

# Simulacra and Stimulations

## *Cocksure*, Postmodernism, and Richler's Phallic Hero

Whether or not Mordecai Richler's *Cocksure* (1968) can still be regarded as "one of the most embarrassing books in Canadian literature" (Warkentin 81), it has certainly been treated as one of Richler's least successful and least significant satires. Despite winning the Governor General's award for fiction in 1968 (an award it shared with Richler's essay collection *Hunting Tigers Under Glass*), and despite Richler's own judgment that it is one of his best novels, many early reviewers agreed that *Cocksure's* ribald mockery of everything from sexual liberation and bourgeois bohemia to mass media and identity politics "lashes out without having a definite place to lash out from" (Wain 34). Subsequent scholarship on the novel echoes this criticism and is similarly hesitant to endorse Richler's enthusiastic self-evaluation (Woodcock 53; McSweeney 27; Ramraj 78). Yet, the "flaws" that unite the novel's detractors—its enthusiasm for "pornographic" vignettes, its seemingly incoherent superabundance of satiric targets, and its apparent lack of a stable moral center—may be accounted for in terms other than an authorial imagination that is "arrested at the level of the high-school lavatory wall" (McSweeney 27).

Margaret Gail Osachoff comes closest to identifying an alternative approach to understanding the novel's complexity when she notes that *Cocksure* satirizes "the cult of youth, organ transplants, and, especially, the film industry," drawing particular attention to the way that "movies can usurp life . . . to the extent that those lives are lived (if that is the right word) in a moral vacuum" (37). Although it does not name it as such, Osachoff's brief but suggestive analysis points to what theorists at the time increasingly

described as the socio-economic “condition” of postmodernity. When approached from this angle, *Cocksure* emerges as a significant but neglected (and typically Richlerian) engagement with postmodernity’s many discontents—an engagement, moreover, that strikingly anticipates the subsequent theorizations of two of postmodernity’s most celebrated diagnosticians, Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard.

By staging a confrontation between conventional morality and the weightless logic of postmodern simulation in which Richler’s liberal humanist belief in “the possibilities within each of us for goodness” (Richler, *Cocksure* 190) comes out the loser, *Cocksure* allegorizes a melancholy and nostalgic version of the much-publicized “death” of the political subject in postmodernism. As I will argue, Richler’s depiction of the liberal humanist subject’s fatal immersion in a postmodern world of empty, endlessly circulating signs is ultimately self-implicating, for the novel draws Richler’s own role as a writer and critic of the postmodern scene into the orbit of its satire. In this context, the novel’s so-called ethical ambivalence, the difficulty it has locating the basis of its own critique, reflects a more complex set of dilemmas than critics have acknowledged. Moreover, far from representing a series of “gross adhesions to the text” (McSweeney 27), the novel’s “adolescent” phallic economy can be seen to play a strategic role in organizing Richler’s blistering response to emergent postmodernity, nostalgically monumentalizing, and perhaps minimally reviving, modernity’s flagging phallic hero.

### **Richler’s Postmodernism**

The main plot of *Cocksure* allegorizes the triumph of postmodernity in terms of the absorption of a traditional London publishing house, Oriole Press, into the “international business empire” of the grotesque and mysterious Star Maker, a film and publishing “Goliath” who oversees his global interests from a Las Vegas mansion staffed with a private army of killers clad in black motorcycle gear. Reputedly “ageless and undying,” the Star Maker is more Frankenstein’s monster than man (29). Originally Greek, he is now “[p]ieces and patches,” “a little bit of everything” (137), prolonging his life through visits to his “mobile operating theatre,” where he undergoes skin grafts, organ replacements, and blood transfusions provided by a reluctant stable of “spare-parts men” (1-2). After first rising to prominence as a Hollywood studio head during the 1930s, one of “a handful of kikes, dagos, and greaseballs, controlling the images that Protestant America worshipped” (138), he eventually dispensed with the “messy” human imperfections of his film actors

altogether. Assuming the Godlike role of a Victor Frankenstein, he hired a team of scientists to design artificial “Goy-Boy” film stars who can be stored in deep freezes or deflated and hung in closets between films. As the novel opens, the blurted obscenity of a disgruntled minion—“Go fuck yourself!” (3)—inspires the Star Maker to pursue a monstrous new project. Already obsessed with the fluid gender possibilities suggested by prominent historical transvestites and transsexuals like the Chevalier d’Éon, Tiresias, and Christine Jorgensen, Richler’s villain surgically transforms himself into “the first self-contained creator” (202), able to both sire and carry his own heir in an obscene parody of immaculate conception.

Such details leave little doubt that Richler intends the “ageless and undying” Star Maker as a symbol for the monstrous appetites, expansive energy, transcendent appearance, and self-replicating power of capitalism. As the Star Maker tells Mortimer, “The revolution eats its own. Capitalism recreates itself” (135)—a reference to the Star Maker’s dismemberment of his henchman for spare parts, a reference which pointedly cannibalizes Marx and Engels’s famous definition of capitalism as a system wherein “[t]he bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production” (224). More particularly, Richler’s Star Maker closely resembles what Jameson calls “late capitalism,” a post-World War II, multinational and consumer-oriented phase of capitalist development marked by “a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas” and a concomitant “rise of the media and advertising industry” (Jameson 36):

The Star Maker, his interests global, swooped out of the sky one day to settle a strike on a Malayan opium farm and the next day flew on to Rome, perhaps to fire the director on one of his multimillion-dollar film productions. His interests were . . . vast and all-embracing, taking in film and TV production companies, airlines, newspapers, diamond mines, oil refineries and gambling casinos . . . (29)

The interpenetration of capital and media that the Star Maker’s “all-embracing” interests represent, as well as the disturbing mobility and invisibility they make possible, register precisely the “prodigious expansion” that Jameson identifies as the economic basis for his now classic account of postmodernism as “the cultural logic of late capitalism” (1)—a logic in which “aesthetic production . . . has become integrated into commodity production generally” (4), yielding, among other things, “a new depthlessness” and a “weakening of historicity” that inhere in “a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum” (6). The eventual dispersal of the Star Maker’s scientific team of “Goy-Boy” android-builders that occurs when “[s]ome of [its] best geniuses

go commercial,” getting involved in “germ warfare and H-Bomb production” (142), is similarly prescient, anticipating Jameson’s sobering observation that “this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world” (5). The ascendancy of such a new “global, yet American” postmodern depthlessness in which image-flows replace narrative and history is precisely what the novel allegorizes in the monstrous American movie mogul’s takeover of a traditional British press, the symbolic last bastion of “humane literary values” (McSweeney 26).

Given Richler’s longstanding interest in film—and his satirist’s distrust of system builders—it is not surprising that his delineation of late capitalism’s cultural logic ultimately focuses more on the effects that its image-making has on individuals than on broader matters of political economy. Thus, despite its nods to the Star Maker’s global commercial network, Richler’s satire of postmodernism tends to anticipate Baudrillard’s more abstract and media-focused account of simulation—an account upon which Jameson nonetheless draws heavily in his theorization of postmodern depthlessness. Postmodernity, in Baudrillard’s formulation, is marked above all by the subject’s immersion in mediascapes and artificial environments: the subsequent generation of reality out of “memory banks and command models” (*Simulacra 2*) causes the traditional “metaphysical” relation between image and referent to “implode” (81-82). For the old dichotomy of reality and representation, postmodernism substitutes hyperreality and simulation (2). The Star Maker’s collection of prefab WASP actors are, in this sense, hyperreal. Modeled on, but radically surpassing, modernist Edward Gordon Craig’s director-centered disregard for stage actors as “übermarionette[s],” the Star Maker’s rubber and wax puppets generate a cinematic vision of “the ideal American male” (Richler 139) that is “more real than real” (Baudrillard, “Evil” 195). As the Star Maker reveals to Mortimer about the origins of “Operation Goy-Boy,”

The Motivational Research boys, the pollsters, covered America for us, and came back with twenty thousand completed forms. We fed these forms into the most advanced computers and finally settled on body and face possibilities. (139)

The result of this process of computerized “combinatory algebra” (Baudrillard, *Simulacra 2*) is not merely the dissemination of perfected images of American masculinity, but a hyperreal collapse of the conventional distinction between image and reality which, in Baudrillard’s thought, marks “an ultimate stage of disenchantment with the concepts and categories of enlightenment thought”

(Norris 172). This conceptual implosion of image and “reality” is made apparent in the narrator’s mockery of the protagonist, Mortimer, whose adolescent worship of the Star Maker’s synthetic matinee idol (69) implicitly accounts for his bland, “[c]onventionally handsome” resemblance to, variously, “old-style movie stars” (25), “the smiling sincere husband in the unit trust advertisements” (25), and “one of those male models . . . getting out of a sports car in the *Esquire* ads” (26). A parallel, but more literal, dramatization of “the murderous capacity of images” that illustrates how they are “murderers of the real, murderers of their own model” (Baudrillard, “Evil” 196) is the new “Our Living History” biography series at the Star Maker’s recently-acquired Oriole Press. Overseen by the Star Maker’s henchman, Dino Tomasso, the series focuses on obscure contemporary figures whose dull biographies are suddenly transformed into hot properties when Dino murders them shortly before publication. The title of the deadly series aptly suggests a muddling of temporal categories and the loss of historical depth that both Baudrillard and Jameson attribute to the culture of simulation.

In all of these ways, the Star Maker thus emerges as the Satanic deity of this increasingly simulated universe, assuming the role of creator that “[p]reviously only God” had played (139). This role culminates in his bizarre pregnancy, wherein the production of his heir through a hermaphroditic closed-circuit symbolizes the “implosive” generation of hyperreality from command models and the murder of the real this entails. By removing any relationship to an outside, the Star Maker’s self-impregnation literally embodies the “fatal strategy” of Baudrillard’s simulacrum, which “reproduces” itself without reference to the real, according to an immanent logic that “leaves images no other destiny than images” and leads, like the Star Maker’s body, to “an exponential folding of the medium around itself” (“Evil” 195). Moreover, the autoerotic narcissism made possible by the Star Maker’s new form suggests that Richler, like Baudrillard, locates the central affect of contemporary media saturation in “a kind of primal pleasure . . . an anthropological joy in images” (“Evil” 194). As the Star Maker says to Mortimer:

Fifty years ago would you have believed in men flying into outer space? . . . There is inner space as well as outer, you see. And it’s fun, oh it’s such fun. In all my years, I have enjoyed nothing more than making love to me. (202)

Like the Star Maker’s extrapolation of modernist theatrical “marionettes” into actual robot actors, his evocation of movements into both outer and inner space posits a historic break with the modernity of “fifty years ago” that is recognizably postmodern. Here, the Star Maker’s embodiment of an

obscene, self-gratifying “inner space” constitutes a striking symbolization of an “imploded” media funhouse. In this space, a labyrinthine hall of mirrors produces a seemingly infinite play of recursive images in a pornographic “ecstasy of communication.”

If the self-love through which the godlike Star Maker conceives his heir is a parody of the “immaculate conception,” it is significant that a simulated version of his nascent “son” (202) is already present when the novel begins in a scene between Mortimer and his visiting fourth-grade teacher:

Mortimer took Miss Ryerson firmly by the arm, leading her across Oxford Street and to the Corner House, stopping to collect the *Sunday Times* for them to study at tea. Unfortunately Miss Ryerson picked up the magazine section first, opening it at the glistening all-but-nude photograph of a sensual pop singer, a young man caressing a cat. The singer wished to star in a film about the life of Christ. Jesus, he was quoted as saying, was no square. But a real groovy cat. (7-8)

Here, Richler cynically suggests, is the “saviour” of the postmodern age. The fact that this parodic postmodern Christ appears long before any “immaculate” conception by the Star Maker also makes possible an ingenious substitution. By placing the newborn-seeming “all-but-nude” pop star, who still only dreams of playing Christ, at the beginning of the narrative, Richler aligns the young man’s future film role with the birth of the Star Maker’s son. The sequencing suggests, in other words, that the Star Maker’s postmodern Christ will be “incarnated” not as the flesh-and-blood child he is carrying, but as a total simulation on the big screen, an “incarnation” that perversely rejects the body to affirm the murder of the real by its images.

Whereas Baudrillard’s writing often seems perversely fixated on the apocalyptic postmodern sublime, Richler’s judgement on this “age of simulation” that “begins with a liquidation of all referentials” (*Simulacra* 2) is unambiguous. The work of a moralist who “writes out of a sense of disgust with things as they are” (Gibson 271), *Cocksure* repeatedly dramatizes the ethical and epistemological consequences of simulation’s unmooring of the traditional relationship between signs and meaning that Baudrillard describes as “the dialectical capacity of representations as a visible and intelligible mediation of the Real” (“Evil Demon” 196). In the absence of such a mediatory function, signs become merely objects of “brute fascination unencumbered by aesthetic, moral, social or political judgements” and embrace a fundamental “immorality” (194). *Insult*, a BBC-2 talk show hosted by “inquisitor” Digby Jones, whose interviews involve a kind of sophistry that superficially “exposes” the depravity of even the most morally upstanding guests for the

gratification of mob-like audiences, exemplifies Richler's outrage at mass media's production of semantic depthlessness and moral vacuity.

Although Richler's comic *aperçus* concerning the pretensions and follies of sexually "radicalized" 1960s liberals do not obviously pertain to his depiction of an amoral postmodern world dominated by simulation, these two narrative strands are, in fact, profoundly intertwined—and with good reason. As Jameson argues, "the economic preparation of postmodernism or late capitalism began in the 1950s" when "new products and new technologies (not least of those the media) could be pioneered," but the cultural preconditions for postmodernism's emergence as a hegemonic "structure of feeling" are to be found in "the enormous social and psychological transformations of the 1960s, which swept so much of tradition away on the level of *mentalités*" (xx). Such a co-implication of counterculture and high-tech in precipitating the emergence of a postmodern era is precisely what *Cocksure* depicts, for Richler's mockery of a hip 1960s liberalism that has adopted the mantras of countercultural revolt as a style is always aligned with his satire of a Debordian society of spectacle.

For instance, Richler's wicked portrait of the ultra-progressive Beatrice Webb school, where male students receive blow jobs as rewards for academic excellence (169) and "uncompromisingly radical parents" entreat the "Expressive Movement" coach to allow their children five minutes to masturbate after class (112), obviously skewers the pretensions of educational experiments of the 1960s. But the school's performance of the Marquis de Sade's *Philosophy of the Bedroom* as a Christmas pageant starring ten-year-old *ingénues* also critiques the "radicalized" discourse of sexual liberation and exposes the culture of simulation as a form of pornographic spectacle. The exchangeability of these positions is cleverly suggested prior to the play's production by a classroom lesson in which a student confuses "marquis" with "marquee" (19-20), a mistake that implicitly connects the school's attack on repression to simulation's attack on the real. The Star Maker's "progressive" identification of his own polymorphous sexuality with the "many gradients on the Kinsey scale" (202), as well as the obscene performance he stages for Mortimer (while holding forth on his own "philosophy of the bedroom"), similarly attest to the convergence of simulation and stimulation in Richler's novel.

What these episodes reveal, when filtered through Richler's unforgiving moral lens, is that the liberal attack on repression in the name of a Sadean "life force" (23) is not substantially different from simulation's attack on the real, even if these attacks privilege "depth" and "surface," respectively.

Ultimately, a philosophy of the bedroom produces an amoral state of polymorphous perversity where, literally, anything goes, precisely because a worldview that demonizes every limit as a repression to be overcome implies a movement beyond good and evil. As Mortimer's treacherous and nihilistic friend Ziggy maintains, "Life is meaningless. Totally absurd" (150). For Richler, this is the ethical corollary of the process of simulation, a process that cancels the relationship between image and referent, rendering all signs equivalent and infinitely exchangeable. Richler's double-edged critique of postmodernity can thus be summarized by Baudrillard's dictum about postmodernism: "in the absence of rules of the game, things become caught up in their own game" ("Evil" 195).

### **Richler's Phallic Hero**

Throughout *Cocksure*, Richler indicates the omnipresence of postmodernity by casting the Star Maker in the mould of grotesque James Bond supervillains, like scar-faced Ernst Stavro Blofeld and one-eyed Emilio Largo—aspiring world-dominators who command the international crime organization, SPECTRE. As Victor Ramraj notices, the opening scene of Richler's novel, which depicts Dino's arrival at the mogul's lavish but sinister mansion, "recalls and probably parodies the pre-credit opening of the Bond movies" which "were at their peak of popularity when *Cocksure* was published" (77). This scene is, in fact, the first of many Bond parodies in *Cocksure*, and its referencing of Bond is apt, for as Jameson argues in his analysis of postmodernism, spy stories were among the first examples of a popular literature of "high-tech paranoia" whose narrativization of global conspiracy constitutes a "privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of third stage capital itself" (37-38). Whereas Jameson's neo-Marxist project reads spy-thriller tropes as incipient "cognitive map[s]" (51) that might allow politically disoriented postmodern subjects to grasp their relationship to a decentered network of global oppression, in Richler's hands, such tropes are fodder for a Baudrillardian satire of postmodernism in which the Bond-villain wins.

The counterpart to Richler's triumphant supervillain is *Cocksure*'s virtuous but impotent phallic hero, Mortimer Griffin, a "satiric *ingénue*" (Ramraj 77) who occupies the structural position of James Bond to the Star Maker's Blofeld, but who is utterly incapable of outflanking and destroying his antagonist. Richler aligns Mortimer's humanistic belief in our innate potential for virtue



with the pop heroics of Bond most visibly by making Mortimer a national hero: his bravery is recognized by the Victoria Cross he receives for rescuing his superior officer in World War II. Like Bond's heroism, Mortimer's morality is also accorded a phallic dimension in the subplot involving Mortimer's persecution by Jacob Shalinsky, the wizened editor of *Jewish Thought*. Shalinsky hounds Mortimer throughout the novel, trying to get him to admit that beneath the Gentile façade he is actually a Jew. Shalinsky suggests that Mortimer's "Jewishness" is metaphorical, and his goodness makes him a moral "Jew" in an immoral world (211). Mortimer's marginalized "ethnic" morality is thereby implicitly identified with the larger-than-life phallic heroism of Bond through Mortimer's suspicion that "minority-group pricks (Jewish, Negro) were aggressively thicker and longer than WASP ones" (87). It is no coincidence, then, that Mortimer's "Jewish" moral heroism is literally marked on his body by a circumcision ("done for hygienic reasons" when he was two weeks old) that makes his wife wonder if his WASPy Ontario family is not concealing at least a little "Jewish blood" (83).

However, Mortimer never truly occupies the position of phallic hero that Shalinsky marks out for him. The schoolyard legends about minority anatomy only give him an inferiority complex, and, more generally, he misunderstands Shalinsky's attribution of Jewishness, wasting a great deal of time defensively (and guiltily) worrying over whether or not he has "a Jewish face" (83). This misunderstanding is one of the many ways that, despite its heroic promise, Mortimer's moral potency is deflated by the plot of *Cocksure* in the service of Richler's thesis that upstanding morality seems unable to stand up to the Star Maker's world of appearances.

*Cocksure* typically dramatizes postmodernism's dismemberment of the phallic hero in scenes that present Mortimer as a symbolically castrated "Agent 007." For instance, when Mortimer is summoned to the Star Maker's film studio to deliver mysterious medical files on Oriole employee, Polly Morgan, he witnesses a sinister episode involving the inflatable "Star" that echoes the Bond parody of the opening chapter. As the Star Maker's black-suited henchmen close in on the synthetic Star, brandishing "an incredible-looking machine with a menacing pump-like device attached" (131), Mortimer finds himself in a spy-thriller scenario where a genuine hero might flex his moral muscles. As the shrieking Star is deflated, however, Mortimer's heroic stature experiences a metaphorical version of the same fate; the passive protagonist is simply "hustled off" to deliver his files to the Star Maker (133). Mortimer's other opportunities to play Bond are similarly

abortive or farcical. Although he uncovers the murderous secret of the “Our Living History” biography series by snooping through Dino’s files, his sleuthing turns out to have been stage-managed by Dino himself (123-24). When he confronts the Star Maker in his lair over the scandal of the deadly biographies, he ends up half-seduced by the Star Maker’s offer to make him head of Oriole Press and promises to keep the villain’s secrets (144). When he attempts to flee the Star Maker after learning that the next biography will be *Mortimer Griffin’s Story* (213), he finds himself cornered, and the novel ends with his implied murder by the black-uniformed motorcycle riders. So much for the phallic heroism of the “Jewish” James Bond.

Rounding out this parodic depiction of Bond’s international escapades are Mortimer’s sexual follies, which take Bond’s legendary priapism and replace it with introspection, neurosis, and impotence. Anything but “cocksure,” Mortimer is cuckolded by his “friend” Ziggy, develops an “increasingly obsessive fear that he didn’t have a big one” (86), and finds himself caught in a hollow performance of virility for his literary cronies—an act which involves flaunting prophylactics and aphrodisiacs that are never used, but that accumulate and silently reproach him from the locked cupboard where Mortimer hides them from his wife (94-95, 85). Similarly, Mortimer’s “affairs” with beautiful women in the Star Maker’s employ are largely illusory or sexless, deliberately evoking a contrast to Bond’s bedroom prowess. For example, Mortimer’s introduction to Rachel Coleman, the black Oriole librarian hired by the Star Maker, features language that directly parodies Bond’s suave pickup lines and signature name inversion (63). Moreover, Rachel is a stereotypical Bond-girl: young, attractive, standoffish but come-hither, employed by the villain, and “a curiosity” (63). Whereas Bond would no doubt find her exoticism alluring, for Mortimer she precipitates a neurotic liberal crisis, as he is wracked with anxiety over how to behave: “Her perfume was bewitching, but he dared not sniff emphatically lest she think he believed colored people had a peculiar smell” (63). Later, when she consents to sleep with Mortimer, but only if he pays her—ostensibly to relieve his white liberal guilt—she confirms her role as a Richlerian version of the castrating femme fatale who threatens the phallic hero in Bond’s misogynous adventures. Mortimer, whose “two-pronged” purpose (153) in following her to bed is to be “grade[d]...for size” and cured of his impotence, ends up satisfied on neither account and tellingly flees her apartment when she reveals that she has been talking to Shalinsky: “in the buff, there’s no mistaking a Jew man, is there, honey?” (155). Still failing to understand the import of the old

man's crusade to expose him as a Jew, Mortimer experiences Rachel's taunt as further persecution, rather than recognizing in her reference to his circumcision an ironic reminder of his untapped moral vigor.

The parodic framework of such episodes, which play Mortimer as a Bond *manqué*, already hints at Mortimer's absorption within the simulacrum, for his reenactment of Bond's film adventures mirrors his uncanny resemblance to "conventionally handsome" models from *Esquire* ads (25-26). In both cases, resemblance points to the generation of the real from preexisting models that are themselves utterly artificial, and to the resulting implosion of reality and fantasy. Significantly, the origin of Mortimer's impotence is precisely such an implosion. In a set piece that allows Richler to travesty avant-garde cinema, Mortimer attends the premier of Ziggy's formally pretentious and politically correct experimental film, *Different*. The movie's disjointed, new wave narrative represents "square" society's persecution of a repressed homosexual businessman and a closeted transsexual hockey player, culminating in an emblematic shot of WASP villainy: a "well-adjusted man peeling a banana" who turns out to be Mortimer himself, unwittingly captured by Ziggy's intrusive camera (55). The novel's subsequent chronicling of Mortimer's torment by "homosexual doubts" that leave him impotent (65) directly attributes the withering of the phallic hero to the breakdown of the conventional relation between screen image and real life in Ziggy's movie. This breakdown perfectly illustrates simulation's "artificial resurrection" of referents "in systems of signs, which are more ductile material than meaning" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 2). Ultimately, then, Mortimer's crisis dramatizes more than simply the semiotic postmodern "weightlessness" produced by the loss of "God" as a "guarantor" of the sign's relation to a recoverable "depth of meaning" that Baudrillard describes ("Precession" 196); it also dramatizes, with uncanny accuracy, the parallel collapse of the phallus as master signifier and guarantor of semiotic stability that Baudrillard-inspired cultural theorists Arthur and Marilouise Kroker allude to when they suggest that, in postmodernism, "the penis, both as protuberance and ideology, is already a spent force, a residual afterimage surplus to the requirements of telematic society" (95).

Fittingly, this trope of the obsolescent phallus emerges in Mortimer's encounters with the Star Maker, whose symbolic role as generator of this weightless universe of simulation makes him the ultimate source of Mortimer's real and metaphorical impotence. In fact, the Star Maker's bio-engineered form and auto-reproductive capacity exemplify the "designer

bodies” and “technologies of sex which make possible a sex without secretions” to which the Krovers attribute the “burnout” of “the *postmodern penis*” (95). If Mortimer’s own limp appendage attests to the symbolic obsolescence of his creed, then the scene in which the Star Maker lectures him on advanced Russian techniques of penile enhancement (200-201) emblematically anticipates the simulacrum’s fatal absorption of the phallic hero: here, the phallus becomes another example of a dead God whose resurrection becomes undecidable and irrelevant because, in a simulated universe, “everything is,” so to speak, “already dead and risen in advance” (Baudrillard, “Precession” 197).

The implied murder of Mortimer at the hands of the Star Maker’s black-suited motorcycle men literalizes this process of the phallic hero’s liquidation by forces of the simulacrum. It does so, moreover, in a final parody of the Bond films that cleverly merges the two lines of mock-Bond adventure pursued in the novel so far: Mortimer’s passive non-conflict with the Bond-villain on the one hand, and his humiliating love affair with an exotic Bond-girl on the other. In the final chapters of the novel, Mortimer conducts an affair with Polly Morgan, the “bewitchingly gorgeous,” but “puzzling, somewhat abstracted” editor whom the Star Maker’s henchman Dino has placed in charge of the “Cinemagician” series at Oriole (36). This affair is somewhat illusory, however, since Polly is a “creature of a generation”—the postmodern generation—whose sense of lived experience has been utterly absorbed into the simulacrum of cinema images she worships. She even lives her life in crosscuts, jump-cuts, close-ups, pullbacks, and montages. Mortimer’s vision, too, is affected by her bizarre perspective, and he remains sexually unfulfilled because “their affair, such as it was, had only been consummated on the wide screen of her imagination” (197). In the end, his fate is sealed by Polly’s inability to heed her lover’s desperate plea for help: “This is no movie. This is real. Understand?” (215). Treating the encroaching threat of the motorcycle riders as a thrilling big screen climax to be milked for suspense, she fails to summon the police and remains blissfully unaware that she has doomed the hero. The novel ends with a vision focalized through Polly, on “the wide screen that was her mind’s eye” (215). This hallucinatory reverie pointedly replaces any dramatization of the murder that is about to occur with a simulated fantasy that its dreamer no longer recognizes as such, precisely because her perspective epitomizes the implosion of reality and illusion that has now usurped the narrator’s voice and completely taken over both text and world:

[S]irens sounded, police cars heaving into Beaufort Street in the nick of time. Crowds formed. They embraced. Somewhere in the night a bird was singing. Tomorrow the sun would come up. Tomorrow and tomorrow. Old Sol, she thought. (216)

Her unwitting allusion to the nihilistic soliloquy from *Macbeth* while rhapsodically contemplating “Old Sol”—yet another nostalgic image of a dead master-signifier—is Richler’s final comment on the absurdity of the postmodern world that is “full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing” (V.5.27-28). Mortimer’s disappearance from the narrative at the very moment that his story reaches its culmination is, furthermore, a telling anticlimax. Denied even a death scene, Richler’s phallic hero simply withers away.

### Richler’s Obscenities

In her “Abandoned Introduction” to the novel, Germaine Warkentin answers Philip Toynbee’s charge that “[i]t is quite impossible to detect the moral platform on which Mr. Richler is standing [in *Cocksure*], and from which his darts are launched” (qtd. in Warkentin 83), arguing that, on the contrary, *Cocksure* is an “unremittingly moral” (Warkentin 83) satire whose hero “poses a real threat to the Star Maker’s power” simply by virtue of the fact that “he tells the truth” (84-85). Richler’s frank disclosure of his views on the serious writer’s moral vocation in interviews tends to support Warkentin’s reading (Gibson 271). Considered on its own terms, however, the slippery humour of *Cocksure* makes Toynbee’s complaint worth revisiting. This is not primarily because, as Toynbee contends, in order to write “a really good satire [Richler] will have to learn not only what he hates, but where he hates it from” (qtd. in Warkentin 83). If the novel proposes no clear, practical alternative to the morally bankrupt world it projects, that is not because Richler needs to “learn” anything *per se*; it is, rather, the result of an internal contradiction that arises from the novel’s own fatal implication in the serious reckoning with the free-floating codes of postmodernism it performs. *Cocksure*’s satire, in this sense, is a victim of its own success, for the novel’s evocation of a postmodern precession of simulacra feels, by the end, so totalizing that it seems completely to demolish any ground on which its doomed hero—or even its author—might stand. As Jameson argues in his famous account of the postmodern eclipse of parody by pastiche, one of the casualties of a “postlitera[te]” late capitalist world dominated by “a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm” is any stable notion of satire (17). Pastiche follows parody’s method of imitation, but “it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of

the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists" (17). Richler's novel is neither "amputated of the satiric impulse" nor "devoid of laughter," so it is obviously not a pastiche in the Jamesonian sense. Nonetheless, and despite Richler's "ulterior motives," the contradiction between the satiric aims of the novel's parody and the corrosive implications of its critique of postmodernism produces an impasse not unrelated to the "blank parody" (17) produced by pastiche. In presenting a chimerical world of images where the real has become hyperreal, and where normative moral statements and their satiric counterparts find it impossible to gain traction, Richler has, as it were, pulled the rug out from under himself. He leaves us with a satire that crackles with rage and a yearning for "vengeance" (Gibson 269), yet, at the same time, seems curiously hopeless, a resigned expression of "disgust" for a postmodern scene from which there appears to be no exit.

Richler appears to be aware of this dilemma. Despite his desire to be "an honest witness to what I do know" (Gibson 269), the apparent impossibility of creating meaningful political art by any traditional means in the postmodern context profoundly complicates such aspirations. Richler dramatizes this problem in the novel through the metafictional trope of Mortimer's "indictment" of the Star Maker—a written brief detailing all the secrets of the Star Maker's fearsome simulations that Mortimer entrusts, rather ambiguously, to Shalinsky, from whom he extorts a promise not to publish the document unless he or Polly come to harm. Shalinsky's decision to ignore his promise and publish the document anyway, changing the names so that he cannot be sued for libel, is equally ambiguous. His unwitting sabotage of Mortimer's only potential power over the Star Maker suggests, perhaps, Richler's own uncertainty about the power and, indeed, the possibility, of truth-telling in a postmodern world. On the one hand, Shalinsky styles himself as a political artist who turns the paper he steals from businesses into a utopian medium for social transformation: "What do they need paper for?" he asks Mortimer, answering, "Bookkeeping. But for a poet with a pencil and a paper...*magic*" (209). In other words, Shalinsky articulates a liberal vision of the artist who can still imagine an efficacious cultural politics. On the other hand, his inability to recognize Mortimer's referential indictment of the Star Maker as anything but "a fantasy" couched in dull language that was "too dry, and even legalistic" (212), recalls the callow studio audience of *Insult*, who are so dazzled by Digby Jones's media circus that they cannot register Mortimer's

VC as the meaningful signifier of a moral act (186-91). In this way, Richler aligns Shalinsky with the semiotic implosion of sign and referent that characterizes the simulacrum, and makes the old man's boasts about the social relevance of his art appear self-deluding. If this is the fate of representation in postmodernity, Richler seems to ask, what practical value can his own political art possess? On what basis, if any, might the postmodern satirist retain his historic power to disturb, to defamiliarize, to incite?

Unlike Baudrillard, whose work throughout the late 1970s and 80s increasingly emphasized simulation's triumph as a *fait accompli* and thus moved "into a more nihilistic, cynical, and apolitical theoretical field" (Best and Kellner 122), there are ways in which *Cocksure* stops just short of such an apocalyptic pronouncement, even if it frequently adopts a fatalistic and cynical pose to drive home its satirical barbs. For instance, despite the novel's pessimistic allegory about postmodernity's liquidation of traditional moral values, one may at least register the moral obscenity of Mortimer's murder as *obscene*—a judgement that is only possible because, as the novel represents it, the triumph of simulation remains (however minimally) incomplete. The Star Maker, for all the power that his nebulous global empire commands, requires an heir precisely because he is more vulnerable than he seems (72). Ziggy's outrage about censorship in the Western media is another case in point: his "artistic dream" that it will one day "be possible to show fucking on the screen" (197) has not yet come to pass in the manner he would like, a holdup which confirms his belief that "so long as you couldn't pull your cock on TV his artistic freedom was impaired" (56). *Cocksure's* strategy for retaining its power as satire hinges on just such an impairment of the pornographer's artistic license—an impairment that Richler dramatizes at the level of content through a minor character like Ziggy. Through the gap in the simulacrum produced by, for instance, Ziggy's concern about "censorship," *Cocksure's* obscenities are not simply trivial examples of how "Richler succeeds more in entertaining than vexing the world" (Ramraj 79). The obscenities are not merely symptoms of the same "ecstasy of communication" the novel diagnoses. These are, rather, brash attempts to beat simulation at its own game, and thus to shore up a semiotic system whose distinctions have not yet completely collapsed into a "a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without norm" (Jameson 17). If Richler can stay one step ahead of the simulation models that render social relations increasingly "absurd," his novel might yet salvage the power to shock through the sheer brutality of its excesses. In so doing, *Cocksure* would not only galvanize a

sagging system of signs whose total collapse could yield only flaccid satire, it might also recuperate some vestige of the moral ground that seems, by the novel's end, to have disappeared.

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