The Afterlife of Raymond Carver: Authenticity, Neoliberalism and Influence

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Abstract

This thesis explores the afterlife of Raymond Carver in relation to a number of important writers and artists that claim Carver as an influence and who are working within countries or cultures that have recently made, or are in the process of making, the transition from embedded liberalism to neoliberalism. This project argues that while Carver’s influence has been conventionally limited to what critic A.O. Scott calls ‘a briefly fashionable school of experimental fiction’, in recent years his writing has come to represent a ‘return’ to a more ‘real’ form of literature, one that, his advocates would argue, is more ‘authentic’ than other kinds of recent writing. Carver’s ‘authenticity’ is closely tied to the idea that his fiction is a response to his own working-class experience and is seen to be more broadly synecdochic of the socioeconomic struggles faced by many other Americans during this period.

Given the cultural and aesthetic differences between Carver’s life and work, and those studied in the main chapters of this thesis – Jay McInerney, Haruki Murakami and Alejandro González Iñárritu – I argue that Carver’s afterlife is best viewed as being a social phenomenon, born out of the social relations, historical circumstances and economic forms that resulted from the US’s move to neoliberalism in the late-1970s. My introduction historicizes this transition and argues that while Carver may have struggled to make productive sense of his socioeconomic circumstance, it affected his life in very pointed and particular ways, trapping him between the conventional American dream of individual freedom and equal opportunity and the reality of inequality and social immobility. For those who claim Carver as an influence, his fiction represents a zone where the difference between hegemonic narratives and lived experience is explored and embodies a model of how to negotiate, for better or worse, the complex and shifting foundations of this recent political transition.

My introduction then continues to argue that of equal importance to Carver’s afterlife is the fact that, in his late-writing in particular, Carver’s work represents a ‘retreat’ from the short-term, competition-based notions of neoliberal labour towards a non-incorporated residual alternative that has particular artisanal tenets associated with craftsmanship. Carver’s texts operate beyond their initial cultural and historical moment by becoming distinctive sites of resistance to the hegemonic norms of late-capitalism. In this way, I argue, Carver’s ‘authenticity’ combines with a consolatory craftsmanship to become a coping mechanism that offers other writers and artists working in neoliberalism a way of navigating a world which seems to exceed the frame of conceptual mapping.

By working through a series of short case studies on Stuart Evers, Denis Johnson and Ray Lawrence, and then moving on to more detailed explorations in my three central chapters, this thesis will consider how this is the case in relation to a number of important artists who claim Carver as an influence. Chapter one utilises my archival research to historicize the relationship between Carver and McInerney and argues that Carver’s pedagogy pushed McInerney towards the idea that the writing process is connected to residual narratives of American craft. It also contends that many of the orthodox ideas that Carver held about literature proved particularly enabling for McInerney’s novel Brightness Falls, which, through parody and satire, signals a retreat from postmodern experimentation towards a more ‘Carveresque’ realism. Chapter two similarly chronicles Carver’s relationship with Murakami and argues that, for Murakami, Carver’s fiction is an important example of writing that explores the difference between hegemonic narratives and lived experience. The chapter moves on to argue that what some critics view as Carver’s reformed post-alcoholic fiction helped facilitate Murakami’s own unorthodox spiritual response to the twin tragedies of the Kobe earthquake and Tokyo gas attack in 1995. Chapter three proceeds on slightly different lines in that it considers Iñárritu’s Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance) and argues that while Iñárritu uses Carver as the foundation for his film, the film is particularly interesting because it is, itself, a study of Carver’s afterlife. My final chapter suggests that while there is merit in viewing Carver as an ‘authentic’ artist (a kind of model for negotiating neoliberal culture), the totality of that solution is more ambivalent than his advocates might initially suggest.
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Introduction

A decade after his death, A.O. Scott wrote that Raymond Carver:

- has gone from being an influential – and controversial – member of a briefly fashionable school of experimental fiction to being an international icon of traditional American literary values. His genius – but more his honesty, his decency, his commitment to the exigencies of craft – is praised by an extraordinary diverse cross section of his peers.¹

As Scott’s generous assessment suggests, for a writer who only published a total of sixty-eight short stories and four major story collections during his lifetime, Carver’s influence is exponential. The list of those who attest to its impact includes artists as diverse as Robert Altman, Salman Rushdie and Bob Adelman, and their admiration suggests that Carver’s writing, despite its distinct subject, is not bound by its immediate geographic or cultural context.² His stories have been translated into over twenty languages, and even nearly thirty years after his death, Carver is still widely read, with new editions being frequently printed.³ The result is that Carver has been canonized into the world of American letters. As Kasia Boddy makes clear, ‘Although his final years were marked by warm attention from the literary establishment, few would have predicted how central and secure Carver’s place in the story of twentieth-century American literature would become’.⁴ At least part of the reason for this is, as Scott indicates, a tight and intricate relationship between Carver’s texts and his perceived lifestyle and writing practice. Underlying these ideas is the perception that Carver broadly represents a ‘return’ to a more ‘real’ form of writing – what Scott calls ‘traditional American

³ In 2009 The Library of America published The Collected Stories in the US. Meanwhile in the UK, Vintage brought out new paperback editions of his collections, which have now sold over 43,000 copies between them.
literary values’ – one that is, Carver’s advocates would argue, more ‘authentic’ than other kinds of recent writing. This thesis explores why Carver’s ‘authenticity’ is an important aspect in his influence on other writers and artists.

Underpinning the forthcoming discussions is the proposal that Carver’s influence is, in the first instance, a social phenomenon, born out of the social relations, historical circumstances and economic forms that were produced by the US’s move from embedded liberalism to neoliberalism in the late-1970s. Read within this socio-historical context Carver’s realist authenticity appears to embody a model for retreat from the bewildering world of late-capitalism, and in turn becomes a coping mechanism, or form of consolation, that offers other writers and artists a way of navigating a world which seems to exceed the frame of conceptual mapping. In this sense, Carver’s work appears to inhabit a zone that explores the differences between the hegemonic narratives of late-capitalism – that is, the conventional American dream of equal opportunity, individual freedom and upward socioeconomic mobility for all who work hard enough – and the reality of lived experience at the turn of the neoliberal era. This idea is reinforced by Carver’s late fiction, which offers a muted oppositional alternative based on residual values of craftsmanship which, for those who are influenced by him, provides a distinctive site of resistance to the hegemonic norms of late-capitalism. The three expository chapters that follow consider the effect and impact of this idea on three important contemporary artists who all claim Carver as an influence.

The Emergence of Neoliberalism

While critical attention has previously been paid to the relationship between Carver’s writing and his socioeconomic context, there has been little that explicitly analyses his writing – and, of course, his influence – in connection with the neoliberal turn. Carver, himself, was affected by the socioeconomic changes in US capitalism in the 1970s and ’80s, and his experience, which is communicated through his writing, became a model for later artists of how to negotiate, for better or worse, the complex and shifting foundations of this significant political transition.
His influence is further augmented by significant advances in neoliberal communication, technology and media that mean that his influence is disseminated across cultural and geographic borders. The process of this socioeconomic change – what has been called elsewhere the eras of Fordism and post-Fordism, or, now more commonly, embedded liberalism and neoliberalism – has been the subject of much sociological, political, historical and geographical discussion. Since neoliberalism is central to large portions of my argument in this project it is worth providing a detailed summary of its background.

Perhaps most notably, neoliberalism is associated with the rejection of ideals that are commonly represented by the Keynesian economics favoured by welfare-capitalist states in the western world during the postwar era. In this sense the emergence of neoliberalism can be traced to a number of important breaks or shifts away from this system. The first was the dissolution of the Bretton Woods currency agreement between 1968 and 1973, brought about largely because the US was seeking to respond to the increasing domestic crises of overaccumulation, unemployment and inflation, and also their loss of control over the global free-flow of US dollars, which, because of their high value, had been deposited en masse into European banks. In 1971 President Nixon announced the suspension of the dollar’s convertibility into gold and international currency and exchange rates were allowed to float.

Meanwhile The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil shock between 1970 and 1973 tripled the price of crude oil for the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Member countries, which dramatically increased production costs for private corporations. The solution was for the US to put military pressure on Saudi Arabia to force them to recycle their petrodollars through the New York investment banks. The banks then had command of massive funds for which they needed profitable outlets, and because of the poor domestic economic conditions they sought opportunities in the Global

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South. The recent liberalization of international credit and financial markets meant that banks were free to loan at lower risk and favourable rates designated in US dollars. This, incidentally, left the balance of power in the hands of US monetary policymakers, who could increase interest rates without the consent of the borrower.

Working alongside each of these two historical events was the passing of the Financial Services Modernization Act into law, which repealed the Glass-Steagall Act originally passed by President Roosevelt during his first hundred days in office as a way to re-gain control of the banking sector after the 1929 banking crisis. Roosevelt’s bill demanded the separation of investment and commercial banking and provided federal insurance on deposits, and although the bill wasn’t officially repealed until 1999 by President Clinton, much of the act had been bypassed by loopholes and lenient regulatory interpretations for decades. Sensing a fresh opportunity to reverse the government’s control on finance, the business community turned to lobbying and policy think tanks in order to gain control. In the late 1970s a ‘new’ kind of liberalism was touted by a number of influential institutions, such as the University of Chicago, and the static regulatory flaws of Keynesian economics fast became unpopular in Washington. By the early 1980s Washington’s corporate lobbying community had become so infiltrated by the business community that New York banks began to gain a level of influence on a par with those in the 1920s. What made this acquisition of power so remarkable is that the business community achieved its goals without any broad public mandate.6

While signs of neoliberalism can be traced back to the early 1970s, it was Paul Volcker’s decision as Chair of the Federal Reserve to raise interest rates by 20 points on 6 October 1979 that is broadly seen as symbolising the beginning of the neoliberal era. The swing to neoconservative politics and the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 cemented its impetus. While much could be written about its implementation and impact on socioeconomic life in America more broadly, the point that ought to be emphasized is that neoliberalism is an ideological practice that reaches all aspects of life in the capitalist societies that promote it – and sometimes, as I will argue later in relation to Mexico and Iñárritu’s filmmaking, even in those

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that don’t. Founded on the economic theory of the Mont Pelerin Society in the 1930s, neoliberalism is built on a system of laissez-faire economics, and holds to libertarian free market principles and Adam Smith’s ‘hidden hand’ as a guide for the demand and supply of free market goods. Within this framework the neoliberal state has two clear objectives. The first is to prioritise the creation of a business climate in which capital can accumulate. The second is that when financial crises appear – which, because of the inherent contradictions in capitalism, they inevitably will – the state must favour business interest over its citizens. Of course, there are times when political pragmatism prevails and the state cannot follow the preferred neoliberal line, but the overall impact of neoliberal policy has been the redistribution of wealth towards the historic upper-classes, an increased wealth gap, the reduction of top bracket corporate and individual tax rates, a decrease in federal spending, an increase in the availability of private capital, increased dynamism and ephemerality in labour markets, and the retraction of social privileges such as health care, public education, pension rights and social services – the core strands of embedded liberalism and ‘welfare-capitalism’.

Carver’s writing – and its influence – appears to be tightly bound to these socioeconomic developments. And even though Carver himself struggled productively to make

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1 For example, between 1947 and 1979, productivity in the US rose by 119 per cent, while the income of the bottom fifth of the population rose by 122 per cent. But between 1979 and 2009 (after a shift to neoliberal policies) productivity rose by 80 per cent, while the income of the bottom fifth fell by 4 per cent. In the same period the income of the top 1 per cent rose by 270 per cent. See, Robert Reich and Bill Marsh, ‘The Limping Middle Class’, New York Times, 3 September 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/04/opinion/sunday/jobs-will-follow-a-strengthening-of-the-middle-class.html> [accessed 23 May 2017]

In addition there are other neoliberal markers, including: a change in legislating and regulatory frameworks to advantage business interests (such as the introduction of the Financial Services Modernization Act in 1999), the opening up of financial markets to global trade and commerce (new membership arrangements for the WTO and IMF were made in this respect), the curtailment of labour unions (which encourages short-term flexibility in labour markets), international trade agreements that favour trade and goods over labour (such as the NAFTA treaty), governmental bailouts for the financial sector in times of crises (such as the bailout of New York banks in the 1978 crisis at an estimated cost of $150 billion to the taxpayer), the increase in surveillance and self-discipline (as recent trends in the education sector demonstrate), and an increase in state-business collaboration.

This final point is best illustrated by two longer examples. Firstly, take the National Bureau of Economic Research, an organization which was previously chaired by Martin Feldstein, who later chaired the Council of Economic Advisers to Reagan. In 1983, 45 per cent of the NBERs funding ($2.61 million) came from corporations and foundations. Major donors included IBM, Exxon and AT&T (Edsall, The New Politics of Inequality, p. 15). Secondly, and more recently, the infamous consultancy group led by Dick Cheney that formulated the Bush administrations energy policy document. The names of the committee’s members were never officially released, but almost certainly included Kenneth Lay, the head of Enron, a company accused of profiteering by deliberately fostering an energy crisis in California and which subsequently collapsed amid a huge accounting scandal.
sense of this socioeconomic transition, and while he may not have directly identified these problems as traits of the forthcoming neoliberal era, they affected his life in very pointed and particular ways. It is these experiences that are reflected in his writing, his life and his influence. Indeed, while he experienced these events at a local level, the expansion of neoliberal practice throughout the world has meant that his experience, and his influence, has, as I have already suggested, a particularly global resonance. This project considers how this is the case in relation to a number of important artists who claim Carver as an influence and who are working within countries or cultures that have recently made, or are in the process of making, the transition from embedded liberalism to neoliberalism. More specifically I read Carver’s influence within this framework in the following ways: with Jay McInerney, in relation to finance and capital in the US in the 1980s; with Haruki Murakami, in relation to labour and consumption trends in Japan in the 1980s and ’90s; and with Alejandro González Iñárritu, in relation to trade and technology in Mexico in the 1990s and ’00s.

**Carver, Neoliberal Hegemony and Craftsmanship**

To argue that there is an important connection between Carver’s writing and his historical circumstance is to position oneself in line with critics who view Carver’s fiction as being, at some level, a response to his working-class experience. Many of these critics also suggest that Carver’s writing is a class-conscious commentary on American life that stands-in as a synecdochic example for the socioeconomic struggles faced by many Americans during this same period. Irving Howe’s review of *Cathedral* (1983) in *The New York Times* typifies this opinion:

> Mr Carver is showing us at least part of the truth about a segment of American experience few of our writers trouble to notice. Neoconservative critics, intent upon pasting a smile onto the country’s face, may charge him with programmatic gloom and other heresies, but at his best he is probing, as many American writers have done
before, the waste and destructiveness that prevail beneath the affluence of American

The experience to which Howe refers is rooted in Carver’s own frustrations at being caught
between the conventional American dream of individual freedom and equal opportunity, on the
one hand, and the reality of inequality and social immobility on the other. Carver and his first
wife, Maryann, married after they graduated from high school and employed an orthodox
American protestant work ethic as a means to realise their ambitions, but the financial burden of
two young children, a lack of secure long-term employment and a marriage complicated by
alcohol addiction and infidelity undermined any hope of social mobility. Writing about his
experience in ‘Fires’, an essay published in 1982, Carver recalls – in rhetoric that is reminiscent
of David Harvey’s description of the failed Fordist narrative in \textit{The Condition of Postmodernity} –
when he realised that his long-term plans for upward socioeconomic mobility were little more
than fantasies. ‘We had great dreams, my wife and I. We thought we could bow our necks, work
very hard, and do all that we had set our hearts to do. But we were mistaken.’\footnote{Raymond Carver, \textit{Collected Stories}, ed. by William L. Stull and Maureen Carroll (New York: The
Library of America, 2009), p. 737. Further references to Carver’s fiction and non-fiction essays are to this
dition and will be cited parenthetically in the text. For Harvey’s analysis of the failure of the Fordist
narrative to contain the contradictions of capitalism in the mid-twentieth century, see, David Harvey, \textit{The
Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change} (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990),
pp. 141-2.} Later Carver
recounts the ‘exact’ moment of realisation – while washing his children’s clothes in the
laundromat, a setting of almost uncanny Carveresque banality:

At that moment – I swear all of this took place there in the laundromat – I could see
nothing ahead but years of more of this kind of responsibility and perplexity. Things
would change some, but they were never really going to get better. I understood this,
but could I live with it? At that moment I saw accommodations would have to be made.
The sights would have to be lowered. I’d had, I realised later, an insight. But so what?

What are insights? They don’t help any. They just make things harder (p. 739).

Carver’s resignation in the face of failed hegemonic narratives points towards the broader affect
of capitalism’s ideological efficacy. Mark Fisher’s popular short book \textit{Capitalist Realism} seeks
to illustrate the famous statement nominally attributed to Fredric Jameson that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Jodi Dean – whose work has been concerned with a leftist retreat of oppositional alternatives to neoliberal hegemony – draws similar parallels when, in conversation with Fisher, she argues that Fisher’s term ‘designates a general ideological formation […] wherein all illusions and hopes of equality have been shed’.

In this way neoliberal ideology operates in two distinct ways. The first is the acceptance and propagation of the belief that neoliberalism cannot be fought. And the second is the notion that adopting neoliberal domination is just a question of pragmatic survival. These two ideas combine to produce a depressive resignation, an affective dimension in which it becomes ‘common sense’ to follow the dominant neoliberal line.

In *The Enigma of Capital*, David Harvey echoes this idea when he argues that the past and future evolution of capitalism is contingent on its concomitant ability to evolve what he calls ‘mental conceptions of the world’ (that is, ‘knowledge structures and the cultural norms and beliefs consistent with endless accumulation’) in line with more conspicuous developments in technological production, labour processes and institutional arrangements. Harvey theorizes seven ‘activity spheres’ within the evolutionary trajectory of capitalism (one of which is ‘mental conceptions of world’), in which each sphere develops on its own, but always in dynamic relation with the other spheres. The effect of this idea, to use Harvey’s own example, is that adaptations in mental conceptions will have a consequential effect on social relations, labour processes and other institutional arrangements. Capital, Harvey postulates, cannot circulate or accumulate without touching these ‘activity spheres’ (to the extent that if any of these areas

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12 In their discussion, Fisher uses the following helpful illustration, ‘I mention in the book [*Capitalist Realism*] the example of managers who implement neoliberalizing changes in the workplace, while saying, “I don’t believe in any of this stuff, but this is just the kind of thing we have to do now”’ (p. 27).

13 The other six are: ‘technologies and organizational forms; social relations; institutional and administrative arrangements; production and labour processes; relations to nature; the reproduction of daily life and of the species’. See, David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 123-4.
limits or restricts accumulation then capital must overcome it). The result is that the formation
of a belief system in support of neoliberal capitalism (whether that be a positive affirmation or,
more likely it seems, a resigned acceptance) is vital to capitalism’s development and survival.

Carver’s story ‘The Student’s Wife’ illustrates the fictional transposition of this kind of
resignation in the face of neoliberal ‘common sense’. Nan’s recollection of a camping trip she
took with her husband, Mike, just after their wedding – like Carver and Maryann, they too were
married after high school graduation – symbolises, it seems, a time of youthful innocence. Their
heavy blankets in the tent, which are so thick ‘she could hardly turn her feet under all the
weight’, appear indicative of the protective narrative of hard work as a route to socioeconomic
security and prosperity. But Nan’s sentiments are countered by Mike who reminds her, with a
definite sense of resignation, that ‘that was a long time ago’. Time and experience in late-
capitalism has changed things for Mike. ‘What he did remember,’ Carver writes, ‘was very
carefully combed hair and loud half-baked ideas about life and art, and he did not want to
remember that’ (p. 95). Mike, then, appears to have settled for the reality of their impover
ished
situation, helplessly caught, as he is, amongst the folds of American experience, in a new
society without the support of conventional working-class narratives of conscious rebellion, and
where state support and apparatus are moving towards neoliberal hegemony.

In an attempt to help her sleep, he asks her to make a list of her likes and dislikes. The
two-hundred-word monologue that follows – what amounts to a conspicuous anomaly in
Carver’s writing – embodies her desire for social mobility.14 ‘Most of all’, she concludes, ‘I’d
like us both just to live a good honest life without having to worry about money and bills and
things like that’ (p. 97). Her dreams are eventually, and devastatingly, undermined, when,
sitting at the kitchen table later that same night she notices the sunrise, and it dawns on her –

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14 It also overtly mirrors Carver’s own situation. In the story Nan accounts her desire for a social life, a
nine-to-five existence, a fixed residence and clothing for her children. Carver described those early years
in the following way:

In those days I always worked some crap job or another, and my wife did the same […] Time
and again I reached the point where I couldn’t see or plan any further ahead than the first of next
month and gathering together enough money, by hook or by crook, to meet the rent and provide
the children’s school clothes.

See, Gordon Burn, ‘Poetry, Poverty and Realism Down in Carver Country’, in Conversations with
Raymond Carver, ed. by Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull (London: University Press of
Mississippi, 1990), pp. 117-9 (p. 119).
perhaps for the first time – the hopelessness of her situation. In what might easily be seen as a continuity of Edward Hopper’s artistic impressions, Carver writes, ‘She had seen few sunrises in her life […] and none of them had been like that. Not in pictures she had seen nor in any book she had read had she learned a sunrise so terrible as this’ (p. 99). The ending to Carver’s story – the explicit way in which Nan learns or realises the reality of her situation – neatly corresponds with his own laundromat epiphany. It is a moment of shameful failure and personal inferiority, and a moment reminiscent of other Americans’ experience during that era. (One described, for instance, by Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb in *The Hidden Injuries of Class* as ‘social failure’, the combined realisation of failed social growth and social contribution, which leads to humiliation and a strong sense of personal inadequacy.)\(^{15}\) In short: Nan’s insight only makes her struggle harder.

Considering the parallel experience depicted in stories like ‘The Student’s Wife’ and Carver’s own personal essays it is unsurprising that many critics see the class crises of Carver’s early-life as being the source for much of his fiction.\(^{16}\) It is, as Ben Harker argues, the precise ‘creative struggle to narrate apparently inexplicable social experiences’, along with the conjuncture of Carver’s ‘socioeconomic disempowerment and diminished class-consciousness’ that is the essential component of his fiction.\(^{17}\) Stephen Groarke argues that Carver’s fiction, while often linked to his nominal literary ancestors, is better viewed as emanating from the socioeconomic situation of his familial, relational and financial circumstances. He argues, as I

\(^{15}\) In their study of working-class life in Boston in the 1960s and ’70s, Sennett and Cobb sought to overturn the social zeitgeist of the time, what Sara Sanborn describes as the:

> ethos of individualism and personal development [that] puts the burden squarely on the worker.  
> Old notions of Social Darwinism still linger over the field: those who deserve to get to the top will rise, and those left behind are where they belong.

See, Sara Sanborn, *‘The Hidden Injuries of Class*, by Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb (Book Review)*, *Commentary*, 54.6 (1972), 94-6 (p. 94). Sennett and Cobb conclude that as long as workers are valued for what they can do, rather than what they are, class distinctions will persist. This will only be intensified by an increased dependency and focus on the intellectual and technical abilities of workers rather than their worth as individuals. See, Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

\(^{16}\) ‘The Student’s Wife’ is not the only story that exemplifies this point. ‘Gazebo’, ‘Night School’ and ‘What Is It?’ are three other well known stories that hold similar parallels to Carver’s experience. As if to reinforce this connection, The Library of America *Collected Stories* edition of Carver’s fiction even devotes a section to his selected essays, a rather curious addition which appears to denote the intricate relationship between fiction and non-fiction in Carver’s oeuvre.

\(^{17}\) Ben Harker, ‘“To be there, inside, and not be there”: Raymond Carver and Class’, *Textual Practice*, 21.4 (2007), 715-36 (p. 715).
have already suggested, that it was the necessary banalities of the laundromat, childcare and low-wage employment that impacted his writing most readily.\textsuperscript{18} Martin Scofield, in two separate publications, also views Carver’s life as being the basis for his fiction, and he praises Carver’s ability to mix the reality of that socioeconomic context into the fiction of his writing. While the relationship may not be as unmediated as it seems, it does provide, Scofield argues, the foundation upon which Carver is able to operate empathetically at close quarters with his characters.\textsuperscript{19}

Reinforcing this idea more widely was a dominant East Coast media, which portrayed Carver in book reviews and opinion columns as the ‘chronicler of blue-collar despair’. Bruce Weber makes it clear that Carver’s voice has ‘an almost journalistic kind of accuracy; his voice is the voice of experience’.\textsuperscript{20} This, surely, is the reason that Phillip Moffitt, editor-in-chief at \textit{Esquire} in the 1980s, wrote to Carver to try and convince him to compose a number of short journalistic features about his regional working-class experience:

For all the newspaper and magazine correspondents posted throughout America, it’s my feeling that remarkably little gets written about what people across the country really see when they look around them […] Instead of getting an honest feel for a person or a place, we get only the ‘balanced’ and usually inadequate view of a journalist struggling to keep his own perceptions out. It’s exactly those perceptions that I’d like to see left in stories about the regions of this country I don’t know.\textsuperscript{21}

Moffitt’s letter is revealing, for it seems to suggest that it is only someone like Carver – that is, someone who has gone \textit{through} the same experience as those he is writing about – that has the authority to fully vocalise the subset of American working-class experience in an authentic way; a conflation that suggests that Carver’s realism is, to a certain extent, as much non-fiction as it is fiction. Moffitt, however, wasn’t alone in this opinion. For many reviewers, and indeed also

\textsuperscript{18} Steven Groarke, ‘Raymond Carver and the Banality of Influence’, \textit{Talus}, 5/6 (1991), 174-84.
\textsuperscript{21} Raymond Carver Papers, XIII, fol. 179, in the William Charvat Collection of American Literature of The Ohio State University Libraries.
individual readers, a large part of Carver’s appeal – and many would argue a large part of his success – is that his realist writing has the definite ring of ‘authenticity’. It is this idea that denotes Carver’s right to cast a light on a very particular type of American working-class experience. By the end of his life, some reviewers even felt he had been successful in promoting this cause. Marilynne Robinson, in a 1988 review of Where I’m Calling From (1988), goes as far as saying that Carver’s fiction has transformed the nation’s perception of the rural working-class. Carver, she wrote – with a not insignificant amount of sentimentality – has ‘turned banality’s pockets out and found all their contents beautiful’.22 Mark Helprin, in The New York Review of Books, argued that Carver’s fiction gave dignity to the forgotten ‘working people [who] seem to be backed up against the northwest coast, as far away from the centres of Anglo-American literary tradition as they can get’.23 The obituaries and short biographies that appeared after his death from lung cancer at the age of fifty only cemented these perceptions. Many are at pains to link the harshness of his early life (and that of other Americans) with the content of his fiction. The New York Times summarised Carver as the chronicler of ‘the working poor’, before reminding readers (lest they forget) that ‘Carver came from the hardscrabble world of the down-and-out blue-collar characters in his stories’.24 The idea even extends beyond the borders of America. Michael Foley, writing in the London Review of Books, calls Carver a kind of ‘literary Rocky – janitor, delivery man, sawmill operator, service-station attendant, an uneducated alcoholic no-hoper who rises to Major Writer status’. He adds, ‘One can tell Carver is genuine because he makes nothing of it’.25 Writing in The Times, Peter Kemp, most famously perhaps, called Carver the ‘American Chekov’ because he reveals the ‘strangeness concealed behind the banal’.26 And while it is important to note that claims of authenticity have a tendency to be overblown – in Carver’s case his persistent self-identification as ‘a paid-in-full member of the working poor’, which the facts of his later life patently contradict – it is the mythic

representation of Carver as an ‘authentic’ artist that seems to persist most readily in the final years of his life.\(^{27}\)

Since my argument about Carver’s influence rests on the assertion that other writers and artists find his work to be useful for making sense of a post-Fordist, neoliberal context, it is important to be clear about the characteristics of Carver’s work that enable this to happen. I want to suggest, therefore, that Carver’s influence can be read in two ways. The first, briefly, is that later artists find in Carver’s work a powerful way to handle the distinction between hegemonic narratives and lived experience. Examples of this are most conspicuous in his personal essays, which explicitly recount the travails of his socioeconomic disempowerment bought on by his working-class background, as well as his early fiction, which, for many, is drawn directly from that same experience. ‘The Student’s Wife’ is an example of just one story that typifies this point, and this thesis will examine others that operate in a similar way. The second aspect that appears to resonate with other artists is Carver’s retreat from the hegemonic narrative of neoliberal labour – that is, as I will argue later, short term, flexible, competition-based work – towards an artisanal form of craft and non-alienated labour. Of course it was Marx who initially argued that the adjustment of labour processes to enhance capital accumulation alienates the worker, but in the neoliberal era, an age which has seen the systematic dismantling of labour unions, the reduction of state intervention, the mass-migration of labour through globalization, the de-skilling of workers in the name of technological automation, and the increasing dominance of age-management in corporations, there appears to have been an intensification of its impact.\(^{28}\) The fragmentation of these institutions in recent years has led, as Richard Sennett makes clear in *The Culture of New Capitalism*, to large groups of working-class and even

\(^{27}\) For more on Carver’s working-poor claims near the end of his life, see, Kellerman, ‘Raymond Carver’, p. 8. At the time of his death Carver owned three homes, two cars, a boat and had nearly $215,000 in savings. For a list of Carver’s assets when he died, see, Sklenicka, pp. 482-3.

\(^{28}\) In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx writes:

Owing to the extensive use of machinery and to division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him.

middle-Americans feeling cast adrift (or, to use Marx’s term once more, alienated) and the result is a widespread sense of personal inferiority and failure — a fact accentuated by neoliberal hegemony which denies the very existence of the working class. Carver, then, appears to offer a muted oppositional alternative to this dominant ideology. It is a narrative of personal belief based on what Raymond Williams famously called residual values. These values are, Williams argued, ‘experiences, meanings and values which cannot be verified or cannot be expressed in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue — cultural as well as social — of some previous social formation’. In the context of late-capitalism or, more specifically, the move from embedded liberalism to neoliberalism, the residue operates outside of the laissez-faire economics linked to free market principles. In Carver’s work the residue is also one that operates outside of the political realm and is particularly localised to his northwest setting. In this sense, then, Carver’s writing projects an alternative, deeply personal form of non-incorporated culture that is distinctive from, say, larger political oppositional solutions and yet — and this is, perhaps, where the intrigue lies — it still provides a distinctive, and even powerful, site of resistance to the hegemonic norms of late-capitalism.

To develop this point a little further, Carver’s anti-political, ground-level resistance might be classed as being part of a wider trend of oppositional movements that have emerged since 1980. Harvey argues:

The effect of such movements has been to shift the terrain of political organization away from traditional political parties and labour organizing into a less focused political dynamic of social action across the whole spectrum of civil society. What such movements lose in focus they gain in terms of direct relevance to particular issues and

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29 Sennett and Cobb begin to deal with this sense of inferiority in *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, and Sennett continues to assess its significance in later publications like *The Corrosion of Character, Respect in a World of Inequality* and particularly in *The Culture of New Capitalism*. Chapter two of this final book deals with what Sennett calls ‘the specter of uselessness’, a state of alienation particularly prevalent amongst middle-Americans in the neoliberal era.

constituencies. They draw strength from being embedded in the nitty-gritty of daily life and struggle.\textsuperscript{31}

Carver’s fiction then, which to borrow Harvey’s term, is heavily invested in the ‘nitty-gritty of daily life’, lends itself to a similar kind of ground-level resistance. And even if many of these organizations hold a plethora of ideas regarding specific alternatives, they are joined with Carver’s work through their commitment to a kind of a-typical political formation.

I will analyse in more detail the specifics of Carver’s residual retreat from neoliberalism in my upcoming chapters, but for now, and as a way of illustrating my point, I want to provide a few brief examples from Carver’s work. In ‘Kindling’, a posthumous story published in Esquire in 1999, Myers, the story’s protagonist, finds solace from his peripatetic life through the act of splitting logs for the couple he is lodging with. This activity seems to be a deliberate refracted reflection of the rural past, and the more Myers involves himself in the work the more its significance is heightened. Carver writes, ‘He decided that he would cut this wood and split it and stack it before sunset, and that it was a matter of life and death that he do so’ (p. 665).

Although Carver does not explicitly state it, we might argue that Myers’s act, by the end of the story, has reached the level of craftsmanship. ‘Craftsmanship’, Sennett argues, ‘names an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake’.\textsuperscript{32} In another story, ‘Menudo’, the protagonist, who has been having an affair with a neighbour, finds solace and a peculiar satisfaction in raking leaves. Carver writes:

It’s light out – light enough at any rate for what I have to do. And then, without thinking about it any more, I start to rake. I rake our yard, every inch of it. It’s important it be done right, too. I set the rake right down into the turf and pull hard. It must feel to the grass like it does whenever someone gives your hair a hard jerk (p. 581).

Like the work undertaken by Myers in ‘Kindling’, Carver’s protagonist in ‘Menudo’ places an emphasis on doing a job ‘right’, that is, to take Sennett’s terminology, ‘to do a job well for its

\textsuperscript{31} Harvey refers to a number of movements to illustrate his point, such as the Zapatista revolution in Mexico, the ‘50 Years Is Enough’ campaign and Greenpeace. See, Harvey, \textit{A Brief History of Neoliberalism}, pp. 200-01.

own sake’. The task itself (raking leaves) seems particularly significant in that it is the pulling up of dead matter, a not entirely pleasant process – ‘It must feel to the grass like it does whenever someone gives your hair a hard jerk’ – but a necessary one for providing the light, oxygen and life necessary for organic growth. In this sense, then, the action of raking becomes a route to character development. As the mid-twentieth century sociologist C. Wright Mills argued:

The craftsman’s work is thus a means of developing his skill, as well as a means of developing himself as a man. It is not that self-development is an ulterior goal, but that such development is the cumulative result obtained by devotion to and practice of his skills. As he gives it the quality of his own mind and skill, he is further developing his own nature; in this simple sense, he lives in and through his work, which confesses and reveals him to the world.\(^{33}\)

Beyond this, the action speaks more broadly towards the protagonist’s own domestic situation, that in the act of cleaning his lawn, he is also cleaning up his own domestic ‘mess’. After his own yard, he moves across the road to his neighbour’s yard, a movement that suggests that craft leads towards a muted kind of collectivism. When the Baxters, the homeowners, come out to see what he’s doing, he stops. ‘I’ve finished here anyway’, Carver writes. ‘There are other yards, more important yards for that matter. I kneel, and, taking a grip low down on the rake handle, I pull the last of the leaves into my bag and tie off the top’ (p. 582). Having completed his task to a gratifying level, his mind turns to others – especially, it seems, to the neighbour he has been sleeping with – which suggests the possibility of spreading the effect of craftsmanship, that, like the action of tidying the leaves, he might be able to ‘tie off’ the loose ends of his extra-marital relationship.

The idea that craftsmanship extends to the area of social collectivism or personal development is reinforced in ‘Elephant’, another late-story in which the protagonist’s walk to work becomes a time of social craftsmanship, a moment to reflect and cultivate his familial

relationships, even if the reality of his social situation appears, initially at least, far more constrained than the end of the story actually suggests. The allusion to social craftsmanship underlines the idea that, for Carver, craft stretches beyond its natural territory of manual labour. Craftsmanship, after all, focuses, ‘on objective standards, on the thing in itself’, as Sennett argues, and therefore we might even point to Carver’s presentation of his own writing practice as an example of sharing or providing an example of non-alienated labour. As he wrote in ‘On Writing’, ‘In the end the satisfaction of having done our best, and proof of that labour, is the one thing we can take into the grave’ (p. 731). Carver’s essay places a strong emphasis on craft and skill over the idea of sudden inspiration or innate, untrained talent. In his later-life fiction and personal writing Carver depicts work done for enjoyment and self-worth, a space where the ultimate aim is not the accumulation of capital or the accomplishment of an arbitrary numerical target, but rather the accumulation of dignity, personality and experience – an idea that stands in sharp contrast to the transient, adaptable and ephemeral labour processes of both Fordist and post-Fordist capitalism. In *The Culture of New Capitalism* Sennett argues that ‘The emerging social order militates against the ideal of craftsmanship, that is, learning to do just one thing really well; such commitment can often prove economically destructive’. Carver’s poem ‘Shiftless’, underlines this idea by emphasizing creative activity, and what might be read as his own creative expression, as being firmly outside of the sphere of economic activity. He writes, ‘My goal was always | to be shiftless. | I liked the idea of sitting in a chair | in front of your house for hours, doing nothing […] Making things out of wood with a knife. | Where’s the harm there?’.

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35 These ideas find their source most conspicuously in Carver’s first writing teacher, John Gardner, an idea I will discuss in more detail in chapter one.
36 For more on labour trends in the twentieth century, see, David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, pp. 189-200.
more simple aim of wood whittling. This is an example, as one critic makes clear, of ‘anachronistic craftsmanship seemingly outside or pre-dating the alienating processes whereby things and people are re-produced’. And while a political analysis might be interred from this poem, its emphasis is subtle compared with that placed on the craftsman-like action, suggesting that Carver’s residual response is rather more consolatory than it is critical.

**Theoretical Approaches to Carver’s Influence**

For now, then, it is helpful to remember that those who are influenced by Carver are attracted to him for two main reasons. First, they see in his writing a zone where the difference between hegemonic narratives and lived experience is explored, and, second, they see what appears to be a consolatory retreat towards a kind of residual craftsmanship that responds to the dominant neoliberal ideology. This thesis, therefore, is a study of what others have done – in different media and places – with this legacy. To develop this a little more, and in order to gain some purchase on where my ideas on Carver’s influence sit, I want to move on to explore how Carver’s influence operates.

As a preliminary to this discussion it is worth pointing out that, broadly speaking, literary history is constituted by a favourable view of influence. In this sense, writers typically seek to embed themselves amongst their literary predecessors by calling into practice allusions, affinities and kinships with earlier writers. This, for example, was something that Carver was apt to do. In his essay ‘On Writing’ he situates his own work within a broader canon of past short story writers from Isak Dinesen to Chekov, Evan Connell, Flannery O’Connor and V.S. Pritchett. The proliferation of critical models of influence in the last century – in the criticism of T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis, Ihab Hassan, Harold Bloom and Christopher Ricks – suggests an equally broad critical interest in the topic. The most noteworthy – and certainly controversial –

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40 In more recent literary history this practice goes as far back as Spencer’s invocation in section VII of *The Faerie Queene* in which he refers to Chaucer as being ‘the pure well head of poesie’ and his decision to be buried within feet of his grave in Westminster Abbey.
in this list is Bloom’s theory of influence published in *The Anxiety of Influence* in 1973. The first in what was to become a tetralogy of works on influence, Bloom argues for a heroic, individualist reading of authorial influence that is heavily mediated by his idealist view of literature.\textsuperscript{42} Bloom relates this to literary influence by asserting that literary history is ‘indistinguishable from poetic influence’ since writers make literary history by misreading their precursors in an attempt to ‘clear imaginative space for themselves’.\textsuperscript{43} This misreading, or what Bloom, taking a cue from Shakespeare’s ‘Sonnet 87’, calls poetic misprision, is best understood as a twofold psychological action. First the later writer falls in love with a precursor’s text with a Longinian passion, which results, secondly, in a psychological imprisonment. The anxiety of influence which is produced out of this complex act of misreading draws heavily on Freud’s family romance in which the later writer is locked in an *agon*, or struggle, that takes place at the level of the psyche with their precursor. Consequently a battle occurs between both writers, a battle which is, above all, an individual one, enacted in the later writer’s own private mind against their precursor until the precursor is eventually, if the later writer is to be victorious, effaced. In order to implement his theory, Bloom presents a literary mechanism that he calls the six revisionary ratios, movements that exhibit how one writer deviates from another, or, in other words, how what he calls a ‘strong’ writer escapes the anxiety of influence.

It is worth dwelling on Bloom’s theory, not only because it is perhaps the most widely recognised theory of literary influence in the last few decades and has given rise to a number of other interpretations on influence (not least Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s formation of a feminist theory of influence in *The Mad Woman In The Attic*) but because Bloom, in his introductory textbook series for Chelsea House Publishers, applies his theory to Carver’s


\textsuperscript{43} Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 5.
writing. In it Bloom writes that he has an ‘imperfect sympathy’ for Carver’s fiction, arguing, in an allusion to Irving Howe’s book review, that Carver is ‘a master within the limits he imposed upon himself’. These ‘limits’ are what Bloom perceives as the restrictions of a Hemingwayean literary realism, as he makes clear later on:

So overwhelming was Hemingway’s influence upon Carver’s earliest stories that the later writer wisely fended Hemingway off by an askesis that went well beyond the elliptical style practised by the author of The First Forty-Nine Stories. In his own, final phase, Carver began to develop beyond an art so largely reliant upon leaving things out.

To explain, just briefly, what Bloom means by this I want to first turn to his definition of askesis in The Anxiety of Influence. The shortened definition given for this penultimate revisionary ratio is that it is a ‘movement of self-purgation which intends the attainment of a state of solitude […] [the later artist] yields up part of his own human and imaginative endowment, so as to separate himself from others, including the precursor’. In other words, the later artist yields up part of their creative freedom, and in this process of self-sacrifice, individuates themselves.

Askesis is, on a simple level, a curtailment. The later artist makes themselves smaller than their precursor – or in Bloom’s violent lexicon, ‘wound himself without further emptying himself of his inspiration’.

While Bloom’s assessment of Carver is provocative, he fails to give a single example of how or why Carver might have done this. The only clue he provides is his reference to Carver’s ‘final phase’, in which he proposes that Carver ‘began to develop beyond an art so largely reliant upon leaving things out’, an idea that only reiterates what other critics, like Ewing Campbell for example, had previously argued regarding the ‘evolution’ of Carver’s writing.

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45 Bloom, Raymond Carver, p. 10.
46 Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence, p. 15.
47 Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence, p. 121.
48 Campbell aligns each of Carver’s major story collections with a developmental period. Apprenticeship: Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?; Breakthrough: What We Talk About When We Talk About Love;
Bloom’s intimation seems to be – and this is reinforced by his critical focus on Carver’s late stories in the textbook – that Carver’s early fiction, specifically his first two story collections, were unable to circumnavigate the anxiety of influence posed by Hemingway’s fiction.

However through a curtailment of his minimalism – which in practice, perhaps rather counter-intuitively, means a formal expansion – Carver was able to overcome Hemingway’s influence. Which is not to say, I would add, that Bloom necessarily counts Carver’s late fiction as being particularly successful in and of itself. For Bloom closes his analysis by suggesting that one of Carver’s most anthologized stories, ‘Cathedral’, is actually indebted to D.H. Lawrence’s ‘The Blind Man’, and argues that Carver, who he suggests must have known of Lawrence’s story, produces a weaker piece of fiction. Bloom concludes by revealing his Longinian tendency, ‘There is a reverberation in Lawrence’s story that carries us into the high madness of great art. Carver, though a very fine artist, cannot carry us there’.49

The problem with Bloom’s formulation in relation to Carver is that his idealism fails to accept the role of any external circumstances in the creation (and subsequent reading and interpretation) of Carver’s text. It is now widely understood, for instance, that Carver’s development (which was nominally thought of in terms of a broadening of literary style in line with his own personal victory over alcohol addiction) has more to do with the lessening of Gordon Lish’s editorial control over his work than any type of stylistic development or even – to indulge Bloom just a little – a psychological battle with Hemingway’s fiction.50 Likewise Bloom’s accusation that Carver’s ‘Cathedral’ is indebted to Lawrence’s ‘The Blind Man’ fails to take account of the broader historical and biographical background to the formation of


Carver’s narrative, which is now recognized as being based on a real-life meeting between Carver and Tess Gallagher’s blind friend Jerry Carriveau.51

Bloom’s theory then, while stimulating, appears to fall short of providing a definitive route into analyzing Carver’s influence. Alan Sinfield provides a useful summary of the opposition when he writes:

Usually, in our culture, literature is envisaged as ‘rising above’ its conditions of production and reception; as transcending social and political concerns and other such mundane matters. The argument most often presented for this is that great art has endured the test of time […] In my view the ‘art’ of other times and places that we ‘appreciate’ is, ipso facto, that upon which we can gain some kind of purchase from our own time and place, mediated through our particular institutions.52

While Sinfield’s former point highlights the type of idealism that underpins Bloom’s theory of influence, his latter point is helpful in developing an understanding of how Carver’s texts operate on those who are influenced by them. Despite his admirers’ protestations – and here I am particularly thinking, for example, of the work done by Tess Gallagher, William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll in promoting the reprinting of Beginners (2009) – I hold that Carver’s texts, to borrow Sinfield’s phraseology, do not transcend the social, political or even the mundane circumstances in which they were produced, and therefore must not be studied independently of these realities. Raymond Williams summarizes this position when he argues that literature and art cannot be separated ‘from other kinds of social practice in such a way as to make them subject to quite special and distinct laws’.53 Likewise, my exploration of Carver’s influence on McInerney, Murakami and Iñárritu suggests that Carver’s influence is most pronounced when those who are influenced by him find in his writing a way of gaining some kind of purchase on their own reality. I have already tried to show something of this in the way in which the

53 Raymond Williams, Problems in Materialism and Culture (London: Verso, 1980), p. 44. Writing more recently Terry Eagleton echoes Williams’s idea when he writes that ‘we may see literature as a text, but we may also see it as a social activity, a form of social and economic production which exists alongside, and interrelates with, other such forms’. See, Terry Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism (London: Methuen, 1976), p. 60.
institutionalization of Carver as an ‘authentic’ artist in the media came to be the dominant view of his writing and persona, and my later chapters will seek to more fully develop more specific examples – such as the impact of Carver’s stylistic changes in the late-1980s, which seem significant for Murakami as he tries to respond to the twin tragedies of the Kobe earthquake and Tokyo gas attack in 1993.54

In this sense, then, it is worth highlighting that there is also a strong affinity between the socioeconomic reality of those who are influenced by Carver and their hermeneutic reading of his texts. Sinfield continues to argue that:

the kind of intervention intended by the writer is not usefully considered as merely personal inspiration; it occurs within a framework of socially constructed possibilities (as speech and writing use the lexicon and grammar of the language). Nor need it dominate serious study, for once the text gets out into the world the conditions of reception are quite beyond the writer’s control. Literary texts are certainly read, all the time, in ways the writer did not mean – that is the condition, no less, of continuing attention.55

There are two points that are worth gleaning from this. The first is that Carver’s writing was originally composed within an important socially constructed framework that ought not to be discounted when interpreting his texts. And the second, which I think in a way precedes the

54 In this respect it is worth drawing attention to the arguments made in Mark McGurl’s The Program Era. McGurl traces the influence of creative writing programmes on postwar American literature and in doing so presents a model of influence that is more clearly aligned to Sinfield’s interpretation, and is therefore closer to my formulation, than Bloom’s. McGurl argues for a twofold approach to the influence of creative writing programmes. The first is that they impart textual influence through their teaching syllabus. ‘Consider the stylistic afterlives of Faulkner and Hemingway’, McGurl writes, ‘who spent little time in the classroom but have been “teachers” to so many’. And, secondly, creative writing programmes infer an influence between the professional tutor and their students – an idea that has its precursor in the relationship between editors and writers, such as Stein and Hemingway, or Pound and Eliot. See, Mark McGurl, The Program Era (London: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 321-2.

55 Sinfield, Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain, p. 41.
first, is that what is of real interest in relation to Carver’s influence is the way in which his texts are read and interpreted by others who have come after him, and in particular the way in which the socioeconomic reality of those who are influenced by Carver affects their reading and understanding of his work. This is the reason why I give such weight to understanding the particular socioeconomic and historical circumstances of those who claim Carver as an influence. It is through this lens of socially constructed possibility that Carver’s writing becomes ‘powerful stories working in and beyond their initial historical moment’.\(^\text{56}\) As Sinfield’s position makes clear, to repudiate the idealist position is not to diminish the consequence of Carver’s texts, rather to see them in this way frees them to multiple interpretations, none of which need be bound by geographic, political or historical exclusivity, meaning that his influence can extend across a number of significant geographic and cultural boundaries.

**Gordon Lish and Tess Gallagher**

This line of criticism holds a concomitant purpose in relation to Carver studies in particular, and leads me to address one final issue before moving on to the study of Carver’s influence proper. The issue is not so much with Carver himself, but is to do with the editor of his first three major collections, Gordon Lish. Readers who are broadly familiar with twentieth-century American literature will be aware of Lish’s pivotal role in the New York publishing industry in the 1970s and ’80s.\(^\text{57}\) It has been widely documented – first by D.T. Max in *The New York Times* in 1998, and more recently by Lish himself in an interview with *The Paris Review* – that Lish went beyond what might be considered to be standard editorial practice in relation to Carver’s fiction, sometimes inserting chunks of his own writing, or, more commonly, subtracting drastically from Carver’s prose.\(^\text{58}\) Lish’s most radical role was in the production of Carver’s second

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\(^{56}\) Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, p. 41.

\(^{57}\) Lish became the fiction editor of *Esquire* in 1969 before moving on to the post of senior editor at Knopf in 1977.

collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), his most notoriously minimal and what was therefore seen as his most Carveresque publication. The account has been much studied and has played an important part in redefining Carver scholarship in recent years and so I can therefore be brief in my exposition. 59

The pair first became acquainted in 1968 when Carver was working for a textbook company in Palo Alto. An aspiring editor, Lish’s main accomplishment at the time had been the creation and publication of the journal *Genesis West* for which he had managed to solicit the work of Donald Barthelme, Tillie Olsen and Grace Paley (amongst others), and convinced Ken Kesey to become an editor. When Lish later became the fiction editor of *Esquire*, Carver began sending him stories. In 1971, almost two years later, Lish accepted Carver’s story ‘Neighbours’ for publication. After two further stories in the magazine (‘What Is It?’ and ‘Collectors’) Lish edited Carver’s first major collection, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, and published it with McGraw-Hill in 1976. Four years later, a year before *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* was published, Carver wrote a letter to Lish, now a senior editor at Knopf, explaining that he had a group of stories that he thought would make a good new collection. In May 1980, Carver hand delivered the manuscript to Lish in New York and only days later Lish wrote to Carver letting him know he wanted to publish the stories with Knopf. A month later, as Carver was about to leave for a summer trip, Lish sent an edited manuscript to Carver who only had time to briefly look over it, before mailing back a cheque for typesetting. When he returned from his trip Carver found a contract from Knopf waiting for him in the post which he duly signed and returned. A few days later, Lish’s typed manuscript arrived and the differences with

the earlier manuscript were considerable. Lish had cut back much of Carver’s prose. Carver, who had signed the contract without seeing the final galleys, was powerless to change anything. When the publication was eventually released, Carver was hailed as the king of minimalism, his photograph was printed on the front page of *The New York Times Book Review* and he became a household name in American letters.

It is frequently claimed that Lish cut the manuscript of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* by seventy-five per cent. Some critics therefore argue that Carver’s work ought rather to be seen as a composite production, a culmination of author and editor, and that any critical discussion of Carver’s influence is negated because of this fact. But this can be countered in the following way: even if some of Carver’s work involved an element of collaboration with Lish that does not discount a discussion based on the pragmatic premise that there is a certain Carveresque aesthetic that exists and has been circulated that proves resonant and influential to other writers and artists. This is especially true since that is how, until more recently, Carver’s writing has been understood, and, more importantly, it is how the artists that I analyse later understood it.

It is also briefly worth highlighting that for those who have an idealistic view of Carver’s work – to borrow from Sinfield again, that it “‘[rises] above’ its conditions of production and reception” – Lish’s involvement clearly problematizes the validity of Carver’s published work, which is why critics like Stull and Carroll call for a return to what Carver wrote (before Lish’s edits) and collaborated with Gallagher to produce *Beginners*, the original manuscript that Carver delivered to Lish in New York in 1980. In this sense too, the debate surrounding the legitimacy of Carver’s authorship points towards another important aspect of Carver’s afterlife that if I had had more time and space I would have discussed in more detail: Tess Gallagher’s management of Carver’s literary estate. Since Carver’s death, Gallagher has opposed a number of publications that contradict her optimistic version of Carver’s life. Sam Halpert recalls that Gallagher retracted her interview for his biography. ‘For the record’, Halpert

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60 Stull and Carroll state their case in, ‘Prolegomena to Any Future Carver Studies’, *Journal of Short Story in English*, 46 (2006), 2-5 (p. 3).
writes in his introduction, ‘I did interview her [Gallagher] for …What We Talk About Raymond Carver. She wrote many friendly notes expressing enthusiasm for the project before her final approval of the transcript, but shortly after the book was typeset and review copies had been sent out, her attorney informed me of her decision to withdraw her interview’. Carver’s brother, James, who recently published a reminiscence of his early life with Carver, also revealed that he was ‘very careful to avoid any lawsuit from her [Gallagher]’. Perhaps the most notorious interference was the copyright warning issued by Gallagher to Brian Evenson, a professor at Oklahoma State University, who attempted to publish his research on Lish’s edits before D.T. Max wrote his article (it took the influence and skill of The New York Times to bypass Gallagher’s warnings when they published Max’s article in 1993).

The reverse side of these interventions is that Gallagher has promoted various posthumous publications of Carver’s work, and sold the filmmaking rights to a number of feature film directors. Both these negative and positive interferences suggest that Gallagher remains invested in how Carver’s legacy is perceived, and therefore plays a role in his afterlife. This is an area of Carver studies which has garnered little critical attention to date, largely because there is little information in the public domain regarding Gallagher’s administration of Carver’s estate. The most comprehensive account of how Gallagher came to acquire Carver’s literary rights – a not entirely straightforward process – is documented by Sklenicka in her epilogue to Raymond Carver: A Writer’s Life. ‘Under Gallagher’s stewardship, [Carver’s] major books have remained in print’, Sklenicka writes. ‘Though sales of Carver’s books have fallen off in the twenty years since his death, his influence abides. He is, as he liked to say, “out

62 Email to the author, 23 June 2016.
there in history” – a summary that suggests that Gallagher’s involvement in Carver’s texts since his death plays a significant role in their reception, and indicates an area worthy of further study.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{64} Sklenicka, p. 488.
Three Case Studies

The following chapters present a detailed exploration of Carver’s influence on three distinctly individual writers and artists. While it has been inevitable that personal preference has played a role in my selection, it is also true that each fulfils a basic criterion. The first is that each produced work after Carver, and the second is that each admits to having an affiliation with, or being influenced by, Carver. Admission, of course, is not a condition of influence, but it did help narrow down what was otherwise a long shortlist of candidates.  

Perhaps the final thing to say in justification is that these are also artists in which I am interested and whose work raises stimulating and important questions for the study of Raymond Carver and contemporary literature and film more generally. In tracing these connections, however, I am not suggesting that Carver’s influence is limited to these three individuals. Indeed there are other writers and artists, from equally distinct and individual backgrounds, from whom the main chapters may have been formed. Therefore, before beginning my chapters I want to present three short case studies of other artists who have been influenced by Carver that I have not explored in detail in the main body of my thesis. These are case studies that might be developed if this thesis was to be extended into a book-length study.

The Transatlantic Political Convergence and Stuart Evers

If Carver came to prominence in the US in the early 1980s, then he also came to prominence in the UK around the same time. In 1982 Bill Buford, the American ex-pat editor of *Granta*, published a special feature issue titled ‘Dirty Realism: New Writing From America’. Collected in the publication was Carver’s ‘The Compartment’, as well as Ford’s ‘Rock Springs’, Wolff’s ‘The Barrack’s Thief’, and stories by Jayne Anne Phillips, Elizabeth Tallent, Frederick Barthelme and Bobbie Ann Mason. Buford opened his introduction with the following announcement:

A new fiction seems to be emerging from America, and it is a fiction of a peculiar and haunting kind. It is not only unlike anything currently in Britain, but it is also remarkably unlike what American fiction is usually understood to be.\footnote{Buford went on to argue that this new fiction is of a ‘different scope’ to what had come to be understood by British readers as conventional American literature – the ‘epic ambitions of Normal Mailer or Saul Bellow’ or the ‘self-consciously experimental’ writing of John Barth and Thomas Pynchon. Dirty realism is devoted instead to the ‘local details, the nuances, the little disturbances in language and gesture’, and focused on, as Buford famously put it, ‘unadorned, unfurnished, low-rent tragedies about people who watch day-time television, read cheap romances or listen to country and western music’. See, Bill Buford, ‘Editorial’, \textit{Granta}, 8 (1982), 4-5 (p. 4).}

Three years later, Carver – who was possibly the most marketable of this new literary school – had a collected version of his first three major story publications published by Picador in the UK, as well as interviews by Gordon Burn in \textit{The Times}, David Sexton in \textit{Literary Review} and a lengthy article by Michael Foley in the \textit{London Review of Books}.\footnote{Raymond Carver, \textit{The Stories of Raymond Carver} (London: Picador, 1985); Gordon Burn, ‘Poetry, Poverty and Realism Down in Carver Country’, \textit{Times}, 17 April 1985; David Sexton, ‘David Sexton Talks to Raymond Carver’, \textit{Literary Review}, 85 (1985), 36-40; Michael Foley, ‘Dirty Realist’, \textit{London Review of Books}, 2 May 1985, (p. 12).} The same year Buford organised Carver’s first UK book tour, courtesy of Picador and Collins Harvill, and while he was in London, Carver gave a reading at the National Poetry Centre with Ford, Wolff and Tallent – all writers championed by Buford in \textit{Granta}. Carver opens his essay ‘Friendship’ with an account of the evening and, in playful resistance to Buford’s characterisation, reminds his readers that while ‘for some time now critics and reviewers who write for the British papers and magazines have been calling them “Dirty Realists”’, he, Ford and Wolff, ‘don’t take this seriously. They joke about it just as they joke about a lot of other things. They don’t feel like part of a group’.\footnote{Raymond Carver, ‘Friendship’, \textit{Granta}, 25 (1988), 155-61 (p. 156). On a second visit to Britain two years later, Carver and Gallagher rented a flat in Notting Hill for a month. From it Carver held interviews and met photographers and filmmakers. Collins Harvill arranged another book tour, this time with Ford and Jonathan Raban, and while the trips were primarily promotional, they also gave Carver the chance to meet other writers and editors. On their first visit in 1985 Carver and Gallagher visited museums with Ted and Virginia Solotaroff, and met Sean O’Faolain and Edna Longley while staying at Paul Muldoon’s flat in Ireland. In 1987 Carver and Gallagher spent a long evening with Salman Rushdie and Marianne Wiggins.} While the development of all three writers’ careers in the late 1980s and ’90s suggests that Carver’s assessment was true, what was particularly appealing about Buford’s categorisation for UK readers at the time was that dirty realism, as Robert Rebein argues, presented a ‘specific class of people’, who lived in ‘specific places’, and held down ‘specific jobs’. It presented an image of America as ‘wealthy beyond words and yet crime-ridden,
arrogantly confident and yet horribly dissatisfied’. In short, it was a kind of ‘truncated documentary naturalism that told the “truth” about America in the 1980s’.  

Perhaps one of the reasons why Carver’s writing – and writing like his – became so popular in Britain was because the UK was turning towards a similar socioeconomic context. Around the same time that Buford published his special feature issue, Margaret Thatcher’s government – just like her US counterpart – was turning the UK towards neoliberalism.

Housing, transport and utility sectors were privatised; jobs in manufacturing and other primary and secondary industries declined as the labour market and international trade was globalized; neoliberal logic retracted state intervention and union power was curtailed; the industrial and financial sectors were deregulated; and international free trade and foreign direct investment were encouraged. Ideological neoliberalism became entrenched under New Labour’s ‘entrepreneurial governance’ in the ’90’s and ’00’s, which saw, in particular, the public sector re-orientated towards marketization and a subsequent widespread appropriation of neoliberal ‘common sense’.  

What is interesting, however, is that despite Carver’s popularity in the UK in the 1980s and the socioeconomic convergence between the two nations, there does not appear to be a conspicuous example of a British writer who is indebted to Carver’s work in the way that I have been arguing during this time. The only useful case study that might be pointed to during this time is a collection of short stories by fifteen young British writers entitled All Hail the New Puritans. Published in 2000 – over a decade after Carver’s death – and edited by Nicolas

\[\text{69} \text{Robert Rebein, } \text{Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists} \text{ (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001) p. 42.} \]


\[\text{71} \text{Nicholas Blincoe and Matt Thorne, } \text{All Hail the New Puritans} \text{ (London: Fourth Estate, 2000). The collection featured stories from the following British authors: Alex Garland, Toby Litt, Scarlett Thomas,} \]
Blincoe and Matt Thorne, the collection opens with a ten-point manifesto that eschews everything from rhetorical devices and authorial asides to dual temporal narratives and elaborate punctuation. While the manifesto is more extreme and dogmatic, it does echo some of Carver’s sentiments in ‘On Writing’. And yet, when one considers the writers featured in the collection and the development of their careers – take, for instance, Scarlett Thomas, Geoff Dyer, Alex Garland and Bo Fowler – it could hardly be said that they continue to adhere to the dogmatic commandments that the collection proposes.

It is not, then, Carver’s immediate context of the 1980s or even the 1990s in which his influence appears in any convincing form in the UK. Instead I want to consider the generation after Carver, and in doing so assess his impact on one of the UK’s more recent short story practitioners. Stuart Evers was born in 1976 and grew up in Congleton, Cheshire. Like Carver’s American northwest, Evers’s Cheshire deeply informs his fiction. It is a kind of British hinterland, ‘a nowhere and everywhere place’, he argues, ‘neither North nor the Midlands, neither affluent nor dirt poor’. He studied English at Liverpool University, but it was not until his early twenties when he first read Carver that his passion for short stories was kindled and he felt the drive to begin the creative process. His first collection, Ten Stories About Smoking, was published in 2011 and won the London Book Award. A novel, If This Is Home, based on two characters featured in his first collection, followed in 2013. A second collection, Your Father Sends His Love, was published in 2016.

What is notable about Evers’s first collection in particular, is that it exhibits formal similarities to Carver’s writing that, despite their admission of strong influence, as I will argue later, does not exist in quite the same way in McInerney or Murakami’s fiction. Evers’s first published collection, Ten Stories About Smoking, features stories remarkably similar in tone and style to Carver’s early work. His prose is characterised and reliant on parataxis, ellipsis,

Matthew Branton, Candida Clark, Nicholas Blincoe, Daren King, Rebecca Ray, Simon Lewis, Ben Richards, Anna Davis, Matt Thorne, Tony White, Geoff Dyer and Bo Fowler.  


repetitive conjunctions and other verbal tics – even his titles are reminiscent of Carver’s.\(^7^4\) It’s unsurprising, then, that critics describe his fiction as ‘Carveresque minimalism’, as ‘American as apple pie and writing workshops’, and ‘spare and controlled […] worthy of the many comparisons to Raymond Carver’.\(^7^5\) But more importantly, the banal content of Evers’s fiction – like Carver’s – complements its style. For Evers’s characters are working-class or lower-middle-class men and women caught in unappealing careers and unfulfilling relationships. They are, he admits, the ‘forgotten men and women’ of twenty-first century Britain:

People who work in pubs and supermarkets, in offices and business centres, people who have small dreams that never seem to be fulfilled, people who aren’t anywhere when important events happen, but are driving a car taking their kids to school, or waiting for a bus. The kinds of people I know, the kinds of people I see every day.\(^7^6\)

This would all be of interest in terms of tracing an affinity with Carver but perhaps ultimately rather aimless if it were not for Evers’s own claim of literary ancestry. Of Carver himself, Evers writes that he is ‘the ultimate modern short story writer’, and that his fiction exhibits similar empathy and concern to his own – ‘regret, loneliness, moments of joy shining through

\(^7^4\) Take the following titles: ‘Things Seem So Far Away, Here’, ‘What’s in Swindon?’, ‘Sometimes Nothing, Sometimes Everything’. For an example of prosaic similarity, take this section from his story ‘Underground’:

‘Say something,’ she said. ‘Oh please, honey, say something at least.’
He wiped at his mouth again and put his head in his hands. He shook his head.
‘No,’ he said. ‘I can’t. I can’t do that to you.’
‘Do what?’ she said.
‘I can’t,’ he said. ‘I promised myself I wouldn’t do this.’
He looked away from her as he spoke. He told her he loved her very much. He told her that she had made him happier than he could ever have imagined. He told her that he never meant to let it get this far. He told her that she gave him hope and that there was nothing he would like to do more than marry her.
‘So what is it? What?’ she said. He looked up at her.
‘I think I killed some people.’

Like much of Carver’s dialogue, this section from Evers’s story is (mostly) arranged into simple paragraphs that isolates the characters’ actions and perceptions. The prose is disjunctive and the structure of the sentences replicates working-class speech. There is an equal inability to conceptualize, and while the character finally reveals the source of his anguish by the end of the conversation, the repetition of phrases and questions represents a broader inarticulateness. See, Stuart Evers, Ten Stories About Smoking (London: Picador, 2011), p. 106. Further references to this collection are given in parentheses after the quotation in the text.


\(^7^6\) ‘Stuart Evers’, Storgy Magazine [https://storgy.com/stuart-evers] [accessed 23 May 2017]
drudgery’. He even admits, as McInerney and Murakami both do, that ‘Carver had a profound, deep influence on me and my writing’. A large part of Carver’s impact on Evers, it seems, is political. ‘I wanted to write about people I identify with’, Evers told one interviewer. ‘People who don’t shop in Waitrose because there isn’t one for fifty miles. They’re what politicians call “hard-working people” but I just think of them as people who get by’. These ‘people that get by’ are Generation X, the children of the Baby Boomers, whose parents’ socioeconomic prosperity appears to be an unattainable model in the neoliberal age of deregulation, diminished education grants and deindustrialisation on a national scale. The uncertainty of socioeconomic security – a feeling firmly emulative of Carver’s own broken American dreams (the bankrupt Toni and Leo in ‘What Is It?’, the covetous Millers in ‘Neighbours’, and the depressed Nan and Mike in ‘The Student’s Wife’) – threads through the course of Evers’s fiction.

What is particularly interesting, therefore, about Evers’s work is that not only is Carver a clear stylistic antecedent but his content and thematic concerns are mirrored too. In this sense Carver’s influence on Evers has some correspondence, as I will show later on, with McInerney and Murakami, in that the same issues of work and labour in the neoliberal period are clearly present. A story like ‘Real Work’, for instance, published in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, explicitly questions the possibility of ‘real’ and fulfilling labour in post-austerity Britain. The story centres on Ben and Cara, a couple caught in a somewhat unconventional relationship. Ben’s life is rigid, structured around a small social circle in north London and his work as a data analyst for Haringey Council. Cara is a visual artist who lives in an inner-city high rise flat and inhabits a highly sexualised community. Throughout the story Cara’s work takes increasing precedence in the couple’s relationship. When they move into their flat in Dalston – a flat that the estate agent tells them had once been part of the mental institution that housed the Elephant Man – Cara declares that it is the kind of place she ‘can do work […] real work’, and sets her studio up in the spare room (p. 168). From then on any attempt by Ben to regulate her artistic autonomy is swiftly rejected. While he worries about their accruing debt, Cara turns down a

78 Liu, Independent, 16 May 2015.
position as a commercial artist. When he buys her an ‘electronic gizmo’ to help organise her life, she ‘destroyed it and made it part of one of [her] works’ (p. 176). While a new circle of artistic friends aids her career, her drug and alcohol use increase, which consequentially hinders Ben’s regulated occupational life. Eventually Cara begins to sell some of her work, and when Ben suggests they take a holiday to celebrate, she refuses to go, arguing, ‘I’ve got work I’ve got to do here […] I’ve got to keep working’ (p. 177). While he is away she finishes her long-term film project and one of her new friends offers to host a screening at his gallery. The relationship eventually collapses after Ben watches the film, a split screen montage that contrasts pornographic images with violent news footage, which she dedicates to him. The story closes quite suddenly after the explicit description of Cara’s film. Ben leaves the screening, and the implication is that he is leaving Cara too.

Primarily, as I’ve already suggested, Evers’s story appears to be an ironic commentary about the possibility of ‘real’ work in the neoliberal era, or to be more precise, post-austerity Britain, and indicates that Carver’s influence is still resonant, especially after the 2008 financial crisis. Ben’s regulated employment is clearly unfulfilling, but the opposite – the creative freedom offered by Cara’s art – is an equally unappealing alternative. In this sense there is a similar logic, I would suggest, in Carver’s ‘Put Yourself In My Shoes’ in which Myers leaves his unfulfilling job as a textbook editor only to find that the creative freedom of full-time writing is equally alienating. When Myers meets his wife, Paula, after work she asks him what he’s done that day. ‘Nothing’, Myers says, ‘I vacuumed’ (p. 103). His admission is preceded only a page earlier by Carver who reveals that ‘Myers was between stories, and he felt despicable’ (p. 102). In both stories the promise of artistic freedom fails to provide any sense of purpose and instead only leads to the same kind of boredom and dissociation felt in the kind of bureaucratic office job so prevalent in the neoliberal labour market. In this sense both stories reveal or highlight a kind of negative space behind the idea that the writer or artist provides an example of unalienated labour, and this is why the idea of craftsmanship is vitally important in understanding Carver’s own artistic intervention. Evers’s story doesn’t go as far as Carver does in his late fiction in this sense, but the broader implication of Ben’s action at the end of the story
is that what he sees as the latent immorality of Cara’s artwork opposes what appears to be his
(and also Carver’s) conservative ideal that successful art ought to have a use value, one that
concomitantly instructs and illuminates society in some kind of ethical or affirmative way.

**Diminished Class-Consciousness and Denis Johnson**

The idea that Carver offers a retreat from, or consolatory model of how to negotiate, the
bewildering world of neoliberalism will be a main strand of my forthcoming argument.
Underpinning much of this idea is the notion that Carver’s fiction does not include any overt
political class-consciousness.\(^{79}\) Despite Carver’s ostensible position as the ‘chronicler of blue-
collar despair’ there is a conspicuous lack of political discussion, political theory or trade
unionist activity in his fiction, and because of this some critics argue that Carver’s fiction is
void of any clear codified working-class narrative.\(^{80}\) The reason for this reticence is, perhaps
appropriately enough, not fully articulated by Carver. While his father was involved in an AFL
sponsored strike when he worked at a Biles-Coleman lumber mill in 1936, Carver, who never
settled into a labouring career, had no involvement in strike action.\(^{81}\) But perhaps this more
plainly reflects broader trends in the labour sector in the US during Carver’s lifetime. His early
adult life was marked by industrial decline, particularly in areas reliant on production and
manufacturing, and his later years by the quashing of union power under Reagan’s
administration and the rise of short-term service sector employment. Sennett and Cobb’s *The
Hidden Injuries of Class* explores the impact of these trends on class-consciousness. They
argued that ‘the source of social legitimacy in capitalist society comes primarily from what a

\(^{79}\) Even though Carver, as I outlined in my introduction, is nominally thought of us a blue-collar writer,
class divisions and class-consciousness is not a subject that either McInerney’s Yuppie protagonists nor
Murakami’s quotidian characters have much time for. And while it is true that Iñárritu’s filmmaking is, in
general, conscious of class divisions – especially in *Biutiful* and *The Revenant – Birdman* has decidedly
little to say on the issue.

\(^{80}\) This argument is taken up by Ben Harker who writes:
Carver found that the predominantly realist and naturalist formations of earlier working-class
protest fiction had no purchase on his world: he did not see himself as belonging to a tradition of
working-class fiction, any more than to a tradition of working-class militancy (Harker,

\(^{81}\) For a full description of the strike see, Sklenicka, pp. 7-8.
person produces, and it is from this that inferences are drawn about who he essentially is. A young teacher, for instance, who believes their new occupation is valuable because of its role in social education, quickly loses their sense of purpose when they realise that all they are actually doing is helping students pass exams. The same is true, in a different context, for workers who moved from manufacturing to (often temporary) service sector employment, where tasks became increasingly menial: mindless waitressing, cleaning hotel rooms and selling printing supplies. David Harvey provides a statistical analysis of this impact in Chapter 9 of The Condition of Postmodernity (1990) when he traces employment and inflation rates – as well as labour market structures – in the 1970s and ’80s. ‘Nearly one third of the ten million new jobs created in the USA were thought to be in the “temporary” category’, Harvey writes. ‘The aggregate effects, when looked at from the standpoint of insurance coverage and pension rights, as well as wage levels and job security, by no means appear positive from the standpoint of the working population as a whole’. 

This fact is magnified by the neoliberal state which represses trade unionist activities, dismantles state welfare and repeals state support for secondary industry. The systematic removal of these institutions – all of which help to codify and provide a narrative of solidarity to working-class labourers – serves to leave those near the socioeconomic base of society in a state of peripatetic alienation. This, for better or worse, provides a clue to the lack of political activity in Carver’s fiction. Irving Howe describes it in this way:

It’s a meagre life that Mr. Carver portrays, without religion or politics or culture, without the shelter of class or ethnicity, without the support of strong folkways or conscious rebellion. It’s the life of people who cluster in the folds of our society. They are not bad or stupid; merely lack the capacity to understand the nature of their deprivation – the one thing, as it happens, that might ease or redeem it. The question that follows then, is, what is the impact of this on those who came after Carver? Denis Johnson’s collection Jesus’ Son (1992) – published twenty years after his tutelage by

83 Harvey, pp. 156-7.
84 Howe, ‘Stories of Our Loneliness’, p. 42.
Carver at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop – is an example of one writer who extends Carver’s ‘meagre life’. Johnson’s characters are an underclass void of political ambition, characters whose lack of faith in humanity is countered only by their faith in the ephemeral high of narcotics and violence. This is a familiar world to Johnson who came of age during the 1960s and was, himself, a heavy user of both drugs and alcohol in his late teens and twenties. He published two collections of poetry early in his career before detoxing in the late-1970s and writing four novels in the subsequent two decades. *Jesus’ Son*, published in 1992 but written in the early 1980s, is made up of eleven interconnected vignettes, all narrated in the first person by a character appropriately, and rather unceremoniously, nicknamed ‘Fuckhead’. While drug abuse, crime and violence are far more explicit in Johnson’s work than Carver’s – even in ‘Tell The Women We’re Going’, Jerry’s murderous actions are described in the most minimal terms – there is a sense in which *Jesus’ Son* extends or develops a similar structure of feeling to Carver, one in which shock replaces solidarity and addictive cycles are conjoined by the inability of the protagonist to negotiate the gap between the hegemonic capitalist discourse and reality of his underclass existence. If, as Harker argues, Carver’s texts ‘dramatize characters confronting experiences that lie outside the hegemonic stories through which they apprehend the social world’, then Johnson’s *Jesus’ Son* dramatizes characters in similar situations but without the knowledge of those hegemonic narratives. While Carver’s characters might recognise the possibility of the American dream (even if they cannot attain it) Johnson’s characters live disconnected from even the idea of upward social mobility. In *Jesus’ Son*, hegemonic narratives, or any kind of codified existence, have been replaced by a drug-fuelled experience, which provides only a regressive fantasy of fulfilment. Where Carver’s characters might find solace in their relationships – however flawed they may be – the relationships in Johnson’s collection, whether amorous or convivial, are disintegrated by the undulated depressive cycles brought on by drugs and violence.

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85 Harker, p. 725.
86 In the course of the collection Fuckhead is married, divorced, and has at least two other girlfriends. The prospect of fatherhood is impeded by an abortion in ‘Dirty Wedding’. And even the brotherhood in ‘Two Men’ is broken when one of them is hurt while burgling a pharmacy and his friends drop him off at the
The story ‘Work’ opens with a description of a fight between Fuckhead and his girlfriend at a Holiday Inn – one described in all its brutality, ‘as we stood arguing at a streetcorner, I punched her in the stomach. She doubled over and broke down crying’ (p. 45). This opening might be a story in and of itself, but so common is violence to Johnson’s protagonist that he soon forgets the incident and finds himself at a local bar, the Vine. There he meets another addict, Wayne, who takes him to his old house – ruined in a flood – and they break in and strip it of its internal wiring. Even though the protagonist quickly realises that he is ‘going to make some money’ he struggles to maintain any sense of purpose and begins ‘dancing around and pounding the walls, breaking the Sheetrock and making a giant racket’, before complaining to Wayne that ‘All this work […] is fucking with my high’ (p. 48). While they are stripping the house they watch a boat come past on a nearby river pulling a kite. Attached to the kite, a hundred feet in the air, is a naked woman with long red hair. The men stare at her and Wayne declares, ‘Now, that is a beautiful sight’ (p. 49). After selling the wire for fifty-six dollars at a scrapyard at the edge of town the men stop off at Wayne’s house and his wife comes out to meet them. She is described as the parasailor’s negative, for she too has red hair but is also ‘about forty, with a bloodless, waterlogged beauty’ (p. 50). As they drive away Fuckhead ponders the comparison and concludes that they are the same people. This, it seems, is what Wayne is wishing for. ‘As nearly as I could tell’, Fuckhead says, ‘I’d wandered into some sort of dream that Wayne was having about his wife, and his house. But I didn’t say anymore about it’ (p. 51). If Johnson’s fiction is devoid of hegemonic American narratives of upward mobility then this kind of hallucinating fantasy, it seems, is its replacement. As one critic puts it, ‘Heaven has turned into hell, then, via hallucination, back into heaven again’.

Eventually the men return to the Vine and the feeling of spending the day with an occupational purpose leaves Fuckhead with an emotional high that matches the one brought on by his drug addiction. ‘Usually we felt guilty and frightened, because there was something back door of the hospital and he is subsequently arrested. ‘We’d torn open our chests and shown our cowardly hearts’, Fuckhead says, ‘and you can never stay friends after something like that’. See, Denis Johnson, Jesus’ Son (London: Granta, 1992), p. 13. Further references to Johnson’s collection are given in parentheses after the quotation in the text.

Rebein, Hicks, Tribes and Dirty Realists, p. 50.
wrong with us, and we didn’t know what it was; but today we had the feeling of men who had worked’ (p. 53). If Johnson closed the story there, then it would be, perhaps, a not wholly unusual American narrative (one similar to that found in Carver’s late fiction) about the benefits and rewards of hard work – even if that work is somewhat illegitimate. But any affirmative conclusion is precluded by the story’s ending which resorts back to the cycle of violence and abuse with which it started. After selling the metal and returning to the Vine – a building that, incidentally, is about to be destroyed in the name of ‘Urban Renewal’ – a woman serves the men at the bar. She is given no name other than ‘Mother’ (perhaps because she nurtures Fuckhead’s alcohol addiction) and is described as being full of ‘grace’ and ‘generosity’, terms somewhat reminiscent of Fuckhead’s earlier vision of the parasailor. But Johnson quickly overturns this affirmation by reverting to a description of her hellish reality, ‘Your husband will beat you with an extension cord and the bus will pull away leaving you standing there in tears, but you were my mother’ (p. 54). It is a perverse and shocking moment, but it perfectly fits the constant movement between underclass reality and hallucinatory fantasy that Johnson’s characters slide between.

Transnational Adaptations and Ray Lawrence’s Jindabyne

In discussing Carver’s influence on Iñárritu’s Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance) (2014) chapter three will deal with an adaptation-in-kind of Carver’s fiction. However the chapter does not consider in detail adaptations of Carver’s work more generally. Given, then, the recent development of adaptation studies in the UK, the transnational turn in American studies more generally, and a number of recent adaptations of Carver’s fiction, there seems to be space for further critical enquiry.

88 While the chapter does discuss Robert Altman’s Short Cuts, it might have considered, for example, Dan Rush’s feature film Everything Must Go or Ray Lawrence’s Jindabyne – which is the topic of this section. There are other recent smaller adaptations are worth mentioning too. Andrew Kotatko’s short films Everything Goes (2004) and Whoever Was Using This Bed (2016) toured a number of international film festivals and won numerous awards.

89 In 2008 the journal Adaptation was first created, along with a Centre for Adaptations at De Montfort University and an Association of Adaptation Studies. For a general introduction to adaptation studies see, Deborah Cartmell, A Companion to Literature, Film and Adaptation (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2012). Also see an earlier text, Brian McFarlane, Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).
In 2006 the Australian director Ray Lawrence adapted ‘So Much Water So Close To Home’ for his film *Jindabyne*. Composed of numerous vignette-like scenes which fade in and out of each other, the film centres around a close community of working-class families in rural New South Wales, the driving plot-point being the discovery of an Aboriginal girl’s body while the men are on a fishing trip. The film operates between the vast expanses of rural Australia – home to its native inhabitants – and the densely oppressive urban sprawl of trailer parks, small town petrol stations and Thai restaurants. If the geographic setting has at least some resemblance to Carver’s parochial northwest, then there are strong thematic connections too. Writing in the *Guardian*, Peter Bradshaw argues that the film ‘addresses a gulf between articulate women and moody silent males’, and that the dramatic themes and frightening landscapes are tempered by ‘the interior domestic drama of Claire’s troubled personal history’.  

And yet while these surface similarities point to Carver’s source text, there is much that has been adjusted in the move from Northern California to New South Wales. Perhaps most notable is a discussion of race, sovereignty and cultural boundaries. Much is made in the film, for instance, of the men’s decision, as white Australians, to tie the Aboriginal girl to the side of the river while they continue to fish for the weekend. ‘You would have acted differently if she were white’, says another Aboriginal on a local news clip. Stuart’s justification in the film is decidedly ambiguous. What if it was their son? asks Claire. But it wasn’t, replies Stuart. And that, it seems, is the point. The film also explores how the pain and memory of individual and collective pasts play a significant role in relationships in the present – perhaps a theme that is not so explicit in Carver’s text. Not only, as Bradshaw correctly judges, does Claire’s past play an important role in her relationship with Stuart and her son – in the film she runs away for eighteen months after her first child his born – but memory of the damage of white Australians who have gone before haunts the film. Jindabyne, the town in which the film is set, was moved onto the hillside in the mid-twentieth century, because the valley in which it was originally built was flooded for a reservoir. The small town and its surrounding landscape were destroyed in the

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name of industrial progress, but the lives and memories – especially the native Aboriginal ones that are associated with the landscape – are altered irrevocably. Near the opening of the film Stuart’s son catches a clock while fishing in the reservoir – surely a reminder that for those who were living in the town, time and the production of the past (which time measures) quite literally stopped the day the town was flooded.

There is a temptation for Carver scholars to view adaptations of Carver’s fiction negatively. Often alterations to Carver’s texts are dismissed under the banner of ‘purity’, but a feature film like Lawrence’s only serves to complicate and problematize Carver’s fiction, to draw out new thematic compositions and interrogate and extend the influence of Carver’s work. Part of the critical task in analysing Jindabyne, and other adaptations like it, is to explore the nature of the change to Carver’s original text in relation to cross-cultural adaptation. The current challenge for American Studies scholars – at a time where conventional notions of geopolitical sovereignty are more fluid than they have ever been – is to consider, as Shelley Fisher Fishkin points out, ‘the multiple meanings of America and American culture in all their complexity’, and to pay ‘attention to the ways in which [American] ideas, people, culture, and capital have circulated and continue to circulate physically, and virtually, throughout the world’.91

**Raymond Carver’s Afterlife**

The following three chapters proceed in, broadly speaking, chronological order. Chapter one focuses on Jay McInerney and historicizes his relationship with Carver, from his first encounter with Carver’s fiction at Williams College – a kind of ‘Carver conversion moment’ which suggests that Carver’s fiction shed light on a type of reality that had, up to that point, exceeded conceptual mapping – through to their meeting in New York City in 1980 and McInerney’s subsequent move to study under Carver at Syracuse University. Utilising my archival research, this first chapter argues that Carver’s practical example in Syracuse appears to have dispelled the connection in McInerney’s mind between excessive experience and artistic success – a

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notion aligned to innate, untrained talent – and replaced it with a more artisanal work ethic associated with craftsmanship. I conclude the first half of chapter one by arguing that Gary Fisketjon’s publication ‘experiment’ with Carver’s paperback fiction at Random House paved the way for the commercial success of McInerney’s own debut novel *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984). The rest of the chapter considers McInerney’s writing in more detail. I first consider *Bright Lights, Big City* and, in light of Carver’s ideas about literary realism (which find their source in the ideology of his own writing teacher John Gardner in the late 1960s), explore in what ways McInerney’s early writing accepts or rejects Carver’s influence. Drawing upon David Kaufmann’s research, I argue that the connection between the two is the use of parataxis, a style that signals a retreat, or a form of consolation, a way of dealing with the bewildering world of late-capitalism. I then close the chapter with an extended reading of McInerney’s fourth novel, *Brightness Falls* (1992), in which many of the ideas that Carver held about writing and literature in the 1970s and ’80s are played out. In this context, McInerney’s satirical presentation of Victor Propp, an experimental novelist, appears to be a defensive manoeuvre that signals a retreat from postmodern experimentation towards a more ‘Carveresque’ realism. In doing so I argue that McInerney implies that he holds faith in the values that Propp opposes and even though he demonstrates an acute consciousness of the forces ranged against Carveresque values, he ultimately proposes that these values are still the best way to understand reality.

Chapter two explores Carver’s influence on the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami. Like chapter one, it opens by chronicling the relationship between both writers, and explains the importance of Murakami’s own ‘Carver conversion moment’ and his subsequent decision to translate all of Carver’s fiction into Japanese. The chapter then argues that while for many English language readers Murakami’s admiration may come as a surprise – broadly speaking, his novels embody a kind of postmodern surrealism that is quite distinct from Carver’s minimal realism – Murakami clearly suggests that beneath the ‘surface’ of Carver’s ‘simple’ fiction lie important and relevant truths, even for the postmodern, neoliberal era. I explore the idea that for Murakami, who is part of the Japanese postwar generation, Carver’s texts become powerful
stories that work beyond their initial geographic and historical moment, particularly in the way in which he finds in Carver’s fiction a zone in which the difference between hegemonic narratives and lived experience is explored. Specifically, I argue that he sees a concurrent societal humiliation and dislocation in his own generation. The chapter continues to argue that Carver’s literary development, which many critics, rightly or wrongly, see as emanating from his recovery from alcoholism and a return to a kind of unorthodox spirituality, facilitated Murakami’s own response to the twin national tragedies of the Kobe earthquake and Tokyo gas attack in 1995. In this sense, too, Murakami appears to mirror something of Carver’s own conservative ideals in his post-1995 writing, through which he feels he has a duty as a popular Japanese author to help improve Japanese society by providing a ‘new narrative’ for the post-postwar generation.

Chapter three proceeds along slightly different lines by looking at adaptations of Carver’s work, an important aspect of his afterlife. In doing so the chapter traces the adaptive line that extends from Robert Altman’s *Short Cuts* (1993) to Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *Birdman*, and argues that Iñárritu, a left-wing filmmaker concerned with the surface ephemerality prevalent in neoliberal culture, positions Carver as an example, or paragon, that might be used to negotiate such a context and, as such, uses Carver as a figure through which he can explore the impact of recent neoliberal cultural developments on individuals. In this sense I argue that *Birdman* operates at a level above the representation or reflection of Carveresque values; it is itself a study of Carver’s afterlife. The chapter considers why Riggan Thompson (Michael Keaton), the film’s protagonist, uses Carver’s ‘What We Talk About When We Talk About Love’ as the basis for his Broadway ‘comeback’ and suggests that despite initial appearances, Iñárritu chose Carver because he was not an appropriate figure for theatrical adaptation. In a world where authenticity and artistic longevity are slippery properties, Riggan turns to what is best understood as a conservative belief in the transcendent power of Carver’s writing, and as such Carver becomes a kind of artistic touchstone after his years in artistic exile in the Hollywood film industry. But Riggan’s faith in Carver is challenged in the film by his co-actor, Mike Shiner (Edward Norton), who holds a more radical position towards Carver’s work,
portraying him as an alcoholic, a writer who suffered in much the same way as the characters he created, and whose experience, therefore, was the source of artistic authenticity. In this way the chapter explores, and even challenges, the appropriateness of depicting Carver as an influential figure and suggests that while there is merit in viewing Carver as an ‘authentic’ artist (a kind of model for negotiating ephemeral neoliberal culture) the totality of that solution is ultimately, perhaps, rather more ambivalent than writers like McInerney and Murakami might suggest. My decision to consider Iñárritu’s film in the final chapter was bolstered by the film’s commercial and critical success, which placed Carver firmly in the contemporary popular consciousness.
Chapter One

‘Carveresque Realism’: Raymond Carver and Jay McInerney

‘Like, what books were you lending?’

He thought about it. ‘Céline, Nathanael West, Paul Bowles, Hunter Thompson, Raymond Carver.

Carver’s first collection of stories was huge for both of us.’

Early Years and Correspondence

The traditional account of the first meeting between Jay McInerney and Raymond Carver goes something like this: on the afternoon of 9 December 1980 McInerney was in his Greenwich Village apartment in New York City when he received an unexpected phone call from his best friend Gary Fisketjon. Fisketjon, an assistant editor at Random House, had just finished a lunch meeting with Carver and Gordon Lish. In lieu of a tour guide, he told McInerney that he was sending Carver to his for the afternoon before a scheduled reading at Columbia University later that evening. McInerney, at the time an aspiring writer and Carver admirer, thinking this was some kind of practical joke, immediately hung up the phone. Fisketjon had to re-dial and insist that Carver really was on his way. Moments later, it seemed, there was a knock on his door and Carver’s lumbering frame shadowed the threshold. The two men spent the afternoon taking cocaine together and talking about writing. Later Fisketjon turned up and sped Carver uptown via the subway just in time for the reading. Carver and McInerney parted that evening.

94 Sklenicka reports that Carver read ‘Put Yourself in My Shoes’ to a small audience at Columbia University (p. 364). At the time the editor of *Antaeus* magazine and Ecco Press, Daniel Halpern, was Chair of Graduate Writing at the university. Halpern had long been a supporter of Carver after being introduced to his writing when Lish read Carver’s ‘Fat’ to Halpern’s fiction class at the New School in New York City (Sklenicka, p. 231). He solicited ‘They’re Not Your Husband’ as early as 1972 (although in the end decided not to publish it). Perhaps more significantly Halpern did eventually publish a Carver story. He chose ‘What We Talk About When We Talk About Love’ for *Antaeus* 40/41 in 1981 (Sklenicka, p. 363).
so the story goes, with Carver entreating McInerney to leave the financial and creative drain of New York City and move to Syracuse to study on the creative writing program with him.

To fully understand the significance of this event for McInerney it is worth re-visiting, for a moment, his undergraduate years at Williams College. Five years earlier McInerney was studying for a philosophy major (hoping to become a writer after he graduated) and came across Carver’s collection Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? (1976). He describes the initial experience of reading Carver as ‘a bolt out of the blue’ that illuminated the reality he saw around him. ‘Suddenly this very new language, this wonderful new idiom. It’s the world as you always suspected, but you never realised it was until you read the book’, he told Sam Halpert in an interview. After reading Carver’s collection, which he claims cemented his authorial ambitions, McInerney passed it on to his roommate Gary Fisketjon – an experience that McInerney fictionalises, as this chapter’s epigraph points out, in his most recent novel. As McInerney pointed out in a letter to Carver, dated 12 December 1980, it seemed appropriate that Fisketjon returned the favour and introduced Carver that December afternoon five years later.

While it appears that Carver’s literary text had a profound impact on McInerney’s early career, after their initial meeting in 1980 the two also developed a correspondence, and Carver began to exert a significant pedagogical influence. The mentorship soon developed into a friendship that ran throughout most of the 1980s. Writing after Carver’s death in The New York

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95 Halpert, p. 138. McInerney’s reaction upon reading Carver for the first time was, as I’ll show in chapter two, somewhat similar to Murakami’s, and adds weight to the idea that Carver’s fiction reveals or sheds light on a type of reality that, up to that point, exceeds conceptual mapping. Richard Ford echoed this notion when he described hearing Carver read his story ‘What Is It?’ for the first time. ‘One learned from the story, many things’, Ford wrote. ‘Life was this way – yes, we already know that. But this life, these otherwise unnoticeable people’s suitability for literary expression seemed new.’ He concluded, ‘One also felt that a consequence for the story was seemingly to intensify life, even dignify it, and to locate in it shadowed corners and niches that needed revealing’. See, Richard Ford, ‘Good Raymond’, New Yorker, 5 October 1998, p. 72.

96 Archives of this letter and their other correspondence is primarily contained in the Raymond Carver Papers, Box XIII, fol. 178, in the William Charvat Collection of American Fiction of the Ohio State University Libraries. But also see, the Tess Gallagher Literary Archives, Box 185, fol. 6125, also held at the William Charvat Collection, and also, the Jay McInerney Papers, Box 1, fol. 1, in Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections of the Cornell University Library. Further references to their correspondence will be given by the relevant collection followed by the date as it appears in the letterhead.
Times Book Review, McInerney recalls that in those early years Carver changed his life ‘irrevocably’. 97

When they first met in 1980, McInerney had been living in New York City for just over a year. He moved there from Japan, where he had been studying on the Princeton-in-Asia Fellowship, and arrived in New York just as the city was coming out of its own fiscal crisis and implementing a new pro-business era. 98 At the time McInerney had yet to publish anything of repute. He had a draft of a novel, but was making a living writing book reviews and research. Carver, meanwhile, was coming out of the despair of his alcoholic years. While his literary stock was rising (he published ‘Where Is Everyone’ in TriQuarterly, and ‘A Serious Talk’, ‘Want To See Something?’ and ‘Gazebo’ in The Missouri Review that year) it wasn’t until the following spring that he rose to national fame and notoriety with the publication of What We Talk About When We Talk About Love (1981).

This biographical background is worth bearing in mind because popular folklore suggests that the first step on the Carver mentorship programme was to convince McInerney that New York City was a financial and creative drain on the young, aspiring writer. This, for instance, is Sklenicka’s opinion. She writes, ‘Ray saw that McInerney was dissipating his energy in New York. He urged him to study fiction writing at Syracuse’. 99 The benefit of this narrative for both writers is clear. On that December afternoon, it is intimated, Carver must have spotted the talent and promise of the young McInerney, while McInerney, for his part, realised that studying with a great American writer like Carver would propel his career. The truth, however, is probably far less glamorous – and the narrative certainly problematized by McInerney’s lack of publications and Carver’s rather modest career at the time. In a letter to Carver written only three days after they had met, McInerney recalls their time together and writes, ‘I mentioned that I am interested in the writing programme at Syracuse’, before adding,

98 For more on the urban crisis, bankruptcy and subsequent implementation of neoliberal financialization in New York City in the late 1970s see, Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism, pp. 44-8.
99 Sklenicka, p. 364.
‘anything you could send down would be much appreciated’. Of course, this does not wholly disprove Carver’s attempt to convince McInerney to leave New York City and it is worth conceding the obvious, that the financial drain of city life stifled creativity, a truth the twice-bankrupt Carver knew only too well, but it does highlight the need for a continual critical questioning of these accounts. Perhaps McInerney was reluctant to leave the exhilarating atmosphere of New York City as he often recalls but that is tempered by a willingness to reside in a more sedate atmosphere. ‘When I graduated from college I considered it my duty as a writer to stay as far away from campuses as possible, supporting myself any damned way’, he wrote to Carver. ‘Now after three years of travelling and one year in New York, I’m beginning to feel the need for a consistent critical response to what I’m writing’.

If the discrepancies in the biographical accounts remind us of anything, it is, surely, the need to continue McInerney’s critical demand. Consideration must be taken not to subsume everything in these accounts – in essays, interviews and correspondence – as complete fact. Memories fade; stories change. Not to mention, if Carver and McInerney did spend the afternoon inhaling cocaine their senses would have been, at the very least, inhibited. The early correspondence, too, must have been carefully composed. McInerney presumably sought to impress a writer he admired, and Carver may have been cautious in dispensing wisdom and encouragement. Likewise the archived correspondence appears incomplete. Only a handful of McInerney’s letters remain at Carver’s archive, dated between 1980 and 1985, and McInerney’s archive holds even fewer letters between the same period. In the final analysis there must be an attempt to pick away the extremities and seek to present as complete a truth as possible. It is not the purpose of this study to disprove McInerney’s accounts, but rather, to piece together a more balanced report of Carver’s influence – his practical example, his pedagogy and his writing – on a young and soon to be established American author.

100 Raymond Carver Papers, ‘12 December 1980’.
101 Raymond Carver Papers, ‘12 December 1980’.
Even so, it seems reasonable that Carver’s mentorship of McInerney in those early years can be traced through their correspondence in the 1980s. The letters that McInerney sent and received show that not only did Carver help in the artistic aspect of writing but he also offered a model of how to negotiate the practicalities of becoming a writer. In the fall of 1981 McInerney moved to Syracuse and began the creative writing program. He received a fellowship that he suspected Carver was behind which afforded him financial stability and he moved into an apartment half a block from Carver’s house. This was the end of a defining year for the young writer – fired from the fact-checking department of *The New Yorker* for incompetence, separated from his first wife, and moving away from the drug-fuelled nightlife of Manhattan Island – this must have seemed like a chance for reinvention. Thus, his close proximity to working writers was important in establishing a new routine. He took classes with Carver and often brought stories to him on a one-to-one basis. All the while McInerney was a keen sender of stories to magazines and small publications in an attempt to make some kind of breakthrough. Unusually, perhaps, McInerney published a story in a national magazine early on at his time in Syracuse. After submitting a story to *The Paris Review* in the winter of 1981, he received a phone call from the editor George Plimpton asking for more writing. Taking a look at what he might be able to send Plimpton that night, McInerney found nothing satisfactory, but instead ‘chanced’ upon a fragment he had written after a party at Fisketjon’s apartment and was ‘inspired’ to write a new story. The fragment, which ran, ‘You’re not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of the morning, but here you are’, became the story ‘It’s Six A.M. Do You Know Where You Are?’, and famously, the opening of his bestselling debut novel *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984). He sent the short story to Plimpton and received another phone call from assistant

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102 Halpert, p. 135.
editor Mona Simpson letting him know that the story had been accepted. It was published the following January.\textsuperscript{104}

What is unusual, perhaps, is that despite his publication in \textit{The Paris Review}, McInerney struggled to secure a second publication. Indeed, much of the early correspondence between him and Carver is concerned with McInerney’s frustration at failing to get another break. Small comments about rejection slips and unanswered letters are notable additions to letters in those early years, from the very first (which denotes his desire for ‘a consistent critical response to what I’m writing – something more than I am getting in my rejection slips’) to one written a year and a half later which reveals that Richard Ford sent a Xerox of McInerney’s story to \textit{TriQuarterly} and the editor’s rejection being ‘very frustrating, like nearly getting laid’.\textsuperscript{105} A letter simply marked, ‘Sometime in June’ – early on in tone and content – outlines his frustrations more lucidly:

I just got a formal hosing from \textit{The Missouri Review}. ‘The editors regret…’ As I recall I dropped both your name and Toby’s [Tobias Wolff] in my covering letter. I don’t know what it takes to get even a goddam signature on my rejection letters. I suppose I just have to keep some in the mail. The more impersonal these people are, the more personally I take it.\textsuperscript{106}

Carver, of course, could empathise with McInerney’s position. He had spent much of the 1960s attempting, often unsuccessfully, to publish in magazines and small quarterlies, too. And like McInerney’s prominent publication in \textit{The Paris Review}, when Carver eventually managed to get his story ‘Neighbours’ published by Lish in \textit{Esquire} in 1971 such a prominent publication did not lead to instant acceptance at other magazines. Still, Carver’s personal essays reveal a belief in the power of these magazines as a route to literary success and posterity.\textsuperscript{107} It is fitting,
then, that McInerney’s second publication came in one of these small quarterlies when, a year and a half later in July 1983, a guest editor at *Ploughshares* magazine accepted his story ‘Amanda’. The editor was Raymond Carver. His response to Carver’s acceptance was as follows:

> Hot damn! Just got your letter and I am riding high. It really means a lot to me that you like the story enough to publish it. I have read the letter over several times to make sure it was good news; Merry [girlfriend] tells me that it is indeed an acceptance. I’m kind of jumping around the apartment, trying to decide who I can tell about it. I think I’ll run up a nice big phone bill tonight. It really feels like things are starting to happen for me as a writer.

While this was McInerney’s second publication, his elation has curiously similar parallels to Carver’s own first acceptance for *Western Humanities Review* twenty years earlier. This acceptance placed McInerney’s story alongside writing by Joyce Carol Oates, Tim O’Brien, Mona Simpson, Tobias Wolff, William Kittredge and Tess Gallagher. Accepted the summer he graduated from Syracuse, the story can be seen as the completion of his formal education. ‘Amanda’, the short story that Carver chose for *Ploughshares*, was another section from the draft of his novel *Bright Lights, Big City*. McInerney had recently finished the draft, which he started after sending Plimpton the opening for *The Paris Review*, and that Fisketjon would soon publish at Random House as a headliner for his new Vintage Contemporaries Series in September 1984. There is little evidence to suggest that Carver knew that ‘Amanda’ was extracted from the draft novel – McInerney only tells Carver it is a new piece of writing – that this was where most of the best fiction in the country and just about all the poetry was appearing.


It is worth pointing out that McInerney submitted two other stories to Carver called ‘Overland’ and ‘In The Northwest Frontier Province’.

Carver claims that was one of the ‘best days ever’. He drove around town with Maryann showing the acceptance letter to all his friends. The publication of his first story in an anthology gained a similar response. The day the book was published he bought a copy home and took it to bed with him. See, Mona Simpson and Lewis Buzbee, ‘Raymond Carver, Art of Fiction 76’, *The Paris Review*, 88 (1983) <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3059/the-art-of-fiction-no-76-raymond-carver> [accessed 23 May 2017] (para. 18).
although *The Paris Review* story had a similar tone and was also written in the second person, so it is conceivable that Carver knew both stories were part of a larger project.\textsuperscript{111} Carver also had a hand in editing the story before publication. Carver replied to McInerney’s submission with a number of editorial queries that McInerney claimed were, ‘good ones’, and promised to, ‘sit down at the earliest quiet moment and deal with them’ – rhetoric which is noticeably Carveresque in its willingness to please.\textsuperscript{112} It is, perhaps, hard to quantify exactly how important Carver’s selection of ‘Amanda’ over the other stories was in McInerney securing the publication of *Bright Lights, Big City* given his close acquaintance with Fisketjon at Random House, but Carver’s selection of ‘Amanda’, at a time when he was fast becoming one of the country’s most recognisable short story writers could only have amplified McInerney’s literary credentials.

**Vintage Contemporaries 1984**

When McInerney graduated from Syracuse University in 1983 and secured the publication of his debut novel only a few months later it was not hard to understand the commercial appeal of the young writer. By the time *Bright Lights, Big City* was published in September 1984 the twenty-nine year old had accumulated an extensive catalogue of experiences: the son of a sales executive, he spent his childhood sojourning in a number of countries and states, later to become best friends with one of the brightest young editors in New York, he spent his early twenties sampling both the spiritual mysticism of the far-east and the consumerist excess of the west, he settled for the hedonism of the latter and became familiar with parties and substance use – the benchmark of all mythic urban writers – all before he was fired from a job as a fact checker at *The New Yorker* in order to commence the pursuit of his craft under the instruction of some of America’s principal living writers. In all, his early life epitomised the high-speed ephemerality of many young urban Americans living in the 1980s. *Bright Lights, Big City*,

\textsuperscript{111} Sooner or later, though, McInerney must have informed Carver that ‘Amanda’ was part of his draft novel because the contributors notes say, ‘Jay McInerney is a University Fellow in the English Department at Syracuse University. “Amanda” is from his novel *It’s Six a.m. Do You Know Where You Are*? another section of which recently appeared in *The Paris Review*. See, ‘Contributor’s Notes’, *Ploughshares*, 9.4 (1983), 200-01 (pp. 200-01).

\textsuperscript{112} Raymond Carver Papers, ‘20 July 1983’.
which takes its realism – and comic tone – from McInerney’s experience, presented Fisketjon with the perfect combination of in vogue literary and cultural fashions. All Fisketjon required, it seemed, was a matching format to partner the text.

The idea behind the Vintage Contemporary Series, the publication banner under which McInerney was first published, came a number of years earlier while Fisketjon was writing a review of Carver’s small press publication *Furious Seasons* (1977) for the *Village Voice*.\textsuperscript{113} E. Graydon Carter suggests that Fisketjon was frustrated that Carver, who had been nominated for a National Book Award for his first work, in lieu of a novel, was forced to release his second collection with the small press publisher Capra Press.\textsuperscript{114} Believing that current practices were therefore not serving writers well, Fisketjon began to formulate a plan that would increase a smaller writer’s commercial viability. Fisketjon’s solution was to produce a uniform trade paperback series that combined well-known and newer writers behind a series of distinctive covers.\textsuperscript{115} This overcame the problem of market saturation as Stephanie Girard explains:

By the early 1980s bookstore resistance to the mass-market paperbacks had been overcome; hardcovers, quality paperbacks, and mass-market paperbacks were all competing for shelf space. In general, the kind of name-brand associations that sold other products were not operative in the book marketplace; each book fended for itself. Without help from the publisher, a title could easily get lost; in 1984 alone, 51,058 titles competed for sales. One form of help that emerged was the quality paperback series, of which the most successful and widely recognized was Vintage Contemporaries.\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{115} Although it is worth noting that Fisketjon was not the only editor at Random House who proposed this idea. Judith Appelbaum reports that Erroll McDonald, an editor of foreign fiction at the publisher, believed that his authors would sell better if they were: incorporated in a series under the firm’s Vintage paperback imprint – partly because people who like one book are apt to try others with the same brand name and partly because booksellers, who realise the benefits of brand-name loyalty, are likely to get behind books that, as a group, can command promotional resources while they are unlikely to support any single non-blockbuster title on a publisher’s list. See, Judith Appelbaum, ‘Paperback Talk’, *New York Times Book Review*, 18 September 1983, p. 44.
Fisketjon’s plan, however, took a number of years to come together. It began in 1978 when he phoned Carver from New York and enquired if he would be interested in publishing an expanded edition of *Furious Seasons* for Random House. Carver, it seems, was willing, but poor paperback sales on *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* discouraged the executives at Random House from committing to the project and Carver’s contract with McGraw-Hill complicated the republication of the stories.\(^\text{117}\) Forced to set aside the Carver project temporarily, Fisketjon moved to trial his marketing idea with Don DeLillo, and after succeeding commercially with the series, convinced Random House to purchase Carver’s reprint rights for *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* and then began publishing paperbacks of Carver’s collections in a uniform edition. After the success of both trials, Fisketjon created a more comprehensive trade paperback series. He called it *Vintage Contemporaries*, immediately granting a suitable amount of literary and cultural appeal to the publications, and then convinced McInerney to bypass the usual route of a hardback first novel and to publish *Bright Lights, Big City* in paperback.

The seven titles released in the first series of *Vintage Contemporaries* were: *Bright Lights, Big City* by McInerney, *Cathedral* (1983) by Carver, *Dancing Bear* (1983) by James Crumley, *Dancing in the Dark* (1983) by Janet Hobhouse, *The Timeless People* (1969) by Paule Marshall, *Far Tortuga* (1975) by Peter Matthiessen and *The Bushwhacked Piano* (1971) by Thomas McGuane. For several weeks, *Cathedral* and *Bright Lights, Big City* alternated at the top of the *Village Voice’s* bestseller list and by the end of its first year, McInerney’s novel had sold three hundred thousand copies. After two years an estimated half a million copies had sold.\(^\text{118}\) As well as being a commercial success the series also won Fisketjon the 1984 Carey-Thomas Award for creative publishing. And while a large part of its popularity was also down to the quality of fiction that Fisketjon selected, his marketing was an important aspect of the series’ commercial success.

\(^{117}\) Sklenicka recounts that *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* only sold 1,500 paperback copies (p. 339).

\(^{118}\) Sklenicka, pp. 423-24; Girard, p. 167.
Perhaps then, the true brilliance of the series lay in the interrelation of new authors alongside more established names. In this sense, as Girard explains, much of the synergy of the series derives from what she calls the ‘cross-fertilization’ of cover blurbs. In this regard Fisketjon was very deliberate in his choice of authors for the series. Prominent on *Bright Lights, Big City’s* front cover was a recommendation from Carver while on the back cover was a quotation from Thomas McGuane. McGuane’s own novel, *The Bushwhacked Piano*, and Carver’s collection, *Cathedral*, were, as I have already noted, both printed in the Vintage Contemporaries Series alongside McInerney. Fisketjon also asked Tobias Wolff to write a blurb, and in it Wolff compares *Bright Lights, Big City* with McGuane’s *The Bushwhacked Piano*. Not only, therefore, did the self-referential blurbs and recommendations grant kudos to less established authors – like McInerney – but the cover designs, which were more akin to album covers, appealed to a younger and, importantly for the publisher, a more consumer orientated readership in an increasingly buoyant US economy. Paperback editions also had smaller overheads so Fisketjon was able to set price-points lower than traditional first edition hardbacks. He retailed the books between $4.95 and $6.95, more expensive than traditional

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119 Girard, p. 168.
120 McGuane wrote, ‘Terrific: remarkable, funny writing, a perfect power-to-weight ratio’. The quote that Carver gave for the front cover still remains on the current edition, ‘A rambunctious, deadly funny novel that goes for the right mark – the human heart’. McInerney’s response when Fisketjon told him what Carver had written was symptomatic of their relationship over those years; one of love, devotion and admiration for the man he counted as the source of his fledging career:  

> Just a quick note, less than I owe you, to say thank you for the wonderful quote you gave Gary [Fisketjon] on my book. He just read it to me over the phone. I am blown away and very touched. I am sure you know how much it means to me, coming from my teacher, my mentor, my buddy and one of my favourite writers – all at once. The Japanese have a wonderful word which means both teacher and doctor, Sensei, and also carries the sense of spiritual mentor and guide. It is a high honofric. Well, I say Domo Arigato Gozaimasu, Ray-sensei. Which means, among other things, that I am forever in your debt (Raymond Carver Papers, ‘20 March 1984’).

121 As Appelbaum reports, the prospect of low inflation, low interest rates, the strengthening of the dollar and increased sales in all major segments of the publishing industry caused widespread optimism for publishers at the end of 1983. ‘In 1987’, she predicts, ‘publishers will sell 786.19 million more books than they did in 1982 and take in an additional $6.171 billion’. Citing John P Dessauer, the director of the Centre for Book Research at the University of Scranton: ‘Focusing on books for the general public, he projected sales of 681.6 million units of trade titles and 1.034 billion units of mass market paperback titles in 1987, compared with 433.8 million units of trade books and 668.07 million units of mass market paperbacks in 1982’. See, Judith Appelbaum, ‘Paperback Talk’, *New York Times Book Review*, 4 September 1983, p. 19.
mass-market paperbacks, thus finding a market somewhere in between the commercial market of paperbacks and critical recognition of literary hardbacks. While this kind of quality paperback was not a completely new idea – Penguin had a trade paperback series which started in 1979 – the combination of well-known and debut authors, with fresh, innovative designs and pricing created the ideal context for commercial success and critical acclaim.\(^\text{123}\) ‘Although this cross-blurbing was originally designed to help the first novel of a relatively unknown author earn respectable sales’, writes Girard, ‘we can assume that it also worked in reverse when that first novel became a bestseller, attracting a new audience for the other six reprinted titles’.\(^\text{124}\) Even here, then, at McInerney’s early commercial success, Carver’s presence is not far away – the success of Fisketjon’s experiment with his early paperback editions eventually culminated in the commercial success of McInerney’s debut novel.

While Fisketjon’s deliberate orchestration of Vintage Contemporaries manipulated the buyer into thinking there was a strong literary connection between the established and the new, the reality, of course, was that there was not. The contents of McGuane’s novel – a satirical narrative about a nefarious flâneur called Nicolas Payne – had very little to do with the fiction found in Carver’s collection. What was associative though, was the network of friendship Fisketjon built that allowed him to take advantage of the opportunity of a publication series like Vintage Contemporaries. Whether Wolff – who was not published in the series – knew that he was partaking in such nepotism when he compared McInerney with McGuane is not entirely certain, but it seems likely he was party to the idea because he was based with Carver and McInerney in Syracuse in the early 1980s.\(^\text{125}\) While the marketing and blurb attached to a novel is now widely accepted to have a marketing bias, it is interesting to note the innovation and

\(^\text{123}\) In this sense the series appealed to consumer trends in the mid-1980s. Appelbaum also reports that Charles Newman, a bookstore owner in New York, thought that consumers were “‘looking for value and quality,’” and as books compete with television, computers and the like for the public’s attention, the “‘aesthetic appeal of a well-made book is becoming increasingly important’. See, Appelbaum, ‘Paperback Talk’, 4 September 1983, p. 20.
\(^\text{124}\) Girard, p. 169.
\(^\text{125}\) One suspects that Carver was in on Fisketjon’s marketing plan too. Not only because Cathedral was also due to be published in the series but because McInerney reveals that Carver encouraged Fisketjon to send him the manuscript (Raymond Carver Papers, ‘21 February 1984’).
success of Fisketjon’s campaign in the 1980s, an era where, I will argue later, McInerney explores the sharp increase in financialization of the publishing industry.

If those early letters do something to open the door on the relationship between mentee and mentor, then 1984 must be considered the seminal year for McInerney’s career. Aside from Fisketjon’s marketing, a large part of the success of *Bright Lights, Big City* must also be put down to McInerney’s text itself. The novel, which tells the story of a young twenty-something attempting the negotiate life in a glamorous New York City in the early 1980s, appealed to an emerging market of young urban professionals. Narrated in the second person, the novel is fashioned in the kind of self-confident, exuberant style that epitomised the era. As if to reinforce this idea, soon after publication, the book was optioned by MGM and McInerney was given the task of adapting the novel for the big screen. After nearly a decade of part-time jobs and small bursaries, the success of *Bright Lights, Big City* opened the door to financial stability. This is the period in McInerney’s life when it might be said that his mentorship with Carver began to come to an end. Now he and Carver became, for want of a better phrase, good friends. In 1984 Carver wrote a poem called ‘My Boat’ in which he imagined space for a couple dozen of his closest friends:

It’s going to have plenty of room
on it for all my friends: Richard, Bill, Chuck, Toby, Jim,
Hayden, Gary, George, Harold, Don, Dick, Scott, Geoffrey, Jack,
Paul, Jay, Morris, and Alfredo. All my friends! They know who they are (*All of Us*, p. 82).

The association that Carver makes between McInerney and other writers amounts to one of his major victories as a young writer in the literary world. Not only was he becoming increasingly close to Carver, but he was also close friends with Fisketjon – soon to be Carver’s editor – and he came to know and correspond with Tess Gallagher, Richard Ford, Tobias Wolff, Mona Simpson, Tom Jencks, Thomas McGuane, Haruki Murakami, Geoffrey Wolff, Chuck Kinder and Gordon Lish. These friendships were noted, at times, for their excesses and hedonism as well as frequent story sharing and editing. What the correspondence – the mentorship – between
Carver and McLnerney reveals so pertinently in those early years is that Carver offered a model to navigate such a landscape. The mantra told time and again by Carver, through his work, lifestyle and letters was simple: as McLnerney recalls, ‘Get black on white’.

It would be fair to say that getting ‘black on white’ became a motto for McLnerney’s early career. It is certainly a major theme of their early correspondence and also McLnerney’s multiple reminiscences. The phrase became a useful guidepost for McLnerney, who, at the time, held noticeably different ideas to Carver on the nature of the writing process:

When I met him I thought of writers as luminous madmen who drank too much and drove too fast and scattered brilliant pages along their doomed trajectories. Maybe at one time he did, too. In his essay ‘Fires’, he says, ‘I understood writers to be people who didn’t spend their Saturdays at the Laundromat’ […] In the classroom and on the page, Carver somehow delivered the tonic news that there was laundry in the kingdom of letters.

In other words, Carver appears to have dispelled the connection between excessive experience and artistic success – a notion closely aligned to innate, untrained talent – and replaced it with a more artisanal, and perhaps more conventionally American work ethic. This transition is important because it meant that for McLnerney the writing process became more akin to a kind of labour or traditional craft than a spontaneous sensation projection. The result was that writing became a skill which could be honed and mastered. In this sense McLnerney’s move from New York City to Syracuse marked an important spatial transition. In interviews he admits that he was reluctant to move upstate. ‘I had some resistance’, he explains to Halpert. ‘I still felt I was in the centre of the media and publishing world’. But Carver quickly dispelled that belief by insisting that the literary world was wherever a man or woman was writing. This idea was only

126 Halpert, p. 137.
127 Raymond Carver Papers, ‘Sometime in June’.
128 McLnerney elaborates when he reveals his daily agenda to Carver:
I write every morning from about nine to twelve, and then spend afternoons here at Random House. Sometimes I don’t believe I will ever finish or rather, most of the time I don’t believe it, but I seem to be able to suspend disbelief for a couple or three hours a day. I think it was you that quoted that relevant piece of advice from Maupassant: ‘Get black on white’ (Raymond Carver Papers, ‘Sometime in June’).
reinforced when McInerney eventually moved to Syracuse and he knew that ‘one of the masters of American prose’ was clacking his typewriter just up the street. Carver’s practical example, then, appears to be an important partner to his textual influence. This insistence on working and practicing writing as a craft, is often repeated in McInerney’s accounts of his time at Syracuse. Carver, who apparently took a very hands-on approach to his mentorship, became intricately involved in his life – more, certainly, than a tutor reasonably would:

He used to call me up in the morning and he’d see if I was awake and he’d say, ‘Are you writing?’ or, ‘Are you going to write?’ Or he’d call me at the end of the day and say, ‘Did you write?’ It sounds unglamorous and I guess that’s the point, for Ray it was about getting black on white. It was plugging away every day, as he quoted, I think Chekhov, ‘With hope and without despair’. It was going at it like a job.

Whether McInerney saw his excessive, sensual and highly experiential life in New York City as the route to literary success is not completely clear – he may well have been drawn to those places because he was a twenty-five year old with a taste for excess – but Carver’s insistence that the heart of the writing process was the following trade secret appears to have had a profound impact on him: ‘you had to survive, find some quiet, and work hard every day’. McInerney’s ‘luminous madmen’ were replaced at Syracuse by long (daylight) hours at the typewriter.

As I develop my discussion of Carver’s influence on McInerney it is important to map the landscape and outline some boundaries. McInerney, who first read Carver in 1975, began his correspondence and mentorship in 1980 and studied with Carver at Syracuse between 1981 and 1983. It was during that time that McInerney published his first stories in The Paris Review, Ploughshares and Granta, all extracts from his bestselling 1984 novel Bright Lights, Big City. It was also during his Syracuse years that it might reasonably be argued that McInerney felt the

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130 Halpert, p. 135. Although it’s worth pointing out that McInerney’s recollection is tempered slightly by his first letter to Carver in which it is him who asked Carver for information on the writing programme at Syracuse.
influence of Carver’s presence most keenly. The practical example and emphasis that Carver placed on routine and regularity in particular allowed McInerney the time to practice his ‘craft’. In one sense it is regrettable that his early published stories are only extracts, for if they had been independent pieces Carver’s influence might have been assessed on a larger plain. Although this chapter does not discuss it in detail, McInerney’s second novel *Ransom* (1985), written at the same time as *Bright Lights, Big City*, may also bear the hallmarks of Carver’s influence.\(^\text{133}\) His third novel, *Story Of My Life* (1988), returns to the atmosphere of hedonistic New York in the manner of his debut and has a suggestive Carversque feel in its use of colloquial, non-literary nuances and idioms. From then on McInerney published about one story every year in national magazines: ‘The Real Tad Allagash’ in *MS* (1985), ‘Smoke’ in *Atlantic Monthly* (1986), ‘Reunion’ in *Esquire* (1987), ‘The Business’ in *Granta* (1988), ‘Lost and Found’ in *Esquire* (1988) and ‘Jimmy’ in *Granta* (1989). After Carver’s death in 1988 McInerney’s short story publishing become more sporadic, perhaps because his novels increased in size and scope. His fourth novel, *Brightness Falls* (1992), appears particularly significant in this regard. Twice the length of anything he had published previously, it took him five years to write. While clearly different in size and scope, the novel, I will argue, is the pinnacle of Carver’s influence on McInerney, in that it deals with many of the ideas that Carver held about writing and literature. It is with this in mind that I shall begin to chart a more specific map of Carver’s influence. First, I will briefly assess Carver’s own publications in the 1980s, then analyse the important principles that underpin his writing – which are sourced from his mentor John Gardner – before I finally analyse how Carver’s writing and teaching are transmitted to McInerney’s work. I will begin briefly with McInerney’s first novel, *Bright Lights, Big City*, before focussing, in more detail, on *Brightness Falls*.

**Carver’s Realism, Minimalism and Literary Accuracy**

\(^{133}\) Carver gave some comments on the *Ransom* manuscript. See, Tess Gallagher Literary Archive, ‘12 July 1985’.
First published in *The New York Times Book Review* in 1981, ‘A Storyteller’s Shoptalk’ is the clearest personal account of Carver’s writing process. The essay, which was re-titled ‘On Writing’ and collected two years later in *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories* (1983), may in this sense be classed as Carver’s own literary manifesto. Appearing alongside three other short essays in the collection, it combines Carver’s pragmatism with the kind of fundamentalism that epitomised his folklore image as the arch-minimalist.\(^\text{134}\) His primary argument, often reduced to a few sound bites – ‘Get in, get out. Don’t linger’; ‘No cheap tricks’; ‘Fundamental accuracy of statement is the ONE sole morality of writing’; ‘No iron can pierce the heart with such force as a period put just at the right place’ (*Collected Stories*, pp. 728-33) – not only solidifies the Carver myth of ideological literary austerity but is also Carver’s attempt at providing a defence for literary realism in an age when experimentalism was popular.

The literary atmosphere in which Carver learnt to write – first at Chico State with John Gardner, then at Humboldt State with Richard Day, and subsequently the Iowa Writer’s Workshop with Paul Engle – was one where literary experimentalism was fast replacing realism as the dominant form. At the time, a wave of anti-realists – Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, William Gass, Richard Brautigan, Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme and John Barth, to name just a few – were attempting to push the boundaries of literary style, and Carver, I propose, saw this as a deliberate attempt to dismantle the foundational principles of realism. While I could give space to a lengthy assessment of realism’s waning in the twentieth century, to do so would exceed the purpose of this thesis. However it is beneficial to provide a short summary of the key components so that I can better contextualise the historical circumstances in which Carver (and McInerney) learnt to write.\(^\text{135}\)

\(^{134}\) The other three essays are ‘My Father’s Life’, ‘Fires’ and ‘John Gardner: The Writer As Teacher’.

\(^{135}\) Debates about the relevance of realism in the twentieth-century have been argued in various forms in the past and so it is not my intention to address them directly here. Many of the positions are politically driven, and, at the risk of oversimplification, see realism as either being part of or opposed to the political status quo. Erich Auerbach and Ian Watt provide the seminal assessments of realism’s poetics. See, Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953); Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London: University of California Press, 1957). The realism versus modernism debates between Adorno, Brecht and Lukács in the 1930s, ’40s and ’50s have been compiled in a useful edition by Ronald Taylor. See, Ronald Taylor, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1980). Roland Barthes’s essay ‘The Reality Effect’ regards realism as a distinctly bourgeois aesthetic. See, Roland
In the first instance, it was the literary modernists – especially Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot and James Joyce – who resisted the orthodox narrative of realism. They particularly viewed the realism practiced by nineteenth-century authors such as James, Balzac and Dostoevsky as an inadequate mode for detailing life in the new century. It was Virginia Woolf who infamously summed up the mood when she asserted that ‘On or about December 1910, human character changed’, before adding that ‘for us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death’. In light of the progression from modernism to postmodernism the emergence of the influence of the New Critics in America in the second quarter of the twentieth-century was important in propelling ideas concerning aesthetic autonomy. William Faulkner’s fiction was significant from this point of view. Written at the height of the New Critics, his 1936 novel Absalom, Absalom!, it has been argued by Brian McHale, exemplifies a secondary step away from the principles of realism. In Postmodernist Fiction, McHale uses Roman Jakobson to describe the shift, claiming that the fundamental distinction between the modernist and postmodernist period is a move from an epistemological to an ontological dominant. This new dominant, which is prefigured in Faulkner’s novel, became clarified by his literary ancestors in the second half of the twentieth-century. Such a shift from questions of ‘knowing’ to questions of ‘being’ fit closely with the emergence of poststructuralism, and in particular, Jean-François Lyotard, whose The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge argued for the demise of meta-narratives and the emergence of micro-narratives. As one critic has recently

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137 McHale claims that chapter eight is where the significant break occurs: Quentin and Shreve reach the limit of their knowledge of the Sutpen murder-mystery; nevertheless they go on, beyond reconstruction into pure speculation. The signs of the narrative act fall away, and with them all questions of authority and reliability. The text passes from mimesis of the various characters’ narrations to unmediated diegesis, from characters ‘telling’ to the author directly ‘showing’ us what happened between Sutpen, Henry, and Bon. The murder-mystery is ‘solved,’ however, not through epistemological processes of weighing evidence and making deductions, but through the imaginative projection of what could – and, the text insists, must have happened [...] Abandoning the intractable problems of attaining the reliable knowledge of our world, they improvise a possible world; they fictionalize. See, Brian McHale, Postmodernist Fiction (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 10.
pointed out, ‘The rise of postmodernism and poststructuralism in the late seventies and eighties added powerful new philosophical and socio-historical elements to the anti-realist argument’.  

Malcolm Bradbury and Sigmund Ro assert that in America these new ideas were established out of a rejection of pre-war modernist myths – Fitzgerald’s American Dream, Faulkner’s experimental rhetoric, and Hemingway’s economic reportage. Writers appeared to be exasperated by both nineteenth-century realism and modernism and began to move away from their precursors’ literary style. ‘Literature was exhausted’, cried the arch-experimentalist John Barth in his seminal essay of the same name. Perhaps in reaction to the first global wars, the increasing rejection of meta-narratives and the significant time-space compression of late-capitalism, the very idea of a controlling artist was condemned by Barth as ‘politically reactionary, authoritarian, even fascist’. The condition was diagnosed in fiction too. ‘Everything there was to know about life was in The Brothers Karamazov, by Feodor Dostoevsky’, Kurt Vonnegut wrote in Slaughterhouse-Five, ‘But that isn’t enough any more’.

In terms of literary form, linguistic fragmentation became prominent. Central to the anti-realist’s agenda was a Saussurean understanding of linguistics combined with the idea that literature had exhausted the conventions of realism. As a result Tom LeClair and Larry McCaffery grant the terms ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ to describe the opposing sides. In their estimation the ‘visible’ anti-realists deliberately drew attention to their techniques and move away from what Barth described as the exhausted conventions of ‘invisible’ realism. Such linguistic opacity was seen to be as much a break with, as a deliberate attack on, the foundational principles of realism. Although, of course, as much as Carver and his realist contemporaries resist their categorisation into a literary subset, so those who wrote anti-realist fiction struggled against any attempt to be coined a homogenous movement. And yet, despite

142 In ‘Surfiction’ Raymond Federman attempts to defend a similar accusation claiming that no writer ever says to himself, ‘I am going to experiment with fiction’, and concludes that the label is applied post-
their distinctiveness there is enough similarity to build a binding nexus, which, to come back to the opening point, is that they challenge the psychological realism of orthodox literature.

Considering all of this, what is therefore quite remarkable is that, despite coming of age in this period, Carver fervently resists the aesthetic autonomy of the anti-realist paradigm, and attempts to write fiction that is decidedly realist. As he explains in ‘On Writing’:

I overheard the writer Geoffrey Wolff say ‘No cheap tricks’ to a group of writing students. That should go on a three-by-five card. I’d amend it a little to ‘No tricks’. Period. I hate tricks. At the first sign of a trick or a gimmick in a piece of fiction, a cheap trick or even an elaborate trick, I tend to look for cover […] Writers don’t need tricks or gimmicks or even necessarily to be the smartest fellows on the block. At the risk of appearing foolish, a writer sometimes needs to be able to just stand and gape at this or that thing – a sunset or an old shoe – in absolute and simple amazement (p. 729).

As a response to the experimental ideology posited by anti-realists such as Barth, Carver’s proposition offers a limited attempt at re-establishing the principles of realism he believed in. Its rhetoric – which he truncates, thus cementing his minimalist mythology – admits no qualification, and might equally refer to the literary style of the anti-realists as it does to the conventions of genre fiction. Likewise, when the essay is set within the context of the editorial process of What We Talk About When We Talk About Love (which only predates it by a matter of months) Carver’s fundamentalist stance emits, as Sklenicka argues, a strong sense of ambiguity.

We might highlight further flaws in Carver’s manifesto. Not only does his rhetoric present a weak and inconsistent defence, but it also fails to answer Barth’s dismay at what he calls ‘technically old-fashioned’ writers, that is, novelists and writers grounded in the socio-historical context of the twentieth century and yet who deny – from Barth’s point of view – the production to whatever, ‘is difficult, strange, provocative, and even original’. This is, perhaps, a helpful, if slightly conspicuous, observation. As Federman continues, he argues for a more subtle approach in the assessment of writers such as Gass, Barth and Burroughs whose fiction is not, he suggests, exceptionally experimental, but rather an exploration of the limits of fiction, a challenge to tradition and an example of imagination. See, Raymond Federman, ‘Surfiction’, in Surfiction, ed. by Raymond Federman (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), pp. 5-15 (p. 7).

Sklenicka argues that in light of the battle and compromise that Carver underwent with Lish over the publication of What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, ‘On Writing’ makes for equivocal reading. See, Sklenicka, pp. 364-65.
existence of ‘the great writers of the last sixty years’. And while Barth is markedly unspecific about who it is who is writing in this style (a denial that masks any attempt to fully engage with the debate it seems) Carver certainly fits his mould.

Carver, however, did not simply ‘happen’ upon a realist aesthetic. His opposition to anti-realist experimentation is anchored in the ideology of the man he called his first mentor, John Gardner. Gardner’s militant stance and his instruction of Carver at a young age were instrumental in guiding Carver towards the realist mode. There is also an extraordinary correspondence between Carver’s development as a young writer under Gardner and McInerney’s maturation under Carver. In this regard it is notable that much of the instruction that Carver imparts to McInerney is sourced from Gardner’s philosophy.

Carver and John Gardner

Carver met Gardner in September 1959 when he moved to California to begin his first degree at Chico State University. In ‘John Gardner: The Writer as Teacher’ Carver recalls that he saw Gardner behind the registration desk in the woman’s gym when he signed up for an elective creative writing class. At the time Gardner held the mythical mantle of being what Carver calls a ‘real writer’ and, having moved halfway across the country from Oberlin College, Ohio, his reputation radiated the enigma worthy of what the young Carver thought a writer ought to be (Call If You Need Me, p. 108). In the opening of his essay, Carver writes that in those early years he wanted to write articles for ‘Sports Afield, True, Argosy and Rogue (some of the magazines I was then reading)’, reflecting a debonair ideal – sourced most obviously from Hemingway – that the writer is at once commander of nature and seducer of women (p. 107). It is with some disappointment then, that Gardner, a ‘real writer’ – in a similar way to Carver’s

144 In ‘Literature of Exhaustion’ he writes:
That our century’s more than two-thirds done; it’s dismaying to see so many of our writers following Dostoevsky or Tolstoy or Flaubert or Balzac, when the real technical question seems to me to be how to succeed not even Joyce and Kafka, but those who’ve succeeded Joyce and Kafka (p. 33).

145 It is unsurprising that Carver’s reminiscence of Gardner, ‘John Gardner: Writer as Teacher’ is an antecedent to McInerney’s reminiscence of Carver, ‘Raymond Carver, A Still, Small Voice’. Both are written after their respective mentors’ deaths and are remarkably similar in tone and form, each recounting early impressions of their mentors at an early point in their career.
initial impact on McInerney – soon shattered the young Carver’s rakish vision of a writer’s life. Recalling his initial impression with some dissatisfaction he wrote, ‘Gardner had a crewcut, dressed like a minister or an FBI man, and went to church on Sundays’ (p. 108). As I’ve already alluded, in his essay ‘Fires’, Carver recalls that at the time he, ‘understood writers to be people who didn’t spend their Saturdays at the Laundromat and every waking hour subject to the needs and caprices of their children’ (Collected Stories, p. 739). But Gardner undermined Carver’s ideas and projected an image of ceaseless hard work and social responsibility as the route to literary success – an idea, as we have already seen, that became synonymous with Carver later in life, and which he imparted to McInerney. In her account, Sklenicka describes Gardner as ‘indefatigable’ having undertaken a translation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight at the same time as planning a biography on Chaucer while also working on several novel manuscripts. She further claims that while he was at Chico State ‘he wrote poems, started two magazines, worked at a local theater, and took care of their baby while his wife went to school’, a successful example that the peripatetic, soon-to-be alcoholic and bankrupt Carvers failed to emulate.146

Despite the model that Gardner, who was only five years older than Carver, provided, it was not until nearly twenty years after their time together, after his recovery from alcoholism, that Carver could look back with the required pragmatism and recognise that his life changed when he met Gardner at Chico State in 1959.147 Significantly it was Gardner’s loan of his office key at weekends that Carver describes as, ‘a turning point in my life’, providing the typewriter, desk and isolation that he needed to make his ‘first serious attempts at being a writer’.148

Gardner’s pedagogic style was known for being abrasive and direct. His classes were often dominated by his strict opinions on the nature of what he thought good fiction was. At the start of the academic year he took his students outside, sat them down and, as Carver remembers, told them that not one of them had the necessary fire to become published writers.

146 Sklenicka, p. 66.
If these theatrics were meant to scare, they had the opposite effect on Carver who associated writing with a high calling, ‘a thing to be taken very, very seriously’. Much of the fundamentailsm that Gardner taught at Chico State was published later in his life. His most significant publication in this regard, *On Moral Fiction*, first published in 1978, is a polemic that opposes Barth’s ‘Literature of Exhaustion’ and other anti-realist who Gardner viewed as producing superficial literature. The opening of the book outlines his basic argument:

> In a world where nearly everything that passes for art is tinny and commercial and often, in addition, hollow and academic, I argue – by reason and by banging the table – for an old-fashioned view of what art is and does […] My basic message throughout this book is as old as the hills, drawn from Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Dante, and the rest, and standard in Western civilization down through the eighteenth century; one would think all critics and artists should be thoroughly familiar with it, and perhaps many are. But my experience is that in university lecture halls, or in kitchens at midnight, after parties, the traditional view of art strikes most people as strange news.

Gardner’s traditional view is summed up in this way, ‘true art is moral: it seeks to improve life, not debase it’, and is anchored in the foundationalist principles of the nineteenth-century realists, especially Tolstoy, whose small polemic *What Is Art?* is Gardner’s precursor text. Remarkably, however, despite spending two hundred pages denouncing ‘false’ art – which is interchangeable in Gardner’s mind with ‘immoral’ art – Gardner carefully skirts any

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150 As well as *On Moral Fiction*, two writers handbooks, *On Becoming a Novelist*, which Carver’s ‘John Gardner, Writer as Teacher’ was a foreword for, and *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* were published posthumously in 1983. Sklenicka claims that ‘Carver believed that Gardner’s ideas about fiction had not changed a great deal between the year he had him as a teacher and the years when he began publishing them in his two handbooks and *On Moral Fiction*’ (p. 508, n.17).
151 In the opening pages of his book Gardner wrote:

> No one is more cranky, more irascible, more quick to pontificate on the virtues of his effort than the artist who knows, however dimly, that he’s gotten off the track, that his work has nothing to do with what Shakespeare did, or Brahms, or Rembrandt. Having gotten into art for love of it, and finding himself unable to support, in his own art, what true art has supported since time began, he turns defensively on everything around him. He becomes rabid, often rabidly cynical, insisting on the importance of his trivia. He sends to his fellow artists sharply worded notes: ‘Literature is exhausted’.

152 Gardner, p. 5.
authoritative definitions – he does not pin morality to a religious origin or societal consensus – and only claims that its value comes from its ability to ‘inspire and incite human beings toward virtue’ – a phrase which smacks of a rather Carveresque platitude.\textsuperscript{154}

Gardner then moves on to develop his argument into a defence of realism against postmodern literary experimentation. While he admits to there being a certain kind of aesthetic beauty in experimental fiction, he argues that its emphasis on language results in a new kind of impenetrable literature. The problem with such a technique for Gardner is that it shifts the writer’s priority from the orthodox realist notion that literature should be made up of a ‘sequence of dramatized events tending toward understanding and assertion’ to what is now best understood as a Derridean – or decentred – understanding that nothing exists outside of the text.\textsuperscript{155} For Gardner, this new position is undermined by its inability to present a critical social or moral statement:

Fiction as pure language (texture over structure) is \textit{in}. It is one common manifestation of what is being called ‘post-modernism’. At bottom the mistake is a matter of morality, at least in the sense that it shows, on the writer’s part, a lack of concern. To people who care about events and ideas and thus, necessarily, about the clear and efficient statement of both, linguistic opacity suggests indifference to the needs and wishes of the reader and to whatever ideas may be buried under all that brush.\textsuperscript{156}

But underlying this broader critique is a more personal aspect, for Gardner continues to argue that:

One reason we read fiction is our hope that we will be moved by it, finding characters we can enjoy and sympathize with, an academic striving for opacity suggests, if not misanthropy, a perversity or shallowness that no reader would tolerate […] Where

\textsuperscript{154} Gardner. p. 18.
\textsuperscript{155} Gardner, pp. 65, 67.
\textsuperscript{156} Gardner, p. 69.
The ideas proposed in *On Moral Fiction* filtered through to Gardner’s classroom. The assignment for Carver in Gardner’s class was to produce one story at the end of the semester. The ‘kicker’, as Carver described it, was the story would have to be ‘revised ten times in the course of the semester for Gardner to be satisfied’ (*Call If You Need Me*, p. 110). This led to a series of personal conferences between Gardner and Carver, in which Gardner would go over Carver’s manuscripts in painstaking detail. ‘Before our conference he would have marked up my story’, Carver wrote in his tribute to Gardner, ‘crossing out unacceptable sentences, phrases, individual words, even some of the punctuation’. He adds, ‘In other cases he would bracket sentences, phrases, or individual words […] We’d discuss commas in my story as if nothing else in the world mattered more at that moment’ (p. 112). In these conferences Gardner placed a special importance on prosaic specificity. ‘He helped me to see how important it was to say exactly what I wanted to say and nothing else’, Carver writes in ‘Fires’. ‘The word “ground” and the word “earth,” for instance. Ground is ground, he’d say. It means ground, dirt, that kind of stuff. But if you say “earth,” that’s something else, that word has other ramifications. He made me see that absolutely everything was important in a short story’, Carver explained (*Collected Stories*, p. 744).

Gardner, p. 69. Gardner reserves his most disparaging criticism in this regard for William Gass, a writer that becomes a synecdoche for a generation of anti-realists who are, in Gardner’s estimation, ‘short of significant belief […] and short on moral fibre’ (p. 66). For Gardner, Gass only uses words in ‘the way logical positivists do’, that is, to mirror intellectual concepts so that ‘characters are merely verbal structures’ (p. 67). Often doubling back on its own presuppositions and alluding to its own artifice, Gass’s fiction sits comfortably alongside the theory of its day: Roland Barthes’ death of the author, Derrida’s freplay, and Lyotard’s rejection of logical consistency. Such a position opposes Gardner’s concept that ‘Words have [fixed] associations and groups of words have chains of association’ (p. 112). This referentiality creates empathy, he argues, between the reader and the character which leads to an ‘inextricable emotional charge’ (p. 112). It is this ‘emotional charge’ that is the point of contention for Gardner because it grants the reader the ‘experience of falling through the print on the page into something like a dream, an imaginary world so real and convincing that when we happen to be jerked out of it […] we stare for an instant in befuddlement’ (pp. 112-13). Thus Gardner argues that the accumulation of language is akin to ‘the way a crow collects paper clips’ (p. 70), Gass and his contemporaries being ‘more in love, on principle, with the sound of words – or with newfangledness – than with creating fictional worlds’ (p. 71). Principally this is a rejection, as I have already suggested, of the conservative position that literature ought to communicate. ‘The fact remains’, Gardner concludes, ‘that the search for opacity has little to do with the age-old search for understanding and affirmation’ (p. 71).
The aim of Gardner’s assignments and his meetings with Carver was to instil in him the idea that it was through the rewriting process and gradual revision that the story reached its most effective form. ‘What the writer understands’, Gardner argues in *On Moral Fiction*, ‘is that the writer discovers, works out, and tests his ideas in the process of writing’.

At the time, Carver admits that this idea struck him with the ‘force of revelation’. ‘From the very beginning I loved the rewriting process as much as the initial execution’, he told Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory in 1984:

There I was, groping to find my own way, and here someone was telling me something that somehow conjoined with what I already wanted to do. It was the most natural thing in the world for me to go back and refine what was happening on the page.

These ideas of revision, which seem to be closely related to notions of craftsmanship, or doing things well for their own sake – even, possibly, to reiterate Sennett’s argument in my introduction, to focus ‘on objective standards, on the thing in itself’ – proved highly informative for Carver’s own writing method and process. He concludes the matter in his reminiscence, ‘A writer’s values and craft. This is what the man taught and what he stood for, and this what I’ve kept by me in the years since that brief but all-important time’ (*Call If You Need Me*, p. 113).

These ideas also, significantly, were helpful later in life when he was teaching writing classes himself. When asked about his teaching methods, he told an interviewer, ‘The real model I had, of course, was John Gardner’.

And while McInerney reports that Carver favoured listening to lecturing, when the opportunity arose Carver would emphasize the importance of word-economy and Gardner’s idea of ‘honesty in writing’, often, McInerney

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emphasizes, ‘hammering away at that point’. When it was possible, Carver would also arrange personal conferences much like Gardner. McInerney recounts that many students received much of the same kind of treatment his manuscripts received from Gardner:

Fortunate students had their stories subjected to the same process he employed on his own numerous drafts. Manuscripts came back thoroughly ventilated with Carver deletions, substitutions, question marks, and chicken-scratch queries. I took one story back to him seven times; he must have spent fifteen or twenty hours on it. He was a meticulous, obsessive line editor. One on one, in his office, he almost became a tough guy, his voice gradually swelling with conviction.

In what can be interpreted as either a symbolic duplication or a convenient reaffirmation, it was during one of McInerney’s own personal conferences that Carver took the time to debate with him the same point as Gardner, ‘Once we spent some ten or fifteen minutes debating my use of the word “earth.” Carver felt it had to be “ground,” and he felt it was worth the trouble of talking it through’. Like Carver’s comment on Gardner, McInerney writes, ‘That one exchange was invaluable; I think of it constantly when I’m working’.

**McInerney’s Early Fiction**

Therefore, it would be reasonable to expect to find in McInerney’s early writing – the fiction he produced while he was still under the mentorship of Carver at Syracuse – a similar defence of realism, or even, perhaps, an extension of a conservative aesthetic that attempts to communicate some kind of Gardneresque morality. And yet, counter-intuitively, his early work became a flagship for the kind of surface and ephemerality – the ‘tinny and commercial’ as Gardner might put it – associated with late-capitalism. His first novel, *Bright Lights, Big City*, was dubbed by *Playboy* as the ‘Catcher in the Rye for the MBA set’ – a comment subsequently printed on the inside cover of the book – and was seen as being part of a new wave of urban texts written by

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162 McInerney, ‘Raymond Carver: A Still, Small Voice’, p. 25. Also, see, Tromp, “‘Any Good Writer Uses His Imagination to Convince the Reader’”, in *Conversations*, ed. by Gentry and Stull, p. 78.


Bret Easton Ellis, David Leavitt and Tama Janowitz.\(^{165}\) This melange of twenty-somethings were soon dubbed the Literary Brat Pack – who, to adopt the tagline from David Blum, were what people wanted to see, be and read.\(^{166}\) The culmination of this movement was a sensationalist, transgressive fiction: Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991), which only appeared to confirm the groups’ adherence to the grotesque void of consumerism and superficiality.\(^{167}\)

McInerney’s first three novels, all published within Carver’s lifetime, detailed young, peripatetic protagonists indulging in a pervasive commodity culture. Caught in the perpetual consumption of alcohol, drugs and sex, his protagonists blamed their behavioural misconduct on broken relationships and took little responsibility for their actions. His novels were epitomised by slick dialogue inflected with young urban vernacular and Valley Girl vocal nuances, branded goods were ubiquitous and characters were constantly orientated to built environments. It is perhaps understandable, then, that at the time many critics read McInerney’s early work as a mere surface reflection of the excess and hedonism of New York neoliberal culture, rather than a satirical critique in line with the principles of orthodox realism.

Typical of these critics was Josephine Hendin who called *Bright Lights, Big City*, the ‘first Yuppie bestseller’ that was merely ‘the compression of the novel of manners into an equivalent of upscale ads’. She argued that the novel confuses surface with substance, that ‘the title is supreme’, citing the protagonist in *Bright Lights, Big City*, who claims to know the high points of the English language, even knows the titles of the best works – *Anna Karenina, As I Lay Dying, Being and Time* – but has kept himself innocent of their content. In this way, Hendin presents McInerney as a key participant in postmodern culture. His art is, ‘a fiction not of insurgency but of cultural collaboration’. What stands out, she observed, ‘is an assimilation, to

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\(^{165}\) James Annesley notes that *Bright Lights, Big City* is part of this broader trend of New York novels about affluent urbanites; a trend that mutates from the more satirical slant of McInerney’s novel and those by Ellis and Tama Janowitz to the light comedy of Chick Lit. ‘Clear continuities can be traced’, Annesley argues, ‘both in terms of setting and with regard to the ways in which they display brands and logos in their prose’. See, James Annesley, *Fictions of Globalization: Consumption, the Market and the Contemporary American Novel* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 33.

\(^{166}\) In true postmodern artifice the Literary Brat Pack were just a mirage of a mirage. The original ‘Rat Pack’ had emerged thirty years earlier, now replaced by the Brat Pack, a group of young actors and actresses who symbolized the hedonism, consumerism and glamour of 1980s America. See, David Blum, ‘Hollywood’s Brat Pack’, *New York*, 10 June 1985 <http://nymag.com/movies/features/49902/> [accessed 23 May 2017]

the point of wholesale adoption, of advertising culture’. Elaborating further, she offers the following provocative analysis:

Labels, name brands, surface signs have become the sole social referents and methods of character definition. McInerney’s characterization of a man of literary sensibility is effected not through a representation of consciousness but by the ownership of unread books, contempt for the underyuppie class, and the ability to give such imaginative names to cocaine as ‘Bolivian Marching Powder.’ What motivates the Nostril-hero is obscure; he has too little feeling for the gradual and now final withdrawal of his wife, a fashion model and perfect label-wearer. In a belated effort at explaining what drives his hero, when the book is nearly over, McInerney, introduces his mother who, near death, wishes she could have lived the way he does. Not even a dying mother runs deep.\(^{168}\)

We might view Hendin’s analysis – which operates, if not explicitly then implicitly, as a wider critique of neoliberal culture – as echoing Jameson’s critique of ‘Warhol’s Diamond Dust Shoes’ in Postmodernism, which he argues, ‘turn centrally around commodification’, and, do not, ‘really speak’. We might push further and argue, in the words of Jameson, that McInerney’s novels, ‘ought to be powerful and critical political statements. If they are not that, then one would surely want to know why, and one would want to begin to wonder a little more seriously about the possibilities of political or critical art in the postmodern period of late capital.’\(^{169}\) For if Bright Lights, Big City does not move beyond surface representation it suggests only two clear perspectives: an aspirational model for young urban professionals, or a sympathetic portrait of the dangers of youthful excess.

The issue is complicated by the fact that in much the same way as the media conflated Carver’s fiction and his historical and biographical background, the same media merged the actions of the novel’s protagonist with McInerney himself. If part of Carver’s appeal was his ‘authentic’ working-class background, then the same kind of idea about authorial ‘authenticity’

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\(^{169}\) Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Logic of Late Capitalism (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 8-9.
is true for McInerney. Even very early reviewers made this connection. On two separate occasions in *The New York Times Book Review*, two different writers summarised the novel in this way, ‘A daring fellow, this narrator, who we suspect is Mr. McInerney’s himself or a close facsimile’, and later, ‘A young man who sure sounds like the author is hired – and fired – by a magazine that sure sounds like *The New Yorker*’.¹⁷⁰ These ideas were cemented by regular *People* magazine columns detailing McInerney’s social life, *Newsweek* declaring 1984 as the ‘Year of the Yuppie’ and a review of publishing in 1984 by George Garrett that argued that in order to understand the publishing scene one must read, ‘a cornucopia of slick-coated-paper magazines’, which offer, ‘news of the publishing world in a contextual reality of expensive cars and wristwatches, of lingerie and perfume advertisements’.¹⁷¹

Issues surrounding the commodification of literature provide a persistent problem for any literary interpretation of *Bright Lights, Big City*. Nonetheless if there is to be a defence from McInerney’s perspective against Hendin’s ‘cultural collaboration’, it is important that McInerney provide critical distance between his actions and those of his protagonist. It is significant, then, (and perhaps indicative of the novel’s aim) that McInerney not only anticipates this perspective but also attempts to defend his intentions in writing the novel. ‘Readers tend to confuse author and protagonist’, he said in one interview, ‘the alluring vision with its unqualified endorsement’. ‘I’ve heard myself described as a Yuppie hero’, he continued, ‘I thought I was writing a book about someone coming to terms with failure’.¹⁷² His denial would help settle the matter if it were not for one problem: his instant and unassailable rise among critics, socialites and bankers in the cultural urban sprawl epitomised the very culture he was trying to critique. This blurring of boundaries extends to the novel. The protagonist’s humorous remarks, for instance, obfuscate the distinction between repulsion and attraction – a symptom,

perhaps, of McInerney’s own hedonistic lifestyle. Furthermore, the predicate for the protagonist’s behaviour – the avoidance of all collective social responsibility – is weak. It is, ‘only a matter of conducting an experiment in limits’, he argues, and despite the apparent profundity of such Solomonic wisdom, it ultimately offers an unsatisfactory riposte for his: familial failure (the avoidance of his brother and father), his occupational failure (fired from the magazine), his societal failure (soliciting drugs from a teenager), and his relational failures (negligence of his marriage and friendships).

And yet there are indications that McInerney was attempting, at least on some level, to do more than provide superficial entertainment. The second person perspective, for example, implies that the protagonist’s problems extend to a collective or suggestive social, psychological group and draws in any reader who recognises even a shade of shared experience. ‘We have all been victimized just like the “hero”’, David Kaufman exclaims, who notices, in a more affirmative critique, that the novel is, ‘about the person it addresses, about the “you” who is both the reader and the narrator’. In this sense, Bright Lights, Big City performs a kind of allegorical surgery, represented in the opening scene as the protagonist talks to the girl with a tattooed scar on her scalp. It is a startling image that elicits this foreshadowing response, ‘I could use one of those over my heart’, which in turn exposes the superficiality of the urban culture, her response, ‘You want I can give you the name of the guy that did it’ (p. 3).

The final chapter of this short novel goes someway to restore hope for the protagonist and his situation. Finally beginning to accept and digest both the loss of his mother and his wife, the protagonist makes his way to another party with the last of his money. The night then takes

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173 In a letter to Carver, written on The Plaza hotel notepaper dated 9 January 1983, only eighteen months before the publication of Bright Lights, Big City, McInerney describes his new year celebrations in which he and Fisketjon rented a limo and ‘landed up with champagne, illicit substances, and topes and motored from party to party. McInerney continues, ‘Being in the limo was more fun than the parties. People looking through the smoked glass, who are these people?’’. See, Raymond Carver Papers, ‘9 January 1983’.

174 Jay McInerney, Bright Lights, Big City, (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1984), p. 4. Further references to McInerney’s novel are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.


176 It is also worth pointing out that Carver saw something of value in McInerney’s novel, as his blurb quotation indications. While his comments ought to be tempered by a certain amount of nepotistic scepticism, Carver’s selection of an extract for Ploughshares and his willingness to be publically associated with the novel suggests that he saw, at the very least, some level of worth in McInerney’s text.
a sharp turn when his ex-wife appears, but the inevitable confrontation is anti-climatic. Shirking, for the first time, thoughts of Amanda and distancing himself from the influence of his friend Tad Allagash, he seeks out a phone and calls Vicky, a woman he has recently met (a philosophy major from Princeton) and who appears to represent a return to a state of innocence. Confessing his past transgressions (and also notably telling her about the death of his mother), the protagonist leaves the party and begins to walk home. At this point the religious imagery is heightened. It is Sunday morning. Redemption is prefigured, ‘After a few minutes you notice the blood on your fingers. You hold your hand up to your face. There is blood on your shirt, too’ (p. 180). Nearby, a homeless man offers a benediction, ‘God bless you and forgive your sins’ (p. 180) – a phrase that is amplified because the protagonist observes that it is not followed by a request for money. Then, noticing a bakery up ahead he is reminded of his hunger – a physical need as much as spiritual – he has not eaten since Friday night. He trades his sunglasses – a symbol of blindness – for the bread. The novel ends with the protagonist in a position of petition, ‘You get down on your knees and tear open the bag. The smell of warm dough envelops you. The first bite sticks in your throat and you almost gag. You will have to go slowly. You will have to learn everything all over again’ (p. 182).

Girard argues that McInerney’s communion ending probably has as much to do with Carver as it does with any explicit Christian experience. Carver’s story ‘A Small, Good Thing’ – first published in a truncated form as ‘The Bath’ in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, before its restoration in Cathedral – closes, for instance, on similar imagery.177 In Carver’s story the parents of the boy hit by a car on his birthday are harassed by a baker for not picking up their cake. When the trio eventually meet in the early hours of the morning the baker’s repentance and the parents’ forgiveness is confirmed over ‘warm cinnamon rolls just out of the oven’, and later, a heavy, rich bread that tastes of ‘molasses and coarse grains’. Carver closes the story in an affirmative tone that suggests that the reconciliation prefigures

177 William L. Stull was the first critic to notice the difference between the two versions. His essay also provides a convincing argument in favour of interpreting the end of ‘A Small, Good Thing’ in religious terms – although whether it is possible to read something deeper into Carver’s personal state from this observation is decidedly ambiguous. See, William L. Stull, ‘Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver’, Philological Quarterly, 64.1 (1985), 1-15.
hope for the parents’ situation, ‘They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving’ (Collected Stories, p. 425).

While it’s worth noting these similarities, a more stimulating nexus exists around the stylistic and formal approaches of both writers. David Kaufmann, in his short comparison of the two, argues that the connection is not content but style, claiming that ‘Carver and McInerney share a commitment to resolute parataxis’.

The emergence of paratactic fiction, which Kaufmann defines as a ‘disjunctive style marked by its avoidance of grammatical subordination’ is entwined, he argues, with the socio-historical context of the US in the 1980s. Leaning on a lecture by Habermas titled ‘The Crisis of the Welfare State and the Exhaustion of Utopian Energies’, and his terms ‘system’ and ‘lifeworld’, Kaufmann argues that economic crises in society cause broader crisis tendencies in non-economic forms, so that the changes to US capitalism in the 1970s and ’80s (the move from embedded liberalism to neoliberalism and the associated trends in labour and socioeconomic mobility in particular) has an important impact on the organizations of everyday life:

Most tellingly, it has deformed the structures of representation through which we depict our lives to ourselves by undermining the very institutions of solidarity through which individual and collective identities are interpellated and asserted. As the constellations on which the welfare compromise was based disintegrate, so the horizon of hope – that is, the collective and universalizable orientation toward an improved future we call utopia – has been undercut, if not destroyed.

Kaufmann argues that the disintegration of the ‘horizon of hope’, and what might also be termed as the acceptance of neoliberal ‘common sense’, leads to a new structure of feeling embodied by the paratactic fiction that he sees being produced by both Carver and McInerney (and other writers such as Ellis, Leavitt, Janowitz and Bobbie Ann Mason). In an era, as

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180 More specifically, Kaufmann analyses Carver’s language in ‘Fat’, ‘Gazebo’ and ‘Why Don’t You Dance?’ and argues that the paratactic sentence structure in these stories ‘is not a stylistic quirk but is
Kaufmann writes, ‘marked by the growth of service labour and deskillling, work no longer serves as the key category for sociological self-definition’. In this sense, therefore, it seems significant that he identifies the rise of parataxis, because it is a style which ultimately ‘signals both the loss of complexes of meaning as well as ways of dealing with that loss’. In other words, the rise of paratactic fiction suggests a retreat, a form of consolation, a way of dealing with the bewildering world of post-Fordist capitalism.

The Calloways: An Example of Carveresque Realism?

While the link between McInerney’s early work and Carver’s short fiction might be aligned to a similarity in style or imagery, this model appears somewhat unfulfilling in light of the fiction that McInerney published after the 1980s. In fact, Brightness Falls, his fourth novel, published in 1992, moves beyond any kind of Carveresque form. The novel’s tone, style and length appear to mark a significant break from McInerney’s early work and his lengthy cultural summaries, in particular, develop what Kaufmann perceived as his early paratactic inarticulacy into a prescient commentary on the socioeconomic and cultural situation that McInerney saw around him in New York City neoliberal era:

After years of inflation someone had noticed that the equity of corporate America, as reflected in stock prices, was undervalued. A new, pro-business president said it was morning in America, inflation subsided, and smart shoppers began to wake up and call their brokers. The financial-services industry grew like an oil town in full boom. And if buying stocks on margin in a rising market could double your rate of return, buying companies outright with borrowed money and reselling the parts seemed to be the fastest way anybody had ever thought of to get fabulously rich. Interest payments were rather integral to the construction of the story: the inability to subordinate, to organize material in anything other than chronological order, gets folded back into a larger inability to conceptualize and articulate’ (p. 99). He sees a similar trait in McInerney’s use of the ‘present tense and his wittily disjunctive prose [which] are meant to signal both a hidden trauma and the means by which that trauma is overcome’ (p. 101). Kaufmann’s comment in relation to inarticulateness in Carver’s fiction, in particular, has been studied elsewhere. See, Robert Houston, ‘A Stunning Inarticulateness’, Nation, 4 July 1981; Michael W. Gearhart, ‘Breaking the Ties that Bind: Inarticulation in the Fiction of Raymond Carver’, Studies in Short Fiction, 26.4 (1989), 439-46; Paul Sweeten, ‘Light and Change: Repressed Escapism in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love’, Journal of the Short Story in English, 60 (2013), 2-11.  

tax-deductible, so it was just dumb not to borrow as much as possible and buy everything in sight. Debt was good, equity boring.  

One need only consider the development of neoliberal financialization in New York City in the 1980s to see how insightful McInerney’s description is. The banks’ victory over the government in the 1975 budgetary crisis and their increasing ability to by-pass or find loopholes in the Glass-Steagall Act conjoined with the relatively recent liberalisation of international financial markets and recycled petro dollars from the OPEC oil crisis to create an environment of increasing legislative autonomy and free-flowing capital. The focus on financialization was, of course, just one trait of neoliberalism’s need constantly to accumulate capital, and a reflection of its unerring ability to seek and adapt to new markets – what Harvey calls accumulation by dispossession. (This often occurs on a macro-scale, as in the restructuring of, say, a country’s state apparatus after IMF debt intervention, but it can happen also on a more personal-scale, as in the more recent targeted advertising which takes up increasing space on social media feeds). What ought to be emphasised, however, is that this neoliberal dispossession reaches all aspects of life in neoliberal society, so that it reaches the area of artistic and cultural production as well. In the 1980s, in particular it seems, at the dawn of neoliberalism, there was a strong wave of mergers and acquisitions between publishers. Albert Greco, in his history

182 Jay McInerney, Brightness Falls (London: Bloomsbury 1992; repr. 1993), p. 143. Further references to McInerney’s novel are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text. Such exposition, held alongside Russell’s attempted acquisition of the respected literary publisher that he works for in the novel – plus the plethora of cultural sound bites, ‘Visibility was the single desirable quality’, ‘this was the era of exhibitionism’ (p. 174) – helps build McInerney’s broader critique of the neoliberal era; an age in which aesthetic production was becoming increasingly impacted by financialization and integrated – or infiltrated – with commodity production more readily. In this sense McInerney appears to have become acutely aware of the neoliberal forces which opposed a Carveresque realism. (It is also, I might speculate, significant that it was only after Carver’s death that these ideas formally materialised).

183 Harvey, in A Brief History of Neoliberalism, argues that the investment bankers seized the opportunity to restructure the city in ways that suited their agenda:

The creation of a ‘good business climate’ was a priority. This meant using public resources to build appropriate infrastructures for business (particularly in telecommunications) coupled with subsidies and tax incentives for capitalist enterprises. Corporate welfare substituted for people welfare. The city’s elite institutions were mobilized to sell the image of a city as a cultural centre and tourist destination (inventing the famous logo ‘I Love New York’). The ruling elites moved, often fractiously, to support the opening up of the cultural field to all manner of diverse cosmopolitan currents. The narcissistic exploration of self, sexuality, and identity became the leitmotif of bourgeois urban culture. Artistic freedom and artistic license, promoted by the city’s powerful cultural institutions, led, in effect, to the neoliberalization of culture (p. 47).

184 Terry Eagleton follows a similar logic when he argues that ‘Literature may be an artifact, a product of social consciousness, a world vision; but it is also an industry’. See, Terry Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism (London: Methuen, 1976), p. 59.
of publishing, writes that ‘Between 1984 and 1988, there were 151 mergers, almost as many as in the entire 1960s’. He goes on, ‘A small number of firms in the 1980s carefully crafted media empires that were positioned to withstand the ravages of recession and political unrest and capture global business opportunities’. This analysis is unsurprising given neoliberalism’s free market competition and its tendency to redistribute wealth unevenly. What McInerney’s novel picks up on is the proliferation of this trend in the mid-1980s, but for McInerney, the superficiality of cultural production as a means to capital accumulation as an end in itself is played off against the broader atmosphere of literary realism and literary experimentalism in which he learnt to write, where the latter is viewed as being coterminous with surface capitalism.

In order to fully understand how McInerney develops these ideas in the novel it is worth pausing briefly to quickly assess the fictional history of Russell and Corrine Calloway, the two principle characters in Brightness Falls. The creation of the Calloways – McInerney’s perennial couple – denotes a notable shift away from McInerney’s early trilogy. Their emergence in ‘Smoke’, a story published in Atlantic Monthly in 1986, preceded their fuller exposition in Brightness Falls. Its sequel, The Good Life, was published in 2006 and situated Russell and Corrine amongst the aftermath of September 11, before they resurfaced more recently in 2009 in another story called ‘The March’. They made what appears to be their final appearance in 2016 in McInerney’s latest novel, Bright, Precious Days.

Their fictional debut, under the guise of the Callahans in the story ‘Smoke’, predominantly concerns their fledging marriage as they attempt to negotiate the strains and complexities of New York City life. Framed within this context is the retelling of their time at

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185 Greco provides more detail:
The major transactions involved Bertelsmann AG’s acquisition of Dell and Doubleday; Rupert Murdoch and Harper & Row; the emergence of Holland’s Elsevier-NDUNV as a major player in the United States; the unraveling of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; the rise and fall of the United Kingdom’s Robert Maxwell; the transformation of the Paramount Corporation (formerly Gulf & Western) into one of the top players in the industry; the United Kingdom’s Pearson PLC’s move to acquire New American Library; and the emergence of Canada’s Thomson Corporation and the United States’ Times-Mirror as global media players.

college, in which their first encounter was signified by an inexhaustibly long conversation where they ‘talked about everything’, Russell unable to ‘stop thinking about her mouth, her lips on a cigarette’, before the words stopped only to be replaced by ‘a crisis of lips and tongues’ – a suitable metaphor for a relationship marked by a failure to understand and embody a Carveresque idea of linguistic accuracy.186 Once an aspiring poet, Russell, constrained by the financial burden of the city, has taken an editorial job with a publisher. Presiding over a ‘series of travel books composed of plagiarism and speculation in equal parts’, his move to publishing symbolises, in the narrator’s mind at least, the beginning of a descent from the ‘Byronic tradition’ to literary bureaucrat. His current work is now only a formulaic production in which ‘adjectives became severely dog-eared’, which leaves him feeling ‘queasy and unclean’ (p. 102). His wife, Corrine, a recent convert to investment banking, tempers Russell’s cynicism:

Certain dates and names were fraught with unlikely significance for her, and, much more than Russell, the class poet, she believed in the power of words. When, after a week, Russell asked her to marry him, she made him solemnly promise never to use the word divorce, even in jest (pp. 109-10).

The characterisation of the Calloways in ‘Smoke’ indicates that McInerney is using them to embody something of the opposition between those like Gardner and Carver – who viewed the writers’ task as having some kind of orthodox moral obligation tied to the inherent power of language – and postmodernists like Barth and Gass who emphasized experimentation and a more decentred linguistics. McInerney reveals something of his belief when he opens his reminiscence by describing Carver’s voice:

As I say, he mumbled, and if it once seemed merely a physical tic, akin to cracking knuckles or the drumming of a foot, I now think it was a function of a deep humility and a respect for language bordering on awe, a reflection of his sense that words should

186 Jay McInerney, How It Ended (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), p. 109. Further references to to this story are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.
be handled very, very gingerly. As if it might be almost impossible to say what you wanted to say. As if it might be dangerous, even.187

Clearly, then, there are parallels between McInerney’s view of Carver and Carver’s own view of Gardner – that words have the capacity to ‘improve life’ and ‘inspire and incite human beings toward virtue’. 188 Carver famously wrote in ‘On Writing’ that ‘At the first sign of a trick or a gimmick in a piece of fiction, a cheap trick or even an elaborate trick, I tend to look for cover’ (p. 729). He continued, with particular reference to John Barth, ‘Too often “experimentation” is a license to be careless, silly or imitative in the writing.’ And as if to cement his idea in Gardner’s ‘moral fiction’ he concluded, ‘Even worse, [it is] a license to try to brutalize or alienate the reader. Too often such writing gives us no news of the world’ (p. 729). While the veracity of Carver’s argument is, as I have already indicated, debateable, and while it is not my intention to analyse it in detail right now, it is worth noting that, for better or worse, McInerney appears to have taken on the ideas proposed by Carver about this opposition and used them as the basis for his characterisation of the Calloways in Brightness Falls.

In order to understand, then, how this idea plays out in the novel it is helpful to begin by analysing Victor Propp, a novelist that Russell edits. Propp, who begins as an ostensibly minor character, soon becomes the hub on which the novel’s plot turns when he suggests, in a move that will propel both men’s careers, that Russell should attempt to leverage financial control of Corbin, Dern, Russell’s employer. The attempted buyout in turn marks the beginning of a concomitant decline in Russell’s employment, his marriage, and his literary standing as one of

188 On Moral Fiction, p. 5, 18. It seems only natural therefore that when Russell and Corrine try to quit smoking – ostensibly the primary theme in the story – Corrine is keen that they work on their communicative network, surmising that talking about it would make it easier to quit and making Russell agree that they call each other ‘whenever they are feeling weak’ (p. 111). However under pressure at work and fortifying their stress with a string of social commitments, Russell and Corrine separately succumb to their cravings. Gradually the couple’s schedule moves out of sync. Corrine finds solace in her long hours and an attentive colleague and Russell in parties and alcohol. The blurred boundaries between the temptation to smoke and the temptation of infidelity are rife in the story and it is Russell and Corrine’s inability to articulate these problems that proves their downfall. Such reticence, both when Russell fantasizes of an affair with an ex-girlfriend and when Corrine dreams of smoking, ignites a downward spiral that leads to real – rather than imagined – infidelity. Despite Corrine’s confession at the end of the story that she has smoked, it is Russell’s eventual unfaithfulness at a party that make him the greater sinner. His lack of integrity with words, both written and spoken, are clearly analogous with the dishonesty of his actions and his relationships; his inability to confess to Corrine, symbolically recalls that, of course, there is no smoke without fire.
New York’s rising editors, until eventually – and perhaps inevitably – all three collapse at once with the rest of the financial market in the 1987 crash. Propp, a synecdoche for the anti-realist novelist of the 1970s and ’80s, and therefore presented by McInerney as the antithesis of Carveresque realism, is satirized throughout the novel. Suitably enough Propp claims he was ‘spawned’ in Boise, Idaho, a ‘product’ of a Swedish mother and a Russian father (pp. 70-71). In his own mind he had never been ‘particularly American’, and only began to find his place when he ‘discovered Europe in the comp lit department’ at Yale when he was sixteen (p. 70). It is because of this that he came to view himself as ‘outside the culture, critical and aloof, quarantined at an Ellis Island of the spirit with the disease of his art’ (p. 71). Thus Propp’s self-diagnosis – that his identity is in the texts of the comparative literature department at Yale – exposes the fault line between foundational realist principles and decentred worldview of poststructural experimentalism. McInerney elaborates:

A hundred years after Henry James had fled the raw continent, Victor mused, the consciousness of his native land remained barely half forged. Americans were still radical materialists. More innocent than Kalahari bushmen, who were adepts at reading signs and symbols, Americans took everything at face value – words, signs, rhetoric, faces – as if reality itself were so much legal tender. For Victor it was a treacherous text composed by a necromancer, diabolically resistant to analysis. Even the phrase ‘face value’ suggested to a mind like Victor Propp’s a labyrinth of interpretation, of masks and falsity and deceit, divergences of appearance and reality, rancorous divorces between signifier and signified, the apparent solidity of the words collapsing underfoot, feathering out and deliquescing into Derridean twilight, surfaces giving way suddenly (p. 71).

Seen within the context of the whole novel McInerney’s analysis is, I think, deeply ironic. And while McInerney shows awareness of the risks of unmediated realism – an American consciousness ‘barely half forged’ – the stronger critique appears to be of Propp’s decentred worldview; an author who has taken Derrida’s famous maxim that there is nothing outside of
the text to its logical conclusion.\(^\text{189}\) Thus, in what is meant to be an ironic comment, for Propp, even the phrase ‘face value’ emits a plethora of disjunctive, slippery definitions. In the novel, and, it seems, in McInerney’s mind, this poststructural ideal, where everything is a ‘treacherous text’ firmly ‘resistant to analysis’, opposes Carveresque realism, which purports that the ability to craft one true sentence presents, on some level, a valuable engagement with reality. This idea is reinforced later in the novel when one fictional commentator describes Propp’s prose as, ‘Henry James with bowel movements’ (p. 74).\(^\text{190}\)

Propp’s hypothetical masterpiece, then, becomes a metaphor for what McInerney sees as superficial literature. The unfinished novel appears to be a deliberate attempt by Propp to maintain a high level of literary stature while the fame of his contemporaries diminishes according, McInerney is quick to point out, ‘to conventional market principles as they predictably published fifth, sixth and seventh novels’ (p. 73). Still, fragments of Propp’s novel are intermittingly published in literary journals in order to continue the façade. One of the most famous passages, McInerney explains is, ‘the heroic monologue of the embryonic protagonist recounting the tides, rhythms and developmental struggles of the amniotic world as he delivered himself from the womb by sheer force of will’ (p. 74). If the description of Propp’s fiction is laughable it is because there is a strong element of reality in his landscapes, for the extreme caricature would seem implausible if it were not for Harold Brodkey, a Propp-like figure, whose semi-mythical novel, \textit{A Party of Animals}, was also in production for decades, and also reportedly increased in value year-on-year. And yet McInerney is doing more than merely caricaturing, for he is attempting to present a pertinent critique. Russell, who has a history of adhering to the ‘Byronic tradition’ begins to be taken in by Propp’s ideology, and puts immutable faith in the unfinished novel, which, consistent with his obfuscatory character and


\(^{190}\) The commentator’s metaphor extends to Propp’s irrepressible verbalisation too, for he spends, ‘half his day on the phone’, needing ‘many ears into which to pour the torrent of his verbal overflow’ (p. 75), all of which is as ultimately valueless as his prose, for he has been working on the same novel for twenty years.
typical Pascalian nature, and despite its deadline receding ‘gradually into a semi-mythical future’ (p. 21), he considers, ‘worth the wager of belief’ (p. 242).

Later, Russell puts his faith into action and agrees to arrange a publicity reading at the Y for Propp, but when Jeff Pierce, a younger novelist that Russell edits, fails to show to give the introduction, Propp becomes furious and leaves. Thus Propp and his novel remain suitably inconspicuous and cause a minor media storm. ‘Propp’s dusty, enigmatic legend grew immeasurably’, McInerney writes, ‘burnished with a shiny coat of scandal’. The resulting rumours inevitably became, ‘much more interesting than any possible response to an actual reading’ (p. 242). McInerney takes pains to invent an elaborate quote from a ‘downtown weekly’, which calls Propp the, ‘quark and the black hole of contemporary American literature, a nearly theoretical entity whose size and shape and importance can be deduced only partly from visible manifestations’, before the fictional review seals the synopsis of Propp’s ambition:

Derrida having made the author obsolete in favour of an endless scrim or écriture and intertextuality, Propp apparently means to erase even the text with his long silences, punctuated by glimpses of dazzling prose – the silence assuming legendary proportions, the long-unfulfilled promise of the novel, which we register in pieces, like glimpses of flesh beneath a hem, this deferred gratification perhaps the very point of the enterprise (pp. 242-43).

Thus Propp’s novel becomes the extreme parody of art in the postmodern or neoliberal era. It is a novel which, to coin Jameson’s earlier critique ‘does not really speak to us at all’. Propp’s novel speaks even less, considering its non-existence. This kind of world offers little problem for someone like Propp who lives ‘as if in a maze of conspiracy’, a world where he cannot trust ‘the evidence of his senses’, and is unable to ‘take reality for granted’ (p. 23). But for McInerney – who holds to Carveresque realism – Propp’s disdain is an affront, a pernicious attack even, on its foundations. In this sense, the constant satirizing and elaborate parodying by McInerney appears to be a defensive manoeuvre – perhaps even a retreat in the face of an incomprehensible postmodern experimentation towards a more orthodox form of writing. In any

191 Jameson, Postmodernism, p. 9.
case, McInerney is clearly implying that he holds faith in the values that Propp opposes, and in doing so demonstrates an acute consciousness of what he deems to be the forces ranged against Carveresque values, but ultimately, he fundamentally proposes that these values are still the best way to understand reality.

It is highly significant therefore, that Russell’s belief in Propp’s artificial reality – a world which is inextricably linked to the unsteady foundation of the financial markets – leads to his downfall. Appropriately enough the events that propel the plot towards their inevitable end are ignited by Propp. Attending one of their monthly lunch meetings with the preconceived idea that ‘Russell might just accomplish something noteworthy or even spectacular, particularly if given a push’ (p. 72), Propp proposes that Russell mounts a financial coup at Corbin, Dern. In what becomes a rather self-serving conversation, Propp, who seems to know Russell’s job prospects, solicits his feeling of presentiment:

‘Everybody’s getting rich, Russell’, Victor confided, leaning forward and engaging him with that toilet-plunger gaze, which was unsettling and flattering in equal measure.

‘Every remotely sentient being except for you and me. If you were in any other business right now, you’d be making twice, ten times what you do now’ (p. 78).

In a scene that recalls the mythic appeal of urban excess, Propp proposes, “Do you remember what Nick Carraway said as he was driving into Manhattan?”, a question as much rhetorical as it is meant to conjure romantic notions of the lost American dream – “Anything can happen now that we’ve slid over this bridge…anything at all” (p. 79). Russell is almost convinced, but in one last appeal to the vestige of reality he counters with his inability to raise capital. “That doesn’t matter”, Propp’s responds, “All you need is ambition, imagination and leverage” (p. 79), before concluding his pitch, “Credit, Russell, the philosopher’s stone of our era. You can turn the lead of wage slavery into golden destiny – if you have the courage” (p. 80). Propp’s mischief should be viewed as the ignition for Russell’s ambitions – although not the source, for McInerney explains that ‘the idea was not so wild or remote that it had not occurred to Russell’ (p. 80) – ambitions which appeal more to the ‘artifice’ of Propp’s decentred world than any foundation of ‘reality’.
It is in this way that McInerney symbolically aligns his novel with a critique of the neoliberal financialization.\textsuperscript{192} It is Russell’s hostile takeover of his employer, Corbin, Dern, that simultaneously exposes the unethical foundations of the financial sector and the superficiality of literary culture. Firstly, not only has Russell symbolically slipped from the Byronic tradition to the world of administrative publishing, but he is now about to attempt to leverage financial control of an artistic institution by taking advantage of a corrupt financial system. Supposedly more concerned with, ‘Literature and socially conscious publishing’ (p. 207), the chance of a quick profit is too great a temptation for Russell to resist. During the negotiations he brokers a ten per cent cut of equity based on sales targets and buys one hundred thousand dollars worth of undervalued stock on borrowed credit.

In the novel the attempted acquisition of Corbin, Dern soils everything (and everyone) that comes into contact with it, and, to reiterate, it is Russell’s faith in Propp’s artificial premise that begins this series of events. Despite Russell’s protestations of literary purity, the acquisition of Corbin, Dern is the culmination of a line of smaller instances that exhibit his tendency towards McInerney’s cultural analysis that ‘debt is good, equity bad’ (p. 143). Three years before he orchestrates the deal, he purchases a fur coat for Corrine, which, ‘cost twice as much as they’d planned to spend’, but the thrill of the purchase exhibits a physical response which parallels the ephemeral buzz of substance abuse elsewhere in the novel. ‘Russell insisted in spite of, or perhaps precisely because of, the syncopated flutter of his heartbeat, the hollow vertiginous feeling in his stomach, the sweat on the palms of his hands’ (p. 373).\textsuperscript{193} It is an addiction that even the acquisition of a seventy million dollar company cannot quench for Russell soon becomes a man, ‘chummy with the four-and-five-digit numbers’, considering a house in Southampton that, ‘went for ten thousand a month’, when, as Corrine thinks, ‘they didn’t have a liquid nickel’ (p. 220).

\textsuperscript{192} One thinks, for instance, of Jameson’s comment that the ‘frantic economic urgency’ of Wall Street has infiltrated the ‘essential structural function’ of aesthetic production. See, \textit{Postmodernism}, pp. 4-5.
\textsuperscript{193} Ace’s drug abuse is described in a similar way earlier in the novel: The buzz enters through his lungs and spreads like an electric current into the bloodstream, passes Go and collects two million dollars, rockets up the spine, deposits it at the back of the skull, where it explodes in a burst of white phosphorescence (p. 211).
It is only a small step then, it seems, once Russell has instigated the attempted acquisition and succumbed to the speculation of the financial markets to his infidelity with Trina Cox. And while Trina becomes the object of Russell’s affections, his predisposition to infidelity – which, if I have not made already clear, is symptomatic of the infiltration of the markets into aesthetic production – can be traced to the very opening of the novel.\(^{194}\) It is indicative, then, of the novel’s wider critique that the main sexual temptation that Russell faces is intertwined with the fiscal world and it is therefore entirely appropriate that Trina, who is an up-and-coming operative in Mergers and Acquisitions, works in the field of financial services, which is the very personification of McInerney’s critical maxim earlier in the novel. The night of Russell’s first sexual episode with her represents the integration between infidelity and commodity production appropriately. Lying on her bed in her apartment as she pours them both champagne and while explaining the principles of the fiscal system, “‘Well, anyway, a beta of one is the market rate. Oops, little spillage, here.” Licking her wet wrist, she said, “A high beta, like two, indicates high risk and a higher required rate of return. See?’” (p. 257). Russell, of course, has seen, and before long the inevitable happens, and ever the pragmatist he seeks to internally justify the sequence:

Even when she twisted over on top of Russell to pour him another glass and kissed him instead, as if merely because she chanced to be in the immediate vicinity – this was harmless enough. Why should anybody object to this pressing together of lips, which felt so good, after all? Why should pleasure be a zero-sum commodity, when the store of it could be so easily expanded, the wealth increased by sharing? (p. 258).

The reification of pleasure in this passage – only one of the many instances when emotion or sensation is commodified in the novel – more broadly represents McInerney’s attempt to expose

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\(^{194}\) The perennial problem is, at first, tempered by, ‘a nagging inner voice acquired via the Times op-ed and the higher media, progressive girlfriends and old New England schools’ (p. 61), but soon gives way, first during a trip to the Museum of Modern Art, then when the Calloways go on holiday to the Caribbean, then at a party in New York when Russell is approached by a model and finally, and significantly, through his relationship with Trina.
the omnipresence of capital in the neoliberal era. This influence, as we have seen already appears to be viewed negatively by McInerney in the novel and is closely intertwined with a rejection of Carveresque literary principles. It is significant then, that McInerney characterises Corrine as a figure who resists its presence. At their lunch meeting, Propp asks Russell how Corrine is progressing as a stockbroker, interested to find out if the recent rise of women in the financial service industry has tempered the traditional bravado and risk that its masculinity exudes. Russell explains that Corrine is cautious about the financial outlook. “Women are cautious”, Propp interrupts, before offering a prescient contrast, “Men are the great romantics, the dreamers and fools. Women are realists” (p. 77). Her description as a ‘realist’, places her in conflict with Propp’s decentred universe, and indicates that McInerney is using her to embody those principles most clearly associated with Carver. It might be tempting, then, to view Russell and Corrine rather simplistically, as representative of opposing poles, that one is compromised by commodity production and the other disassociated from market influences, but this is not the case. In fact the Calloways oftentimes present an entirely ambiguous analogy. However rather than view them as a confusing model, we might better see them as reflecting the nuances and intricacies insistent in a more pragmatic view of literary realism.

Elsewhere, for instance, the Calloway’s marriage is compared to a ‘corporate debt restructuring deal’ (p. 276). Corrine, in particular, finds herself conflicted between the two values. On the one hand, she respects what McInerney calls ‘the power of language’, has a strong social conscience and eventually rejects the corrupt financial system, but on the other, she works as a stockbroker, covets the affluence of her friend’s, Casey Reynes, lifestyle, and succumbs to frequent retail impulses. The dialectic is exposed after one of her many arguments with Russell when she flees to the sanctuary of Fifth Avenue in a state, ‘almost mad enough to go into Bergdorf’s and charge up one of these nice Donna Karen ensembles with all the accessories’ (p. 66). Her temperament betrays her weakness for the fleeting pleasures of consumerism, but it is quickly tempered by a lucid anthropological assessment that suggests a deeper understanding of the forces that oppose Carveresque realism:

Dioramas of late-twentieth-century Manhattan chieftains and their women, the windows at Bergdorf’s displayed extravagantly costumed mannequins in the postures of revel and feasting. Having swindled the original inhabitants out of the land and then exterminated them, this tribe flourished until shortly before the millennium… Pausing in her commentary, Corrine, as anthropologist of the future, tried to decide what form of doom had befallen – would befall – her own. For lately it seemed to her that the horsemen of the apocalypse were saddling up, that something was coming to rip huge holes in the gaudy stage sets of Ronald McDonald Reaganland. Meanwhile she was selling stocks, a glorified Fuller Brush Girl. Hi, I’m Corrine, can I interest you in a sexy growth stock or maybe a cute little annuity? (p. 66).

Corrine’s prediction is symptomatic of the broader critique of commodity production in the novel. On a practical level her premonition that some kind of ‘doom had befallen – would befall – her own’ is proved right in the 1987 market crash and also the concomitant failure of her marriage. Still, what signifies a weightier perception is that her presentiment is not restricted to her personal experience. Her description
To conclude: these ideas are combined in a key set piece in the novel. During their weekly Sunday visit to the Museum of Modern Art, Russell and Corrine find themselves in a post-impressionist exhibition when Russell notices a French woman in a nearby gallery. Perhaps indicating McInerney’s broader point of aesthetic corruption he writes, ‘Amidst the rocks and trees of Cézanne’s Provence, this French girl was shaped like something dreamed by Brancusi, Russell thought, a piece that would be called *Sex Moving Through Space*’ (p. 61). As if reading Russell’s thoughts, Corrine interrupts his fantasy by saying, ‘At least Cézanne doesn’t let his ego into the painting’ (p. 61). Surprised, Russell challenges her comment. Corrine continues:

‘I was thinking about Hemingway saying he learned how to write from Cézanne,’ she said. ‘His descriptions of nature have that same solidity of depth, but it’s like all the trees in Hemingway’s forest have his initials carved in them, and his brooks burble ‘Me! Me! Me!’ (p. 61).

Frustrated by this apparent ‘shopworn revisionism’, Russell begins to raise his voice and their argument fills the gallery. He notices that the French woman moves into another room – infuriating him further:

‘When was the last time you read “Big Two-Hearted River”? ’ Russell boomed, his voice filling the small gallery. Feeling absurd even as he spoke – defender of truth, the mot juste and American literature. ‘Read it and weep. Then tell me about ego’ (p. 62).

Corrine, in response, flees from the gallery and Russell is left alone. ‘Why do we even come here?’ he wondered. ‘Usually they made it to Synthetic Cubism before they started to argue’ (p. 62).

Distinguished by its dynamic rather than its critically perceptive qualities, Russell’s defence of Hemingway’s fiction is, of course, sharply ironized by his actions in the novel. For, far from being the ‘defender of truth, the mot juste and American literature’, as he claims, the of America as ‘Ronald McDonald Reaganland’ – a dual rebuff which denotes capitalist greed and a shallow politics where a Hollywood actor was president – pairs her admission as a ‘glorified Fuller Brush Girl’, criticising the superficiality of the financial industry which was becoming increasingly prevalent in neoliberal society.
surrender of his poetic ambition in pursuit of financial success embodies his failure to uphold any kind of Hemingwayean, or even, Carveresque code of realism. His allusion to ‘Big Two-Hearted River’ is significant too, for Carver’s first publication in *Western Humanities Review* in 1963, ‘Pastoral’ (later published as ‘The Cabin’ in *Fires*) was, as Stull notes, a ‘Hemingway imitation’ that is ‘closely modelled on “Big Two-Hearted River”’. Carver’s story is, significantly, an ironic imitation of Hemingway’s Nick Adams’ stories and centres on Mr Harold, a middle-aged man who goes on a fishing retreat to a place where he and his wife had earlier enjoyed a holiday together. But his trip is interrupted by a gang of teenage boys who are hunting deer and threaten to shoot him while he’s fishing. Mr Harold only survives by pleading for their mercy and leaves the retreat feeling, as Stull summarizes, contra-Hemingway, ‘unheroic, homeless, and alone’.

The argument in the museum, and the literary context in which it occurs, is significant because it reflects McInerney’s own judgement:

Encountering Carver’s fiction in the early 1970s was a transforming experience for many writers of my generation, an experience perhaps comparable to discovering Hemingway’s sentences in the twenties. In fact, Carver’s language was unmistakably like Hemingway’s – the simplicity and clarity, the repetitions, the nearly conversational rhythms, the precision of physical description. But Carver completely dispensed with the romantic egoism that made the Hemingway idiom such an awkward model for other writers in the late twentieth century. The cafés and *pensions* and battlefields of Europe were replaced by trailer parks and apartment complexes, the glamorous occupations by dead-end jobs. The trout in Carver’s streams were apt to be pollution-deformed mutants. The good *vin du pays* was replaced by cheap gin, the romance of drinking by

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the dull grind of full-time alcoholism. Some commentators found his work depressing for these reasons. For many young writers it was terribly liberating.²⁰⁰

Here, it seems, is the nub of Carver’s influence on McInerney. Corrine’s opinion of Hemingway’s egoism echoes McInerney’s own reading, and mirrors his view of Carver, that through his ‘authentic’ working-class content, and his refusal to accept the debonair idealism implicit in Hemingway’s masculinity, and his emphasis on craftsmanship over innate talent and experience, he side-stepped what McInerney clearly seeks as Hemingway’s limited literary model. But more so, for McInerney, Carver’s fiction also represents an attractive retreat from the world of postmodern literary experimentation to a more orthodox realist form. ‘One aspect of what Carver seemed to say to us’, McInerney reminds his readers, ‘was that literature could be fashioned out of strict observation of real life, wherever and however it was lived’. He concludes, ‘This was news at a time when academic metafiction was the regnant mode. His example reinvigorated realism’.²⁰¹

Chapter Two

‘The Transpacific Partnership’: Raymond Carver and Haruki Murakami

‘I did it because I knew that if I did not do it, somebody else would […]
And I thought I was the one to do it in the right way.’

On 23 March 1999 Murakami wrote a letter of confession to Carver’s widow Tess Gallagher. In it he admits to translating D.T. Max’s *New York Times* article ‘The Carver Chronicles’, and, knowing Gallagher’s displeasure at the original publication, wrote to explain his actions. Max’s article, which claims that Gordon Lish played ‘a crucial role in the creation of the early short stories of Raymond Carver’, was demonstrably rejected by those loyal to Carver’s legacy, including Gallagher, who viewed it as a piece of sensationalism designed to present a ‘disconcerting and equivocal’ message that depicted Carver as a ‘composite author’. Gallagher replied to Murakami’s confession only days later and absolved him of complicity in the denigration of Carver’s name. ‘Don’t worry at all about my distaste for D.T. Max’s article,’ she wrote. ‘I have no distaste for truth, but many things were mistaken to a high degree in that piece.’ She then concludes the matter by thanking Murakami for accompanying the translation with his own opinion piece on the saga. Their brief exchange exemplifies Murakami’s sensitivity to Gallagher’s concerns, for Murakami – an internationally bestselling author – inextricably ties his fiction to Carver, claiming him as his ‘greatest literary comrade’.

Murakami’s claim might seem conceited for those who are unfamiliar with the close connection between the two writers. In 1982, early on in his writing career, Murakami first

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202 Letter from Haruki Murakami to Tess Gallagher dated 23 March 1999. Archives of their correspondence are contained in the Tess Gallagher Literary Archive, Box 100a, fol. 4262, in the William Charvat Collection of American Fiction of the Ohio State University Libraries. Further references to their correspondence will be given by the collection followed by the date as it appears in the letterhead.
204 Tess Gallagher Literary Archive, ‘29 March 1999’.
encountered Carver’s fiction when he read the longer version of ‘So Much Water So Close To Home’ in the anthology West Coast Fiction. Writing after Carver’s death he vividly described the experience:

The story literally came as a shock to me [...] There was the almost breathtakingly compact world of his fiction, his strong but supple style, and his convincing story line. Although his style is fundamentally realistic, there is something penetrating and profound in his work that goes beyond simple realism. I felt as though I had come across an entirely new kind of fiction, the likes of which there had never been before.206

For English language readers who are familiar with Murakami’s fiction, his admiration of Carver’s writing might come as a surprise. His lengthy and complex novels embody a kind of postmodern surrealism – one that blends the ubiquitousness of life in late-capitalism with the distinctly American styles and modes of detective writing and science fiction.207 Carver’s style on the other hand, as I have already highlighted, is distinctly minimal and distinctly realist – a form that still has its proponents but which has also come under increasing critical scrutiny in recent decades.208 Murakami himself offers a rebuff to those critics when he claims that Carver’s fiction goes ‘beyond simple realism’ – and by that, surely he means, beyond its supposed minimalist limitations – that beneath the surface of Carver’s fiction are important, communicable, and relevant truths, even for the postmodern, neoliberal age. For Carver this conservative view of literature finds its root, as I suggested in the previous chapter, in Gardner’s ideological pedagogy (that ‘true art is moral: it seeks to improve life, not debase it’), and this idea finds an analogous outlet in Murakami’s own writing, through which, as I shall argue later...

207 Although it ought to be noted that there are strong realist elements to Murakami’s fiction which are often overlooked by critics. His first bestselling novel in Japan, Norwegian Wood, for instance, is devoid of any fantasy elements. Likewise so are many of his short stories, particularly those featured in after the quake, as well as his latest English language novel Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage. It is also worth pointing out that Murakami has published two less-read books that link him to Carver. The first, in 2004, an anthology of selected stories, which features Carver’s ‘The Bath’, titled, Birthday Stories. The second, in 2008, a book on running titled What I Talk About When I Talk About Running.
208 Mark McGurl’s formulation of postwar American literature in The Program Era is another example of this anti-realist periodization. While McGurl presents a thorough and eminently readable analysis of Carver’s fiction, realism is a term that he does not associate with Carver, instead opting for his own, more obscure, ‘lower-middle-class modernism’ (pp. 273-320).
in this chapter, he feels he has a ‘vested duty’ as a popular Japanese author to improve Japanese
society. Furthermore, while a major strand of my argument in this chapter is that the
influence of Carver on Murakami is seen most strongly in their responses to their specific
socioeconomic conditions, it does appear that Murakami – especially in his short stories – often
borrows from Carver’s fascination with the uncanny strangeness of everyday life. In his more
surreal writing, this appropriation of the quotidian and ubiquitous existence of late-capitalism –
from shaving and dressing to dull work and empty materialism – is given free reign, and often
turns into moments of explicit psychological distress. However, in his more realistic writing,
such as his story collection after the quake (2002), this quotidian world more simply reflects
Carver’s fictional world, exploring, as his translator Jay Rubin describes, ‘the lives of realistic
people in realistic situations, people whose outwardly satisfactory lives leave them feeling
unfulfilled and who live on the edge of some devastating discovery’. If the connection between Carver and Murakami is less apparent for English language
readers, then in Japan, Murakami has undoubtedly had a significant influence on how people
experience Carver’s writing. He has translated all of Carver’s fiction, including his posthumous
stories, and also published interviews and articles about him. And even though Murakami’s

209 Gardner, On Moral Fiction, p. 5; Haruki Murakami, Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the
references to Murakami’s book are to this edition and will be given parenthetically after the quotation in
the text.
description mirrors how Carver’s fiction is often described. Take Martin Scofield’s more recent summary,
in which he writes:
In Carver we are often left with ‘anti-epiphanies’, where the realization (at least for the
characters) just does not come. But what makes Carver’s stories humane as well as artistically
subtle is the feeling that his characters are striving, often desperately for understanding; and that
even where (as is usually the case) it is not achieved, its absence is felt and registered as a central
element in the story.
See, Martin Scofield, The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story (Cambridge: Cambridge
While this chapter intimates some of the stylistic connections between both writers it stops short
of any thorough exploration. For more on the stylistic similarities between the two writers see Naomi
Matsuoka’s excellent article in which she argues that Murakami bases his representation of the quotidian
on the ‘subtle but realistic and humanistic depiction of life [in] Raymond Carver’. See, Naomi Matsuoka,
‘Murakami Haruki and Raymond Carver: The American Scene’, Comparative Literature Studies, 30.4
211 It is worth pointing out that Murakami is a prolific translator. The list of authors he has translated aside
from Carver includes: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Truman Capote, Raymond Chandler, J.D. Salinger, John
Irving, Tom O’Brien, Grace Paley, Denis Johnson, Thom Jones, Mark Strand and Paul Theroux. As
Miyawaki Toshifumi points out, ‘in terms of volume Murakami is an established translator. He has done
translations and fiction are distinct entities, there is clearly a relationship between the two outputs. In May 1983, only a year after he had read Carver for the first time, Murakami published his first translation, *Boku ga denwa o kakete iru baso* [*Where I’m Calling From and Other Stories*], in the same month that he published his own first collection of short stories, *Chugoku-yuki no soro boto* [*A Slow Boat To China*]. This pattern continued for the early part of his career, demonstrating the close correlation between the two processes. The strong synergy is further emphasized by Murakami’s translation technique which is painstakingly meticulous, working word by word, so that his translation, in his opinion, personifies the deceased writer and conveys ‘the rhythm of his breathing, the warmth of his body, and the subtle wavering of his emotions’. Murakami refers to this process as ‘experiencing Raymond Carver’, a feeling so powerful that he claims he becomes one – ‘body and soul’ – with Carver. One of Murakami’s English translators, Jay Rubin, supports this idea. At a symposium on Murakami’s fiction at the University of Berkeley in 2008, Rubin, in response to a question about Murakami’s translation technique said, ‘I remember reading a Raymond Carver story twice in one day – once in English, once in Japanese – and it was like reading the same thing twice’.

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While Carver is a central influence for Murakami, it is worth pointing out that the development of his distinctive literary style has a broader base than just one man. Born in 1949, Murakami made a notable diversion from his ancestral past when he was young. It was possibly his proximity to Kobe and Osaka – two East-Coast mercantile port cities – that began to shape his sensibility for Western culture. Discovering English language paperbacks in second-hand bookshops when he was a teenager, he began to immerse himself in the fiction of Raymond Chandler, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Evidence of the influence of those American writers can be found in his first two novels *Hear The Wind Sing* and *Pinball, 1973*.\(^{215}\) Both novels found a small but committed audience among the young, postwar generation but conservative Japanese critics denigrated their explicit references to Western pop culture and condemned them as items for popular consumption.\(^{216}\) It was not until 1982 when he published his third novel, *A Wild Sheep Chase* – significantly, the year he first encountered Carver’s fiction – that his writing reached a wider audience.\(^{217}\) The commercial success of the novel allowed Murakami the financial stability to immerse himself further in his writing. His fourth and fifth novels, *Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985) and *Norwegian Wood* (1989), bear the hallmarks of his early Americanized fiction, but also denote a shift towards the exposition of a clearer critical evaluation of the contemporary Japanese experience.\(^{218}\)

Brian Seemann recently offered a thought-provoking analysis of what he considered to be an existential connection between Carver and Murakami’s short fiction.\(^{219}\) And while there is

\(^{215}\) Both novels were published in 1979 and 1980 in Japan, but because Murakami viewed them as ostensible ‘apprentice novels’ they were only published in the US and UK in English translation for the first time in 2015.


\(^{217}\) In *Music of Words*, Rubin records that *A Wild Sheep Chase* sold 50,000 copies in Japan in its first six months of publication (p. 96), and while sales figures, of course, do not equate with literary merit, it is worth highlighting Murakami’s large readership, even at this very early stage of his career.

\(^{218}\) *Norwegian Wood*, which I will analyse briefly later in this chapter, depicts the social turmoil of the 1960s and is generally viewed as being heavily influence by *The Great Gatsby*.

\(^{219}\) Seemann argues that inarticulateness and inaction in both writers’ work exemplifies a struggle to determine individual essence. He writes, ‘this failure to connect ultimately serves as the existential foundation for many Carver stories as his characters strive to relate in environments that may prevent the acts of discovery and engagement’. See, Brian Seemann, ‘Existential Connections: The Influence of Raymond Carver on Haruki Murakami’, *The Raymond Carver Review*, 1 (2007), 75-92 (p. 77).
value in pursuing this line of enquiry – one that finds its precursor in the foundational Carver scholarship of David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips\(^{220}\) – it is the proposition of this chapter that Carver’s influence on Murakami resides most powerfully in the example or model which he set of how to negotiate, for better or worse, the complex and shifting neoliberal foundations of late-twentieth-century capitalist society. This chapter argues, therefore, that the process of reading (and later meeting) Carver enabled Murakami to engage with, and think through, his own similar yet distinct socioeconomic experience. Murakami is, I propose, a good candidate for this influential model because he is not only clearly influenced by Carver but he is also consciously working within, and often against, the boundaries of late capitalism. I will present my argument through a number of comparative close textual readings, positioning each in its relevant socioeconomic context, before judging the extent and limitation of Carver’s influence. Ultimately my readings suggest that Murakami’s acceptance of Carver’s influence rests in a corresponding desire to depict a pervasive societal humiliation and dislocation, one that is distinctly tied to each author’s experience of the trends towards short term flexibility in the labour market in America and Japan in the late twentieth century. I will then conclude by suggesting that both writers attempt to map out a solution based on non-incorporated residual values.

**Carver’s American Postwar Context**

In David Harvey’s account of the socioeconomic transformation that occurred in the US in the late-twentieth century, he argues that working life in America was marked by the inability of the hegemonic Fordist system to contain the inherent contradictions of capitalism.\(^{221}\) The Fordist principles that had dominated since the early 1900s, designed on the premise of the mass production and mass consumption of goods, led to a postwar boom and eventual market saturation. As a result, the long-term, large-scale fixed capital investments that had proved stable in the past became increasingly profitless. The labour force, instead of adapting to new

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\(^{220}\) See, David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips, ‘*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?: Voyeurism, Dissociation, and the Art of Raymond Carver*’, *The Iowa Review*, 10.3 (1979), 75-90.

\(^{221}\) Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, pp. 141-2.
markets, became rigid – reallocation was problematic – and any attempt to overcome these rigidities were opposed by the immovable force of working-class power. Unable to maintain the compromise, the capitalist system shifted, as Harvey describes, to a system of flexible accumulation.\textsuperscript{222} Resting not on the premise of rigidity but flux, this new system was designed to promote flexibility in labour markets, labour processes and consumption. As a result those attempting to achieve socioeconomic prosperity through a Fordist mentality of constant work and consumption were blocked by a system designed to directly confront the rigidity of the Fordist narrative. These new socioeconomic circumstances were reinforced by the breakdown of Bretton Woods, the subsequent liberalization of currency markets and a new focus on foreign investment. Corporations who, under the Fordist system, had focused on domestic investment were now turning to an increasingly international clientele who focused on short-term profits in share prices. When this new economic context was combined with the time-space compression provided by technological advances in telecommunication and computing, the old system in which individuals or workers found a defined sense of self in their commitment to a long-term institution, an idea which is closely tied to the acquisition of the American dream of socioeconomic prosperity, was quickly eroded. Sennett insists that in his experience most people:

\begin{quote}
    need a sustaining life narrative, they take pride in being good at something specific, and they value the experiences they’ve lived through. The cultural ideal required in new institutions thus damages many of the people who inhabit them.\textsuperscript{223}
\end{quote}

While this new, dynamic capitalism might seem technologically progressive, Sennett argues that it directly opposes any sense of sustained occupational pride, what he refers to as craftsmanship. This situation extends to the broader socioeconomic context of working life in the US more generally. Sennett continues:

\textsuperscript{222} Harvey’s term is used tentatively in his account, and I would suggest is now more broadly recognisable as being in-line with neoliberal free market principles. For a more in-depth account see, Part II of Harvey’s \textit{The Condition of Postmodernity}, ‘The Political-Economic Transformation of Late-Twentieth Century Capitalism’, pp. 121-197.

\textsuperscript{223} Sennett, \textit{The Culture of New Capitalism}, p. 5.
The more one understands how to do something well, the more one cares about it. Institutions based on short-term transactions and constantly shifting tasks, however, do not breed that depth. Indeed the organization can fear it; the management code word here is ingrown. Someone who digs deep into an activity just to get it right can seem to others ingrown in the sense of fixated on that one thing – an obsession is indeed necessary for the craftsman. He or she stands at the opposite pole from the consultant, who swoops in and out but never nests.224

For Americans, men and women like Carver, who are tied rather rigidly to the idea of sustained hard-work, or craft, as a route to socioeconomic, even artistic, success, the move towards dynamic capitalism in the neoliberal period marks a particular moment of crisis. Instead of long-term narratives, which offered delayed gratification, institutions – more broadly labour, education and consumption – began to focus on short-term plans and short-term goals. In what amounts to a rather perverse paradox, then, despite rising economic expectations, many Americans did not actually see an increase in long-term personal prosperity.225 In fact, as Sennett argues in The Culture of New Capitalism and earlier in The Corrosion of Character, the fragmenting of institutions left large groups of middle Americans feeling distinctly alienated. For many, the advent of neoliberalism destroyed the hopes of attaining the American dream.226

**Humiliation, Consumption and Idleness in Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?**

224 Sennett, pp. 105-6.
225 One way that neoliberal policy makers sought to combat this problem was to introduce a debt-based economy; an idea that still operates to this day. In the 1980s in particular, and as I explored in my discussions of Brightness Falls in chapter one, credit became easily available for many.
226 Sennett, *Culture of New Capitalism*, pp. 6-7. As a brief example, take the restructuring of labour contracts in the 1970s and ’80s, which moved work arrangements away from regular employment to part-time, temporary or sub-contracted agreements. These shifts in labour had their most profound effect on middle-America. In her account of the period, Katherine S. Newman argues that 1985, a year when 600,000 white-collar management jobs were dissolved, was exemplarily of the situation. Much of these shifts can be traced back to the breakdown of the Bretton Woods currency agreement in the early 1970s, which appeared to weaken national constraints on investing and resulted in a period of economic instability. Sennett argues that during this period, ‘corporations reconfigured themselves to meet a new international clientele of investors – investors more intent on short-term profits in share prices than on long-term profits in dividends’. See, Katherine S. Newman, *Falling From Grace* (New York: Pantheon, 1989), p. 34.
Growing up in the postwar period, Carver felt the effect of this transition. As I noted in my introduction, in ‘Fires’, Carver recalls when he realised that his long-term plans for economic and social mobility were little more than fantasies, ‘We had great dreams, my wife and I. We thought we could bow our necks, work very hard, and do all that we had set out hearts to do. But we were mistaken’ (p. 737). Carver never fully reveals what their ‘great dreams’ were – although they most likely involved education, movement out of the working-class and a successful writing career – but the Carvers’ ressentiment fails to account for a reality beyond their control. Harker unpacks this idea when he suggests that:

They [the Carvers] invested in the hegemonic narratives of contemporary consumer society – working hard, loyalty, trying to advance themselves through education, doing the right things. But the socioeconomic world inflicted experiences – bankruptcy, unemployment, and working hard and getting nowhere – about which these hegemonic narratives had little or nothing to say.  

One need only spend a short time studying Carver’s early life to find a number of pertinent examples to illustrate this. Most applicable for any discussion is the account of their first bankruptcy in 1967. Carver, who had just completed his university education at Humboldt State, was honing his writing while working a variety of low-paid jobs, most notably as a night janitor at a local hospital. His wife, Maryann, on the other hand, was beginning to earn a dependable salary as a saleswoman. Still, despite a level of financial security, Carver found a number of outstanding debts – mainly college loans and credit cards – to be a daily burden. After meeting a bankruptcy attorney at a bar, he decided that the easiest way to escape from their onerous loans would be to declare bankruptcy and start afresh. What is particularly interesting about the situation is that Maryann opposed Carver’s plan. Sklenicka records that, from Maryann’s point of view, they both had steady employment and, with time, was sure they would have been able to pay back their creditors. Her embrace of America’s new debt economy can be seen as being tantamount to an acceptance of the forthcoming neoliberal economic era. Carver’s attitude, and

fear of debt, on the other hand, reflects the rigidity of the Fordist narrative. This small anecdotal example serves to illustrate Carver’s struggle to adapt to the transition from embedded liberalism to neoliberalism – and might also be understood as a reflection of the difficulties faced by many Americans trying to adjust to a new era of capital in this period. The humiliation that he faced before the facts of working life in the neoliberal era – or as he put it in his laconic prose, ‘the imminent removal of the chair from under me’ (p. 737) – reveals the flaw of the Fordist principle, or, what we might better understand as an orthodox American narrative or hard work, in a society shifting towards neoliberal ideals.

It is unsurprising therefore that Carver’s early fiction represents a wide spectrum of middle-American jobs and documents much of this humiliation. Often caught ‘in-between’ circumstances, Carver’s characters are humiliated because of joblessness, unable to improve their lot through hard work, and left yearning for a missing ‘something’ in their lives. The working life that his first collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976) depicts – waitresses, students, teachers, writers – does not represent a demeaning life in itself; rather it is the threat of fragmenting institutions and fragmenting lives that weaken his characters’ long-term socioeconomic plans and cause humiliation. For Carver and for many Americans it was hard work that was the vehicle for long-term social and economic prosperity; joblessness, bankruptcy, or even the prospect of either, therefore, reflected a weakening of that American dream. This, in turn, led to a dislocation that Sennett argues was emblematic of late-twentieth century capitalism where ‘institutions no longer provide a long-term frame’ and individuals have to ‘improvise his or her life-narrative, or even do without any sustained sense of self’.

228 Sklenicka makes this point clear when she summarises the situation by writing, ‘In Maryann’s opinion, the bankruptcy was unnecessary; indeed, her credit-based notion of how to get ahead has since become an American norm’ (p. 129).

229 Interestingly, at the time, Carver showed little sign of humiliation in going through the bankruptcy process. The final couplet of his poem ‘Bankruptcy’, ‘Today, my heart, like the front door, | stands open for the first time in months’ (*All Of Us*, p. 8), reveals a certain level of relief; a chance at a fresh start. It is only later, as I will argue, that his writing starts to register the humiliation of the situation.

230 Carver’s tone makes this clear. These are jobs that any American might hold, and which Carver, as he documented in ‘Fires’, did at one time (p. 741). Later, in an interview with Bruce Webber, Carver claimed that ‘the country is filled with these people. They’re good people. People doing the best they could’ (*A Chronicler of Blue-Collar Despair*, p. 92).

231 Sennett, *Culture of New Capitalism*, p. 4.
Carver’s story ‘What Is It?’ deals with the humiliation of broken socioeconomic aspirations. The opening sentence reveals an ultimatum, ‘Fact is the car needs to be sold in a hurry’ (p. 157). After a period of uncontrollable consumption, Leo and Toni have been forced to declare bankruptcy. They are advised by their lawyer to sell their most expensive possession: the convertible, ‘today, tonight’. Such insistence calls for urgent action and, in a darkly equivocal manner, ‘Leo sends Toni out to do it’ (p. 157). This action marks a significant moment in their lives. As the desperate couple part company amid empty promises of an unrealistic future – ‘I’ll get out of it’ and ‘Things are going to be different!’ (p. 159) – they let go of their final vestige of consumer addiction, the yardstick by which they measure socioeconomic success. This humiliation is underlined a few hours later when Leo, after contemplating their predicament considers whether ‘he should go to the basement, stand on the utility sink, and hang himself with his belt’ (p. 159). Pulled out of his suicidal thoughts by Toni who rings from a restaurant, where she is with the salesman who is buying the car, Leo verbalises his chief concern a number of times, ‘Did somebody buy the car?’ (p. 161). Toni reveals she has sold the car for ‘six and a quarter’ (p. 162), which she counts as lucky – although it is not the nine hundred dollars Leo wanted – and, after repeating the salesman’s opinion that, ‘he’d rather be classified a robber or a rapist than a bankrupt’ (p. 162), she hangs up the phone. In a moment of subtle ambiguity, Carver underlines Leo’s humiliation. Not only has his economic situation drawn him to suicidal thoughts but it is now compounded by the salesman’s opinion that bankruptcy is worse than robbery and rape – two crimes which, we are now almost certain, are about to be committed in one form or another. When Toni returns, the two lie in bed and Leo feels the ‘stretch marks’ on her body, a physical reminder of their distorted ambition, which seem like ‘roads’, and finally thinks of the lost convertible, ‘He remembers waking up in the morning after they’d bought the car, seeing it, there in the drive, gleaming’ (p. 164).

The foundational problem to Leo and Toni’s predicament is that they have bought into the hegemonic narrative that work and consumption lead to long-term economic and social success:
She wanted something to do after the kids started school, so she went back selling. He was working six days a week in the fiber-glass plant. For a while they didn’t know how to spend the money. Then they put a thousand on the convertible and doubled and tripled the payments until in a year they had it paid (p. 159).

Their embodiment of the Fordist principles of mass production and mass consumption belie a contradiction that cannot be contained by their belief in the hegemonic narrative, for soon they enter a period of uncontrollable consumption. They spend their money on their children, buying them bicycles, clothes and food. Their actions are motivated in large part by a desire to escape their working-class roots through consumption and Toni’s admission confirms this, ‘I had to do without when I was a kid’ (p. 160). Their acquisition of books and records is a symbol of an attempt at a cultural education before they buy the obligatory consumer capitalist appliances and luxury goods that denote graduation to middle-America. Their compulsive spending reflects the consumer zeitgeist described by Sennett:

> In using things we use them up. Our desire for a dress may be ardent, but a few days after we actually buy and wear it, the garment arouses us less. Here the imagination is strongest in anticipation, grows ever weaker through use.  

For Leo and Toni the initial freedom offered by an expendable income in consumer-capitalist America mutates into a consuming addiction. The convertible is a significant symbol in this regard. Its symbolism is concomitant with Gareth Cornwall’s notion that Carver’s characters have ‘no limit to the range and scale of their desire’ and therefore presents a defining paradox for Leo and Toni. One might expect the acquisition of their most notable consumer item, the convertible (the sky’s the limit), to be the catalyst to release them from the confines of their working poor life, but instead, it becomes a prison of consuming addiction. Consequently it is that addiction and the impending humiliation of bankruptcy that leads to the collapse of their

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233 To illustrate this kind of consuming purchase Sennett uses the example of an iPod whose ‘commercial appeal consists precisely in having more [memory] than a person could ever use’. The car that Leo and Toni buy therefore reflects this desire. ‘Buying a little iPod similarly promises to expand one’s capabilities’, and here is the crux, apt to the point of cliché, ‘As the salesman who flogged my iPod said, without any embarrassment, “The sky’s the limit”’ (pp. 153-54).
upward economic and social mobility. For Leo and Toni hard work and consumption does not lead to the acquisition of long-term socioeconomic dreams. The sky is not the limit. Instead they are caught in the dark side of America, where, just like Carver’s experience in real life, hegemonic narratives are undermined by a capitalist society in transition.235

If ‘What Is It?’ explores the failure of Carver’s orthodox work ethic as a means to socioeconomic security and prosperity, then another story in his first collection, ‘What Do You Do In San Francisco?’, explores the flipside of that narrative, the unattractiveness of idleness, or, the lack of any work ethic. Narrated by Henry Robinson, a mailman in the small northern Californian town of Arcata, the story revolves around the arrival of the Marstons, a small family who move to the town from San Francisco. Whatever their reasons for moving to Arcata, the Marstons buck small town convention. They keep to themselves, take a long time to move their belongings from their U-Haul trailer, and fail to keep up the appearance of the house. As weeds grow and the lawn turns yellow, their idleness, or lack of small town American work ethic, is reinforced by the term that Robinson uses to describe them: Beatniks. Marston’s wife, who remains nameless throughout the story, is a painter and Robinson supposes that Marston does something similar, which, importantly for Robinson, does not count as real work. Real work, he claims, has ‘value’ – but the only valuable quality Robinson exposes is, ‘the harder the better’ (p. 85). Soon rumours abound in the small town as to who the Marstons really are and what they are doing in Arcata. Sallie Wilson, a member of the Welcome Wagon, claims ‘the worst story’, Marston’s wife is a dope addict and the family are trying to escape their past (p. 89). In the story, the reason for their move to Arcata is never revealed, and presently Marston’s wife and the three children leave him, leaving Marston in limbo, unemployed, waiting daily on the porch for news from his wife until he too disappears from Arcata all together.

Throughout the story it is Marston’s inactivity that is scrutinized the most. Robinson’s narrative stems from a murder he reads about in the newspaper. ‘It wasn’t the same man’, he assures the reader, ‘though there was a likeness because of the beard’ (p. 85). The beard is an

235 The symbolism of the story is made even more pertinent when considered in the context of the Carvers’ first bankruptcy, for they too had recently bought a convertible on Maryann’s salary and were forced to sell it during the bankruptcy.
important aspect of Marston for it symbolises his idleness. ‘People here aren’t used to seeing
men with beards – or men who don’t work for that matter’ (p. 86), Robinson states. Whether the
beard reflects a lack of work-readiness or a lax attitude towards personal hygiene (or both), one
thing is certain: it becomes his distinguishing feature. As the drug related rumours settle down,
the only time anyone in Arcata takes notice of Marston is when they stare at his beard in the
supermarket. This is conjoined with the gender ambiguity of how his wife dresses, in ‘a man’s
undershirt’ (p. 86), and together represents a subversion of traditional American values. If there
is anyone more likely to work in the sense that Robinson sees it, it is Marston’s wife, it seems –
the man’s undershirt perhaps denoting that she is dressed for action.

These ideas are only reinforced by a lack of urgency in Marston’s actions. Not only
does it take them over fourteen hours to drive the three hundred miles from San Francisco to
Arcata, their U-Haul trailer sits half-emptied outside their house for several days, Marston fails
to rename his mailbox – an (in)action that suggests impermanence – and he remains in a state of
befuddled transience at the end of the story after his wife leaves him. Coinciding with these
smaller incidences is Marston’s refusal to look for paid employment. The reason for his
ideological aversion to work is never fully revealed by Robinson – a sign that he finds
Marston’s idleness incomprehensible – but the story’s narrative suggests that Carver does not
view it as an attractive option. Whatever the cause, Marston’s one notable action early in the
story is to refuse the job opportunity offered to him by Robinson:

*I tapered off, seeing how they didn’t look interested.*

‘No, thanks’, he said.

‘He’s not looking for a job’, she put in (p. 87).

Marston’s inactivity is, of course, a point of contention for Robinson who views it as a violation
of the American ideal of hard work. His values are in-line with those that were influential for
the rise of productivity and development of the US in the early-to-mid-twentieth century (the
very ideals that, as we shall see later in this chapter, the Japanese sought to imitate in the
postwar years). And while Robinson’s attitude is hardly designed to be an emulative model, the
flipside, Marston’s idleness, or refusal to engage in any meaningful work or activity is an
equally unattractive option. The climax of the story occurs when Robinson attempts to pull Marston out of his inactivity by espousing his American work ethic. He does it the day he delivers a letter with a Portland postmark that he imagines is from his wife:

She’s no good, boy. I could tell that the minute I saw her. Why don’t you forget her? Why don’t you go to work and forget her? What have you got against work? It was work, day and night, work that gave me oblivion when I was in your shoes and there was a war on where I was…’ (pp. 91-2).

Of course, Robinson’s appeal does not result in any change in Marston’s attitude. Rather, the opposite happens: on the run from his failure, a feeling seemingly cemented by joblessness, he is left in stasis, in a state of humiliation. He retreats into his house and does not come out to meet Robinson anymore. Instead, he waits for the mail inside, looking out the window. The final scene depicts Marston staring beyond Robinson as he delivers the mail, his eyes fixed over ‘the rooftops and the trees, south’, (towards San Francisco), apparently watching something. But when Robinson looks all he can see is ‘the same old timber, mountains, sky’ (p. 92). Of course, we are witnessing the most Carveresque of motifs. David Boxer and Cassandra Phillips argue that it is ‘a symbol of voyeurism’. That is, what Marston is staring at is not the scenery but the ‘hideously clear vision’ of himself, distant, in the words of Boxer and Phillips, and unattainable.236 This ‘hideously clear vision’ is the reality of his joblessness, and his isolation, displacement and dissociation from society and himself. While Robinson’s presence implies the existence of an intact Fordism, it does not provide a valuable alternative for Marston. The dislocation of the neoliberal era has begun to have an affect on him. Marston has been cast adrift. Even the confrontation with Robinson fails to buoy him into action, and Marston is left to wander, like a peripatetic loner in small town America.

Murakami’s Japanese Postwar Context

The effect of Carver’s literary response to his socioeconomic situation on Murakami’s own fiction can only be understood with clarity by placing it within the context of the social and

cultural crises that Murakami’s fiction depicts in late-twentieth century Japan. Prior to the dramatic socioeconomic changes after 1955, Japanese life was defined by the humiliating defeat in the Pacific War, the Emperor’s surrender and the subsequent military occupation by the U.S. The level of poverty in immediate postwar Japan was high, but advances in industrial technology and procurement orders from the U.S. military during the Korean War ignited economic recovery. From 1955 onwards, consumption of traditional necessities declined as the country began to adopt the ideals of western embedded liberal capitalism, most notably increasing expenditure on education, the financial sector and the leisure industry. This coincided with Prime Minister Ikeda’s income-doubling plan in 1960 which began a period of huge economic growth. In an effort to improve exports many companies moved towards the Pacific coast causing significant migration. In Murakami’s home region, Kyoto-Osaka-Kobe, for example, the population increased by 62 per cent. The movement towards the Pacific was significant in a cultural sense, too, as television ownership increased and imported American films and television programs began to have an impact. The media became American-centred – the material and social success of the postwar period in the U.S. became an emulative model – and depictions of American families surrounded by consumer goods had a powerful impact on the Japanese mind-set. Marilyn Ivy recognises that ‘The middle-class “American way of life” became the utopian goal and the dream of many Japanese in the 1950s’, a goal tied to the orthodox American (even Fordist) conviction that unflagging hard work is the basis for commodity acquisition. Crucially this positive impression was passed on to Murakami and his postwar generation. ‘When I was in my teens in the sixties’, Murakami told one interviewer, ‘America was so big. Everything was shiny and bright’.

The specific boom period between 1966 and 1970, known as the Izanagi Boom, paved the way for a swift change in lifestyle priorities for the Japanese people in two distinct ways.

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Those who were older, who were tied to corporate infrastructure and could remember Japan’s immediate postwar poverty, embraced their new prosperity with vigour. They became intensely proud of their achievements, and began to enjoy their gains in an increasingly materialist society. Commodities such as electrical appliances and cars became common among the masses. If the ‘American way of life’ was their goal then the prewar generation was coming close to achieving it. The postwar generation however, like Murakami himself, had a different attitude to Japan’s rise. Many of them, embedded in Japanese universities, began to harness a particularly strong grievance against the established priority given to the economy and industry, which they viewed as leading to an excessive level of corporate control on individuals. This came to a head in 1968 with widespread rioting at the universities.

Writing two decades after the event, Murakami’s novel, *Norwegian Wood,* gives a fictional account of the riots.

The lecture was about half over and the professor was drawing a sketch of a Greek stage on the blackboard when the door opened again and two students in helmets walked in. They looked like some kind of comedy team, one tall, thin and pale, the other short, round and dark with a long beard that didn’t suit him. The tall one carried an armful of political agitation handbills. The short one walked up to the professor and said, with a degree of politeness, that they would like to use the second half of his

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240 Chie Nakane helpfully analyses the situation in her anthropological study of Japanese life in the mid-twentieth century. ‘The point where group or public life ends and where private life begins no longer can be distinguished’ she explains. Continuing, and in reference to the average worker in late-twentieth century Japan, she states:

Their sphere of living is usually concentrated solely within the village community or the place of work […] The provision of company housing, a regular practice among Japan’s leading enterprises, is a good case in point […] In such circumstances employees’ wives come into contact with and are well informed about their husbands’ activities. Thus, even in terms of physical arrangements, a company with its employees and their families forms a distinct social group […] With group-consciousness so highly developed there is almost no social life outside the particular group on which an individual’s major economic life depends. The individual’s every problem must be solved within this frame.


241 There are clear parallels between the student movement in Japan and the New Left in America in the 1960s. Richard Sennett’s opening lines to *The Culture of New Capitalism* – which describe life in America – uncannily echo the sentiments of the Japanese student movement:

Half a century ago, in the 1960s – that fabled era of free sex and free access to drugs – serious young radicals took aim at institutions, in particular big corporations and big government, whose size, complexity, and rigidity seemed to hold individuals in an iron grip (p. 1).
lecture for political debate and hoped that he would cooperate, adding, ‘the world is full of problems far more urgent and relevant than Greek tragedy’. Murakami’s farcical descriptions in the novel undermine the protesters’ attempt at revolution. The protagonist, Toru Watanabe, unimpressed with their propaganda, claims that ‘The true enemy of this bunch was not State Power but Lack of Imagination’ (p. 75). He immediately leaves the lecture with his friend Midori. When outside, she suddenly asks, ‘Are we going to be strung up on telephone poles if the revolution succeeds?’ To which Toru replies, ‘Let’s have lunch first, just in case’ (p. 75). The novel’s mocking tone belies the fact that Murakami initially became involved in the riots. However, he came to view the political organizations that erected barricades and pursued a violent agenda as hypocritical. When the police were called in to break up the students the revolutionaries gave in easily and the Establishment claimed victory. After almost a year of closures, universities began to reopen and the majority of students came back the following semester, and student radicals, who had once thrown rocks and handed out propaganda, began to prepare for life in Japanese society. ‘The mood of excitement and idealism collapsed’, Rubin writes, ‘leaving in its wake a terrible sense of boredom and politeness’.

This widespread sense of societal disillusionment (or boredom and politeness) is paramount in *Norwegian Wood*. The novel opens in 1987 with Toru sitting on a plane in Hamburg airport. The weary tone of post-1970s Japan is implied by his tone at the very opening of the narrative, ‘So – Germany again’ (p. 1). Tired from years of Establishment living and the prominence of empty materialism he begins to recall his (free) student days between 1968 and 1970. It is within this temporal frame that the contrast between the reality of post-1970 Japan and the idealistic world of the 1960s is considered, and yet, as Matthew Strecher argues, ‘Murakami’s parody of the 1960s is not entirely nostalgic, for it is tinged with a critical scorn

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for the politics and moralism of the student movement of the late 1960s’. The distinction that results from the protesters’ failed idealism and their eventual adherence to Establishment living is played out in the novel. Talking in an interview with Larry McCaffery a number of years later, Murakami summed the feeling up in the following way:

I belong to a generation of Japanese people who grew up during the counterculture era and the revolutionary uprisings of 1968, 1969, and 1970. The Japan when I was a child was poor, and everybody worked hard and was optimistic that things were getting better. But they are not. When we were kids, we were a poor country but very idealist. That began to change in the sixties; some people just got rich and forgot their ideals, while other people struggled to save idealism […] Then, very quickly, all that simply disappeared. The uprisings were all crushed by the cops and the mood became bleak. The whole sense of the counterculture rebellion seemed finished.

It is this sense of humiliation before the hegemonic narrative of Japanese life that Murakami is responding to in much of his fiction. Like Carver’s bleak depiction of the ubiquitous humiliation of middle-Americans caught in a world where full time work is in decline and low paid, irregular work is increasing, Murakami’s portrayal of the boredom and politeness of corporate work and consumption in post-1970s Japan represents a national sentiment. It is a feeling that is still so pervasive that Rubin recognises that Murakami’s fiction continues to ‘attract readers too young to have experienced the events themselves, but who respond to the lament for a missing “something” in their lives’. The crux of Murakami’s fiction is often found when characters, distracted by corporate conformity or a consumerist mentality – a way of life that Murakami clearly depicts as an unfit antidote for the prevalent malaise in late-twentieth century Japan – realise they are still suffering from the debilitating burden of post-

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245 Larry McCaffery, Sinda Gregory and Toshifumi Miyawaki, ‘It Don’t Mean A Thing, If It Ain’t Got That Swing: an Interview with Haruki Murakami’, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 22.2 (2002), 111-9 (p. 117); This sense of loss – loss of idealism, loss of autonomy – finds itself most clearly emphasised in the series of events that leads to Naoko’s suicide in *Norwegian Wood*: the loss of virginity, the loss of youth, the loss of mental stability, the loss of Toru’s fidelity, until finally her suicide completes the loss of innocence.
1970s humiliation. For, in Murakami’s fiction of the 1980s we frequently meet characters who are awkwardly and painfully caught between the failed idealism of the 1960s and the materialism of the 1970s and 1980s. The resulting sense of humiliation, as characters reflect on their lost idealism, echoes very clearly the kinds of humiliation present in Carver’s America.

**Humiliation, Consumption and Conformity in The Elephant Vanishes**

While *Norwegian Wood* reflects the postwar generations’ struggle to come to terms with post-1970s humiliation, I want to suggest that it is in Murakami’s short fiction that we find the clearest exposition of this theme. Boku, the narrator of Murakami’s story ‘The Second Bakery Attack’ is symptomatic of his generation’s situation. One night he wakes up suffering from ‘tremendous overpowering hunger pangs’. Sitting at the kitchen table with his wife he reveals that he suffered a similar feeling when he protested as a student. His resistance to corporate infrastructure was so firm at the time that he refused to get a job, even to buy food. So, in order to eat he and a friend decide to attack a bakery. Their folly is underlined when the baker deflates the situation by offering no physical resistance and instead gives them free bread on the condition that they sit and listen to an album of Wagner overtures. The students decide to accept the deal because it was not work ‘in the purest sense of the word’ (p. 40). For another

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247 Murakami’s short fiction is also where, incidentally enough, he admits to feeling Carver’s influence most strongly. In ‘A Literary Comrade’ he writes:

Raymond Carver was without question the most valuable teacher I ever had and also the greatest literary comrade. The novels I write tend, I believe, in a very different direction from the fiction Ray has written. But if he had never existed, or if I had never encountered his writings, the books I write (especially my short fiction) would probably have assumed a very different form (p. 132).


249 Haruki Murakami, *The Elephant Vanishes*, trans. by Jay Rubin and Alfred Birnbaum (New York: Knopf, 1993), p. 36. Further references to Murakami’s story ‘The Second Bakery Attack’ and ‘Family Affair’ are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text. It is worth noting that *The Elephant Vanishes* was Murakami’s first collection of stories published in English and was compiled and commissioned by Gary Fisketjon. In a publicity move reminiscent of his Vintage Contemporaries series, Fisketjon had McInerney provide a quote for the back cover:

Haruki Murakami is a remarkable writer, and remarkable things tend to befall the protagonists of his stories – their favourite elephants disappear into thin air, they stick up the local McDonald’s at gunpoint, but they take whatever comes with a certain jaded equanimity. Murakami writes about Everyman as sort of a cross between Jerry Seinfeld and the anti-heroes of Raymond Carver. American readers may be surprised at just how recognizable is the landscape described in these stories, and how deftly Murakami captures the common ache of the contemporary heart and head.
writer the failed bakery attack might not hold much more significance, but in Murakami’s
fictional world Boku’s failed idealism mutates into a humiliating reality, and marks victory for
the Establishment in his life. Talking to his wife he concludes:

It was a kind of turning point. Like, I went back to the university, and I graduated, and I
started working for the firm and studying for the bar exam, and I met you and got
married. I never did anything like that again. No more bakery attacks (p. 41).

The return of Boku’s hunger pangs, then, cannot be coincidental, for they correspond with his
move into the Establishment – he has only been married two weeks and recently passed the bar
exam – and reflect the re-emergence of old countercultural desires. The inability of the
hegemonic narrative of corporate work to satisfy the humiliation of his lost idealism is
indicative of its failure. His justification for his conformity is merely a reticent ‘Times change.
People change’ (p. 40), a declaration that reflects something of the socioeconomic transitions in
twentieth-century Japan, one that is reminiscent of Sennett’s argument that ‘the normal path of
the adult’s “sentimental education” is meant to lead to ever greater resignation about how little
life as it is actually conducted can accord with one’s dreams’. In light of this, then, we might
consider the humiliation of failed Japanese idealism exhibited in much of Murakami’s fiction as
being correlative with the humiliation Carver felt when he realised the failure of the Fordist
narrative in 1970s America.

To view ‘The Second Bakery Attack’, then, as being influenced by – or even
developing – Carver’s fiction is to notice a number of interesting points. The first is that the
couple in Murakami’s story do not attempt to overcome their problem alone, like the rather
autonomous actions of Leo and Toni, or Marston and his wife, but express their solution
through communal activity. It is Boku’s wife who deems that the only way to resolve the
‘curse’ of the first failed bakery attack is to implement another, more successful raid – an
indication that familial community is an important ideal in combatting corporate conformity.
She loads up their Toyota Corolla – the most ordinary of Japanese cars – with the extraordinary:

Sennett, *The Culture of New Capitalism*, pp. 182-3. Boku’s declaration is also a notable reflection of
Mike’s acceptance of neoliberal ‘common sense’ in Carver’s story ‘The Student’s Wife’. 
a Remington shotgun, ski masks, rope and cloth-backed tape, and the newlyweds set off into the Tokyo night. However, unable to find a bakery, Boku’s wife decides that a McDonald’s will suffice and the pair enter the restaurant and hold up the staff. The only other customers are a couple of students who are asleep at their table and are oblivious to the attack. It is worth pausing on this point briefly, for there is a significant distinction between Boku’s student idealism and that of the post-postwar generation; the former were defined by a principled refusal to enter the corporate structure (even if they eventually compromised their ideals), while the latter are defined by a pervasive sleep; Boku characterises the students like ‘a couple of deep-sea fish’, before rhetorically asking, ‘What would it have taken to rouse them from a sleep so deep?’ (p. 48). Disaffected by the example of failed idealism set by the postwar generation, the students of post-1970 (who incidentally represent the core of Murakami’s readership) have succumbed to the failed promise of consumerism and entered a symbolic boredom expressed through inactivity.

Managing to escape with thirty Big Macs, Boku and his wife drive half-an-hour away to a deserted car park where they consume a third of their spoils. The result and conclusion of the story is significant. As the couple’s insatiable hunger begins to fade they have an epiphany, symbolised by dawn breaking over the Tokyo skyline. As they look out the windows of their car they notice, for the first time, the ‘filthy walls’ of the urban environment around them, the huge Sony Beta ad tower glowing with ‘painful intensity’, and the ‘whine of highway truck tires’ as ubiquitous as the dawn chorus. The scene is reminiscent of another Murakami story, ‘A Slow Boat To China’, in which the narrator describes Tokyo as a place full of dirty facades, nameless crowds, unremitting noise, packed trains, grey skies, billboards on every square centimetre of space, hopes and resignations; and the crux, ‘everywhere, infinite options, infinite possibilities. An infinity, and at the same time, zero’ (The Elephant Vanishes, p. 238). The failed ideology of 1960s Japan, and post-1970s conformity, which may have initially appeared hopeful, has mutated into resignation – ‘zero’ – a parallel of the humiliation felt by many of Carver’s characters in his fiction. This idea is only reinforced by the very close of Murakami’s story, in which both Boku and his wife attempt to overcome their resignation through extreme
consumption. The absence of a bakery, their magnetism to McDonald’s, the thirty stolen Big Macs, and the capitalist cityscape symbolise as much. The sleep that Boku’s wife succumbs to in the final scene after she has consumed the hamburgers is reminiscent of the ‘deep-sea’ sleep of the students in McDonald’s. This sleep, which was so elusive at the beginning of the story, has finally come, but with it a menacing undertone. For the couple are left isolated in the capsule of their car, with the looming narrative of materialism rising high in the filthy urban environment around them.251

If the societal shift towards trends of overconsumption in Japan in the late-twentieth century were determined by the country’s rising economic prospects, then on a personal level they also represented a distraction from post-1970s humiliation. If Yuppie culture was prominent in America in the 1980s, then the Japanese had their version: shinjinrui (the new species). Their lifestyle, described by Gary D. Allinson as ‘a parody of materialism in its own right’, mirrored the increasingly fragmenting social fabric of Japan during the decade.252 If the student riots highlighted growing intergenerational differences in the 1960s, then the post-postwar generation’s materialism was their way of rebelling against the postwar generation’s lost idealism and conformist living. They rejected the pattern of their workaholic parents, and instead sought the part-time service sector work that was becoming increasingly prevalent in neoliberal capitalism. After short, intense periods of effort, and after amounting a pile of expendable income, they’d quit their jobs and go on spending sprees. When the money ran out, they simply repeated the cycle. Allinson writes:

251 It’s worth noting that Murakami’s story also presents a gross mutation of Carver’s baker in ‘A Small, Good Thing’. ‘The Second Bakery Attack’, which was published in Japan in 1986, three years after Carver published ‘A Small, Good Thing’ in Cathedral, alters Carver’s optimistic vision of a reformed baker. In Carver’s story the baker is described rather paternally as wearing a ‘white apron that looked like a smock’, with ‘straps cut under his arms’ that tie ‘under his heavy waist’ (p. 402). Despite his menacing actions in the story, his repentance at the end of the narrative and the reconciliation he offers by ‘breaking open a dark loaf’ – ‘It’s a heavy bread, but rich’, he says – reinforces Carver’s opening description. Murakami’s baker (and his bakery), in contrast, are described by Boku in the following way, ‘[It was] not a big bakery. Not famous. The bread was nothing special. Not bad, either. One of those ordinary little neighbourhood bakeries right in the middle of a block of shops. Some old guy ran it who did everything himself’ (p. 39). Murakami’s transformation is surely only reinforced by the second bakery attack which takes place in a McDonald’s, a symbol of US capitalist imperialism, where the taste of ‘molasses and coarse grains’ is replaced by the grease of a Big Mac patty.

The uneasiness, anxieties, and contention that appeared in the 1970s and 1980s were a by-product of this increasing dividedness, if not divisiveness. Individuals, families, business firms, interest groups, and others seemed preoccupied with their own concerns [...] A more dissenting, self-centred atmosphere promoted greater flux, less cohesion, and diverging goals.²⁵³

If, on the one hand, Murakami suggests that failed Japanese idealism has mutated into a humiliating, debilitating conformity, then he also suggests, on the other hand, that the answer to that problem is not the overconsumption indicative of the post-postwar generation. The Boku of ‘Family Affair’ is, then, in this sense most clearly representative of this new species. He conducts a decidedly autonomous lifestyle, and the phrase ‘it’s my life, not yours’ (p. 160) is his mantra in the story. While on the surface this kind of idea might seem reminiscent of the postwar generation’s anti-establishment ideals, it is really a distortion of that reality, for his autonomy, has more do with his amoral lifestyle than any principled refusal to conform.²⁵⁴

When his sister, who is four years younger than him, begins to take her life more seriously Boku’s self-interest becomes the point of contention for the pair. His sister’s passage to the Establishment is well documented by Boku in the story who recognises early on what he calls ‘dangerous symptoms’ (p. 166) – cleaning, cooking and organising.

The biggest change to their relationship occurs when his sister meets her fiancé, Noboru Watanabe, on holiday.²⁵⁵ When they return to Japan they begin to date and straight away Boku notices that she has begun to ‘glow’ (p. 165). The introduction of light is no coincidence, for ‘Family Affair’ is suffused with images of light that appear to be an attempt by Murakami to

²⁵³ Allinson, pp. 166-67.
²⁵⁴ In the story Boku has several girlfriends at one time – his sister describes them simply as ‘a body you sleep with’ (p. 160) – he drinks copious amounts of alcohol, and generally shirks any familial, occupational or collective responsibility. He has no serious career ambitions, only working at his particular company because, as his sister again points out, ‘It just so happened he had an in with that particular company’, before adding, ‘He’s not particularly interested in anything that’s of benefit to society’ (p. 178).
²⁵⁵ Readers familiar with Murakami’s fiction will recognise the serial name Noboru Watanabe. In Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words, Jay Rubin states that he is an original character from the Japanese edition of The Second Bakery Attack (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjusha, 1986); he is the soon to be brother-in-law in ‘Family Affair’; the elephant keeper in ‘The Elephant Vanishes’; Boku’s translation partner in ‘The Twins and the Sunken Continent’. Additionally he is Boku’s brother-in-law in The Wind-up Bird Chronicle, and the name of his cat too. Rubin claims that he is named after Murakami’s friend Mizumaru Anzai, but he changed the name to Watanabe – a conventional Japanese surname (p. 140).
highlight, or illuminate, negative aspects of Boku’s life. Coming home from work one day, he tries to listen to his records but then remembers that his amplifier has recently broken. He tries watching television instead but the same amplifier powers the speakers so the sound doesn’t work:

This also made it impossible to watch TV. I have one of those monitors without any sound circuitry of its own. You have to use it with the stereo.

I stared at my silent TV screen and drank my beer. They were showing an old war movie. Rommels Afrika Korps tanks were fighting in the desert. Their cannons shot silent shells, their machine guns shot silent bullets, and people died silently, one after another (p. 163).

Like the interconnectivity of Boku’s consumer devices when one component fails the rest fail too. His sister’s impending marriage appears to be one such broken component that threatens to break his aimless consumerist drifting. The problem is compounded for Boku by Noboru who seeks to impose conformity onto his life.256 When Noboru comes round to Boku’s flat to have dinner with his sister he takes the chance to look at Boku’s broken amplifier, and quickly diagnoses the problem, ‘The connecting cords between the preamp and the power amp. The connection’s been broken at the plugs on both channels’ (p.176). He promptly runs out to the hardware store to buy a soldering iron and fix the amplifier. Reconnecting the circuitry is important because it allows the three of them to play music again, and, as Rubin explains, ‘Music is, for Murakami, the best entry into the deep recesses of the unconscious mind’.257 This leads to an important moment for Boku at the end of the story. That same evening he meets a

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256 Noboru is a computer engineer who Boku describes as working for ‘one of those three-letter places – IBM or NEC or TNT. I don’t know’ (p. 167). Like Murakami’s use of McDonald’s in ‘The Second Bakery Attack’ the abbreviated company name represents the prevalence of global capitalist conglomerates in Japan in the late twentieth century. And while Noboru has a kind of Fordist stability to his life – the polemic opposite of Boku’s lifestyle – I don’t think Murakami is suggesting it as a viable alternative or answer to post-1970s humiliation. Both characters represent two extremes – conformity and distorted autonomy. I will suggest in my forthcoming discussion that Murakami seeks to present a balance between both extremes as a viable narrative for life in late-twentieth century Japanese capitalism.

girl at a bar and the two go back to her apartment where they have sex, according to Boku, as a ‘matter of course’:

‘Put the light out,’ she said, so I did. From her window you could see the big Nikon ad tower. A TV next door was blasting the day’s pro-baseball results. What with the darkness and my drunkenness, I hardly knew what I was doing. You couldn’t call it sex.

I just moved my penis and discharged some semen (p. 182).

The conformist capitalist institutions that infiltrate the darkness of the bedroom, and, also what is typically in Murakami’s fiction a moment of love, intimacy and human connection, suggests that Boku’s countercultural ideals have been corrupted. The subsequent re-emergence of sound in connection with his failed sex signifies the crux of the story and implies that the principled opposition to the status quo has lapsed into a kind of amoral decadence. This point in the story marks a noteworthy parallel with ‘The Second Bakery Attack’. The Nikon ad tower is reminiscent of the Sony ad tower, and both emit an intense glow that illuminates warped countercultural idealism. In ‘The Second Bakery Attack’ this emerges as excessive materialism which leads to inactivity and sleep – a wholly unattractive option – and in ‘Family Affair’ it has become an amoral, self-absorbed ideal – another wholly unattractive option. By extension there is a similarity to Carver’s ‘What Do You Do In San Francisco?’ too, in that Marston’s countercultural ideals translate into isolation and dislocation and become, like the examples found in Murakami’s short fiction, again, wholly unattractive.

After the failed sex, Boku begins his journey home. As he walks he begins to think about Noboru Watanabe:

Then, with no connection at all, I thought about Noboru Watanabe and the soldering iron he had brought me. ‘You really ought to have a soldering iron in the house. They come in handy,’ he said.

What a wholesome idea, I said to him mentally as I wiped my lips with a handkerchief. Now, thanks to you, my house is equipped with a soldering iron. But because of that damned soldering iron, my house doesn’t feel like my house any longer (p. 182).
Now it is the lack of connection that binds these two men together. A wholesome idea, indeed, and admirable for its attempt to bridge the gap between the poles of Japanese society but it is unsuccessful. The final line of the story (which is reminiscent of ‘The Second Bakery Attack’ and also Carver’s ‘What Is It?’) presents a world still waiting for an effective answer, ‘When I closed my eyes, sleep floated down on me like a dark, silent net’ (p. 185). While there is no obvious solution offered, like much of Carver’s early fiction Murakami’s early fiction highlights the unattractiveness of dominant ideology: a zone where the difference between hegemonic narratives and lived experience is explored.

**Turning Points: The Impact of Life-Altering Events on Carver and Murakami**

If Carver and Murakami present corresponding ideas on the failure of both orthodox narratives and their alternatives, then they offer, I want to suggest, a somewhat similar solution, too. The themes found in their early fiction are cemented in their response to the personal and social conditions that they saw around them. For Carver this was struggling to maintain financial stability, sobriety and a marriage. For Murakami it was the lost idealism of the postwar generation and their conformity to the Establishment. It is in the same, consistent manner then, that their later work reflects the changing of those personal and social conditions. Carver’s late fiction, for example, is characterised by a re-adjustment of aims. The orthodox narrative of hard work as means to social and economic prosperity (which lost out to alcoholism, bankruptcy and broken relationships) gave way to what might be thought of as more objective, down-to-earth aims: the restoration of personal relationships, recovery from addiction, and modest artistic creation. Likewise Murakami responded to the life-altering events of the Kobe earthquake and Tokyo gas attack in 1995 by attempting to present what he calls a ‘new narrative’; an answer to the conformity of the postwar generation and the hyper-consumerism of the post-postwar generation. For the rest of this chapter, then, I want to explore Carver’s late-work, after his recovery from alcohol addiction, and then assess how this acts as a model for Murakami as he seeks to create his own new narrative for the Japanese people after 1995.
June 7, 1977 was, famously, the date when Carver stopped drinking. Almost a decade of alcoholism had ruined his marriage, crippled his fledgling career and almost ended his life. Slowly beginning to recover from this destructive cycle, his writing appeared to change. His fiction, once described by Donald Newlove as ‘sparingly clear as a fifth of iced Smirnoff’, began to intimate signs of embellishment and growth.\(^{258}\) At the time, critics viewed the transformation as part of a wider development in Carver’s oeuvre. Writing in 1985, William L. Stull claimed that Carver’s fiction was beginning to embody a metamorphosis from ‘sorry tales more transcribed than told’ – the Carvers’ first bankruptcy and ‘What Is It?’ is a premium example of this – to a more generous realism in ‘a spirit of empathy, forgiveness and community’.\(^{259}\) The idea of positive progression and development fast became the prevailing opinion and was backed up by critics like Ewing Campbell in *Raymond Carver: A Study of the Short Fiction*, who viewed Carver’s four main collections (*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), *Cathedral* (1983), *Where I’m Calling From* (1988)) as representative of a four-stage evolution: apprenticeship, breakthrough, maturity, and mastery and growth. While this view remained dominant among scholars through the ’80s and ’90s, it was superannuated when D.T. Max published his article on Lish’s editing in 1998. Those loyal to the Carver cause rushed to the archives to invalidate the journalist’s spurious claims, only to be disappointed and find that, yes, it seemed Lish had played an important role in shaping Carver’s formal aesthetic. The evolution theory had been disproved. His early writing was, it seemed, as generous as his late writing. A move soon followed to establish and publish Carver’s original manuscripts, thus preserving the purity of the Carver canon. William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll completed *Beginners*, the original and unedited text of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* in 2007.\(^{260}\)

As I noted in the introduction, the situation regarding Lish is complicated by Carver’s lack of denial concerning Lish as a negative influence. In fact, more often than not, despite their


\(^{260}\) *Beginners* was first published in Japan in 2007, of course, translated by Murakami.
fracious relationship, he tended to present a positive front and praise Lish for his editorial involvement – or at least for giving him the opportunity to begin his career. A second factor further obfuscates the issue: Carver’s relationship with Tess Gallagher. It seems to be no accident that Carver’s publication of longer, generally positive and more expositional stories coincides with the reduction of Lish’s editorial control and the development of his relationship with Gallagher. Chad Wriglesworth is convinced that Carver’s relationship with Gallagher ‘remains the most significant influence on his spiritual and relational recovery’. Evidence of this abounds, Wriglesworth claims, not only in Carver’s late fiction and poetry, but also in his non-fiction prose. He offers Carver’s final piece of writing, a short essay written for the University of Hartford’s 1988 graduation ceremony, at which he was due to receive an honorary doctorate, as an apposite example. Sklenicka reinforces Wriglesworth’s claim when she notes a strong undertone of Gallagher’s vision in the text, ‘the Hartford speech moves in a rhythm that sounds more like Gallagher’s than Carver’s’, although she does concede that ‘there’s a definite Carver touch in his valedictory paragraphs’. The address echoes a religious belief that Carver claimed to hold towards the end of his life, and turns on a phrase he borrows from Saint Teresa, ‘Words lead to deeds…. They prepare the soul make it ready, and move it to tenderness’. In what amounts to a short sermon, Carver moves on to describe the phrase as being ‘mystical’ and focuses particularly on the words ‘soul’ and ‘tenderness’, finally exhorting his audience to ‘remember that words, the right and true words, can have the power of deeds’ (p. 125). Such power comes, by Carver’s own admission, from a spiritual place, especially in a time ‘less openly supportive of the important connection between what we say and what we do’ (p. 123), a

261 In ‘Fires’, writing only months after Lish had severely cut What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, Carver writes that Lish was one of two individuals who held irredeemable notes of influence on his work (p. 745). A fact hardly worth contesting, and one stated, I think, by Carver with a note of affirmation.


263 Sklenicka, p. 469.

sentiment that, since Carver’s death, Gallagher has placed as a template for Carver’s second-life recovery:

[Carver] never heaped credit upon himself for having overcome his illness. He knew it was a matter of grace, of having put his trust in what AA identifies as a ‘higher power’, and of having miraculously been given the will to turn all temptation to drink aside.265

It is easy to be sympathetic towards Wriglesworth’s argument that Carver’s post-alcoholic life and work evinces a spiritual recovery – one, in particular, ‘not bound by orthodox creed or specific doctrine’.266 This idea is perhaps most clearly reinforced by the posthumous publications that Gallagher has commissioned – Call If You Need Me (2001), Carver Country (2013), Soul Barnacles (2000), A New Path To The Waterfall (1989) – which contain a particularly overt spiritual resonance, one, I might add, that seems to lead towards a curious, and partisan, veneration of Carver’s name. Gallagher concludes her foreword to Call If You Need


Aside from the more overt allegorical imagery in ‘A Small, Good Thing’ – a story that is often cited in favour of the spiritual argument – I would suggest that a version of Gallagher’s spiritual vision is found most clearly in the way in which characters, who are external to the story’s central plot, often operate as a kind of benign guiding force for the protagonist. A character like Frank Martin in ‘Where I’m Calling From’ is a good example of this. He is active, for instance, in providing an alternative, essentially moral, narrative to the socioeconomic failures of Carver’s first-life. In a scene reminiscent of Gallagher’s ‘higher power’, Carver writes:

Then he raises his chin toward the hills and says, ‘Jack London used to have a big place on the other side of this valley. Right over there behind that green hill you’re looking at. But alcohol killed him. Let that be a lesson to you. He was a better man than any of us. But he couldn’t handle the stuff either […] End of sermon (p. 460).

I would tentatively suggest that other characters in Carver’s fiction operate in this way. Nelson in ‘Vitamins’, and Chef in ‘Chef’s House’, being two notable examples. These are characters that offer the protagonist specific and particular advice, and in a way point Carver’s hopeless protagonists away from the problems brought on by their socioeconomic circumstance. ‘Where I’m Calling From’ closes with this image:

I remember the house and how we’d only been in there a few weeks when I heard a noise outside one morning. It was Sunday morning and it was still dark in the bedroom. But there was this pale light coming in from the bedroom window. I listened. I could hear something scrape against the side of the house. I jumped out of bed and went to look (p. 465).

The close of this story tentatively suggests a kind of symbolic new birth for the narrator. Naked, he gets out of bed to see what the noise is. It turns out it is just the landlord who has come to paint the house. But, importantly, the landlord has woken him up, and now the Sabbath is upon him, a sign that he may be about to enter a period of rest, newness and reconciliation. The sun, likewise, might be symbolic of an outside ‘light’ shining some kind of hope or insight into his situation that proceeds a change.
Me, for example, by asserting that Carver’s writing holds an almost scriptural property, one that ‘we can dip into at any point and find something to refresh and sustain us’. But when considered against the intensely materialist world of Carver’s fiction, Gallagher’s remarks seem to obscure as much as they illuminate. One wonders if whether, for good or ill, this new narrative is motivated in large part by an attempt to usurp an older and more established view of Carver’s life and canon and present a new spiritualism that denies – or rather, forgives – his minimalist persona or his personal, wilful involvement in the actions of his first-life. It may be associated with the acrimonious break-up of Carver’s first marriage, or with the negativity associated with his ‘Running Dog’ alcoholism – the abusive relationships, the infidelities, and the defrauding – but one is apt to point out – for the sake of balance – that the image that Gallagher has attempted to preserve since Carver’s death subtly denies the sin of his first-life. Her rhetoric promotes a redeemed view of Carver – a recipient of a kind of literary salvation – that fails to accept broader socioeconomic factors – financial circumstances, relationships and Carver’s own will power – that might have contributed to his recovery.

Whether or not we choose to accept or deny what Wriglesworth calls a ‘manifestation of a sacred reality’ in Carver’s second-life fiction, it is interesting to note that Murakami’s more recent publications offer a correlative proposition to the idea that words have the power to provoke actions of tenderness and spirituality. This idea is very much part of his response to the postwar obsession with corporate identity and materialism and post-1970s malaise. Perhaps unsurprisingly too, Murakami’s move to a clearer critical response is marked – much like Carver’s – by a profound real-life experience.

After the extended economic rise in the 1970s and ’80s, Japan’s economy finally came to a halt in 1991 with the widespread collapse of the financial sector. The long bust that ensued

268 Wriglesworth, ‘Raymond Carver and Alcoholics Anonymous’, p. 139.
269 One of Murakami’s English translators, Philip Gabriel, argues that 1995 marks a significant turning point in Murakami’s fiction, when his writing began to show the ‘beginnings of a serious critique of contemporary Japan’. See, Philip Gabriel, Spirit Matters: The Transcendent in Modern Japanese Literature (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2006), p. 89.
sapped the self-assurance of the 1980s and replaced it with serious anxieties about the future. The period, which has been defined as being ‘synonymous with prolonged malaise’, extended beyond the economic instability and political stasis to the general populace. Sociologists have reported the rise in unemployment, suicides, divorce and domestic violence. Jeff Kingston states, ‘[w]ith the misery index rising, the swaggering self-confidence of the 1980s gave way to sweeping anxieties that extend well beyond the economy’. And so The Lost Decade began, ten years of malaise among the Japanese that carried them from shattered 1960s idealism, the boredom of conformity and the excesses of materialism to disaster. Kingston notes that the outcomes of these economic and social conditions were twofold. First, there was, ‘a pervasive social malaise in contemporary Japan’, and secondly, it was, ‘generating a sense of looming catastrophe’.

Indeed catastrophe did strike. Twice in the first three months of 1995. In January an earthquake struck the city of Kobe and killed over 6,000 people and in March the cult Aum Shinrikyo dropped multiple bags of sarin gas on the Tokyo subway which killed 13 people and injured over 1,000. These two events led the Japanese to become even more introspective and Kingston notes that ‘some analysts suggested they [cultists] were reacting against the materialism and spiritual void that permeate contemporary Japan’. Murakami was one of those analysts. In his fiction and non-fiction writing he pulls both events together; for Murakami both disasters – one natural, one man-made – act as wake-up calls. He describes the events as, ‘the gravest tragedies in Japan’s postwar history’ (Underground, p. 206), and spent the latter half of the 1990s working on two projects in connection with them. The first, Underground (1997), focused on the gas attack and presented a series of interviews with the victims alongside cult affiliates. This non-fiction project allowed Murakami to explicitly diagnose the social conditions that he saw in Japan at the time, whilst continuing to explore similar themes with

271 Kingston, pp. 255, 38.
those in his early fiction – lost 1960s idealism, conformity to the Establishment and an acceptance of hyper-materialism. Murakami finally draws the following conclusion:

What have we learned from this shocking incident? One thing is for sure. Some strange malaise, some bitter aftertaste lingers on. We crane our necks and look around us, as if to ask: where did all that come from? If only to be rid of this malaise, to cleanse our palates of this aftertaste, most Japanese seem ready to pack up the whole incident in a trunk labelled THINGS OVER AND DONE WITH. We would rather the meaning of the whole ordeal was left to the fixed processes of the court and everything was dealt with on the level of ‘the system’ (p. 196).

This, of course, is not a satisfactory answer for Murakami. Writing with a rhetoric which curiously reflects Carver’s in a ‘Meditation on a Line from Saint Teresa’, Murakami calls for ‘words coming from another direction, new words for a new narrative’ that will have the power to ‘purify the [old] narrative’ of mindless conformity to work and consumption (p. 197). The (new) task that Murakami sets is to present a narrative that leads towards a sustained, complete, fulfilling life in contemporary Japan. He compares the feeling to, ‘a gigantic sword dangling above my head. It’s something I’m going to have to deal with much more seriously from here on’ (p. 202). Now accepting that he is in ‘the ranks of that generation with a “vested duty” towards Japanese society’ (p. 204), Murakami recognises that 1995 symbolises a new period in his writing; a time for a more sincere fiction – a more viable narrative – that seeks to answer the problems of lost idealism, conformity and materialism that he presented in his early fiction.273

The second project, a series of short stories published as after the quake was a response to the Kobe earthquake in January 1995. Set in February 1995, the month between the earthquake and the gas attack, the context of this series is fundamental to the predicament that its characters find themselves in. They are literally caught ‘in between’ two disastrous events. Perhaps deliberately reminiscent of the paradigm that many of his characters are stuck between

273 I am not suggesting that Murakami’s writing pre-1995 was not ‘sincere’, this would undermine my argument, rather, I am seeking to demonstrate that the events of early 1995 affected Murakami in a such a way that he began to attempt a more complete and fulfilling answer to the problems that he saw around him.
in his early fiction (Establishment and non-conformity), the characters in *after the quake* are still coming to terms with the natural disastrous impact (both nationally and personally) of the earthquake. It is not long, then, until the man-made disaster, the Tokyo gas attack, will present the Japanese people with a problem: how to cope with what Murakami calls the ‘darkness’ that is inside. This is the major theme of the series. *after the quake* documents how characters face the wake-up call of the natural earthquake without succumbing to the internal darkness that threatens to usurp any attempt to purify the old-narrative. The stories also mark a notable change in direction for Murakami’s short fiction. Abandoning his recognizable – and popular – Boku narrator, the series is written in the third person. Rubin acknowledges the significance of this change, ‘By abandoning the limited focus of Boku, Murakami implies that the malaise he is diagnosing goes beyond the privileged few who live on the periphery of national events’. The series also marks an important reflection of how Murakami saw life in Japan at the time. ‘The result’, Rubin says, ‘is a glum panorama of mid-1990s Japan in which the earthquake is a wake-up call to the emptiness of their lives’. This emptiness, Rubin argues, may also reflect what Murakami found in the lives of the ordinary people he interviewed for *Underground*: that there is some indefinable thing missing from their lives. The result is that the characters that feature in

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274 The exact nature or origin of this ‘darkness’ is hard to pinpoint precisely. Murakami provides a fictional illustration in ‘UFO in Kushiro’ in which the story’s protagonist, Komura, is asked by a colleague to deliver a box to the northern island of Hokkaido. His colleague’s sister and her friend, Shimao, meet Komura at the airport. Later Shimao takes him to a love hotel where she attempts to sleep with him. But the couple fail to have sex (Komura, whose wife has recently left him, cannot go through with the act), and instead Shimao begins to question Komura about his life. She asks him what he thinks is inside the box that he has delivered – its contents were unknown to Komura – and she suggests that the parcel contained, ‘*something* that was inside you’. This causes a violent reaction in Komura who:

- lifted himself from the mattress and looked down at the woman. Tiny nose, moles on the earlobe. In the room’s deep silence, his heart beat with a loud, dry sound. His bones cracked as he leaned forward. For one split second, Komura realised that he was on the verge of committing an act of overwhelming violence.

The violent act, however, is not committed. Shimao pulls out of her comment by suggesting that she was only joking, but the phrase has stuck with Komura and he begins to make a profound discovery. Jonathan Boulter recognises that the box which, ‘weighs practically nothing’, and which Komura surmises might be ‘used for human ashes’, becomes, ‘a portentous emblem, a physical object correlative to Komura’s own emptiness’. This emptiness, Boulter suggests, is the result of Komura’s, ‘loss of his own wife, but also the massive loss initiated by the quake’. This emptiness also, it appears, has the capacity for what Murakami might term ‘darkness’ – violence and destruction. See, Jonathan Boulter, *Melancholy and the Archive: Trauma, History and Memory in the Contemporary Novel* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), p. 87; and also, Haruki Murakami, *after the quake*, trans. by Jay Rubin (London: The Harvill Press, 2002), p. 19. Further references to Murakami’s stories in this collection are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

after the quake are, often, similar to the sort of peripatetic loners found in Carver’s (or Murakami’s) early fiction. There is an overriding sense of the banal in this series – Murakami’s talismanic surreal world is absent. Paramount too is the consumer-capitalist culture that permeated Japan up to that point. The recession of the early 1990s may have caused an economic and social malaise but the characters in after the quake still work in electronics, medicine and banking. This is a collection then, that seeks to explore the realistic lives of people in everyday situations. These are the quintessential Murakami characters, ordinary Japanese people whose outwardly satisfactory lives hide a deeper sense of incompleteness and malaise.

**Residual Spirituality in ‘All God’s Children Can Dance’**

The series of narratives that make up after the quake document how the natural earthquake acts as a wake-up call for characters caught in the net of post-1970s malaise. The severe hangover that Yoshiya, the protagonist of ‘All God’s Children Can Dance’, is suffering from is surely the physical symptom of what Murakami sees as an increasingly ‘spiritual’ void amongst the young, post-postwar generation. Attempting to regain some kind of psychological normality after a hedonistic night, Yoshiya epitomises the addiction to hyper-consumerism in post-1970s Japan. He elicits a plea to the heavens, ‘Please, God, never let this happen to me again’ (p. 43), a cry, which is uttered more in despair than in genuine petition. Yoshiya’s mother, who he still lives with, conducts, in contrast, a religious but hypocritical life. On the one hand a devout member of a Christian cult, she holds to the purity of a works-based religion, and on the other succumbs to the depravity of her sexual desires for her own son. With the perverse, organised religion of his mother offering no real alternative to his hyper-consumerism, Yoshiya embarks on a series of alternative sexual experiences, but these also fail to remedy the void of his spiritual nature. Claiming that Yoshiya has no biological father – an ideology proffered by her cult – his mother one day describes a string of sexual experiences she had with an obstetrician before his birth. Spotting a man on the train that matches the obstetrician’s description the day of his severe hangover, Yoshiya begins to trail him. When he alights he follows him in a taxi
before pursuing him on foot and losing him in a series of dark alleys. Left in a void of blindness and silence, Yoshiya’s quest represents a broader search for meaning in 1990s Japan:

What was I hoping to gain from this? he asked himself as he strode ahead. Was I trying to confirm the ties that make it possible for me to exist here and now? Was I hoping to be woven into some new plot, to be given some new and better-defined role to play? (p. 56).

It is at this point in the narrative that Murakami grants Yoshiya a strong element of self-perception. His internal questioning enables him to understand his situation. His denial, therefore, that his current void is the result of past collective experience (mixed identity or unanswered cultural guilt) makes him realise the insufficiency of the orthodox narrative offered by the Establishment. In discussing Murakami’s post-1995 fiction, Stephen Snyder and Philip Gabriel argue that ‘Murakami turns not to collective myth and memory but to the inviolateness of the individual and the insistence on the right of the individual to loneliness and separation’, and it is this persistence of autonomy that allows Murakami to pinpoint the source of the void in 1990s Japanese society.276 This, then, is a quest of serious consequence, Murakami’s reference to the ‘tail of the darkness inside’ is clearly a synonymous phrase for his conjecture in Underground that the Tokyo subway attack and the Aum phenomenon revealed the ‘distorted image of ourselves’ (p. 198). While Yoshiya’s quest to fill the void in 1990s Japan may be commended, the dangers for a wrong turn are profound. As such, the problem does not stem from the past but from inside. The ‘darkness’ is symbolised by the metaphor of the alley in which Yoshiya chases the man – it is ‘dark as the bottom of the night-time sea’ (p. 54) – and Yoshiya can only follow the man based on the sound of his footsteps. The re-emergence of the sound – reminiscent of Rubin’s comment that music is the best entry into the deep recesses of the mind in Murakami’s fiction – points towards a significant moment in the story. Murakami describes Yoshiya as ‘clinging to the sound’ of the man’s footsteps until eventually even that begins to fade and ‘there is no sound at all’ (p. 54). Left in a void of blindness and silence,

Yoshiya continues down the alley until he comes to the end and manages to escape and finds himself on an empty baseball field. The pursuit has ended. The man who Yoshiya thought was his father has mysteriously disappeared. The self-perception that Yoshiya shows at this point is important because it represents an awareness of the danger that lurks in the quest for release from the void in 1990s Japan. Forced to confront the emptiness that has been inside him for his twenty-five years, Yoshiya is at a crux.

In many ways whether the man was Yoshiya’s father or not is irrelevant to the plot of the story. The point is that he represents an outside guiding force that leads to a moment of perspicuity. ‘[n]ow the stranger had disappeared, however, the importance of the succeeding acts that had brought him this far turned unclear inside him. Meaning itself broke down and would never be the same again’ (p. 56). Having begun to realise the brokenness of the ‘old’ narrative, Yoshiya is at a point of self-diagnosis, and his next act embodies a kind of generic spiritual solution:

Unable to think of a song to match his mood, he danced in time with the stirring of the grass and the flowing of the clouds. Before long, he began to feel that someone, somewhere, was watching him. His whole body – his skin, his bones – told him with absolute certainty that he was in someone’s field of vision. So what? he thought. Let them look if they want to, whoever they are. All God’s children can dance (p. 58).

This closing moment, an example of what Rubin in a BBC documentary calls Murakami’s ‘down to earth spirituality’ is, I am tentatively suggesting, Murakami’s solution to the hangover-malaise of the orthodox narratives of corporate conformity and materialism. If Yoshiya’s quest reveals a longing to fill the internal void present in The Lost Decade, then his improvised dance, in time with nature, reveals a kind of independent pantheism that frees him from the constraints of postwar Establishment and protects him from the darkness of the post-postwar generation.277 And yet, this new narrative mirrors what some critics view as Carver’s

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277 In The Forbidden Worlds of Haruki Murakami, Matthew Strecher reinforces this idea when he argues that ‘the point of this story is the process by which a young man discovers and acknowledges his proper place in the world. The story illustrates and celebrates spiritual awakening to the internal narrative and to the omnipresent Narrative’ (p. 136).
non-creedal spiritualism in that it is enacted out in the presence of a benign guiding force – what, if Gallagher is to be believed, is analogous to the ‘higher power’ that Gallagher claims that Carver believed in after his recovery from alcoholism. Rubin continues to explain Murakami’s spiritual solution by suggesting that his fiction is ‘dealing with religious themes without the remotest appeal to established religion. He’s getting into those things that you can call spiritual without any spiritual nonsense’.\(^{278}\) The success of Murakami’s solution is, of course, far more equivocal. If, for instance, Rubin’s definition seems a little vague, it is, perhaps, because it fails – much like the definitions that describe Carver’s second-life spirituality – to mirror the specificity of the strongly materialist, socioeconomic diagnosis found in both writers’ early fiction. In this way it is perhaps better viewed not as a definitive model, but an idealistic one; an undogmatic solution that presents fleeting moments of connection and fulfilment to a society steeped in orthodoxy.

**Residual Craft in ‘Kindling’**

While Gallagher’s notion that Carver evinced a spiritual answer to the material diagnosis of his early life goes some way to explaining the more ‘generous’ aspects of his late fiction – and while I think this idea is picked up by Murakami in his response to the events of 1995 – I want to conclude by suggesting that this is really a rather limited view of Carver’s final years. In the introduction to this project I suggested that Carver’s work is better viewed as embodying a return to a kind of residual narrative associated with ideas of craftsmanship, one that is nominally seen as being more authentic and supplying a more sustained sense of self and purpose in the neoliberal era. It is to this idea that I want to now return. Elements of Carver’s craftsmanship are depicted in his very late fiction and while some of his ideas are perhaps not as fully developed as they might be – in part due to Carver’s death in 1988 – I want to suggest that the notion of craftsmanship is a large part of Carver’s response to the socioeconomic problems that he saw around in the early neoliberal era. With this in mind I want to return in more detail to his posthumous story ‘Kindling’.

‘Kindling’ was, as I have already noted, published posthumously by *Esquire* in 1999 and, as such is unlikely to have offered an example for Murakami’s immediate post-1995 fiction (although it may offer an example for his more recent work). The purpose of looking at this story now, however, is that I want to suggest that it indicates the trajectory that Carver’s fictional vision was taking before his death. The story principally concerns Myers – Carver’s only serial character – who has just got out of rehabilitation. The story opens, ‘It was the middle of August and Myers was between lives’ (p. 654). If, as I have already intimated, there are moments of incomplete recovery from socioeconomic demise in some of his other fiction (particularly in stories like ‘Where I’m Calling From’, ‘Chef’s House’ and ‘A Small, Good Thing’) then ‘Kindling’ fulfils something of the promise of those early partial optimistic fictional visions. In the story, Myers is beginning a new life – a second-life, we might say – he has left his wife and her boyfriend, he has left his alcoholism, and he is starting out again in small-town America. He moves in with Sol and Bonnie, a childless couple with a spare room looking for a lodger. While Sol might be read as an invocation of Carver’s call in ‘A Meditation On A Line By Saint Teresa’ for the value of spiritual belief – the name, of course, suggests spiritual life, hope and vivacity – his actions also suggest that he operates as an extension of other characters in Carver’s fiction who have a positive impact on the protagonist’s problems. Like Frank Martin in ‘Where I’m Calling From’ or Chef in ‘Chef’s House’, Sol provides a deeper meaning to the start of Myers’s second-life, pushing him towards the cultivation of social and labour-related responsibility:

What kind of work do you do? he wanted to know. I’m just curious. This is a small town and I know people. I grade lumber at the mill myself. Only need one good arm to do that. But sometimes there are openings. I could put in a word, maybe. What’s your regular line of work? (pp. 660-1).

Readers who are familiar with Carver’s fiction will know the answer to Sol’s questions. Myers is a writer. And the last we saw of him he was struggling. ‘Put Yourself In My Shoes’ describes the start of his career, ‘Myers was between stories and he felt despicable’, we are informed (p. 102). In ‘The Compartment’ he is attempting to repair his broken relationship with his son, but
ends up on the wrong train heading in the opposite direction. But something has changed in Myers’s life. While he still finds himself, as Carver puts it, between lives, he now has a more sustained sense of purpose; his aim for the time being is to find some way to be reconciled with his wife:

Myers kept to his room, where he was writing a letter to his wife. It was a long letter and, he felt, an important one. Perhaps the most important letter he’d ever written in his life. In the letter he was attempting to tell his wife that he was sorry for everything that had happened and that he hoped someday she would forgive him. *I would get down on my knees and ask forgiveness if that would help* (p. 661).

Myers is a character quite distinct from any other in Carver’s fiction. Where Carver’s early-fiction was noted for its stasis and idleness, Myers is decidedly active and his attempt to write a letter to his wife reflects something of his desire to craft for himself some kind of new social ideal. What Myers more broadly represents in ‘Kindling’ is a character intent on pursuing, in all areas of his life, the ideals of craftsmanship argued for by Sennett in *The Culture of New Capitalism* as a means to providing a solution to the problems that he is encountering in life in neoliberalism. Sennett writes:

*Craftsmanship* is a term most often applied to manual labourers and denotes the pursuit of quality in making a violin, watch, or pot. This is too narrow a view. Mental craftsmanship also exists, as in the effort to write clearly; social craftsmanship might lie in forging a viable marriage. An embracing definition of craftsmanship would be: doing something well for its own sake. Self-discipline and self-criticism adhere in all domains of craftsmanship; standards matter, and the pursuit of quality ideally becomes an end in itself.279

While Myers’s ability to craft a letter is important in the narrative, and in Myers reaching some level of emotional closure, it is not where the crux of the narrative lies. Instead, it lies in the work that Myers completes while he is staying with Sol and Bonnie:

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The next morning it was all he could do to wait until they’d left the house before he went out back to begin work. He found a pair of gloves on the back step that Sol must have left for him. He sawed and split wood until the sun stood directly over his head and then he went inside and ate a sandwich and drank some milk. Then he went back outside and began again. His shoulders hurt and his fingers were sore and, in spite of the gloves, he’d picked up a few splinters and could feel blisters rising, but he kept on. He decided that he would cut this wood and split it and stack it before sunset, and that it was a matter of life and death that he do so. I must finish this job, he thought, or else (pp. 664-5).

As the sun sets, Myers finishes work. In Carver’s early stories the close of day often marks a point of psychological distress or the oncoming of a menacing future. But in ‘Kindling’ Myers’s work leads to a distinctly positive ending. ‘Just as the sun went down and the moon appeared over the mountains, Myers split the last chunk and gathered up the two pieces and carried the wood over to the garage […] Then he went inside’ (p. 665). Myers appears to be embodying the essence of Sennett’s craft. Here is work done ‘well for its own sake’. It is a ‘self-discipline’, where ‘standards matter’ and the ‘pursuit of quality ideally becomes an end in itself’. Part, then, of what makes craftsmanship so appealing for Sennett as a means to escape the futility of working life in the neoliberal era is that it emphasizes objectification. In other words something is made to matter in and of itself. ‘This objectifying spirit can give even low-level, seemingly unskilled labourers pride in their work’, Sennett argues. And then illustrates this point by drawing upon his research of Bostonian bakers in the 1970s (an appropriate illustration for Carver), ‘in a family run bakery where the most junior members were treated roughly and pressed too hard by fathers and uncles, the results in the early morning similarly salved some of the upset: the bread was good’. Sennett concludes his point with this observation:

280 In ‘Popular Mechanics’, for instance, a modern day retelling of Solomon’s judgment, Carver opens by writing:

Early that day the weather turned and the snow was melting into dirty water. Streaks of it ran down from the little shoulder-high window that faced the backyard. Cars slushed by on the street outside, where it was getting dark. But it was getting dark on the inside too (p. 302).
While it’s important not to romanticize the balm of craftsmanship, it matters equally to understand the consequence of doing something well for its own sake. Ability counts for something, by a measure which is both concrete and impersonal.\textsuperscript{281}

To recall, once more, the socioeconomic context in which Carver is writing, the distinctly short-term aims of institutions in late capitalism, the flux and flexible accumulation opened up by the liberalization of international currency markets, the requirements for labourers to be constantly shifting tasks with transferable skills, and the avoidance of anything, to borrow the management term, ingrown, then the idea that Myers would complete a seemingly low-level, unimportant task such as splitting wood, a task that offers no financial remuneration, with the sole purpose of doing it well for its own sake, seems deeply countercultural. The personal affirmation and sense of fulfilment that the action leads to at the end of the story, the promise of a pastoral landscape, is a place reminiscent of residual values – Myers writes, ‘It reminds me of someplace I’ve read about but never travelled to before now’ (p. 666) – and suggests that this kind of craftsmanship is Carver’s answer to the problems of his socioeconomic context.

**Epilogue: ‘The Projectile’**

The strong literary influence that this chapter has been exploring between Carver and Murakami was reflected in a trip that Murakami and Yoko, his wife, took in 1984 to meet Carver and Gallagher at their home in Port Angeles. The four spent their time together discussing Carver’s fictional depiction of the many humiliations in daily life, something, Murakami thought, with which the Japanese people could strongly associate. By the end of the afternoon Gallagher recalls that she and Carver recognised they had ‘met an extraordinary couple to whom they felt somehow connected’.\textsuperscript{282} A number of years later Carver recalled the meeting and wrote the poem ‘The Projectile’ and dedicated it to Murakami. The poem begins:

\begin{quote}
We sipped tea, politely musing
on possible reasons for the success
of my books in your country. Slipped
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{281} Sennett, *The Culture of New Capitalism*, pp. 104-5.
into talk of pain and humiliation
you find occurring, and reoccurring,
in my stories. And that element
of sheer chance. How all this translates
in terms of sales (All of Us, p. 146). 283

Carver continues to describe how their conversation triggered an adolescent memory of a snowball fight which ended in a broken eardrum after ‘a ball of packed ice’ fluked its way through a three inch gap in his car window. The pain, Carver writes, was ‘stupendous’, but more pertinently, so was the humiliation – a phrase isolated on its own line – as Carver began to weep in front of his peers. He closes the poem by writing, ‘We politely raise our teacups in the room. | A room that for a minute something else entered’ (p. 147). While the poem is an interesting account of their time together, its content is more than anecdotal. The key appears in the poem’s opening, ‘How all this translates | in terms of sales’, a short couplet that seems to be an ironic commentary on the influence and impact of the ‘humiliations’ he faced in his early life. While Carver could not have read Murakami’s fiction at the time (it was yet to be translated into English) Carver’s recollection of their conversation neatly encapsulates the close association between his and Murakami’s fiction. In this sense then, the problems that Carver faced early in his life – the impact of the socioeconomic transition from embedded liberalism to neoliberalism – and which, in turn, contributed to the production of his fiction are the very characteristics which drew Murakami, who saw similar trends reflected in Japanese society, to his writing. The couplet reveals that Carver realises the irony of this, that when that same experience was commodified through Murakami’s translations, the popularity of Carver’s work contributed to bringing about the very socioeconomic mobility and artistic posterity which had seemed so inaccessible early in his life.

283 While it is my contention that the thematic similarity between Carver and Murakami did indeed contribute to Carver’s success in Japan, it is surely also true that the commercial success of Murakami’s own fiction in the 1980s contributed to the commercial success of his translations of Carver. In a letter Murakami informs Carver that his most recent translation had just been released in paperback and was ‘selling well’. That particular translation was no doubt aided by the success of Murakami’s 1985 novel Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World, which won the prestigious Tanizaki Literary Prize in Japan. See, letter dated, ‘12 September 1986’, Raymond Carver Papers, Box. XIII, fol. 179, in the William Charvat Collection of American Fiction of the Ohio State University Libraries.
Chapter Three

‘Why Raymond Carver?’: The Equivocal Carver in Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *Birdman*

It has been the predominant remit of this thesis so far to assess Carver’s influence in the realm of literary studies. The influence of Carver on Jay McInerney and Haruki Murakami came, as I have already argued, through a twofold combination. First, Carver’s work and his perceived lifestyle was seen to be indicative of his own socioeconomic circumstance and vital to an exploration of the difference between hegemonic narratives and lived experience, and second, Carver’s work and life became a model of retreat towards a residual narrative associated with artisanal tenets of craftsmanship as a way of navigating this bewildering world of late capitalism. Notably, both authors also read Carver’s fiction at a significant moment in their development as writers, and they then later met Carver and found that there was a concomitant influence when their reading was combined with their ‘real-life’ encounter.

This third and final chapter, then, while continuing to develop the socioeconomic theme of my earlier chapters, proceeds along slightly different lines. Firstly, because it considers Carver’s influence within the context of Alejandro González Iñárritu’s film *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (2014), and secondly, because Iñárritu did not meet Carver. My argument concerning Carver’s influence in this chapter, therefore, differs somewhat from my previous two. My reading of Iñárritu’s *Birdman* is distinctive in that it suggests that, at times, the film seems to, contra-McInerney and Murakami, debate – even resist – the appropriateness of using Carver as an influential model in the neoliberal era. My intention in raising this opposition is not to undermine my broader thesis, but rather to raise and consider points of opposition to its main thrust. Ultimately I will conclude that while Iñárritu’s film depicts Carver as an influential literary, and more broadly artistic, figure – especially in relation to the ephemerality associated with neoliberal culture – the totality of that solution is presented
with an ironic twist, which suggests that Carver’s influence in the contemporary era is perhaps more ambivalent than Carver’s advocates might suggest.

In my introduction I argued that the problem of how one views Carver is, by its very nature, a historical one. In doing so, I outlined a number of important critical opinions on Carver’s life and work, and concluded by suggesting that while it is hard to define an exact historical narrative, the combination of biography, stylised fiction and media speculation created a kind of irrepressible mythology surrounding Carver. The meat of this argument is that Carver was a working-class writer, a commoner, drawn from the backwaters of the rural northwestern United States. He overcame educational and class barriers to rise to the echelons of East Coast literary society by remaining loyal in form, style and content to his roots and by writing about the disenfranchised, those people who presumably – many surmised – surrounded Carver for most of his early life. The primary piece of evidence for this narrative of authenticity was his slim second collection *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), which balanced hard-edged working-class content with what seemed to be a profound and meaningful minimalist realism.

I am revisiting this argument at the outset of this final chapter because it is my proposition that Iñárritu, a left-wing filmmaker who is concerned with the surface ephemerality prevalent in neoliberal culture, positions Carver as an example, or paragon, that might be used to negotiate such a context. In casting Carver as the foundation for his film, Iñárritu begins to explore, in a particularly distinctive way, the impact of recent neoliberal cultural developments on individuals. While his early trilogy, *Amores Perros* (2000), *21 Grams* (2003) and *Babel* (2006), depicts the alienation and dislocation that results from the global time-space compression that has occurred under neoliberalism, his fifth feature, *Birdman*, presents a study of the cultural impact of these contemporary traits. In a world where, for Iñárritu, authenticity and truth have become de-centred, slippery properties, *Birdman’s* protagonist, Riggan Thomson (Michael Keaton), turns to what might be best understood as a conservative belief in the transcendent power of Carver’s writing to communicate across generations, and as such Carver
becomes a kind of artistic touchstone after his years in artistic exile in the Hollywood film industry. But Riggan’s faith in Carver is challenged by his co-actor, Mike Shiner (Edward Norton), who holds a more radical position towards Carver’s work, portraying him as an alcoholic, a writer who suffered in much the same way as the characters he created, and whose painful experience, therefore, was the direct source of a kind artistic authenticity. However, Mike’s own wrestling with integrity complicates his opinion, for he is an actor lauded by the critics for his truthful, method acting approach but is unable to fulfil any meaningful relationships off-stage.

A short scene in the film featuring both characters exemplifies this conflict. Mike, who has just ruined the first preview of Riggan’s Broadway play – an adaptation of Carver’s story ‘What We Talk About When We Talk About Love’ – with an improvised outburst that belittled both the adaptation and its audience, takes Riggan to the Rum House, a small bar in New York’s Theatre District, to debate the merits of the play. Satisfied that his point has been sufficiently argued, he leaves. Alone at the bar, Riggan turns an empty whisky glass in his hand when suddenly Mike returns, raises his finger and says in a tone as accusatory as it is imperious, ‘I want to know something: why Raymond Carver?’ Riggan looks up, puts his glass on the bar and pulls a browned napkin out of his wallet. He hands it to Mike. The handheld camera moves from Riggan’s face, to the now unfolded napkin covered in an indecipherable scrawl in Mike’s palm. Before he has a chance to read it, Riggan explains, ‘When I was in high school, I was in a play up in Syracuse and Carver was in the audience. He sent that back to me afterwards.’ Mike reads the message aloud, ‘Thanks for an honest performance. Ray Carver.’ He rubs his forehead and begins to laugh. ‘What’s so funny?’ Riggan asks. ‘It’s written on a cocktail napkin,’ Mike replies. ‘He was fucking drunk, man.’

It is worth briefly highlighting two things at this early stage. The first is that Riggan’s view of Carver is somewhat similar to the description offered by Sinfield in my introduction concerning literary idealism, that ‘literature is envisaged as “rising above” its conditions of production and reception; as transcending social and political concerns and other such mundane matters’. And, secondly, it is worth pointing out the clear meta associations of casting Keaton, who formally played Batman, as a washed-up Hollywood actor who formally played a character called Birdman. This final point is an important aspect of the film, which I will return to later in this chapter.

Alejandro G. Iñárritu, Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance) (Fox Searchlight, 2014) [on Blu-ray DVD]. Subsequent references are from this edition of the film, unless otherwise stated.
Mike’s question – why Raymond Carver? – and the short dialogue that follow reveals that Carver has influenced both men in very different ways. Riggan idolises Carver as a writer with an enduring artistic integrity that transcends the ephemerality of contemporary Hollywood productions. Whereas Mike’s view of Carver is revealed during his improvised monologue (‘He left a piece of his liver on the table every time he wrote a fucking page!’) and denotes admiration for Carver’s ‘method-style’ sacrifice, in which the socioeconomic reality of Carver’s historical experience fed into the perceived authenticity of his literature. From this point of view, Birdman operates at a level above the simple representation or reflection of traditional Carveresque values; it is itself a study of Carver’s afterlife.

Neoliberalism, NAFTA and Alienation in Iñárritu’s Early Trilogy

Born in a small barrio in Mexico City in 1963, Alejandro G. Iñárritu, like Jay McInerney and Haruki Murakami, is an artist concerned with the specific socioeconomic trends of his homeland over the past three-and-a-half decades. He began his career in the media industry in his twenties as a disc jockey for WFM, one of Mexico’s most popular radio stations, before becoming an artistic director for Televisa in 1990. A year later he founded his own production company, Zeta Films, and began making short films and commercials. During this same period he partnered with the novelist Guillermo Arriaga to develop his first feature length production, Amores Perros. The film, the most expensive privately funded Mexican film when it was made, was released only weeks before the political establishment, Institutional Revolutionary


*Party* (PRI), lost the general election for the first time in seventy-one years. Their defeat at the polls indicated a monumental shift in the socio-political structure of the country. Since the end of the revolution in 1920, Mexico had been governed by the PRI on a broadly socialist protectionist trade and investment basis. However the onset of the 1982 debt crisis – brought on by the neoliberal turn in the US – resulted in the IMF instigating a support package of neoliberal structural reforms. Democratic capitalism was introduced to the country, business and manufacturing was agglomerated and centralized, and anarchic urban growth began to ensue in the capital city.

*Amores Perros*, a multiprotagonist film that portrays social divisions in Mexico City, is Iñárritu’s foundational attempt to represent the increasingly uneven and fragmented existence in Mexico’s new neoliberal era. The film’s representation of extreme violence, severe disparity of wealth and lack of social justice are encompassed by a pervasive feeling of alienation and dislocation that prefigure motifs found in his later work. These concerns find their specific context within the expansion of availability of technology in Mexican neoliberal society –

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288 *Amores Perros* is reported to have had the budget of $2.4 million. See, Paul Julian Smith, *Amores Perros* (London: BFI Publishing, 2003), p. 12.

289 As I outlined in my introduction, one of the consequences of the neoliberal turn in the US in the late 1970s was a rise in interest rates. The Mexican government, which had borrowed from US investment banks at low rates, was unable to afford repayments. Following the new, and increasingly popular, neoliberal logic, Mexico was forced to take on board the IMF’s restructuring programmes, and to do so no matter the cost to the local population. The liberalization of Mexico’s economic infrastructure enabled private – often, American – corporations to buy out the state apparatus at ultra-low prices. Joseph Stiglitz summarizes the procedure of restructuring when he writes:

> Decisions [at the IMF] were made on the basis of what seemed a curious blend of ideology and bad economics, dogma that sometimes seemed to be thinly veiling special interests. When crises hit, the IMF prescribed outmoded, inappropriate, if ‘standard’ solutions, without considering the effects they would have on the people in the countries told to follow these policies. Rarely did I see forecasts about what the policies would do to poverty. Rarely did I see thoughtful discussions and analyses of the consequences of alternative policies. There was a single prescription. Alternative opinions were not sought. Open, frank discussion was discouraged – there was no room for it. Ideology guided policy prescription and countries were expected to follow the IMF guidelines without debate […] Inside the IMF it was simply assumed that whatever suffering occurred was a necessary part of the pain countries had to experience on the way to becoming a successful market economy.


media that Néstor Canclini describes as having ‘vertical and anonymous logic’, and that Iñárritu views as prioritising capital (or commodification) over community and human relationships. It is through the prevalence of television, celebrity culture, advertising, mobile phones and global banking that *Amores Perros*, as Julie Minich highlights, offers ‘a critique of consumer culture [and] also a sense of how thoroughly it permeates our lives’. This, of course, is part of the ideological strength of neoliberalism.

Equally notable for their critique of late-capitalism are Iñárritu’s subsequent English language films. His second and third feature films, *21 Grams* and *Babel*, along with *Amores Perros*, form a trilogy of multiprotagonist pieces that concomitantly represent the complex relationships between people (labour), goods and capital within the increasingly compressed global existence in neoliberalism. A real world parallel to these films is found in the socioeconomic effect of the North American Free Trade Agreement (*NAFTA*) on his homeland, and as a Mexican filmmaker working in the US, it is firmly within this context that Iñárritu is making his films. While its proponents argued that the treaty would instigate national

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292 Minich, ‘Rehabilitating Neoliberalism’, p. 977. In another article, the narrative of el Chivo, an ex-revolutionary turned hit man, takes the attention of Dierdra Reber, who argues that his contrived inclusion in the film ‘pointedly spans the failed revolutionary era and its neoliberal aftermath that signals its express intent to comment on that very historical turn’. Continuing this imagery, Reber argues that another character, Gustavo, the banker who hires el Chivo’s services, and his cell phone stand in for a symbol of neoliberal culture: Gustavo’s communications are telegraphic and emotionless commands regarding the movement of liquid capital between accounts, and we can only presume that these cryptic transfers are serving to accommodate a covert and untraceable payment of the hit [...] Used, as it implicitly is, to arrange for the corporate transfer of blood money, Gustavo’s cell phone serves as the most potent symbol that the film represents as a murderous neoliberal capitalism (p. 285).

293 Naturally enough even though Iñárritu’s films often criticise neoliberalism, as a filmmaker working within its boundaries, he cannot escape its effect. In this regard, a brief look at the smaller projects that he has been involved with presents an interesting and disconcerting impression. Perhaps most problematic are the advertising campaigns he has worked on for large multinational corporations. In 2001 he directed a short film for BMW for its advertising series *The Hire* and nine years later directed an advert for Nike titled *Write the Future*. *The Hire* was a series of eight films, all (aside from Iñárritu) directed by Hollywood studio directors. The series starred Clive Owen as The Driver, a chauffeur-come-stunt-driver who found himself inexplicably driving BMW cars in a variety of extreme global settings. *Write the Future*, coincided with the 2010 FIFA World Cup and featured a plethora of global sporting stars, including Wayne Rooney, Didier Drogba and Ronaldinho. Even though the filmmaking style of these commercials are firmly recognizable as Iñárritu’s (the use of handheld cameras is notable), his explicitly commercial work clearly problematizes the critique of capitalism in his feature films.

294 It hardly needs to be stated that NAFTA was and is in many ways a controversial treaty. It has both its proponents and critics, and arguments made on either side are usually influenced by heavily mediated political and social persuasions. While it is not always helpful to generalize, until recently, and certainly
economic progression, in turn curing Mexico’s debt overhang and improving social problems, in reality the result of NAFTA and the affiliated liberalization has been – in vast contrast to regional economic convergence – dramatic uneven geographical development, in the vein of other neoliberal economies. Strong and lasting economic growth has not ensued in Mexico, particularly in the labour market, and the lack of internal innovation and investment has caused analysts to project poor prospects for sustainable development in the country.

Iñárritu’s third feature film, *Babel*, is particularly significant in this regard. Set on three separate continents, the film traces the movement of people and goods across geographic borders and draws attention to the contemporary issues of nation-state sovereignty and social injustice that Iñárritu sees in neoliberal Mexico. The narrative follows the movement and impact of a hunting rifle, a gift from a Japanese tourist to a Moroccan guide, which ends up being involved in the accidental shooting of an American tourist in the Moroccan desert. The central image in the film, the hunting rifle, denotes the ease with which foreign goods and services move between nation-state borders and the potent impact that they have on the local population. The shooting of the American tourist sets in motion a series of dramatic global events – buoyed by the dominance of US foreign policy – which leads to the death of children in Morocco, the deportation of unofficial Mexican workers from California and the near-suicide of the Japanese businessman’s daughter.


295 At the time of writing Mexico has the fifteenth largest economy in the world – worth $1.26 trillion – yet has the second highest wealth disparity among OECD countries. At the time of writing, 26% of the country’s GDP comes from an informal economy of street-sellers and domestic services. 0.12% of Mexico’s economic elite controls almost half of the countries wealth (a proportion that is almost ten times that of the US). 55 million Mexicans – around 46% of the population – are estimated to be living in poverty. For a summary of recent economic indicators see, Peter Vanhan, ‘Top 10 Things to Know About the Mexican Economy’, *Agenda for World Economic Forum*, 5, 5 May 2015, and, Nathaniel Parish Flannery, ‘Investor Insight: How Strong is Mexico’s Economy?’, *Forbes*, 8 September 2015.

296 Elsewhere Harvey claims that the rise of neoliberalism in countries like China (and their cheap workforce) has led to a decrease of 200,000 jobs in Mexico. While NAFTA was designed to provide good export and investment opportunities for Mexican economy, in the neoliberal era capital is dynamic enough to move to the most profitable source. See, Harvey, *Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 138.
Particularly significant in this multiprotagonist piece is the narrative of Amelia (Adriana Barraza), an undocumented Mexican nanny, who looks after Richard (Brad Pitt) and Susan Jones’s (Cate Blanchett) children while they are travelling in Morocco. When Susan is shot and left stranded in a remote Moroccan village, their delayed homecoming creates a conflict of interest between Amelia’s responsibility as a nanny and her own son’s wedding in Mexico. Intent on not missing the wedding, Amelia resolves to take the two children with her across the border for the day, and asks her nephew, Santiago (Gael García Bernal), to drive them. While their exit from the US is markedly uneventful – as they cross the border, one of the children ominously says, ‘My mom said Mexico is dangerous.’ ‘Yes,’ Santiago responds in Spanish, ‘it’s full of Mexicans’ – their return is dramatically different.\(^{297}\) Stopped at a US border checkpoint after an increase in security – due in part to the shooting in Morocco and the perceived global terrorist threat on US citizens – Amelia, with no official documents and two American children in the back of the car, is thoroughly scrutinized. Her nephew, still drunk from the wedding, anxious and seeing no obvious escape from the police, drives through the checkpoint. He leaves Amelia and the children by the side of the road in the remote wilderness and drives off into the desert.

The moment is keenly symbolic, for Amelia’s excursion in the US / Mexico hinterland overtly embodies the soul of the film: the diasporic effect felt by many Mexicans in contemporary America.\(^{298}\) In the morning the police eventually find Amelia, and the dehydrated and exhausted children are saved from their life-threatening situation. Amelia, however, despite living in the US for many years, is deported back to Mexico. The border porosity, which allows the unimpeded movement of goods between nation-states, clearly does not extend to the movement of people groups – even to those who are willing to offer social and economic

\(^{297}\) *Babel*, dir. by Alejandro González Iñárritu (Paramount Vantage, 2006) [on DVD].

\(^{298}\) As Iñárritu explained in one interview about the film, ‘I also wanted to observe the problem of the borders between the United States and Mexico, and to talk about the millions of Mexicans who live a very harsh reality in America. I was interested in solitude, and deserts […] urban deserts, where you are surrounded by people but totally isolated’ (O’Keeffe, p. 36). It is also worth noting the work by scholars more recently on the impact and effect of this new borderland. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa, called the Mexican/US border ‘una herida abierta’, where the Third world grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms haemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture’. See, Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), pp. 25-6.
support to the country. The defining summary indicated by the film’s biblical title is that while there are intricate and global connections between people groups in contemporary society, ultimately there is still no effective form of communication, the impact of neoliberalism and NAFTA remains: the primacy given to the movement of capital is a process which reifies the Mexican populace, and eventually leaves them alienated.299

*Babel* certainly presents a solemn – and at times overwhelmingly negative – view of the current neoliberal state. Whether Iñárritu’s personal beliefs are aligned with the strongly polemic writing of David Harvey cannot be ascertained for certain, but his films do reveal support for a set of values that are analogous to Harvey’s call for ‘open democracy dedicated to social equality coupled with economic, political and cultural justice’.300 As I have suggested, this idea is clearly presented in *Babel*, which pits the dominance of American capital against the welfare of humanity. Harvey’s analysis is of significant help when seen within this context, for he argues:

If it is invidious to view daily life and the lifeworld as something ‘outside of’ the circulation of capital, then we have to concede that everything that now occurs in the workplace and in the production-consumption process is somehow caught up within capital circulation and accumulation. Almost everything we now eat and drink, wear and use, listen to and hear, watch and learn comes to us in commodity form and is shaped by divisions of labour, the pursuit of product niches and the general evolution of discourses and ideologies that embody precepts of capitalism. It is only when daily life has been rendered totally open to the circulation of capital and when political subjects

299 María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo picks up on a similar idea when discussing NAFTA in relation to Alfonsa Cuarón’s *Y tu mamá también*. Cuarón, a contemporary and friend of Iñárritu, released his film a year after *Amores Perros*. Assessing Cuarón’s film Saldaña-Portillo writes:

While NAFTA facilitated the unencumbered movement of goods and capital across the North American continent, it pointedly did not address the third leg of this capitalist triumvirate: labour. NAFTA is strangely mute on the subject of the movement of labourers across national borders […] although the U.S. economy, from California to New York, is visibly addicted to the importation of cheap, un-documented labour from the south.


have their vision almost entirely circumscribed by embeddedness in that circulation that capitalism can function with affective meanings and legitimacy as its support. It is the impact and effect of this embeddedness that Iñárritu’s early multiprotagonist trilogy explores. As Deleyto and Azcona usefully elaborate:

In them, time expands and contracts, becomes distorted and repeats itself ad infinitum, moves around in circles and branches off in unexpected directions – constituting, in sum, a powerful symptom of the ways in which contemporary experience has been shaped by economic, cultural, and technological phenomena.

For Iñárritu the result of capital’s primacy is a fragmented existence that makes effective human interaction and community ephemeral, transient and fragile. Such obvious cinematic mapping marks Babel as the cornerstone of his work, as well as a platform from which he is able to progress towards more nuanced and specific contemporary issues to do with artistic authenticity, legacy and influence in the neoliberal era, and it is exactly these kinds of problems that Iñárritu seeks to address in Birdman.

Iñárritu’s Preoccupations and Carver in Birdman’s Opening

A relatively detailed description of the opening sequence of Birdman will give an idea of the distinctive manner in which Iñárritu tackles these themes. The film’s epigraph, Carver’s poem ‘Late Fragment’, appears letter by letter at random intervals on a black screen and remains only long enough to be read briefly before it disappears. The poem’s transient appearance prefigures broader motifs in the film, but its ostensible randomness (like his early multiprotagonist films) is countered by Iñárritu’s subtle orchestration – the letters actually appear in alphabetical order and when they disappear they leave, for a microsecond, the word ‘amor’. In a film that is not

301 Harvey, Spaces of Global Capitalism, p. 82.
302 Harvey argues elsewhere that the end result is that the body – that is, humanity – becomes an ‘accumulation strategy’ for capital, and while this effect is not fully explored in his early films, elements in his more recent work – in Biutiful (2010) (through the exploitation of migrant workers) and Birdman (through the prevalence of technology and social media) – suggest that Iñárritu is beginning to depict a world in which Harvey’s final evaluation is fast becoming the dominant reality. See, Harvey, Spaces of Hope (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2000), p. 82.
303 Celestino Deleyto and Maria Azcona, Alejandro González Iñárritu (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2010), p. 49.
only concerned with the broader implications of maintaining loving relationships in a
contemporary society, but also, on a diegetic level, a film about an adaptation of a story called
‘What We Talk About When We Talk About Love’, this opening shot carries meaningful
overtones that connect it to the themes of Iñárritu’s earlier work. Notwithstanding this
interesting allusion, the text itself appears equally significant:

And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth (All of Us, p. 294).

The poem’s poignancy is heightened by its context. Written only weeks before Carver’s death,
it also appears on Carver’s gravestone – perhaps the ultimate indication of the universality of
life’s fragility and ephemerality. The text has strong elegiac connotations and its title echoes
back, as Sandra Lee Kleppe points out, ‘to antiquity and the heart of the Western love poem
tradition as represented by Sappho’s fragments’. Despite the poem’s compact nature, it
encapsulates much of Riggan’s predicament. The antipophoric effect – which is emphasised by
left and right justification on screen – not only reflects Carver’s poetic voice, but also interplays
with Riggan’s alter ego, a character who performs the role of internal interrogator in the film.

Even at the outset then, the link between Carver’s poem and Riggan’s characterisation
is significant. Riggan’s main preoccupation in the film is the creation of a critically respected
piece of art that he hopes will ensure his posterity. This aim is ultimately tied to a recent
epiphany that his personal life and acting career have been a failure, and that his past
Hollywood work is disposable, ephemeral and ultimately worthless. (‘I’m disappearing,’ he
says at one moment of particular desperation in the film.) Concerned, and often reminded by
other characters, that the commercial success of his early career is firmly rooted in the past, his
adaptation, production and performance of Carver’s story becomes an attempt to fix some kind

of longevity to his name. But the purity of Riggan’s motivation is a moot point. His estranged wife, Sylvia (Amy Ryan), makes the perceptive observation that Riggan has confused love for admiration – a notable reason for their initial break-up, it seems – and so, in light of her comment we might view Carver’s conclusion to ‘Late Fragment’ (‘To call myself beloved, to feel myself | beloved on the earth’) as being tantamount to Riggan’s situation. In fact, it is precisely this personal conflict that is explored in the film. Carver’s poem presents an interesting, if slightly ambivalent, conclusion. The first clause of Carver’s final sentence, ‘To call myself beloved’ (emphasis added), appeals to Riggan’s search for critical admiration, but the phrase is spontaneously broken off by the poem’s final phrase, ‘to feel myself | beloved’ (emphasis added), which aligns more clearly with the need for experiential love and community. As I will argue later, the conflict is ultimately resolved in the film’s conclusion, for Riggan finally – and unwittingly – gains critical recognition for his play and in the process restores his filial relationships.

The rest of the opening sequence continues to build on these ideas. The appearance of the epigraph coincides with Antonio Sanchez’s erratic and inimitable drum score. The percussive accompaniment, which continues throughout the film, is a subtle reflection of Riggan’s chaotic production as well as his increasingly apparent inner turmoil. Its menacing rhythm is also tantamount to Carver’s prosaic specificity, and aids the transition from the epigraph into the opening shot – after a short prelude of a shooting star, yet another potent motif that reiterates notions of transience and intense ephemerality – which begins in Riggan’s dressing room.

Riggan is alone, wearing a pair of white briefs and sitting in the Lotus Position – apparently levitating in mid-air. His bare back fills the screen. Backlit by a bright white light from an opaque sash window – a feature evocative of the bleach by-pass effect prevalent in Iñárritu’s early films – Riggan’s skin is the same colour of the walls: an off-white shade reminiscent of dirty snow. This decidedly intrusive moment recalls many of Carver’s stories, forcing the viewer into Riggan’s intimate space. The quietness is oppressive – a ticking clock, the only indication that time is actually passing. Faint sirens and traffic noise place the scene in
an unidentified metropolis. Unable to see Riggan’s front, his physical condition remains undetermined, but his broad shoulders and the visible portion of his slight thighs suggest a middle-aged man who was once in good shape. A half-hidden Buddha’s head and some obscured pictures (photographs of Carver, Tess Gallagher and a print of Alfredo Arreguin’s Ray’s Ghost Fish) reinforce the initial element of spirituality and community, while the defunct lightbox in the bottom left-hand corner denotes depressive tendencies. It is the latter sensibility that pervades, the peeling white paint on the radiator, out-dated décor, wonky clothes rack and empty paper towel dispenser recalling a dilapidated school toilet more than the comfortable dressing room of a Hollywood star.

While the opening shot prefigures Riggan’s failures in the film, the mobile video call from his daughter, Sam (Emma Stone), which follows, prefigures ideas that relate more specifically to Iñárritu’s critique of neoliberalism. The mobile phone, as Deleyto and Azcona have noted, is a prominent motif in Iñárritu’s early films, especially in relation to the notion of ephemerality or the fragility of human relationships, and so its early appearance in Birdman is unsurprising. Set against the wider socioeconomic context of the film, the early appropriation of mobile video calling – a noticeably contemporary technological phenomenon – is noteworthy. Iñárritu’s adoption of the form (as opposed to a regular phone call) not only allows Sam to infiltrate Riggan’s dressing room through the transmission of sounds, but also allows her to see into Riggan’s absolute space. Sam is present in the dressing room without actually being there. As I will argue later on, the appearance of contemporary technology, especially social media, is particularly important in relation to broader ideas that Iñárritu expresses concerning technology’s inability to compensate for what he sees as authentic, real experience. This idea is underlined in the film’s opening by the fleeting temporality of the video call – particularly in how abruptly Sam is able to start and, most significantly, end it – and also by its incapacity to

305 Deleyto and Azcona, Alejandro González Iñárritu, p. 75. As I noted earlier, Gustavo, the fratricidal businessman, uses one to arrange the transfer of blood money in Amores perros and in 21 Grams Cristina repeatedly plays Michael, her dead husband’s, voicemail message.
306 Riggan admits later on in the film, for instance, the regret he feels over missing Sam’s birth, at the time only video taping it, ‘I should have been there. I should have been in the moment’, he confesses to Sylvia.
offer an effective means of communication. For despite the dominance of technology, neither the absolute space of the florist nor that offered through cyberspace affords an effective avenue for communication. Sam cannot understand the Korean florist behind her, nor her father, and ends up buying his least favourite flowers – roses.

Divergent Approaches to Adaptations of Carver’s Writing

It is almost impossible to approach any adaptation of Carver’s fiction without dealing with, or at least acknowledging, Robert Altman’s Short Cuts (1993). Altman’s film presents a very different view of Carver’s fictional world to Iñárritu’s. While Birdman uses Carver’s story ‘What We Talk About When We Talk About Love’ as its centrepiece and debates various interpretations of Carver – Carver almost feels like an invisible character in the film – its singular narrative arc is in no way adapted from his fiction. Altman’s film on the other hand is a melange – an interwoven and complex narrative – that overtly renders nine of Carver’s short stories (and one poem) into the first feature length production of Carver’s work. Approved by Tess Gallagher and endorsed by an extensive marketing campaign, Altman’s project was presented as the continuation of Carver’s prematurely ended artistic output. Cementing this idea was a new eponymous publication by Harvill, which featured the nine stories and one poem portrayed in the film, alongside the customary front cover and the caption, ‘Now a major film’. Not content with simple association, the edition also featured a short introduction from the director titled ‘Corroborating with Carver’, at once attempting to reinforce ideas of artistic collaboration and suggesting Carver’s posthumous hand in the project. ‘What he [Carver]
really did was capture the wonderful idiosyncrasies of human behaviour’, Altman writes, before making the connection to his own work, ‘And human behaviour, filled with all its mystery and inspiration, has always fascinated me’. This idea is foundational in understanding how Altman views Carver’s work. ‘I look at all of Carver’s work as just one story’, he states rather conclusively, the kind of thought-process that allowed him to cut, edit and intermingle Carver’s stories as he saw fit, and also granted him permission to move the stories’ location and focus on themes closer to his own values. In the film, Altman transposes Carver’s rural northwestern locations to the Los Angeles suburbs, in turn ‘Los Angelising’ many of Carver’s characters: the teacher in ‘Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?’ becomes a paediatrician, the salesman in ‘They’re Not Your Husband’ becomes a limousine driver, and the unemployed protagonist in ‘Collectors’ becomes a helicopter pilot. It is exactly this transformation that Kasia Boddy contends with. She argues that Altman’s adaptation not only presents a formal change but also distinctive thematic transformations, a gulf vast enough for her to claim that ‘A reading that conflates them [Carver and Altman] is one that fails to do justice to either’. Altman’s multiprotagonist approach, Boddy argues, makes a soup of Carver’s ‘discrete and diverse short stories’, and, ‘inevitably results in a distortion of that work’.

In connection with this multiprotagonist approach is the view, touted during the release of the film, that in allowing characters from different stories to interact with each other Altman playing a washed-up Hollywood star – and while the film’s official trailer provides brief shots of the St James’ Theatre and the title of Riggan’s play, overall the relationship between the film and Carver is distinctly downplayed, suggesting, at the very outset, a decidedly ambiguous connection to Carver’s influence. 310 Robert Altman, ‘Corroborating With Carver’, introduction to Raymond Carver, Short Cuts (London: Collins Harvill, 1993), pp. 7-10 (p. 7).

created ‘the novel Carver was denied the time to write’. 312 In a more recent article Peter Bailey argues that this idea typifies ‘attempts to present Short Cuts as a more effective and coherent adaptation of Raymond Carver’s fiction than it actually is’. 313 It is this point – that Carver’s short fiction is an inferior form, only completed by Altman’s novelistic vision – that Boddy vigorously contends with:

The belief that Carver’s status as a writer was ‘untested’ because he had not published a novel reveals the full weight of the critical bias that exists towards the novel. The short story, it is implied, is an apprentice form, while writing a novel represents an ignition into the mature world of letters. 314

Indeed, far from honouring Carver’s legacy, the argument that Short Cuts is the novel that Carver never wrote seems contrarily derogatory. Not only because Carver certainly did have the time to write a novel – especially in his final decade – but because Carver himself was a staunch defender of the short form. While in his early life he may have favoured it for its brevity, later in life he favoured it for its formal properties. 315 Altman, naturally enough, is wise to these objections, admitting in his essay that ‘some purists and Carver fans may be upset’, accepting that he has ‘taken liberties with Carver’s work’, but still maintaining that the project really was a ‘serious collaboration’, not least because Tess Gallagher was, ‘a real contributor’, to the film, a notable theme throughout Altman’s conversations about its production. 316

While neither Gallagher, nor (of course) Carver, is officially tied to Iñárritu’s Birdman, the production and release of the film had a definitive impact on how Gallagher managed Carver’s literary estate. In the three months after the film opened in the US, sales of What We Talk About When We Talk About Love increased by 121 per cent. This was quickly followed by the decision to publish Beginners, the unedited manuscript of What We Talk About When We

312 Luck, Trust and Ketchup: Robert Altman in Carver Country, dir. by John Door and Mike Kaplan (EZTV, 1993) [on DVD].
315 See Carver’s ‘Author’s Note to Where I’m Calling From’, for instance, in which he writes, ‘I’m hooked on writing short stories and couldn’t get off them even if I wanted to. Which I don’t’ (Collected Stories, p. 746).
316 Altman, ‘Corroborating With Carver’, pp. 7-8. One significant purist who was uneasy with Altman’s adaptation was Murakami who Gallagher records as having ‘that translator’s fidelity of saying he would still like to see Ray’s stories treated more exactly from the text’ (Gallagher, Soul Barnacles, p. 96).
Talk About Love (already available in the UK and Japan) in September 2015, while Vintage also released e-book editions of both titles for the first time. An article in Publishers Weekly also reported that Gallagher’s agent, Andrew Wylie, claimed that Gallagher worked with Iñárritu in structuring Birdman around parts of Carver’s story.\(^{317}\) The exact veracity of this claim is, naturally enough, hard to contest, but the two did meet in New York and, in an article published exactly six months after Birdman’s Oscar success, Gallagher claims that she and Iñárritu were in ‘perfect accord’, that she ‘more or less went to bestow [her] blessing’ on the film.\(^{318}\) After the film was complete Gallagher gave Iñárritu one of Carver’s old shirts to wear for the 2015 awards season, a typical gesture of goodwill for anyone she deems as extending Carver’s legacy.\(^{319}\) There is certainly some mutuality in Gallagher’s sentiments, for Iñárritu thanked Gallagher for allowing him access to Carver’s story in his Oscars acceptance speech and in an earlier interview described her as being a ‘wonderful woman […] generous with affection for the movie’.\(^{320}\) It remains an interesting paradox that Gallagher supports Iñárritu’s film so publicly, especially considering its equivocal and, at times, plain unfavourable treatment of Carver’s fiction and personality. Indeed, Birdman is perhaps the first high profile adaptation to treat Carver in this way that Gallagher has publicly endorsed. Retracted interviews, embargoed articles and letters from copyright lawyers have been a frequent tale for those who oppose her rather optimistic version of Carver’s life, and so it is encouraging to find Birdman treating Carver with more nuance and scrutiny, which suggests the beginning of a new era of critical parity for Carver scholars.

‘Why Raymond Carver?: Riggan’s Conservative Car

\(^{319}\) Jim Rainey, the Senior Film Reporter for Variety, tweeted a picture of Iñárritu at the Directors Guild Awards 2015 and wrote: “Alejandro Inarritu is wearing the shirt of Raymond Carver, tie of Billy Wilder he says. Two idols of his.” (@RaineyTime, 7 February 2015). Robert Altman received two of Carver’s shirts, un Laundered with ink stains and cigarettes still in the pocket (Luck, Trust and Ketchup, Kaplan and Dorr (1993) [on DVD]).  
But why exactly, it is worth asking at this point, does Iñárritu employ Carver as the centrepiece for his film? Perhaps the most conspicuous reason is that Iñárritu claims to have been an admirer of Carver since he was a young man. But to rely solely on that idea would belie the complexity with which Iñárritu treats Carver. In the Goldsmith interview, Iñárritu reveals that the reason he chose Carver was ‘not only because I was a fan, but also because I thought it was the best bad idea ever to adapt Raymond Carver for the theatre’.\footnote{Goldsmith, ‘The Q&A’, 16 January 2015.} In other words, Iñárritu chose Carver because he was not an appropriate figure for theatrical adaptation, an admission that suggests that Carver’s influence on the film is more mediated than it may first appear. I will develop this idea later on in this chapter, especially when I consider how Riggan appropriates Carver’s text in the film, but Iñárritu’s initial suggestion is that Riggan’s misreading of Carver’s story is an integral element to the film; that Riggan’s attempt to attach himself to Carver’s legacy through his theatrical adaptation is not necessarily an efficacious route for negotiating and conquering the ephemerality and surface of his early Hollywood career.\footnote{It is also worth highlighting that Carver’s story emphasizes the implication and significance of love, a theme that is not only a preoccupation for Riggan and his co-actors in the film, but also, as I have already intimated, for Iñárritu. His debut feature, \textit{Amores Perros} (translated into English as ‘Love’s a Bitch’), explicitly explores the significance – and even boldly questions the very possibility – of lasting and life-affirming love in the alienated existence created by a neoliberal society. The theme reoccurs in a parallel, but more dramatic, way in \textit{21 Grams}, which portrays Paul Rivers (Sean Penn), a mathematician who suffers from a fatal heart condition, who receives a life-saving heart transplant from Michael Peck (Danny Huston), a husband and father of two, who is killed in a car accident. After the operation, Paul begins a quest to find the owner of his transplanted heart. He meets Michael’s widow, Cristina (Naomi Watts), and the two enter into an intense – and despairingly desperate and ephemeral – relationship, as it soon becomes apparent that despite the transplant, Paul’s heart condition is quickly deteriorating.}

While these ideas add to the interesting associations between Carver and Iñárritu, a more interesting and complex reason for choosing Carver lies in the significance of Carver’s fictional napkin note to Riggan. For Riggan, it seems, sees a strong correlation between what he sees as a conservative element that communicates some kind of transcendental truth about the human condition in Carver’s fiction and his own critical success and longevity. This version of Carver is revealed most clearly in Carver’s own personal essays, which become a kind of propaganda in this regard. The bulk of ‘On Writing’, for instance, is dedicated almost paragraph by paragraph to the exposition of writing dictums borrowed from other (notably realist) writers that reinforce this conservative view; avoid weak specification – Henry James; no cheap tricks –
Geoffrey Wolff; no iron can piece the heart with such force as a period put just in the right place – Isaac Babel; and suddenly everything became clear to him – Anton Chekhov; fundamental accuracy of statement is the ONE sole morality of writing – Ezra Pound. Carver, the essay reveals, wrote these mottos on three-by-five cards and pinned them to his noticeboard. As I noted in chapter one, Carver’s emphasis on carefully chosen vocabulary, usage and grammar, while in itself does not distinguish his writing from postmodern experimentalism, does clearly associate him with notions of orthodox literary realism. The link is clarified when considered in light of his personal essays, which were written in the background of the radicalism posited by writers like John Barth and William Gass. And while Carver was clearly mistaken in some his opinions – take, for instance, the fact that he thought experimentation was a ‘license to try to brutalize or alienate the reader’ (Collected Stories, p. 729) – ‘On Writing’ reveals that he thought that his art was doing something very different; that it held some kind of communicable essence that was antithetical to what he saw as the surface of experimentalism, that he thought his writing was, what might pragmatically be called ‘serious’ art.

It is this image of Carver that holds particular significance for Riggan, because in the bottom right-hand corner of his dressing room mirror is his own three-by-five motto, which reads ‘A thing is a thing, not what is said of that thing’, a phrase that appears to reflect a firmly Carveresque, even anti-Saussurean, understanding of reality. Not only does the tone of Riggan’s motto stand in-line with Carver’s rhetoric – the phrase is noticeably reminiscent of Carver’s stylized titles – it also represents the axis upon which much of the film turns. For, the world that Riggan inhabits is one ruled by a warped, decentred intellectualism. Truth and even the very notion of reality are, for Riggan, slippery properties. He is able to use the superpowers of his fictional alter ego Birdman – the superhero character that he played decades ago in a once commercially successful comic book film franchise – to telekinetically open doors, move objects and even, in one scene of euphoric triumphalism, fly through the streets of Manhattan. And yet, in the film there is a strong tension between the phantasmagoric world inhabited by his alter ego – one associated with the transience of Riggan’s commercial success – and the reality of his current existence and his aim of artistic posterity. Riggan’s motto, therefore, interplays
with Carver’s elegy in the film’s epigraph. For the distinction that the poem places between ‘calling’ and ‘feeling’ loved reflects the contrast between ‘what is said’ and simply ‘what is’, and reflects Carver’s idea – most obviously sourced from Gardner – that what is most important in writing is the communication of some kind of immutable truth rather than the language itself. The motto’s appeal then, to this kind of Carveresque view of reality has a broader impact on Riggan’s metaphysical nature in its attempt to pull him away from the illusory surface of his alter ego and the commercialised – and ephemeral – art he is associated with, and draw him towards a more ‘serious’, lasting art form.

Riggan’s Theatrical Adaptation of ‘What We Talk About When We Talk About Love’

If the reason that Iñárritu uses Carver is founded on a representational view (that is, what Carver is seen to symbolise), then I want to develop this idea further by considering how Carver is used in the film. Perhaps the most conspicuous intervention is that Riggan appropriates Carver’s writing. His play, upon which the film is narratively, spatially and metaphorically centred, is adapted from Carver’s story ‘What We Talk About When We Talk About Love’. Carver wrote the story in the early 1980s, while he was living and teaching in El Paso, Texas and just after the breakup of his first marriage and recovering his post-alcoholic life. Set in a domestic kitchen in Albuquerque, the narrative concerns two couples, Mel and Terri McGinnis and Nick and Laura, and their gin-soaked conversation on the nature of love. A notable stasis pervades the fifteen-page story (the longest in Carver’s truncated second collection); the characters do not leave the kitchen table; the only outside intrusion is the fading afternoon sunlight and the McGinnis’s persistent anecdotes that attempt to exemplify their definition of love. Narrated by Nick, the story intricately weaves a number of opposing tropes and symbols as the characters, who often interrupt or question one another’s experiences, fail to come to an agreed definition.

323 Of course there is an interesting contradiction at the heart of this idea, and it is the peculiar trait of Carver’s minimalism, which purports to be surface – a straightforward form and style, one that is transparent by nature – but that also offers a wealth of hidden and underlying meanings. This binary between surface and serious is reflected in the film through the tension between Riggan’s commercial past and his present Broadway production – an opposition connected to the broader question raised in the film about the validity of different art forms that, in turn, stands in for a wider debate on the nature of truth and falsehood.
on the topic. At one end of the pole is Mel, a cardiologist, who subscribes to an idealized, sentimental definition of love. Nick says of Mel near the beginning of the narrative, ‘I think what you’re saying is that love is an absolute’ (p. 311). At the other end is his second wife, Terri, who thinks love is primarily marked by devotion. She recounts a previous relationship she had with Ed, a man so dedicated to her, his passion turned violent. ‘He dragged me around the living room by my ankles,’ she offers as evidence. ‘He kept saying, “I love you, I love you, you bitch”’ (p. 310). The comparison between Ed’s psychopathic love and Mel’s sentimentalised affection becomes the central focus of the discussion.

Despite its nonsensical nature, Ed’s devotion is stoically maintained throughout the narrative by Terri as an example of authentic love. ‘Sure, sometimes he may have acted crazy,’ she explains, ‘But he loved me. In his own way maybe, but he loved me’ (p. 310). Dissatisfied with Ed as an example, Mel, who becomes increasingly intoxicated throughout the narrative, recounts a story that, for him, epitomises the nature of love. He recalls an elderly couple that were involved in a car crash on an interstate highway. Mel, part of the surgical team that operated on them overnight, continued to visit the pair while they recuperated. Both were covered head to foot in bandages and casts and despite improvement to their condition the man remained depressed. It was not the accident, he told Mel, but the fact that the casts stopped him from turning his head to see his wife. ‘I’m telling you’, Mel says, ‘the man’s heart was breaking because he couldn’t turn his goddamn head and see his goddamn wife’ (p. 320).

The end of Mel’s anecdote marks the conclusion to Carver’s story. Nick’s narrative begins to quickly tail off at this point. The afternoon sunlight, which is described at the beginning of the story as filling the kitchen from the big window behind the sink, begins to fade, and the symbolic darkness, as Paul Randolph Runyon describes, ‘invades the room in the last line of the story’. The lasting impact of Mel’s anecdote and their discussion remains enigmatic. All retreat into a solemn stasis. Laura announces her hunger – like the use of food in ‘A Small, Good Thing’, and even Murakami’s bakery in ‘The Second Bakery Attack’, this, surely, is a symbol of a broader dissatisfaction as much as any physical craving – and while

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Terri offers her some food she fails to move from her chair. Nick is motionless too, and while Boddy argues that there may be an element of release or consolation in his final line, predominantly it denotes a decidedly Carveresque despair, ‘I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone’s heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark’ (p. 322).325

The dialogical nature of Carver’s story means that any attempt to distil the story’s thematic discussion into a neat analysis is frustrated by the multiple anecdotes and assorted viewpoints. Mel is a good example of such equivocation. A medical professional and seminary dropout, he is – on the surface – a character untypical of Carver’s fictional world, and yet his mixed professional past is significant, for it is symptomatic of an inner confusion reminiscent of the core of those who inhabit Carver’s writing. Stammering for a definition of love at the beginning of the story, Mel looks to Nick for assistance, ‘I think what you’re saying is that love is an absolute,’ Nick says. Mel responds, ‘The kind of love I’m talking about is’ (p. 311). The definition offered by Nick links neatly with Mel’s medical profession, one of scientific understanding and materialistic certainty. Indeed, ought he not to know on a definitive level? He is, after all a heart doctor. But his self-deprecation later in the story undermines any authority he may have on the issue, ‘I’m a heart surgeon, sure, but I’m just a mechanic. I go in and I fuck around and I fix things’ (p. 318). His assertion to ‘fuck around’ with patient’s hearts, of course, interplays with his inability to fully grasp the concept of love, as well as the idea of infidelity and broken relationships present in the story.326 The idea links to the fluidity of love that Mel argues for elsewhere, that if one of them were to die, ‘The other person, would grieve for a while, you know, but then the surviving party would go out and love again’ (p. 315). And yet, Mel’s scientific understanding of love is severely undermined by Nick’s assessment of him, ‘Mel thought that real love was nothing less than spiritual love’ (p. 310), an idea that might extend from his time at seminary, although Mel’s incomplete theological degree suggests an

326 All four characters have been married before, and the suggestion is, I think, that Nick and Laura met while Nick was undergoing his divorce. ‘Laura is a legal secretary. We met in a professional capacity,’ he says at one point (p. 313).
equally deficient understanding of the story’s theme. Meanwhile Mel’s ideas are clearly distinct from Terri’s, which is fixed to the personal value that she found in Ed’s devotion, even if it led to violence. Ultimately, any love that Mel has experienced in his life, with Terri or with his first wife, cannot compare to that exhibited by the elderly couple, and this is the point it seems. Mel’s experience of love, in fact, any of the characters’ experience of love is deficient, denoting a slipperiness to any offered definition in the story, an idea fundamentally reflected in its title. 

Despite the story’s complexity, it might be tempting to think that its conversational focus and domestic setting lead it to being a suitable candidate for the kind of kitchen-sink theatrical adaptation that Riggan produces. However, Riggan’s adaptation, direction and performance of the play does little to interpret or distil the equivocality of Carver’s story. In fact, it is not long before Riggan’s play has veered so far from Carver’s original text that any reader even vaguely familiar with the original is left – very much like the characters – in a state of bewilderment. It would be a mistake to give these inconsistencies too much focus. For in the first instance, any attempt at a thorough comparative reading is problematized by the oft-interrupted and incomplete portrayal of Riggan’s adaptation in the film, but more importantly because Iñárritu appears not to be using Carver’s story in an adaptive sense like, say, Altman, but is more interested in the question of artistic authenticity in the neoliberal era. Even so, some

327 It is worth noting that it was Lish who created the title, an issue of some contention for a number of Carver scholars (see, for instance, Stull and Carroll’s ‘Editor’s Preface’ in Beginners). Carver’s original manuscript title was ‘Beginners’, from the line, ‘We’re all just rank beginners at love’. Lish’s title, while over-stylized, is, I think, justified, for, as Enrico Monti argues, it: cleverly captures Carver’s slanted, oblique approach to the issue of love. The new title seems to suggest that all you can do is turn around the matter, without really seizing or defining it, and indeed its convoluted phrasing seems to mimic the character’s attitude in the story. See, Monti, ‘From “Beginners” to “What We Talk About…”’: Variations on a Carver Story’, pp. 39-40. 328 Not only is the set and costume design more akin to the 1950s than the 1980s but dialogue is mixed between characters. The central anecdote about the elderly couple is transferred from Mel and given to Riggan’s character, Nick, and in the process Nick admits to being a cardiologist, leaving Mel’s occupational identity unknown. In the transposition, the anecdote is converted from a poignant retelling to a melodramatic monologue delivered away from the quartet towards the audience at the front of stage. Further expository monologues are added and backstories are invented. Soon the plot becomes muddled. At one point Laura (Andrea Riseborough) takes the stage alone for a dream sequence, surrounded by fog and moving trees. The McGinnis’s play out a sex scene in a motel room, only to be interrupted by a suicidal Ed. Confusion is further added by the fact that Ed is also played by Riggan, the only visible difference being a denim jacket, an ill-fitted hairpiece and a wispy moustache. The play’s finale occurs, not in the fading light of the McGinnis’s kitchen, but in their motel room as Ed finally realises that Terri does not love him and commits suicide in front of the pair. Much of the subtlety of Carver’s prose is undermined by Riggan’s adaptation, and its themes are brought, quite literally, centre stage. Riggan may hold the persona of Carver as an example of artistic authenticity, but his appropriation and treatment of Carver’s story reveals little respect for Carver’s actual text.
critics have been tempted to compare Riggan’s adaptation with Carver’s text and in so doing criticise the film, and so because these arguments oppose mine, it is worth briefly dealing with them.

A recent article by Jonathan Leaf argues that Riggan’s adaptation, and specifically his use of the Lish edited 1981 version of ‘What We Talk About When We Talk About Love’, is a decision, ‘something akin to re-writing Shakespeare’. Leaf’s article argues that the choice to use the truncated publication denies the ‘deeply human, honest and understated storytelling’ that is found in Carver’s original manuscript. In one sense Leaf’s preference for the unedited version of Carver is not objectionable, but leaving aside the fact that the 1981 version of the story is not only the most widely recognised (and likely most popular) version of the story, his criticism is a misjudgement primarily because it takes Riggan’s adaptation at face value – judging it for its inconsistencies – and failing to see the deeper significance of Riggan’s misreading. Francine Prose, in the most comprehensively critical article to date on Carver and Birdman, picks up on Leaf’s weak argument – admitting her inability to fathom why Iñárritu’s choice of the 1981 text should affect our understanding of the film – and posits her own criticism, that ‘the scenes from Riggan’s drama that we see are the pretty awful stuff of kitchen melodrama […] They lack the delicate subtext that makes so much of Carver’s story seem to happen between the lines’. In many ways, Prose’s assessment is right. Riggan’s adaptation severely misjudges Carver’s text. Take Laura’s dream sequence monologue for instance. Its tone is typical of Riggan’s play, revealing a sentimentality that transgresses the Gardnerian rules of writing held by Carver:

I guess we make choices in life, and we choose to live with them or not. I didn’t want that baby, not because I didn’t love Nick, and not because I didn’t love the idea of it, but just because I wasn’t ready to love myself. There’s a distance to it all now, a wistful distance, underscored by a gentle breeze and the sound of the birds laughing at the whimsy of it all.

Prose recognises, that the ‘joke at the heart of the film’ is that Riggan’s play is (as his alter ego suggests) ‘talky, depressing, philosophical bullshit’, but again, she fails to pick up on the nuances of the Iñárritu’s approach. For she speculates about the appropriateness of Carver as model at this time in cultural history, claiming that – in her experience – Carver is rarely read, whereas I am suggesting that the film presents a more nuanced understanding of Carver’s influence; that while there may be inconsistencies in Carver’s portrayal in the film, it is exactly because Riggan views Carver as a prescient artistic model that he adapts Carver’s story for his Broadway comeback. Moreover, it is not even necessarily the issue of popularity that makes Carver an important figure for the film, but rather the fact that Riggan’s adaptation illustrates, or exemplifies, broader questions about the inherent authenticity of certain art forms.

I will continue to develop this idea throughout the rest of this chapter, but for now I will counter Leaf and Prose by arguing that the film presents Riggan’s adaptation with such a strong level of ironized self-deprecation that it provides its own critical perspective. The most conspicuous moments of self-awareness are bound up in the conflict between Riggan and his co-actor, Mike Shiner, the mercurial and respected Broadway actor – an actor, therefore who has attained something of the artistic authenticity and longevity that Riggan is searching for – who joins Riggan’s play as a replacement for Ralph (Jeremy Shamos) the day before the first preview. Marching through the corridors of the St James’ Theatre with Jake (Zach Galifianakis), only moments after Ralph’s stage light accident, Riggan attempts to justify his decision to search for a substitute. ‘That guy’s the worst actor I’ve ever seen in my life,’ he says of Ralph. ‘The blood coming out of his ear was the most honest thing he’s done so far.’ Prone to

331 Prose, ‘A Nightmare on Broadway’.
332 There are a number of smaller, subtle criticisms of Riggan’s production that are worth highlighting. When Jake, Riggan’s manager, questions the cost of Mike’s contract he says to Riggan, ‘The reserve is gone. We spent it on the fog and those fake trees.’ Riggan, who responds with the immediacy and enthusiasm of someone so obviously blinded by his own artistic vision, justifies the expenditure by saying, ‘It’s a dream sequence, Jake!’ One need only know a little of Carver’s aesthetic to realise that Riggan’s dream sequence is a farcical addition. This point is reinforced later by Laura who, just before the same dream sequence, remarks to Riggan (as actors dressed in white with branches for head pieces waltz on the stage in dry-ice) ‘When I imagined myself on Broadway, I never saw the dancing reindeer. Nice touch.’ This is the point it seems: Riggan is ignorant of the flaws in his adaptation, but this is played out in the film with the viewer (and many of the characters) being fully aware of it.
333 Ralph has to leave the production after a stage light falls on his head during rehearsal. The moment is suitably ironized, as Ralph cries out Mel’s line, ‘Son of a bitch, your days are numbered!’ the light falls and knocks him to the ground.
mimicry and imitation, Ralph’s portrayal of Mel McGinnis was not grounded in the methodical verisimilitude that Riggan requires for his production. Unceremonious in his attempt to find a better actor – that is, someone capable of communicating a sense of truth – Riggan rather miraculously finds a replacement in Mike, who Lesley (Naomi Watts) reveals has recently become unattached to his current project. His surreptitious departure (‘Quit of fired, which is it?’ Riggan asks Lesley. ‘Well with Mike it’s usually both,’ she replies) ought to have indicated Mike’s disruptive nature, but buoyed by his joint commercial and critical appeal (‘He sells a shit load of tickets,’ Jake argues. ‘They [critics] want to spooge on him’) Jake begins contract negotiations with Mike’s agent. Compared with Ralph, Mike initially appears capable of providing a performance filled with the realism that, up until that point, had been missing from Riggan’s play. Impressed after just one reading, Riggan tries to justify Mike’s salary demand to Jake by describing him as ‘the real deal.’ The exact definition of Riggan’s riposte is not entirely clear, but Mike’s ‘real’ acting comes at a price – a point that is not entirely serendipitous, denoting underlying inconsistencies in Mike’s claims of integrity – and it is four times more expensive than Ralph’s dishonesty.

If Riggan is first introduced in his dressing room (the traditional haunt of the Hollywood A-lister) then it is appropriate that the critically respected method actor is introduced on the theatre stage. Lit side-on by a bare light bulb, Mike’s trilby, scarf and woollen jacket depict a menacing silhouette. Riggan’s excitement at the prospect of working with Mike is hardly mutual, and their first meeting binds a conspicuous self-awareness alongside a critical position towards Riggan’s play. ‘Do you have any idea who walked on these boards before you?’ Mike asks before continuing without waiting for a reply, ‘Geraldine Page, Marlon Brando, Helen Hayes, Jason Robards, and now you, Riggan Thomson.’ The association is presented with a deliberately derisory tone. Could Riggan Thomson, the one-time ‘Hollywood clown in a Lycra jumpsuit’ really be antecedently connected to Page, Brando, Hayes and Robards? The answer, found in the subtext of Mike’s next line, is clear, ‘So, you wrote this adaptation. And you’re directing and starring in the adaptation. Ambitious.’ The dramaturgical reference works within the context of the film because all four actors, who are historically
respected for their theatre acting, made the successful transition to the Hollywood backlot. (In fact, it is probably generally accepted that they stand-in for a time when Hollywood was still concerned with creating what Riggan would think of as serious art.) Riggan, of course, embodies a reversal of sorts, for he is seeking artistic longevity and authenticity in the theatre, a deliberate move away from the commerciality of the contemporary Hollywood film franchise. *Birdman* makes a major point out of this distinction. Mike later tells Riggan that the play is a risk-free endeavour for him because if it fails he can simply go back to his ‘studio executive pals’ and continue to commit ‘cultural genocide’. He, on the other hand, so Mike argues, will always be out on the stage ‘baring his soul’. The question at stake, it seems, is this: what kinds of art are inherently more authentic? Riggan’s move from Hollywood studio to Broadway theatre can easily be read as an attempt at artistic regeneration; although the film makes the point that the very possibility of artistic success is entirely conditional on critical approval. While Riggan’s production has proved a particularly taxing project, critical approval, it seems, is even harder to muster. At one point in the film Tabitha Dickenson (Lindsay Duncan), the theatre critic from *The New York Times*, tells Riggan, ‘You don’t get to come in here and pretend that you can write, direct and act in your own propaganda piece without coming through me first – so, break a leg.’ Before adding, ‘You’re no actor. Let’s be clear on that. I’m going to kill your play.’

The conflict between Hollywood and Broadway, or surface and serious, is multifaceted and is more broadly reflected in the external make-up of the film. Iñárritu’s directorial career, which started with Spanish language and independent features – films that may pragmatically be referred to as serious art – has more recently moved towards more commercially viable, Hollywood production company funded feature films. *Birdman*, which was funded by three production companies – Fox Searchlight, New Regency and Worldview Entertainment – was designed as a low-cost, and therefore low risk, project for Iñárritu to direct while waiting for timetabling conflicts to be resolved on the much larger production, *The Revenant*.334 But Iñárritu

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334 For more on the funding of *Birdman* see ‘The Q&A with Jeff Goldsmith’. There were two main delays in filming *The Revenant*. The first was that Leonardo DiCaprio, the film’s principal actor, was already
and his fellow co-writers and producers still struggled to find the fairly modest $18 million needed to finance *Birdman*. The key, it seems, lay in a combination of casting, a short shooting schedule and a fast post-production period. It took Iñárritu and his producers eight months to gather all the financing, which meant that by the time they had the money in place they were ready to begin production. While the simulated long take style that Iñárritu was planning to use was an artistic risk it meant that if it worked there would not be much need for months of post-production editing, and the planned twenty-nine day shoot meant that there was little chance of the budget spiralling out of control. Perhaps most importantly, the ability to produce the film in this short timetabling window meant that *Birdman* could be released in the US in November 2014, just in time for the Oscar nominations. But above all of this and of most value, it seems, was the cast. Before the financing was finalized, Michael Keaton and Emma Stone were already committed. Edward Norton was soon added, as were Naomi Watts and Zach Galifianakis.\(^{335}\)

The ensemble – all of whom are well-known in the Hollywood film industry – buoyed by the collaboration of cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki – who had won an Oscar for his work on Cuarón’s *Gravity* (2013) the previous year – provided the film with a suitable amount of investment potential. Add to this the media interest surrounding the meta associations of casting Keaton as the film’s protagonist and Iñárritu’s project quickly garnered commercial and critical attention. All of which denotes more broadly that the value of the film is not found so much in its identity as a serious piece of art – that is, Iñárritu’s direction or the writers’ screenplay – but rather in its box office appeal, its investment potential, and its Hollywood cast.

And yet – to add another layer – the production of *Birdman*, and the financial associations connected to it, is itself a topic ironized in the film. More subtle evidence is found in Riggan’s own difficulties in financing his production – he has to re-mortgage his Malibu

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\(^{335}\) Thompson, ‘How *Birdman* Got Made’. 

*filming Martin Scorsese’s *The Wolf of Wall Street*, and the second was that Iñárritu wanted to shoot his film chronologically through the winter and so had to wait until autumn to begin filming. Fox Searchlight were the first production company to look at the script for *Birdman* but decided it was over their budget. New Regency also saw the script and decided the same thing. Both companies had already worked on *12 Years a Slave* the previous year, and with New Regency already committed to working on *The Revenant*, both decided to partner to finance *Birdman*. See, Anne Thompson, ‘How *Birdman* Got Made: Fox Searchlight and New Regency Partners Tell All’, *Indiewire*, 21 October 2014 <http://www.indiewire.com/2014/10/how-birdman-got-made-fox-searchlight-and-new-regency-partners-tell-all-keaton-norton-stone-videos-190522/> [accessed 23 May 2017]
beach house to pay for Mike’s contract – whereas more conspicuous evidence is found in the film’s meta self-referencing. After Ralph is hit in the head during rehearsal by a falling stage light at the beginning of the film, Riggan begins an immediate hunt for his replacement. Talking with Jake about the issue, their dialogue slips into the hinterland between fiction and reality:

RIGGAN
Just find me an actor, a good actor. Give me Woody Harrelson

JAKE
He’s doing the next Hunger Games

RIGGAN
Michael Fassbender?

JAKE
He’s doing the prequel to the X-Men prequel

RIGGAN
How about Jeremy Renner?

JAKE
Who?

RIGGAN
Jeremy Renner, he was nominated, he was The Hurt Locker guy

JAKE
He’s an Avenger

RIGGAN
Fuck! They put him in a cape too

The point of the exchange is unmistakable and rather unsubtle. ‘They’ refers to the Hollywood Studio Executives who are perpetrating, in Mike’s words, ‘cultural genocide’. The cape, of course, is a constant reminder that it was the commercial success of Riggan’s own fictional Birdman Trilogy that made him the instigator for the present trend of superhero mania in the Hollywood film industry – a fact that now fills Riggan with guilt and drives him to attempt his latest artistic endeavour. The irony of this line of critique (the in-joke we might say) is that the

336 Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance), scr. by Alejandro G. Iñárritu, Nicolás Giacobone, Alexander Dinelaris, Jr. Armando Bo (Dinosaur Out, 2013), p. 8. Subsequent references to the screenplay will be given as page numbers in parentheses after the quotation in the text. It is worth noting that the film’s dialogue is often energetic and brisk and so for this reason I have chosen, where appropriate, to quote from the screenplay.
cast of Iñárritu’s *Birdman* have found themselves, at one point or another, invested in a major superhero franchise: Michael Keaton in Tim Burton’s *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992), Edward Norton as Bruce Banner in *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), Emma Stone in *The Amazing Spiderman* (2012) and Naomi Watts in Peter Jackson’s *King Kong* (2005). This may, of course, be seen as presenting a rather problematic, even hypocritical, relationship between those starring in the film and the film’s critique, but the issue is ironized to such an extreme degree that the exaggerated feel fits the canny satire that Iñárritu is attempting to produce. One critic summarises the situation by arguing that ‘the movie functions as a commentary on its own melodramatic excesses’, a point reinforced by one of the film’s producers who says, ‘You can’t not look at the casting of Michael Keaton as a former superhero’. In fact, the making-of documentary released with the film’s DVD reveals that the film revolves around this meta association. Iñárritu says that he convinced Norton to join the project by telling him that he was only going to make the film if Keaton was involved. In one prescient moment backstage, Keaton, who is wearing the Birdman costume for rehearsal, reveals to Iñárritu that the costume designer has just told him that they based the design on Keaton’s original Batman mannequin, and with a smile says, ‘Still fits’. In the film, the reoccurring object of derision is Robert Downey Jr. (Iron Man), an actor who, according to Riggan’s alter ego, is making ‘a fortune in that tin man get up.’ Twenty-three years before the production of *Birdman*, Downey Jr. inhabited Carver’s fictional world when he played Bill Bush, the male protagonist in Robert Altman’s adaptation of Carver’s story ‘Neighbours’ in *Short Cuts*.

**Revision, Opposition, Appropriation: Mike’s Radical Carver**

Carver’s influence on Iñárritu’s film, then, appears to be less direct than that on McInerney and Murakami. While both authors found Carver’s influence particularly enabling for negotiating the neoliberal era, my initial assessment of Iñárritu’s film suggests that he treats Carver’s legacy with a deliberate irony that indicates certain limitations to its capacity. In order to develop this

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idea I want to consider three key scenes in which Mike tests or challenges Riggan’s belief in Carver with his own, very different portrayal.

Mike’s hostility towards Riggan is presented in a progressive manner through a number of important scenes in the film. The first (part of which I have already considered) occurs during their initial meeting on the theatre stage after Mike suggests that they rehearse a scene from the play. Uncertain that Mike will be able to rehearse without a copy of the script, but provoked by Mike’s insistence, Riggan launches into his dialogue:

**RIGGAN**
‘I’m the wrong person to ask. I didn’t know the man. I’ve only heard his name mentioned in passing. I wouldn’t know. You’d have to know the particulars. But I think what you’re saying is that love is absolute.’

Mike stares at Riggan, hyper-focused.

**MIKE**
(Ruminating.)
Am I saying that love is absolute?
(He transforms.)
‘Yeah. The kind of love I’m talking about is. The kind of love I’m talking about you—’
(An intense pause.)
*Well, you don’t try to kill people* (p. 19).

Mike’s performance, even in this impromptu rehearsal, contrasts starkly with his predecessor’s. Ralph’s version of Mel was contrived, factitious even, distinctly separate from the required method that Riggan is searching for in his direction. Mike’s performance, on the other hand, appears spontaneous. This impression comes as much from Mike’s process as it does from his actions. Only following Riggan’s script after he has cross-examined his character’s motivation, his question, ‘Am I saying that love is absolute?’, is not only rhetorical, it is a genuine focused internalization that reveals his methodology: he is becoming Mel McGinnis. Of course, seen within the cynical tone of the film, we must remain sceptical of Mike’s characterisation. If Riggan can be taken as an ironized version of a failed Hollywood actor attempting to resurrect his career, then Mike appears to be an ironized version of the American method actor. In fact,
Mike fits this mould so well it is hard not to see something more significant in Iñárritu’s causticity. For the film depicts, as I will argue later, a strong correlation between Mike’s extreme methodology and the broader debate surrounding authenticity in art.

For now, though, it is enough to note that Mike’s minor critique, and the subsequent interaction, reveals a more rigorous textual questioning and an astute critical objective. After suggesting they rehearse the scene again, Mike interrupts Riggan’s speech and begins to challenge Riggan’s adaptation:

Can I make a suggestion? Do you mind? Forget that, just stay with me. ‘I’m the wrong person to ask’, he says, but what is that? What’s the intention in that? Is he fed up with the subject, so he’s changing it? Is he deflecting guilt over the marriage? And here’s the thing, you got four lines after that, that all say the same thing: ‘I didn’t even know the man.’ ‘I’ve only heard his name mentioned in passing.’ ‘I wouldn’t know.’ ‘You’d have to know the particulars.’ And the particulars, I mean, it sounds like my grandmother, but the point is, you don’t know the guy, we fucking get it, make it work with one line: ‘I didn’t even know the man’, right?

What is particularly significant about this editorial session, however, is that the section that Mike insists on breaking up and analysing is taken, verbatim, from Carver’s story. When Mike accuses Riggan of tautology, he is by association, accusing Carver too. If Riggan can be excused for irreverently treating Carver’s text through ignorance, then Mike’s criticism is more intentional. The moment is conflicted and multivalent. On the one hand, Mike is pursuing Carver’s own minimalist line. While on the other, Mike’s appeal to ‘cut it down’, in a story that has already been dramatically curtailed by Lish, is a conspicuous assault on Carver’s text.

This first critical antagonism is followed by other, more explicit, interventions later in the film. The following night Mike disrupts the play’s first preview when – drunk because he has been drinking real gin rather than the water provided by the prop team – he interrupts Riggan’s anecdote of the elderly couple. Performing at the front of the stage, with the kitchen set in the background, Riggan addresses his central monologue towards the audience. Non-diegetic orchestral music begins to crescendo, as the handheld Steadicam swings around him in
a low-to-high spiral until it is level with his face. The dramatic cinematography can only be a
mirror of Riggan’s own exaggerated adaptation, which takes the anecdote from its subtle
domestic setting and presents it, quite literally, front of stage. Mirroring Riggan’s dynamic
levels, Mike begins to mutter at the back of stage, until just as Riggan is about to conclude his
monologue and reveal the archetype of true love – the defining centrepiece of the play – he
hurls his glass against the wall and interrupts him:

RIGGAN
Take it easy. You’re drunk

MIKE
Of course I’m drunk! I’m supposed to be drunk! This is Carver, man! The guy lost a piece of liver every time he wrote a page! If I’m supposed to drink gin then bring me fuckin gin! I mean, you fucked with the time period! You took all the good lines for yourself! At least let me—

The audience is now hysterical. Dozens of cell phones pointing at the stage. Mike walks toward the apron, facing the audience.

MIKE
Oh, okay. Seriously? You people are pathetic. Put the cell phones down and join the real world! Will somebody please just live in the real world?!! (p. 33).338

If Mike’s first intervention is defined by his revision of Carver’s text, then his second intervention is notable for his opposition to Riggan’s interpretation of Carver. On a diegetic level, Mike’s disruption is the result of Riggan replacing his gin with water, which is an assault on his methodological approach (‘If I need to be drinking gin, who the fuck are you to touch me

338 In the film, Mike’s tirade towards the audience is changed slightly but significantly to:
Oh, come on people, don’t be so pathetic. Stop looking at the world through your cell phone screens, have a real experience. Does anybody give a shit about truth other than me? I mean this set is fake, the bananas are fake, there’s fucking nothing in this milk carton, you’re performance is fake, the only thing that is real on this stage is this chicken, so I’m going to work with the chicken.
As if to top off the irony, as Mike eats the chicken and Riggan walks off the stage, Mike shouts out, ‘Hey! This is good bird, man.’
gin, man?’ he says in the film) but his outburst also reveals an underlying opposition. Whereas Riggan idolises Carver for his enduring artistic principles, Mike’s definitive statement that he is ‘supposed to be drunk’ because ‘this is Carver’ reveals that he values Carver because it reflects the historical experience that created it. That is, that Carver was an alcoholic; who wrote about other alcoholics; that he sacrificed his own body for the sake of his art – ‘He lost a piece of his liver every time he wrote a page!’.

Of course, Carver’s alcoholism is well documented, not least by himself and those closest to him, and it has become a core strand, as I have already argued, in the popular understanding of who Carver was – even though later in his life Carver pointedly marked the distinction between his art and his addiction.

The propagation of this Carver myth, as I have already noted in relation to the composition of ‘What We Talk About When We Talk About Love’, is plainly not true. But if Mike’s opinion can so easily be debunked, what, then, is the point of Iñárritu utilising it? My proposition is that Mike’s accusation is connected less with his idea of Carver (although this is certainly part of it) and more closely connected with ideas of what it means to be a truthful and authentic artist in the neoliberal era. This idea, then, is important to note, recalls Riggan’s central mantra in the film, ‘A thing is a thing, not what is said of that thing’. For Mike’s extreme methodology is a deliberate blurring between his on-stage and off-stage persona – between fiction and reality – a distinction that, as we will come to see later in this chapter, Riggan is constantly attempting to mark and define in order to ascertain some level of artistic longevity. This opposition is cemented only minutes later in the film when the pair debate the play in the Rum House. Riggan argues that the play ought to be a serious drama because it is an adaptation of Carver – the implication being that Carver was a serious artist who wrote about serious and meaningful things.

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339 This point is underlined by Mike’s caricature as an American method actor. This very scene is a parody, for example, of the Stanislavski System of acting. Mike can only exhibit what he sees as a truthful performance through an external activity (drinking real gin) that in turn creates real emotion (being drunk) in order to engender authentic experience. By association, we might argue that Mike views Carver as the literary equivalent; that he too was reliant on an external activity (his alcoholism) in order to create real emotion and authenticity in his writing. See, Konstantin Stanislavski, An Actor’s Work (London: Routledge, 2009).

things – whereas Mike argues, ‘You don’t know what this play is. These are previews. This is where we find out what the play is.’ Mike’s inflection rests, not on the transcendent nature of Carver’s text, but rather on the performance; that the actors will discover the meaning of the play through the very act of playing it. 341

The climax to their opposition occurs halfway through the film when Riggan reads Mike’s interview on the front page of The New York Times’ Arts Section. The headline declares, ‘Carving Out His Place In Theatre History: Shiner says Raymond Carver is the reason he became an actor’. History, again, plays a vital role in validating the experience of the present, this time though (the audience knows because they have been privy to Riggan and Mike’s earlier conversation in the Rum House) in a fallacious manner. For Mike, a method actor who purports to uphold truth, has stolen and manipulated Riggan’s backstory, in turn appropriating Carver’s reputation, and used it to propagate a myth about his own artistic ambitions. Mike’s plagiarism is the turning point for Riggan and marks the symbolic transition towards his psychological breakdown. He rolls up the newspaper – a rare moment of dominance over media in the film – and storms out of his dressing room to find Mike. Marching through the maze of corridors, Sanchez’s erratic drum score becomes more prominent and more chaotic. Riggan bursts into Mike’s dressing room, throws open the sunbed he is lying on (bought under the pretence that Mike needs a tan because his character is a ‘red neck’) and begins to attack him with the rolled up paper. Wearing nothing but a pair of grey camouflage briefs, Mike gets up. In his right hand he conspicuously holds a copy of Borges’s Labyrinths, and the pair begin to argue:

RIGGAN
So, Carver is the reason you became an actor?

MIKE
What?

341 Interestingly this idea is not unlike that presented by Gardner in On Moral Fiction when he posits that ‘Art, in sworn opposition to chaos, discovers by its process what it can say. That is art’s morality’ (p. 14). As I pointed out earlier in this thesis, Carver picked up on these words in ‘John Gardner: The Writer as Teacher’ when he wrote, ‘It was a basic tenet of his [Gardner] that a writer found what he wanted to say in the ongoing process of seeing what he’d said’ (Call If You Need Me, p. 110). In a roundabout way, this premise is associated with the ideal of craftsmanship, in that it denotes the importance of perseverance, skill and objectivity.
RIGGAN
This is my play! I did the work. I raised the money. I arrange the press.

MIKE
They called me for an interview. I said—I don’t know, I said the first thing that came to mind. Jesus, we got the cover of the Arts section!

RIGGAN
You said the first—Fuck the Arts section. The first thing that came to mind? Right. Cause that’s you. Mr. Natural. Mr. Fuck the scene, just stare at my massive hard-on Because that’s the truth of the moment.

MIKE
You think it looked massive?

RIGGAN
Shut up. Shut the fuck up. You don’t get hard on my stage unless I tell you to.

MIKE
Your stage? This stage belonged to a lot of great actors, pal. But you are not one of them.

Mike storms out of the room. Riggan follows him into the hallway. He slaps Mike on his sun burned back.

RIGGAN
So, you wrote your own lines?

He slaps him again.

MIKE
Ow. Fuck. Yes I did.

RIGGAN
You changed a few words, and mumbled a little, you self absorbed prick.

MIKE
Look who’s talking…

RIGGAN
Let me tell you something, you spiteful nobody piece of shit.

MIKE
Nobody? My hard-on already has fifty thousand views on YouTube.
RIGGAN
Fifty thousand views? A cat playing with a dildo has more than that.

MIKE
I don’t care.

RIGGAN
Yes you do.
(Beat.)
Everybody says: ‘Mike is so honest’. (Smacks him.) ‘So truthful’. (Smacks him again.)

MIKE
(Like a child.)
Ouch. Fuuuuuuck. Cut the shit! (pp. 67-8).

The first thing worth mentioning in discussing the significance of this scene is that Iñárritu positions it within the context of a broader debate about what being truthful – or, perhaps more appropriately, authentic – really means. In this regard it is highly significant that Mike and Riggan’s fight unfolds with Mike holding a copy of Borges’s story collection. It is not a large leap to suggest that, in this context, Borges acts as a signpost to ideas of illusion and surface. Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra, for instance, plays on its own reference to Borges’s story ‘On Exactitude in Science’. Baudrillard argues that contemporary experience is not simply understood as a double or mirroring of reality, but has progressed further to be based on the ‘generation of models of a real without origin or reality’. In many ways, then, Mike embodies this type of contemporary experience. Earlier, during one of the previews, as Mike and Lesley

342 Borges’s short, one paragraph fable retells the story of an unspecified Empire in which ‘the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City’. Not content with that scale of representation, later cartographers designed a map to the exact dimensions of the empire. Subsequent generations, who lost interest in the study of cartography, viewed the map as useless and abandoned it to the wastelands. ‘In the Deserts of the West’, Borges concludes, ‘there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars’. In Simulacra and Simulation Baudrillard opens by writing:

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 those of the Empire, but our own. The desert of the real itself.

prepare for the motel sex scene, Mike reveals that he is aroused and suggests that they, ‘really do it,’ justifying his idea by saying, ‘It’ll be so real’. Attempting to resist, Lesley pleads with Mike to stop. ‘Don’t call me Mike. Call me Mel. Mel,’ he insists. Interrupted by Riggan’s character, Lesley manages to free herself, and when Mike stands up his erection is prominent. Off-stage the couple fight about the incident. ‘I needed it to be real,’ Mike insists again after Lesley reveals, ‘You can’t get it up in six months and now you want to fuck me in front of eight hundred strangers!’ For Mike, reality only exists on the stage set of a Broadway theatre. It is only when Riggan reads Mike’s interview in *The New York Times* that he begins to understand the flaw in Mike’s pronouncements on methodological truth. For Mike all reality has collapsed into the world of simulation and any distinction between reality and representation is blurred.

This is, I think, the reason why Mike feels he has the freedom to appropriate Riggan’s backstory for himself. Eventually Riggan manages to get Mike in a headlock and says in his ear, ‘You’re a fake! You’re a fake!’ Mike’s inability to distinguish between on-stage and off-stage reality, his fictionalised past and his penchant for virtual spectacle undermine Mike’s claim of artistic authenticity.

The fight between Mike and Riggan, then, begins to unpack the oppositions in some of these ideas. Unconvinced by Mike’s justification for the article, Riggan perceptively highlights the contradiction between Mike’s pronouncements on truth and his actions. Mike’s response, in turn, reveals where *his* loyalties lie. ‘My hard-on already has fifty thousand views on YouTube,’ he says, revealing a solipsistic rationale that denotes his partiality for virtual admiration. It is worth dwelling on this contradiction, not only because Mike’s off-stage persona is antithetical to his earlier on-stage pronouncements, but because the virtual space to which he aligns himself typically dominates the neoliberal era, and is often a space in which reality (or truth) is replaced by image and illusion. The proliferation of references to social media is a notable feature of Iñárritu’s film and, as I suggested earlier on in this chapter, not only connects *Birdman* to the

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343 This idea is reinforced later when Mike plays a game of truth or dare with Sam and she asks him if he wants to fool around with her. ‘No,’ Mike replies, ‘I’d be afraid I couldn’t get it up.’ ‘That didn’t seem to be a problem for you on stage,’ Sam says, before Mike reveals the underlying issue, ‘Nothing’s a problem for me on stage.’
themes of Iñárritu’s early trilogy, but is also an example of the specific personal impact of the embeddedness of capital in life in neoliberalism. This is an idea that needs to be contextualised alongside broader socioeconomic critiques. Writing recently, David Harvey explores this new form of commodification that he terms ‘spectacle’:

Everything from TV shows and other media products, films, concerts, exhibitions, sports events, mega-cultural events and, of course, tourism is included in this. These activities now dominate the field of consumerism. Even more interesting is how capital mobilises consumers to produce their own spectacle via YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and other forms of social media. All of these forms can be instantaneously consumed even as they absorb vast amounts of what might otherwise be free time. The consumers, furthermore, produce information, which is then appropriated by owners of the media for their own purposes.344

We might apply Harvey’s analysis more widely to the integration between virtual commodification and the absolute space of real life. In an era in which virtual identities are constantly created or re-created, where relationships are only official if they are confirmed in the virtual arena, and where, at a click of mouse, friends can be requested, accepted, or deleted, it is hard to imagine – for many individuals – life outside this virtual reality. As a filmmaker who is very much aware of the neoliberal boundaries in which he is working, Iñárritu’s film naturally reflects something of these concerns. When Riggan and Sam argue over Riggan’s motivation for producing the play, Sam says:

Let’s face it, Dad, it’s not for the sake of art. It’s because you just want to feel relevant again. Well, there’s a whole world out there where people fight to be relevant every day. And you act like it doesn’t even exist! Things are happening in a place that you wilfully ignore, a place that has already forgotten you. I mean who are you? You hate bloggers. You make fun of Twitter. You don’t even have a Facebook page. You’re the one who doesn’t exist.

Delivered with deliberate exaggeration, Sam’s rebuke, taken within the wider context of the film, can only be read as a subversive critique of the integration between virtual and absolute space. Of course Riggan ‘exists’. It would be, and is, nonsensical to suggest otherwise, but Sam’s assertion is tantamount to the neoliberal experience in which everything is subsumed by the ideological and economic status quo; where existence is focused on the spectacle. Later, as if to cement this idea, Riggan is locked outside the theatre in his underwear and forced to walk unceremoniously through a packed Times Square. As he ducks and dodges through what is surely the most conspicuous example of mass-commodification and commercialisation in New York City, and as he attempts to avoid the crowds of tourists – who are there to see this ‘spectacle’ of advertising – the crowd’s attention turns from the advertising arena to Riggan, and his movements are filmed on a plethora of mobile phones. The footage is soon posted to YouTube and, as if to prove Sam’s point, Riggan quickly becomes an online sensation (or a commodified spectacle in Harvey’s terms). When she shows him the footage and tells him that he is becoming a ‘trending topic’, she declares, ‘Believe it or not, this is power.’ The images are quickly deemed newsworthy and appear on television. It is an interesting twist when the news anchors deride Riggan for creating this ‘spectacle’, saying, ‘Why do actors have to resort to this? Come on, just put out a good film’, so used are they to the artifice of social media that they now severely misread this real event as an illusion.

**Surface, Ephemerality and Riggan’s Alter Ego**

Iñárritu, it seems, uses Riggan and Mike – and their opinions on Carver – to explore the nature of truth and authenticity in the neoliberal era. And yet their ideas on truth and authenticity are undermined by the film’s ironic tone to such an extent that Iñárritu seems to be suggesting that neither characters’ beliefs embody a solution to the intense commodification and superficiality of art in recent years. Carver, as both a cultural figure and artist, is caught somewhere in the middle, and, in the film, neither his representation as a transcendental touchstone by Riggan or an authentic artist by Mike posit a valid response either. While for McInerney and Murakami, Carver becomes a model or figure by which they can negotiate – through a retreat towards
craftsmanship – neoliberal culture, for Iñárritu, Carver’s influence is rather more ambiguous. In order to fully grasp why Iñárritu positions Carver in this way I want to conclude by taking a closer look at the fractious relationship between Riggan and his Birdman alter ego.

Present at the very beginning through his voiceover, and remaining until the film’s conclusion, Riggan’s alter ego is a notable addition to the film’s aesthetic. The physical embodiment of Birdman, he is the character that launched his career, and the character that, both artistically and psychologically, forever plagues him. Nothing, it seems can quell the persistent menacing nagging that the voiceover comes to represent. In one significant scene early in the film Riggan attempts to hide a Birdman poster given to him as a gift from the play’s crew. He takes the poster off his dressing room wall and walks around the room with it. Neither his bathroom nor his closest is big enough to hide the oversized image, and it spends the rest of the film half-hidden behind the settee, its head poking quite noticeably out the side, reminding Riggan (and the viewer) of its omnipresence. If Riggan’s three by five motto is designed to pull him towards what he sees as a world of Carveresque longevity, then his alter ego pulls him in the opposite direction. It is at moments of particular psychological weakness that Riggan is tempted to appropriate his Birdman superpowers and slip into a phantasmagoric reality.

Riggan’s alter ego then is firmly associated with the superficiality and illusion that Iñárritu sees in neoliberal Hollywood productions and operates as a kind of psychological accuser who tempts him back to his commercial past. The internal dialogues that Riggan and his alter ego have throughout the film demonstrate the difficulty that Birdman poses for Riggan. He undermines the validity of Riggan’s current artistic endeavour (in the film he says, ‘You destroyed a genius book with that infantile adaptation’), and also tempts him with his past commercial success (‘You were a movie star, remember?’), and even challenges his future being by asserting his immutable existence (‘It’s always “we” brother’). As hard as he tries,

345 An idea reinforced by the fact that the actor who plays Birdman is uncredited and Iñárritu’s more explicit critique of contemporary Hollywood cinema, which he describes as producing ‘films that don’t mean nothing […] they are just full of explosions and special effects and the superhero in a way is an illusion that doesn’t exist’. See, Preston Barta, ‘Interview: Director Alejandro González Iñárritu unmasks the Birdman’, North Texas Daily, 23 October 2014 <http://ntdaily.com/interview-director-alejandro-gonzalez-inarritu-unmasks-the-birdman> [accessed 23 May 2017]
then, Riggan cannot detach himself from the presence of his debilitating alter ego. The weak repetitive mantra that he mutters to himself when he appears (‘Ignore this mental formation, this is a mental formation’) seems to have little effect, and his three-by-five motto, while providing him with a distraction in the form of the play, does not afford, as Birdman’s persistent presence demonstrates, a consistent enough response.

One suggestion that the film posits, however, is that if Riggan’s play can somehow gain critical success then the resulting artistic longevity and posterity would supersede the ephemerality of his early career. And while this solution is not entirely unproblematic – for, remember that Riggan is inclined to confuse love for admiration – the key to his success appears to lie with *The New York Times* theatre critic Tabitha Dickenson. Unfortunately for Riggan, Tabitha holds a very clear distinction between the ‘serious’ art of the theatre stage and the ‘superficial’ art of the Hollywood studio. Riggan, an actor yoked through his Birdman alter ego to the latter, accordingly has no place in the former. When they meet in the Rum House, Tabitha outlines her view of Riggan’s play:

> I haven’t read a word of it, or even seen a preview, but after the opening tomorrow I’m going to turn in the worst review anybody has ever read. And I’m going to close your play. Would you like to know why? Because I hate you, and everyone you represent. Entitled, selfish, spoiled children. Blissfully untrained, unversed and unprepared to even attempt real art. Handing each other awards for cartoons and pornography. Measuring your worth in weekends. Well, this is the theatre, and you don’t get to come in here and pretend you can write, direct and act in your own propaganda piece without coming through me first. So, break a leg.

Tabitha’s vitriolic attack on Riggan’s past is the most overt critique of the Hollywood film industry in *Birdman*. In positioning Tabitha in this way Iñárritu places his film somewhere on the precipice between what one critic has described as ‘justifiable cynicism’ and ‘idealism’, and while of course, we can easily level Tabitha’s critique at Iñárritu himself – whose own films oftentimes reflect that very film industry that he is attempting to criticise – there needs to be, at
this point, a certain amount of self-scepticism granted towards Tabitha’s comments.346 As Francine Prose suggests quite appropriately, for this part of Birdman to be read correctly there needs to be a certain level of understanding on the part of the audience, for one of the risks that Iñárritu takes with the film, is to assume that the audience are ‘smart, savvy viewers who can at once appreciate – and see beyond and beneath – its innovative technique, its nested ironies, and its knowing in-jokes’. 347 The question remains, then, how can Riggan – a man who confuses love for admiration – overcome Tabitha’s scepticism and perform a piece of art worthy of artistic posterity, in turn silencing the superficiality of his Hollywood alter ego? The answer, unsurprisingly, is not exactly straightforward.

A relatively detailed look at the film’s finale will help clarify a number of these issues and draw a final conclusion. It begins on the play’s opening night. The extraordinary failures of the previews have drawn a large crowd to the theatre, ready for whatever spectacle might confront them. Iñárritu enacts a large temporal compression as day turns to night outside the theatre and the audience emerges during the intermission. The camera zooms through Riggan’s dressing room window where he is lying on his dressing table. His ex-wife, Sylvia, enters and the pair finally reconcile, at which point Riggan admits to hearing the voice of his alter ego, as well as a previous suicide attempt when they broke up. Offering little verbal solace, Sylvia kisses Riggan in a moment that seems both lasting and meaningful, and suggests that Iñárritu sees some possibility for love and community amongst the chaos and surface of neoliberalism – even if the act is equivocated by Riggan’s subsequent actions. Sylvia leaves and Riggan pulls a gun from a shelf and checks it is loaded. In the bottom corner of the shot is his motto (the last time we see it in the film), apparently ineffective at stopping what he is about to attempt. As he leaves to make his way to the stage, he telekinetically opens the dressing room door in time with Sanchez’s drum score. The combination of the real gun, his willingness to use his superpowers


347 Prose, ‘A Nightmare on Broadway’.
and the music deliberately builds the film towards its climax, and recalls an earlier proposal by Riggan’s alter ego to finish with a grand, sacrificial gesture. Riggan refuses the blood rig and walks onto the stage. Now playing Ed (a disturbed character who suitably fits the psychological distress that Riggan is experiencing) he appeals to Terri, in a speech which might easily be addressed to his daughter, his ex-wife or even his alter ego, and which therefore conclusively shows the bleeding of the play’s fictional on-stage reality into Riggan’s off-stage reality.

‘What’s wrong with me?’ Riggan says. ‘Why do I end up having to beg people to love me?’ Before continuing, ‘I just wanted to be what you wanted. Now I spend every fucking minute praying to be someone else. Someone I’m not’. After pointing the gun at Mike, and then the crowd, Riggan eventually turns the gun on himself and shoots.

If his final act on stage was a suicide attempt then, like the suicide attempt by Ed in Carver’s story, it failed. The ironic twist is fully revealed later in the hospital when he looks in the mirror and Íñárritu reveals that he has only managed to shoot off his nose – his beak. The aftermath is played out in Riggan’s hospital room. Jake visits him and brings with him Tabitha’s review. Sylvia reads it aloud:

Thomson has unwittingly given birth to a new form that can only be described as super realism. Blood was spilt both literally and metaphorically by artist and audience alike, real blood, the blood that has been sorely missing from the veins of the American theatre.

Tabitha’s review reveals that Riggan has managed to gain some kind of artistic posterity. (Jake is ecstatic, ‘This play is going to last forever. It’s going to open in London and Paris and the studio’s going to call again and we’re going to get some book deals’.) Her review is cleverly assembled. Riggan’s ‘super realism’ – a label reminiscent of those given to Carver’s own fiction – deliberately blurs the distinction between onstage and offstage reality. While his interpretation of Carver was far from impressive, his final improvised performance – committed, of course, through what Íñárritu depicts as a kind of ignorance or innocence – has portrayed something of a true reality. This new reality – or super realism – is far from complete, and is certainly not perfect (consider the fact that it occurred during a suicide attempt), but it does seem to suggest
that Iñárritu thinks that it is possible to detach oneself from the influence of neoliberal ephemerality and create a piece of art which communicates some element of what might reasonably be called truth and authentic experience (although what that truth or experience is exactly is not defined by Iñárritu and certainly open to debate). In fact, this ultimately seems to be what Riggan’s adaptation was leading towards, and in turn denotes the importance of mirroring the characters in the play with their off-stage characterisation in the film. While Tabitha’s review, and the film’s subtitle, places a strong emphasis on this idea, it is still perhaps a little abstract and underdeveloped by Iñárritu in his film. It may be linked back to the pseudo-spiritual meditation portrayed in the very opening scene, but the suggestion is that in the process of letting go of his ego, Riggan is able to achieve a powerful performance of originality and reality.

Carver’s role in this process is, considering Riggan’s actions, rather equivocal. Iñárritu is far from disavowing Carver as a prescient model for neoliberal negotiation – he is still very much portrayed as an influential artistic figure in the film, after all – but the comprehensiveness of merely taking Carver’s work or life and transposing it into a neoliberal setting is undermined by the fact that Riggan only gains artistic success when he veers from Carver’s art. Carver’s influence is found more foundationally, and perhaps simply, therefore, in his poem ‘Late Fragment’, the epigraph that Iñárritu uses for his film. Soon after Jake reveals Tabitha’s review, Sam arrives and Riggan finally reconciles with his daughter. After Sam leaves momentarily, Riggan gets up and goes to the bathroom to remove his dressing. Next to him, reflected in the mirror, Birdman appears, sitting on the toilet. Riggan leaves, says, ‘Bye, bye and fuck you’, goes back into the room, opens the window, climbs onto the ledge and jumps out. Sam returns; unable to find her father, she runs to the open window. As the camera pulls away from her face out of the window, she looks up and smiles. This final moment is metaphorical. The suggestion, it appears, built on the foundation of Riggan’s artistic success and his filial reconciliation, is that Riggan’s ‘flight’ reflects the euphoric feeling of love that he senses from his daughter – an idea that neatly links with Carver’s poem, and his own sentiments at the end of his life:

And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?

I did.

And what did you want?

To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on the earth (All Of Us, p. 294).
Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore Carver’s afterlife within the socioeconomic context of the neoliberal turn by identifying individual writers and artists who claim Carver to be influential and who are also consciously working within countries or cultures that have recently made, or are in the process of making, this socioeconomic transition. My introduction argued that while Carver’s influence has been conventionally limited to what A.O. Scott calls ‘a briefly fashionable school of experimental fiction’, in recent years his writing has come to represent a ‘return’ to a more ‘real’ form of writing, one that, his advocates would argue, is more ‘authentic’ than other kinds of recent literature. This notion of authenticity is closely tied, I noted, to the idea that Carver’s fiction is, at some level, a response to his own working-class experience and is seen to be more broadly synecdochic of the socioeconomic struggles faced by many other individuals at the start of the neoliberal era.

Given the prevalence of this idea, and the aesthetic differences between Carver’s writing and those that claim him as an influence, this thesis argued that Carver’s afterlife is best viewed as being a social phenomenon – that is, one born out of the social relations, historical circumstances and economic forms that resulted from the US’s move from embedded liberalism to neoliberalism in the late 1970s. My introduction historicized this transition and argued that while Carver may have struggled to make productive sense of his socioeconomic situation, it affected his life in very pointed and particular ways, trapping him between the conventional American dream of individual freedom and equal opportunity and the reality of inequality and social immobility. For those impacted by Carver’s writing, therefore, his fiction came to represent a zone where the difference between hegemonic narratives and lived experience was explored and became a model of how to negotiate, for better or worse, the complex and shifting foundations of this political transition.

My introduction then moved on to argue that of equal importance was the fact that in his late-writing Carver represents a ‘retreat’ from the short-term, flexible, competition-based work present in the neoliberal labour market towards an artisanal form of craftsmanship as a
solution to the bewildering world that he saw around him. Through a series of short examples from Carver’s work, my introduction explored how this muted oppositional alternative was based on what Raymond Williams called residual values. While Carver’s alternative operates outside of the political realm, and is even particularly local to his situation, I argued that for those who are influenced by him, Carver’s texts become powerful stories that work beyond their initial historic and cultural moment and offer a distinctive site of resistance to the hegemonic norms of late-capitalism. In this way, then, Carver’s realist ‘authenticity’ combines with a consolatory craftsmanship that becomes a coping mechanism that offers others a way of navigating a world which seems to exceed the frame of conceptual mapping.

By working through a series of short case studies, followed by three central chapters on McInerney, Murakami and Iñárritu, this thesis has considered how this is the case in relation to a number of significant artists that claim Carver as an influence. The first chapter of this thesis historicized the relationship between Carver and McInerney in the early 1980s and argued that Carver’s example as a working writer pushed McInerney towards a more artisanal work ethic associated with craftsmanship. It also argued for a nexus based, in McInerney’s early work, on parataxis and contended that in his teaching, Carver passed on to McInerney ideas about literary realism – that he learnt from his own mentor John Gardner – that proved particularly enabling for McInerney’s novel Brightness Falls (1992). My second chapter similarly chronicled the relationship between Carver and Murakami and argued that Murakami saw in Carver’s fiction a specific humiliation for those caught between hegemonic narratives and lived experience that resonated with his own Japanese context. The chapter then argued that what many critics view as Carver’s reformed second-life fiction facilitated Murakami’s own unorthodox spiritual response to the twin national tragedies of the Kobe earthquake and Tokyo gas attack in Japan in 1995. My third chapter considered Carver’s afterlife from a slightly different angle and argued that while Iñárritu uses Carver as the foundation of Birdman (2014), the film is particularly interesting because it is itself a study of Carver’s afterlife. The chapter considered two opposing views of Carver, the first by Riggan Thomson, who views Carver’s fiction as having a particular transcendent longevity, and the second by Mike Shiner, who views Carver’s work as authentic
because it reflects Carver’s real-life experience. My final chapter argued that while there is merit in viewing Carver as an ‘authentic’ artist, the totality of that solution is ultimately more ambivalent than writers like McInerney or Murakami might initially suggest.

Despite the increasing centrality of the writers and artists studied in this thesis the critical literature for this area is relatively sparse. Therefore, as the only existing comprehensive study on Carver’s influence, this thesis provides an original contribution to knowledge and fills a gap in the critical literature on Carver. In my introduction I also noted that while previous attention has been given to the relationship between Carver’s work and his socioeconomic context, there has been none that explicitly analyses his writing and influence in connection with the neoliberal turn. This thesis additionally makes an original contribution to the historiography of Carver’s life in that it chronicles, in detail, his relationship with McInerney and Murakami, in particular. It has also utilised previously unused archival material from The Raymond Carver Papers, unearthing a number of insights that challenge existing narratives about Carver’s relationship with other writers and artists, and therefore shows methodological originality.

Nonetheless, this piece of research, like any, has its limitations. While The Raymond Carver Papers proved to be an invaluable research source, the available material is incomplete, and much of Carver’s early correspondence is either lost or unavailable. While chapter one considered something of Carver’s role in creative writing programmes, this thesis does not explore in detail Carver’s contribution, through either his teaching or the use of his texts as course material, to higher education more generally. It is worth noting that for those interested in tracing Carver’s influence beyond those studied in this thesis, this is an area worthy of close attention. In the case of Carver’s influence on Murakami, my research was limited by my inability to read Japanese, and so I was unable to conduct a thorough close reading of Murakami’s fiction in his native language. As such, my reading of Murakami’s fiction is, of course, reliant on the translation of his translators: Alfred Birnbaum, Jay Rubin, Philip Gabriel and Ted Goosen. Likewise, I was unable to access much of the critical material on Murakami
written in Japanese, and which is listed in a useful bibliography at the end of Rubin’s book-length study of Murakami.³⁴⁸

In 2017 Carver’s influence shows little sign of abating. The most recent US presidential election placed an unprecedented spotlight on the plight of the white working class. While a billionaire was elected to the White House, his victory was achieved, as many political commentators were keen to point out, on a wave of grassroots white working-class support.³⁴⁹ His campaign emphasized the negative impact of globalization and neoliberalism on the kinds of individuals central to Carver’s fiction. At the core of Trump’s proposals were plans to curtail unrestricted free trade in manufacturing (with the aim of revitalising industrial areas such as the Rust Belt) and help restore the American dream of social mobility for the working-class. Running alongside this political shift has been the prominence of political commentary – on both sides of the political spectrum – on the negative impact of neoliberal policies over the past four decades. Writers like George Monbiot and Joseph Stiglitz have become frequent contributors to newspapers and magazines, arguing that dominant neoliberal ideology entrenches class divisions and represses the orthodox narrative of upward socioeconomic mobility – an idea to which Carver’s fiction posits the unincorporated residual alternative of craftsmanship.³⁵⁰ The popularity of publications like J.D. Vance’s Hillbilly Elegy (2016) have,

³⁵⁰ For instance, writing in Vanity Fair, Stiglitz argued that:
Of all the costs imposed on our society by the top one per cent, perhaps the greatest is this: the erosion of our sense of identity, in which fair play, equality of opportunity, and a sense of community are so important. America has long prided itself on being a fair society, where everyone has an equal chance of getting ahead, but the statistics suggest otherwise: the chances of a poor citizen, or even a middle-class citizen, making it to the top in America are smaller than in many countries in Europe. The cards are stacked against them.
even more recently, drawn attention to the plight of white working-class individuals and has been adopted by many conservative critics as an example of poor, white experience at the turn of the twenty-first century.\textsuperscript{351} Whatever the political rights and wrongs of the arguments that surround the experience of the white working class, there is no doubt that they are becoming an increasingly vocal and visible demographic. Such an emphasis suggests that while he died nearly thirty years ago, Carver’s work, which I have been arguing is centrally concerned with these issues, will continue to remain influential in the near future.


A similar argument is made by the authors of \textit{The New Class Society}. ‘In short’, they argue in their introduction, ‘when it comes to producing goods and services, America is indeed “Number One!” But when it comes to \textit{fairly} distributing the goods, services, income, and wealth generated by our enormously productive and wealthy society, America is \textit{not} “Number One”’. See, Wysong, Perrucci, Wright, \textit{The New Class Society: Goodbye American Dream?}, p. 1.

Finally, it is also worth mentioning the highly publicized recent opioid epidemic amongst white non-Hispanic Americans, first highlighted by Angus Deaton and Anne Case. They argued that ‘deaths of despair come from a long standing process of cumulative disadvantage for those with less than a college degree. The story is rooted in the labour market, but involves many aspects of life, including health in childhood, marriage, child rearing, and religion’. See, Anne Case and Angus Deaton, ‘Rising Morbidity and Mortality in Midlife Among White Non-Hispanic Americans in the 21st Century’, \textit{Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America}, 112 (2015), 15078-83 (pp. 3-4).

\textsuperscript{351} J.D. Vance, \textit{Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis} (London: William Collins, 2016). While Vance’s account is perhaps the most widely read of recent years, there have been other popular social-science studies that deal with analogous subject matter and come to parallel conclusions. For instance, see, Charles Murray, \textit{Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010} (New York: Crown Forum, 2012), and, Nancy Isenberg, \textit{White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America} (New York: Viking, 2016).
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