Waste

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Georges Bataille interprets the first artistic gesture as an apology for human existence. Much of human endeavor can be understood as an extension of that impulse. Through successive ages of imperialism, it has appeared as though Western man’s greatest ambition was dominion over all things, but our present model of suicide capitalism suggests that the goal of ever-accelerating growth has always been to spend ourselves as quickly as possible, to destroy ourselves and cease to be.

Before Freud accepted the death drive, he saw most self-generated impediments to human pleasure-seeking as perversions. These developmental detours yielded types of pleasure that existed outside normative or efficient economies of pleasure production. Freud believed that childhood anal eroticism, a fixation on the giving or withholding of one’s waste products, could help explain the formation of neurotic adult personality characteristics. During the anal stage of psychosexual development, a child prone to erotic stimulation of the anal zone may display a tendency to obstinately hold back his waste, sometimes waiting to empty his bowels until doing so will cause maximum inconvenience for his caretaker. In this early phase of life, this exercise of control is one of the few available to the child. In exerting control over his physiological functions, the child rehearses the control he will later seek to exercise over other areas of his life.
“The contents of the bowels,” Freud says, are “treated as part of the infant’s own body and represent his first ‘gift’ by producing them he can express his active compliance with his environment and, by withholding them, his disobedience.” The child uses the (mis)management of his waste products as an instrument of perverse control, but also identifies himself with those very waste products. His waste represents his first opportunity to exercise his will, to assert himself as homo faber. It is his first experience of power, both as an autonomous agent with the ability to refuse and as a creator of a thing of value, albeit of dubious value — Freud points out that gold, or mammon, has since archaic times appeared as allied with, or as a stand-in for, the feces of the devil. Freud also speculates that it may be “the contrast between the most precious substance known to men and the most worthless, which they reject as waste matter (‘refuse’),[that] has led to [the] identification of gold with faeces.” According to Freud, anality comes to shape the adult personality in an unhealthy way when the child emerges from his negotiation with the conflicts presented during the toilet-training phase with either anal-retentive or anal-expulsive tendencies, either too parsimonious or overly unregulated in his behavior. It is the conflict itself, however, that is formative — man comes to esteem himself first through denial and abasement, through a confrontation with himself as a creator of that which is vile.

Julia Kristeva reads this primal gift-giving as the archetypical site of abjection, the process of constructing identity via the casting-off of that which is considered so repugnant or intolerable that its proximity infringes on the subject’s sense of self, threatening dissolution and incoherence. “What is abject,” she writes, “is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one qual-

ity of the object—that of being opposed to I.”3 Abjection plays a critical role in ego-formation on both the individual and the cultural levels. We abject various racial, religious, and sexual others to shore up the integrity of the unmarked I. Those construed as waste products are not discarded, but rather must remain present in the imaginary as crucial to personal or cultural integrity. This integrity is contingent on boundaries, division, retention, and control—anal-retentive personality characteristics that stand in sharp contrast to the primal yearning Bataille sees in the artifacts of prehistoric man, who experienced the individuation of his species with shame. Early man’s emerging distance from the animal world, the barrier sealing him off from nature, gave him pain, not comfort. Though we may have forgotten the origin of that pain, Bataille would argue, one has only to behold the orgy of self-destruction we have made of the modern world to see that everything in the human still aches to return to insentience. “Today’s man suspects the inanity of the edifice he has founded, he knows that he knows nothing,” Bataille writes, “and, as his ancestors concealed their features with animal masks, he summons the night of truth wherein the world that has ordained his pretension will cease being clear and distinct.”4 The “night of truth” is war; if barriers must exist, man will annihilate them through violence.

Heiner Müller, Hapless Angel

In a famous passage from his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin describes the Klee painting Angelus Novus, which

shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are

staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

A progressive theory of history holds that human history is marching inexorably towards the good, toward liberty and justice for all. Fukuyama’s theory of history is in this sense progressive. Benjamin wonders whether the costs of so-called progress are really worth the benefits. In Benjamin’s bleak vision, the call of progress tears us away from the work of healing, reintegration, of making “whole what has been smashed.” The angel wants to repair the disastrous errors of the past, but the storm of progress bears him backward into the future to witness new disasters piling onto the old. The heap of debris grows much faster than anyone could possibly sift through it to bring out the bodies, but even if that were not the case only an angel could be expected to awaken the dead, the waste of history.

Heir to Brecht’s legacy, the East German playwright and director Heiner Müller did not share his artistic progenitor’s faith in revolutionary progress. His vision of history owed more to Benjamin. In a 1958 piece of text called “The Hapless Angel,” Müller revisits Benjamin’s Angel of History:

Behind him the past washes ashore, piles debris on his wings and shoulders, with the noise of buried drums, while before him the future dams up, impresses itself down on

his eyes, bursts his eyeballs like a star, twists his words into a sounding muzzle, chokes him with its breath. For a time one can still see the beating of his wings, hear into the roar the landslide coming down before above behind him, louder the more furious his futile movement, sporadic as it languishes. Then the moment closes down over him: standing, buried by debris quickly, the hapless angel comes to rest, waiting for history in the petrification of flight glance breath. Until the renewed roar of mighty beating wings propagates itself in undulations through the stone and announces his flight.6

In Müller’s version, the angel is not merely forced to behold the ugly spectacle of the wrecked past’s waste piling up in the name of progress; he is being buried alive by it. What is more, the angel is being pulverized from both sides. Not only the past, but the future, oppresses him. Brecht adopted the writings of Marx and Lenin as gospel; he believed that the coming global socialist utopia would deliver all of suffering humanity to salvation. Müller’s faith in alternatives to capitalism was undermined by the gap between the utopian ambitions of communist movements and the gruesome reality of what the Soviet experiment produced. For the Hapless Angel, the way forward is dammed, the future as irredeemably damned as the past. Benjamin’s Angel experienced progress as a storm; he does not know or dream of where he is being borne. He is powerless, but at least he is spared the torture of imagination. In contrast, Müller’s Angel’s eyes explode as expectations, aspirations, unrealized plans accumulate. Blind and immobilized, the angel, like progress, is gridlocked. His wings flap uselessly.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Müller returned to the image once again with a short poem he titled “Hapless Angel 2.” Here, the Angel is unmoored, unknown, and unknowable:

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Between city and city
After the wall the abyss
Wind at the shoulders the alien
Hand at the lonely flesh
The angel I still hear him
Yet he has no face anymore but
Yours that I don’t know

The Angel, like the speaker of the poem, suffers from rootlessness, isolation, and lack of either identity or direction. Long skeptical about revolutions and critical of revolutionaries, Müller recognizes that without a cause projecting him into a future, the angel is lost.

Revolution as Theater/Theater as Revolution

Modern tragedy, Raymond Williams posits, is grounded in the awareness of the need for continuous revolution. To be modern is to be in the midst of constant flux, a permanent state of shattering and rebuilding. To see this state as tragic is to take into account the violence and destruction, the inevitable waste that revolution entails. In the postmodern era, we are afflicted with what Kristeva calls “postmodern forgetting.” Facing a crisis of subjectivity and a crisis of knowledge, we struggle to maintain an unequivocal link to our cultural stories, to the truth of past atrocities. We buckle under the unbearable lightness of ahistoricity. Nietzsche tells us that

in the smallest and greatest happiness there is always one thing that makes it happiness: the power of forgetting, or, in more learned phrase, the capacity of feeling “unhistorically” throughout its duration. One who cannot leave himself behind on the threshold of the moment and forget the past, who cannot stand on a single point, like a goddess of victory, without fear or giddiness, will never know what happiness is;

7 Ibid., 57.
and, worse still, will never do anything to make others happy.¹

But the practice of “active forgetting,” advocated by Nietzsche, can be either the instrument or the downfall of those engaged in the modern project of revolution. “Revolution” can mean an insurrection, but the word can also be used, as Kristeva uses it, to refer to a turn, an instance of revolving completed by a return to one’s original position.

When questioned on the subject, Müller was known to scoff, “[r]evolution? After the next ice age.” Müller based several of his own most nihilistic plays on Brecht’s optimistic, utilitarian Lehrstücke plays. Variously translated as “teaching plays,” “learning plays,” or “didactic plays,” the Lehrstücke were intended to be performed only by and for groups of workers engaged in the process of educating themselves. They were to be tools for cultivating revolutionary consciousness, not aesthetic objects to be passively consumed. As Andrzej Wirth and Marta Ulvaeus describe it, in the Lehrstücke project, “two utopian concepts meet: the theater as metatheater, and society as changeable. […] [T]heater should function without an audience, society without classes.”² No longer would the proscenium divide those who produced from those who consumed, perniciously duplicating the oppressive social dynamics of the world outside the theater. The Lehrstücke erase the divide between producers and consumers. The worker/performers own the means of production and labor for their own benefit, no one else’s. The plots of the plays pose intellectual and moral dilemmas analogous to those workers might be expected to confront on the road to revolution. They conclude with a resolution intended to be instructive, an outcome to be emulated. The Lehrstücke are plays that are ex-

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pected to perform a function, rather than merely be performed. Theirs is a functionalist dramaturgy.

In Brecht’s *The Measures Taken*, for example, four communist agitators return from China and relate to their central committee in Moscow the sacrifice they found it necessary to make in order to complete their mission successfully. The action of the play is related, not enacted. In China their young fifth comrade, so distressed by the injustice he witnessed, was moved to shortsighted, indiscreet acts of compassion that threatened to jeopardize their contingent’s larger goals. Ultimately, with his assent, the agitators decide to protect their cause by shooting the young comrade and disposing of his body in a lime pit. The central committee commends them for having done the right thing under the circumstances.

Müller responded to *The Measures Taken* in 1970 with *Mauser*, a relentlessly bleak, cyclical variation on Brecht’s themes. Barred from being either performed or published in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), *Mauser* also focuses on the problem of the loyal revolutionary who goes rogue. Loyalty is not an all-or-nothing proposition; in Brecht’s play, the young comrade believes so deeply in his party’s cause that he cannot delay the instant gratification he experiences helping the downtrodden for the sake of later, larger victories for the oppressed. In Müller’s version, a revolutionary charged with killing enemies of the revolution becomes so zealous in discharging his duties that the violence spins out of control. He begins killing for the pure love of killing and must finally agree to be killed himself for the sake of the revolution. Like *The Measures Taken*, *Mauser* is designed to be performed without an inactive audience. It is a play for doing, not for seeing. In a note appended to the published text, Müller explains that *Mauser* is not a play for the repertoire; [...] Performance for an audience is possible if the audience is invited to control the performance by its text, and the text by its performance, through reading the Chorus part, or the part of the First Player (A), or if the Chorus part is read by one group of spectators and the
part of the First Player by another group of spectators—the text not read by each group should be blotted out in the script—or through other devices; and if the audience’s reaction can be controlled through the non-synchronism of text and performance, the nonidentity of speaker and performer. The proposed distribution of the text is variable, the mode and degree of variants a political choice that has to be made in each individual case.\(^\text{10}\)

The first part of this instruction is straightforward enough. Müller more or less explains the way a Lehrstück works. The piece is not to be performed for a traditional, passive, segregated audience. The second part is more ambiguous, the notion of the audience’s reaction being “controlled” feels vaguely sinister and decidedly un-Brechtian. Brecht used “the non-synchronism of text and performance” to cultivate the estranging Verfremdungseffekt, but Müller’s work is addressed to a pre-alienated audience. He does not seek to use his “teaching plays” to teach through appeals to reason. Instead, he carries the dialectical process to the point of absurdity and collapse. Mauser is a crushingly elliptical text. Though Müller leaves it to the performer/spectators to cast themselves in various roles, we always come back to the play’s refrain: “DEATH TO THE ENEMIES OF THE REVOLUTION.” The play is a machine, grinding into gruel its initially distinct speakers. Speeches are assigned to the following entities:

- Chorus
- A
- A(Chorus)
- B
- Chorus(The Performers of Three Farmers)
- Chorus(A)

The casting choices may initially seem meaningful, with guilt being apportioned unequally among the speakers, some bearing more responsibility than others, some representing the pragmatic perspective and others held up as exemplars of a fallacy. The play begins as a fairly lucid dialogue between the Chorus and A, the revolutionary, being indicted for his misconduct:

A: I have done my work.
CHORUS: Do your last one.
A: I have killed for the Revolution.
CHORUS: Die for her.
A: I have committed a mistake.
CHORUS: You are the mistake.
A: I am a human being.
CHORUS: What is that.\textsuperscript{11}

By the time we receive an answer to this question, it is considerably less clear who is on whose side, who is speaking on whose behalf, who is indicting whom, on what grounds and to what purpose. According to the text, the chorus volunteers the delayed response itself. “A man,” the chorus says, “is something you shoot into / Until Man will rise from the ruins of man.”\textsuperscript{12} The individual must be destroyed so that the collective might thrive. The real must be annihilated so that the ideal might arise. Violent as the imagery is, this poetic assessment sounds like the sort of slogan that could conceivably be endorsed by sane people in desperate times who take seriously their dreams for a better tomorrow. But Müller puts into the mouths of each of his designated speakers a related refrain that topples the Tatlin-esque tower of progressive pipe dreams into the blood-soaked soil: “[k]nowing, even the grass / We must tear up so it will stay green.”\textsuperscript{13} This, of course, is madness.

\textsuperscript{11} Müller, \textit{Mauser}, 95.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 103.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 95.
The American sculptor Justin Matherly adopts this line as the title for one of a series of his pieces fashioned from concrete and ambulatory equipment. This particular sculpture consists of a vaguely humanoid mass of concrete perched precariously on a pair of hospital-style walkers. The patient is not intact — only a pair of hollowed-out stumps of thighs attached to a scarred, bulging torso remain. Already denuded of its organicity by the material (concrete being, eloquently, a kind of man-made stone), what remains of this “body” has been fused to what appear to be woefully inadequate mechanical substitutes for that which has been lost. The form of the sculpture is based on the Belvedere Torso, the famous fragment of ancient Greek sculpture that profoundly influenced Michelangelo and other Renaissance artists when it was brought to the Vatican in 1523. What Michelangelo so admired about that piece was the sense of tension and internal struggle it captured. During the Renaissance, humanism flourished as Europe emerged from the Dark Ages and rediscovered the art and writings of classical antiquity. As interest in the general value and goodness of the human gradually overtook the narrow religious focus of medieval scholasticism, man was “reborn” as the center of the known universe. The Enlightenment idea that through the application of their powers of reason men were destined to become the “masters and possessors of nature” followed.¹⁴ Under the stewardship of mankind in its rush to realize this goal, what we call nature has not fared well. This is despite the fact that, as posthumanist thinkers have shown, human beings are not in any meaningful way separate from nature, a category of our own invention, nor have we managed to escape the deleterious effects of our attempts to exert dominance over it. Matherly’s useless mass of wrecked flesh reflects on the foundering of the Cartesian proposition, the breakdown of the anthropocentric worldview.

Like the play from which it is transposed, Matherly’s sculpture is a queasy-making admission that humankind has lost

¹⁴ René Descartes, Discourse on Method and Meditations (New York: The Liberal Arts Press), 45.
control. The rampaging revolutionary “A” in *Mauser* loses it by hubristically assuming too much control. “DEATH TO THE ENEMIES OF THE REVOLUTION” becomes a suicide slogan when the speakers start to become confused and conflated — A(Chorus) and Chorus(A)? — and it becomes clear that there are ultimately *only* enemies of the revolution. Loyalty expires. Killing becomes “a science,” “work like any other work,” and “daily bread.”

Jonathan Kalb observes that in this post-Stalinist nightmare, the factory, that once-glorified symbol of the revolutionary Soviet state, becomes a slaughterhouse. “Here the vision is of production and death, production of death.”

The revolution tears up grass and grinds up bodies, laying waste to man and insensate matter alike. Even more so than *Mother Courage*, *Mauser* can be described as an allegory of pure waste. No new Man grows out of the ruined bodies of men, no new city on a hill out of the ruins of the old, no hope out of despair. Revolution as a turn or return is a zero-sum game, but no one profits in *Mauser*. Not even a little cache of blood money remains to be divided among the victors. It is impossible even to tell who the victors are or if, indeed, there are any.

Bonnie Marranca calls Müller’s *Lehrstücke* “unlearning plays.” Revisiting his source material again and again, cannibalizing Brecht’s texts and his own in as many ways as he knows how, Müller gives the impression that, like Beckett, he cannot rest until he has devoured language with language. Where Beckett courts silence, Müller is after a total denaturing of language. Both orbit aporias, but where for Beckett memory is, like speech, emptied out, Müller’s utterances are shards of literary allusions, ideological statements, and images of violence, deliriction, and disgust breaking off and tumbling down from the slag heap of German history. Heidi Schlipphacke asserts that, *pace* Kristeva, Germany and Austria suffer from “precisely a lack

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15 Müller, *Mauser*, 98, 96, 100.
of ‘forgetting.’” In these countries where the historical break of the Holocaust occurred, marking their regression to premodernity, national identity remains onerously intact as compared with the rest of globalizing, postmodern Europe. In Germany and Austria there is too much history, too much memory, too much of the “I” and its painful associations. Müller plays the role of a sadistic psychoanalyst who puts his traumatized patient on the couch, dragging them through the hell of recollection and ripping them apart without having any intention of putting them back together again. Even Freud cautioned against full-blown, psychotic individuals submitting to analysis — the process of self-excavation is difficult and painful, and patients have a tendency to get worse before they get better. Sifting through the detritus of Germany’s collective unconscious, Müller never arrives at a moment when the possibility of recovered integrity seems within reach for his analysand. Instead, his plays frequently “give up” on themselves, pivoting to an imagined other for salvation.

In Müller’s The Task, this “other” is, broadly construed, what used to be called the Third World. Written nine years after Mauser, The Task is another version of The Measures Taken, but its agitators are beset not by an excess of zeal, but by a sense of exhaustion, redundancy, and nullification. Three emissaries from the French National Convention — Galloudec, Sasportas, and Debuissone — are sent to colonial Jamaica to incite a slave rebellion against the British just as the coup of 18 Brumaire is taking place at home. With Napoleon ascending to power, effectively ending the French Revolution, the mission drifts. “The revolution has no home anymore,” Debuissone says, “what we believed to be the dawn of freedom was maybe only the mask of a new, even more hideous slavery.” But on the precipice of this aporia, the uncountenanceable thought that the struggle

18 Heidi M. Schlipphacke, Nostalgia after Nazism: History, Home, and Affect in German and Austrian Literature and Film (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2010), 75.
might have been in vain, Debuisson attempts to re-center the revolution by designating for it a new homeland. He dreams of walking through a run-down, minority neighborhood in New York and seeing omens of the next iteration of the struggle rise up like hallucinations on the city sidewalk. A golden serpent represents Asia. A radiant blue serpent represents Africa. These will be the next frontiers of the revolution. Debuisson has had enough of seeing his loves Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity whored out, dragged through “all the sewers of this world, [...] all the brothels.”

Pure revolutionary ideals have been used to justify all manner of atrocities. Equality has been embraced by every repressive regime. Fraternity has been exploited by murderers everywhere. Every dictator has put his lips to Liberty’s breast. “For a thousand years our three loves have been laughed at,” Debuisson laments, “now I want to sit where they laugh, free to do anything that’s to my taste, equal to myself, my own, and no one else’s brother.”

Dead ends and disillusionment culminate in scornful abdication and satanic laughter. As Baudelaire put it, laughter is “born of Man’s conception of his own superiority. Since it is essentially human, it is also essentially contradictory, that is to say it is at once the sign of infinite grandeur and of infinite wretchedness.” For Baudelaire, laughter as an expression of superiority to nature is the pride that goeth before destruction, as the haughty spirit before a fall. There will ultimately be no safe outside space set aside for retired insurrectionists to remain aloof, to laugh from a distance as the colonized world convulses. Though the speakers in The Mission maintain somewhat more characterological continuity than those in Mauser they are still the mouthpieces of a dizzying range of contradictions. Debuisson is blasé, even cruel one moment, laughing satanically at the dirty, brown people scrambling up behind the Europeans to set

20 Ibid., 99.
21 Ibid.
Revolution 3.0 in motion, then he is confiding tremulously to his comrades that he is “afraid [...] of the beauty of the world. I know very well,” he says, “it is the mask of treason. [...] I am afraid [...] of the shame to be happy in this world.”  

The impulsive, unruly compassion of Brecht’s young comrade has aged, grown into jaundiced, unactionable shame. Happiness is betrayal for Debuissone because it perverts time and space. It is the point at which myth becomes history. Embodied man is only hopeful because he is always forgetting, in Nietzsche’s sense, always in the present tense. Müller ends the play with Debuissone retreating into the temporary eternity and the finite infinity of a lover’s embrace. Like Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, Betrayal is a woman. Debuissone covers his ears and succumbs to the embrace of betrayal, who throws herself on him “like a heaven, the bliss of the labia at dawn.”

Woman is the horizon, the vanishing point. “In Müller’s work,” Bonnie Marranca observes, “Woman is spirit, nature, womb, Plato’s cave, the black hole in space, a prison, a snakepit, a one-way street. She is also the landscape of utopia, his grand theme.” By making Woman into everything, he reduces her to nothing. Conjured as a dream or a nightmare, the reality of whatever she might be will always seem crude, mean, offensive. In Müller’s work, “Woman, like nature,” Marranca argues, “is made to embody the ideology of the eternal feminine, passive, fated. But nature is not a still life, nor is the earth a receptacle.”

When Woman finally speaks, in defiance of this enforced symbolic passivity, she must cut through centuries of images that have been projected onto her by men.

23 Müller, *Hamletmachine*, 100.
24 Ibid., 101.
26 Ibid.
Elfriede Jelinek suffers from acute anxiety and seldom leaves her home near the edge of the Vienna Woods. When she won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2004, she did not attend the ceremony, citing agoraphobia, instead delivering her address via a tape she sent to the Swedish Academy. In the speech, titled “Sidelined,” she asks, “what happens to those, who don’t really know reality at all?” As a writer, she goes on, she exists on the sidelines. On the one hand, she can see better from there — distance provides perspective. On the other hand, the true fullness of human life is beyond her grasp. Jelinek has always perceived herself to be several degrees of separation removed from reality. Only in recent years have her physical circumstances come to reflect this symbolic distance. Though her concerns encompass her native Austria’s involvement in the Holocaust and its aftermath, the ravages of global capitalism, and the destruction of the environment, Jelinek’s earliest works for the theater were focused on the subjugation of women and women’s complicity in their own oppression. Throughout her career, this critique has been at the core of her work. Jelinek consistently takes the position that, since misogyny has from the beginning comprised the substrate of language itself, misogyny cannot be overcome without a new approach to language. According to Lacan, language is the domain of phallic exchange. Women do not have access to the symbolic order the way men do because “a woman […] is not considered a subject.” Where a male writer can wield language as an instrument, a weapon, as a means of making direct contact with reality, and even as a means of shaping reality, women will always be operating within a discourse that was designed to exclude them. Women do not exchange; they are objects of exchange. “When a man speaks,” Jelinek says, “he speaks

the discourse of authority. When a woman speaks, she does not. But what she can do is what I am doing, that is, to deal with this speechlessness, [...] if, as a woman, you don't have the right to speak, you've got to pick up the rubble. I am a Trümmerfrau of language.”

Here Jelinek identifies herself with the women who cleared out the rubble from bombed-out cities after World War II. Working with found materials, shattered, damaged materials, Honegger writes that “Jelinek’s strategy of quoting is a form of ready-made speech acts taken from trashcans and the canon. [...] Jelinek does not discard anything from the garbage heap of words, which she spreads on her flat surfaces.” Following Bataille, creation is always already a process of waste management, managing one’s own excess. For Jelinek, the woman writer self-conscious of her status as woman writer, writing is a matter of managing the waste of others. Already, as a woman, speaking in a foreign tongue, Jelinek finds herself doubly estranged by her social isolation. A self-confessed TV junkie, she relies on watching copious amounts of television for information about “reality.” Everything is secondhand but also garishly buffed and polished, exaggerated, sped up, and underscored. Rather than making her less equipped to grapple with the complexities of the world she writes about, Jelinek’s hypermediated existence lends itself to acute observation of the machinations of what is fast becoming our post-truth reality. Jelinek gives voice not to firsthand existential shame — existence is something she might say she has largely managed to avoid — but to the perspective of the horrified spectator.

**Bambiland and the Society of the Spectacle**

“When man’s need for miracles is not satisfied,” Bataille writes, “it transforms itself into a passion for destruction, being at cer-

29 Ibid., 29.
tain moments the only possible miracle, preferable to boredom, be that as it may.”31 War is the miracle humanity conjures for itself to hasten the erasure of its own excesses. War dazzles even as it decimates. “Such is the intensive employment of modern means of destruction: it is incontestable, prodigious, sensational,” says Bataille.32

The war that is the subject of Jelinek’s 2003 play Bambiland is always already mediated, a war experienced via a screen even by many of those on the front lines, inflicting most of the casualties. The world of Bambiland takes place in what Baudrillard calls “the desert of the real,” a place beyond “real” and “artificial,” a place where representation precedes reality, where the map precedes the territory. Baudrillard died in 2007, before the extent of the US’s covert drone strike program was revealed, but since the Gulf War he had often worried in print about “virtual warfare,” war as spectacle, and the distancing, desensitizing effects of conducting a war that plays like a video game or action film.

“The politics of theatre is a politics of perception,” Lehmann writes, “To define it we have to remember that the mode of perception in theatre cannot be separated from the existence of theatre in a world of media which massively shapes all perception.”33 In Bambiland, war is delivered to us in the form of an entertainment juggernaut of TV news images. Statistics, unattributed quotations, associations, digressions, puns, and pop culture detritus all run together in one long unbroken monologue. Bambiland has no designated characters and practically no stage directions. The play’s excess and its intentional formlessness evoke the torrent of waste produced by advanced capitalism and the wars that must be fought to sustain it. The central recognizable figures of Bambiland are the architects of the Iraq War. Taking Aeschylus’s The Persians as a (very) loose model, the play is nar-

31 Bataille, The Cradle of Humanity, 104.
32 Ibid.
rated as though being watching on television by someone in a semi-comatose state as “the mighty Master of War,” probably Cheney, is “marching his menfolk onward, […] it’s just part of our culture that we eventually get around to exercising a certain degree of force.” Jelinek depicts the conflict as “blood for oil” crusade fought by ignorant, pugnacious conquistador-cowboys on behalf of a nation of “clients. Consumers. Customer Kings.” The waste of oil is ironically treated as more of a calamity than the waste of a life. Compare:

Where did all that oil go, unspent? Burning. Burning. Explosives set round the rigs where the oil wells up, where it goes up in flames and goes to waste. It’s impossible to imagine, and hard to foresee. And anyone who might manage to spare himself from drowning in that tear-soaked sea of salt, the least we shall do is to kill him. You can set fire to our homes, set fire to our icons, just keep your fires off our oil and our television sets!

with:

So many men laid to waste! What a waste — surely, I could have used the one or the other of them. My garden could have used one, or my walls, which need painting, could have used one of them too. And my bed sure could use something better than lonesome old me.

The narrator/ventriloquist/viewer cannot empathize with the images on the screen for more than a few blinks before ego-centric fantasies resume control. Lehmann argues that, however “true to life” the image conveyed by the high-speed contemporary media apparatus, “produced far from its reception and

35 Ibid., 125.
36 Ibid., 112.
37 Ibid., 124.
received far from its origin, it imprints indifference onto every-thing shown.” Fact and fiction alike are “dramatized” to the point where everything acquires an identical veneer of irreality. The graphics and audio effects used to turn presidential debates into rock-’em, sock-’em show downs are identically to those used to punch up the World Series or Super Bowl.

An image is flat and unbreachable, textureless — one can purchase it but not get purchase on it. One is forced to consume it wholesale. This “seductive eyewash,” as Jelinek puts it, anesthetizes viewers. However violent or ecstatic the imagery, it cannot rouse viewers from their coma of complacency.

Rhetoric — language become image — can do the same. As Hannah Arendt writes, “Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression […] have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality.”

In Bambiland, the true motivation behind the war is kept hidden behind an impenetrable wall of such rhetoric, which Jelinek parodies mercilessly:

Look, people, the basic principle is that we are the only ones with any real principles: Ours is the only country where the individual counts anymore because every individual is an entity unto himself. […] Every human individual counts. Every human individual counts his money. Some count more, others count less. Dick Cheney counts more, we count less.

Jelinek catches American political discourse in its many hypocrisies and contradictions. “It only works when both are the same. But both people are different. This is the whole basis for our civiliza-tion — that people are different. It’s just that those sand niggers don’t see it that way,” and periodically folds her own more straightforwardly caustic commentary in as well: “[w]ill you fi-

38 Lehmann, Postdramatic Theatre, 185.
39 Jelinek, Bambiland, 113.
41 Ibid., 122.
nally deal a deathblow in the war against the alpha-male type as a model for humanity!” For Jelinek, this model stands not just for violence, but for those narrowly capitalist values of “individualism” and “efficiency” that have motivated the US’s frightening transformation from a democracy into a corporatocracy.

_Bambiland_ stretches on like a discursive desert. There is no real sense of progress being made, of victory approaching, or even of sense gradually accreting. Voices that seem as though they cannot possibly be human praise self-targeting smart-bombs and “advanced surveillance systems that take the human eye out of the act of seeing.” The “climax” comes near the end of the play when God Himself makes an appearance. Rather than pass judgment or issue a command, He promptly commences with fellating an American warhead. While narrating this experience, He reaffirms the American mandate, unconvincingly explains that “our side” is justified in killing thousands of people, including civilians, with imprecise, hyper-destructive cluster bombs because doing so enables us “to keep our losses at an absolute minimum.” God wonders “whether we’ll ever be satisfied,” though it is not clear whether He is thinking of the greed of Americans or of His fellatee and the threat of lockjaw.

The capitalist, by definition, can never be satisfied — growth demands constant escalation — and the capitalist, by definition, must count only her own losses before considering those of the enemy. _Bambiland_ presciently anticipates Donald Trump’s “America First” style of nationalism and commitment to running the country “like a business,” where generating profits for a handful of top shareholders takes precedence over any other mission. The military-industrial complex is the only real “winner” in _Bambiland_, forcing even God and Country to submit. The play ends when God’s hoplophilic blowjob does: “Finally,

42 Ibid.
44 Jelinek, _Bambiland_, 140.
45 Ibid.
Rechnitz and the Exterminating Angel of History

The Persians, Bambiland's chief dramatic intertext, is considered to be the oldest surviving play in the history of theater. Like Bambiland, it is a history play. As Aeschylus did in writing The Persians, with Bambiland Jelinek was chronicling history practically in real time, dealing with current events as they were still unfolding, but she frequently makes a point of revisiting closed cases, digging up buried histories, especially contentious ones. Generally, history is written by the victors, but Jelinek is committed to (re)writing history from the perspective of the vanquished, from the perspective of those whose voices and even traces have been erased from the official record.

The relationship of Jelinek’s Austria to the ascent of the Nazis before the Second World War is part of a particularly contentious national history. After the war, while Germany itself was carved up into externally administered segments and forced to undergo an extensive “de-Nazification” process, Austria was able to downplay their complicity and contributions to the Holocaust by claiming that they were merely Hitler’s first victims, the targets of the aggressive foreign policy of the Nazis. This was a convenient fiction, now referred to as the “victim myth” (Opfermythos). In fact, when Hitler marched into Vienna after the 1938 annexation (Anschluß) of Austria, he was greeted with a parade. Austria has never entirely let go of the victim myth, which began to give way to a more accurate picture of the period between 1938 and 1945 only after many years and tremendous international pressure. Not until 1998 did Austria even appoint a committee to begin addressing questions of restitution dating from the war years.

Jelinek’s Rechnitz confronts the gaps in official historical narratives by focusing on one macabre evening in a small Austri-
an town on the Hungarian border in 1945. Rechnitz castle was owned by Count and Countess Bátthyány and served as a residence for local Nazi leaders during the war. On March 24, 1945 the Countess threw a lavish party. In attendance was Rechnitz’s Gestapo chief, Franz Podezin, who was also rumored to be the Countess’s lover at the time. During the party, Podezin received orders to pick up 200 Jewish inmates deemed too sick or weak to work who were being transported to Rechnitz by train from a nearby forced labor camp in Kőszeg. They were put up at the castle’s stables and shot by party guests, to whom guns had been distributed during the festivities. To this day, the site of the mass grave has not been found.47 The case has been a highly controversial issue in Austria ever since. Residents of Rechnitz boycotted the investigation. In 1946 a witness was murdered and “other witnesses died in mysterious accidents.”48

Jelinek’s play is subtitled “The Exterminating Angel,” a reference to Luis Buñuel’s 1962 film of that title. In Buñuel’s film, a dinner party held at a mansion for an upper crust group turns darkly surreal when at the end of the evening the guests find themselves unable to leave the music room to which they have retired for some after-dinner entertainment. There are no physical barriers preventing them from leaving, but despite hunger, serious illness, and crushing despair, the power of some collective hallucination keeps them trapped in the room for many weeks. The spell is only broken when, by some chance, the group finds themselves arranged in precisely the same physical configuration they were in on the evening of the party. Repetition and remembrance set them free, though there are casualties; some of their number do not make it out of the mansion alive.

Jelinek portrays the elite group turning mass murder into a party game that night in the Rechnitz castle as suffering from a collective hallucination by denial of their own, a collective hal-

lucination that has never been dispelled because remembrance continues to be forestalled. Jelinek has described the process of writing Rechnitz as an attempt to “write a play around a blind spot.” To do this, she assembles a chorus of messengers, who offer competing descriptions of that fateful evening of March 24 as well as competing philosophies of truth and the transmission of traumatic memory.

In classical Attic tragedy, from which Jelinek habitually borrows characters, scenarios, conventions, and motifs, the voice of the messenger is one we trust implicitly. The dramatis personae and the audience rely on messengers to convey in language what is not representable in images. In Rechnitz, the accounts of the messenger(s) are continuously interrupted with slippery qualifications that undermine confidence in their veracity: “I tell it how it is, I tell you what I was told, literally.” Which is it? “I saw it with my own eyes, at least I think they were my own.” No eyewitness seems to trust their own perceptions. Eventually the chain of information becomes so vexed that it can no longer be said with any certainty that there were any eyewitnesses present at the event in question at all. Everyone wants to disavow responsibility:

[S]he started to shoot, the countess, the reports contradict one another already, what’s going to happen next, and most importantly, to whom? And she kept shooting, the countess, bang, bang, she shot them down, and she shot and shot, or did she not shoot at all? Did she just shoot off from the castle? And we confused it with her usual freewheeling antics and our far-fetched semantics (remember now, we weren’t there).

50 Jelinek, Rechnitz and The Merchant’s Contracts, 94.
51 Ibid., 143.
52 Ibid., 130.
If all of history is reduced to semantic gymnastics, the guilty can never be brought to justice. The undead appear frequently throughout Jelinek’s oeuvre, a continuing reminder that the dead cannot rest in peace until the truth about their murderers is known. For Jelinek, the combination of Austria’s disinclination to acknowledge its sordid past and the global drift towards a post-truth media landscape accelerated by technology portends disaster. Like Buñuel’s well-coiffed society types who descend into savagery and derangement when trapped in the echo chamber of their mutually-reinforcing delusions, the messengers of Rechnitz have lost the ability to think for themselves. They have conceded their right to move, shape, and write history—history, rather, moves them, as Fukuyama imagined it would. As Jelinek puts it in one passage, they have their heads up history’s ass:

[T]his story can’t be true, says the historian, who did a colonoscopy on history from the other end as it were, but it stayed dark […], makes no difference anyway, he would have seen only darkness from any direction. He wouldn’t see a thing, even if it were shown to him in a picture, because he is used to finding out everything from pictures.53

A generation raised on finding everything out from pictures stands even less of a chance of being able to read between the lines of official histories, those written by the victorious, the powerful, those who can afford to buy the truth:

In every proper history the wealthy, the stuffed man, the stuffed-up man has his representative, who handles all his stuff and takes care of his shit, I mean he has to take care of all the shit in place of his master. History only tunes its instruments, but it rarely gets to play. Life is very long. But today is one of those days history is playing with us as if life would never end. We are its instruments. We are in tune. We

53 Ibid., 70.
bring history in tune with us. Our testimonies must hit the right tone and we should all sing to the same tune. No, we never get it right and no one listens to us anyway. So the story should be looked at in peace and quiet.”

When Lehmann describes the ways in which contemporary mass media severs actor from action and speaker from speech, he could well be describing the dramaturgical mechanism of Rechnitz: “[w]e have the impression that individuals are reporting to us, but in fact it is collectives, who for their part represent nothing but functions of the medium.” Their language speaks them. No one is an originator. No one owns truth or meaning. Everyone is only a messenger, not responsible for or intimately associated with the content of what they have to deliver. “On the one hand,” Lehmann observes, “the medium releases the senders from all connection with the emitted message and, on the other hand, it occults the viewers’ perception of the fact that participation in language also makes them, the receivers, responsible for the message.”

Jelinek presents questions of historical fact and responsibility as irretrievably “occulted” in Rechnitz. Rather than doing the necessary work of sifting through the layers of obfuscation and deception that have accumulated over the years since the Rechnitz massacre and other wartime atrocities, she sees countries with Nazi pasts doubling down on tried and true strategies for misdirection, once again looking for scapegoats in the form of outsiders, immigrants, and refugees. Grimacing at the image of Austria exported to attract tourism — idyllic, Alpine, dirndled in The Sound of Music style — she strikes at the violence undergirding this Hollywood stereotype. “I am sure you want to know more about the so-called Europa Warranty,” a speaker ventriloquizing a travel agent says, “which we added to your package, so you won’t be scared — it guarantees that Europe’s hot springs

54 Ibid.
55 Lehmann, Postdramatic Theatre, 185.
56 Ibid.
function free of harmful germs of foreigners, but only if no foreigners are let in.”

Tourism comprises nearly nine percent of Austria’s gross domestic product, and if the truth is bad for business, there will always be ways of massaging that truth into something that will look better on the brochure.

**Planned Obsolescence: Death of a Salesman**

The US emerged from the Second World War without the Teutonic burden of “too much memory.” The experience of saving the world from the scourge of fascism left Americans with a Bambi-esque belief in their country’s innocence and righteousness. The belief that America is an unequivocal force for good in the world has long motivated our foreign policy. The idea that the world needs our intervention if global order is to be maintained has made it easier for the public to accept the death tolls.

In the post-WWII period when the US was experiencing a period of unprecedented economic prosperity, this faith in American exceptionalism was at its apogee, but Arthur Miller turned his attention to those the American dream had left behind in his 1949 *Death of a Salesman*. Affluence is a form of potential energy and, as Bataille observes, “excess energy provides for the growth or the turbulence of individuals.” While, socially and politically, Americans were focused on growth, Miller saw turbulence.

The motif of waste is dominant throughout *Death of a Salesman*. Willy Loman is plagued by planned obsolescence, a recent capitalist invention that ensures that everything from the refrigerator to the car is constantly breaking down and needing to be replaced. Willy’s frustration with this type of systemic wastefulness has to do not with “excess” desire—waste as the product of effort over-spilling the capacity of consumption—but with

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57 Jelinek, Rechnitz and The Merchant’s Contracts, 88.
58 Schlipphacke, Nostalgia after Nazism, 75.
material waste and the enervating perpetual maintenance work it requires. Willy is just barely able to keep his house from falling down around his ears, but he is not in forward motion. He is not advancing professionally, financially, or personally. He has a passionate and volatile relationship with the \textit{stuff} his dwindling commission enables him to buy, and he contradicts himself constantly, sometimes within the space of a few lines, never apparently noticing a pattern. At first, his new Chevrolet is “the greatest car ever built.”\textsuperscript{60} Just a few years later, Willy is railing, “that goddam Chevrolet, they ought to prohibit the manufacture of that car.”\textsuperscript{61}

Nevertheless, the Lomans persist in their belief in in the integrity of advertising. When Willy fumes about their brand-new refrigerator needing repairs, Linda soothes him by reminding him that the company that manufactures it has “got the biggest ads.” “I know,” he says, somehow reassured, “it’s a fine machine.”\textsuperscript{62} An advertisement works, when it works, by creating anxieties that it promises can be assuaged simply by purchasing a particular product. It generates new wants, and if it succeeds in convincing the consumer that those wants are needs, the advertisement is a success. In a post-\textit{Mad Men} era, the Lomans’s faith in the institution of advertising seems comically naive, but the transformations the advertising industry underwent during the 1940s had thoroughly conditioned Americans to be so trusting.

Because the business of advertising absorbs resources without producing anything strictly \textit{necessary}, in times of scarcity advertising budgets once presented an obvious opportunity for trimming the fat. This was the case during the First World War, when many manufacturers reoriented their operations in order to produce war materials instead of consumer goods and backed off of advertising nonessential products for the duration of the

\textsuperscript{60} Arthur Miller, \textit{Death of a Salesman} (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1948), 23.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
crisis. Things changed, however, during the Second World War when US companies increased spending on advertising from $2.1 billion in 1941 to $2.8 billion in 1945. Even companies who couldn’t afford to meet pre-war levels of demand due to the diversion of crucial resources invested heavily in advertising to keep their products tantalizingly alive in the minds of their past and future customer bases. When they didn’t have anything to sell, corporations ran ads encouraging Americans to buy war bonds— flaunting one’s patriotism was good for business, too. The government itself got into advertising in a way that blurred the lines between public service announcement, propaganda, entertainment, and private profit. The corporate brand was well on its way to attaining the status of quasi-religious icon that it now enjoys. “Think of the brand,” Naomi Klein writes, “as the core meaning of the modern corporation, and of the advertisement as one vehicle used to convey that meaning to the world”

As the corporation takes its place at the center of American public life, the human inclination towards wastefulness is suppressed, and the principle of producing at the least expense becomes the “meaning” not only of the corporation, but of our individual lives as well.

The more successful a company is at insinuating itself into the public consciousness as humane (Google’s motto: “Don’t be evil”) or at least human-centered (Facebook’s stated goal of connecting the world), the better it often is at diverting power away from actual humans. The insidious rise of the ostensibly benevolent corporation began in earnest during the Death of a Salesman era. In the 1940s, for example, the then-behemoth-in-the-making Walt Disney Company had yet to establish itself as an effective synonym for family-friendly Americana, but it was already working with the government to produce training and propaganda films for the US Army and Navy. Some were dry,

technical affairs initially shown only to audiences of service-men, but some were widely distributed zany romps trafficking in crowd-pleasing racial stereotypes featuring beloved cartoon characters like Donald Duck holding his own against the Nazi’s (1943’s “Der Fuehrer’s Face,” “Education for Death”) or the Japanese (1944’s “Commando Duck”). In one ingenious example of Disney’s exploiting the inroads it had already made into the psyche of the average American, the company repurposed the distinctive actor Fred Shields, who had voiced the character of the supremely authoritative “Great Prince of the Forest” in 1942’s *Bambi*, deploying him as a narrator in a cartoon short called “The Spirit of ’43” exhorting Americans to pay their taxes.65

These tax dollars, Bambi’s father told the nation, would fund the crucial manufacturing of “machine guns, anti-tank guns, long-range guns, guns, guns, all kinds of guns!” Every dollar spent for something you didn’t need rather than saved to “pay your taxes” was, catchily, “a dollar to help the Axis.” Serving as the US government’s cuddliest propagandist lent the company a kind of gravitas that would have been difficult to acquire had they remained strictly purveyors of entertainment.

Disney was not above pressing its mice into service for lesser goods, too. A 1939 animated short called “Mickey’s Surprise Party” is perceptually indistinguishable from any other Disney cartoon of the era until the last thirty seconds or so, when it is revealed to be a commercial. The short opens with Minnie Mouse in full, aproned, domestic splendor, chirping as she mixes up a bowl of dough, “[w]e’re gonna surprise Mickey with some cookies like his mother used to make.” But alas, it is not to be. By the time an amorous and hungry Mickey arrives, a series of disasters in the kitchen have rendered the cookies inedible. Minnie collapses into operatic sobs, wailing, “I wanted to make those cookies like your mother used to make, and now they’re all burnt up!” To console her, Mickey laughs, “[o]h, my mother used to burn ‘em all the time.” The little lady is inconsolable.

65 J.D. Connor, lecture in the course “The Art of Disney,” Yale University, New Haven, Fall, 2015.
Still intent on salvaging their romantic date, Mickey dashes out to the store and returns with a box of Nabisco™ products. “Oh, Mickey! Nabisco! Lorna Doone! Social Teas! And Oreos!” she coos, each product arousing her more than the last. “Yeah, my mother used to buy ‘em all the time,” Mickey says. Reassured that a simple trip to the supermarket can elevate her to the status of primary love object in her beau’s eyes, Minnie covers Mickey in kisses. Nabisco products cure Oedipal anxieties and leave young couples with more free time for canoodling.

The fact that “The Spirit of ’43” and “Mickey’s Surprise Party” were both very recognizably Walt Disney productions reflects the burgeoning importance of the brand as icon, in the devotional sense. Indeed, the words we most frequently see associated with the word brand itself are “trust,” “loyalty,” and “faith.” “Disney invented the game” of modern branding, Klein writes, but spawned a host of imitators, all of whom hoped to inspire in consumers a fervor once reserved for things like religious faith or patriotism.66 Death of a Salesman was written at a moment when the place of religion in the American public consciousness was undergoing an important transformation. Before the Second World War, with the country mired in the Great Depression, religious movements such as the Social Gospel, which took direct aim at economic inequality and other capitalist ills, experienced a resurgence. After the war, Christianity was rebranded as inherently capitalist and enlisted in the struggle against “godless communism.” Religion became patriotic and capitalism became religious. Like other objects of religious devotion, a corporate brand stood for something. Brands are supposed to encapsulate and communicate values. Americans have perhaps never been as trusting, faithful, and loyal to their country as they were in the Death of a Salesman era. With the war won, the bounty of a robust economy, and the comforts of hearth and home waiting to be enjoyed, a sense of optimism, even invincibility, was practically compulsory. What more could they possibly want? In this exceptional country peopled by heroes and

66 Klein, No Logo, 156.
innocents, the notion that the economy is rigged, that there exist among us malevolent forces and individuals who do not have the interests of the majority at heart was not a fashionable idea. More likely, if hardship struck or a flicker of doubt troubled an otherwise peaceful mind, one was more likely to look inside the self for the source of the failure, to commit to playing the rigged game harder, better.

Miller pointedly does not specify what it is that Willy sells, but he likely attempts to do unto others just what those misleading advertisements do to him. The functions of advertising and salesmanship are the same; both consist of pushing products that people do not really need, products that will soon be garbage. One of Willy’s many blind spots prevents him from seeing that he is perpetuating the same capitalist swindle that leaves him feeling as though he’s desperately running from month to month just to stay in the same place. Of course, the most difficult lesson for Willy to learn is that under capitalism, he himself will ultimately be reduced to the status of waste and discarded. When he ceases to be productive, he is unceremoniously fired. “You can’t eat the orange and throw the peel away,” he implores his boss Howard. But of course you can. And of course Howard does.

Phallic Coprophilia: Norman Mailer’s Ancient Evenings and Matthew Barney’s River of Fundament

Over half a century later, American exceptionalism having taken some hard knocks, the sculptor Matthew Barney seized on waste as a symbol of rebirth and regeneration for his 2014 symphonic film, River of Fundament, in which, as one critic put it, “[w]estern civilization’s foundation is also humanity’s anus.” A five hour opera scored by Jonathan Bepler, the project has also

67 Miller, Death of a Salesman, 59.
been shared with the public in the form of exhibitions of objects made for the film and during the filmmaking process, a way of foregrounding the residue of the film, giving its own waste products an afterlife. Shot in New York, Los Angeles, and in the contemporary wasteland of Detroit, where the decline of the American automobile industry becomes both Barney’s central subject and metaphor for American masculinity (or America as masculinity): the possibilities of the open road, speed, power, mobility, the virile wonder of heavy machinery transforming base metals into a muscle car. The film is earnestly worshipful of these things, never connecting them to, for example, the unsustainable levels of pollution generated by car culture. For Barney, waste is infinitely fecund. If life is woman’s gift to the world, waste is man’s. While aggression is everywhere in River of Fundament, the world Barney renders is not consumed by a war of all against all; homoerotic violence is elevated to the level of religious ritual, giving form and meaning to all social life.

While the film’s libretto borrows from Walt Whitman, its principal source is Norman Mailer’s Ancient Evenings. The novel is a narration of narration, a story of stories being told over the course of a long dinner in Ancient Egypt, and narrative coherence is not one of the film’s priorities—visual coherence is. Early in the film, the penis and the turd are symbolically conflated, with each precious package depicted wrapped in gold foil. Barney spatially transposes Mailer’s story but does not make a clean temporal break. Ancient mythology and iterations of archaic deities are very much present in Barney’s contemporary America, beginning with a wake for Mailer shot in a replica of the dead author’s apartment. Supra- and supernatural characters from the novel arrive drenched in shit to mingle with what’s left of the late-twentieth century quintessentially New York culturati—Fran Lebowitz, Elaine Stritch, real-life writers, artists, and musicians playing themselves. They burst into song at irregular intervals as guests dine on maggot-infested hors d’oeuvres made from produce fertilized by the Pharoah’s feces and discuss Mailer’s legacy. Barney originally conceived of the piece as a work for the stage, and indeed, it can be seen as a piece
of postdramatic theater, with Mailer’s text serving as a reservoir of images upon which to draw in order to create something that ultimately far surpasses its source material.69

Kate Millett characterized Mailer as “a prisoner of the virility cult” and as a man whose “powerful intellectual comprehension of what is most dangerous in the masculine sensibility is exceeded only by his attachment to the malaise.”70 This critique is not immediately discernible in the visual discourse of River of Fundament and in the conversations that float around the two sarcophagi occupying prominent places in Mailer’s library during the depicted wake: “[t]hat’s one of the greatest innovations of Normal Mailer, proclaiming his own brilliance,” someone says. Ancient Evenings is a novel about sodomy and coprophagy, life and death. Menenhetet I, obsessed with immortality, manages to secure his own infinite insistence by mystically climbing into the womb of a lover during sex in order to be reborn. Barney’s film finds a grotesque analogue in having a young “Norman” slit open the belly of a dead, bloated cow and bury himself inside, closing the first act of the three-part film. Norman will achieve two rebirths but fail a third time. Woman, the Feminine, is positioned in both Mailer’s and Barney’s projects as vessel and inanimate object, but perhaps more productively as the “piss and shit” between which we are all born.71

The Feminine is irrelevant in Mailer’s universe unless it exists to serve as a passageway to eternity or a novel tourist destination for men being sodomized and through this experience becoming acquainted with their own submissive homosexual desires. After hundreds of pages of hyper-macho, orgiastic fighting and fucking, the first detailed description of a vagina is treated as an obscenity, something Menenhetet only feels comfortable speaking of since “the boy,” our narrator, is presumed to be asleep.72

69 Matthew Barney, Q&A session following screening of River of Fundament, IFC Center, New York, December 6, 2015.
72 Ibid., 307.
The anus, however, is treated with a kind of transcendent, universal reverence. Menenhetet tells us that:

In Khert-Neter, there is a river of feces deep as a pit. Across it, the dead must swim. The Ka of all but the wisest, most prepared, or the most courageous, will expire in that river, weeping for their mother. They have forgotten how they came out of her. Between piss and shit are we born, and in water do we die the first time, slipping off to death on the release of our waters. […] [S]hame and waste may be buried in shit, but so is many a rich and tender sentiment as well. […] How then can this cauldron of emotion be no more than a burial chamber? Is it not also part of the womb of all that is yet to come? Is not part of time reborn, by necessity, in shit? Where else can be found those unresolved passions which — frustrated, unworked, maniacal — must now labor twice as hard to germinate the future?

John Scanlan defines waste as “dead matter.” For Mailer’s ancient Egyptians, death is not the full stop that it is for modern mortals, and thus they are able to see more clearly the power of this “dead matter.” It is by dining on bat feces that Menenhetet (or “Norman” in Barney’s film) learns how to recycle his soul — by recycling lover into mother. “Excrement is full of all that is too despicable for us, but it also may contain all that we cannot afford to take into ourselves — all that is too rich, too courageous, or too proud for our bearing.” Bataille holds ancient Egypt up as the pinnacle of what he calls “societies of consumption” as distinguished from societies of acquisition. Where today we are spiritually miserly, meager, the Ancient Egyptians were capable of building the pyramid, most prodigious and prodigal of tombs. Bataille and Mailer would have us see in such glorious extravagance possibilities attainable even by those of us whose

73 Ibid., 69–70.
75 Mailer, Ancient Evenings, 207.
relationship to death and time does not include the existence of an afterlife. For the Ancient Egyptians, it seems, we cannot, or do not use up our various potentials in a single lifetime — our bounty is as boundless as the sea. For modern humans, it seems we never have enough; people die full of regret, having fallen short, having lost the race, having failed to recoup, filled with bitterness that the world didn't deliver all that it once promised. In taking death as merely a light suggestion, Mailer's characters are less inclined to save themselves; potentially infinite chances lie before them, at least for the men.

Mailer flips conventional models of time that associate the masculine with linearity and the feminine with cyclicality — the narrator's mother Hathfertiti interjects at one point that “[w]omen search for the bottom of their grief. If they can find it, they are ready for another man. Why, if I were ever to weep for a lover and learn that my sorrow was bottomless, I would know he was the man I must follow into the Land of the Dead.” This idea of terminal grief is also a vision of excess, but shows woman revealed to herself not in infinitely repeatable acts of love or war, but in bereavement. Man is born to lay waste. Woman is born to lose.

River of Fundament builds to an epic struggle between two “gods” vying for rule. A contemporary stand-in for Horus tricks a version of Set into eating Horus’s semen, after which a battle is staged in a dry dock at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, with hundreds of spectators looking on. The film’s parallel narrative, following the reincarnations of the iconic American automobile, culminates here, too. We begin with the 1967 Chrysler Crown Imperial, a car Barney chose because of its reputation for being virtually indestructible. The Chrysler is transformed into a 1979 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am, the last, best, example of the original muscle-car generation. At the end of the battle between Horus and Seth, the car is reborn again as a 2001 Ford Crown Victoria Police Interceptor, the vehicle of choice for twenty-first-century American police cruisers. This last iteration evokes the repres-

76 Ibid., 348.
sive power of the state, not the uninhibited machismo of the cowboy, and it mirrors Norman's inability to survive into a third self. War between equals gives way to state-sponsored violence. The scale shifts, and the individual will is subsumed by the collective. These transfigurations and failed transfigurations reveal a self-destructive undercurrent to an apparently megalomaniacal strain of American virility. The desire to dominate becomes the desire to obliterate the self in mutual conflagration.