

R. Colin Tait

“jesus is never mad at us if we live with him in our hearts”: the dialectical view of america in david o. russell’s *i ♥ huckabees*

The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link. The nature of the cinematographic illusion has often been considered. Restoring our belief in the world – this is the power of modern cinema (when it stops being bad). Whether we are Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrenia, *we need reasons to believe in this world* (Deleuze 166).

In the wake of September 11, and the resulting paradigm shift which is an ultimate casualty of the event, perhaps now is a good time to examine the impact that this has had on one of our most interesting mass cultural institutions; namely cinema. If we believe Gilles Deleuze’s assertion that the medium’s history reflects the materialist conditions of its genesis, then a radical alteration of world historical events will necessarily also be embodied in the textual qualities of a film. Thus, any drastic change will be detectable within any film’s framework in order to account for the new qualities of the moment it emerges from. This will correspond to Deleuze’s conception of the “Time-Image,” where “the crystal” is “the point of indiscernability of the two distinct images, the actual and the virtual, while what we see in the crystal is time itself, a bit of time in its pure state...” (Deleuze 79). Cinema, then, will inevitably become the record of a particular mood of a particular time and stands for the public reaction of a specific moment. Deleuze’s analytical tool corresponds to Fredric Jameson’s own work in mass-cultural analysis, where cinema is also representative of the *unconscious* fears and desires of the society from which it emerges. Thus, a film “manages” within its structure the psychic issues that need to be addressed by the work of art. Jameson states that this method “allows us to grasp mass culture not as empty distraction, or ‘mere’ false consciousness” but rather, as “a transformational work on social and political anxieties which must then have some presence in the mass cultural text in order to be ‘managed’ or repressed” (Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” 25). Clearly, if he has both theorists’ models in mind, the film analyst is therefore equipped with a mechanism through which to view a particular document; both by characterizing the manner in which it depicts the frozen image of the moment that it emerges from (Deleuze) and also the unconscious elements that it necessarily contains as a work of mass culture (Jameson).

It is with these foundational tools that we can now address the cultural artifact *par excellence* of the 9/11 shift. While any film from 2001-2004 would likely serve our purposes, I propose that David O. Russell’s 2004 film *I ♥ Huckabees* captures this *zeitgeist* most clearly as it is the frozen image of an America captured by cinema. Indeed, the film uses the raw materials of contemporary

Americana; issues ranging from the “Wal-Martification” of the suburbs, the decrease in public green spaces, to the consumption of petroleum which seemingly lies at the core of American foreign policy. At the heart of this debate lies the film’s centre; a throwdown between the Religious Right’s conception of American market forces (and their relation to modern democracy), and the liberal Left’s desire to preserve ‘open spaces’ regardless of the cost. The explicit debate of the film is portrayed at a dinner table, where environmentalist Albert Markovski (Jason Schwartzman) defends his position against the expansionist beliefs of suburban engineer Mr. Hooten. Albert’s goal is simply stated: “Albert - I’m talking about not covering every square inch of populated America with strip malls and houses till people can’t remember what happens when you stand in a meadow at dusk” (Russell 53). Mr. Hooten’s philosophy is characterized by his belief in the link between capital and democracy. He asks if countries like Sudan wouldn’t like a little bit of “suburban sprawl” as this would allow the war-torn region to resemble America with its “industry, houses, jobs, medicine, videos, toys, cheeseburgers, cars, computer games,” and thus embolden it with “a functioning economy” (52-53). Thus, Mr. Hooten’s portrayal is a satiric view of the conflation between suburban politics and manifest destiny. Russell deliberately depicts the relationship between the resurgence of the religious Right’s influence on the “average” American’s political views, and exploits an exaggerated vision of this Puritan ethos in both foreign and domestic policies to do so. As a result, everything is equivalent in the Hooten family and the statement of daughter, Cricket (who says that “Jesus is never mad at us if we live with Him in our hearts” [54]) corresponds to Mr. Hooten’s outrageous claim that “God gave us oil!” (57). It is by analyzing the direct rendering of these points of view that we should address the central issue of the film. This entails locating the presence and origins of the American Religious Right’s view of politics, society and the market (which all stem from the kernel of theological interpretation) and reflecting on how these influence aspects of contemporary American life. Only then can we can perceive the formal operations of *I ♥ Huckabees*, which not only positions the spectator to experience a rapid-fire enumeration of the issues of the day, but also attempts to equip him with a means to navigate through the new features of his era. The deep-structural qualities of the text (and its surface) both embody the extremely confusing time of the film’s conception, and also the subjective existential dilemma facing the contemporary American subject.

What the film depicts through its construction of seemingly one-dimensional characters corresponds to Jameson's view of allegory in film, where the author states that "allegory is precisely the dominant mode of expression of a world in which things have been sundered from meanings, from spirit, from genuine human existence." In this manner "the object [film] itself is henceforth incapable of projecting any meaning on its own; it can only take on that meaning which the allegorist [filmmaker] wishes to lend it" (Jameson, *Marxism and Form* 71). What *I ♥ Huckabees* achieves is the literality of this transitional moment where the characters' opportunity to question their lives and their socio-political institutions, corresponds with our need to do the same.

Since the story is framed by the terrible events of September 11th it portrays the factors that led to the ultimate shift in American foreign policy. What did not occur, according to Slavoj Žižek (in his work on the topic, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*) was the public questioning of the institutions of American society that the window provided. Žižek states,

[w]hat if – as the massive display of American patriotism seems to demonstrate – the shattering experience of September 11 ultimately served as a device which enabled to hegemonic American ideology to 'go back to its basics', to reassert its basic ideological co-ordinates against the antiglobalist and other critical temptations? Perhaps I should none the less qualify this statement by introducing the temporality of the *future anterior*: on September 11, the USA was presented with the opportunity to realize what kind of world it was part of. It might have taken this opportunity – but it did not; instead it opted to reassert its traditional ideological commitments... (Žižek 46-47).

What Žižek called for was an intervention and an entry point for America into a multilateralist position in the newly emerging global space. What happened instead was the redoubling of unilateralist national policies which oppose the author's view. Contrary to Žižek's observation, the very existence of the film is testament to the idea that a form of this questioning did occur; albeit on a different scale. Indeed, as we encounter the Deleuzian/Jamesonian position, we can see that the film embodies Jameson's system of "management" in the mass cultural text, where the issues of the day are presented, addressed, and worked out diegetically by the characters in *Huckabees* with a great deal of precision and sophistication. Nevertheless, we should be careful to qualify our characterization of *Huckabees* as a mass cultural text, as the film's positive critical reception was largely countered by its (tepid) box-office performance. Still, we have the rare occasion to analyze a contemporary film that embodies Deleuze's thoughts on cinema and the manner in which a viewer is presented with his contemporary reality through the means that it is depicted on screen. By directly addressing the prevailing ideology (the political dominance of the American Religious Right) and the manner that this is embodied on the global landscape (both domestically in the form of the suburban/exurban wasteland and abroad in the ever-expanding service economy) certain truths about the theological origin of American market forces can be asserted. By rendering these antagonisms explicit, the film attempts, through the dialectical process of its narrative construction, to separate the prevailing ideology from the recently scarred American psyche and present a viable alternative; one which unhinges the current composition of

politics from consumerism, theology and nationalism. These debates are played out in the multi-layered conflicts in *I ♥ Huckabees*.

The first of these is found in the clash between Albert Markovski and Brad Stand. This antagonism is central to the film's structure, as are Albert's attempts to understand Brad's prominence in his subconscious. Albert's seemingly random motivation to investigate his life is spurred on by his need to find the answer to the coincidental reappearance of "The African Guy," Steven. His quest is aided by the "existential detectives" of the Jaffe agency, who use a myriad of methods to "dismantle" Albert's identity and put him into spiritual contact with his immediate environment. Vivian and Bernard will also explain Albert's cosmic connection to his polar opposite; the corporate executive Brad. On the other hand, Brad, the rising star executive of Huckabees (here, a properly allegorical incarnation of Wal-Mart) stands as the opposite of Albert's desire for environmental responsibility. Brad eventually co-opts Albert's campaign to save the environment through a corporate fundraiser featuring Shania Twain. While Albert's goal was to save a vital piece of the environment, Brad's campaign involves climbing the corporate ladder through his successful manipulation of the currency of stardom. What the detectives reveal is that their bond specifically involves the fact that neither of them is happy with their current lives; Although Albert is a founding member of his organization, and Brad would seem to have it all (as the trappings of his successful career would testify) they both long for some sort of cosmic intervention that would point them in new directions.

Several other characters need to be mentioned, as their excessive beliefs can be viewed as the causes of their existential undoing. Therefore, we need to address the role of Tommy Corn, the shell-shocked firefighter whose personal encounter with the World Trade Center aftermath informs his opinion (likely shared by Michael Moore) that there is a direct link between American foreign policy (namely, the consumption of oil) and the attacks. Another character that needs introduction is model Dawn Rhodes (played by Naomi Watts) whose job as a "corporate spokesperson" for Huckabees is essentially reduced to a series of sexually charged gestures and poses. Her role as "Miss Huckabees" embodies the vacuousness of the surface exploitation of star personas, and who presumably possesses absolutely nothing of value underneath. The inclusion of the "existential detectives" who combine a philosophy that examines both the finite details of Albert's life and the infinite possibilities of his connection to the universe is contrasted by the presence of their former student, Catherine Vaubon. This nihilistic portrayal French theory serves as a foil to the Jaffes' by introducing an opposite philosophy to the detectives' own. As a result, the extra thread of critical theory is woven into the fabric of the diegesis providing the critic with yet another avenue to explore the film's meaning. Through the direct linking of characters to an extreme aspect of philosophy (Albert to environmentalism, Tommy to conspiracy, Brad to hypercapitalism, Dawn to appearance, the Jaffes' to existential/transcendental cosmology, and Catherine to nihilism) the film allows the diametrically opposed viewpoints to engage in conflict, and thus results in interesting narrative permutations, as characters speak, listen, and alter their views. This phenomenon varies greatly from the traditional (Hollywood) form, where

characters rarely embody a viewpoint or express any opinion about the world. In *Huckabees* the fate of the respective characters depends on resolving the new spiritual crises which arise from their new reality. A dialectical process of argument is engaged, and the various viewpoints come to inform and inflect the discussion within the film. The philosophy of “somethingness” is here opposed with that of “nothingness,” and the logic of reading poems to save large tracts of wilderness is countered with the idea of involving corporate charity into an environmental event. It is extremely important to note that the characters experience a great deal of change in their positions and this phenomenon is both testament to the complexity of the film, and to its interventionalist position in the post-9/11 landscape where the debate takes place within cultural institutions.

Before entering a discussion of the mechanics of the film, we should first investigate the path of its narrative. Albert enters the existential detectives’ office in order to find out the answer to the manifestation of his coincidences. He tells Vivian that he wants to know about “The whole thing. The universe...the big one. Should I keep doing what I’m doing or stop because it’s hopeless” (Russell 7). In their investigation Vivian informs him that they will scrutinize every aspect of his life, “[n]othing can ever be too small. You know how the police can find the tiniest piece of DNA and build a case, we might see the way you floss or masturbate and it could be the key to your entire reality” (4). Albert learns that this process will employ two methods; one will investigate every detail of the banalities of his existence and the second will consist of a form of spiritual counseling. Bernard illustrates Albert’s interconnectedness to the universe via the example of “the blanket” to teach Albert that “[e]verything’s the same thing, even if it’s different” (10). In order to achieve this understanding, Albert must first penetrate his subconscious through meditation. This begins with a confrontation of the negative symbols that both plague his subconscious and prevents his everyday mind from realizing its interconnectedness with the larger universe. In Bernard’s view, Albert must first deconstruct his identity, moving beyond the psychological (i.e. the articles of his subconscious mind) to the transcendental level of his being. Once Albert understands these connections, he’ll understand his own role in the structure of the blanket, or, as Bernard explains; “when you get the blanket thing, you can relax, because everything you could ever want or be, you already have and are” (11). The film demonstrates this connection visually in exhilarating ways as the screen breaks up into the little particles within the frame, and pieces of the images float to the other side. Thus, the metaphysical composition of the infinite is rendered fully and is embodied in a pro-filmic manner, as the visual expression of Bernard’s cosmology.

The film is also structured, to some degree, like a generic work in the detective/*noir* mode. It corresponds to Fredric Jameson’s writings on postgeneric film in his essay “Historicism in *The Shining*,” where he states that filmmakers (like Robert Altman, Roman Polanski, and Stanley Kubrick) can only emulate the old models of generic works, something that *Huckabees* very obviously does. In this manner, the notable change in the detective film (as outlined by David Bordwell’s account in [Narration in the Fiction Film](#)) is that the structure is turned inward. For the purposes of the narrative’s progression, Albert,



while still remaining the protagonist, is also the film’s central mystery. Following this logic, the answer to Albert’s existential mystery *should* yield the results of the resolution of the film’s plot. However, the film is far more complicated than this, and Albert’s story is merely one element of the detective film’s construction. Much like the hard-boiled, Raymond Chandler variant, Albert functions as the springboard to the larger mystery, as does the *femme fatale* in a film like *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), and he first misleads the detectives by planting false clues about his case. The metageneric transformation in this case is that Albert is both detective and mystery, and the plot largely focuses on him as the chief protagonist. The narrative is, in this sense, internalized and self-reflexive. As the investigation unfolds unsatisfactorily, Albert takes hold of it with the aid of his other, Tommy Corn. Tommy acts as the initial bridge between the two opposing philosophies of Western Existential Buddhism, and French Nihilist Theory. As such, Tommy not only convinces Albert to steal his file, but also influences him to cross over to the overtly anarchistic and nihilistic excesses of the sexy Vaubon. Ultimately, the resolution of the plot relies on Albert ending the perpetration of his lies (or the false evidence that he plants for the Jaffes’) and facing *a truth*; one that is brought about by his embracing a part of Vaubon’s ugly view of the world. The film demonstrates that only by incorporating Vaubon’s negative philosophy can Albert return to a positive place and solve his mystery. This dialectical movement is the work of the film, as the various conflicts jar against their opposites and find synthesis in a manner resembling Albert’s spiritual transformation. In this manner, it is possible for Albert to realize (in the sense of “the blanket”) that he and Brad are the “same” person, but only after tarrying with the negative can he come to this resolution. Though the characters are able to express their opinions in a sophisticated way, the degree of the flexibility of their representative philosophies is key to understanding this film.

Having examined the narrative construction of *I ♥ Huckabees*, it is now possible to analyze individual elements of the film itself. Here, I believe that an elaborate investigation of the dinner scene is crucial to understanding the issues that are at stake in the work. As previously stated, the scene embodies the collision of theology and politics within the single site of American discourse; the suburbs/exurbs.

Albert and Tommy ride out to the address of “The African Guy”; this time Albert has actually sought him out

instead of this being just another coincidence. Steven asks his adoptive family whether Tommy and Albert can stay for dinner. While the scene is short, it is also the explicit rendering of many of the film's core issues that need to exist in conversation, externalized from the characters and examined out loud. The array of topics includes the petroleum industry, smart growth in the suburbs, corporate responsibility and the issue of Christian Charity. The mention of Christianity within this context is extremely important, as it begs the viewer to ponder the contemporary collision (and collusion) of Church and State which is central to the film's specific relation to a particular time and space. In this way, the film relays its central subject of questioning, which goes beyond the existential issue of Albert as an individual (and here we can freely assert that Albert is predisposed to do this kind of work anyways) but to certain other types, such as the figures within site of the dinner scene. The cast of players here include disinterested teenagers, who make fun of their "adopted brother" Steven, who as a Sudanese refugee, resembled a "skeleton man from Africa" (55). The children smugly recall how Steven didn't know where food came from in America ("He wanted to know where all the meat comes from since he doesn't see any cows around here" 51), and they demonstrate their poor understanding of Christianity with their half-hearted recitation of Grace before eating and playing video games at the dinner table. Clearly, director Russell is pointedly taking aim at the ideological roots of America's current dilemma, and the dinner scene is his opportunity to directly criticize what he sees as the hypocrisy of the current synthesis of theologically-charged politics which exist alongside the consumptive habits of the typical suburban family.

Richard Jenkins portrays the American status quo *par excellence*, and is employed as a stereotypical mouthpiece for the Right. As a result Albert is immediately branded a communist by Mr. Hooten for having views that lie outside the suburban mainstream discourse. Additionally, the knee-jerk response to the announcement that Tommy is a firefighter (after September 11) is a predictable "God Bless You." Tommy and Albert respond by highlighting some of the problems that face the society of exurbanization and the (Christian) element of the ideology. These include, the collusion of the US government in places like Sudan (where Steven is from) with errant governments for the direct purposes of oil consumption, and the opposite opinion (from engineer Jenkins) who believes that if only people in those countries would get their country together (into a proper hypercapitalist society) they would have more than enough space to have mini-marts and to provide for everyone in their country, instead of having to rely on Christian Charity.

In this way, what the film enacts with the antagonism of the dinner table is that the this exaggerated version central Christian doctrine in the example the "successful American family" (as embodied by the Hootens' noble act of adopting Sudanese refugee Steven) which is not so much wrong as misguided, and that the deconstruction of an subjective identity (as in Albert's case, a man who is predisposed to do this sort of work) needs to occur through the exposition of prevailing positions and their place in contemporary society. In other words, before any progress can be made (particularly in the shadow of September 11) people have to be able view admit unpleasant things about their society, and their origins as well. The inherent tragedy

of self-knowledge is voiced by Tommy when he asks "why is it that people only ask themselves really deep questions when something really bad happens, and then they forget about it later..." (43) This question finds its echo in Zizek's view of historical trauma, where the author states that it is not only the choice between forgetting and remembering that is at stake, but rather, "[w]e should therefore accept the paradox that in order really to forget an event, we must first summon the strength to remember it properly" (Zizek 22).

While the film is unequivocally brutal in its criticism of American society, its most direct questioning is reserved for its biggest target; namely the religious roots of American civil life and the links between the current version of politics inflected by a specific version of the American Protestant dogma and expansionist doctrine. Doug Williams has pinpointed the pro-filmic expression of this ethos in his 1998 essay, "Pilgrims in the Promised Land" where the author grafts the foundational American myths of frontier expansion onto the Western film genre. For Williams, the movement to America by the Puritans was that of "an oppressed minority who felt themselves to be the Elect of God in a corrupted world," and to whom "the answer to the mystery of North America was clear - the New Continent was the Promised Land for God's chosen people, providentially revealed" (Williams 94). While Williams outlines the Puritanical strain in what he dubs the American epic form (the Western) it can be asserted that the same strains of religiously-informed ideological precepts still lay at the heart of American politics today. These range from the entitlement to the frontier and subsequent conquered lands, the "core-ement" of patriarchy (96) and the transformation of a "vast wasteland" into a Garden of Eden. It is not a great logical leap to see these same impulses enacted on the new lands of the suburbs, where large congregations of (largely Christians) continue to settle the domestic American sphere and, to return to Albert's view, "pave over every last inch of American space" (Russell 53). Economist Benjamin R. Barber comments on this phenomenon in his intriguing study of the explicit link between runaway global capitalism and the return to fundamentalist strains of religion which he dubs as the conflict between "Jihad" and "McWorld." Here, the author states that "[a]t least since the 1730s, when America experienced its first 'Great Awakening' in Protestant fundamentalism, this country has periodically felt the zeal of reactive religion" (Barber 212). Furthermore, Barber locates this prevalent strain in suburbs, where followers of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson express the "yearning...for the certainties of a literal New Testament [that] are no less ingenuous than the yearning of Arabic martyrs for a literal Qur'an" (213). The logical sequel to Barber's and Williams' work lies in two recent essays, where the further link between Puritan theological principles and economic expansion is elaborated. The continuation of "Pilgrims in the Promised Land" can thus be found in Gordon Bigelow's essay "Let There Be Markets." In this work economist Bigelow outlines the inherent link between the rise of Capital and the ideological tenets of the American Protestant work ethic in its Puritan variant. Bigelow attempts to bind the intrinsic contradictions within the market to theological principles, stating that:

Looking back at two centuries at these early debates, it is clear that pure free-market ideology can be logically sustained only if it is based in a fiery religious conviction...The market is a complete solution, the market is a partial solution-both statements were affirmed at the same time. And the only way to hold together these incommensurable views is through a leap of faith (Bigelow,36).

With this view in mind it is also possible to return to the essence of expansionist policies and the treatment of Christian Charity. In Bigelow's view of early capitalist doctrine (for which he uses the Dickensian rendition of a system of "Bleak Houses" and orphanages as examples) the economist states:

At the center of this early evangelical doctrine was the idea of original sin: we are all born stained by corruption and fleshly desire, and the true purpose of earthly life was to redeem this. The trials of economic life-the sweat of hard labor, the fear of poverty, the self-denial involved in saving-were earthly tests of sinfulness and virtue...they believed that the suffering of the poor would provoke remorse, reflection and ultimately the conversion that would change their fate. In other words, poor people were poor for a reason, and helping them out of poverty would endanger their mortal souls (35).

Now it clear that the combination of these views establishes a continuing thread which binds these compatible concepts. First, the original myth of settlement, as dictated by Williams' interpretation of the Western as the American epic form, and also by Bigelow's assertion that the Market that is God's crucible by which the anointed will be revealed, serve to inform the religiously-infused politics that are present at the dinner table, and the further settlement of the frontier which is now represented in the relentless quest for both oil and for markets abroad. This self-contained universe is characterized in what Susan Willis calls 'exurbanization' and she depicts the residents of these areas as, "[h]aving fled more congested inner suburbs, exurbanites congregate in anomalous *cul-de-sac* neighborhoods newly gouged out of farmland and open nature." She continues, stating that "once installed, exurbanites lobby for more highways (to facilitate their consumerist lifestyle) and less growth (to preserve their dream of escape)..." (Willis 129). I would add to this assumption that that the exurbs implicitly promise the return to Eden for the "anointed." What this exurban impulse further reflects, in Willis' view (and as her discussion of the Washington sniper Lee Muhammad demonstrates) is that "the quintessential embodiment of our moment in history, the sniper manifests the repercussions of U.S. imperialism on the home front" (135). Here, Willis traces (as Zizek has) the interconnection of global capital (of which Wal-Mart/Huckabees is the ultimate example) and its 'evil' doppelganger; the international terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda, who planned and executed the terrible events of September 11.

What this intersection has demonstrated (it is hoped) is that by linking these seemingly disparate works is that they can be used to inform and to frame our discussion of the dinner scene. In this instance it is not the original inhabitants that need to be conquered (in the form of a native population) but *nature itself* that is literally paved over by the overwhelming ideology, which, in Bigelow's view, comes to stand in the way of both the progress of Christian society and the market itself. It is possible to see the depiction of the suburban as the new embodiment of the American Christian dominance of the landscape, and

this ideology ends up informing the current view of foreign policy and other aspects of society. Once again, as the dinner table scene exemplifies, the schism happens at the same time as the redoubling of authority, and the absorption of the language of Christian doctrine into nationalist politics; where the precedence of Christ becomes the motivation for all decisions in life, just as the appeal to reason is eclipsed by the combination of faith and ideology. The film's example shows Mr. Hooten's chiding Albert by telling him that not only is "the cat...killed by curiosity" (Russell 51) but that the consequence of questioning the dominant ideology is to be dismissed as a communist. This logic is subsequently used to discredit anyone with an opposing viewpoint, and was demonstrated in the 2004 American election, where John Kerry and Edwards were both characterized as being the most radically liberal forces in the United States.

Finally, it is the direct confrontation between Tommy Corn's view of oil consumption and "Christ's love" that is at the heart of this discussion. Tommy's asserts that "we'd all be heroes if we'd quit using petroleum" (54) and is countered with Mrs. Hooten's view that Albert and Tommy are "blasphemous socialists" (55). Finally, the debate comes to its climax when Mrs. Hooten offers proof of her Christian fealty by presenting Steven. Tommy opposes this logic by asking "How did Sudan happen? Could it be related to dictatorships we support for some stupid reason?" (56). It is at this point that Albert and Tommy are driven from the home and the episode ends.

Far from claiming to have "the answer," the film offers a multiplicity of viewpoints with which the viewer can align himself. These answers are embodied in the relativistic and multiply refracting ideas that are contained within the film. Here, the change from this central dinner scene is important, as it presents the viewer with alternative positions to relate to. In this way, the changes that occur in both Dawn and Brad's characters are even more significant than what happens to Tommy and Albert given that the latter figures are predisposed to change. That Brad and Dawn's transformation occurs almost precisely after the dinner scene (which is itself located at the direct center of the work) is further testament to the film's dialectical construction.

Brad and Dawn seem to have it all, and their relationship (and the possession of matching Jetskiis) are trappings of success in contemporary American exurban society. Additionally, the depiction of Huckabees as the new successful business model (as perhaps can be exhibited by the fact that Wal-Mart is now a larger employer than the manufacturing sector - which is embodied by the decline of the auto industry in the United States) and Brad as rising executive is interesting, as is the claim that Dawn (who clearly wears skimpy patriotic outfits and advertises in an array of suggestive poses) is *the voice* of the corporation when she is clearly its *body*. Though they seem to have absorbed the dynamic of the American Christian expansionist doctrine, it is both these characters that effect the greatest amount of change in the film. While they seem to be living the American Dream, it is revealed by the Jaffes that they are just as lost as everyone else. This counterfoil in the narrative is very powerful, as it allows the filmmaker to pierce the main issues discussed at the dinner table through a process of existential detangling.

Despite the fact that Brad goes to the detectives in order to undermine Albert's contributions to the Open



Spaces Coalition, the detectives question the certainties of his well-constructed façade by continuing to investigate him. Central to Brad's character is the "tuna fish story" where he has composed a cute anecdote about Shania Twain and how he fooled her into eating a tuna fish with mayo sandwich. What this story actually reflects is Brad's projection of a persona which hides his inner being. When the Jaffes ultimately call him on it, and replay the recorded occasions of his use of the story, Brad's carefully fashioned corporate personality falls apart, and he is left wondering aloud "how am I not myself?" Brad's career spirals downward as well, when he can't quite muster the fortitude to tell the tuna fish story to the board of Huckabees after his big promotion. The core of his identity, the mask he projects, is not only false but cannot be reconstituted once it has been destroyed.

A similar fate befalls Dawn, the "voice" of Huckabees, whose existence is physicality itself. Here, she represents the fallacy of the voice of corporate imagery. When Dawn begins to question the exploitation of her looks, she both falls apart and recomposes herself in the way she wants to live. She embraces the substance of who she is and attempts to cultivate her inner self. The manner in which she does so manifests itself, like everything else in the movie, as an extreme. Dawn follows the path of the other characters; embracing her opposite impulse as she makes herself ugly (the script actually refers to her from this point on as "Uglified Dawn"). For Albert, this means transforming himself from an environmentalist to an arsonist. Tommy will sacrifice everything he had in order to find what's important (it must be noted that Tommy's transformation is already in the process of being developed, while everyone else in the film is at the beginning). Brad will change from a carefully-composed executive to an overwrought, emotional wreck.

The film is more reasonable with its characters and their beliefs as well, and allows them to return and come to their own respective 'happy endings.' We witness Albert's growth as he moves beyond his initial philosophical formulations of the world, and it is only by his participation in a fully-rendered process of examination that this can take place. The conclusion that Albert's process allows for is the synthesis of the opposing philosophical precepts that take place in the movie. It is as Albert exclaims when he has his revelation that "he is Brad," or rather, that the question at the core of his destructive act may have achieved the opposite result; "did it bond me to Brad in the insanity of pain till I saw that I'm

Brad and he's me" (109)? It is clear that on the theoretical level of the text, a unity of views is necessary to make sense of the world, and Albert realizes that the new philosophy for post 9/11 America must include both aspects of the dialectic; as he states to the competing Jaffes' and Vaubon "you're too dark and you're not dark enough" (110). In other words, the philosophies of both the Jaffes' and Vaubon's aren't adequate to contain the good and bad elements of the contemporary moment, and that the interconnection of the universe is both "amazing" and "nothing special" at the same time. In short, they are dialectical. Albert's new cosmology is becomes the synthesis of Vaubon's and Jaffes' where, "it grows in the manure of human trouble...no manure, no magic." (118-19). In this manner, only a dialogue (or intervention) staged in the pro-filmic world will provide an answer to the problem of "why [it is] that people only ask themselves really deep questions when something really bad happens, and then they forget about it later..." (41).

By raising the pertinent issues that contribute to the deadlock of the Right and Left political structure of American politics, the film is a valuable contribution to the biggest questions of our era. By utilizing a dialectical structure to analyze the religious and secular extremes, the film enacts what Slavoj Zizek characterizes as the need to break from the currently composed methods of ideological and religious discourses. In his short essay "From Christ to Lenin...and Back" the author asserts that there is a need for what he calls a "Leninist intervention," which opposes all sides of contemporary discourse in order to reassert a new paradigm to revise the politics of our moment. This break,

aims neither at nostalgically *reenacting* the "good old revolutionary times," nor at the opportunistic-pragmatic *adjustment* of the old program to "new conditions," but at *repeating*, in the present world wide conditions, the Leninist gesture of initiating a political project that would undermine the totality of the global liberal-capital world order, and furthermore, a project that would unabashedly assert itself as acting on behalf of truth, as intervening in the present global situation from the standpoint of its repressed truth. What Christianity did with regard to the Roman Empire, this global "multiculturalist" polity, we should do with regard to today's Empire. (Zizek, On Belief 4-5)

This notion corresponds to Barber's conclusion of his own study of politics, religion and Capital, where he asserts that it is only with the creation of what he terms a "global civil society" (Barber 286) that progress can take place. This would include a reconstitution of a "public" who are "something more than a random collection of consumers or an aggregation of special political interests or a product of identity politics" (*Ibid*). In other words, in order to change the parameters of the film's center (the dinner table scene) we need to be aware of the errant elements of civil society and individually examine these issues from all sides (Left and Right, theological and commercial). This movement (which I have proposed is the movement of the film) thus corresponds to Zizek's hope for the Leninist intervention where "it is only through such a violent displacement that the 'original theory' can be *put to work*, fulfilling its potential of political intervention" (Zizek 3). In order to do so, we can follow the path that the film dictates and find our interconnectedness to the universe through a questioning of our own lives. The film then, embodies an allegorical break from contemporary politics through its vocalization and reformulation of the important issues

facing American domestic and foreign policy; or rather, “of adopting the unequivocal position from which it is only possible to intervene in such a way that our intervention changes the coordinates of the situation” (*Ibid*). Here, the staging of a series of confrontations with the dominant ideologies (as represented by opposition to the concepts of Christian settlement of the new Promised Land – the exurbs and the revision of foreign policy by a serious questioning of the dependence of petroleum) yield positive results in the on screen discussion of these issues. In real life, the actual interventions, discussions, disagreements, debates (as recent history has shown) were largely silenced, and (as recent history has also shown) the pursuit of all that Tommy opposes continues unabated.

Perhaps here is a good time to discuss the final point that Tommy illustrates in the dinner scene, where he attempts to admonish the father figure and engage in a productive conversation by asking; “You say that you’re Christians living by Jesus’ principles, but are you” (54)? When turning the discussion to oil he states repeatedly that Jesus would be ashamed of the family, despite their best intentions to lead a good Christian life. In this sense, in its current unilateralist incarnation, American existence is mutually exclusive and strictly aligned with Capital. Furthermore, the American exurbanite is “hailed” (in the Althusserian sense) by the Ideological State Apparatuses which address him through the pan-religious appeal to his Christianity. I want to be clear that I am in no way asserting that *any* Christians are evil people, that the idea of Christian Charity is not noble, or even that “religion” is “the opiate of the masses.” Rather, I am suggesting (as the film suggests, and as recent historical “episodes” of the Terry Schaivo incident, and the “intelligent design” vs. evolution debate examples show) that we need to acknowledge Barber’s investigation of the dialectical relationship between the hypercapitalist form of globalization and its repercussions of fundamentalist retrenchment in both Middle Eastern and American contexts. Furthermore, by questioning the surrounding events that 9/11 provided a window to, we can perhaps “remember correctly” the historical context of the event on a global scale.

Here, one can refer both to Slavoj Zizek’s assertions about the immediate consequences of the event and that it was precisely this kind of questioning that did not take place. However, if we are to return to the Deleuzian/Jamesonian position then we will see the work of *I ♥ Huckabees* not as an intervention *itself*, but an expression of the *desire* for the kind of questioning to take place. In this manner (and following this logic) the film (in Jameson’s terms) manages the collective fears and also the Utopian longing that opposes the ruling ideological construct. In this manner, the characters’ thorough self-examinations provide the society with the tools to examine themselves. What the film proposes (as I have argued by the very fact of its existence) is that by following a dialectical process of the logic of opposition, and by combining with a relativistic existential approach one can achieve a sophisticated balance and reconstruct a “third way” to facilitate America’s multilateral global citizenship. Firstly, it acts as a critical evaluation of the society that it depicts and offers tools to decipher not what the answers are, but to find the questions in the first place. Secondly, it not only criticizes the notion of the model of success within both its satiric depiction of the hypocrisy of the “proto-

Christian” doctrines of Americanization abroad and domestically, but also biting criticizes the American Dream by demonstrating that the center does not hold. This is shown by the deconstruction (and disintegration) of the perfect American couple, Dawn and Brad. When the masks that they wear are removed, it is revealed that there is nothing behind them. This could be easily applied to the internal logic of the proto-Christian doctrine of “the market” (God) sorting everything out in the world by allowing the market (God) to anoint the chosen and by demonstrating that those who do not obey this “crucible” (here exemplified by Steven’s and his countrymen; the Sudanese) will perish at its hands. I understand that some of this analysis may be problematic given the conception of the role of film in our society, but considering that film is now our mass-medium *par excellence* and that it often contains the keys to understanding the various moments that it depicts, *I ♥ Huckabees* is an excellent example of how a film can depict the fears and desires of an era explicitly, while still ultimately being a product for the palatable digestion by consumers. In other words, the film’s logic dictates that it will debate *for* the spectator and by presenting a conclusion that is *itself inconclusive*, it examines not only the moment of its origin, but acts as a record for the prevailing questions of its era. ☺

WORKS CITED

- Barber, Benjamin R. Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World. New York: Ballentine Books, 1996.
- Bordwell, David. Narration in the Fiction Film. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.
- Bigelow, Gordon. “Let There Be Markets: The Evangelical Roots of Economics”. Harper’s Magazine, Volume 310, No. 1860, May 2005. p. 33-40.
- Deleuze, Gilles. Cinema 2: The Time Image. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. London: Continuum, 1989.
- Jameson, Fredric. Signatures of the Visible. New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1992. 9-74.
- Marxism and Form. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971.
- Russell, David O. & Jeff Baena. I ♥ Huckabees: The Shooting Script. New York: NewMarket Press, 2004.
- Williams, Doug. “Pilgrims in the Promised Land: A Genealogy of the Western” in The Western Reader. Ed. Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman. New York: Proscenium Publisher’s Inc., 1998. p. 93-111.
- Willis, Susan. “What Goes Around Comes Around: A Parable of Global Warfare.” Social Text 77, Vol. 21, No. 4, Winter 2003. ed. Ella Shohat. p. 127-138.
- Zizek, Slavoj. On Belief. New York, 2001. 1-7.
- Welcome to the Desert of the Real. New York: Verso, 2002.