Scenes of Sympathy

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Part I

Sympathy and the Spirit of Capitalism
I

Sympathy and Spectacle in Dickens’s “A Christmas Carol”

In a well-known essay, Sergei Eisenstein describes literature in general and Dickens in particular as cinema’s predecessors because of their evocation of visual effects. Literature, Eisenstein writes, provides cinema with “parents and [a] pedigree... a past,” it is “the art of viewing.” 1 What Eisenstein conceives as aesthetic development may be regarded, however, as evidence for what Christian Metz calls a persistent “regime of perception” in Western culture—one in which appeals to the eye play a significant role in the production and circulation of ideology. 2 An emphasis on visuality, whether literary or cinematic, promotes spectatorship as a dominant cultural activity. But such an emphasis also reinforces, and thereby naturalizes, forms of spectatorship already inscribed in the social structures within which particular cultural representations are produced. The idea of a continuity between literature and film may thus be significant less for what it reveals about the genealogy of cinema than for...

2 According to Metz, the “regime of perception” perpetuated by cinema is one for which the spectator has been “prepared” by the earlier arts of representation (the novel, representational painting, etc.). The Imaginary Signifier (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 118-19.
what it tells about the role of visuality and its literary evocations in defining, reinforcing, and disseminating some of Western culture's dominant values.

"A Christmas Carol" (1843) is arguably Dickens' most visually evocative text. In its detailed attention to and elaborations of surfaces, its reliance on contrast between darkness and light, its construction as a series of scenes (a structure reproduced in the images the spirits exhibit to Scrooge), and particularly its engagement with a dynamic of spectatorial desire, the story is an artifact of, and an exemplary text for understanding, the commodity culture Guy Debord terms a "society of the spectacle"; the mechanism of Scrooge's conversion is, after all, spectatorship. Projecting Scrooge's identity into past and future, associating spectatorial and consumer desire with images of an idealized self, "A Christmas Carol" elaborates what I wish to argue is the circular relation that obtains between, on the one hand, spectacular forms of cultural representation, and, on the other, persons, objects, or scenes invested with ideological values and that already, within their cultural contexts, are spectacular. Moreover, an understanding of the story's representational effects helps explain the peculiar power of spectacle as a vehicle for ideology. For while "A Christmas Carol"/the film reproduces the relationship between an individual subject and spectacular culture, it also achieves an allegory of the subject's relation to culture in general, defined, by Clifford Geertz, as "an imaginative universe within which...acts are signs."4

A recent revision of "A Christmas Carol" reproduces the story's circularity. At the end of the film "Scrooged" (1988), the character played by Bill Murray, involved in making a television version of Dickens' story, steps out of television space and into cinematic space to address the viewer "directly." The point of this shift is, of course, to frame television space as fictional by seeming to move into a more "real" space, and the point of his address is to direct spectators to become engaged with the world beyond television. Telling viewers not to watch television, Murray's

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3 Dickens' story has long been recognized as an exemplary commodity text for its unabashed celebration of excess and consumption, its commercial rendering of the "Christmas spirit," and the seemingly infinite adaptability and marketability attested to by its annual reappearance as literary text, public reading, theatrical performance, and film.

character reinforces, however, the idea that some medium is needed to send them that message. Implicit in the directive to leave fiction behind and move into the world, as both the film and the text on which it is based, is the claim that the way to the world lies through representation.

Presenting Scrooge with images of his past, present, and future lives, Dickens's spectacular text seeks to awaken that character's sympathy and direct it to the world beyond representation. As a model of socialization through spectatorship, the narrative posits the visual as a means toward recapturing one's lost or alienated self—and becoming one's best self. If it fails to explain how the process occurs—how sympathy emerges from identification, and identification from spectatorship—it nevertheless asks its readers' assent to this series of effects. And if, as I argue, Scrooge's sympathetic self emerges from his relation to representation, such is also the implied effect of the reader's relation to the scenes of "A Christmas Carol," giving the text's explicit analogy between Scrooge's activity and the reader's (the narrator notes, for example, that Scrooge is as close to the Spirit of Christmas Past as the narrator is to the reader: "and I am standing in the spirit at your elbow").

Making visual representation necessary for the production of individual sympathy and thus, ultimately, to social harmony, Dickens' text both participates in and reinforces the perceptual regime to which Metz refers. For at stake in the story's appeal to visibility is not just the assertion of a connection between spectatorship and sympathy but a definition of spectatorship as a means of access to cultural life. Paul Davis has used the term "culture-text" to describe the way the "Carol" has been rewritten to reflect particular cultural and historical circumstances. I wish to argue that the story deserves this name, however, because it identifies itself with culture; it projects images of, has come to stand for, and constitutes an exemplary narrative of enculturation into the dominant values of its time.

"A Christmas Carol" tells the story of a Victorian businessman's interpellation as the subject of a phantasmatic commodity culture in which...
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laissez-faire economics is happily wedded to natural benevolence. And, in
a manner that would be appropriate for a general definition of culture but
is especially suited to a spectacular society, the story articulates the relation
between the subject and culture as a relation between the subject and rep-
resentation. Scrooge gains access to his former, feeling self and to a com-
community with which that self is in harmony—and not incidentally, he saves
his own life—by learning to negotiate the vast field of visual representa-
tions. Cultural "frames" embedded in the story's images invite the opera-
tor's identification, collapsing sympathy into an identification with rep-
resentation itself. Making participation in its scenes dependent on such
identification, the story constitutes both its idealized charitable self and
the ideal subject of commodity culture. "A Christmas Carol" reconciles
Christmas Past and Christmas Yet to Come, that is, by conjuring up an
illusion of presence.

The story's ideological project—its attempt to link sympathy and business
by incorporating a charitable impulse into its modern, self-conceptions—
underlies its association of charitable feeling with participation in cultural
life. A narrative whose ostensible purpose is the production of social
sympathy, "A Christmas Carol" both recalls and revises those scenes in
eighteenth-century fiction that, depicting encounters between charity
givers and receivers, model sympathy for readers positioned as witnesses.9

Although such scenes have an instructional function and were meant to

8 Despite the importance of feminine subjectivity to Victorian ideologies of feeling, "A
Christmas Carol" links charity to a masculine-identified form of power: to the proper
functioning of the economy. See Adamson's discussion of the way in which "our
domestic deities" are invoked to keep women "in their place," the male
subject having been "trained in a self-contained way to see himself, and the female
subject to recognize and desire him, only through the mediation of images of an
unimpeded masculinity." Adamson, "Male Subjectivity at the Margins," 42.

9 Scrooge's miserliness is by implication a corollary of his rejection of female com-
panionship and the family; the story presents Scrooge with images of his own impaired mas-
culinity and permits him to restore himself, through gift giving, as a symbolic father to the
Cratchit family ("to Tiny Tim, who did NOT die, he was a second father" [133-34]).

I refer to such novels as Henry Mackenzie's The Man of Feeling and Laurence Sterne's
A Sentimental Journey. These scenes are themselves "culture-texts," in that they stage con-
flicts between characters situated in different social contexts and demonstrate emo-
tion's inseparability from social configurations.
direct readers from the text to the world beyond it, they also posit the existence of strictly "literary" feeling: meant to "inculcate... humanity and benevolence," they nevertheless provided "a course in the development of emotional response, whose beginning and end we name," What I have described as a certain circularity in representations of sympathy is thus not new in the nineteenth century but from the eighteenth-century novel's scenes of sympathy to the spectacles observed by Scrooge, the sympathetic text has both widened its scope and tightened its grasp on the reader, from a display of virtue meant to incite imitation and teach judgment to a relatively select audience, it has moved to a profound manipulation of the reader's visual sense in the form of—and by means of—the mass marketing of sympathetic representations. In the "Carol," the subject is not the man of feeling but the man who has forgotten how to feel; in Victorian England, the potential charity giver no less than the beggar requires socialization. Not simply a representation of an act of benevolence or an exhortation about the pleasures of sympathy, Dickens's text creates in naked the position of the man without feeling in a narrative whose function is to teach him how to feel, and it constructs him as sympathetic subject no less than as spectacular one by manipulating "visual" effects in a manner that mirrors Scrooge's own interpellation through spectacle.

The story opens on a world shrouded in fog that gradually dissolves to reveal Scrooge working in his counting house (47). Here, as in numerous other scenes that evoke contrasts between darkness and light or in other ways emphasize the visual, the story draws attention to its own surface and its control over visual techniques (what Metz calls "mechanisms of desire")—its power to let readers, positioned as spectators, see or not see.  


10 See Metz, Imaginary Signifier, 77, for an account of techniques that emphasize the camera's control over the spectator's vision: "the boundary that bars the look," Metz suggests, the camera eroticizes seeing, in a "veiling-unveiling procedure" that excites the viewer's desire. This kind of procedure characterizes Dickens's writing in passages such as the following: "Meanwhile the fog and darkness thickened so, that people ran about with flaming links, prolonging their services to go before horses in carriages, and conduct them on their way. The ancient tower of a church... became invisible... In the main street, at
In doing so, it seems to create spectacle out of a grab bag of projective or framing devices that it implicitly describes as the property of literary texts. But while suggesting that literature can transform any reality into spectacle, the story features chiefly on objects, persons, and scenes that are already spectacular in Victorian culture: already invested with cultural value and desire. As the story seems to spectacularize the real, in fact it reinforces the desirability of a series of culturally valorized images and contributes to a sense that nothing exists—at least, nothing worth looking at—outside those images.

Spectacle depends on a distinction between vision and participation, a distance that produces desire as a spectacle. The early parts of Dickens's story dramatize the elder Scrooge's identification with images of his youth and associate the effect of those images with that of literary texts. The scenes of Scrooge's youth possess an immediacy that the Spirit of Christmas Past underscores by warning Scrooge against it: "There are but shadows of the things that have been," said the Ghost. "They have no consciousness of us." (71). But the text's emphasis is on the "reality" of these "shadows," and that emphasis is multiplied by an insistence on the reality of an even more removed level of representation: the characters of Ali Baba and Robinson Crusoe, products of the young Scrooge's imagination, not only appear in the first scene but are "wonderfully real and distinct to look at." And their realism seems both to produce and to be evidence of the spectator's ability to identify with representations, enchanting about the adventures of these fictional characters, Scrooge "expended all the earnestness of his nature... in a most extraordinary voice between laugh and sobs," while, [as the corner of the court, some labourers were repairing the gas-pipes, and had lighted a great fire in a brazier, round which a party of ragged men and boys were gathered] (52).

At stake in this description is less an attempt at mimesis than an evocation of desire for light (and heat). Other scenes, discussed in the body of the paper, similarly depend not so much on minute description as on a "strip-tease" effect that fetishizes the visual (Metz, Imaginary Signifier; 77). Dickens resembles numerous other Victorian novelists in his interest in the interrelations of vision and power. For more on this topic see D. A. Miller, The Novel and the Police (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), and Audrey Jaffe, Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). The ability of "A Christmas Carol" to make readers "see" is further associated with a mechanics of projection and dynamic of spectatorial desire that produce in readers a condition of consumer desire and construct the text as commodity.
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ing and crying," his face "brightened and excited" (74). Subsequent scenes produced by the spirit similarly evoke desire and compel identification. The scene of Fezziwig's ball takes Scrooge "out of his wits": "His heart
and soul were in the scene, and with his former self"; he speaks "uncon-
sciously like his former, not his latter self" (78). If Scrooge's relation to the
scene from the Arabian Nights and Robinson Crusoe is analogous to his re-
sponse to other scenes from his past and both are analogous to the reader's
relation to the text of "A Christmas Carol," then literature is here imag-
ined as spectacle, and both are defined as compelling identification while
precluding participation.

Although temporal distance and fictitiousness separate observer from ob-
served in these scenes, the story's emphasis on the realism of what is seen
blurs the difference between a spectacle literature finds and one it cre-
ates. Similarly what the spirits choose to represent as "scene" is often, in
effect, already one. Davis has described the story's construction as a series
of scenes in its use of dreams and projections and its allusions to popular
Victorian images. But in scenes are also related to what Mary Ann Doane
calls "scenarios": constellations of objects or persons charged with cultural
significance, they are images of images deployed as evoking desire in a spe-
tator who recognizes the values embedded in them.11 The scenes of
Scrooge's boyhood friends, for instance, compel spectatorial desire through
their temporal distance and through Scrooge's evident, immediate pleasure
in apprehending them. Indistinct as they are, however, they serve chiefly as
imagined youth and boyhood fellowship and to gesture toward an idealized
preindustrial world in which work resembles play. In the description of
Fezziwig's ball, similarly, desire is signaled by absorption, the disappearance
of both the spirit and Scrooge while the scene is being described. But de-
sire is also inscribed in the display of the dance itself, with its stylized em-
phasis on couples and courtship. Encoding specific cultural values in vis-
itory scenes, surrounding with a golden or rosy light the images that
convey them, the story identifies those values with light and vision them-
selves, and signifies, as I argue below, what it calls "spirit."12

11 Davis, Lives and Times, 65-66; Mary Ann Doane, The Desire to Desire: The Woman's
Film of the 1940's (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 13-14.

12 The cultural value placed on masculine virility, for instance, is conveyed by the detail that,
as the old merchant danced, "a positive light appeared to issue from Fezziwigs calves" (77).
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Encoded in these scenes, then, are some of Victorian culture's dominant values—youth, boyhood fellowship, heterosexual desire, and familial pleasure—their autonomous asserted by means of a strategy that identifies seeing with desiring. For embedded in the scenes are screens of their own: cultural frames that define the contents as desirable. In perhaps the most powerful example, a scene after the ball, the narrator myriadly drivers, moving into the spirit's position and, imaginatively, into the scene itself. He supposes himself one of several "young brigands" playing a game in which a young woman who might in other circumstances, it seems, have been Scrooge's daughter.

As to measuring her waist in sport, as they did, bold young brood, I couldn't have done it; I should have expected my arm to have grown round it for a punishment, and never come straight again. And yet I should have dearly liked, I own, to have touched her lips, to have questioned her, to have looked upon the lashes of her downcast eyes, and never raised a blush. I should have loved, I do confess, to have had the lightest licence of a child, and yet to have been man enough to know its value. (81-82)

The merging of narrator, spirit, and Scrooge in the speaker's "I" is the narrative's characteristic way of dramatizing the power of its own representations. And the subject of the passage—the impossibility of touching an image whose status as image provokes the desire to touch (and harks out a promise of "value")—might itself serve as a definition of spectacle. But this seductiveness is a function not only of the image's status as representation but also of what Laura Mulvey calls the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of what is represented.13 What prevents the narrator from touching the woman's skin—the "skin" separating spectator from spectacle—defines

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13 As Mulvey explains, "In their traditional exhibitionist role women are unhesitatingly looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact as if in order to make a woman is to look at her." "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Ideologies of Gender, edited by Laura Mulvey, 18-19. This effect is what I refer to as circumscription in representing women. A Christmas Carol's treats, of course, are only that much highlighted开局 already coded for visual impact, culturally defined in representational terms.
both the reality of what is seen and the spectacle's condition as representation, the combination of desire and inaccessibility here, as well, at woman's status in the real as representation. By framing the scene as fantasy, the text doubles and eroticizes the image's spectacular quality. It is not just projection that makes the idea of touch—a breaking of the skin of representation—seem transgressive here; what is presented is already defined as spectacle in Victorian culture.

And as transgressive. For this image is also desirable and untouchable because of the prohibitions embodied in the imagined desire of the father for his own daughter. The woman's presence in the dream or fantasy thus echoes and encodes other prohibitions against touch, prohibitions marking gender codes and familial relations. Desire is both elicited by these prohibitions and inscribed in them; participating in that desire, observers become complicit in the scene's cultural dynamics.

Along with mode of representation and content, temporal distance gives the images of Scrooge's past an inherent spectacularity. But what the story offers as everyday reality—Christmas Present—possesses the same projective or illusory quality. It is as if, in order to make Scrooge and the story's reader desire the real, the text has to offer not everyday life but rather its image: everyday life polished to a high sheen.

The poulterers' shops were still half open, and the fruiterers' were radiant in their glory. There were green round, pew-bellied baskets of chestnuts, shaped like the waistcoats of jolly old gentlemen, lolling at the doors, and tumbling out into the street in their apoplectic opulence. There were ruddy, brown-faced, broad-girthed Spanish Onions, shining in the fatness of their growth like Spanish Friars; and winking from their shelves in wanton slyness at the girls as they went by.... There were pears and apples, clustered high in blooming pyramids; there were bunches of grapes, made in the shopkeepers' benevolence to dangle from conspicuous hooks, that people's mouths might water gratis as they passed. (89-90)

Figs are "moist and pulpy," French plums "blush in modest tartness"; there are "Norfolk Biffins, squab and swarthy, setting off the yellow of the oranges and lemons, and, in the great compactness of their juicy persons, urgently entreating and beseeching to be carried home in paper bags and eaten after dinner" (90). These objects carry the same erotic charge as did
the woman in the game-playing scene (and desire is once again modeled, in the image of warning mouths) they also similarly suggest temporal distance, with the spectator positioned as not yet in possession of what he sees. But they have these qualities not because they are framed as projections, although they appear in the scenes shown by the Spirit of Christmas Present, but because they are behind a screen already in place: the shop window. As in the earlier scene, what the text situates within its literary and phantasmatic frames is already culturally framed. Indeed, the idea of “framing” Christmas Present has as its premise the proposition that the real is only desirable—in fact, for Scrooge, only visible—when made into representation.14

It makes sense, then, that Victorian England’s most important site of value—the home—also appears as image, framed by a perception from without that invests it with longing. There is no difference between the frames imposed by the spirit present and what a passerby in the street would ordinarily see: “As Scrooge and the spirit were along the streets, the brightness of the roasting fires in kitchens, parlours, and all sorts of rooms, was wonderful. Hence, the flickering of the blue-shaded preparations for a cozy dinner, with her plates boiling through and through before the fire, and deep red curtains ready to be drawn, to shut out cold and darkness.... Here, again, were shadows on the window-blind of guests assembling.”15 The representational frame Dickens sets to set fantasy apart from reality—the dynamics that give “A Christmas Carol” its mythical or fairy-tale quality—turn out to be fully operative in the “real” world for Scrooge and the spirit as they walk through the streets, the world is a series of such frames, of window and projective scenes.

The reality Dickens re-presents is, thus, already encoded as spectacle: it is “to-be-looked-at.” And in this way the text, by emphasizing the real quality of its projections and the projective quality of what it offers at the level of the real, dissolves any sustainable difference between the real and the real.

14 Thomas Richards discusses the way the Great Exhibition synthesized, in the manufactured commodity exchanged and encased with spectacle such as the play of light on the object and the imposed distance between spectator and object. See Richards, The Commodity Culture of Victorian England (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
the image. Structuring desire through the imposition of fictionalized projections, on the one hand, and showing that desire is already structured by such everyday frames as windows and blinds, on the other, the story effectively demonstrates that the real already possesses the quality of image and shadow—of form from the point of view of someone positioned outside it. And defining the real as spectacle, the text positions all of its readers outside it. Focusing on objects already fetishized visually (women, home, and food) and framing the already culturally framed, the story defines reality as spectacle—what one watches and remains outside of. Inviting its representational surface with falsification, the story turns its readers into spectators and positions them outside of everything. At Christmas (when, as Dickens imaginings of the holiday as in contemporary America’s, the dominant fiction seems to be the only available reality), the story seems to say, the world is an image; moreover, it is an image in which spectators must seek to see themselves. This imperative to locate the self within the story’s spectacles, associating as it does the representation of the self with the story’s other representations, ultimately defines sympathy in the “Carol” as a spatio-temporal term as relation to representation. Scrooge typically loses himself in the “vivids” of what he sees, immersing, for instance, the younger Scrooge’s transfer identification. The story presents his watching of these scenes not only as the production, witnessing, and loss of self in spectacle (and, analogously, in reading) but also as the taking on of the image’s desire. But the scene prompts compassion as well: Scrooge’s identification with his former self leads to sympathy for that self, and, in turn, to sympathy with others, and not only with images. “There was a boy singing a Christmas Carol at my door last night. I should like to have given him something: that’s all,” he says after witnessing the first scene of his boyhood self (73). The narrative of the development of fellow feeling offered here makes the two kinds of sympathy (identification and compassion) appear to be continuous, as if the opening up of space between the self and its representation produces a general desire to identify, which can then be detached from the

15 This collapse of reality and illusion suggests Jean Baudrillard’s simulacra. But I am arguing not that the commodity form dominates culture, but rather that commodity culture draws its power from its status as an exemplary form of culture—its identity with culture as a system of representations.
self and shifted to some other identity. Indeed, throughout the story the presence of visual representation is identified with the presence of Scrooge's former self (the sight of Fezziwig's ball makes him "unconsciously" like his former self), and representation takes on a nostalgic quality, as windows or screens define a temporal distance between observer and observed. The scenes of Scrooge's past always possess "presence," then he fonds Scrooge has a natural ability to oscillate with representations that the older Scrooge recovers as soon as the scenes are presented to him. In several ways, then, the story is the ability to sympathize with images in the imaging of a past self to presence.

Positioning Scrooge as a reader and interpreter of cultural scenes, Dickens's story recalls Geertz's definition of culture as a system of signs to be read. But reading in "A Christmas Carol" also includes an element of internalization—or more precisely what Louis Althusser has called interpellation, a process he imagines "along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'" In this theoretical street scene, "the hailed individual will turn round. By this one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject." As Althusser maintains, the individual can respond to the policeman's hailing only if already a subject. According to this narrative, if Scrooge learns his lessons with astonishing quickness, he does so because what is represented in learning is at the same time known already. Reading, for the spectator of the story's scenes, is staged as the recovery of knowledge the reader once possessed.

Althusser dismisses the apparently tautological structure of his narrative (the problem that the subject must already be a subject in order to respond), and wants to demonstrate that in his heart he knows them already. Reading, the spectator of the story's scenes, is staged as the recovery of knowledge the reader once possessed.

The problem that the subject must already be a subject in order to respond (as Elliot Gilbert has dubbed "the Scrooge Problem") is that Scrooge's "ease" suggests a projection of the text's ideal reader, compelled, as Scrooge is throughout, by the power of the story's representations. See Gilbert, "The Ceremony of Innocence: Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol," PMLA 90 (1975): 22.

hand the shop window suggests that the narrative structure of Althusser's example exposes a similar narrative in the capitalist subject's identity. The images of Christmases Past invite Scrooge's identification and imitation, but access to their reality is blocked by their status as representation. The objects Scrooge sees in the "real" world, however—such as the Norfolk Biffins that ask to be "carried home in paper bags"—are expressions of the spectator and the objects explicitly invite participation in the form of possession. Visual representation inscribes the spectator as absence or lack and, in their fullness, these images emphasize that lack. But the relation between spectator and image is reversed, as these commodities call out to the spectator to complete them.

In the scenes of Christmases Past, Scrooge's (and by implication any spectator's or reader's) relation to representation is articulated in terms of absorption and self-loss to supplement his own lack. Scrooge desires the presence projected by the image, but the image in the window is presented as desiring the spectator, now figured as consumer, whose completion of the scene depends on recognizing and identifying with their desire. Indeed, the logic of Dickens's speaking commodities seems contradictory at first. When one desires the objects that "speak" to one, the speaking appears to manifest either the external world's acknowledgment of one's individuality (as if, when a commodity says, "Hey, you there!" something essential about the self is being confirmed) or a recognition that the self requires something beyond itself to become individual or complete. In fact, this narrative may be said to display the same "conversational" logic as Althusser's, demonstrating that the individual who becomes a subject already is one. But the apparent contradiction might also be said to elaborate modern capitalism's construction of a temporally diffuse, or narrativized, subject—the kind implicit in the temporal division and reconstruction of Scrooge's life. For such a subject, that is, only the moment of consumption offers an illusion of presence, giving the self that consumes the opportunity to coincide phantasmatically with the idealized and temporally detached self projected into the object consumed. In a never-ending narrative of self-creation and transformation, this commodity culture may be said to work in effect by making its subjects feel incomplete without the objects they may purchase to complete themselves. Through the purchase of commodities, spectators become present to themselves, expressing an identification with representation and pur-
Sympathy with representation, then, links sympathy as compassion with the construction of the subject as spectator and consumer. Dickens' speaking commodities thus literalize and dramatize Scrooge's implicit relation to representation throughout the story. All the scenes Scrooge is shown "speak" to him, positioning him as spectator and as desiring subject. But unlike the other images he sees, the commodities provide him with something to do, enabling him to participate in the circulation of representations the text defines as participation in culture.

By the time Scrooge gets to the third of the series of scenes shown to him by the spirits, he has become an accomplished reader. He knows he should seek some meaning, as well as his own image, in these scenes, and he does so with confidence. "Scrooge was at first inclined to be surprised that the Spirit should attach importance to conversations apparently so trivial, but feeling assured that they must have some hidden purpose, he set himself to consider what it was likely to be... [Nothing short of that information over which they applied they had some latent mind for his own improvement, he resolved to treasure up every word he heard, and everything he saw; and especially to observe the shadow of himself when it appeared...] He looked about in that very place for his own image" (113).

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19 The scene after the ball similarly imagines a consolidation of past and present in terms of "presence" through "the lightest licence of the child" with a man's knowledge of value.

20 My interest lies in asserting not that readers have no agency—that the story's claims are irresistible—but rather that "A Christmas Carol," like any other text, will interpellate those subjects who respond to its call, "A Christmas Carol," like any other text, will interpellate those subjects who respond to its call, to whom the story appeals, to whom the story applies, to whom the story affords belief in the feeling and calcifies in its expression. My telling them to participate in some way is the "A Christmas Carol" moral of Dickens's narrative. I have never meant to suggest that such readers believe in the story without argument, as well as despite Mr. Fezziwig's desire that Scrooge "look about in that very place for his own image" (113). Even the best evidence for the story's success at interpellation is the spectacle of social cohesion that takes place around its images each December. Those who resist the spirit of the "Carol" are, after all, still working for a bunch of old Scrooges.
But his image does not seem to be there; instead there is the shrouded body and a conversation about the profits that can rightfully be made from it, given the way the living person had profited from others. "I see, I see," says Scrooge, thinking he has absorbed the lesson. "The case of this unhappy man might be my own" (117). In a moment, however, the thankful distance implicit in the conventional Christian formula for sympathy—"there but for the grace of God"—is exposed by a startlingly literal literary identification: the case of this unhappy man is his own. The scene projected by the spirit is now the place in which Scrooge doesn't want to identify. The text teaches not only the need to project the self into the consciousnesses of others but also the potential unpleasantness of doing so: the desire not to be in the other's place. And that desire points toward what occupies the position of the real in this text: the images that pose an alternative to the story's scenes of cultural value. For although the story collapses the difference between reality and history, turning both into image, the scene of Scrooge's death (and indeed all scenes in which Scrooge appears as his present-day, undesirable self) signifies the real, pointing as it does toward the end of the narrative of Scrooge's actual life rather than toward the ideal life that will replace it. "Yet to come," like serial publication, seems to promise plenitude; indeed, Dickens' text dramatizes what Metz calls the ability of cinematic representation to construct a spectator who both identifies with an image and feels temporally distant from it—eclipses paradoxically identifying with his image, can only "catch up with himself at the last minute."21 But Christmas Yet to Come projects a grim scene by contrast with the seductive images offered previous to and alongside it. Scrooge is offered the end of the series, the inevitable consequence of a life lived outside the representations presented to him and to readers as life, as cultural life—indeed, as the identification of the two. "A Christmas Carol" accomplishes its interpolation of its readers not, finally, by modeling spectatorship in the person of Scrooge, but rather by identifying culture with images and scenes to be absent from which is, effectively, not to exist. Scrooge's death is a metaphor for his absence from representations; more powerfully, it is a metaphor for his absence from culture, defined as representation as a series of images and structure of significations in relation to which, as he

21 Metz, "Imaginary Signifier."
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learns to "read" them, his own image takes on meaning. His death realizes, and teaches him to fear, the absence from the world of representations he—and we—have been shown.22

Dickens' text doubles, by framing, the scenes the spirits project or otherwise show and other kinds of frames, such as the windows of shops and of homes. Habituating readers to frames and focusing on the already spectacular, it presents the real as a series of images that exist even in the absence of any visible picture-making technology blinding in frames of and out of visibility, the story reproduces the logic of the relations between cultural representation and ideology, in which frames are sometimes literal—in pictures, literary texts, or movie screens—and sometimes appear as an inherent effect on objects and vision. "A Christmas Carol" thus provides an anatomy of the way in which, in a print culture and even more emphatically in a "society of the spectacle," cultural values become manifest as—and as a collection of images. More precisely, they become a way of seeing in which the real is filtered through cultural frames that precede any particular manifestation of it. Making the Christmas spirit visible and presenting visibility as a threat, the story dramatizes the coerciveness inherent in a culture's ability to endow certain artifacts, persons, and activities with "presence." And the conversion of Scrooge's feeling provides an analogue for the story's commodifying power: while alluding to the recovery of the natural, both reveal the absence of anything outside the frames of culture.

The culture from which Scrooge has been absent is, of course, commodity culture; his failure to participate in human fellowship is signaled by his

22 Vicki Goldberg discusses the idea of images as collective culture in an article about the use, in advertising, of news photographs of catastrophes. "Whole populations," she writes, "have the same mental-image files, which constitute a large part of the common culture." "Images of Catastrophe as Corporate Sublimes," New York Times, 5 May 1992, sec. 2, p. 33. Such image repertoires, while obviously increased by the existence of cinema and television, would exist as soon as and wherever images are circulated. Elizabeth Eisenstein also suggests as much: e.g., The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 37. The identity between culture and a series of visual images is reinforced by Dickens' description of his memories of Christmas as a series of images (see Davis, Lives and Times, 66-67).
refusal of, and need to learn, a gift-giving defined as the purchase and exchange of commodities.23 The need for conversion the text stresses and the form Scrooge's awakening takes resemble what Thomas Haskell has described as the social discipline and character modification effected by modern capitalism, which created the cognitive conditions that made humanitarianism (in particular, the abolition of slavery) possible, conditions such as the development of conscience and the necessity of living "partly in the future," anticipating the long-term consequences of one's actions. For Haskell, the conditions for humanitarianism were created by the "lessons" of modern capitalism.24 Scrooge lacks, Marley's ghost informs him, "the spirit within him [that] should walk abroad among his fellow-men, and travel far and wide" (61). The awakening of this spirit promises him affective relations where he previously had none, as well as improved business prospects. Scrooge's ability to project into past and future teaches him, and is concurrent with, his ability to project himself into the consciousness of others (his skills in distant possession of a spirit that travels far and wide—what might be called a spirit of capitalism, a capitalist sensibility).25 The interconnection of commodities require in this text is the same as that which spectacle (and literary identification) invite—indeed, compel: each attests to the possession of a dispersed self capable of being in several places at once. As the story illustrates in an exemplary fashion, the conversion of self required by the humanitarian ideology of "A Christmas Carol" also characterizes the capitalist subject's relationship to representation.

23 Scrooge does participate in the economic system; Davis discusses the idea that before his conversion Scrooge promotes a "supply side" economy (Lives and Times, chap. 7).
25 The serialization of Scrooge's life (its division into past, present, and future) reflects the link between capitalism, serial publication, and the need for "projection"—living partly in the future—Haskell defines as necessary to a capitalist sensibility. Haskell quotes Defoe on the connection between business and metaphorical travel: "Every new voyage the merchant contrives is a project, and ships are sent from port to port, as markets and navigation delight, by the help of strange and universal intelligence; wherein some are so exquisite, so swift, and so exact, that a merchant sitting at home in his counting-house, at once converses with all parts of the known world" ("An Essay upon Projects," quoted in Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility," 558).
Dickens's text draws out further implications of the connection between capitalism and the spirit that travels far and wide, implications that reintroduce an idea of circularity into an understanding of capitalism's projective effects. Like women, homes, and food, the poor in Dickens's text are projections or spectacles of the already spectacular; fittingly, the images most frequently cited as evidence of the story's affective power are the children displayed by the Ghost of Christmas Present, allegorical figures named Ignorance and Want. If, in Haskell's formulation, capitalism produces a spirit that travels far and wide, it also creates the distance between classes that makes such traveling necessary, incorporating distance into daily life and turning immediate surroundings into allegorical figures or projections.

The story's most famous icon, Tiny Tim, reproduces its economy of representation and consumption. Scrooge's macabre remark that the Cratchits' Christmas turkey is "twice the size of Tiny Tim" associates such plenitude with the object of sympathy in a manner that has become paradigmatic for "A Christmas Carol" itself. Exemplifying the feeling that leads to the gift, Tiny Tim appropriately enough imagines himself, at one point, as sympathetic spectacle: "He hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple" (94). The Cratchits' family dines off the image that has become, for Dickens's text, the emblem of an inexhaustible fund of sympathetic capital. And the name for that capital, here, is "spirit." The gift is a visible manifestation of spirit, a moment of willingness to move into and identify with the story's circulation of representations. That identification accounts for the story's apparently limitless capacity for transformation: capturing the commodity's potential for sympathy, "A Christmas Carol" constitutes itself as an endlessly sympathetic commodity, its variable surface reflecting an unchanging ability to embody readers' and spectators' desires.

26 These images reflect the sense in which, by the time of Dickens's story, poverty was a spectacle rather than a visible reality for many members of the middle and upper classes. See Gareth Stedman Jones's discussion of the "separation between classes" in Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society (New York: Pantheon, 1971), part 3.

27 "A Christmas Carol" is, of course, concerned with relations between employer and employee—between the businessman and his clerk. But this story of class relations is mapped onto the symbolic context of a patriarchal Christian order, and its cross-class
In a cultural scenario of its own making, the marketing of "A Christmas Carol" consolidates and elaborates upon the text's interweavings of consumerism and sympathy. If vision's ability to evoke presence serves as a primary way of naturalizing ideological effects in the "Carol," the story's annual return may be said to perform the same function by making specific feelings and activities, including making or viewing the story itself, seasonal (re)presentations. The "Christmas book" (for the "Carol" initiated a series of Christmas books) naturalizes literary production, linking text and reader to holiday and season—a season already bound up with ideas of resurrection and eternal presence. With the metaphorical deaths and rebirths of Scrooge and Tiny Tim echoing its annual return, the story associates the idea of Christian renewal with its own form of production. And in a way that further associates natural life with textual production, Scrooge's life—its ending witnessed by the reader-spectator who thereby becomes his life's owner and producer—displays all the malleability of the serially published text. Indeed, Scrooge's exchangeable identity, and the story's emphasis on Christmas as a time when identities become exchangeable, may have given both Dickens and Christmas new currency by revealing the fungibility of self and time implicit in both Christian conversion and modern consumer culture. A capitalist sensibility is perhaps most evident in the story's refusal of temporality: in the identification with a time of year that ensures its annual return and the offer—to Scrooge, to its readers or viewers, and theoretically, to the poor themselves—of an endlessly repeatable cycle of failure and recovery, figured as an alienation from, and reacceptance into, an ever-forgiving culture. The reader-spectator who identifies with the Christmas spirit identifies with a culture in which spirit will
always be necessary; the self as image is a renewable self, forever holding out the possibility of a new ending. Such an interpretation depends not on the idea that the story has no effect on the external world, but only that such an effect is never conceived as an ending: it is, rather, part of a cycle in which the story’s own representation—having become a part of the culture it represents—also belongs. For Dickens, the term spirit jokingly yet insistently signals the weakness of the boundary between the invisible and the visible—and warns of the likelihood that the former will manifest itself in the latter. 29 Thus “A Christmas Carol” returns annually and, more often than not, visibly, with an emphasis (and a relentlessness) it has itself projected. In the story’s identification with Christmas and in the repetition this identification ensures, Dickens’s culture-text promotes its own endlessness as well as that of the culture it has helped to create.

29 “A Christmas Carol” was the first, and the most frequently performed, of Dickens’s public readings. Although the text varied from night to night, the crucial feature of the readings was reportedly the author’s impersonation of his characters and his evident identification with the “spirit” of both book and holiday. See Philip Collins, Charles Dickens: The Public Readings (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 4-7.