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The Climate of American Radicalism

When we consider what is loosely deemed the postmodern or contemporary period in American literature, it is often from the perspective of so-called metafiction. Academics and others point to writers on the order of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo as hallmarks of the former. Recent scholarship shows renewed interest in the period; Amy Hungerford's 2008 essay "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary," and Gordon Hutner's response argue its need for scholarly evaluation.

My motivations in exploring the function of style, voice, and history within Renata Adler's recently reissued novel, *Speedboat* (1976), and Joan Didion's novel *Democracy* (1984), briefly alongside Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool* (1969)—each set in the late 1960s or early 1970s—are to understand what claims might be made about representations of the period though their vantage. Simply put, what do these texts indicate about history and representation in the postmodern and contemporary novel? When we loosely deem these years radical, how is that radicalism represented?

Each, I suggest, refuses optimism surrounding the period's political idealisms by privileging characters whose thrust is liberal, but who ultimately cannot maintain their position. These characters, like the narratives themselves, collude to obscure our ability to successfully critique, pointing to larger structures of meaning and metaphor evinced in such areas as plot, style, and voice. The elision of clear fictional and nonfictional boundaries, and the textual aversion to precise reading and understanding, works in conjunction with the rise of political shifts.

Media studies professor Aniko Bodroghkozy's analysis of television from this era details a theme that opens up my discussion both chronologically and ideologically. In *Groove Tube*, her 2001 monograph, Bodroghkozy demonstrates how liberal agendas borne of the Yippies—the 1960s Youth International Party founded by Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin—for instance, were harnessed within the various TV programs she assesses. Thus, a medium that might seem to espouse a singular identity (the Nightly News and such emblems from the era) maintained interplay between the political and conservative, youth and adult cultures and so on. Detailing the Chicago Democratic Convention in 1968 (the site of much of *Medium Cool*), she writes: "Very little of the televised coverage dealt with the youthful protestors. William Small, head of CBS News in New York, emphasized that in total CBS and NBC, the only two networks to provide live broadcasts, devoted only about 3 percent of their entire coverage to the violent disturbances on the streets" (*Groove Tube* 102). Such short shrift was, however, of little import: "The images from the convention hall formed the 'dull field of establishment rhetoric,' … As [Abbie] Hoffman logically put it: '*We were an advertisement for revolution*'" (102-3).

The texts I will be assessing are ripe for a reading of this kind of interplay. Ideologically complex, they offered what could be construed as the rhetoric of liberalism, but refuse that as a final stance. By "text," I refer to the body of work—film or book—to offer cohesion in my discussion. In this way, *Medium Cool*, in featuring a television news reporter as its protagonist, plays with the messages that medium offered (revolutionary in Hoffman's eyes) and those Wexler would present in his own movie. Each work features protagonists that are members of a creative class. Their aims are socially mindful. But

within the notion of "an advertisement for a revolution" they refuse such useful—or seemingly noble—aims. Indeed, their own stories do not reflect the kind of dramatically liberal ideal espoused in the studio-commissioned *Strawberry Statement* (1970) that Bodroghkozy explores in her article "Reel Revolutionaries." That film echoed Columbia's 1968 "Gym Crow" protests: an uprising response that took place at Columbia University in April, partially in response to the university's "plan to build two gymnasiums on the slope running from Morningside Heights down to Harlem, one at the top for students, with its own entrance, and one at the bottom for Harlem residents [predominately black], with a separate entrance" (McFadden). *Strawberry Statement*, set in a California university, is heavily imbued with stereotypes of the moment, unlike the texts I explore. They are also not simple amalgams of 1970s disillusionment. Instead, their textual obscurity suggests an overarching disillusionment with the limits of fiction's capabilities itself.

Indeed, each work employs nonfictional elements—reportage, dates, facts, even footage from Chicago's real protests—to elucidate its multifaceted aims. If the universe of the novel (or the fictional film) could not offer enough about the moments these authors sought to depict, then the novel had to be changed to suit the author's larger aims. What we are left with is the sentiment the Yippies hoped would be seen: a kind of dialogical rejoinder—but this one not for liberalism's aims. Didion suggests, in recreating a kind of *Heart of Darkness* relationship in *Democracy*, that we might contort our reading to understand the novel and its characters. This reading becomes as much about the limits of story as representation as it is about the characters and plots themselves.

As Adler, Didion, and even Wexler point to the constructs of our known worlds across their texts, they move beyond the realm of the diegesis. In doing so, their characters' sentiments mirror our own interpretative constraints. As dissatisfying as it is to write a simplistic analysis of these texts, so is it dissatisfying to be an operator in this political climate. I do not mean to suggest any kind of one-to-one comparison here, but to indicate the ways that these texts not only eschew convention in, say, a Joycean style, but also use the collusion between our interpretative abilities and their own forms to frustrate our reading: Adler's Jen Fain is no more politically desirable than she is personally. Our distaste for her ellipticism and seemingly apathetic self is, indeed, part of the point.

These characters are simultaneously as frustrated by their world positions and political machinations as these texts are by narrative conventions. As these narratives refuse conventions—playing with what exists outside; what the novel as a form can accomplish; what is real and false in film, TV, and documentary—they invoke and, indeed, depend on the limits of their genres to function.

Moving through the works chronologically, each offers a prescient take on the shifting dynamics of art and society. In part, they deserve consideration not only because their authors are lesser known in the academic sphere, but also because the period is now achieving a kind of renaissance in culture. Adler's novels received front-page attention in the likes of *Bookforum* in spring of 2013, while Didion's entire oeuvre was recognized with PEN's Lifetime Achievement award this year. Wexler's work, long respected, provides an interesting corollary. As a film often taken up in cinema studies circles, I suggest its conflated, self-referential narrative mode offers specific, visual insight into cultural and artistic formations of the period.

I attempted to find formal definitions between the line of the postmodern and contemporary; such a line was difficult to draw at best. I locate this period as roughly reaching its height within the 1960s and early 1970s onwards. Nevertheless, I am not especially interested in defining the texts below so much by genre conventions as in utilizing the terms for their historical connotations.

Our current cultural nostalgia for the 1960s and 1970s is also of particular interest to me. In some sense, this period represents not only important political shifts, but also important shifts in representation at artistic and other levels. It coincides with analyses such as those on the rise of the corporate enterprise, the individual within larger mechanistic postwar systems, and class stratification. Such notions can be found in popular works from the late 1950s including William Whyte's *The Organization Man,* and C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite*, among others. More specifically, these three texts are set on the cusp of that transitional moment, poised between that oft-cited early 1960s idealism and its aftermath, even as Didion writes from the early 1980s.

I refer here also to Jameson's work on postmodernism, alongside Michael Salzay's recent book, *Hip Figures,* which has been taken up in circles outside the academy. (Though Salzay's themes refer to Eric Lott's work on minstrel shows as well as black identity, it points to larger functions as well.) While the "Yippies embraced bizarre, disjunctive imagery over verbal discourse" through television and other messages, these authors create a sphere that suggests such bizarre qualities might remain unread—nearly open, in some sense, in their texts (*Groove Tube* 105).

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It is important to bear in mind several key features of these texts. First, that each incorporates fact and fiction, and is predicated (to an unusual degree) on our understanding of larger social conventions and codes. Second, that information itself is an arena of negotiation for each of these authors.

Several theories and recent articles have influenced my perspective on these issues. As the texts specifically subvert former modes of representation but are frustrated in their own inability to produce the new, they require the reader to formulate her understanding around their holes. Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the writer's existence within "semantic and expressive layers"—her own world—warrants consideration here (279). The writers I explore shape style, by his definition, for particular pursuits. Bakhtin's notion of the word, "born in dialogue as a living rejoinder," requires that "any given historical moment of verbal-ideological life … has its own language" (Bakhtin; 290). The texts I explore take up this individualistic identity and play with it. They insist that they be seen as amalgams and representatives of their moment, even as they depend on their readers to fill in the gaps—to provide that rejoinder.

In considering my own interests in historical approaches to my texts, two articles have assisted in helping to distinguish the line between nonfiction and fiction. In Robert Chodat's article, "Is Style Information?" he explores the notion of style using a scene from *Democracy* as a springboard to point toward the problems of seeing style itself as something overly calculable (146). The concept of "information" for him obtains in "a wide variety of contexts today," but styles are used in Wittgenstein's sense, as "the expression of *attitudes* or *aspirations*" (147). Relatedly, Eric Heyne has dedicated important attention to the blurred line between fiction and reality in texts of my vintage.

Distinct from the autobiography or memoir, he addresses the overarching question of the real, or nonfiction, against the fictional through New Journalism, calling upon Northrop Frye (326). Heyne's concluding stance argues against a binary model for the categories—asking, "why a story can't be both powerful and factual"—that will be useful in my readings (Heyne).

As a film, *Medium Cool* is especially useful for my project. This is, after all, a movie that provides documentary footage of the very period I address in two novels, and whose director had an established history in documentary work. The film elides traditional distinctions between reality and fiction, narrative form and instruction, as Ethan Mordden suggests (238). In the Criterion Collection's release of the director's commentary, Wexler and participants in the project go to great length to insist on their collective concern with the narrative shaping inherent in "nonfiction" films. Likewise, the fictional nature of all objects in narrative film troubles Wexler: "I think of documentary as being narrative, it's just a different kind of fiction" (*Cool* commentary). He continues, "Around 1968 I'd been shooting a lot of documentaries … I could get deeper into the true reality of the scene by arranging things, and organizing things—by playing with what you might call 'reality'" (*Cool* commentary). This kind of framing was the lead-in to his interest in *Medium Cool*, where a primary aim was to obscure the line between these forms, "and fin[d] those areas where the two [fiction and nonfiction] overlap" (*Cool* commentary). Importantly, he contends that, "[t]he electricity … that was in the country at that time was not being reflected through anybody's camera" (*Cool* commentary).

While the director's intent is perhaps offered more forthrightly than the books I explore, the film's innovative style and content, as well as its production history, suggests

a more complex reading. For example, Wexler cast a boy from Chicago's Uptown for the purpose of filming, only to place him back in relative poverty (by his own account) when the film was complete (*Cool* commentary). Likewise, throughout the Chicago protests he films but does not help real people while they are tear gassed; he becomes implicated—much as his lead character does—in a political agenda even as he refuses it.

This moment also coincides with the rise of television and film culture at large, when the screen supplemented the cultural significance of the novel. Bodroghkozy cites the sheer volume of Chicago 1968's watchers: "Before an estimated viewership of 50,500,000 households who watched an average of nine and a half hours of coverage, the fiction of a benign democratic system operating consensually was ripped away" (*Groove Tube* 106-7). One could hardly imagine a director filming a fictional narrative amid a real protest now; today such action would be a direct affront to such protests. In this way, Wexler's own work, like Adler and Didion's mixed worlds, implicates itself politically.

By extension, the implications of the style of these texts come to the fore around larger academic frameworks. In "Tribal Politics and the Postmodern Product," Timothy Parrish outlines a complex question in situating Jameson's postmodernism alongside Milan Kundera's *The Art of the Novel*, concluding that while both agree, "what distinguishes postmodernism from modernism is the political context it addresses and imagines. […] For Kundera, a novel is inevitably a product of history, and cannot help portraying and interacting with history" (665). Significantly, however, Kundera aligns himself with the notion of the text as extended meaning and metaphor—"that it conveys unexpected meanings that readers … might discover *only* through their encounter with a particular novel" (Parrish). Parrish ends on a similar, if not challenging, note:

> Totalitarian Truth is not only the created province of political regimes, but also expresses its repressive spirit in out of the way places … where everywhere one is always encountering declarations of political or aesthetic liberation that are ultimately as oppressive as the regimes of truth they imagine are being replaced. Such a 'romance of identity' can only celebrate its expression within a perpetual present; it engages nothing beyond its own narcissistic expression. (656)

Taking up the case of these contemporary novels—some forty years past and well beyond the vantage of my memory in these instances—seems in some sense the only recourse we might have on the matter of this period's cultural significance.

Rather than cordon off these texts as simply liberating or its opposite, I propose what we might learn is specifically oriented around seeing these texts without "reduc[ing] man's life to its social function'" as a result of postmodernity's context (Kundera qtd. in Parrish 656). These texts are, in a sense, primed to convey the complex nature of their historical/political moment in their refusals, but such a reading need not be reductive. While not solely, by my estimate the works suggest larger ambivalence not as a cohesive reaction against politics or social forces; but complexly, and ambivalently, employ those themes alongside the question what art might of represent.

1. Disaster Footage

Set in the midst of Chicago's 1968 Democratic National Convention, *Medium Cool* was groundbreaking in its use of a kind of documentary and borderline reportage all within the context of a story. Directed by renowned cinematographer Haskell Wexler, the film traces the brief story of John Cassellis (Robert Forster), a television reporter who is exploring various stories on poverty and race in Chicago when he encounters a woman, Eileen (Verna Bloom), and her son, Harold (Harold Blankenship), from West Virginia. The pair live in Uptown, Chicago's housing: small, crowded, and visibly unclean in areas. Utilizing historical realities, the film features a subplot with actual members of the recently formed Black Panthers, and shows Cassellis visiting D.C. to cover RFK's recent funeral as well as Resurrection City, all using the historical events themselves. Wexler also enlisted the well-known historian and journalist Studs Terkel to work with the Appalachian community that would be prominently featured (*Cool* commentary).

The film opens as Cassellis and his partner come upon an accident on a Chicago freeway. As they view a car wreck, they circle with their equipment—filming its interior and the surrounding rubble. The opening credits role as Cassellis rides a motorcycle into and through Chicago while the sun rises over the city. Moments later, the film cuts to a cocktail party where a variety of characters discuss the nature of filmmaking and photography. One man likens his camera to a typewriter, asserting that he operates somewhat like a machine as he explains he is like the "elongation of a tape recorder" (*Cool*).[1] The group assesses the politics of filmmaking and of television, asserting that "All good people deplore problems, but at a distance" (*Cool)*. When an especially wide-

[1] The film quotes in this section are all taken from my own transcription of *Medium Cool*'s dialogue; all in-text citations will be written as: (*Cool*).

eyed, conservatively garbed woman speaks, she defends the photographers' actions—"And you need the money to feed your family"—but the reporters reject this kind of moral defense (*Cool*). For them, filmmaking and photography are inherently enjoyable, professional, voyeuristic, and defined as such—there is no moral, political, or personal retribution from their work.

Wexler focuses on the larger structure of television production, where Cassellis resides professionally. As Cassellis's job is threatened (and ultimately lost) while he pursues screen time for the Black Panthers, most notably, the protests start. He aligns himself with television's coolness, teetering between the kind of willful cynicism and commentary Renata Adler would bring to her novels, and presenting a more overt socially concerned framework than Joan Didion would offer. *Cool* moves between truth and storytelling, but its organization is more straightforward than those texts.

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In the film's key scenes, Eileen, a former schoolteacher whose education is deemed subpar to teach up north, falls for Cassellis. The two take up together as he loses his regular news gig and winds up filming the Democratic National Convention in a freelance role. After staying over near the eve of his coverage of the convention, Eileen's son runs off, leaving her to wander the street looking for him set against the film's quintessentially 1960s soundtrack as Frank Zappa plays in the background. As the riots take over, fiction meets reality. Eileen calls the police for help finding her son; unable to find support while the Chicago Police Department manages the crowds, she rushes out into them. She walks past real protestors—real tear gas—searching for her boy, and is instead found by Cassellis when he leaves the convention to assist her.

The film's production history and Chicago's own background is especially significant here. Speaking in the director's commentary, Wexler explains that he was commissioned to build a film out of an entirely different story: Paramount had requested he adapt Jack Couffer's book *The Concrete Wilderness* (*Cool* commentary). His work as a cinematographer made him especially appealing to the studio for such a visually oriented narrative. Instead, swept up in the assassinations and protests, he angled *Cool* to explore the political moment.

Bodroghkozy, writing in *Cinema Journal* roughly a decade ago, positions Paramount's 1969 release of the film alongside Hollywood's larger emphasis on the production of revolutionary movies, and demonstrates their academic significance. Pointing to studio emphasis on films easily marketable toward the ever-growing under-twenty-five cohort, she writes: "Much ballyhooed was the demographic statistic that by 1967 52 percent of the American population would be [of that age]" (39). Discussing this era's revolutions and television while invoking Stuart Hall in *Groove Tube*, she persuasively argues: "these television programs are clues pointing to some important shifts in hegemony at the level of the social and cultural … [they] serve as a kind of historical evidence" (14). *Medium Cool* offers much of the same.

Likewise, it is important to delineate aspects of the political climate in Chicago at this moment. Setting the stage, David Farber writes of the Students for a Democratic Society's history and manifesto at the moment of protest: "[I]t began with a full-out critique of American society. Redolent with the thinking of C. Wright Mills … It presented a detailed examination of the arms race, the Cold War, racism, big business, unions, and much more" (76). Wexler goes so far as to allude to these historical markers

in restaging the moment of RFK's real Los Angeles assassination in a Chicago kitchen, and in positioning Cassellis and a coworker in a cab driving along the Washington mall as the driver asks if they are visiting "for the funeral?" (*Cool*).

As a political venue, the film then offers what Farber describes as the political moment of Chicago.

> Both sides wished to live within a society in which conflicting interests were subsumed by a shared consciousness. Both sides believed that in America the people's interests could be collectively realized. Both sides looked at the political struggles of the postwar years with distaste, viewing them as narrow and partisan reactions to large-scale changes. (227)

This kind of ideological unease sets the stage for the mid-1970s moment Didion and Adler are consumed by, but remains optimistic in its intent. Farber goes to great length to demonstrate the seeming perversity of the Yippie's intentions in Chicago. The myth-making he points to moves beyond obvious political connotations of Wexler's film as it elucidates the themes that come off the surface of his story, like skin at the top of burnt milk:

> Hoffman then went on, in an almost academic call on higher authority, to quote Marshall McLuhan at some length on the TV generation's dependence on myth for creating a 'participation mystique,' a feeling of belonging in the world. "Myth," Abbie asserted, "can never have the precision of a well oiled machine … it must have the action of participation and the magic of mystique. It must have a high element of risk, drama, excitement and bullshit." (45)

Indeed, the film's larger metaphor is contingent on this particular interplay between television and reality, film and truth, evoking the Yippies' very political framework. As Bodroghkozy elaborates throughout her book—first demonstrating how the youth generation of the 1960s was in fact reared on television, and even further, was collectivized under its sustained influence during the 1960s assassinations: "We need to take into account one of the dominant ways people in this period made sense of television

as a medium. Four years earlier television had provided fur days of continuous, uninterrupted coverage of the assassination and funeral of [JFK]" (32). Furthermore, networks, like Cassellis's own, "made much of their medium's ability to keep the nation together in a collective, shared experience … the dominant circulated meanings of the coverage emphasized the power of the medium" (Bodroghkozy). *Cool* shows all the arenas the participation mystique seemed to exist in—a club where Eileen and Cassellis presumably get high and go dancing in, the streets themselves—but refuses to participate, to fully espouse the rhetoric of Cassellis's own network.

Bodroghkozy speculates one step further when she incorporates Michael Shamberg's argument that the youth of this generation was able to see the narrative holes—the oppositional and uneven aspects of television's messages—and react to them. Thus, "following a strategy 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend,'" one idea within this vein posited the youth's enjoyment of the TV as a reaction against Nixon and Agnew—who were, unsurprisingly, disapproving (37). Whether or not we agree that the generational shift among television viewers occurred in this way, it positions Hollywood's interest in producing films of, even, this ilk. Moving past and on to the protest's participants, Wexler follows the police and tanks as they parade down the greenery. Wexler eyes his characters less than his point-and-shoot mechanisms, falling hard not for the promise of political change, but for the narrative freedom of the political moment.

The film's title comes from Marshall McLuhan's mid-1960s bestseller *The Medium is the Message*, which asserted that, because of television's complex, populist, interactive qualities it is an inherently "cooler" medium. At the moment of *Cool*'s

release, ads focusing on "McLuhanesque phrases, such as 'the fluid medium'"—a kind cool presentation—popped up across the Hollywood studio spectrum (Bodroghkozy, *Groove Tube* 14). Though Wexler claimed to understand the book very little, he plays with the seduction of television, documentary footage, and narrative film, even as he refuses direct political aims (*Cool* commentary).

The film's culminating scenes, like those on the Washington mall, take place during the actual 1968 protests as tanks enter the city and the crowd is tear gassed. Despite its unfortunate context, Wexler's film is beautiful, reverential even, in the final scene as Eileen and Cassellis speed off and their car crashes, killing them. The sound of a radio reporting on the crash comes in as the car violently veers off the road, killing the uncertain pair.

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Like the film itself, Wexler's characters remain at the fringe of politics. Seeking to use their camera to not simply reflect, but also engender spaces, Cassellis observes the speeches inside the convention while Eileen witnesses the so-called radical protestors (the footage shown is of kids: a conservatively dressed couple pushing a pram, for example). On the one hand, the film instantiates the disarray—refusing establishment ideals in Cassellis's objection to his network. But Wexler also employs them in the act of filmmaking—in Paramount's influence, in the Panthers' breaking of the fourth wall as they speak to the camera when Cassellis shows up for an interview:

> You don't want to know, man. You don't know the people. You don't show the people, Jack. I mean, dig, here's some cat who's down and out. I mean he's nobody … so the cat finds a brick and he throws it through Charlie's window, you understand. Or he takes a gun and he shoots [man positions finger like a gun into camera] then the cat lives, man. He really lives, dig? A hundred million people see the cat on the tube, man … You make him the TV star of the hour on

> the six, the ten, and the twelve o'clock news. Cuz what the cat is saying is truth, why don't you don't find out what really is? Why you always got to wait till somebody gets killed? (*Cool*)

The Panthers assert the fundamental trouble here—the one the Yippies hoped for: that television, or film, would offer a revolution even as its messages did not satisfy one of the most revolutionary cohorts. As Cassellis defends himself in this scene—falling back on the notion that it is his job and he "does it well"—he is deliberately unable to assuage the Panthers (*Cool*). In these moments, the members speak directly into the camera, at Wexler's argument. Like Harold's own position—as a real child of this very place in Chicago—the film does not lift him out of poverty, it only removes him for a series of weeks. The very reflection of liberal society the film offers fails to liberate in a final sense. Even within the diegesis, the characters fail to offer a full liberalism.

"Jesus, I love to shoot film," Cassellis says in one of *Medium Cool*'s most famous lines, asserting the obvious theme that underpins it. "This isn't just a movie; it a weapon" Ethan Mordden echoes in his assessment (238). In the background, it's date night in Eileen's house, and a televised special in tribute to John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy plays in the background as Dr. King's "I have been to the mountaintop" echoes, giving Eileen "chills" (*Cool*). In each scene that significantly features an assassination, this kind of interplay between a longing and reality exists. Here Eileen covets King's speech—recalling simplicity in his cadence while as she invokes the memory of her West Virginian spiritual rebirth by water. Set against *Time* magazine's 1967 cover—one that declared the 1960s youth as its "Man of the Year"—*Medium Cool* positions its characters at the fore, but not involved, in these assassinations and skirmishes ("The Inheritor").

On the one hand, Wexler's movie is shot with a cinematographer's eye for style and color that offers a kind of aesthetic reprieve from this moment and seems suggests pleasure amid—even within—chaos. In similar fashion, as "Sweet Georgia Brown" plays early in the film, Cassellis and a woman go on a date to the roller derby where violence is both masked and presented. Instead of the sounds of violent fighting and outbursts we see on screen, the song plays as the pair watches—and flirts—until the music drops out and the real sounds come in. It is loud and violent as participants hit and push each other: "Kill her, kill her" (*Cool*). Again, Cassellis does not involve himself in the violence, but instead derives another kind of pleasure from the fray. The sounds of the brawl continue as the two are shown having sex moments later.

The closest the film or its characters come to liberation is in the boy, Harold. But even in this, the characters fail when they leave him by dying in the accident. In a beautiful scene, Harold showers in Cassellis's home after the two have been out, admiring the prints on his wall and food he serves. The play is genuine: the boy character is not simply a constructed amalgam of poverty, but appears as a real child who has never been in a shower (*Cool* commentary). On the other hand, the characters he plays with are just that—characters.

These individuals are not a part of the Yippie or political framework—they are not members of the opposition—but spectators. Their organizing or liberating thrust is stagnated not only by the inherent falseness of the story (within its real footage), but also in the larger corporate strictures. This thrust presages the moment Cassellis will not only lose his job, but also discovers that "for about a year now [the station] has been letting the cops, and the FBI, study our footage" (*Cool*). Outraged, he replies: "What am I? A fake?

… It's a wonder more cameras haven't been smashed" (*Cool*). When Cassellis attempts to film more honest stories, the station head insists he hold back: "I got a convention coming up, plus, I've got a war, plus I got baseball, plus, I got a nervous city" and the list goes on (*Cool)*. When Cassellis continues to film, he loses his job. He is not even fired in person, but only in discovering he's been issued a severance slip.

Likewise, when Cassellis draws excitement through his invocation of "lov[ing] to shoot film" within and despite tragedy (MLK's assassination) he reveals his dualistic interest in genuine reportage—attempting to convince the station to allow him to pursue stories those in poverty or on racial tension—and narrative flair. As Wexler's camera follows the enterprising Cassellis, he insists the political demonstrators be seen through the lens of a camera as individuals who "reveled in the simulated world of the mass media" (Farber 250). "Their efforts were aimed not at concrete changes so much they were toward changing people's images and understanding—somehow those ideological changes would produce something better" (Farber). Even the real people are, then, implicated in this kind of false liberalism—one that might not produce live change, but would kill these characters. Even as the relatively faceless police allow Eileen to leave the stage of the protests when she insisting she has only gotten swept up in the scene, unease emanates.

As the characters move through the various scenes—recording the Panther's agenda, flying off the handle at the network, eschewing a day's work in favor of the agenda of depicting Chicago's race and poverty issues—they may hardly be center stage, but their youth, their energy, is the safe medium between radical (or non) SDS members, and *Time*'s facetious ideal of the under-25 man as a man of the year. Vietnam hardly

needs to be mentioned—the purpose extends far beyond literal political activity to artistic representations of politics. Echoing Vincent Canby's review in the *New York Times*:

> Franklin D. Roosevelt's theme, 'Happy Days Are Here Again,' serves as a soundtrack bridge between pious events in the International Amphitheater and the riots outside. That's like pouring catchup on a corpse. 'Medium Cool' is an awkward and even pretentious movie, but, like the report of the President's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, it has an importance that has nothing to do with literature.

If the later novelistic attempts at political plots of this moment would eschew in some senses a direct linkage between their politics and representation itself, *Cool* insists on its accuracies even as its veneer threatens to release us from political readings. The result is startling as, for instance, Wexler's camera captures the lush greenery of Chicago and points to a larger conceptual framework for the film. This framework was "more extensive" than what Wexler ever imagined: We enjoy the ruin and moral ambiguities as Eileen runs through the protests in a bright yellow dress—the characters remain anything but politically idealistic, or simple (*Cool* commentary).

2. Circling Typhoons

Speedboat (1976) is the story of Jen Fain, a younger woman who comes of age in the late 1960s to early 1970s, recalling her childhood socialist summer camps and East Coast lineage of the 1950s. Deeply epigrammatic, Jen offers little in the way of narrative. Instead, the book is composed of Jen's memories, thoughts, asides, and observations. On the one hand, this is a kind of *bildungsroman*; on the other, Jen never says where she progresses. Her relationships are conveyed, like her jobs and ambitions, within a particular New York milieu. Its referents in style are almost more filmic than literary: rarely are novels written with as little narrative thrust as this one.

Speedboat was Adler's first of two novels (*Pitch Dark,* her second and last, as of now, was released in 1984), set in a particular literary historic moment. In the Afterword to the New York Review of Books' reissued edition of *Speedboat* this year, Guy Trebay writes: "[T]he novel has a unique power to produce what Donald Barthelme described admiringly as 'glimpses into the special oddities and new terrors or contemporary life'" (173). To individuals versed in Joan Didion's essayistic conception of these years, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and so on, it is somewhat unsurprising to answer the question of her style with a rather boring summary; the critic Katie Roiphe characterized her as a representative of a so-called "damaged woman" ("*Speedboat* Mania…").

Positioned elliptically within its historical moment, Jen moves across temporal and literal spaces through Adler's pithy style. Her life is born of its historical moment, as Trebay calls upon Patty Hearst's sentencing, the Irish Republican Army, and Jimmy Carter's candidacy to situate its year of publication. This text is also, like *Democracy* and *Medium Cool*, not the one Adler was meant to write. In interviews, Adler, a longtime

staff writer at *The New Yorker* and, briefly, a film critic for the *New York Times*, claimed that she set out to write a thriller—a more narrative-based story (Robson). Instead, she wound up with what might loosely be construed as vignettes ending in biting aphorisms. Or, more precisely: as a metaphor en masse and in its parts, representing Jen's political and artistic moment in "everyday ephemera" (Indiana). This style points to a "mood" of stasis even as Jen moves physical and geographic coordinates—changing jobs and reporting stories.

As if anticipating *Democracy*, *Speedboat* is both metaphoric in form (holes in the text denoting holes in history, memory, time, so on) but also in the sum of its parts. Michael Wood's review of *Democracy* persuasively points to the relationship between form and meaning here. Even more pointedly than *Democracy, Speedboat* pokes holes in the supposed precision of narrative. For both writers, the questions turn to those of what a novel can accomplish; what a novel should accomplish; and if precision and a whole need even apply:

> Is it always possible to make narrative sense of things? Should we always try? In her earlier novels Didion implicitly answered yes to these questions, with rather disappointing results. … In *Democracy* she again implicitly (and successfully) answers yes, but explicitly she is saying only maybe. 'Most readers,' she shrewdly notes, are 'rather quicker than most narratives', and this means, I think, that while she needs narrative for this book, narrative does not meet all her needs. (Wood)

As if grasping at the straws of not only what one might convey of history and experience, Alder takes up these questions. She focuses significantly on what narrative and, indeed, life as a narrative can hold. Her parallel conjoins Jen's limitations and those of her story—philosophy, profession, art, and the indescribable—what exists in Barthes's obtuse angle when looking at an image (61).

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Speedboat opens with an epigraph from Evelyn Waugh's Vile Bodies that sets up the kind of multifaceted interpretations available throughout: "'*What war*?'" said the Prime Minister sharply. 'No one has said anything to me about a war. I really think I should have been told …' And presently, like a circling typhoon, the sounds of battle began to return" (Adler 6). There are the wars Jen touches on: the Six-Day War she nearly misses in Egypt, and Vietnam as the text's obvious backdrop. Figuratively, however, it is the war Jen is constantly caught off-guard by, linked to Adler's own "creating of a genre" referenced in the first page (7). The book itself has come out not as she intended. Adler presupposes another breaking of genres, another breaking of political formations. The "circling typhoon" is the formations that surround Jen herself as she is as caught off-guard by the notion of change, of impending shifts.

Jen at once situates the ineffably yearless quality of her own prose. She offers aphorisms in lieu of narrative: "That was a dream, of course, but many of the most important things, I find, are the ones learned in your sleep. … Everyone has the power to call your whole life into question here. Too many people have access to your state of mind" (Adler). The dream of this opening is the dream of the book itself; one "about art itself in a new kind of way; even more, it means that one of its essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new" (Jameson, "Postmodernism" 132-3).

At the same time, Adler evokes a feeling, a sentiment, a part of time; she also positions Jen against the grain. Lost in a kind of stasis, Jen's thoughts are critiques, uncertainties. Her strain of liberalism is, also, a discomfort with the term and disbelief in

its capabilities. The ideas and realizations Jen comes to in her sleep suggest that the only privacy she enjoys is in a metaphoric realm. In the light of day—or the light of a more linear narrative—realizations cannot be reached. She recalls a childhood through the lens of Communist summer camp in the mid-1950s; she studies in France and cites a hot-plate burning incident in a dorm room in more detail than an Algerian bombing. She dates different men with different descriptors, and works as a journalist, public library employee, and college teacher.

Jen is an intellectual, it is important to note—a woman of a certain milieu for whom being the principle character in one's life must be the point. This milieu enables her literary presentation on the one hand, and perhaps engenders it on the other. "The point," she says about both nothing in particular, and her agency in her own life—invoking Jameson's "blank irony"—"has never quite been entrusted to me" (55-6; "Postmodernism…" 17). The "point" Jen is bereft of is the one Adler deliberately eschews, using "all deliberate speed" to demarcate a cab rather than (and even as she invokes) politics, insisting on a lack of resolve in form and reference (50).

Her text, above and beyond the others I consider, invokes the contemporaneous political and literary critical mode: Jen views the historic as though it were a falsified document. There is no certitude—no sure norm for her. "On the other hand," Jürgen Habermas lectured in 1980, "the time consciousness articulated in avant-garde art is not simply ahistorical; it is directed against what might be called a false normativity in history" (4). For Jameson, writing in *Postmodernism*, similar details present. Where there is a "crisis in historicity," evinced in the disconnect between "any organic relationship between the American history we learn from schoolbooks and the lived experience of the

current multinational, high-rise, stagflated city of the newspapers," the novelistic resolve appears to be one which "resists interpretation" (*Postmodernism* 22-3). *Speedboat* is a text we might construe as minutely *by* an author and at the same moment represents the *looseness* of authorial presence. In this manner, it elides the hallmarks of narrative convention as Jen speaks both of *story* and to *us* at once. Adler's metaphoric and mimetic tendencies refuse an alignment between history and truth. Very little might be trusted in her eyes.

Even within this analysis, the epigraph's corollary, like the text's metaphoric components, is obscured by its montage quality; a constant reordering occurs as a sentence takes on new meanings and inflections. Her commentary is as much about the writing she will be doing, invoking Eagleton's notion that "the text constitutes itself as a structure: it destructures ideology in order to reconstitute it on its own relatively autonomous terms"—about stories themselves—as it is about precise historical corollaries (324). Early on, Jen intones: "For a while, I thought I had no real interests—no theater, concerts, museums, stamp collections. Only ambitions" (10). Moments later, "Now the ambitions have drifted after the interests. I have lost my sense of the whole. I wait for events to take a form. I remember someone saying, You've got to *steep* yourself in things. So I *steeped* myself, in thrillers, commercials, news magazines" (Adler). And finally: "The same person used to write 'tepid' and 'arguable' all over the margins of what our obituary writers wrote. I now think 'tepid' and 'arguable' several times a day" (Adler).

It is the kind of ironic detachment of Jen's immediate agency that comes to the fore in this passage—the presentation she offers is detached. At once bitingly funny (as if

a stamp collection is a "real interest" as opposed to what, exactly?) the passage is also deliberately melancholy. "I wait for events to take a form," Jen offers listlessly. Her sense of political stakes, despite her journalistic profession, is mutable: the "tepid" and "arguable" that now reside not only on the obituary pages, but also in Jen's psyche.

This tepidity runs across not only Jen's own life, but also one she insists on as she assesses literal politics. Writing sardonically of Gerald Ford, Jen says, "When a new President brought our national nightmare to an end by asking us to 'bind up the internal wounds,' we knew that we were almost in the clear" (82). Moments later she claims, "Citizens in the middle of small betrayals … described themselves as in a cranky mood" and then, "[i]nduction, detection, the very thrillers everyone was reading were obsolete. The jig was never up"—this "jig" is narrative itself—always ongoing in Jen's life even as it fails to cohere: "In every city, at the same time, therapists earned their living by saying, 'You're too hard on yourself'" (83).

Likewise, the disdain she exhibits above at the city's passivity meets it match when she encounters it firsthand; she reacts by incorporating such absurdity. Of her time working at New York's 42nd Street library, Jen encounters a man who says, in response to her question of research interests: "'I'm writing my autobiography,'" before she muses: "The trouble is, I sometimes understand that research project" (16). On the opposing page she claims: "Another weekend. Any dreams. P.O. Box 1492," playing, quite obviously with not only American dreams, but American flights of fancy—of its failures (17). This is Adler's autobiography, in one sense, as the project of *researching* one's own life story takes on meaning for Jen.

The political front here is one infused with the rhetoric of America—of its presentation in images, classrooms, and advertising that Jameson sees as "fed by postmodernism" ("Postmodernism…" 143). Jen's commentary is commentary on that very rhetorical structure—freedom as rhetoric, commodity. Just as these sections point toward Jen's overarching concerns as dutifully or explosively political, she insists against it, critiquing the mechanism of American history, as it exists:

> In a public school in a run-down section of Brooklyn, Mrs. Cavell, under a grant for special projects, was conducting her kindergarten civics class. "What are you?" she would say … "Today, we are going to say it in our individual voices," she said. "When I call on you, I want you to stand and say it proudly." (105)

"'All right'" she continues, intoning the teacher to the reader—again aligning herself with us. "'Jefferson Adams, what are you?'" Jefferson Adams got it: "'I'm free,'" he replied" and so the children continue until "Mrs. Cavell, a good soul, who had taught for thirty years in Brooklyn, saw a look of somehow disquieting resolution on Billy Martin's face. 'What are you, Billy Martin?' Mrs. Cavell asked. 'I am four,' he said" (Adler). For this child, one who jokingly refuses to state freedom as his cause, but rather states his age, she enacts a kind of smarmy response to history, and politics, as fact. Hers is not an overt liberalism here, but a deep unwillingness to conflate belief, or nonfiction, with the real or true.

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In Peter Campbell's review of *Pitch Dark* (a novel that employs similar techniques) in 1984, he suggests a dissonance between the snippets Adler presents and a unified whole. In response, we might once again take up Gary Indiana's notion of Jen's boredom—confusion—over the everyday as a matter of the text's form and production. In one of her asides, Jen mentions: "It is not at all self-evident what boredom is. It

implies, for example, an idea of duration. It would be crazy to say, For three seconds there, I was bored," and she continues: "It is no accident that boredom and cruelty are great preoccupations in our time. They flourish in a single region of the mind" (131-2).

The *threat* of boredom's consequences—of cruelty and anything born of it (a reference to growing up in the 1950s with an overarching awareness of totalitarianism rings out in one passage) holds over the text. A five-hour production of *Parsifal* Jen unwittingly attends under the guise of a fun evening out becomes cause for intense anxiety. "In some places, it may already have begun, the war of everybody against everybody, all against all" Adler asserts, " 'The Great Game … is finished when everyone is dead. Not before'" (30).

During another evening out, the same kind of subtle longing for death, or a new era, present. Jen remembers a "middle-aged gentle black worker speaking to his son who had insomnia. 'When you can't sleep … [just] tell yourself the story of your life" (50-51). The unsaid rejoinder is that the story of one's life is no longer a narrative, no longer available in a plot-centered form. Now, Jen thinks, prefiguring Didion's lead character Inez and reflecting the death of Cassellis and Eileen, "Suppose we blow up the whole thing. Everything. Everybody. Me. Buildings. No room. Blast. All dead. … Let's just have a little quiet around here" (Adler). The quiet she longs for is intimately tied here to the death or decay of society: the implication that one cannot achieve it without a "blast."

The blowing up of narrative follows from the blowing up of Jen's daydreams. And so the "holes" of the book themselves produce a kind of circular logic in creating a world of metaphoric capabilities—where nearly each thread takes on other meanings—only to refuse its interpretation and insist on a kind of brick wall. As Jen steeps herself in

things—emphasizing at once their inanity—the narrative itself, like her life's larger endeavors, become the aside. Obsessed with the minutia, *Speedboat* fragments into several readings, offering contradiction. Contradiction is, after all, a great part of Adler's pleasure; the story is funny, but "in an archly reserved way" (Indiana):

> Four-leaf clovers. … Many children take a stem from one three-leaf clover and a stem and a leaf from another and tie the stems together, in full consciousness that it is not the same. I know that. When I was last at my wit's end, I dreamed I parked my car on my way to my stabled horse and found the country roadside absolutely strewn with silver. It was overgrown with poison ivy, vicious, three-leafed, shining. It was by no means a parable about capitalism and making money. I believe in both, and would not think of dreaming against either. Anyway, I do not dream in parables. (37)

The idea here is striking. On the one hand, we feel compelled to read the book as a parable—Jen's life as warning against the flippancy of uncertainty in form and content. On the other, the anecdotes she provides read as parables, offering uncertainty as a kind of refrain. She at once refuses the extended metaphor of the dream, but in full self-contradiction claims she would not "think" of "dreaming against either." Of course that is exactly what she has done; in identifying the dream's subtext, she insists we read it as a capitalist critique.

Likewise, only under a kind of pointed duress (her disdain for the complications of an academic department, for instance) does Jen find a kind of decisive quality in herself. Her insights might be searing, but her very person is not. Her distaste for liberal academic notions is one of the few things certain:

> I visited the University of California at Santa Cruz once. It was rich, and near the sea, and full of redwoods. … "The only way you can get even a quorum of a class here," a professor told me, "is with a class in Sensitivity Training or Transcendental Meditation." I left soon. (30)

In the ensuing scene, Jen is in Paris at the moment of the Algerian crisis as a young student ("studying [at] the Cité Universitaire") when she witnesses a bombing. The details of the scene follow not about the bombing, which is peripheral, but to "[a]nother night" when an uninspired girl plays "oddly violent Guess Whats" (31). The guess this time is a hot plate burning: "The fumes were poisonous … 'Oh Ruth,' the girl said, like some reproachful loser in a mindless chess game, 'you always guess'" (31). The scenes here fall not on the obvious bombing, but on the peripheral dialogue. It is here, in Adler's realm, that metaphor asserts primacy: the united clover; the rich and overdone lushness of Santa Cruz as forced liberalism; the hot plate as both representation of political danger and also *more* dangerous than the bombing. It is because of the plate, rather than the bomb itself, that the room becomes poisoned.

With this elliptical focus, Adler depicts a particular kind of historical stasis. Amid the purported chaotic scenes of her generation, she builds on the narrative and character tensions—around the inability to progress. If Adler's prose is ceaselessly concerned with the mundane qualities of the everyday, it is also fixated on reflecting the inefficacy of one's own agency. Jen refuses cohesion. But, despite the cadence of her aphorisms, they have the feel of omniscience.

Jen's is not simply the problem of genre, or narrator, as the introduction purports, but also one of functionality: death looms. The stricture of Adler's text is that it functions as both highly elliptical and endlessly precise. It at once offers a metaphor of utter meaning and one devoid of idea. Adler plays with Jen as an emblematic woman and one who lacks representation. Her ability to restructure form to suit a kind of pointless book is, on the one hand, a seemingly entire aesthetic experience. On the other, it incorporates

a kind commentary on politics and society that is decidedly pointed. Adler's text employs aesthetic notions as the point of the book itself, even as it its descriptions change meaning. Like *Medium Cool*'s lush greenery, beautiful music, and yellow dress, the aesthetics masks and reveal the ideas behind the work. Adler's "archly reserved" humor is a kind of artistic ideology, a critique against establishment politics and, at once, its opposite: maintaining itself, thriving, in contradiction with no final gesture toward liberation.

3. Refracted Identities

Set during the final days of the Vietnam War as Saigon is invaded, *Democracy* pushes past a linear depiction of events, breaking the proverbial fourth wall, as Didion the character commands and confides in the reader. *Democracy* is written from the narrator Joan Didion's perspective as she insists we view her critique of the characters she reports on alongside political processes and events. "At the heart of this novel is not so much a character or a situation as a set of perceptions, colours, dreams, a response to a poem, notes on places, scraps of dialogue, tiny signs of large events in American history" Michael Wood wrote in *The London Review of Books*.

The plot goes somewhat as follows: Joan Didion, a character in the novel, recounts her meetings with Inez Victor, a woman of financial and social standing from Hawaii (who she knew in her early 20s), the wife of politician Harry Victor, a failed presidential candidate from the 1972 election. The Victors, most especially Harry, are quintessentially liberal. He recounts actively seeking out a photographer in *Life* magazine to capture his "getting tear-gassed in Grant Park" during the 1968 Chicago convention. There is also a kind of murder mystery, but the resolution is simple: Inez's increasingly mentally ill father kills her sister's lover, and this must be hushed up, away from the Victors' class and political circles. The story Didion meant to tell, she writes, is one of Inez's past—her family's "colonial impulse" in Honolulu—lunches at "the Pacific Club," younger daughter Janet's "defensive veneer of provincial gentility," their mother's stories of arriving on the islands (25-6). Instead of Inez's first person, we are provided with Didion's. The novel becomes an exercise in what she can, and will, show.

The characters of *Democracy* are, as Szalay and other reviewers have shown,

amalgams of types from that period—representations, in a sense, of political and ideological formations. In the book's culminating moments, Inez's daughter Jessie, a heroin user, runs off to Saigon as the war comes to a head. In a flurry of action, Jack Lovett, Inez's lover, rescues the girl. Szalay argues that the romantic trio mirrors Didion's political inclinations. He situates Harry Victor as a kind of JFK figure, Inez as Jackie, and Lovett as Onassis (the date of their deaths, he notes, nearly coincide), suggesting a kind of love affair born long before the end of her marriage with Harry:

> Published during Jackson's 1984 presidential bid, Didion's novel looks back on the seventies from the vantage point of [Jessie] Jackson's emergent Rainbow Coalition, a political formation that expressed the utopian social aspirations of postwar liberalism. Her heroine rejects the interracial vision that Jackson would come to express. (253)

Inez Victor takes up with Jack Lovett after he returns from Saigon before his sudden death. As a sort of C.I.A. operative and man she has known since before her marriage, Lovett is an estranged and welcomed character. After his sudden death, the novel ends with Inez working in an orphanage and Didion seeking her out for interviews.

Inez's journey is nearly solipsistic; her mind, like Jen's, is the only thing that remains close to certain, even as the texts fail to deliver on them as certainties. Reviewing *Democracy,* Mary McCarthy called on the filmic quality across the novel, "Like the camera, this mental apparatus does not think but projects images, very haunting and troubling ones for the most part, precisely because they are mute." This kind of haunting clouds Didion's text so that it becomes nearly a mystery as complex as Jameson's postmodern apparatus, rather than a story. The enigma is metaphoric, reflecting the change in political power structures as Didion the writer viewed the 1980s political ensembles and the dissipation of postwar liberal identities.

In the text, Didion the character recalls her younger adult life (true to the real life Joan Didion) wherein she worked with Inez at *Vogue*, attended Berkeley, and recalls nonfiction from earlier stages in her career. Thus, the novelist Didion places fact alongside fiction; the characters seem nearly historical and her interest in them is itself reportage—"What I had there was a study" (22).

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The stakes in the story are, in some senses, higher for Didion here than for Adler. There is a political complexity born not simply of the political nature of Didion's story but, crucially of the very in-club that she posits. The references of *Democracy*'s world, like those of *Medium Cool*'s, require a kind of secret handshake. A code that allows Didion the writer to construct a story around Didion the narrator who, in turn, watches as the story of Inez unfolds. When Didion arrives in the final scenes to interview Inez, she remarks in a profoundly Jen Fain manner:

> They were definitely connected to her but she could no longer grasp her own or their own uniqueness, her own or their difference, genius, special claim. What difference did it make in the long run what she thought, or Harry thought, or Jessie or Adlai did? What difference did it make in the long run whether any one person got the word, called home, dreamed of a white Christmas? The world that night was full of people flying from place to place and fading in and out and there was no reason why she or Harry or Jessie or Adlai, or for that matter
> Jack Lovett … should be exempted from the general movement.
> Just because they believed they had a home to call.
> Just because they were Americans.
> No. (208)

Wood agrees: "Inez haunts us not like a memorable character but like a troubling lyric in the middle of a story … the persistent song keeps threatening to unravel into mere rags of rational guesswork." This rational guesswork is what we might guard against in our reading of Adler's characters. For Didion, the allusions are similarly murky. McCarthy

calls upon *Heart of Darkness* as a kind of corollary within the book. Szalay posits this holds in regard to “Lovett, Didion’s Mr. Kurtz” (260). I suggest that association moves toward the terrifying—in which the intrigue of a murder mystery is more a forum for the terrors of class and social problems than storytelling.

Democracy is the story of Didion at once constructing a character that resembles Jen Fain of a later vintage, and one also of narrative’s constraints. Older than Jen, with an entirely different social and personal standing, the book is born of a later political moment. While Didion suggests a preoccupation with Inez’s history, like *Speedboat*’s holes, she gives us another story. One constructed around the elliptical history of Inez’s marriage and family’s downfall. Didion began thinking of these questions at “a point in my life when I lacked certainty” (17). She reflects the lack of narrative delineations and, significantly, something even more elusive.

Didion’s characters refract through history and time as if held not by specific points, but by Inez and the character Didion’s uncertainties—the venues unfold before them. In an interview Inez conducts during Harry’s 1972 nomination campaign, an Associated Press writer prods her to describe the “‘major cost’ of public life” (51). She replies with varying degrees of certainty: “‘Memory, mainly,’” and, later “‘Something like shock treatment,’” and then, “‘No. I mean you lose track. *As if* you’d had shock treatment … Of what happened … During your whole life’” (Didion). The reporter jumps on the invocation of “shock treatment” even as Inez insists she is only describing a feeling.

The montage effect is what Inez refers to here—a kind of lack of stasis in her everyday reality even as she forgets facts until reminded of them by the reporter. Inez

suggests that the footage the reporter has viewed is more accurate than the everyday memories she has forgotten, or neglects. The allegory that Alan Nadel has pointed to here is not "to define our position in the world but," at least in part, "about our ability to believe in our personal and national allegories" across the text (96). "Cards on the table," both Mary McCarthy and he have noted, may be a phrase Didion employs as she feigns a kind of openness across the text, but from the reader's vantage we see a closed hand (17).

In her opening, Didion is a reflexive character in the story she is writing, viewing the story she will be telling through real and false elements. The narrator writes of herself teaching a class at Berkeley where she encounters a composition textbook and reads: "'*Didion begins with a rather ironic reference to her immediate reason to write this piece … Consider, too, Didion's own involvement in the setting: an atmosphere results. How*?" (17). Narrative authority, as Nadel has shown, is very much up for grabs. Even as this character Didion evokes atmosphere, she refuses novelistic certainty as she mimics: "*Let the reader be introduced to Joan Didion* … So Trollope might begin this novel. I have no unequivocal way of beginning it, although I do have certain things in mind" (16). Thus, Didion the character and her interest in showing how she shapes and frames narrative, echoing Wexler, becomes the book's primary cause.

The atmosphere, as in *Speedboat*, is as much one of what constitutes narrative as it is about these political formations. Michael Wood suggests, "the book is in one sense about the language these characters inhabit, the awful homes of stereotype they make or borrow to live in." Inez is in a higher social class than Jen, surrounded by euphemism (her daughter is not an addict but a girl with "substance habituation"), but the result is a lack of depth all around her, a refusal of Harry's political liberalism as personally

liberating. Instead, a deep skepticism takes hold.

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"Politics is for assholes, and she's not interested in producing blueprints for how to change the world. She's interested, rather, in weapons that can destroy it" Szalay claims of Didion's own political alignment (268). This liberal refusal is manifest through these characters: In a telling scene early in the book, Lovett strikes out with descriptive flourishes. Not of sunsets, but of atomic testing in the early 1950s, evoking simplicity in the wholesale destruction of the bomb. "In *Democracy*," Szalay contends, "the bomb promises to clear the rot and stench of Washington, DC, if not all collectivizing forms of representation" (Didion).

Lovett seems hardly a part of a nation so much as an economic enterprise. "Water under the bridge and dynamite it behind you," Didion writes of his seemingly ahistorical philosophy, born of his nostalgia for a moment before "they were using computers instead of analogs for the diagnostics [of nuclear tests in the Aleutians]"—even as that nostalgia is rejected by the terror of those tests (18; 13). Lovett is a politically and personally unmoored character; while he saves young Jessie and provides a capitalistic prowess, those actions don't offer satisfaction or groundedness. He dies in a swimming pool shortly after he and Inez travel together. As "one of those men for whom information was an end in itself," Lovett elides the complexities of Inez's personality and alignments—hers are ever shifting, ephemeral, like Didion's own text (36).

Instead, Lovett provides the simple opportunities of commerce. He "was also a man for whom the accidental did not figure" (Didion). Positioned against the host of other characters—extending even toward Jen herself—Lovett resides not only as a

transcendent figure within this network of capital and complexities. He also works in various places, holds various roles (not unlike Jen herself, of course), but his positions incite no personal tension. "That there is money to be made in time of war is something we all understand abstractly … but Jack Lovett did, not abstractly but viscerally," she writes, echoing not a person but, instead, the relationship between *Medium Cool* and Paramount (159).

In the final chapters, Didion the narrator, present throughout but engrossed in her story, comes to the fore. As Inez reveals the story of Jack Lovett's death—the two have been traveling as lovers—the story becomes increasingly cryptic even as more is revealed. Lovett's death is provided without detail as the book relays Inez's experience watching it unfold: "She had thought at the exact moment of reaching for the towel about the telephone number he had given her, and wondered who would answer if she called it" (222). We are not told what she saw (his body, of course, floating), simply that she "had sat on the edge of the pool with Jack Lovett's head in her lap until the Tamil doctor arrived" (223).

Professor Emily Apter, writing in *American Literary History* of the "paranoia of a world system" two decades later positions a more evolved version of the Lovett-Inez relationship. This relationship is one "giving rise to endless mirroring—defines not only the paranoid character of knowledge but also the condition of subjective rivalry with intellectual globality; the subject's jealousy of an alienating object—thought—that threatens to subsume or englobe it entirely" (372). Their life after the war presages this very alienation, and variation on paranoia. As a character and object, Lovett's job is tied to unknowable global operations. For his capital and political prowess (his ability to

ascertain information and find where Jessie Victor has run off to, for instance, is conveyed with an admiring eye by Didion), Lovett is awarded a kind of special pass, one that enables him to move beyond the narrow operations of Didion's world to something outside the text—something larger. Inez, somewhat broken, lets her own nationality go.

Lovett functions as a kind of capitalist ownership as he controls the scene, operates around and outside the story. While Didion troubles herself with the minutia of structures—seeking to break them by reorienting the novel's terms, telling us several times that the story she meant to tell is not this story at all—Lovett lives, and finally dies, extraterritorially; both from the book and from geography itself.

Didion the character ends where she begins—with the moment she met Inez in Kuala Lumpur, where the story becomes a question of memory itself.

> I have been examining this picture for some years now and still lack the reason why Inez Victor finally agreed to talk about what she 'believed' had happened ("I believe we were in Jakarta," Inez would say, or "let's say it was May," as if even the most straightforward details of place and date were intrinsically unknowable, open to various readings) … (215)

Nothing here is truthful or direct. The beliefs these characters hold—beliefs of memory, of real events—are abstracted metaphors for their interactions with family, nationality, political process and belief. In Kuala Inez loses her American identity by choice—she discards it. The obsession of the narrator, like that of Inez herself, resides within the minutia: "At one point," Didion says, "I tried to work out a chronology for what Inez remembered of this period," but, like Inez herself, she becomes preoccupied with the question of *which* 15th of April Jessie was rescued: by America or Hong Kong's clock (213)? Her own aims, like politics themselves, are obscured by her search for perfection in the mundane.

The question of stasis at once turns esoteric and elusive. For a woman who "had spent her adult life immersed in Harry Victor's conviction that he could be president," Inez finally resides outside her class's social apparatus and, consequently, "ceased to claim the American exemption" implying a kind of ending with implications for American culture and consciousness (211). On a private plane she flies with his body from Halim to Manila, Manila to Guam, Guam to Kwajalein, and then to Johnston and Honolulu. The names of these territories are told as commands to us, the reading audience: "Say Kwajalein. Say Johnston" (224). The places, like the final days of Lovett's own life, in which he various political ties and associated indiscretions, are revealed as abstract nouns.

The entire retelling, however, insists on a surprising degree of certainty. Like *Speedboat* and *Medium Cool*, the text's physical looseness is still rendered with factual precision. Didion the character goes to great lengths to establish that her presence in Kuala Lumpur is, of necessity, deliberate: "No one 'happens to be' in Kuala Lumpur, no one 'passes through' en route nowhere, and for me to see Inez there implied premeditation, a definite purpose on my part and a definite decision on hers" (216). In fact, the two women coming together seems as first like a press play—journalist Didion goes to see political wife of a former presidential candidate off working with orphans.

When Inez divorces herself from political context she also seeks to remove herself from known history, joining Kurtz. She pushes again and again toward an unspecified grain where, as she says in the AP interview, she can hardly remember what has been said, recorded, or taped of her life, and what is true. A recording, she posits, will be more accurate than her own memory. Didion's sparse novel holds similar weight: the other

information, other accuracies we do not see but are told exist and are better beyond. What we are provided are refusals of the liberal agenda, and uncertainties about the alternative.

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Returning to the question of nostalgia—the kind we have for this period—the complexity that unites these texts seems to offer the reader something significant, but different, in their political and artistic refusals. Part of the unifying principle that underpins each of these works is a dedication to complexity not only in character, but also in aesthetic styles and sensibilities. Adler's prose might be biting, but it is also quick, elusive, and even beautiful. Didion's work holds a similar cachet. As she and Inez sift through places and plots, a kind of belated Jackie O. sensibility permeates; they too are women of a certain vantage, taking a certain trip, telling a certain story. *Medium Cool*'s characters and cinematographic eye often want to serve as recompense for the riot's terrors. As Eileen runs down the street in her bright yellow sundress, the quality of the film almost transcends the moment's horrors. Still, Cassellis and Eileen insist we see their own ambivalences rather than a perfect liberalism or buttoned-up opposite.

Rita Felski, along with others, has discussed the enchantment texts offer at the level of the cadence of prose and in the overall rhythm of watching or reading an entire narrative (53). These books and film offer both aspects of enchantment, even as they refuse the kind of compartmental narrative modes we are often most accustomed to. In moving outside traditions, each of these works has obtained a kind of cult following, one that no doubt influences their current cultural cachet. The nostalgia many reflect upon when considering this era is in part nostalgia for what we might view as a more honest and troubled accounts of histories and fictions.

As each of these texts eschews conventions, asking with an authorial conviction what their respective mediums can accomplish, they also belabor the aesthetic point. Each offers us a way to enjoy nostalgia for the period through the guise of aesthetic appreciation, even as they offer more. Jen Fain might be a difficult character to find sympathy with, but her voice draws us in through its intelligence. If the 1950s brought with it a host of works, referenced above, on the stifling norms of society, it also brought a complex picture of what the modern, postwar world would offer. Jen Fain is born of this moment, and her response is as troublingly elusive as it is seductive.

For me, thinking on Timothy Parrish's concern that scholars read texts like these and see not for their nuance, but their supposed liberal positions, leads to the inevitable conclusion that such reading is insufficient. Wexler, Adler, and Didion did not avoid the aesthetic in positioning their political ideals, nor do they create liberating, sure, and successful characters. Instead, they each offer deeply complex and, even, flawed, individuals by political standards.

It seems to me that the deeply epigrammatic work Adler offers, the discomfort Didion places upon her characters and her own failures in their depiction, even Wexler's line between story-teller and journalist, begs larger questions. If we might locate, within the moment of postmodernism, an increased discomfort in narrative's world—what it does, is, and offers—we might also locate that discomfort within these texts. The response is a political manifestation both in the obvious moments of the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and so on, but also in the political position of writers and artists in a larger frame. As Wexler's camera follows the protests but refuses to participate, as *Medium Cool*'s cocktail party shows a kind of precursor to the world the

1970s would come to inhabit, it also points to the dissonance between what representation offers and what is required.

If Tom Wolfe's famous 1970 essay "The Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny's" would signify the conjoining, if not appropriation, of what we might conservatively call progressive and leftist politics by social idealists (even, some would say, the elite), these texts refuse that kind of coolness. That essay discusses, in as cool a manner as anything, the moment the Black Panthers meet the Upper East Side, as it were, in a Park Avenue birthday party. As aesthetically oriented as the texts I explore may be—as lost as we find ourselves in their enchantments—they do not quite allow for a world that breaks down the barriers between what is political action and what is narrative formation. Even as their characters move toward that liberating thrust, none of them are the Black Panthers, none SDS members, none even the Leonard Bernstein of Wolfe's essay. Instead, their discomfort offers what is perhaps a picture of that moment that reads beautifully, but pushes beyond the neatness of a headline.

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