Review Essay

Death and Democracy: Snakefarm's *Songs from My Funeral* and the New World Gothic

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Snakefarm. *Songs from My Funeral*. Kneeling Elephant, 1998.

The Twilight Years

The early 1980s saw some of the most exciting and outlandish independent musical production, much of which came from Europe, particularly from the city of Brussels. The Continental music scene was self-consciously "arty," eclectic, and commercially aloof.[1] The musicians who gathered in the Belgian capital were multi-national. They included groups like San Francisco's Tuxedomoon, Liverpool's Pale Fountains, and Minimal Compact from Israel. The late Billy Mackenzie of The Associates, Cabaret Voltaire, The Durutti Column, and Paul Haig were also on location, as were a not yet famous Michael Nyman and the Belgian minimalist Wim Mertens (who, like Nyman, composed the soundtrack for a Peter Greenaway film, the lavish 1987 *The Belly of an Architect*). Many of these musicians were signed by Les Disques du Crepuscule, a mysteriously chic label whose brand of art-house pop music, meticulously packaged, is to this day a reminder of unusual and interesting times in alternative music. Toward the 1990s, independent labels suffered increasing commercial and artistic difficulties, and the Brussels scene sadly went into a

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slow decline.[2]

An American ex-patriot in Brussels, Anna Domino recorded her first mini-LP *East and West* for Les Disques du Crepuscule in 1984. In 1986, the LP *Anna Domino* was released. These were followed by *This Time*, *Colouring in the Edge and the Outline*, and *Mysteries of America*. As the thriving Brussels music scene began to flag, Domino moved to America with her musical partner Michel Delory. In America came out the collection *Favorite Songs from the Twilight Years: 1984-1990*. Finally, relocated to the Arizona desert and with their new record label Kneeling Elephant, Domino and Delory transformed themselves into Snakefarm and released a distinctively American album: *Songs from My Funeral*.

While Domino's solo albums were known to the relatively few who were interested in the weird and wonderful continental music scene, *Songs from My Funeral* has been reaching a wider audience.[3] Although Snakefarm is not likely to become a huge commercial success, *Songs from My Funeral* captured a special mood of *fin de siècle* America, a mood that still prevails after the dawn of the new millennium. I call this cultural temperament "gothic" in the widest sense of the word. Fearful and contagious, the gothic is a sensibility that is attuned to the dark side of existence and concerned with the themes of death and undoing.[4] In this essay, I place Snakefarm's album within a range of themes and of texts, from American road narratives to American cinema noir, all of which share an interest in, even an obsession with, America as the space of abjection on the boundary between the fascinating and the foul.

Digital Shrouds

Songs from My Funeral is a collection of traditional ballads whose themes are those of love, death, and travel. These 19th century ballads have been reworked and repackaged using a combination of computer-generated and acoustic samples and sounds. All are confidently compiled into a comprehensive journey to the darker reaches of the American heartland. The ballads include those classic tales of ill-fated love like "Frankie and Johnny," "Banks of the Ohio," and "St. James." The most famous of these is, perhaps, "Rising Sun" (better known as "House of the Rising Sun" by The Animals). The song is a first-person tale of a prostitute's life of hardship in a New Orleans brothel. Two songs on the album invoke the idea of America's spatial magnitude: "This Train that I Ride" laments the loss of home in the sublime vastness of the American scene, while "John Henry" recounts the epic-like birth and death of the legendary African-American railroad worker who refused to lay down his hammer after machines were introduced in place of manual labor. Several tracks belong to the sub-genre of the "murder ballad," which has been enjoying a revival in recent years.[5] As well as the aforementioned "Banks of the Ohio" and "Frankie and Johnny," the album features the historically based "Tom Dooley," a man executed for the alleged stabbing of one Laura Foster in 1866. Another ballad is "Black Girl" (also known as "In the Pines" or "Where Did You Sleep Last Night"), famously recorded by the legendary folk and blues singer Leadbelly in 1944 and later performed by Nirvana in their 1993 unplugged session.

This is a gory tale of death and distress that probably originated in the Southern Appalachian Mountains in the 1860s.[6] The supernatural aspect of folk ballads dominates "Laredo," which features a ghostly encounter with a mysterious cowboy. The album draws to a close with the chilling lullaby "Pretty Horses."

As with fairytales and folktales, ballads reveal something about the archetypal darkness of the national soul. *Songs from My Funeral* unflinchingly parades a cast of cheating lovers, conmen, cowboys, strongmen, slaves, whores, drifters, and killers. An array of cruel and kind crooksters, these common but larger than life heroes and heroines recall the democratic catalogues in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Indeed, *Songs from My Funeral* forms an on-the-move American collage, recasting grim and gruesome folk-tales in the plusher guise of contemporary electronica. Surprisingly perhaps, the ballads are well served by their new digital dress, which enhances rather than obscures the natural hallucinatory quality of the songs. The result is, therefore, effortlessly evocative and may be branded "electrofolk," trip-hop, or alternative country. But whatever the generic hybrid, *Songs from My Funeral* illustrates the happy marriage between cutting-edge music technology and more traditional material.

The use of ballads is of special interest here. What constitutes the lasting appeal of ballads, with their tales of love and loss? Moreover, what is unique to the ballad form, its particular economy? Ballads are musical miniatures, condensed and episodic. One feature common to ballads is their refraining from offering any great psychological insight into their subjects' inner worlds. Ballads lack the dimension of interiority which creates fictional "characters." What one encounters in ballads are not "persons," but "agents" or "catalysts," the symbolic pawns in the formation of a collective psyche. Ballads concentrate almost exclusively on actions and their consequences and are therefore characterized by a particularly tight economy. The world that unfolds through these ballads is, then, a world devoid of psychological introspection, and one that reflects the tragi-comical drama of universal passions. Domino's singing is typically understated, and the deadpan delivery of these tales of woe and horror is in keeping with the emotional thriftiness of the ballad form itself.[7] As a result, ballads represent the world mythologically. Their subjects are not simply people who love, suffer, and die, but the entire landscape in which they move: Laredo, New Orleans, the stretch of railway pressing Westward. America is not only at its most mythological in these songs, it is also at its most cinematic.[8]

The mythological dimension of ballads largely depends on their continued cultural resonance. An essential feature of the ballad form is, therefore, its historical versatility. Ballads are subject to an oral tradition which both preserves and alters them as they travel through time. Though recorded as well as sung, these ballads have received numerous interpretations over the years. *Songs from My Funeral* is another chapter in this historical-cultural process and in this sense is strictly "traditional."

Snakefarm's version relocates these essentially rural songs in a contemporary technocultural setting. This apparent contradiction is potentially fascinating. Indeed, in recent years, musical hybrids (mainly through the use of samplers) have

been merging country, blues, jazz, gospel, and folk with electronic sounds and extending the frontiers of electronic music. Musicians such as Moby have brought such combinations into the mainstream.[9] Technology need not be cut off from earlier musical traditions and can be used as a way of re-inscribing older material in new ways. It so happens that ballads have always been subject to such periodic reinterpretations. *Songs from My Funeral* maintains a balance between the two seemingly contrasting sensibilities of the rustic and the urban. Traditional material is not used as a cheap ploy, and there is sufficient use of acoustic instruments to retain the folkish stamp. On the other hand, as with much non-commercial electronica, technology delivers a sound as broody and dystopian as the original songs.

Ballads, then, are not just collective and mythological; they are continuously reinterpreted. That is to say, with each repetition traditional songs assert their relevance in slightly different ways. Yet if ballads can be said to maintain their historical value against the backdrop of shifting cultural climates, what is the cultural context in which the old-new ballads on *Songs from My Funeral* signify to audiences today? I understand this context to be the richly pervasive American culture of gothic.

I would like to suggest that *Songs from My Funeral* is a kind of musical road trip through America's sordid underbelly, invoking the constant tension within American culture between America's wholesome exterior and its darker hidden depths. The album falls into place alongside other works of popular Americana, such as the collaborative body of work of director David Lynch and composer Angelo Badalamenti, who have been meticulously composing the American narrative as one in which dream and nightmare collide and merge. Snakefarm's cool resuscitation of traditional material similarly plays in the murky half-light of American gothic, a culture that, in spite of the events of September 11, shows no signs of subsiding.[10]

In *Songs from My Funeral* Domino contemplates the idea of "America" as a dangerous dreamscape. The album ultimately recognizes the pivotal place that "America" now occupies in the modern or so-called postmodern mind. To those with a particular interest in American Studies, the ballads of *Songs from My Funeral* join an array of homegrown travelogues, from Emerson and Whitman's voyaging egos to Jack Kerouac's existential meanderings in *On the Road* or the American trips of Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. In a different sense, recalling Domino's *Mysteries of America* album and making the voyage from Belgium to the United States, this project retains the outsider's perspective and the fascination of the transatlantic visitor. What *Songs from My Funeral* finally asserts is that "America" is as universal as it is local, a paramount phenomenon.[11]

If earlier I described *Songs from My Funeral* as a kind of musical travelogue, this is partly because images of railroads and trains are scattered throughout the album. "Rising Sun" begins with "One foot is on the platform / And one foot is on the train." In "John Henry," the legendary hero dies building America's railroads. And "This Train that I Ride" addresses the American predicament of open spaces, of which the railroad was, until its defeat by the car, the supreme embodiment. America's large surface area has come to signal much more than the country's sheer

geographical size. It symbolizes opportunity and openness toward the future, which are at the heart of America's democratic vision. This vision has given rise to that quintessentially American genre: the road movie. American identity, in tireless transit, is largely a matter of mileage. But "This Train that I Ride" does not merely lament the expansive distances there are to cross, but also the essential homelessness of the traveler: "This train that I ride, a hundred coaches long / Hear the whistle blow a hundred miles / I'm one lord I'm two, three lord I'm four / Five hundred miles from my home." The American identification with and commitment to speed and motion is as painful as it is promising. Ongoing free movement and the consequent semblance of home are features of what the critic Philip Fisher has called American "democratic social space."[12]

One extreme symbol of American mobility is the desert. The desert appears on the cover of Snakefarm's album, as well as in the extraordinary cover photograph of Jean Baudrillard's postmodern travelogue *America*. In both cases, the desert is a place of mythical abstraction: its blank iconography is at once deadly and sublime, futuristic and primitive, creative and annihilating. The desert (to which the late country-rock musician Gram Parsons requested his body should be committed) is a symbol of pure space, something to master or be mastered by. Such an intense yet empty vastness is an important feature of American culture and a potentially boundless resource of representation. It therefore recurs in many American road narratives, from Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* to Wim Wenders's *Paris, Texas* or Lynch's *Lost Highway*.

Baudrillard brilliantly writes: "The point is not to write a sociology or psychology of the car, the point is to drive" (54). The idea of "America," then, is an idea which is rather a form of practice, a performance.[13] More so than in any other case, it seems, American "identity" is essentially bound up with action and movement. This movement, Baudrillard suggests, need not (and cannot) be theorized, for it mechanically constitutes its own justification. To "be" American is, then, to act as one. If this mobile identity seems to categorically elude the substantive, this is because it never bothers to stop for it.[14] Rather than fix an identity, Americans are continually eradicating theirs ("who will I be tomorrow?"). American identity is thought of (and marketed) as the feat of constant recreation. If American identity can be defined as this peculiar restlessness, it is neither grounded nor sustainable. To be an American is, then, to stay on the move, to renew oneself as one goes, and to forget who one was before—an amnesiac sort of existence.

America may be said to envisage itself spatially rather than temporally. In place of the Old World's elevation of History as a means for uncovering (or cementing) a national identity, America takes the conquest of space ("manifest destiny" and the opening up of new frontiers) as its principle of self-realization. America does not so much lack a history (a bizarre European cliché) as refuse to make use of the past for its self-understanding. And yet, an ever-expanding American horizon does indeed convey a particular attitude towards time. America boasts a Whitmanian confidence in the future and the possibilities it holds. From Alexis de Tocqueville and Whitman to Francis Fukuyama, "America" has been thought as the "end of history," as its positive culmination. But, as Jacques Derrida has pointed out, the

future can also be thought of as supreme risk, and intimations of the future may also harbor fears of regression and decline.

Songs from My Funeral belongs to a rich repertoire of popular American narratives that bring into play these two contrasting yet ever-related tendencies: the American promise of the large fulfillment ahead and its twin tendency of the threat of downfall and annihilation. The ballads walk this tightrope by referring to an America in which the American dream has turned into a nightmare. Take, for example, the ballad "Black Girl," in which a mysterious girl is haunted by a man's violent death. The language is emphatically gory disclosing a grisly decapitation: "My husband was a railroad man / And he died half a mile from town / His head was found in the driver's wheel / But his body never was found." "St. James" is a lover's necrophiliac elegy to a dead beloved as she lies "stretched out on a long white table" at St. James infirmary, "so pale, so cold, so fair." The lover goes on to speak of his own inevitable death: "When I die I want you to bury me / In a wide-brimmed Stetson hat / Put a five dollar gold piece on my watch chain / Let'em know I was standing pat." The album ends poignantly with the lullaby "Pretty Horses," in which a mother sings a child to sleep with the promise of "all the pretty little horses." But the song soon tells of another, less fortunate baby, not far away: "Way down yonder in the meadow / There's a poor little lamby / The birds and flies peckin' out his eyes / As the poor little thing cries mammy." "Pretty Horses" is the lullaby a black slave sings to a white child. The slave tells this child of another child, her own, left motherless in the meadow, for whom the day to come holds no promise, for whom there is no repose in sleep. The recurring "Hush little baby don't you cry / You know your momma was born to die" is vengeful, reminding the careless dreaming child of his own mother's death, since death, they say, is truly egalitarian. Or perhaps the singer mourns her own child whom she had left behind. A clandestine allegory of race relations, this gothic lullaby works to poison the dreams of innocent sleepers. In the new dream/nightmare that the song conjures, nature appears once in the elegant form of beautiful horses and a second time as the violent transformer of babies into putrefying and vermin-eaten carcasses.

New World Gothic

In *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of Gothic*, Mark Edmundson argues that America in the 1990s was characterized by two seemingly opposed yet closely linked cultural trends. The first is a (broadly defined) culture of gothic; the second is that of "facile transcendence" (xv). The gothic streak in American culture in the late 20th and early 21st century is not merely apparent in the proliferation of horror, disaster, or apocalyptic narratives. Gothic reigns supreme in the "real life" dramas on *Oprah* or "reality TV," such as courtroom broadcasts (the O. J. Simpson trial). America, claims Edmundson, is increasingly thinking of itself in gothic terms. It entertains gothic fears in multiple forms, from the serial killer to the meteoric holocaust, the post-nuclear mutant monster, or the post-Apocalyptic talk of the new Christian Right.

Such gothic rhetoric finds its counterpart in the rhetoric of "facile transcen-

dence," the language of easy, even instant redemption. Contrary to the gothic, facile transcendence sees individual existence as always alterable and insists on the possibility of personal transformation. Edmundson's chief example of the kind of world depicted by the culture of facile transcendence is Robert Zemeckis's 1994 hit *Forrest Gump* in which American "niceness," even while bordering on the idiotic, is amply rewarded. Then there are the American obsessions with angels, the culture of advertising, and the self-help movement (93).[15] All of these propose to counteract gothic pessimism. Yet Edmundson then moves to deconstruct the alleged opposition between the culture of gothic and that of facile transcendence and shows that the two are inevitably interlinked: they enhance rather than negate one another.[16]

Edmundson's cultural analysis of the tension in pre-Millennial America between a life-affirming American optimism and gothic pessimism brings to mind another cultural study of America written exactly ninety years earlier. In *The American Scene*, Henry James shrewdly observes that the façade of the typical American town tellingly

> sounds . . . the note of the "virtue"—so little, in general, can any picture of American town-appearance hang together without it. It amounts, everywhere, to something intenser than the implied absence of "vice"; *it amounts to a sort of registered absence of the conception or the imagination of it.* (230, emphasis added)

Lynch's entire *oeuvre* turns on precisely this American failure to conceive the vicious, a failure that simultaneously acts as an open invitation to do just so. James is clearly fascinated by this cultural aporia, and he continues with a warning: "[A]ll the while, as one goes and comes, one feels that no community can really be as purged of peccant humours as the typical American has for the most part found itself foredoomed to look" (230). James's commentary identifies the American aspiration to, and insistence on, the pure, the healthy, and the wholesome. But as James well understands, and Edmundson later echoes, the powerful expulsion of those "peccant humours" paradoxically makes "vice" implicit in the very appearance of the virtuous. This condition of an exterior from which any traces of what James elsewhere in the book calls the "sordid" have been expelled is contrasted with the conspicuous sordidness of Europe: "The 'European' scene, at a thousand points, looks all its sophistications straight out at us—or looks, in other words, at least as perverse as it practically is" (230). For James, "sophistication" lies precisely in European willingness (ethical as well as aesthetic) to interweave "virtue" and "vice." James repeatedly uses this in his "international theme," in which American simplicity meets European degeneracy. This decadent principle by which the sordid leaves its traces on the wholesome has indeed become a commonplace way of imagining and representing Old World sensibilities. Unlike Europe, James sees America as having publicly exorcised the sordid, the morally shabby, or the decadent, in favor of a new, simplified civilization. He insists, however, that America has done so at its peril, and, like a true gothic impresario, James prepares us for the return of the repressed.

One can perhaps distinguish between two gothic sensibilities that develop in America and Europe respectively, based on the difference in assumptions (and dreams) of the New versus the Old World. The difference lies in the location and source of gothic energy. In America, the gothic sounds from the deep, gradually overtaking the good-natured and serene exterior with its demonic energy. This stealing movement of contamination is exemplified in Angelo Badalamenti's creeping synthesizers and in Lynch's preference for overripe melodies (e.g. Bobby Vinton's "Blue Velvet"). In England and the Continent, the gothic is more often subsumed in the surface fabric of things: Jack the Ripper roams the streets of London, which are subterranean without being underground, narrow and labyrinthine, ostensibly impoverished and unhealthy.

As in James's cautionary remark concerning the implication of vice and virtue, Edmundson too argues that America's facile answer to gothic fears does not dispel those dark gothic shadows. On the contrary, it restlessly and energetically intensifies them. The tales of abuse, violence, and murder featured on many television talk shows end happily, and the protagonists of the most gothic life-episodes are finally transformed and redeemed. The underlying message of facile transcendence is, then, that past traumas can be successfully overcome by sheer force of will (or by a miracle-working guardian angel[17]). But these two seemingly antithetical discourses, the battle between Life and Death, between the will to live and the forces of "internal ruin"[18] inevitably signal a distinctly American dialectic: the dialectic of the transcendent and debased, of Emerson versus Poe, and most importantly, perhaps, the dialectic of dreams versus nightmares. And it is precisely the *fallacy* of separation between these two antagonistic but intrinsically linked visions which is explored in the most powerful works of contemporary gothic Americana.[19]

In the opening sequences of Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, for instance, the camera moves vertically from the vivid façade of an impossibly pristine suburb to battling insects in the undergrowth. In the next sequence, a human ear is found dumped in the grass. A common misunderstanding of Lynch's work is the separation between his pieces of "innocence" (e.g. *The Straight Story*) and those of "experience" (e.g. *Blue Velvet*, *Lost Highway*). The two sides of Lynch's filmography are inextricably linked—a fact epitomized and brought to completion in what may well be Lynch's best film to date, *Mulholland Dr.*

Another exploration of the relationship between America's gothic preoccupations and their facile denial is Todd Haynes's *Safe*, in which a well off Los Angeles housewife (painstakingly portrayed by Julianne Moore) becomes mysteriously allergic to her environment. To escape "environmental illness," Carol White finally retreats into a "safe-house," a small igloo isolating her from an otherwise uncontrollable reality. Haynes's film is a brilliant allegory of American solipsism that cleverly manipulates the conventions of gothic to achieve its effect.[20] *Safe*, in fact, works as a kind of *counter*-gothic narrative by reversing the traditional aesthetic of gothic: the film's accentuated slick interiors and clinical designer spaces turn claustrophobic and catastrophic. They therefore assume the very gothic feel that the film and its heroine ostensibly flee. New World gothic, then, consists of the elaborate attempts to deny, or escape from, the dark side. As James points out in *The Ameri-*

can Scene, this foredoomed activity is a specifically American enterprise.

Songs from My Funeral revisits America's dark side with imagination and panache. Snakefarm does not signal a complete break with the rest of Domino's discography, and thus brings Domino the somewhat belated recognition her work deserves. One hopes that earlier, hard-to-get albums like *East and West* may now be reissued. By retrieving traditional American material through the use of computer technology, *Songs from My Funeral* demonstrates the revisions that the idea of "America" consistently inspires. These traditional ballads are as much at home in the 21st century as they are the products of their own historical moment. That they were not merely revisited, but, as I have suggested, effectively re-conceived in the form of contemporary American gothic, testifies to the dynamic nature of cultural revision. *Songs from My Funeral* is a compelling piece of Americana that simultaneously weaves and unravels the American Dream.

Notes

[1] The influential band Wire's front-man Colin Newman, for example, released a solo album on his own Brussels label Crammed, poignantly titled *Commercial Suicide*.

[2] For details of the life and times of Les Disques du Crepuscule, see Frank Brinkhuis's excellent and comprehensive survey at: <http://home.wxs.nl/~frankbri/crestroy.html>.

[3] One song from the album has oddly made it to the soundtrack of the highly successful *Sex and the City*.

[4] In this paper I use "gothic" as a general sensibility. I am therefore less interested in the strictly generic proponents of American gothic, such as Stephen King or Anne Rice. This is also why I refrain from using the capitalized "Gothic."

[5] The murder ballad is the musical exponent of gothic. Some musical genres (like the genres of metal and death metal) utilize gothic imagery, but there is also a brand of music that may be called "pop noir." Musicians like Nick Cave and P. J. Harvey have been particularly influential in trailing the darkest recesses of rock. See, most notably, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds' 1996 album *Murder Ballads* (which includes a guest performance by P. J. Harvey), and M. J. Harris and Martyn Baytes's *Murder Ballads: The Complete Collection*.

[6] The history of "In the Pines" is a rich one. It has around 160 versions in genres as diverse as folk, country, bluegrass, jazz, grunge, and now electronic music. For background on the evolution of this song, see Eric Weisbard's "A Simple Song that Lives Beyond Time."

[7] Domino's early album *East and West* includes a cover of Aretha Franklin's "Land of Dreams." But rather than attempting to emulate the master, Domino gives the song a brand new "feel" by withholding the soulful warmth of the original. The result is as far from Franklin's R&B genius as can be imagined and all the more successful for it. Domino serves up emotions at very low temperatures, as if the singer/lover's broken heart had frozen.

[8] On America's cinematic essence, see Gilbert Adair's "On Americana" (214-215).

[9] Snakefarm's project seems closer to Matt Johnson's (otherwise known as The The) *Hanky Panky*, a collection of Hank Williams covers. In recent years, then, and with the help of music technology, boundaries between different musical genres have been breaking down.

[10] What are the cultural repercussions of the nigh-apocalyptic media images of September 11? Those Hollywood studios that predicted a slump in action films were grossly mistaken. On the unfaltering popularity of war and action cinema in the "post-Taliban" era, see Jim Kitses's "One Man From Now."

[11] The singer Gram Parsons referred to his brand of country music as "Cosmic Ameri-

can." The sense of America as at once local and universal informs America's self-image as the supreme embodiment of the spirit of modernity. Even while reproaching the degraded state of American society in "Democratic Vistas," Walt Whitman posited "America" temporally at the end of history. What's more, for his "authentic" democracy, Whitman demands a particular appreciation of death. On the one hand, American culture today is permeated by death (capital punishment, the abortion wars, the fear of terrorism), while on the other, it is engaged in a powerful denial of death (from the "just do it" philosophy to gym culture and "death management"). America's negotiation of death is central to its ideology: must not death be ultimately defeated, or in the least *managed*, if the dignity and autonomy of the individual is to triumph?

[12] See Philip Fisher's "Democratic Social Space: Whitman, Melville, and the Promise of American Transparency." Fisher regards American space as abstracted and identical at every point for easy mobility. This identity across space makes everywhere seem "like home." This virtual homelessness is a regular theme of American road narratives.

[13] Baudrillard's point about the car recalls Jean Francois Lyotard's proposition in *The Postmodern Condition* that "legitimation" in the postmodern society is achieved not through speculative metaphysics or through humanistic politics, but is a matter of pure performativity, of mechanical legitimation: the validation of what works best. This point converges with Henry James's discussion of what he calls the "eloquence" of the "American machine" (79-81). James and Baudrillard similarly recognize America's "lyrical nature of pure circulation" (Baudrillard 27), and they are both hypnotized by it.

[14] The notion of American identity has invited a host of post-foundationalist readings from various literary and cultural theorists, since it offers a case of continual "becoming" as opposed to substantive "being." See, for example, Ross Posnock's "Affirming the Alien: The Pragmatist Pluralism of *The American Scene*" and *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity*. Gilles Deleuze, too, was fascinated by the "flight" of American identity. See in particular Deleuze's radical vision of (an idealized) American community in his essays on Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" and Whitman in *Essays Critical and Clinical*.

[15] On the angelic preoccupation of Americans see Harold Bloom's *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection* and *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*.

[16] Michael Moore's excellent documentary *Bowling for Columbine* ponders the fatal consequences of the association between an elaborate culture of fear and the gun trade in the United States.

[17] CBS's series *Touched by an Angel*, about a team of angels whose mission is to guide humans in trouble, is a good example. All seems well with this angelic A-Team until such ideologically dubious episodes as when the angels attend a death-row prisoner, persuading her to make her peace with her past and march to the death chamber with a heart full of love. This is a far cry from Lars von Trier's profound ethical study of Christian sacrifice in the Home of the Brave, *Dancer in the Dark*. On a closer look, then, there is little which is recognizably Christian in *Touched by an Angel*; it belongs more readily to what Harold Bloom has called "the American Religion."

[18] On death as an active force in the Western cultural imagination see Jonathan Dollimore's "Death's Incessant Motion."

[19] See, for example, Edmundson's reading of Tobe Hooper's 1974 classic slasher film *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (103-105). John Waters's *Serial Mom* parodies this naive separation of spheres by conflating a devout, all-American housewife with an equally conscientious serial killer.

[20] See Roddey Reid's "UnSafe at Any Distance: Todd Haynes' Visual Culture of Health

and Risk." Reid explains how Haynes's film teases audiences by way of a horror that never materializes. From the opening traveling shot of a car making its way along the dim streets, "we're in the land of serial killers, alien body snatchers, and zombies out to disrupt the stifling routines of upper-middle-class domesticity," yet the film again and again deflates these anticipatory moments. "Is this yet another blank time before the eruption of horror? Is something hiding in there? No, nothing, nothing at all" (35). See also my article "No Callous Shell: The Fate of Selfhood from Walt Whitman to Todd Haynes."

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