

GENERIC DEDUCTIVENESS 9

Reasoning as Mood in the Stoner Neo-Noir

Sexuality is the area where the homogeneity of
the new world manifests itself most clearly.
Significantly the hero's erotic instincts are themselves
all but extinguished by his epistemological confusion.
—LARRY GROSS, "FILM APRÈS NOIR"

ORDELL ROBBIE: You know you smoke too much
of that shit, that shit's gonna rob you of your ambition.
MELANIE: Not if your ambition is to get high and watch TV.
—*JACKIE BROWN*, DIR. QUENTIN TARANTINO

It feels like everyone I speak to these days seems to say that they're tired of talking about *transness*, and only want to notice trans people and bodies—lives as they are lived. The authors collected in the recent volume *Trap Door* all seem to echo a point made succinctly by Morgan Page: that trans visibility entrenches trans inequity, by drawing attention and prestige to a minority of trans celebrities, while directing state and public violence to the less prestigious majority.¹ A central mechanism of biopolitical governance, "visibility"

functions through a logic of racial selection. Jules Gill-Peterson argues that the historical construction of the cis body in the early twentieth century served to rationalize the eugenic science of racial plasticity.² Eva Hayward and Che Gossett have argued that the generalization of trans modes of analysis outside the remit of the transsexual has led to the catastrophic neglect of, especially, those subjects whose subjection by cisness is most violently enforced: Black trans women living with HIV/AIDS.³ Insofar as there is a trans everywhere, it screams to stop the theorizing and attend instead to the mechanical reproduction of death by racial capitalism and the global transnational state.

As a result, there are not one but many cisnesses that we are up against. There is the cis-normative movement in social policy, which is not so much a designation as a project of social cleansing; there is that thinking, which attempts, for example, to make a firm distinction between “reversible” and “irreversible” spots of time; there is, perhaps most basically, the cisness of ontic legibility that names a body or mind “cis” if it is uncontaminated by the touch of conscious design, and “trans” the moment that a motive is traceable. There is the voice in a head, which endows each value system with a currency—which distinguishes between natural and synthetic hormones (or breasts, whose growth may be catalyzed but is never caused by hormones) or between the true and the false transsexual. To lay these resistances out for analysis, then, would be to reveal that “cis” and “trans” are hardly ontologized concepts—they are felt limits encountered at the edge of every project of self-knowing or world-building. “Leave us alone” is the cry of trans feminism against cisness: a mode of collective conjuration that demands its own closure to contradict the sequence of medico-political reopenings, rephrasings of old demands, re-enforcements of stale injunctions.

As if to produce a psychic equilibrium with this demand for nonvisibility, nonconceptualizability emerges as a coeval power of scrambled knowledge, a sequence of mythologemes flitting back and forth between minute and gigantic scales. Conspiratorial thinking runs through trans knowledge for much the same reason gossip does: they both feel fun, and the particular kind of fun they feel is an especially effective compensation against the otherwise depressive effects of nonconceptualizability—loneliness, confusion, feeling stupid. The meme would be an effective vehicle of compensation if it bypassed interpretation and landed on the mutually presencing nodes of feeling-togetherness, which otherwise may as well have been abolished along with the concept. A meme becomes, one hopes, a mood; a mood might freeze

into a meme—which, if it does, it does by sloughing off every possible trace of historical specificity. Walter Benjamin writes that the dialectical image is that “wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation.”⁴ A meme, by contrast, is that image wherein the conceptualizability of history as a dialectical particular recedes entirely, and the limitless negativity of space capacitates the co-being of a you and a me, *not* as positively related subjects in a historically determined configuration, but as objects thrown into the same slipstream of cosmic indifference.

Memes are, among other things, instruments of conspiratorial knowing. They evoke knowingness in the absence of knowledge, the negative imprint of a dialectical image. The art historian Michael Fried referred to this condition as “deductive structure”: the minimalist notion that the content of an art object should derive, as literally as possible, from its form—that the dimensions of a canvas determine the marks one puts on it.⁵ Memes refuse to stipulate whether there is one mood or many moods; instead, they repair the schizoid split between singular and plural, bypassing theory and conceptualization and returning knowledge to the presencing zone of affect. The process reverses what Stephen Colbert used to call “truthiness”—the self-satisfied structure of knowledge that vibes out on the purported credibility of a given ideologeme, rather returning us to the vacuity of knowledge claims in untheorizable space, the essential untruthiness of the mood. Yet there is a certain dogged optimism too: an effort to show one’s working, to draw lines and scratch lines over them, to build architectural palimpsests from one’s cognitive labor, to build a house from one’s own delusion.

Although, again, *is* Charlie Day deluded? Is this space he has furnished propositional—does it make a claim?—or is it purely the negative architecture of nonpropositional, nonconceptual, nonabstract deductiveness? Would deductiveness shorn of proposition indeed be in any way distinct from delusion? This question approaches the condition of the cultist who awaits the apocalypse on a particular day and, when the day passes, decides that his calculations, but not his premises, were misguided. Interminable deduction—the work of the day (the working day) as the labor of fitting in the latest *drop* (for QAnon) or *root* (for queer Twitter) with the schematically absented nontheory toward which one is moving. The rationale, to adopt the form of R. D. Laing’s formula in *Knots*, would be something like

- I know that I was gay when I was a child, because I am gay, and when I was a child I liked *Space Jam*, and *Space Jam* is gay.

- I know *Space Jam* is gay because I am gay, and I liked it when I was a child.
- When I was a child, I did not know *Space Jam* was gay, but I should have known I was gay, because I enjoyed *Space Jam*.⁶

And the conspirator reappears as the absented subject who knows only what she does not know (but should have known) and who suspects that the shared condition of “should have known”—of belated nonknowledge—is the negative condition of the mood. And if that subject appears narcissistic (which, of course, it does), it is a narcissism of the primary kind, rather than the secondary: developmentally dashed, the primary narcissist is the infantile type who simply has not had cause to differentiate between the negative space of mind and the negative space of world. Different than the pathological secondary narcissist, the mature subject self-replicates by investing objects with her own ego-libido and loves only the parts of herself she finds in the world.⁷

Deductiveness, on the other hand, was stoner logic—this much seemed obvious . . .

The work of psychoanalysis depends on the unsutured copresence of interpreter and witness. This is, as Paul Ricœur points out, one of the central problematics of Freud’s work: it seems as though Freud is interested sometimes in meanings, sometimes in the mechanics of what happens. Yet what Ricœur names this “mixed discourse” he also calls the “*raison d’être* of psychoanalysis,” as he attempts to think through the notion that Freud’s mission was to make interpretation part of the act of witnessing, and witnessing part of the act of interpretation, without surrendering either to the other.⁸ “How can the economic explanation be *involved* in an interpretation dealing with meanings; and conversely, how can interpretation be an *aspect* of the economic explanation? It is easier to fall back on a disjunction: either an explanation in terms of energy, or an understanding in terms of phenomenology. It must be recognized, however, that Freudianism exists only on the basis of its refusal of that disjunction.”⁹ Unpeeling the implications of that refusal leads Ricœur into *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the inaugural text of psychoanalytic method, and in particular to observing the coordination of the hermeneutic and the descriptive in the Freudian *Deutung*, or interpretation. Interpretation is the “mixed discourse” par excellence, because “to say that a dream is the fulfillment of a repressed wish is to put together two notions that belong to different orders: fulfillment (*Erfüllung*), which belongs to the discourse of meaning, and re-

pression (*Verdrängung*), which belongs to the discourse of force.”¹⁰ For Ricœur, interpretation is not (just) a hermeneutics, but rather that “putting together” of hermeneutics with descriptive analysis, such that the subject of interpretation in *The Interpretation of Dreams* is not the dream—Freud’s is not a dictionary of metaphysical symbols—but the mechanic of interpretation itself.

A “refusal” to disentangle mechanics from hermeneutics, however, is not only the destination of a science of interpretation, but the premise of an autoanalysis, in which not merely were the witness and interpreter identical, so too was the analytic subject, the dreamer himself. Psychoanalysis, infamously, started with a notoriously unsuccessful instance of self-exculpation: Freud’s own dream of “Irma’s Injection.”¹¹ That dream, the subject of Freud’s initial autoanalysis, revealed nothing more repressed by the dreamer-analyst than the latent thought, “I am not responsible for the persistence of Irma’s pains,” but, as Freud’s friend Max Schur realized as early as 1966, nothing could have been further from the truth: Emma Eckstein, a patient of Freud’s, had been subject to a serious surgical malpractice at the hands of Freud’s confidant Wilhelm Fliess, who had left half a meter of medical gauze inside her nasal cavity, which had triggered the seepage of blood that Freud had diagnosed as hysterical, “occasioned by longing.”¹² The episode illustrates with horrifying clarity the notion that, in the text of psychoanalysis, there is no mechanical description that is entirely devoid of hermeneutic overdetermination.¹³

Schur also realized that Eckstein played an important role in an equally formative moment in Freud’s early career: the first stirrings of doubt in the so-called seduction theory of the origin of hysterical neurosis. That theory, which Freud elaborated in a paper entitled “The Aetiology of Hysteria” and delivered to the Vienna Psychiatric Society on April 21, 1896, held that the origins of hysterical symptoms in his patients (including Eckhardt’s) were repressed memories of sexual abuse, usually carried out by their fathers; this view was treated skeptically by the society and dismissed as “a scientific fairy tale” by the sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, who was in attendance.¹⁴ That skepticism, in turn, led Freud to abandon the seduction theory altogether over the following year, explaining at last to Fliess in September 1897 that “it was hardly credible that perverted acts against children were so general.”¹⁵

This narrative is well known outside the ranks of those who read Freud’s letters because of two connected critiques leveled against Freud in the 1970s and 1980s: in an essay entitled “The Sexual Abuse of Children: A Feminist Point of View,” delivered by the feminist activist Florence Rush at the April 1971 New York Radical Feminists Rape conference, and *The Assault on Truth*:

Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory, a systematic critique of psychoanalysis by Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson.¹⁶ These two texts took Freud's malpractice in the Eckstein case, and his ambivalence about the reception of his 1896 paper, as evidence of a wider "cover-up" of child sexual assault, which in turn led psychoanalysis structurally to undervalue the testimony of patients reporting childhood sexual abuse.¹⁷ Scholars tend to agree not only that Rush and Masson overstated the significance of Freud's abandonment of the seduction thesis—after all, he continued to believe that *some* of his patients had been sexually assaulted, and his later work was primarily concerned with posttraumatic symptoms—but that Rush in particular had mistaken the argument of Freud's 1896 paper based on the account of it he offered nearly forty years later in the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*.¹⁸ Yet the accounts that Rush and Masson offered were persuasive enough to stimulate public interest in the notion of repressed memory of childhood sexual assault.

The subject of a "seduction theory," if one takes the argument as seriously as Rush and Masson urged, is radically at odds with the subject of psychoanalysis. As Ricœur showed, psychoanalysis operates by endlessly imbricating explanation and interpretation, orienting each process around the other, and binding the witness ever more firmly into the position of interpreter. But the position of someone whose memories themselves are repressed, whose project of cognitive reunification depends on the interpretation of memories whose mechanic is utterly absent to them but which nonetheless emerges into consciousness with the full force of literal truth, has sundered forever any dialectical mechanism. Rather, the work is simply to build truth via a process of permanent deductiveness, inferring lifeways from truths one inherits from a memory-function beyond even the minimally felt temporal continuity of consciousness. The subject of a seduction theory wakes up, receives narrative fragments whose ontology they are required to assume, and builds narrative in all directions toward and away from them. The affective texture of self-knowing is deductiveness; the medium is mood.

One might also hypothesize that the genre of such a project of deduction would be neo-noir, that genre of emerging Hollywood narrative coincident with Rush and Masson, two of whose early successes—Robert Altman's updated adaptation of *The Long Goodbye* (1973) and Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974)—share more than their location in the dusty, semi-Western expanse of Los Angeles. Classic Hollywood noir movies, especially the works of Alfred Hitchcock, have long been associated with classically Freudian psychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity.¹⁹ In D. A. Miller's essay "*Anal Rope*," for

example, the heterosexual gaze of Hitchcock's camera associates the shadowy backsides of the gay male characters with the fear of castration that characterizes Oedipal maturity. Thus the visual and technical aspects of noir film-making reproduce—or perhaps have been cut to reproduce—the psychic conditions of Oedipalization, the developmental framework with which Freud supplanted the seduction thesis.

Neo-noir, on the other hand, is characterized by a certain aesthetic scrappiness, a multiplicity of visual and textual elements whose clutteredness signifies not merely the overdetermination of clues or data, but more crucially their inassimilability, the overabundance of knowable things. This aspect of neo-noir is highlighted in Larry Gross's 1976 essay on the "sociological" rather than "psychological" aspect of neo-noir, "Film après Noir: Alienation in a Dark Alley." While the traditional dick's greatest skill is his sense of timing, the neo-dick bumbles through a set of plots that happen *to* him: though both Altman's and Polanski's heroes are detectives, neither is exactly trying to solve a crime, and until *The Long Goodbye*'s Philip Marlowe (Elliot Gould) kills Terry Lennox (Jim Bouton) after speaking the last line of the film, neither escapes for even a second the complete control that other characters—Lennox, and *Chinatown*'s Noah Cross (John Huston)—have over them. Gross refers to these movies' understanding of protagonism as "a purely figural abstracted conception of a hero" and elaborates that subtle phrase, "purely figural," with an observation about Elliot Gould's dick: "[Marlowe's] nicotine addiction, his clothing, his catch-all line 'It's all right with me,' are foregrounded signs of a purely figural existence rooted in Hollywood's past."²⁰ His personhood has been vaporous, diffuse. Through a curious device of sound editing, Elliot Gould's mouth is, for most of the movie, kept out of shot, so his mumbling monologue, which is more or less uninterrupted for the whole two hours, feels like one line in the ambient soundscape, another instrument in the slow jazz variations on John Williams's title tune, as though Marlowe's interiority were itself an ambient effect, absorbed rather than emitted by the actor.

Is there a historical claim to be made? Neo-noir emerges as a response to the public collapse of faith in the psychoanalytic settlement of this question and the attempt to reopen the question of repressed memory? I wasn't sure . . .

Emma Heaney asked me to write something autotheoretical—"is that what you would say you do? I know not everyone likes the term . . ."—about the unusual position I've played in the "terf wars" of the last couple of years.

“An object of other people’s paranoia” was her phrase. Damn straight. Earlier today I received a bizarre email from an anonymous account—bizarre, except I get messages like this every day. It describes a scene in which I interrupt some regular working-class men going about their business, desperate for them to make me feel like a woman. When one of the men starts to undress, my heart leaps. Turns out he’s asking me to iron his shirt. If that’s a joke, this whole damn system is a joke.

In thrall to a sexual masochism she can name but hardly control, this “flustered” and evening-gowned gull “zeroed in” on these polite (“heck”) but strip-happy joes, only to realize that patriarchy’s disinterest in satisfying even *masochistic* desire when it is articulated from a place of conspicuous femininity subs out the sauce and reapplies the beefcake. Male body as threat of nonsexual sadism—exhilarating, my Aunt Fanny. Femininity is the spectacle of wanting to get fucked and getting *fucked* instead.

How does it feel to be the object of someone else’s paranoia? Hell, it feels great. Len Gutkin suggests that the traditional dick’s anomie might have been constructed, by Raymond Chandler at least, through an ambivalent negotiation with the Wildean epigram—itself evidence of a more fundamental ambivalence about the figure of what Chandler called “the homosexualist.”²¹ Obviously, I’m getting high on it. Yesterday, a man named Adam Hibbert—and what a name for a white-bread chump—ran a Twitter thread asking “why is Grace Lavery an icon and Rachel Dolezal is a pariah?”²² The missile was precision-tipped to produce the compensatory affect of stupefied but asymptotic assent: *good question, mmm, yes, this is the question, once you’ve framed the question this way, the absurdity of this whole situation is revealed*. What fascinates str8 ppl about transsexuals is the same as what fascinates everyone else: the superfluity of embodiment—always “figural,” but never “purely” so. But the value they extract from us is of another kind entirely: it is the promise that politics might be conflictual again, that competing interests (even on the left) might be enumerated and split. A political scientist colleague of mine, who insisted on pronouncing the word “trans” to rhyme with “barns,” once explained to me during a meeting that debates over trans women’s access to public restrooms would have the salutary effect of ending the détente between anti-sex feminism (which, he said, was rooted in American puritanism) and the sexually licentious liberalism of the boomer flower children.

“As a British Marxist, I’m thrilled,” he added.

“Oh yeah?” I asked.

"The left has been complacent, papering over disagreements, unable to explain its positions, and that's why we've been unable to build a mass movement."

"Whatever you say, man."

"You don't agree?"

"I try not to discuss toilet architecture in the workplace . . ."

"—it's NOT just architecture—"

". . . but I do think that any unity forged in a bonfire of trans feminine vanity doesn't sound like a whole lotta fun to me . . ."

"But don't you see, it's not supposed to be *fun*—"

"Whatever you say, Doc. Whatever you say."

So it's not just paranoia. But it is paranoia too. I realize that, when I was talking about conspiratorial thinking earlier, I referred to a conspiracy theorist as a "conspirator." My lover, who read this, said, "But they're not conspirators, they're conspiracy *theorists*." I replied to indicate that, in my view, potatoes were very much like po-*tah*-toes, and that to theorize a conspiracy is to become a conspirator. That's the nonnegotiable reflex action to believing in a conspiracy. "Sure," said my lover, "but they'd never admit it."

I could have been clearer. But that's the problem: I don't remember what side I'm on, theorist or conspirator. That's another aspect of the neo-noir to add to the list of decathexes: the institutions that might have allowed one to know by whom one is claimed have blurred into one, and there are no sides, just ambience.

Around the house, I refer to the suspects by their last names. I don't pin those names to the corkboard, but I might as well: Stock, Linehan, "Posey Parker" (it's a nickname, so I use both), Jones. . . . Sometimes this group of brainiacs fills the whole page, and I see nothing more than a totality. Damn right, I'm paranoid. My ex told me I was a member of the Illuminati now. Maybe she was right.

I forget if they're brave warriors after truth, or deliberate misinformation peddlers. *The Invisibles* taught me that all conspiracy theories are true—aliens are among us; the Queen was complicit in the human sacrifice of the personification of the hunter goddess Diana—and that felt true, felt energizing.²³ Power protects power, so maybe the epistemic immiseration of the disempowered could produce the knowledge specific to the revolutionary class? "Queer theory" is increasingly named as the psychic blitzkrieg of the ruling class—it is on these grounds, and because I supposedly preach it, that dozens of people call me a pedophile online. QAnon, but starring queer academics.²⁴ Three

days ago, in his essay explaining why I am “grooming” students by teaching texts by Foucault and Hocquengham, Graham Linehan twice uses the phrase “no wonder Lavery didn’t want parents listening in.”²⁵ Today he’s speaking to the House of Lords.

Sure, Emma. Autotheory. That’s what I do.

The neo-noir has always had an affinity with marijuana. And it’s close kin with the stoner caper: the first Cheech and Chong movie, *Up in Smoke*, shares with *The Long Goodbye* a plot concerning smuggling people into Tijuana, and like Gould’s Marlowe, the central pair are equally pestered by cops and organized criminals. Likewise, the animated stoner movie *Fritz the Cat* (1972) shares with *The Long Goodbye* a mumbly urban soundscape in which the speaking mouths are never seen—in the opening sequence, three working joes are speaking an apparently documentary dialogue, and the animation jump-cuts to reveal that these are cartoon animals, sitting on a girder.²⁶ The visual field has been crafted to the specifications of the audio track, not just in the sense that the cartoon characters are moving their mouths along to prerecorded audio, but in a more capacious sense: in order to illustrate the sense of quotidian Manhattan hubbub that the apparently found audio footage conveys, one of these animals is struggling to squeeze his sandwich, ballooning over with meat and lettuce, into his expanding mouth. The object and his body concertina in scale in wobbly dance: it’s a stoned association, suspending the laws of physics and replacing them with mere scuzzy, fungible congruence. Later on, hippie animals smoke weed and play with each other’s bodies in a bath: a bunny (after the Playboy Club waitresses, presumably) moans “I’m there, I’m there!” and could mean either that she is stoned or that she is coming; the two merge.

The motif of stoned, hippie sexual community recurs in *The Long Goodbye*, with the girls getting high with their boobs out on the balcony opposite Marlowe’s apartment. “A melon party. Melon party!” he mumbles, rounding the corner. What makes this scene especially striking is the lack of visual interest that the camera extracts from the nymphets in blue jeans: their circle is closed, and Altman seems (typically, perhaps) happy to observe, rather than to penetrate, the social connections he depicts. The shot spreads open the landscape of Hollywood Heights—the apartment building scenes were shot at 2178 High Tower Drive—as if displacing from the bodies onto the landscape the possibility of exploration, incursion, escalation. Gross argues that



9.1. Still from
Fritz the Cat
(dir. Ralph
Bakshi, 1972).

the erotic energies of the neo-noir hero are “all but extinguished,” but it would be premature to conclude that the universes of these movies are themselves anerotic. Rather, the frazzled libido in neo-noir is no longer focalized through characters, but displaced onto closed communities of blissed-out stoner girls, nature chicks whose oneness with the landscape is a sexual, and not merely aspirational, fact.

If the ecological embrace of the landscape insures Altman’s dick against the potentially castrating closure of the group of girls, the embrace of Mother Earth uses the particular landscape of Los Angeles, terra-cotta roofs smeared over canyons and hills.²⁷ At stake in this embrace is the scalability of pastoral: an urban site depicted as the oversaturation of space by the pleasures of space, greenery, and the “colonial style.” Gould’s shuffling but unfazed Marlowe acts as gofer for the girls—his first action is to head to the supermarket, and he agrees to pick them up some brownie mix, to ferry goods between the green world and that of shoddy commercialism. (Gould’s Marlowe is above all a mule: he conveys brownie mix to the girls, Terry Lennox to Tijuana, and Roger Wade back to his cheating wife.) Weed, the part of the green world that the girls take into their bodies, cannot be obtained at the supermarket. *Chinatown*’s green worlds are entirely hypothetical, the film’s title naming the Los Angeles that negates that green world altogether, and the patches of green in which Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) fantasizes her safety are themselves evidence of the villainy of her father, Noah Cross. At an individual scale, because the saltwater from the Mulwray lawn proves that Cross killed Hollis Mulwray, but globally, because his plan to irrigate (and therefore greenify) and then incorporate the San Gabriel Valley is the motive behind his murderous and megalomaniacal plot.

9.2. Still from
The Long Goodbye
(dir. Robert
Altman, 1973).



Although neo-noir always possessed this affinity with marijuana, with its attendant oscillations between natural/synthetic, urban modern/rural pastoral, paranoia/imaginativeness, and torpor/spontaneity, it was not until the late 1990s revival of the genre that it moved, seemingly, to incorporate the ethos of stonerdom altogether, in Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (1997); Guy Ritchie's *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998); the Coen Brothers' *The Big Lebowski* (1998); and then later in David Gordon Green's *Pineapple Express* (2008); Thomas Pynchon's 2009 novel *Inherent Vice*, which Paul Thomas Anderson adapted into a movie released in 2014; and David Robert Mitchell's *Under the Silver Lake* (2018).²⁸ *L.A. Confidential* (1997), a pastiche of noir movies of the Otto Preminger type, rather than a neo-noir, had turned marijuana into an important element of the plot, but the movie itself didn't feel stoned, and its method of reasoning was essentially distinct: it is his unexpected retreat to traditional shoe-leather detection that gets Jack Vincennes (Kevin Spacey) to the truth, and killed; Ed Exley (Guy Pearce) gets there through archival work, and due to the villain's saying a shibboleth—"Rollo Tomasi"—that revealed he was Jack's killer. The movie contains none of the verbal or visual signs of deductiveness: the liquid-furrowed forehead melting, druggily, over the brow of crossed eyes; the stuttering dick's comically inarticulate attempt to persuade one of the str8s that he's on top of the facts.²⁹

These signs are all exhibited in *The Big Lebowski*, which has generated enough scholarly attention to fill a volume jovially entitled *The Year's Work in Lebowski Studies*, which compiles essays exploring the resonances of the Coen Brothers' movie with high-cultural touchstones as far apart as the Fluxus movement, the Grail quest, and the New Left.³⁰ The film's appeal as a switch-point for various genres and apparently diverse lines of cultural influence has obscured, however, the degree to which *The Big Lebowski* so perfectly encapsulates the genre in which it does its own work: the stoner neo-noir. To stipulate three of the more emphatically realized of these effects:

- 1 **Circular bathos:** In the scene at his midcentury mansion, the pornographer Jackie Treehorn (Ben Gazzara) takes a call (on an anachronistic phone), writes something invisible to the camera on a pad of paper, rips off the top leaf, and then walks out of the frame. Our hero, the Dude (Jeff Bridges), perhaps remembering Cary Grant in *North by Northwest*, heads over to the pad and rubs a pencil over the palimpsest, to reveal what perhaps might be a secret message but in fact turns out to be a doodle of a male figure masturbating an enormous phallus. The joke is a little more complicated than it might appear: what the Dude realizes, when he sees the doodle, is that the cinematic genre whose conventions he was mimicking was, after all, no more capable of disclosing plot or assigning meaning than he could juice from his own posture of speculative, stoned immobility. It is like learning that the grown-up genres smoke weed too, and that the taste not merely for the sexual, but for the *dumbly* sexual, is a vector of continuity between the stoner counterculture and the rich str8 folks in the hills. The moment thus recapitulates visually the logic of the Dude's *conscious*, but equally failed, attempt at bathos a minute earlier:

JACKIE TREEHORN: The new technology permits us to do exciting things with interactive erotic software. Wave of the future, Dude. One hundred percent electronic.

THE DUDE: Uh-huh. Well, I still jerk off manually.

JACKIE TREEHORN: Of course you do. I can see you're anxious to get to the point.

It is clear that the Dude's attempt to knock Treehorn off his future surfboard has failed, but it is less clear precisely what Treehorn's withering response is supposed to indicate: that the Dude is an analogue masturbator in a digital world (which, then, might position Treehorn's doodle as something of a defeat)? Or, with a more sadistic bent, that while he did not expect the Dude to have any opinion on "interactive erotic software" worth hearing, he is nonetheless disappointed by the sheer witlessness of his failure to play along (which might then exempt the character from the exposure of generic vacuity with the doodle)?

- 2 **Stickiness:** The language of *The Big Lebowski* is like that sticky icky—dank and difficult to dislodge. The stoner mind absorbs phrases from the str8

world and disgorges them back into it elsewhere. First, the Dude hears George Bush on the television telling Saddam Hussein “this aggression into Kuwait will not stand,” and then later he spits it back at the titular Lebowski: “This will not stand, man. If your wife owes money . . .” Or, when the hifalutin Maude Lebowski (Julianne Moore), herself mimicking speech she considers beneath her, says that her father’s wife “has been banging Jackie Treehorn, to use the parlance of our times,” the phatic phrase reappears, once more in the face of the big Lebowski (David Huddleston), when the Dude refers to a “young trophy wife, I mean, in the parlance of our times.” Yet here, Jeff Bridges’s enunciation reveals that the character hasn’t fully understood Maude’s usage and seems to think the phrase means something like “nowadays, when things are so precarious.”

- 3 “**New shit**”: The spectacle of stoned deductiveness requires the exhibition of conspicuous thought, of the exertive application of effort. The stoner hero is not a dick, exactly, since the dick (like Da Fino, a “brother shamus”) is a schmo, and the stoner is nobody’s fool but fortune’s. So the labor of the nondick stoner is to produce not a solution to the case, but the *appearance* of working on the case, without forgetting that everything is, in reality, out of his control. His performance of reasoning is not persuasive (“new shit has come to light and—shit, man! she kidnapped herself!”), but nor exactly is it intended to persuade, since it would be just as useful from the Dude’s perspective that the big Lebowski think him an earnest idiot as that he think him a credible detective.

There are more, obviously.

I don’t know what I think about autotheory. It seems like one way out of the relevance-and-hype market of academic prose, which has been in rapid and unmanageable inflation for a few decades and which shudders still further with each spasmodic contraction of the labor market. I don’t want to be relevant—I don’t want (trans) to be theorized!—except if it be by happy accident, by being in the right place at the right time and letting history suffuse me. But I don’t know the provenance of this wish. I’m skeptical of it. “Sometimes there’s a man, and I’m not saying a hero, cuz what’s a hero, but sometimes there’s a man—and I’m talkin’ about the Dude here—sometimes there’s a man who, well, he’s the man for his time and place” (*The Big Lebowski*).

The guiltless classicism of boomer historiography discloses itself each time history simply engulfs a passive dude, filling him with history in return for his injection of meaning: Forrest Gump showing his ass to LBJ.³¹

Look at history happening to me: Forrest Gump, Jeffrey “the Dude” Lebowski, Paul Preciado. Masculine men, each of them, but each also penetrated, oddly passive in the face of their own discourse, flirtatious and indirect. Preciado writes,

I’m not interested in my emotions inasmuch as their being mine, belonging only, uniquely, to me. I’m not interested in their individual aspects, only in how they are traversed by what isn’t mine. In what emanates from our planet’s history, the evolution of living species, the flux of economics, remnants of technological innovations, preparation for wars, the trafficking of organic slaves and commodities, the creation of hierarchies, institutions of punishment and repression, networks of communication and surveillance, the random overlapping of market research groups, the biochemical transformation of feeling, the production and distribution of pornographic images.³²

Preciado (b. 1970) is supposedly a member of Generation X, rather than a baby boomer, but he has nonetheless absorbed the boomers’ characteristic subordination of macrohistorical narrative into a series of private traversals: “you had to be there,” but also, “if you can remember the sixties, you weren’t really there.” The passage smashes together two rhetorical figures: praeteritio and asyndeton. Praeteritio, the art of saying something under negation, works its scuzzy magic in that classic formulation of scholarly bad faith: “I’m not interested in . . .” This isn’t about *me*, this is about the world as it happens to me; it is a phenomenological inrush of historical matter that I hold in my emotional sensorium solely because there is nowhere else for me to hold it, but the body is as disposable a vessel as can be imagined. The hygienic discretion with which Preciado wipes away the traces of *auto* in his theory conspicuously draws attention to that which, in fact, it was never supposed to obscure: the phenomenologist’s genial objectivity, his asserted capacity to withstand the battenning of historical and chemical force with his disinterest manfully intact. Autotheory earns its bones behind the body of the autotheorist, inters him in a shallow grave of macrohistorical runoff. That runoff, meanwhile, splashes through the page as asyndeton, unsubordinated and polyvalent: as with Flaubert in Roland Barthes’s description, “a generalized asyndeton seizes

the entire utterance, so that this very readable discourse is *underhandedly* one of the craziest imaginable: all the logical small change is in the interstices.”³³ Between the apparently disorganized phrases Preciado discloses an unspoken *auto*, which is to say an undisavowed *auto*.

What are the historical conditions of possibility for this image? History has taken Linehan (b. 1968) by surprise too, though he is a stunt autotheorist, who also believes that he can arrest the insanity of the present moment merely by exhibiting it, amplifying it in the emptiness of his own sensorium. It is a project of profound hostility to the *auto*, self-immolating in the service of a comic construction of history, as though Forrest Gump were *himself* trying to imagine the historical position of a Forrest Gump. The conspiracy, which is obvious to anyone inside this discourse and surreal to everyone else, is that the dating app Her, which claims to serve the lesbian community, in fact sells that community out by including men as sexual prospects.³⁴ Perhaps there are examples of this, but the only one that anyone will cite is now Linehan himself, goofily mugging from the isolation of his own self-exile. Does such a project of historical self-erasure possess a motivation, beyond the obvious desires inevitably caught in the undertow of such steamy negations? (Which is to say, the lesbian phallus.)³⁵ Perhaps this: that the trans woman Graham, who claims to be twenty-nine, has lied about her age and therefore performed a generational betrayal, and even (more fancifully) has traveled in time.

If the stoner non-dick (the Dude, Preciado) is the diagnostician of twentieth-century history, then what we learn is that diagnosis is betrayal, a treacherous renaming of the condition of historical being.

I wanted to write about my love affair with a lesbian named L—, and about the ways she has taught me to rename my body, as well as those parasomatic moods that govern my, for example, fidgetiness, or the psychosocial praxis that governs whether or not I am passable in a given frame. I wanted to write into my lover, to groove my words into her flesh, as I pump them out of her with my hand. This, I thought, would be an autotheory worth the name, would answer the stuntists and historical castrati, phallically would reconstruct the episteme of modernity from the lesbian pussy. I wanted to be born out of her into my own body, to birth her through my hole, and I wanted to mash my face into her clit until I gagged and choked, love and melody. Everything I care about is love; why does anyone write about anything else, ever?

I don't know, man. I don't know what I'm making, what I'm repairing. I feel stoned in love and I need a vocabulary. It's not autotheory, it's autocriticism, and it's only that because it isn't anything else.

To recap the argument. ("The story so far.") I have noticed that trans people seem weary of being the subject of endless theoretical speculations, of being positioned as either the apogetic example or the confounding case of queer theory. I have suggested that this weariness is felt through a curious epistemological condition that I have called "deductiveness," which proceeds by a series of enthymemes: inquiries in which neither conclusion nor premise is known. This mode of reasoning, I have argued, is rigorously depicted (or as rigorously as possible) in a genre of representation I have called stoner neo-noir, which has its roots in 1970s noir revivalism but also absorbs new, and generational, theories of historical causality ("boomer historiography"). I have also aligned this mode of reasoning with the 1970s challenge to psychoanalytic accounts of hysteria, and in particular with the attempt by Jeffrey Masson and Florence Rush to restore the so-called seduction thesis, which in turn enabled the so-called recovered memory therapy. Like the stoner neo-noir, recovered memory positions people as receivers of their memories, splitting the functions of witnessing and interpreting, prizing apart metapsychology and hermeneutics. We come to, with a new memory.

This literally just popped up on my computer: Coincidence? I wondered.

David Robert Mitchell's 2018 neo-noir *Under the Silver Lake* picks up a number of these themes.³⁶ The central character, Sam (Andrew Garfield), is a rapacious consumer and reproducer of conspiracy theories who has absorbed part of the paranoid relation to media that *The Invisibles* disseminated.³⁷ Since his life as a drifter in Los Angeles is suffused on all sides by media, from the smiling ophthalmology ad on a billboard saying "I can see clearly now" (a face half of which is eventually replaced by a clown) to the notices across the Silver Lake neighborhood saying "Watch out for the Dog Killer," he therefore develops a paranoid, 1990s method of reading his own existence out of the world. The film therefore affords an opportunity to distinguish between boomer (*The Big Lebowski*), Gen X (*Testo Junkie*), and millennial stoner neo-noir, and to thread through this genre a history of postmodern relation to genre. In *Under the Silver Lake*, the disintegrated subject of neo-noir moves into a phase of reenchantment and repair, where the melancholic effects of

9.3. Still from
*Under the Silver
Lake* (dir. David
Robert Mitchell,
2018).



split subjecthood have worn off, and we are left with a subject whose object-hood has been fully installed into the world of object-signs. Sam not only accepts his position as a powerless cipher of genre, but revels in it; unlike the Dude, then, he has cheerful, low-stakes sex with a handful of people—one of whom, his middle-aged, topless neighbor, seems to stand almost literally for the stoner girls in *The Long Goodbye*, in the same apartment (or same type of apartment), forty-four years later. (The later movie was shot at 3205 Los Feliz Boulevard, a fifteen-minute drive away on the other side of Griffith Park.)

The big Lebowski plots to embezzle funds from the Little Lebowski Urban Achievers charity and create the impression that either the Dude has stolen the briefcase or the kidnappers failed to make good on their ransom note. His scheme is the squalid and ordinary shittiness of a man who, for all his pretensions, is even worse with money than the Dude; when the Dude unveils what has happened, the Lebowskis are, perversely, each diminished by becoming equal with the other. The Dude requires no accommodation to the events of the plot (“let’s go bowling”) because he has ingested and normalized a difference: a doppelgänger initially troubling because of his difference from the little Lebowski, has been brought into the muck, much as the pig-cop in *Felix the Cat* is thwarted by being pulled into the bath orgy. *Under the Silver Lake* portrays the most paranoid conspiracies that deductiveness can produce (enthymemes without premises): the number of letters in each word in one song leads Sam to derive a code from the lyrics of another one, which produces the phrase “rub Dean’s head and wait under Newton.” Sam heads up to the Griffith Observatory, rubs the statue of James Dean, and crouches under the bust of Newton until he is visited by the “Homeless King” and taken to an underground system of tunnels—which eventually he learns are pyramid-style tombs build under the Hollywood Hills where wealthy Angelenos are

buried alive with three “brides,” so that, as the “Final Man” puts it, shortly before he himself is interred, “future men will understand that *we* were the modern kings. Rulers without statues or effigies.” No renormalization for Sam, whose paranoia plot deprives of bathetic deflation, but the perverse normality of harmonization—a reunification of the sign deriving from the universalization of deductive reasoning.

It feels counterintuitive to align Freud, arch nominalizer of phenomena and traducer of fuzziness, with deductiveness—the feeling of thought deprived of premise or destination. Yet to return once more to the dream of “Irma’s Injection,” that dream by which (as we have seen) Freud deflected any regret he felt over Emma Eckstein and, plenty have argued, sublimated his feelings of unprofessional attachment toward Wilhelm Fliess, we can pay special attention to the moment when the dream violates both the natural physical order and, in its retelling, the syntactic organization of elements: “Not long before, when she was feeling unwell, my friend Otto had given her an injection of a preparation of propyl, propyls . . . propionic acid . . . trimethylamin (*and I saw before me the formula for this printed in heavy type*). . . . Injections of this sort ought not to be given so thoughtlessly. . . . And probably the syringe had not been clean.”³⁸ In fact, Freud’s list of chemicals slips into asyndeton, as the chemicals slip off the page and into Freud’s line of imaginative vision, and he starts to slur his own words. The sequencing of elements emerges from phonic echoes—“propyls, propyls, propionic acid”—rather than from logical orientation. Freud is stupefied, for once. Fittingly, since the terrain into which he is passing here is a terrain in which the text of memory—the basis for what he thinks of as the “seduction theory”—is staring him right in the face.

NOTES

- 1 Tourmaline, Stanley, and Burton, *Trap Door*.
- 2 Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*.
- 3 Gossett and Hayward, “Trans in a Time of HIV/AIDS.”
- 4 Benjamin, “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress,” 462.
- 5 Fried, “Three American Painters.”
- 6 Laing, *Knots*.
- 7 Freud, “On Narcissism.”
- 8 Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 65.
- 9 Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 66.
- 10 Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 92.

- 11 Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 96–121.
- 12 Gay, *Freud*, 84–87; Welsh, *Freud's Wishful Dream Book*, 23.
- 13 This is the subject of much scholarly analysis. For example, see Hunter, *Seduction and Theory*.
- 14 Masson, *Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud*, 184.
- 15 Masson, *Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud*, 264. See also Eissler, *Freud and the Seduction Theory*.
- 16 Masson, *Freud: The Assault on Truth*. Masson addressed connections between his work and Rush's in his essay "A Personal Perspective."
- 17 See Rush, *Best Kept Secret*.
- 18 Schimek, "Fact and Fantasy in the Seduction Theory"; Israëls and Schatzman, "Seduction Theory."
- 19 Though neither is at all an orthodox Freudian, Žižek and Miller both explore Freudian classicism in their books on Hitchcock. A version of this argument is also outlined in Larry Gross's 1976 essay "Film après Noir: Alienation in a Dark Alley," which first outlines the new noir of *The Long Goodbye* and *Chinatown* (as well as Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville*, John Boorman's *Point Blank*, and Nicholas Roeg's *Performance*). See Žižek, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan*; Miller, *Hidden Hitchcock*; and Gross, "Film après Noir."
- 20 Gross, "Film après Noir," 45, 47.
- 21 Gutkin, "Dandified Dick."
- 22 Adam Hibbert (@adhib), Twitter, March 8, 2021, 5:19 a.m., <https://twitter.com/adhib/status/1368868882971246597>.
- 23 Morrison, *The Invisibles*.
- 24 Jane Clare Jones (@janeclarejones), Twitter, September 17, 2021, 9:32 a.m., <https://twitter.com/janeclarejones/status/1438858335701327877>; <https://twitter.com/janeclarejones/status/1438858337467211776>: "So, a request for someone to write something—shortish—for the next issue of TRN. Ideally an American, or someone living/has lived in the States. Am interested in exploring the whole 'post truth left and right' thing, specifically of course QAnon/Trans ideology, and would be particularly interested in an analysis that could link this to any notable aspects of American culture, history or politics . . . for example, religiosity, lack of material class politics, conspiracy theories etc."
- 25 Linehan, "Just So It's Absolutely Clear."
- 26 Bakshi, *Fritz the Cat*.
- 27 For an argument about neo-noir as revenge against midcentury modernist architecture, see the video essay by Andersen, *Los Angeles Plays Itself*.
- 28 All of these films, except for the British movie *Lock, Stock*, were set and filmed in Los Angeles too.
- 29 The release of *Inherent Vice* in 2014 prompted an essay by the film critic Chris Wade on "slacker noir," which defines the genre according to a protagonist's "wish to remove themselves from the action." Yet while this might apply to *Pineapple Express*, and more tendentiously to *The Big Lebowski* (tendentious because the

Dude does accept commissions from both Maude Lebowski and Jackie Treehorn to retrieve the missing briefcase), it can hardly apply to *Inherent Vice*, whose protagonist is a professional private investigator, albeit a stoned one; and even less to *Under the Silver Lake*, whose protagonist is an obsessive collator of clues and conspiracy theories. See Wade, “*Inherent Vice*.”

- 30 Jaffe and Comentale, *Year's Work in Lebowski Studies*.
- 31 Zemeckis, *Forrest Gump*.
- 32 Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 11–12.
- 33 Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 9.
- 34 Ironically, or not, I was kicked off Her in 2017 for looking too masculine. To get back on the app, I would have needed to supply them with a passport or state ID illustrating the change in my gender markers. I didn't have such ID obviously; I just wanted to date people.
- 35 Butler, “The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary,” in *Bodies That Matter*, 28–57.
- 36 Mitchell, *Under the Silver Lake*.
- 37 “I mean, I’ve just been thinking, why do we assume that all of this infrastructure and entertainment and open information beaming all over the place into every home on the planet is exactly what people tell us it is. Maybe there are people more important, more powerful or wealthier than us that communicate things or see things in the world that are meant for them and not for us. I think it’s fucking ridiculous to assume that media only has one purpose . . . right?” (*Under the Silver Lake*).
- 38 Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 107 (emphasis added).

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