative. More to the point, the affirmation of kitsch as a sincerely viable concept operates as the saving power by a repositing of it in the equation as a trembling substance. When a notion such as kitsch is brought into the sphere of academic, cultural criticism, one must be ready to reevaluate the traditionally understood ideas that now surround it. But the sincerity of the treatment of kitsch has come into question in the past decade of fiction. The notion has arisen in recent fiction and criticism that the kitsch era has done little more than offer a deadening and distrustful cynicism. Kitsch has been said to represent "vicarious experience and faked sensations" (Greenberg 224). By the '90s, critic Barbara Kirshenblatt-
Gimblett writes that kitsch is understood, at least by some, as “all effect, all surface, depthless” (278). The continuation of such an outright negative connotation of the word not only causes reason for a second look at the word itself, but this treatment also, hopefully, provokes one to reevaluate how kitsch as a concept is subsequently treated. Unwillingness to look at kitsch from a different angle has created, to a large extent, the problem of unchecked skepticism that has been afforded to the small, yet significant, world of art that chooses to embrace kitsch. I intend to offer a solution that has been right in front of us all along; that kitsch offers—on the contrary—the restoration of creative spirit in the play of the American Dream.

Chapter one begins with a short introduction to Nietzsche’s treatment of myth via Greek tragedy and the myth of 19th-century Europe. I use Nietzsche for several reasons. First, the Apollo/Dionysus opposition provides a polarity apropos the current of cultural critique found in today’s and yesterday’s writers. Second, I clarify a few misassumptions about Nietzsche’s work that would obstruct what I see to be a direct link to postmodern thought. Third, Nietzsche gives us the concept of the eternal return, which is central to Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), a book that I use consistently in this essay. The end of chapter one, now with Nietzsche’s concept of the dynamics of myth in hand, offers a brief look at American Dream writers from Whitman to Henry Miller, laying a foundation for the major criticisms of the Dream.

Chapter two is an extensive definition of kitsch primarily coming from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Kitsch is almost unanimously described as something phony and imitative, thereby opposing it to the troublesome concept of
originality. This discussion is where I claim Kundera sets up the Apollo/Dionysus-like opposition between light and weight, and kitsch and shit. Although kitsch’s longstanding polarity to originality has its merits and imparts a great deal of meaning, I find the opposition of kitsch to shit, rather than kitsch to originality, more stimulating and accurate to the contemporary age.

The third chapter is a synthesis of three French philosophers who are not often regarded as compatible. I briefly discuss Derrida and the theory behind deconstructionism, Baudrillard and the simulacrum so prevalent in America, and Lyotard in terms of his language games. These three, who are cultural critics as well as philosophers, lay the foundation for future philosophical/cultural analysis, and their work helps to describe the climate for the fiction writers in chapter four.

I focus on Arnold Schwarzenegger and two contemporary fiction writers in the fourth chapter: Mark Leyner and David Foster Wallace. Each of the two has recognized the pessimism and cynicism present in fiction of the past decades, and each works to resolve it in his own respective way. Both write particularly American fiction that is, in an unspoken yet obvious way connected to the American Dream and the way it is influenced by popular culture.

Embarking on a theoretical analysis of the American Dream, personal examples of capitalistic, Alger-like successes are of no consequence. Rather, this essay is an excursus with the intent of looking at how the American Dream exists today in fiction and the American psyche and how it has adapted or faded, given the changing fiber of thought over the past several decades. The American Dream is—and has always been—a symbol for hope that relies heavily on the ideas that surround
it. The fusion of quite different genres and disciplines is simply an attempt at arranging ideas in a way that properly expresses my own perception of the status of the American Dream as it appears to me.
Chapter 1—The Madman, the Czech, and the Americans

“They can go to hell. I’m going to Texas.”
—Davy Crockett, shortly before going to the Alamo (Eyewitness xxxi).

The American Dream, as unique as it is, sounds, looks, and smells like a myth, and is therefore subject to a comparative analysis with other myths. At some point during its existence, the Dream’s dynamic has appeared to have broken down and caused some to announce its death and even eulogize it. Its ailment seems to have arisen when what the Dream promised was exposed as fraudulent. In other words, the American Dream became effectively unbalanced when the kitschy side outweighed the “real” side. To better understand this approach to myth development, I utilize Nietzsche’s treatment of ancient Greek myth through the model of the Apollo and Dionysus opposition.

Going back to Nietzsche always gives me a pleasure unparalleled by a revisitation of any other writer. Each time, he introduces me to a new idea, rubric of thought, or, at the very least, a stiff middle finger for not living up to his expectations for the generations to follow. For what he despised about his culture and native land is essentially the same disregard for religion and myth I’d expect him to loathe about culture in contemporary America. Contrary to his reputation, Nietzsche was an amicable gentleman, a stringent scholar who was not daunted by classical academic tedium, and a human who, via his philological studies, recognized the need for myth/religion. His fictional madman’s proclamation that “God is dead” was,
ironically, as far from nihilism as a philosopher could be. His diagnosis of 19th-century Europe was that its Christian god was problematic in that it no longer served its original purpose of affirming life. He wanted a new god and a new myth to replace the decaying one, similar to Paul’s conception of a new covenant.

The Birth of Tragedy performs a similar function as far as the processes of myth creation and re-creation go. It is possible, yet slightly irresponsible, to write about this Nietzschean strategy without bringing in the Apollo/Dionysus dialectic. To do so, however, we must delve into The Birth of Tragedy. In Birth, the philosopher makes his boldest move against traditional philology. He delineates the life of Greek tragedy and, in doing so, he ultimately puts Euripides and Socrates on trial for offsetting the delicate Apollo/Dionysus balance vital to the dynamic of the art of tragedy. Tragedy, according to Nietzsche, was born out of a Dionysian festival. The participants in these festivals were orgiastically transformed into the artist/creator by defying what he calls the Apollinian “principium individuationis” [principle of individuation]. They fight individuation by becoming the throng and letting Dionysus erase the conscious mind in favor of the more instinctual, unconscious mind. Soon after, characters separated from the throng to become the principal actors. The throng became the chorus (part of which then split off into the audience)—and it was like this that tragedy appeared in the history of Greece. I stress “appeared,” because the Apollinian function of presentation of the Dionysian is what allowed for tragedy’s existence. What Nietzsche criticizes of Euripides is his transparency of meaning and plot, representing what he calls “Greek cheerfulness,” and for making the chorus and
audience conscious spectators capable of making judgments, rather than participants involved in an experience of art.

In an introduction to *The Birth of Tragedy*, Walter Kaufmann writes,

Far from depreciating what he called ‘the Apollinian,’ he argued that one could not appreciate [tragedy] sufficiently until one became aware of the other side of Greek culture that was barbarous by comparison and found expression in the Dionysian festivals. (9-10)

In this passage, Kaufmann, the foremost Nietzsche scholar and translator of the mid-20th-century, is responding to a popular misinterpretation that says Nietzsche favored the Dionysian element over the Apollinian. Kaufmann’s point is crucial in understanding that Nietzsche did not demonize Euripides and Socrates for being too Apollinian, but instead, for taking the Dionysian out of the equation. Nietzsche writes of Euripides, “Though, with greedy hands you plundered all the gardens of music, you still managed only copied, masked music. And because you abandoned Dionysus, Apollo abandoned you” (Birth 75). Nietzsche proffers the idea that culture, and here tragedy, operates on a dynamic of harmoniously poised opposites, and neither of the poles can be taken out or ignored without the system of signs effectively shutting down.

Most critics justifiably deem Nietzsche’s criticism of Euripides as unfair. And many would say the same about his treatment of Socrates, too. As Kaufmann points out, however, Nietzsche treats Socrates as a god in *The Birth*, and holds him to far higher standards than anyone else. In defense of his translatee, Kaufmann claims that what Nietzsche dislikes of Socrates is his “optimistic faith that knowledge and virtue
and happiness are, as it were, Siamese triplets (12).” These qualities, along with a penchant for considering the ethereal and metaphysical generally superior to the earthly and particular, are what Nietzsche finds harmfully over-dominant in late Greek art.

Nietzsche admired the early epic poetry of Homer, the lyric poetry of Archilochus (as Nietzsche claims that the Dionysian musical spirit is channeled, albeit insufficiently, through lyric poetry), and the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Each of them, with the exception of perhaps Homer, embraced either the darker, barbarous side of Greek culture, or, in the case of Archilochus, “the spirit of music,”¹ which began with the Dionysian dithyrambic song. In all of these cases, the Dionysian substratum was represented by language, and, hence, the Apollinian was harmoniously united with the Dionysian.

Milan Kundera begins his most famous novel The Unbearable Lightness of Being by introducing Nietzsche’s concept of the eternal return. The German explains this idea most clearly in a parable from Thus Spoke Zarathustra entitled “On the Vision and the Riddle.” In it, Zarathustra confronts the weight of existence when he sees the “gateway of the moment” in a path through the wooded mountains. A dwarf, who had previously been on his shoulder, jumps off and explains to Zarathustra that the path goes on in both directions, backwards and forwards, but in a circle. Everything that has happened before will happen again, and vice versa. When Zarathustra imbibes this gravitous spirit, he remembers that the current scene had happened before. He then notices that the dwarf has disappeared and a man is lying just off the path. The unconscious man wakes as a snake hangs from his mouth. The

¹ The subtitle of The Birth of Tragedy is actually Out of the Spirit of Music.
man panics and Zarathustra advises him not just to pull out the snake—which here is a symbol of circular time, like the path, and is something to overcome—but to bite its head off. In this way the weight of time and “the eternal return” is overcome.

Kundera uses the eternal return to set the tone for the rest of the novel by considering the parable either to stress its burden or to highlight the notion that nothing will actually return; all events are transitory and cannot be judged retrospectively on moral grounds. Kundera brings in his own experience of reading a book about Hitler and being reminded of his childhood in the Nazi era. He then writes how the concentration camp deaths of some of his family members were small in comparison to the lost memories—or rather the lost presence that those memories represented. He writes,

This reconciliation with Hitler reveals the profound moral perversity of a world that rests essentially on the nonexistence of return, for in this world everything is pardoned in advance and therefore cynically permitted. (4)

The lightness granted by this view, juxtaposed with the heaviness portended by the idea that every instance does return and every choice is crucial, becomes the dynamic he plays with for the rest of the novel.

With this contrast in mind, we can give Kundera’s notion of kitsch a more detailed explanation, though the lightness/weight dichotomy has value in its own right. Nietzsche’s work, however, focuses on tragedy and its unique capability of allowing human participation in its art. In reference to the early stages of tragedy, he writes,
Similarly, I believe, the Greek man of culture felt himself nullified in the presence of the satiric chorus; and this is the most immediate effect of the Dionysian tragedy, that the state and society and, quite generally, the gulfs between man and man give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity leading back to the very heart of nature. [...] With this chorus the profound Hellene, uniquely susceptible to the tenderest and deepest suffering, comforts himself, having looked boldly right into the terrible destructiveness of so-called world history as well as the cruelty of nature, and being in danger of longing for a Buddhistic negation of the will. Art saves him, and through art—life.

(Birth 59)

This conception of art which Nietzsche employs, and which quietly lies at the heart of the essay, is translated into his other works as well. Yet it wears a slightly different mask each time. Art and life are inherently intertwined for Nietzsche. Sometimes they are one in the same, and sometimes he treats them rather separately. Art, however, must always involve an inclusion of both the earthly and the ethereal. What often seems to be an overt demonization of Socrates in The Birth is actually an aggressive appeal for what he calls an “artistic Socrates” (92). The artistic Socrates is one who takes the Apollinian/Socratic esteem for making knowledge a virtue, for the yearning to make everything intelligible, the resolution to maintain an intelligent, critical eye, and combining these traits with the unconscious, creative impulses of Archilochus, Sophocles, and Aeschylus. He wants a thinker who can tap into the viscerality of life.

2 See his discussion of the artist in The Gay Science, particularly sections 76, 85, 87.
We can hear Nietzsche’s call for the same type of artist in *The Gay Science*, and, in particular, the popular parable of the madman. The madman is the critical observer of late 19th-century Europe *and* the one who has ingested the horror of godlessness. In this parable, the madman runs to the marketplace asking what has happened to god. The townspeople assume he is insane and laugh at the ired man, who answers his own question by saying,

I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I [...] Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. (181)

The madman goes on to ask what should be done now that god has been killed. He speaks with a tone of guilt not unlike that which Nietzsche imposes on Socrates and Euripides for their roles in the death of tragedy. Nietzsche does not want the same disinterestedness of classicism and neo-classicism to continue to lead his culture into a similar pall as that he charges had happened to Greek tragedy.

A careful reading of the sections before and after “The Madman” leads the reader to see that Nietzsche demands a unique respect for nature. An organic, involved treatment of nature is the first step in making a science gay, and a new god a lasting and adequate myth. Tragedies and gods are both myths in Nietzsche’s eyes, but they are myths that once served the genuine purpose of life affirmation. With

---

3 *The Gay Science* (originally *Die Froehliche Wissenschaft: la gaya scienza*) is a loaded title. See the translator’s introduction by Kaufmann for a detailed explication of its possibilities. For our purposes, I will stop at drawing a parallel between the artistic Socrates and a science which Nietzsche says needs an element of lightheartedness.
Euripides and Socrates, and with 19th-century Christianity, this purpose was stripped away, with only the structures and shadows remaining. The madman asks his townspeople, "'What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?'" (182). And Nietzsche asks the tragedian, "What did you want, sacrilegious Euripides, when you sought to compel this dying myth to serve you once more?" (75). The myth is a constructive tool that is destined eventually to fall away or lose its purpose.

Is the American Dream a dying myth? Is it a dead myth? My answer to the latter is certainly "no." Will someone come screaming to downtown Manhattan proclaiming the death of the American Dream? Yes, perhaps. But not me, not here. There is a bumper sticker which I've only recently come to appreciate that reads: Nietzsche is Dead - God. To me this means the myth has the last laugh. I can't possibly conjecture if god, tragedy, or the American Dream are life affirming, but, as the bumper sticker suggests, the myth affirms not life, but itself. And for that matter, the bumper sticker is wrong in saying Nietzsche is dead. His myth still lives on; from those who never read his works (or read them out of context) and still believe he was a proto-Nazi, to rumors (that I once heard in an undergraduate philosophy course) that a man once found him naked, rambling drunk on the street, and asked him what he thought of Sir Berkeley's skepticist philosophy, to which Nietzsche answered, "Throw a brick at his head. He'll duck." However inaccurate and separate from "the real thing" the surviving myth may be, the myth lives on. Although debunking the myth of Nietzsche would be much easier than correcting the other myths. He was
tangible and lived a life in history as fact. The myths of the American Dream, tragedy and god, however, can only be guessed upon as to what they were, originally.

Our primary concern here is what they mean to our present culture. Tragedies—including those of Euripides—are still taught and performed all throughout the Western world’s high schools and colleges. One needs only to drive through downtown Memphis, or across Missouri’s stretch of I-44 to see billboards proving that god is still around in at least some weird form. The two that I remember best read Don’t make me come down there. –God and the presumptive Contrary to popular belief, my last name isn’t damn –God. Only in America. Ironically, god not only exists, but has also made enough capital to pay rent for these billboards. Their tone rings more like Gloria Gaynor’s “I’m Still Alive” or Elton John’s “I’m Still Standing” than god of either Biblical testament, which leads one to believe that god has successfully adapted to modern times. And for that matter, so has the American Dream.

The birth of the American Dream wasn’t meant to affirm life per se. It was born of a desire for riches. And as it developed, it has excluded and included along geographical, not cultural, lines. It has always been a symbol for human progress—as can best be seen with Walt Whitman’s poetic glorification of westward expansion. The editor of Eyewitness to America finds five trends that have characterized Americans from the beginning. One of them is “Americans get angry and then move west” (xxxi). Americans found the need to go west long before and long after Whitman, but perhaps no one believed so radically in westward expansion as divine mandate than him.
Ginsburg called Whitman “a mountain of a poet,” and, in a very true sense, he is a mountain of the American Dream. What Franklin was to the cultural and political side of the American Dream, and what Alger is to the formation of the American Dream via cheesy novels, Whitman is to the poetic American Dream. I use the phrase “poetic American Dream” as the vision of the American Dream expressed in poetry and in the way William Carlos Williams means when he says, “In a word and at the beginning [Leaves of Grass] enunciated a shocking truth, that the common ground is of itself a poetic source” (“Essay” 903). This insight distinguishes Whitman from Franklin and Alger because Whitman strove for a metaphysical plane. He wanted to BE America—through its parts, its individuals. Whitman wanted his poetry and himself to encompass the idea of America and to become the American Dream. Not even his critics can deny his monumentality. Williams criticizes him on the basis of a lack of mechanical roteness, but nevertheless can’t deny the huge impact he made on poetry, including on Williams’ poetry itself. Kenneth Rexroth writes that “[Whitman’s vision] is the best and greatest vision of the American potential” (“Walt Whitman” 977). The literary American Dream par excellence is found in Leaves of Grass. Among many other things, Leaves of Grass is a collection of celebrations of two things: what humanity is, and what humanity portends. Whitman’s description of what humanity is escapes the transparent jingoism at work and unfolds as a pantheistic, pansexual, and aesthetic worship of life itself. The second part is colored by scenes of working class men whose seeming function is a contribution to progress—and therefore an unparalleled display of patriotism and hope.
Henry Miller, writing less than a century after Whitman, paints a portrait of an America that has realized its Whitmanian dream; a dream of a land which has subsequently and effectively failed to be a country where creation can be anything other than quantified. Miller was an expatriate in France for ten years before he came back to tour his home country to write *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, to which I am referring. Upon his initial return he writes,

> When I came up on deck to catch my first glimpse of the shore line I was immediately disappointed. Not only disappointed, I might say, but actually saddened. The American coast looked bleak and uninviting to me. [...] It was home, with all the ugly, evil, sinister connotations which the word contains for a restless soul. There was a frigid, moral aspect to it which chilled me to the bone. (11)

His words are a forewarning to his impressions of the rest of America as well, particularly by his descriptions of "frigid" and "moral." The American Dream for Miller is thus something that could have been but wasn’t to be. By being new, it had all the potential in the world and was, in so many ways, a symbol of the world’s potential. Yet as Miller writes, "A new world is not made simply by trying to forget the old" (17). In Whitman’s time and interpretation the new world revolved around this notion of creating out of a simple equation: a novel land plus a novel set of ideals times the (almost colonialist) will to tame and to civilize the continent. This vision of manifest destiny was no doubt romanticized excessively, and it only found temperance when Whitman witnessed the Civil War. He glorified democracy beyond all else, and he was not ignorant to its American partner of capitalism. With an
unchecked zeal, however, he became perhaps too single-minded about progress when viewed retrospectively in terms of its socio-political consequences.

At some point between *Leaves of Grass* and the World War II era of Miller, the handsome railroad workers sewing drops of sweat in the ties and the diligent mothers, gleefully pregnant, spawned sentinels of greed to be found in Miller’s lugubrious Boston. Or, as Pogues leader Shane McGowan sings, “Thousands are sailing/ Across the western ocean/ Where the hand of opportunity/ Draws tickets from a lottery” (*Essential*). This picture of America echoes one of Franklin’s not-so-lighthearted bagatelles in the form of a facsimile of a letter which he sent en masse to eager Europeans, warning them of America’s potential cruelty to newcomers and sub-par wages for unskilled labor.

It is imagined by numbers that the inhabitants of North-America are rich […] that the governments too, to encourage emigration from Europe, not only pay the expense of personal transportation, but give lands gratis to strangers, with negroes to work for them […] these are all wild imaginations; and those who go to America founded upon them, will surely find themselves disappointed. (*Bagatelles* 131-132)

Just as an anachronistic assessment of Whitman’s myopic (yet colorfully accurate) view of his America is unfair, however, so too is Miller’s antithetical portent of doom. Yet it is a necessary crime if one wishes to track the fluctuating repercussions and reactions to a capitalistic democracy—what Whitman and Miller respectively inscribe as the birth and death of the American Dream. Sixty years have
passed since Miller’s infamous tour of the country, and the American Dream has never been more dead or more alive than at its present moment.

The rules have changed, however, as I mentioned above, and we must seek to escape former rubrics of assessment. We can read *Leaves of Grass* and still fill ourselves with his glorious, celebratory images, but then we walk three miles down Oakland’s McArthur Boulevard or witness nearly identical cases of Muriel Rukeyser’s “Book of the Dead” and wonder to ourselves if it will explode. We can read *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* and make Miller’s sharp and ruthless criticality our own, ex-communicate ourselves to Europe and laugh westwardly, but we remain haunted by a twinkly-eyed Arnold Schwarzenegger saying that,

I’m trying to make people in America appreciate what they have here.

You have the best tax advantages here and the best prices here and the best products here...I am a strong believer in Western philosophy, the philosophy of success, of progress, of getting rich. *(Lost 141-2)*

An entire nation of other such contradictions exists, and we have to find a method of interpretation that gives justice to the dark and the light without a reduction to mere dichotomy. How can one live an entire lifetime without at one point thanking, and, at another, brushing one’s chin, at the American Dream?
Chapter 2—Kitsch

And it saw you not, it never saw you, for what you saw was
Not there, what you saw was Laugh-in, and all
America was laughing, that America brought
You in, brought America in, all that out there
Brought in, all that nowhere nothing in, no
Wonder you were lonesome, died empty and
Sad and lonely, you the real face and voice...
Caught before the fake voice—and it
Became real and you fake,
O the awful fragility of things

—Gregory Corso
From “Elegiac Feelings American:
For the dear memory of Jack Kerouac”

“The awful fragility of things,” according to the section of Corso’s poem above, is probably what eventually drove Kerouac to his suicide. Split between a world of artistic bohemianism and ephemeral fame, Kerouac could no longer chase the American Dream from coast to coast with an integrated conscience. His inner grappling with this polarity reached the boiling point when, on a talk show seated between William F. Buckley and a politically outspoken hippie, Kerouac silenced everyone when he blurted out “Flat faced floogie on the foy floy” (What). The hippie looked confused; Buckley appeared annoyed. Allen Ginsburg sat in the audience silently pensive. No one, most likely including Kerouac himself, could make any more sense of this than that he simply blew a fuse. Either way, Kerouac couldn’t look into the camera and answer questions of politics and poetry with any more
sincerity than he displayed that night. Kundera’s heroes, also keen to the oppressive force of kitsch, respond with similar trepidation, albeit with slightly more articulation.

“The reason I like you,” she would say to him, “is you’re the opposite of kitsch. In the kingdom of kitsch, you would be a monster” (12). So go the first spoken words of Sabina, Tomas’ clandestine lover in the Unbearable Lightness of Being. She is a painter and Tomas a surgeon. Against the backdrop of communist kitsch—the May Day parade where Czech citizens “feign[ed] enthusiasm” under the “idiotic tautology” of a slogan (“long live life”), and where Eastern bloc beauty, i.e. brown cubic buildings in the place of medieval castles, were actually passed off for being proletarianly beautiful by the communists—Tomas, the surgeon, who was all too familiar with the human body and the corporeality of a society under communist rule, saw past kitsch and loathed it. Such an outlook was Thomas’ burden as well as his quotient for lightness. We can say the same about the two adages Tomas repeatedly conjures, which are also two main themes of the story. The first is “einmal ist keinmal,” or “if it only happens once, it may as well not have happened at all.”

Back to the eternal return. The second adage comes from Beethoven’s last quartet. “Es muss sein” translates as “it must be,” which serves as a bridge between the eternal return and Tomas’ fatalistic attitude toward his loves and his life. Like Zarathustra, he overcomes this weight in order to reach the lightness on the next mountain peak.

Tomas is also unable to let the myth of Oedipus escape his mind. “Es muss sein,” he thinks when his future wife Tereza comes to him, as if in the bulrush basket where Polybus finds Oedipus. And for Kundera, having chosen to rewrite the famous myth of Sophocles, the heroine Tereza may not have been born without “einmal ist
“keinmal” returning in his head. The author extends the Sophoclean metaphor to an anti-communist manifesto that Tomas writes, which, by refusing to retract it, costs him his position at the hospital. In the manifesto, Tomas likens the Czech communist party, bedfellow of Mother USSR, to Oedipus, and criticizes them for their lack of guilt, or their refusal to poke out their own eyes in order to see beyond illusion. Instead, they maintain their smiles, reassuring the populace that political kitsch is a good and beautiful thing.

Kundera, however, doesn’t limit his political interpretations of kitsch to Czechoslovakia. Later in Sabina’s life we see her in America riding in a car with a senator and his four kids. As the kids run off to play, the senator watches them and experiences a moment where he sheds two tears.

The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass!
The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch. The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch. (251)

How the word has changed in the past century, yet remained essentially the same. It even ends where it began: it climaxes in its origin. That Sabina is in America for this scene is significant. While the crying man is a senator, his kitschy display is a personal one, and, in its contrast to the political kitsch of Eastern Europe, it is meant to highlight that American kitsch starts at the grassroots, with the people. According to Kluge’s *Etymologisches Woerterbuch*, kitsch comes from the Munich art circles of the 1870s. When English and American art dealers came asking for a painting but
didn’t want to invest large amounts of money, they’d ask for a “sketch.” Not long after, and only through misunderstanding, the word morphed into “kitsch.” *Kitsch’s* debut in English, according to the OED online, came in 1926 from Brian Howard with the phrase “a healthy week…riding, chasing dogs, listening to ‘Kitsch’ on his radio” (*OED-Online*). By 1939, it had already inherited its full meaning and its notoriously negative connotation. “Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is a vicarious experience and faked sensations [the second tear]. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times” (Greenberg 224). Perhaps in 1939 kitsch was a heavier bane to humanity than was previously thought. Kundera feels the same way, however, about kitsch in the WWII era.

He forecasts Sabina’s hatred of the May Day parade with a discourse on shit and Stalin’s son Yakov. Apparently when he was a prisoner of a German camp along with British officers, Yakov consistently left a mess in the toilets. The British were offended, Yakov became offended, and the German commander, who Yakov asked to arbitrate the dispute, was so offended that he refused to hear the case. In embarrassment, Yakov jumped into the electric fence in a strange act of suicide. These circumstance led to Yakov Stalin becoming a war hero in Kundera’s eyes.

Stalin’s son had laid down his life for shit. But a death for shit is not a senseless death. The Germans who sacrificed their lives to expand their country’s territory to the east, the Russians who died to extend their country’s power to the west—yes, they died for something idiotic, and their deaths have no meaning or general validity. Amid
the general idiocy of war, the death of Stalin’s son stands out as the sole metaphysical death. (245)

Of course, Kundera’s entire argument is one of kitsch, Europe’s collective sense of Biblical faith, and the need to deny shit its rights as a valid element of existence. Kitsch, for Kundera, is “the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and figurative senses of the word” (248).

Sabina also despises everything about kitsch. She prefers shit and the genuine. She prefers viscerality over anything that reminds her of false politics and empty rhetoric. We can see this when she envisions Tomas setting her down on the toilet to watch her defecate. This fantasy excites her to the point of letting out an orgasmic cry and pulling Tomas (who was also present outside of the fantasy) down on top of her. Yet despite her attachment to the earthly and bodily, she predominantly represents lightness in the novel. When a lover is willing to leave his wife and kids for her, she leaves. She instinctually uproots herself and moves to Zurich when the Soviets tighten their grip on Prague. She later emigrates to the States and eventually makes it all the way west to California. Sabina is really not entirely dissimilar from Joseph Campbell’s configuration of the hero. Like Zarathustra, like Jesus and Luke Skywalker, she ventures down into the belly of the whale to confront the nausea of human existence. Only after this descent into the ordeal, or rather during this, is she able to leap from mountaintop to mountaintop in lightness.

The majority of the kitsch experienced by the characters in The Unbearable Lightness of Being is political. Political kitsch, though, is the uncle of the type of
kitsch we experience in America—capitalistic popular kitsch. In the face of the vast majority of American Dream literature, however, and partially in concert with Kundera, I find that kitsch is not, and should not be, a moral issue. It is rather an aesthetic one.

Only in the past few decades has literature been able to escape from the morality that runs parallel with the theme of the American Dream. Although the morality takes shape in differing ways, it is almost always there. The first page of The Great Gatsby begins with characteristic moralism a la Alger, “In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I’ve been turning over in my head ever since,” but by the end, or at least by Gatsby’s funeral, the novel unfolds as being moral only in the grander social, rather than interpersonal, sense. The reader can’t help but cancel out Gatsby’s ethical shortcomings with pity for him. The American Dream was all he really wanted in the first place. But when he found it, the Dream revealed its kitschy core—the shimmering veneer enveloping the void that lies in the cockles of high society’s glamour.

By the end of the novel, Fitzgerald likens Gatsby to the earlier settlers who shared the same Algeresque dream of rags-to-riches success. By doing this he makes the same move as did Bob Dylan’s then-shocking “Only a Pawn in Their Game” thirty-eight years later, by placing the blame on society rather than the responsible individual. Unlike the subject of Dylan’s song, we want to feel sorry for Jay Gatsby because he only wanted what all of us want in a sense, and we are allowed to do so because Fitzgerald is saying that the real problem lies in the system that fosters and almost demands that average citizens spend their lives making money.
Chapter 3—Baudrillard and Loathing in Vegas

"Presley indicated that he had been playing Las Vegas and the President indicated that he was aware of how difficult it is to perform in Las Vegas."
—From the files of the President Nixon on Dec. 21, 1971 when Elvis Presley met Nixon at the White House.

Throughout the process of writing this essay, I have had a single image in my head that, whenever necessary, I can return to in order to keep the original perspective that had, and still has, me wiggy in excitement. That image is of Jean-Francois Lyotard’s smile as described by Derrida in Work of Mourning.

A vigilant, uncompromising “discussion,” an amused provocation, always punctuated it seemed, by a smile, a smile at once tender and mocking, an irony committed to disarming itself in the name of what we did not know how to name but that today I would call “all-out friendship” [amitie-a-tout-rompre]. (214)

Perhaps this has become such an important symbol because in the course of my defense of kitsch, internally and in conversations with friends, I would become sickened with what I was defending.

During one sweltering October day in Las Vegas, I sat reclined, poolside at the Bellagio with a book and a friend with a book. It was supposed to be perfect.
Two shirtless academics surrounded by America at its wartime best—a waist-deep pool, fruity cocktails and beautifully wealthy people. Even the beautiful barmaid must have been wealthy by our standards. I read Baudrillard's *America* while my friend read a Bret Easton Ellis novel. And the prospect of a jackpot was only a stone's throw away in the casino.

“This is so fake. I can't read here,” he would say. I couldn't either; not for the life of me. The feeling was awful. Las Vegas, which in Spanish means “the verdant fields,” would have nothing to do with us. And this “terrain” is what I was defending.

The question of how the postmodern subject adapts to an increasingly postmodern America has been problematic throughout my research. But my instincts forced me to maintain my thesis—there is something deeply right in kitsch, especially now. I thought of Lyotard's smile and thought about the friendship Derrida mentioned. That “all-out friendship” is precisely what the disseminated subject must have with our culture. The alienation and disgruntledness so prolifically discussed in contemporary dialogue comes not directly from technology or capitalism or the intolerable/lovable kitsch of pop culture. Instead, this estrangement comes from an inability to befriend our culture and all of its cheap quirks. Listening to the radio, watching prime time TV, or the news—receiving the media—one cannot be asked to court, or even to admire it on an even level. If the subject maintains his identity, however, and engages culture, engages it with this “tender and mocking smile”—only then can the subject transform into the archetypal hero, descend into the kitsch in order to transcend it, find the American Dream that has for so long seemed out of
reach or out of touch because of its obfuscated nature. If this sounds like a game, it is. And it is uncannily close to Lyotard’s concept of language games.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard writes of the new necessity first to learn the rules of the game at work in a given situation. Part of living in the postmodern condition is coming to terms with the volume of different games being played in systems of communication. The Habermasian dream of an undistorted communication in one, gameless language is a dangerous farce. This Habermasian model must be held in immediate suspicion by any poststructuralist. A goal of undistorted communication is for several reasons against the grain of contemporary culture. First, it is metaphysical in that it has one center or referent—or one signified, which doesn’t need to signify any other signifiers. Clean communication in itself holds the meaning. This concept is also a distinctly non-American one insofar as it attempts to level difference. That very leveling is Lyotard’s main problem with it. In leveling differences (in this case the multiplicity of language games), Habermas denies rather than incorporates (as Lyotard strives to do) them. Thus, the central difference between the two theories is not one of diagnosis but of remedy. Both address a sick culture where meaning is lost and distorted due to technology, science, and the melding of cultures, along with the consequent “death” of myth and religion. And coming from the Frankfurterschule as a Neo-Marxian, it is understandable why Habermas treats this issue as a class problem: by trying to democratize the subjects and distribute the commodity equally. But it is for obvious reasons why the French post-structuralist line of thinking, Lyotard’s in specific, is more helpful and applicable to our purposes. To treat any ilk of American studies fairly, we must allow
sufficient space for the Lyotardian and Derridean stress on differences—the spaces between any kinds of signifiers, and at the very least the willingness to acknowledge the different rules at play in different language games and models thereof.

Just as the Apollo/Dionysus opposition is only useful in a transient state—that is, to treat a particular sickness as it arises—we must also learn, as the French thinkers mentioned above would suggest, to go beyond viewing Americanism through the simple dichotomy of kitsch versus substance. The advent of the age of kitsch, contrary to Kundera’s suggestion, does not signal the decadent destruction of culture. And for that matter, there does not exist the metanarrative of meta-kitsch. Kitsch can be seen in the economic, political, interpersonal models, and, in each appearance, it takes on a slightly different shape. But in each of these forms, kitsch does not signify a death because of a starvation of deep substance. Instead, it begs to be understood. It begs to be engaged with on an individual level. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in her book Destination Culture, writes that “to the extent that kitsch is understood as all effect, all surface, depthless, it is the aesthetics par excellence of postmodernism”(278). Granted that her definition of kitsch is contingent on personal understanding, this quote does an injustice to postmodernism and, in turn, to kitsch. I will explain how this happens through a Derridean model, then through Baudrillard, and then show how Lyotard brings them together.

Perhaps the greatest misunderstanding of philosophical postmodernism, the kind in question now, is slippage between what is postmodern and what is nihilistic. To believe that the two ideas can even be compatible is to believe that postmodernism is qualitatively separate from modernism, a notion refuted on many occasions by
Derrida and Lyotard. Modernism contains meaning, postmodernism lacks meaning: such is the misassumption. Derrida’s deconstruction faction of postmodernism has received parallel criticism from his opponents who rename it “destructionism.” In a video interview at Oxford, Derrida responds to such criticism directly by saying, “When you deconstruct anything, you simply do not destroy or dissolve or cancel the legitimacy of what you’re deconstructing…deconstruction is mainly affirmation…a constant reference to the ‘yes’” (Jacques Derrida Vid.). What Derrida stresses is creation in the hope that deconstruction will result in a greater proliferation of meaning.

Deconstruction in particular relies heavily on the poststructuralist adaptation of Saussurean linguistics. Rather than referring to language as a book (closed system), Derrida speaks of it as a “text,” constantly referencing itself and the world outside of itself (Of Grammatology 48). With the model of the text, there never exists what he calls a transcendental signified—that unifying concept, such as god in many medieval philosophies, which by being the central referent eventually commands all other signifiers to reference it. With the model of the text, most explicitly represented by a dictionary, we only have signs signifying other signs (or words defining other words) without there ever existing one permanent, central referent, or a singular unifying referent such as god. Without this transcendental signified, however, an extraordinary amount of meaning still occurs. This task is crucial to Derrida’s mission—the decentering of the central referent, or transcendental signifier. If he can show how a text or philosophy lends itself to an
alternative interpretation where something else can play in the center, then the
previous signified is decentered and the possibilities for new meanings have begun.

The Saussurean linguistic model differentiates metaphor and metonymy on an axis. Metonymy, or time, is represented by substitution on the diachronic line, or x-axis. Metaphor, where traditional, essentialist meaning occurs, is on the synchronic line, or y-axis, which is always moving, shifting, and allowing for new meaning (Of Grammatology 50).

From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs.

We think only in signs. Which amounts to ruining the notion of the sign at the very moment when, as in Nietzsche, it exigency is recognized in the absoluteness of its right. One could call play the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play, that is to say as the destruction of ontotheology and the metaphysics of presence. (Of Grammatology 50).

With this notion that there are only really signs, many closet modernists suffer from a nostalgia for a fixed transcendental signified and then swiftly excuse the postmodern emphasis on the play between signs as nihility. Derrida refutes this common simplification with his own by saying:

The very meaning and mission of deconstruction is to show that things—texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices of whatever size and sort you need—do not have definable meanings and determinable missions, that they are always more than any mission would impose, that they exceed the boundaries they currently occupy.
What is really going on in things, what is really happening, is always to come. Every time you try to stabilize the meaning of a thing, to fix it in its missionary position, the thing itself, if there is anything at all to it, slips away. (Nutshell 31)

Skeptical supporters suggest to Derrida that his method be renamed “reconstruction” because of its affirmative quality or intent. To this he says to go ahead and name it what you want to, though he himself will remain loyal to “deconstruction” because, although it does refer to the “yes,” the process of decentering, or cracking the nutshell open is so vital. And what we are left with after this process are several different possibilities for meaning replacing the old, singular, and unified meaning. These diasporatic splinters don’t necessarily afford immediate meaning because they are no longer definable by their proximity to the original transcendental signifier. Their meanings are now to be found in relation to a web of signifiers as well as in the path one must take to trace them. These splinters and the inability to contain and to sustain meaning are what are so easily written off as meaningless, and what leads deconstruction to be viewed as destructive.

Nevertheless, meaning is present. But from the modernist’s eye, from the perspective of one looking immediately for the closed system with a definable referent, one can certainly look at deconstruction aesthetically, and one can see kitsch as it is suggested by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett above as, “all effect, all surface, depthless” (278).

Baudrillard introduces us to a similar interpretation of the age of postmodernity but with sturdier applications to culture. He combines the previously distinguishable concepts of the real and the imaginary—or simulations of the real—
into what he calls hyperreality. In *Simulations*, he takes as an allegory a Borges story where cartographers draw a map of their empire so detailed that it covers the entirety of the land. Age eventually causes the map to deteriorate to the point where only pieces of it are left in desolate areas. He modifies the story by saying:

Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer that of the Empire, but our own. *The desert of the real itself*. (203)

And for Baudrillard, this desert is America. He goes on to say that Disneyland is then the microcosm of America in the sense that it presents itself as a haven of imagination standing in opposition to the real. While in actuality, it escapes the dialectic in a similar manner as the transitory poles necessary at the beginning of the deconstructive process eventually reveal themselves to be signs as structurally aporetic as any other sign. Baudrillard maintains that Disneyland is not an imaginary escape from the real America. It is America. Both Disneyland and America reside together, one and the same, in hyperreality. The same is also true of Las Vegas and America. Neither one
is any longer the original or a copy of the original. They now mock each other to the
point where they are just simulations of each other. They are both characterized by
“vicarious experiences and faked sensations”—Clement Greenberg’s 1939 definition
in The Partisan Review of kitsch mentioned previously. Baudrillard begins
Simulations with the quote: “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—
it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is real” (1). Now,
harking back to Lyotard and his call for accepting and learning the heterogeneous
modes of discourse is only a short step away.

Lyotard’s short definition of postmodernism as an “incredulity toward
metanarratives” is mirrored in Baudrillard’s refusal to accept the idea of the original
and in Derrida’s refusal to verify the transcendental signified. The games, or
narratives, working in society follow one criterion according to Lyotard: “be
operational (that is commensurable) or disappear” (Condition xxiv). This very
dichotomous threat of either operability or death is the problem that the American
Dream has faced for over thirty years now. An inability to cope with kitsch as a
viable alternative, or rather the destructive propensity to see kitsch as an impediment
to a perception of the American Dream as a real concept has thrown it into stasis—
not operational. Kitsch lets the American Dream function again. Postmodernity
theories, based in large part on the technological model of democracy, lacking
sublimity, have come under fire most often for that very democratic, sublime-less
trait. This model, ironically, is what most postmodernists find sublime about it—the
fact that it is technologically based, that on the representational level meaning is now
every bit as elusive as it was once glaringly present. Only recently, after having
peeled the representational level off the top and reproduced it ad nauseum, can we see that much more meaning lies at the kitsch level than we could have ever hoped to find.
Chapter 4—Leyner and Wallace

"Does my body disgust you?"
—Schwarzenegger in the movie Junior

"Everyone was waiting for the day
I'd have to say that line. I mean,
I've been working on my body and,
by any accounts, from age 15 to 47,
people have been telling me it's spectacular”
—Schwarzenegger (from an interview)

Few who have seen the movie Total Recall (1990) can forget the scene where Arnold Schwarzenegger, the hero, travels to Mars clandestinely donning a sophisticated costume of an obese woman so he can pass through customs unnoticed. As he is handing the customs agent his passport, his face begins warping and bulging, not unlike the mutant worm-baby from Eraserhead (1977). Then the inevitable happens and the female face splits open revealing a befuddled Schwarzenegger. I use the word inevitable here for several reasons, but mainly for one purpose—any oversized woman attempting to smuggle arms into Mars must really be Schwarzenegger underneath. After all, Schwarzenegger, who graduated from the University of Wisconsin with a business degree, knew the amazing potential brewing in America’s capitalism, and succeeded in America beginning with an unprecedented six Mr. Olympia titles and a monstrous appearance. And with little to no acting talent, he has managed to star in a few dozen movies with roles ranging from the audacious, bone-crushing villain through the alacritous, bone-crushing twin of Danny DeVito to the android, bone-crushing hero to the altruistic, bone-crushing kindergarten teacher. In a nutshell, Schwarzenegger is the auto-atavistic cultural
With the thick Austrian accent for which he is well known, he is capable of churning out some of the most memorable lines in movie history—not the least of which is the *Terminator*'s “I'll be back.”

Contemporary fiction writer Mark Leyner’s 1992 novel *Et Tu, Babe* includes a scene featuring Schwarzenegger’s uncanny reproducibility in which the celebrity protagonist (also named Mark Leyner) goes to a record/video store and witnesses a woman asking the sales representative about the latest technology in video editing:

> It allows you to take any movie and insert Arnold Schwarzenegger as the actor in the lead role […]

> “Oh cool! Can I order some now?”

> “Sure.”


> “Sure.”

> “There’s a documentary called *Imagine* about John Lennon. Could you fix it so that it’s Arnold Schwarzenegger instead of Lennon?”
“No problem.”

“So it’ll be Schwarzenegger playing with the Beatles on Ed Sullivan and Schwarzenegger doing those peace things in bed with Yoko Ono and everything?”

“Yes, ma’am. Our equipment is state of the art.”

“OK, and one last on...how about Rain Man?”

“Would you like Arnold Schwarzenegger as the autistic brother or the Tom Cruise character?”

“Could you do it so he’s both, sort of like Patty Duke did as Patty/Cathy in ‘The Patty Duke Show’?” (51)

We can easily see here how Schwarzenegger ceases to be human. Through an almost obsessive display of repetition, the customer repeats his full name, “Arnold Schwarzenegger,” ten times in this passage, rendering the actor flat and the reader numb in a state of seemingly perpetual simulacra. The repetition supplies an exceptional concomitance for the very notion of replacing renowned actors all with Schwarzenegger. At a certain point he becomes merely a signifier, his uniqueness and distinctively human aspects leveled into that of a replicable, replaceable automaton. As if his own movies did not already, Leyner portrays Schwarzenegger as a mockery of himself. To the extent that Schwarzenegger is perpetually anachronistic (voice, physique) in movies about the present, future, and of course the movies Leyner suggests, we lose sight of a real, or Ur-, Schwarzenegger.

One may wonder what the difference is between Schwarzenegger and any other entertainer. It is imperative to dissociate the performer and the characters
portrayed, naturally. Yet as a co-founder of Planet Hollywood, Schwarzenegger is intrinsically and uncannily linked with the fact that any world tourist can now travel to Dubai, Kuala Lumpur, or Beirut and witness the American Dream through “vicarious experiences and faked sensations.” The similarity with Baudrillard’s theory of simulations now extends even further with the connection between Planet Hollywood and Disneyland.

Just as Disneyland is no longer an “imaginary escape from the real America,” neither is Planet Hollywood—which is more of a vicarious road leading to the sensational America than Disneyland. In fact, the proliferation of Planet Hollywood into dozens of foreign countries, both representing America (even if inadvertently) and a so-called escape from America, only contributes to its position in the Baudrillardian hyperreality. We could trace Planet Hollywood back to Schwarzenegger, then Hollywood itself, then perhaps Schwarzenegger again, then American culture... But since American culture is doubtlessly defined to a large extent by Hollywood, the trace becomes endless, and the signifiers signify each other endlessly and circularly, ad infinitum. And what becomes important at this stage, as is manifested in Schwarzenegger’s self-referentiality, is not finding the original source, but the kitschy method of the actual tracing process.

The ensuing rootlessness, or rather the protean ephemerality—where one moment demands a deeper look and the next moment exposes deracination and urges one to continue on—which follows from this sort of analysis, particularly in terms of the American Dream, first transforms the way American culture appears in respect to the American Dream, and second transforms the nature of the American Dream in
reference to American culture. And because our culture is ever-changing, defining
and finding the American Dream is less a matter of doing it Alger’s way, and more a
matter of familiarization and learning the rules—all the while asking questions of
signification, and as Schwarzenegger was quoted as saying, “If I am not me, then who
da hell am I?” (Rolling Stone, 12/8/00).

Leyner’s novels, specifically Et Tu Babe and the more recent Tetherballs of
Bougainville (1997), are, in short, parodies of contemporary American culture and
what it means to succeed in a society where the standards of accomplishment are
inflated to a ludicrous level. In Et Tu Babe, the protagonist is a narcissistic, oddly
masculine, genius kingpin of an organization named Team Leyner. Leyner, the
character, is a celebrity author of books (such as “Lives of the Poets”) and record
liner notes, international lecturer, and model with visceral tattoos of a “guy surfing on
an enormous wave of lava” on one of his heart valves, and “mom” on his pulmonary
artery. After a series of adventures ranging from voluntarily tutoring agoraphobic
housewives in poetry to stealing from the National Museum of Health and Medicine,
Leyner’s team leaves him, and he disappears. The last chapter is a compilation of
first-hand accounts of Leyner’s last day as told by celebrities.

The Tetherballs of Bougainville is a novel with a similarly heterogeneous
structure. In the introduction, Leyner sets a simulative tone which is manifested in
the rest of the novel with a suggestion that someday we (or our souls) will be able to
outrace light and fly to distant planets with high-powered telescopes, thereby
allowing us to watch ourselves in the past. Everyone who has ever lived, Leyner
writes with a sort of cultural apocalypse in mind, will have his “own individual tiny
desolate planet, furnished with a couch, telescope, minibar and self-replenishing hoagie—laughing, crying and belching as they watch their lives loop endlessly in universal syndication” (13). Working from this notion of simulation, the first half of the novel follows a standard first-person account of a thirteen-year-old boy who is attending his father’s unsuccessful execution despite having to write an entire screenplay (for which he’s already won an award) by the next day. The second half is this screenplay about the failed execution and the ensuing drug-addled love affair he has with the prison warden.

The structural shifts in narrative, in both Et Tu Babe and Tetherballs, serve as a buttress for the stronger dynamic in each—that of the palimpsestual linguistic game that Leyner plays with on every other page; this technique is also the dynamic that supplies the comedy. For instance, after the failed attempt of executing Mark’s father (of which the prison offers the family a videotape dubbed with a soundtrack of their choice) the warden gives him a pamphlet composed of typically sterile pamphlet language, informing him of the rules and possibilities of being executed at any time, through any method after his release, pending that his number comes up in the prison’s computer. The father is now allowed to go free, but may be killed at any moment by the New Jersey State Discretionary Execution system:

“How do you feel about it?” my father asks, turning to the rabbi.

“It’s a very postmodern sentencing structure—random and capricious, the free-floating dread, each ensuing day as gaping abyss, the signifier hovering over the signified like the sword of Damocles.
To have appropriated a pop-noir aesthetic and recontextualized it within the realm of jurisprudence is breathtakingly audacious. I think you’re going to find it a very disturbing, but a very fascinating and transformative way to live, Joel.” (71)

By having “recontextualized” lit-speak into the dialogue of a rabbi and a man about to be executed, Leyner takes a particular narrative’s argot and makes it anomalous, like Schwarzenegger. In doing so, and in performing this act so many times—each in respect to succeeding in American culture—he is reaffirming the notion that the American Dream exists essentially on the commercial level. In a similar tone of mocking the direction of literary theory and its tendency toward literary theoretical arguments about other literary theoretical arguments instead of the literature itself, thirteen-year-old Mark carries with him a self-composed review of a movie he has not written the screenplay for:

“It’s not laziness. Concepts excite me. Theory. Form. But the actual screenwriting seems so tedious, so superfluous. I’m not into praxis. I’m more of a dialectician of absence. Writing per se has always struck me as terribly vulgar. To actually commit an idea to paper is a desecration of that idea, a corruption of the mind. It’s not laziness. Heavens no. It’s simply that I’m loathe to violate the Mallarmean purity of the blank page” (181).

This passage is just one example of another grand theme of Tetherballs, that of incompletion. Among other examples, such as Mark’s failure to clearly and distinctly lose his virginity, are the failed execution of his father and the uncertainty that he will
be executed ("the signifier hanging over the signified like the sword of Damocles") \(^4\).

In Lyotardian terms, these are examples of, like Malevitch's squares, "[putting] forward the unpresentable in presentation itself" (Condition 81). In addition, by staging Tetherballs and the aforementioned "events" in the future, he, in a double paradox, formulates "the rules for what will have been done," or the "future (post) anterior (modo)" (81).

These two major concomitant themes discussed above, incompletion (or rather a kind of specious completion via theory), and the strategic repositioning of one narrative gnomonically onto another, both lead to a larger cultural statement; namely that meaning between interlocutors is transferred superficially, on a kitschy level. In a 1997 interview with Salon Magazine, Leyner says,

> Because of the nature of the culture we live in, there isn't one lingua franca. There's a balkanization. When people begin to talk to each other, they immediately, desperately try to find one of these languages [...] we're so inculcated with these ways of speaking that we tend to speak that way without realizing it. We're being spoken and not really speaking (Salon 12/08/97).

The dismal and basically non-humanist outlook purveyed by Leyner's fiction begs the question of what kind of reality we live in (Leyner, from the same interview, says "My outlook is bleak. It's worse than bleak, it's apocalyptic"). What does such a

---

\(^4\) In different terms, but with the same notion of superficial versus real, Marcus says, "Americans are caught between the truth and falsity of performance (or art) (or culture) or of art (or politics) (or culture), caught along with the countless people all over the world whose response to the likes of Elvis Presley has made them, in Leslie Fiedler's phrase, "imaginary Americans" [...] We are attracted to falsity as to the truth—both because we are never sure which is which ("The early, fake Elvis"—what if the later helpless Elvis was the real person?), and because truth is final. That's its satisfaction and its alienation. Falsity is open: its future is always unfixed" (Double xvii-xviii)
false and gloomy state of being mean for the American Dream? And does such a phony path to the American Dream suggest a kitschy American Dream itself? Or is the Dream, like Joel Leyner’s execution, another unattainable veneer whose shiny finish we surf along daily, never to be realized? Across from Leyner, but still firmly in the pool of American Dream novelists, is David Foster Wallace, who, with a different take on the Dream’s status, intends to parlay something greater than the sheer mockery present in Leyner’s work.

Wallace’s most recent book, a collection of short stories called Brief Interviews with Hideous Men (1999), provides scene after scene of misunderstandings and an ever-increasing inability for two people to find a common language. Wallace’s intent, however, is to go beyond a mere diagnosis of our times and affirm something good in it all. “Look man,” he says in an interview, “we’d probably most of us agree that these are dark times and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is?” (McCaffery). He is referring here to the generation of writers and television personalities of the 80s and early 90s who, like American Psycho author Bret Easton Ellis, the earlier works of Leyner, and Rush Limbaugh, only critique culture for what is rotten in it. Leyner’s recent works, in particular Tetherballs, have grown out of the blatant cynicism Wallace refers to and lauded a hero who can live and thrive in the age of reruns and a heterogeneity of languages simply by learning them and accepting the notion that repetition, kitsch, and simulation are inevitabilities. The fact that
thirteen-year-old Mark never lived through the popular optimism of the 50s or the recreation of such optimism in the 80s is important.

In the same 1993 interview as the one quoted above, Wallace says, “The irony, self-pity, self-hatred are now conscious, celebrated […] If I have a real enemy, a patriarch for my patricide, its probably Barth and Coover and Burroughs, even Nabokov and Pynchon,” and that even though “their self-consciousness and irony and anarchism served valuable purposes, were indispensable for their times,” the chic involved in the transformation of postmodern irony has consequently become, “an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy” (McCaffery). The difficulty of combating this irony arises when we see that writing contemporary fiction without incorporating the TV culture or the kitsch or the simulation or the rerun aspects of our culture would be merely escapist and irrelevant to contemporary culture. Both Leyner and Wallace are fully aware of this predicament and come up with similar strategies to deal with the problem.

Rather than battling the superficiality of the age via cynicism and disdain, those who grow up with it find a

5 Any doubts concerning the mood of the 80s may be referred to Eyewitness to America (Douglas Brinkley) where Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan refers to her boss as one who “gleams; he is a mystery” and the straightforwardly written praise, “this happened all the time in Reagan’s White House. You’d walk by the oval office and there was a family full of people with no legs nodding hello to a dwarf who was bringing a message from the doorman at the Mayflower, who’d get a reply. No one else ran a White House like this, none of the modern presidents”(629-630).

6 Larry McCaffery also interviewed Leyner, who said, “I’m totally inside [pop culture]. I’m literally made of it. The other day I was reading some T’ang poets, Li Po and Tu Fu, and I thought to myself, ‘I’m in the Tang Dynasty’—you know, as in people who have grown up drinking Tang, this stimulated completely artificial orange juice product. That’s as much a part of me as the color of my eyes, so it’s not like I’m making a choice about whether to acknowledge it or comment on it. It’s in my genes”.

And from the McCaffery interview with Wallace, “It’s easy for older writers to just bitch about TV’s hegemony over the U.S. art market, to say that the world’s gone to hell in a basket and shrug and have done with it. But I think younger writers owe themselves a richer account of just why TV’s become such a dominating force on people’s consciousness, if only because we under forty have spent our whole conscious lives being ‘part’ of TV’s audience”.


path of acceptance and proactive reformation through excessive self-education more effective than a denial of such kitsch.

The final story in *Brief Interviews*, and one of the two that truly demonstrates a coming to terms with, rather than a mere complaint or cynical response to our age, is the highly metaphorical “Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders.” The other story relevant to our investigation into reruns and TV culture is an overtly allusive myth about “the origins of the ghostly double that always shadows human figures on UHF broadcast bands” called “Tri-stan: I Sold Sissee Nar to Ecko” (235). When juxtaposed, these two short stories play off of each other in a way which surpasses most previous fiction (including his own), and formulates a kind of fiction that is reverential, without being obsequious, to modern day kitsch.

“Tri-stan: I Sold Sissee Nar to Ecko” is of course a play on the myths of Narcissus and Echo and of Tristan and Isolde. The story, stylized to sound mimetically like Ovid, is in one sense an American Dream story about the rise and fall of the tragically beautiful Sissee Nar, and in another sense it is a performative piece apologetically mythologizing reruns, cable, and how an obsessive stalker named Ecko became the “phantasm” who follows behind actors on UHF. The story takes place in America, where “double blind polls revealed that in a nation whose great informing myth is that it has no great informing myth, familiarity equaled timelessness, omniscience, immortality, a spark of the vicarious Divine” (241). The plot revolves around how a goddess, jealous of Sissee Nar’s beauty, concocts a scheme to arrange for Sissee’s death by first convincing Sissee’s programming executive father, Agon M. Nar, to feature his daughter in a remake of a rerun titled
Beach Blanket Endymion. Then, she appears to an ex-executive named Reggie Ecko, who was demoted in the wake of Agon’s success, by casting a spell on him while he’s in a late-night-TV/dream trance to become obsessed with Sissee’s image and kill her. Complex and fascinating in its own right, the plot is not as suited to our investigation as is Wallace’s broader treatment of kitsch as a cultural element to embrace.

Wallace’s statements about the role of TV in our culture and how reruns reflect the national psyche is perhaps most interesting. The narrator of the story, presumably Ovid the Obtuse, treats contemporary culture and Hollywood alike, as myths.

There existed today [...] an untapped market for myth. History was dead. Linearity was a cul de sac. Novelty was old news. The national I was now about flux & eternal return. Difference in sameness [...] “Soon, myths about myths” was the sirens’ prophesy & long-range proposal. TV shows about TV shows. Polls about the reliability of surveys [...] genuine information, would be allowed to lie, hidden & nourishing, inside the wooden belly of the parodic camp. (241-242)

Wallace, himself, is admittedly part of the “parodic camp” as well. But by turning the superficiality into a myth rather than a statement of pure cynicism, he is in a sense affirming the value, or at least the ubiquity, of kitsch. He is in fact selling the reader a myth about a myth based on several myths, which is part of the message he is trying to convey: namely that recursion, simulation, layers of natural irony, and plasticity no longer warrant a value-based judgment. To look at kitsch as something “good” or “bad” will only serve to propagate the cycle of cynicism and to add onto the layers of
irony which have, in only the very recent past, "gone from liberating to enslaving" (McCaffery Interview).

So what then happened with the myth's lead characters who each chased the American Dream? As mentioned above, Reggie Ecko's ghost was banished to be the shadow for all UHF bandwidth's reruns. He was "to abide there annoyingly & imperfectly juxtaposed with all figures & imbricately to overlap & mimic their movements as an irksome visual echo" (253). Sissee, whose fate was sealed when she froze upon seeing her reflection in Reggie's sunglasses as he stormed in wielding a gun, got not so much as a flower in her memory. Ovid the Obtuse, however, the storyteller, and the one who sold a "Remembering Sissee" TV special, received a "kill fee" for the show and "ended up making out okay on the whole thing; don't you worry about Ovid" (255). The ending, however tragic, is more than a diagnosis of who's on top—assuming that the ultimate success Ovid, described as the syndicated "chronicler of trans-human entertainment exchange" is a symbol of the recent success of the Entertainment Channel, which broadcasts biographies of movie stars, specials about reruns, and then re-runs these specials. More than this, Sissee Nar's fate, like Narcissus', and failure to live out the American Dream was a result of not having ever seen her image before Reggie Ecko's arrival, and being entranced by the image of herself as "imperfect nay flawed & inadequately Enhanced & like totally gnarlyly mortal" (254). Wallace iterates the necessity in our contemporary age for the subject to be able to employ kitsch to properly identify oneself as a product of kitsch instead of a metaphysically unified, pure, being. That is, kitsch, through a reflective
acceptance and knowledge of it, has surpassed the point of alienating into the realm of humanizing.

Wallace reiterates this point in the slower and almost cathartic, aforementioned “Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders.” It is the simple story of a boy getting his hair cut by his mother as his father runs through the radio tuner and his twin brother mimics the boy’s every face from across the room. The mother, Mum, is intent on keeping her son still, going so far as wrapping a towel over his mouth. The father, Da, which seems to be an eponym for the previous generation of writers (the “patriarch for [his] patricide”) acts only as a haunting presence—only his face is described as illuminated by the “glowing dial” of the radio (319). The tension of the story builds into a frenzy as the twin’s mimicry persists and the boy, by now in agony from being “lampooned,” sees in his brother’s face,

the gross and pitiless sameness, [...] knowing past sight that my twin’s face would show the same, to mock it—until the last refuge was slackness, giving up the ghost completely for a blank slack gagged mask’s mindless stare—unseen and—seeing—into a mirror I could not know or feel without. No not ever again. (321)

The necessity of the mirror is once again stressed by Wallace. More importantly, he emphasizes knowledge of the necessity of the kitsch-like mirror. Harking back to Ovid’s version of the story, one important detail sometimes lost in the Freudian

---

7 “Da” could here either reference the dada effect or capriciousness left for Wallace’s generation by the writers of the 50s and 60s, or, could refer to the musical term “da capo” which Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary defines as “From the beginning; a direction to return to the beginning and repeat” (207). This author prefers the former possibility.
connotation of Narcissism, is that Narcissus did not know that it was his own image that he became infatuated with. His death, like Sissee Nar’s, was caused by not having knowledge of the medium of presentation—the mirror.
Conclusion

"The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch."
—Milan Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being

"Life without kitsch would be unbearable"
—Austrian architect, Hundertwasser

Knowledge of this “base of kitsch” or awareness of the surroundings—no matter how vile they appear—is the lynchpin necessary to begin an honest analysis of our cultural context. Like a hero of Alger, who comes to America, learns the context, and then maximizes his situation with that knowledge (in most cases that knowledge is the debatable notion that prosperity is awarded to the one who proceeds with hard work and self-reliance), the contemporary hero must do the same. Therefore, in order to engage in a serious discussion of the American Dream and/or kitsch, we must employ the ideas of Hunter Thompson, whose stylized journalism seeks subjectively to analyze American culture. Thompson approaches this task by creating a character functioning as an interpretive lens who expresses the difficulty of assimilating to, or finding the redeeming value of, Las Vegas (“the heart of the American Dream”) by saying “I could never properly explain myself in this climate” (Gilliam). As far as Thompson’s writing is concerned, drugs have always been a means to the end of reflecting the culture of artificiality and nonsense; of fighting estrangement from society, or, rather, finding a method to better understand the surrounding culture. In a book of letters released in 2000, Thompson reveals that during his famous trip to Las Vegas which Fear and
Loathing (1971) was partially based on, he was not using drugs, but rather making a “very conscious effort to simulate drug freakout”—further supporting the idea that the main character, Duke, is much more a vehicle used to represent one struggling to deal with the kitschiness of the American Dream than an extension of himself (Fear and Loathing in America 405). During this struggle, Duke is unable to differentiate drug frenzies from the hyper-commercialization of Las Vegas. And by the end of the novel, Thompson’s reason for changing the working title of “Death of the American Dream” to Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream becomes apparent when Duke accepts the state of the American Dream as a kitschy one rather than denying its validity altogether: “I took another big hit off the amyl, and by the time I got to the bar my heart was full of joy. I felt like a monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger” (204). As a “joyful…reincarnation of Horatio Alger,” Duke works as the hero who performs no other heroic act than to realize his environment.

In quasi-Apollinian phraseology, one must “know thyself” by knowing the culture surrounding him. In an ironic turn, it is neglect of the Apollinian which now stands between the hero and the American Dream. “He, who (as the etymology of the name indicates) is the ‘shining one,’ the deity of light, is also the ruler over the beautiful illusion of the inner world of fantasy” (Birth 35). This is the same ‘beautiful illusion’ that tricked and mesmerized, ultimately dooming, Narcissus and Sissee Nar. Nietzsche proclaimed that his culture was plagued with a lack of veneration for the Dionysian. His culture was missing the viscerality and instinctual level that Dionysus represents. Now, perhaps, the Apollinian is what is missing. This is not to say that we lack lightness, beautiful illusions, or what Apollo also stands for—“plastic

8 From Fear and Loathing in America 14.
energies,” or “mere appearance of mere appearance,” as Nietzsche calls the dream, or kitsch, in my terminology (Birth 35, 45). According to Baudrillard, Wallace, Leyner, Miller, Fitzgerald, Pynchon, Thompson, Kundera, Corso, Marcus, Albee, and almost any other cultural critic, America is full of the Apollinian. Because at some point kitsch in one respect or another covered up what was for them the truth or the real. We have, however, reached a point where kitsch is what is real. Nearly all of our information and communication passes through or originates on a level of kitsch. And even though it so obviously dominates all of the arts, kitsch undoubtedly inhabits the lowly spot in the American psyche reserved for shit. It is denied like Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek describes the American toilet in a comparative analysis, “the basin is full of water, so that the shit floats in it—visible, but not to be inspected” (Plague 4).

Kitsch is not a problem to be solved, it is our environment—in literature, in television, in cinema, in “ads infinitum,”9 in music, in criticism, in magazines, and the list goes on. To treat it is a headache, or wish it away, is a drastic form of denial which only perpetuates the frustration and cynicism. To give kitsch its reverence, to recognize fully its significance—if only because it is here, in our society as a colossal force—is to seek the truths of our times and to prosper harmoniously. Such a task may take the strength and will of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra or madman to take what appears nauseating and consume it, but, once this task is done, we may leap from mountaintop to mountaintop. Then we may encounter Lyotard’s smile, “at once tender and mocking, an irony committed to disarming itself in the name of [friendship]” (Work 214). To pursue this authentic but ironic encounter with culture

that affirms only the perpetuity of open engagement and potential meaning is as close to finding the American Dream as one can get. Otherwise, one sort of misses the gold spike that ceremoniously connected the country.

*   *   *   *
   *
   *
   *
   *   *
Works Cited


<http://gopher.well.sf.ca.us:70/0/Publications/MONDO/mark-ley.txt>.

---, Interview with David Foster Wallace. December 1993


<http://proxy.library.eiu.edu:2161/entrance.dtl>.

Pogues. "Thousands are Sailing." *Essential.* Island Records 198?


Rolling Stone, Interview with Arnold Schwarzenegger. 12/8/00


Salon Magazine. Interview with Mark Leyner. Laura Miller. December, 1987

<http://www.salon.com/books/int/1997/12/cov_si_08leyner2.html>.

---, Interview with David Foster Wallace. Laura Miller. March, 1996


Works Consulted


