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## **Culture Vulture: Navigating the Art of Storytelling in Textual Studies**

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**Culture Vulture: Navigating the Art of Storytelling in Textual Studies**

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Final Master's Portfolio

Submitted to the English Department of Bowling Green State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in the Field of English  
with a specialization in Literary & Textual Studies

August 8, 2019

Dr. Heather Jordan, First Reader  
Ms. Kimberly Spallinger, Second Reader

## Table of Contents

I.	Analytical Narrative	3
II.	Radio Silence: The Lack of Queer Representation in Golden Age Radio	8
III.	From Myth to Miniseries: The Filmic Adaptation of Mr. Wednesday in Neil Gaiman's <i>American Gods</i>	18
IV.	The Visual Allegory of Palestinian Occupation	31
V.	The Internet According to Postman: <i>Amusing Ourselves to Death</i> and <i>Brave New World</i> in the Digital Age	41

### Analytical Narrative

I actually began my first year of college at BGSU as a creative writing major, hoping that it would allow me the opportunity to create stories of my own. After a semester, however, I realized that loving storytelling doesn't fully translate into being able to do it yourself. I certainly wouldn't say I am a bad writer or averse to storytelling though; rather, I did find that turning a thing that had always been a hobby into more of a profession began to affect how much I enjoyed writing as a whole. As a result, I switched to general English instead, choosing to examine stories and subtext in the written word.

If there is one thing I've grown to love over the course of my educational career, it is the art of storytelling. I read thousands of books from childhood to adolescence, constantly trying to learn new stories and ways of telling them. This love of stories didn't stop at the written word, though; I became a constant movie watcher early in life as well, watching whatever would catch my eye. In high school, I began a massive campaign to watch as much TV as I could, which I've maintained, in my spare time, to this very day. I even turned a childhood love of video games into a search for storytelling, playing anything that had a script behind it. Essentially, my love of stories turned me into an avid participant in pop culture, and I wanted to learn how so many people were able to create it so well.

As I began to search for graduate programs, it became apparent that my interests had shifted in the five years I spent as an undergraduate. Although my primary focus was still in English and literature, my definition of "literary text" had broadened considerably beyond my original parameters. With so many ways to tell stories, I felt as though I couldn't only write about books anymore. In addition to the standard writing and literature courses I took, I had also begun taking film classes, pop culture seminars, and numerous other courses that exposed me to

new forms of theory and media. In the end, my biggest takeaway from my Bachelor's degree was that the term "literary text" could be expanded to include a wide variety of media: a film, a TV series, a comic book, a video game, any one of these things could be a text for analysis and examination. This was one of the reasons I was drawn to BGSU's graduate program in the first place: rather than simply calling it a degree in Literature, BGSU defined it as "Literary & Textual Studies." To me, the addition of textual studies was a fluid example of the ways in which literary analysis and criticism could be expanded to include anything, which excited me. Focusing on literature to also discuss different media, I would be able to use what I have learned in order to analyze and disseminate all sorts of media and stories across multiple disciplines. If you've ever heard the phrase "Do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life," this was basically it!

Of course, applying literary analysis across multiple disciplines and fields of study is, in many ways, a difficult undertaking. When I began my graduate career, I had initially focused my interests into one particular discipline: the adaptation of literature into a visual form. I loved the ways in which filmmaking altered and played with original texts to create a new story or idea (a concept further discussed in one of the projects in this portfolio). That is why I want this portfolio to establish one thing that has remained unchanged over the course of my education: my love for storytelling and the numerous ways in which we do it. Hopefully, this portfolio will tell a story of its own in illustrating that point.

The first project in this portfolio is also my substantial research project: "Radio Silence: The Lack of Queer Representation in the Golden Age of Radio." I originally wrote this essay for Bill Albertini's ENG 6820 seminar for the Spring 2019 semester, Queer Before Stonewall. The class revolved around exploring queer identity and stories prior to the Stonewall riots, the event

that is widely considered to be the beginning of the LGBTQ+ rights movement in the United States. The project itself was supposed to be an examination of queer representation during the Golden Age of Radio but took a different turn after my research on the era largely came up empty. Instead of a survey of queer representation in radio, the essay became an exploration on why there wasn't any. I chose this for my substantial research project because I ended up having to be a lot more exhaustive in my research than I normally would for a standard seminar paper, mostly because the amount of research done into this particular topic is practically nonexistent. Since its original writing, I have revised the essay to include a better detailing of my research methods, a piece that was missing before. I also made sure to avoid turning the essay into a history lesson, focusing instead on the research purpose instead of an examination of old radio business practices. In the process of revision, I was able to add to my research into Golden Age radio even more, making the essay even more up-to-date.

The second project I chose for my portfolio is "From Myth to Miniseries: The Adaptation of Mr. Wednesday in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*." This essay was originally written for Kim Coates's ENG 6010 class, Introduction to Graduate Writing. The class was largely meant to prepare first-year incoming graduate students in English for graduate-level essays; this essay was the resulting final paper from that course. This project was also my first foray into adaptation studies as I explored the adaptation of a character from Neil Gaiman's 2005 novel *American Gods* in the context of the current miniseries of the same name airing on the Starz network. Since it was my first essay on adaptation, I revised the essay by updating my sourcing and main points, while also correcting a few errors in syntax that were weighing the essay down. It is a great example of how I've grown as a writer over the course of my education, and the ways in which I've improved since its original writing.

The third project I'm using for this portfolio is "The Visual Allegory of Palestinian Occupation," an essay originally written for Khani Begum's ENG 6800 seminar on Palestinian Film. The essay uses two of the films from our course's syllabus to explore the visual language utilized in the film as a larger metaphor for the occupation of Palestine itself. This particular piece is actually being presented at the Midwestern Modern Language Association's conference in November; as a result, it has already gone through some revision. Essentially, this essay is another illustration of growth; since writing, I've been able to write about filmic language with far more authority than before and to update the essay accordingly. I have also revised it to ensure that the paper is accessible and unbiased in its presentation of its facts and analyses.

The fourth and final project I am putting in this portfolio is "The Internet According to Postman: *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and *Brave New World* in a Digital Age". This essay was written for Kim Coates's ENG 6820 seminar on The Rise of Fascism in the 20th Century. In this course, we examined literature in the WWII era that both predicted and speculated on the nature of fascism and the ways in which it spread through Europe, leading to the rise of the Third Reich and many other authoritarian regimes. This particular essay was an analysis of Neil Postman's 1988 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, a book that postulated that Aldous Huxley's novel *Brave New World* is a far more prevalent prediction of the future than Orwell could have ever penned. The essay largely focuses on Postman rather than Huxley, and it ends up affecting the essay on an analytical level. In revision, I have balanced the focus of the essay to include both writers, while also shoring up some of the points in the essay with better sourcing and research.

In conclusion, this portfolio is meant to reflect my love for the different approaches found to storytelling across mass media, and I believe that the essays I have selected illustrate that very nicely. Through revising and reworking these essays, I've grown to appreciate my ability to write

these essays and analyze the world around me. I look forward to sharing these essays with the world, and I hope that the insights I provide can be beneficial to people. For now, I'm happy to share my story and the stories that I love in the process.

## Radio Silence: The Lack of Queer Representation in Golden Age Radio

When this essay began, it was meant to illustrate early examples of queer representation in radio shows and programs from the Golden Age of Radio, wherever it might be found. After some preliminary searching and studying, this proved to be far more difficult to encounter than previously thought. After further research, it became readily apparent: queer representation is essentially nonexistent in Golden Age radio. There were thousands of radio shows on the air during this period, yet I could not locate any characters or events that could even possibly be considered queer are difficult to discover. Therefore, the question pivots away from asking what queer representation is in Golden Age radio, and more toward where it is and why it is difficult to find. These reasons for this “radio silence” in the world of queer representation will be explored more thoroughly, and will allow us to fully understand this small but significant gap in the public understanding of queerness, and why exactly it is there in the first place: to turn the radio into a tool for creating a heteronormative conformity in middle-class America.

In the 1995 documentary *The Celluloid Closet*, an eclectic group of Hollywood performers, producers, and creators discuss and reminisce about the early days of homosexuality in Hollywood. From the “sissy boys” of silent film to the unambiguously queer superstars of the pre-war era, the film examines the broadly painted and often cruel stereotypes used to classify “queer” people in a time where homosexuality was a deviant behavior. One particular interview with actor and playwright Harvey Fierstein stands out as he describes seeing queer-coded characters in film (characters who stereotypically embodied ideas of gayness): “The hunger I felt as a kid looking for gay images was not to be alone...any representation is good, [even when it’s bad]” (*Celluloid*). The phrase is surprisingly honest: Fierstein is pointing out that the cruel stereotypes being portrayed on screen serve a greater purpose. These portrayals created a sense

of connection, a respite from isolation. Representation mattered to Harvey Fierstein, and it still matters now.

By telling the stories of marginalized people, and by creating marginalized characters, the norms shift in the eyes of the public. With this in mind, one begins to wonder when and where representation of LGBTQ+ people began, and how far it could extend in a time when non-normative sexuality was heavily policed and restricted. (For the purposes of this essay, I will be using the overarching term “queer” to refer to LGBTQ+ persons. This is for the sake of “queer theory” as a preferred academic term and allows me to refer to any LGBTQ+ persons under the same term.) Although queer narratives and characters have been found in early film by numerous scholars over the years, there is an interesting stretch of silence in queer representation that has been overlooked: the medium of the radio. From the early 1920s to the mid 1940s, the United States experienced the Golden Age of Radio, during which radio sets were the primary mode of mass communication available in most American homes. Radio broadcasting sent live music, comedy, drama, stories, news and talk shows to millions of homes during this time period. Even more importantly, these broadcasts served as a way to enforce a narrative that aided heteronormative ideals.

So, with this in mind, why is it so important to look for queer representation in radio? Fierstein’s previous observation actually illustrates just how important it is for people to see queer characterizations in media. According to the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD), on the front page of their GLAAD Media Institute, “GLAAD has learned a lot since its founding in 1985 about the media’s role in changing hearts and minds. GLAAD demonstrated not only media’s powerful influence—impacting how people treat others, how they vote, and their daily decisions—but our own authoritative potential to lead the conversation, reshape the

narrative, and ultimately, change the culture.” GLAAD, in short, is acknowledging the importance of representation in the media as a way of sharing and understanding new narratives that extend beyond society’s normative strictures. Therefore, considering the numerous examples of queerness in early film that *Celluloid Closet* discusses in detail, from both independent and mainstream sources, could there be an equivalent to be found in the Golden Age of Radio, a decades long era of mass media?

The answer, unfortunately, is no. The reasons for this are actually easier to assess than one would think: corporate sponsorship dictating lack of controversy that could reflect on brands, the Federal Communications Commission’s license revocation as a constant threat to networks, and poor preservation of classic radio programs.

Before moving forward, I feel it pertinent to mention that queer-coding (the signification used to identify queer people both within and outside of their communities) was not 100% absent from old radio programming; however, all instances that are available to find illustrate that it was used primarily to enforce an offensive standard. Furthermore, while a character might be queer coded in its presentation, it does not make for an actual queer character, but instead a character that the broadcasters wanted audiences to *perceive* as queer, with all of the negative stereotypes and bigotry in mind. Harry M. Benshoff refers to this phenomenon in his book *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the horror film*: “In this respect, horror stories and monster movies, perhaps more than any other genre, actively invoke queer readings, because of their obvious metaphorical (non realist) forms and narrative formats which disrupt the heterosexual status quo” (Benshoff 6). Essentially, queerness and villainy have a long history in Hollywood. Therefore, to find queer-coded characters in radio, one would not need to look any further than WWII-era propaganda programs: Nazis were constantly coded as queer through high-pitched, lisping

voices, meant to illustrate their lack of moral fortitude and immorality. The same treatment was applied to Korean and Chinese people during the Korean War and earlier, given grotesquely high pitched voices and offensive accents, sounding cartoonish and inhuman. In the end, the only queer-coding I could locate rested firmly in a place of racialized hatred, and while it is interesting to consider, queer-coded stereotypes are not actual queer characters.

Knowing that queer voices in radio have an established association with immoral and evil characters, thus perpetuating hatred toward them, one can understand how queer representation was silenced in the Golden Age of Radio. From there, one can then explore the extreme levels of corporate control of the Golden Age airwaves. Essentially, in order to help ensure their ability to pay for airtime, broadcasting fees, salaries for staff, and numerous other expenses, radio networks sold sponsorships to companies. In exchange, these companies and their products would be heavily featured and advertised during whatever program they sponsored. Cynthia B. Meyers describes the system a bit further in her book, *A Word From Our Sponsor: Admen, advertising, and the Golden Age of Radio*: “This model is usually called single sponsorship, because a single advertiser bought a time period and promoted a single product through a program produced and paid for entirely by that advertiser” (Meyers 79). This particular practice resulted in many programs, particularly in the pre-war period, having the name of the sponsor in the title of the show itself: The classical music program *The Voice of Firestone* was sponsored by Firestone Tires, for example, or *The Campbell Playhouse* was sponsored by Campbell’s Soup Company. Most of the time, the program would instead heavily feature the sponsor in its program: the opening sequence would name the product or company sponsoring the show (sometimes with a short ad or jingle), with a short break in the middle for an extended advertisement, followed by another brief jingle after the closing credits. This format tended to

occur in almost every type of show, whether it was a live variety hour, sitcom, drama, or musical performance. In some cases, the product would even be integrated into the show itself; for example, *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, sponsored by Maxwell House Coffee, would have a point in their show in which the characters would suspend their conversation or joke to comment on how delicious the coffee is, or have one character speak at length about how much he loves Maxwell House. All of these examples illustrate just how deeply Golden Age Radio was indebted to its sponsors, although it should be noted that this practice continues in most forms of mass entertainment today. Should a show or a network time slot lose its sponsor, the program would run out of funds and be cancelled immediately.

Therefore, most if not all radio shows were determined to avoid presenting any sort of material or content that their sponsors might not enjoy. Largely, this mostly meant the program had to avoid saying anything negative about their sponsor, but their avoidance also extended to anything that companies might find objectionable. After all, sponsors would not want their product to be associated with abnormality or controversy. A prominent example of this can be found in the Mae West scandal of 1937. Mae West, an established sex symbol of the screen in the 1930s, was featured on the Chase and Sanborn Hour and brought the ire of both sponsors and the FCC due to her innuendo-laden dialogue on the show. Historian Lindsey Hobbs writes on the incident:

...sponsors and advertisers played a considerable role in dictating content by supporting programming that reflected popular public sentiment and generally shied away from controversy. Networks struggled to balance mainstream views with their desire to lure listeners, at times pushing the envelope on conventional entertainment. Featuring the

already notorious Mae West on a Sunday evening radio show tested the limits of what listeners were willing to accept. (Hobbs 1)

In short, corporate sponsorship was (and still is) a vital part of a program's survival, and any threat to that would risk the show's cancellation. Therefore, one can determine that anything that might have been interpreted as "queer" by scholars of today would never have been allowed to air for fear of losing those sponsors. Hence, corporate control plays a major role in the lack of queer representation in Golden Age radio.

In addition to the implied threat of financial loss if a program allowed subversive or controversial content to air, there was an even greater threat available via the oversight of a certain governmental organization: the Federal Communications Commission, or the FCC as we know them today. Initially known as the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) in the early days of radio, this organization was responsible for regulating and overseeing the rapidly growing network of phone lines, radio waves, and TV broadcasts expanding across the country at this point in history. In order to have the authority to do this, FRC regulations drafted what is now known as the "public interest standard clause," a statement in their official regulations that give the FCC the authority to determine what is best for the public interest in the world of broadcasting. The phrase's goal can be found restated in a 1983 Congressional Committee report on this exact clause: "The federal government's oversight of broadcasting has had two general goals: to foster the commercial development of the industry and to ensure that broadcasting serves the educational and informational needs of Americans" (Cong. Rec. 24 May 1983 GPO). This clause still exists in current FCC regulations today and has since been extended into regulation of network TV, cable television, and even Internet access. However, when it was first introduced into broadcasting, it was used to determine what was allowed to be broadcast and

what wasn't. After all, the FCC is not only in charge of content, but also equipment, licensing, station IDs, and everything that goes with broadcasting on public radio. If one were found to be broadcasting anything that was not considered under "public interest," the FCC had the power to censor the content, or even take away the broadcasting licenses for the station or network that aired it. In a similar fashion to corporate sponsorship, this created yet another incentive for Golden Age creators to avoid giving the FCC a reason to cancel or censor any of their programming.

Of course, while the laws (largely the Communications Act Amendments of 1960) were clear on content that would be immediately censored (which was largely relegated to offensive content such as socialism or queerness of any kind), this did not mean the FCC's oversight did not go uncriticized; many radio shows regularly mocked the FCC's censors in sketches, jokes, and even characters. For example, *The Stan Freberg Show* became well known for a sketch in which Freberg attempts to sing the classic Hammerstein song *Old Man River*, only to be rudely interrupted by an FCC censor with a loud buzzer, who then rings it every time a lyric in the song is found to be offensive (lyrics about drinking, bad grammar, the word "old"). It should be noted that while these sorts of sketches and jokes openly mocked the FCC's censorship techniques, they did so without ever jeopardizing their own programs. For example, the aforementioned Freberg sketch, by joking about censoring lyrics of songs, used the humor as a cover for not actually using the lyrics. The FCC's abilities remained in place, and content that was critical of their practices was actually quite rare. Any content that could be deemed as actually subversive would never reach national airwaves. Through the dual threat of financial loss and licensure revocation, networks would avoid broadcasting anything that might threaten their programs,

whether it be anti-war sentiments, critical comments on race, or even a character or a voice that might be deemed “queer.”

These preventative measures are almost certainly the reason why queer representation is practically nonexistent in Golden Age programming, but when studying such a specific niche in history, there is also a third issue that arises in radio: the poor preservation of radio recordings. During the Golden Age of radio, there were limited options as to what could be used to record the programs sent out over the airwaves, and none of them were optimal. According to Marvin Bensman, a communications professor with the University of Memphis:

The way programs have been recorded (electrical transcription to tape formats) pose problems for preservationists. As transcription turntables disappear and reel tape recorders are replaced with cassette recorders, the means for playing the available material are being lost or exist only in museums. The need to transfer the older formats into new forms is a time and cost problem. Magnetic audio tape deteriorates over time as it is exposed to heat, humidity and atmospheric pollution and is more subject to catastrophic loss of information than is print. (Bensman 3)

In short, many of the original recordings from the Golden Age of Radio, particularly the early days, have been lost to history. Almost no original recordings prior to 1936 have been archived or preserved. Furthermore, the shows that were recorded were all preserved on rapidly deteriorating media. The way in which broadcasting pivoted to television in the mid-1950s was the final blow for many of these shows, as their archives were largely abandoned to studio storage, where improper conditions could make swift work of their audio quality. Today, most archives of Golden Age of radio are kept largely by hobbyists and part-time historians, transcribed to digital by devoted collectors. All of these factors come together to illustrate a

crucial point: if there might have been any queer representation on radio during this time period, it is possible that it might not be discoverable anymore. Perhaps the recordings were warped in the heat of an old warehouse, lost in a fire, or damaged by the leaking water pipes of whichever basement they had been stashed in. Whatever the case, this particular factor cannot be ignored as yet another contributing factor to the lack of queer representation in the Golden Age of Radio.

In the end, the lack of queer representation in old-time radio is simply a symptom of a larger problem: the radio served as a tool for creating a heteronormative conformity in middle-class America. Queer characters and voices were part of a large group of people that were kept from the airwaves: black voices, poor voices, non-corporate voices, socialist voices, and so on. By creating a world in which the voices listeners hear and listen to were heavily curated by governmental and corporate forces, the idea of what is normal and accepted was driven into the minds of millions, leaving the implicit reminder that there are people out there who do not belong. Although radio shows and variety hours were never fully explicit in hatred, the radio was merely another tool in which marginalized peoples were excluded from a common narrative that already valued conformity over diversity of thought. This idea allows us to ask the question: what does our own media say about our society? Will future scholars examine our own media culture the same way we are examining the past now? Will they find it wanting, like we are now? Even in a time where GLAAD's Media Institute can exist, where access to entertainment has become infinitely easier, and where the FCC holds far less power than they did before, these questions are still relevant and difficult to answer, and lie far beyond the scope of this essay. In the case of queer representation, it is pertinent to ask: could we not find gaps just as these in our own media landscape right now?

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From Myth to Mini-Series: The Filmic Adaptation of Mr. Wednesday in Neil Gaiman's  
*American Gods*

**Introduction**

When Neil Gaiman's epic novel *American Gods* begins, the oddly named protagonist Shadow Moon is leaving prison after a long stint for armed robbery. His wife and his best friend have both been killed in a car accident. He barely has enough money to buy a bus ticket home. He no longer has anyone or anywhere to return to. It is at this crucial juncture that Shadow then makes the acquaintance of a zany old man who calls himself Mr. Wednesday, a con man with irresistible charm and extensive knowledge of America's seedy underbelly. From the moment Shadow meets Wednesday, it becomes clear that there is more to the man than meets the eye. He accepts an offer to be Wednesday's bodyguard, and as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Wednesday's friends and acquaintances are all very similar in their oddity. Eventually, Shadow discovers Wednesday's true nature: he is, in fact, Odin, head of the pantheon of Norse mythology, and his various colleagues are all gods as well, their powers and abilities having dwindled as belief in them shrank to near nonexistence. The novel is a long odyssey of fantasy combined with magical realism, exploring the nature of belief and themes of immigration, technology, and religion, and has been an inspiration to scholars of folklore and Americana; however, its recency has precluded it from literary scholarship up until now. Mr. Wednesday is a catalyst to the entire novel, however: as a former god, he dreams of regaining the power he once had, and has spent centuries devising ways to emulate the worships he once enjoyed. He is cold, cunning, and always two steps ahead of whoever might cross him, making him at best a fascinating antihero and at worst the real villain of Gaiman's novel. Throughout the novel, he is seemingly omniscient, capable of predicting Shadow's thoughts and feelings, and is extremely

good at persuading people to go along with his plans in a gruff, all-business manner. Therefore, the folkloric King of the Gods is thus adapted from a legend to an all-too-real complex character.

This leads to the 2017 Starz mini-series based on Gaiman's novel, a mini-series that took on the daunting task of adapting a novel that deals strongly in abstraction, metaphysical experiences, and, quite frankly, extremely disturbing content. The miniseries' first season managed to capture the novel's sense of otherworldly adventure, even managing to engage current issues in the United States by tying them to central narratives, ranging from racial boundaries to the 2nd Amendment. In addition to these general adjustments, Mr. Wednesday was brought to life on the small screen by British character actor Ian McShane, a classically trained performer well-known for playing rogues, scoundrels, and villains throughout his career. This choice ended up playing a major role in how Mr. Wednesday was characterized for the miniseries, remaining as faithful to the source material as possible. How does this adaptation process affect the characterization of Mr. Wednesday, though, and what is the significance of the show making occasional departures to further it? In essence, the questions lies on why Mr. Wednesday is portrayed the way he is on the screen in comparison to the novel.

To answer this question, we can turn to Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation*, a book that applies a deconstructionist view on the adaptation of literature into new media. Hutcheon is breaking new ground through the assertion that literary adaptations bear their own merit in both entertainment and scholarship, despite the modern discourse being rather biased toward these modes of expression. Hutcheon further explores this concept through the image of the "palimpsest," a term originally used to describe a scroll that had its original contents scraped off to make room for new ink, leaving traces of the old text behind. This metaphor serves the idea of adaptation extremely well: by imagining the original source as faint traces on a

parchment, one can easily imagine framing the new story or image using the fragments left behind. Therefore, the adaptation is still something new, but there are pieces of the original that can help guide the adapter. In addition to this metaphor, Hutcheon continues by separating from what she calls “fidelity criticism,” saying, “Of more interest to me is the fact that the morally loaded discourse...is based on the implied assumption that adapters aim simply to reproduce the adapted text...Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication” (Hutcheon 7).

Hutcheon believes that adaptation is not merely a repetition of previous work, but an entirely new work with traces of the original. The new adaptations may rely on previous incarnations for inspiration, but they still hold to their own merits as well. She then goes on to categorize literary adaptations into three categories: “An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works, A creative *and* an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging, [or] An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work” (Hutcheon 8). By examining the television miniseries adaptation of *American Gods* through the character of Mr. Wednesday, one can see that the miniseries is an example of Hutcheon’s second category as the show reinterprets the character (appropriation) and recreates him in a new format (salvaging) in order to provide new contexts for a changing audience. I believe, however, that the process of appropriation and salvaging seen here is not only a way of creating two characters that are distinctive from one another, but also contribute to a constantly expanding idea of the character as well. The palimpsest continues to leave traces of the original, but with every new adaptation, new features and aspects only add to the definition and understanding of the character, building off of previous work. I think of it like a pencil sketch in an artist’s notebook: the first sketch is good, but not quite detailed enough. The artist can then erase the first attempt but use its shape to continue adding new details that only improve the sketch even more.

By exploring a side-by-side comparison of the two characters' incarnations in the novel and the series, the similarities and differences illustrate the palimpsestic work of both Gaiman and the producers of the miniseries, as traces of the original character are found in the new version, and in the miniseries' adapted Mr. Wednesday allowing the character to interact with and explore themes that were not originally present in the novel, adding new details. As a result, Mr. Wednesday is actually further developed as a character through this additional process of adaptation, adding new depth and dimension to the character via the power of adaptation.

### **Mr. Wednesday in the Novel**

To begin with the character of Mr. Wednesday, it must be understood that Gaiman's Mr. Wednesday is himself a palimpsestic character. Odin, or Woden, or whichever name one chooses to call him, is a character rooted deeply in Norse mythology, considered to be the head of the Aesir, the Norse pantheon. Gaiman actually wrote a collection of retellings of classic Norse legends in his own *Norse Mythology*, in which he retells several stories from one of the primary texts of Nordic mythology, the *Prose Edda*, compiled in 1220 by Icelandic scholar Snorli Sturluson. In it, Odin is described as thus: "He is the all-father, the lord of the slain, the gallows god. He is the god of cargoes and of prisoners...He travels from place to place in disguise, to see the world as people see it" (Gaiman 22). To be clear, Gaiman is simply providing a modern reexamination of a much older text written in an entirely different language; furthermore, his *Norse Mythology* was published 16 years after his *American Gods* novel.

With this in mind, it becomes clear why Gaiman chose Odin to be a central character: Shadow is a former prisoner and therefore directly under Odin's spiritual jurisdiction. Furthermore, Odin often spent his time posing as a human during his reign as head of the Nordic pantheon; therefore, Odin would have the most experience at playing a human and would be

easiest for audiences to understand and relate to. With Shadow serving as an audience surrogate, Mr. Wednesday ends up being the closest a god can be to mortal humanity, allowing him to introduce the hidden world of gods and supernatural beings through gradual revelation and expansion. As for the character himself, Mr. Wednesday lives up to his namesake; he is tall and authoritative, extremely enigmatic, and generally expectant of full obedience from those around him. When introduced in the novel, he is a complete stranger to Shadow who sits next to him on a plane and tells him he has a job for him. He provides no explanation, no expectation of refusal, and no background or context as to what the job will be (Gaiman 24). This fully goes along with the character archetypes attributed to Odin in *Norse Mythology*: powerful, all-knowing, and fully able to conceal his godliness from mortal eyes. Gaiman has redrawn the palimpsest of Odin into a new version: an ancient being in a contemporary setting, maintaining his supernatural abilities long after people stopped believing in them. These abilities also contribute to the character's self-confidence; any mortal with omniscience and an inability to fully die will certainly live life differently than those around them. Mr. Wednesday already knows the details of the job at hand, and most likely already knows that Shadow will accept his proposal. His literal "know-it-all" attitude is extremely off-putting to Shadow, naturally, but when one knows everything like Mr. Wednesday, he cannot be bothered to relay everything to someone as woefully uninformed. Wednesday is very gruff and to the point, not leaving much room for discussion on Shadow's part, and is understandably annoyed that Shadow rejects him. Later, after traveling over a hundred miles in the opposite direction of Mr. Wednesday, Shadow is shocked to discover Mr. Wednesday has somehow ended up in the same bar as him, urging him to accept his offer. His persistence ends up being rewarded when Shadow accepts the job (Gaiman 41).

Later, Wednesday, tired of having to explain himself to Shadow, reveals himself fully by listing off the numerous names he has gone by in his long life (Gaiman 132), sharing just how old he was and shutting down any criticism Shadow had for him. Up until that point, Shadow had found Mr. Wednesday's views on the world, religion, and belief rather cynical and depressing, but the final revelation of Wednesday's identity as Odin made him realize that Wednesday is a cynic not because of beliefs, but of experiences. Odin had watched mankind grow, expand, go to war, and turn away from the Nordic religion that birthed him. His idea of mankind was created from a lofty position tempered by his living among them for so many years, built from a melancholy sense of sadness that his "creations" have strayed so far from their original status. Here, the palimpsest is added to by asking what a god might be like if they experienced pain, regret, or even fear. Mr. Wednesday, despite his braggadocio and seeming detachment, knows he would not even exist if it were not for the beliefs of humanity, and must do whatever he can to remain "alive" in some way. In this way, Mr. Wednesday is a fascinating character due to both his mythological basis and his literary palimpsest. However, he is also quite cunning, capable of conning and tricking whoever might prevent him from achieving his goals. At one point, he puts gas in his car without paying; in fact, the girl behind the counter pays him for the pleasure of serving him (Gaiman 44). Later in the novel, he recruits other gods to his "cause" of regaining the faith of Americans through subterfuge, flattery, and sometimes flat-out deception; in one case, he forces Shadow to put his life on the line in order to earn an old god's support (Gaiman 81). He doesn't truly care about anything other than the adoration of humanity, and will go to great lengths to receive it; in fact, this endgame ends up being the motivation for his inception of a war with the "new gods" of America: Media, Technology, and Celebrity. In the end, Wednesday would end up trying to sacrifice the other gods to oblivion in order to gain their

power and their belief, his entire goal to become almost as strong as he was in his heyday (Gaiman 538). His no-nonsense approach to his plans transform him into a fascinating antihero, and perhaps the actual villain of the story all along. Gaiman uses the fantastical elements of godhood in mythology to add new definition to the palimpsest: a god who feels the human need for love but cannot separate himself from his previous status or obsession with power. New details are added, and Odin grows deeper as a character in the process.

### **Mr. Wednesday in the Mini-Series**

Now we can begin to examine the next layer of adaptation: from the literary to the visual interpretation. Hutcheon describes this process as such: "...a performance adaptation must dramatize: description, narration, and represented thoughts must be transcoded into speech, actions, sounds, and visual images...there is inevitably a certain amount of re-accentuation and refocusing of themes, characters, and plot" (Hutcheon 40). This is certainly the case with *American Gods*: for one, the mini-series divides the story up into sections so that it can cover the extensive narrative of the novel fairly. As a result, the mini-series' first season only covers the introductory chapters of the novel, at least a quarter of the story. The subsequent second season carries another third into the novel while diverging further from the novel's original plotting. Finally, the miniseries approaches the narrative by updating and reworking certain themes of the 2001 novel to match with late 2010s standards. These can be seen through the creative liberties that alter the course of the show: Shadow's recasting as a black man and the racial themes that go with it, and the issue of gun culture in rural America. With these elements in mind, attention can once again be turned toward Mr. Wednesday as adapted for the small screen. As a new approach to the character is forged, the palimpsest is once again shored up with new details and personality.

To reiterate, Mr. Wednesday is being played by character actor Ian McShane. As stated in the introduction, McShane is best known for playing various rogues and scoundrels, ranging from pirates to Mafia hit men. This foreknowledge of the character indicates that the showrunners have fully embraced the character of Mr. Wednesday as an antihero, a character driven by moral ambiguity. Audience members may think of his previous roles when viewing the series and be prepared for that level of character development. As for the character itself, some liberties have been taken to adapt the character to both the actor playing him and the changing themes seen in the series. For starters, the first introduction viewers have to Mr. Wednesday is not as a confident old man in a pale suit, but a doddering old man in a cardigan, blithering to an airline employee about how he needs to be on a flight to see his son. This is a marked difference from Wednesday's introduction in the novel; rather than providing an air of confident poise that unnerves Shadow in the novel, Shadow immediately writes the man off as an old man off his rocker. Wednesday also doesn't propose a job to Shadow right away; instead, he strikes up a casual conversation with Shadow, inquiring about his life and circumstances. He mentions in passing his ability to make people do what he wants them to, but doesn't demonstrate it. It isn't until he appears hours later at the same bar as Shadow that his irregularity becomes noticeable. When he presses Shadow to take the job, he is not gruff or unfeeling; instead, McShane imbues a charming, easy-going tone into Wednesday that makes him seem infinitely more approachable and persuasive, feeling more like a benefactor than the harshly demanding nature of Wednesday in the novel. The palimpsest now has a new face of Odin, and its resemblance to Ian McShane is able to create a physical representation of Odin that was not present in the literary sphere, making him appear more like an actual person.

Another way the miniseries changes the context of *American Gods* is to dwell on the deeper, darker sides of Americana that Gaiman didn't elaborate on in the novel. One of the primary ways this works is through the casting of Shadow Moon (described as racially ambiguous in the novel) as a black man. This affects the interactions he has with other characters: for example, when Shadow plays chess with the European god Czernobog, the god tactlessly points out that he is the first "darkie" he's ever met in person. The show also takes a new approach to when the New Gods attempt to kill Shadow; rather than shooting him, they make the decision to try and hang him from a tree, capturing imagery that purposefully evokes those of early 20th century lynchings in the United States. This very incident illustrates a primary exchange between Shadow and Wednesday afterwards: Shadow cries, "I was nearly lynched; strange fucking fruit, plucked and all" ("The Bone Orchard," 38:00). Wednesday is utterly bemused by the comment but insists that he'll be fine and shouldn't take it so personally. This exchange illustrates just how antiquated Wednesday actually is. Despite watching America's growth (or lack thereof) as a nation, Wednesday should be well aware of the difficulties of black people in the United States, but his desensitization to violence and obliviousness of racial barriers illustrate his insular way of thinking: if it doesn't involve him directly, why should he care? Wednesday is utterly ignorant of the plight of an African American man, and he willfully ignores it for his own selfish purposes. It establishes to the audience that race isn't important to Mr. Wednesday, even when it is to humans who actually live and experience the consequences of it. Wednesday's ignorance also clues the audience in to his antediluvian nature well before the show fully reveals its hand, something that the original novel does not have the opportunity to present. A detail like this again helps the palimpsest add further detail to Odin, capitalizing upon his immortality and age to flesh him out as a character.

We also can see the adaptation's retooling in the sequence involving Vulcan, the Roman god of fire. Vulcan is not in the original novel, but his character provides an interesting idea: gods of war would fit in American culture all too well. This is the case for Vulcan, who has used his mastery of the forge to become a gun manufacturer and staunch 2nd Amendment activist. When Vulcan is introduced, the town where he has built his factory is filled with gun-toting Americans, with Vulcan himself giving a heartfelt rally in the town square. Wednesday asks him about his work, and Vulcan happily exclaims that "business is booming." Wednesday, being a bloodthirsty old god himself, gets along with Vulcan very well, illustrating that the inherent violence of the religions and concepts that birthed them fit into the gun-loving American zeitgeist all too well. These new elements of the show allow the characterization of Mr. Wednesday to adapt to an even newer America than Gaiman had seen in the novel. His established traits of former godhood also include a streak of violence and cruelty that had not been previously explored, adding even more detail to the palimpsest.

Finally, the miniseries' version of Wednesday is viewed a bit more sympathetically in the miniseries than the novel by imbuing him with distinctively human traits. For one, he is given a romantic subplot in his relationship with Zorya, a peasant god of fertility from Eastern Europe. Wednesday's conversations with her indicate a long, storied affair that has apparently been maintained across the centuries, with Wednesday wooing the now wizened old goddess with the promise of youth and fertility in a world populated by gods again. Unfortunately, the second season of the series involves Zorya being killed by their enemies, an event that causes Wednesday, blinded by grief, to obliterate one of the "New Gods" from existence, accelerating their war even further. The fact that Wednesday would put a plan that took centuries to formulate at risk for a fellow god is surprising; in the novel, Wednesday is seen as never caring for more

than his own gratification, but on-screen, Wednesday feels strong, overpowering emotion for others, a far more human characteristic. In addition to this, Wednesday is revealed in Season 2 to have had a son, Donar, otherwise known as Thor, the god of thunder. During the 1930s, Donar is a strongman in a circus, and his feats of strength and Nordic lineage draw the attention of a certain German party obsessed with eugenics. Donar resists their offer but is rebuked by Wednesday for cutting off potential profit. The show later reveals that Wednesday's betrayal caused Donar to commit suicide, adding a well of deep tragedy to Wednesday's life, and further painting him as a deeply troubled and complicated being, not unlike a human character. Through these examples, Wednesday is given a sense of earthliness that, again, endears him to the viewer in a different tactic from the novel. The previous incarnations' connection to family and community are added to the palimpsest, creating a deeper understanding of Odin/Wednesday's emotional state as well.

### **Conclusion**

As one reads this discussion of Mr. Wednesday, one may wonder precisely why this discussion matters. Why exactly should readers be concerned with how a television show chooses to portray a character from a novel that isn't much older than the average college undergraduate? Essentially, the process of adaptation is a tool for improving and adding to an original idea. As Hutcheon writes, adaptations are "second without being secondary," a reflection of the original work with its own interpretation and re-contextualized themes. In this way, the miniseries becomes a literary text itself, open to interpretation and discussion in the same way as the original. Mr. Wednesday is a character with his own quirks and merits, a new variation on an old god, allowing for interesting interpretations and new contexts to be applied to his mythology. Furthermore, the visual representation of Mr. Wednesday is retold and

contextualized by the showrunners for a new audience and a new generation, just as Hutcheon described, bringing the character into a new level of humanity previously unseen in his literary counterpart. The miniseries takes the fantastical elements of the novel and applies them to a more troubled USA than the pre-9/11 world Gaiman wrote about, thus adapting the novel for a younger audience. Neither character is superior nor inferior to the other; instead, they are both nuanced depictions of a character that earn their own merit and are able to function separately from one another as distinct palimpsests. The miniseries, however, is able to benefit from a continued narrative of a developing character, adding more complexities and traits to a character that already had plenty. The palimpsest is further developed, illustrating the real power of adaptation: the ability to realize a character like Mr. Wednesday even further than the previous adapter. In that distinction, one can see how adaptation can be a wonderful way to experience stories, characters, and themes on different levels of analysis, and contribute to an extended conversation with the past. Perhaps the future will see further adaptations of characters like Mr. Wednesday; if that is the case, I believe that the myth of Odin can continue to grow as more adapters contribute to the larger palimpsest, working together to create a fully realized picture.

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### The Visual Allegory of Palestinian Occupation

When one examines the traditional themes of Palestinian film over the course of its limited history, one particular theme arises from every single one: imprisonment. Documentaries filmed in the West Bank and Gaza are filled with the ominous imagery of fences, barricades, and checkpoints. The cameras show Palestinian citizens standing in single file lines as they wait to pass each barrier, armed soldiers overseeing their every move. Bureaucracy impedes them in a much more metaphorical way as the need for permits, stamps, and other regulatory items prevents anyone from actually passing these barriers. All in all, Palestinians in the West Bank & Gaza are experiencing imprisonment; these citizens have committed no crime yet are punished for merely existing where others do not want them to. While there are countless documentary films that capture the aesthetic of containment felt in the region, there are other films that manage to convey the essence of captivity in the midst of other narratives: dramas. Palestinian drama is integrally tied to their present living situation, and dramatic films made by Palestinian filmmakers or allies illustrate the stresses and frustrations of the common populace in a different way. Rather than simply showing the lives of Palestinians as they are (an effective method on its own), Palestinian dramas are able to allegorize the struggle of Palestine in a microcosmic examination of Israeli oppression. The characters in Palestinian films are not only themselves; they represent Palestine as a whole as they struggle for freedom, whether it is through acquiescence, defiance, or even violent uproar. The Israeli soldiers and their walls and checkpoints are representative of Israel's government as it encroaches further and further onto what little land and property Palestine can still claim for itself. In this way, these dramas have a far greater scope than the characters represented on-screen. This minimalist approach is especially prevalent in Hany Abu-Asad's 2002 film *Rana's Wedding*, and in Saverio Costanzo's

2004 film *Private*. Both of these films illustrate the oppressive nature of the occupation and the stresses it adds to the daily lives of Palestinians, while also illustrating the larger conflict through visual metaphor. Of course, these films are not alone in their focus: other films like *The Syrian Bride* (Eran Rihlis, 2004) and *The Other Son* (Lorraine Levy, 2012) also have an allegorical subtext to their films, although to a lesser extent. In this way, Palestinian film has a different, more subtle approach to chronicling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

To begin, we will first examine Hany Abu-Asad's *Rana's Wedding*. The film follows a young Palestinian woman as she frantically tries to get married by the end of the day in order to avoid having to leave the country. Right away, the film introduces a sense of impending danger as Rana awakens to find a note from her father. The note explains that Rana's father is planning on leaving Palestine today in order to escape the constant bureaucracy of the occupation, and Rana has a choice: she can either go with him, or get married to a man who can take care of her in his absence. The caveat, however, is that she must select a man to marry from an approved list that her father has provided. Immediately, the stakes are high for Rana: she does not want to leave her home, but she also has no intention of marrying a stranger in order to stay. Rana's confusion and fear is readily apparent from the first few minutes of the film as she hurriedly packs a bag and leaves the apartment. Rana has been thrown into an unwanted, unexpected situation that threatens to displace her and take away the things she loves, which draws immediate parallels to Palestine itself. Palestinians have been in a constant state of disruption since the 1948 war that first displaced them from their land, with little to no recourse for Palestinians other than to leave the country, be forced into refugee camps, or (in many cases) die. In Rana's case, she is already in a position of loss, almost assuredly losing her home, and possibly losing her father as he crosses into another country, whose borders she will be unable to

cross. Her displacement is allegorical to the displacement of Palestine, something that she begins working to correct in her own personal situation. Upon reading the note, Rana sets out into the city to locate someone, who is eventually revealed to be her lover, Khalil. This only adds to the stakes of what Rana could lose: her relationship with a man whom she actually loves and cares about. The issue here arises from the fact that Khalil is an actor and a playwright, a profession that Rana's father has no respect for, disqualifying him from being included on his list of "suitors." Rana is determined, though, and her search for Khalil illustrates her striving for the ideal husband: one who she loves, and one who respects her individuality. Rana's search thus illustrates the search for self-actualization in Palestine following sudden upheaval. Khalil represents the ideal hope for Palestine: an authority that allows for mutual respect where both parties support and help each other. Palestine has never had that sort of leadership before, but Rana represents the struggle toward independence faced by Palestine; even if there is no standard or model to follow for this type of approach, Rana pushes forward nonetheless. This interpretation is supported by the constant interruption and impediment of Israeli soldiers, as they close roads, loom over doorways and entrances, and even threaten Rana with their weapons at one point. Israel's forced occupation of Palestinian spaces has been documented time and time again throughout their filmic history, and it's readily apparent that the army is present for the purpose of preventing Palestine from centralizing or rallying into a force that can actively resist their encroachment. Rana's constant prevention of reaching Khalil represents a desire for change, one that is discouraged heavily by the ever present military. The fact that Khalil is a playwright is interesting as well; here, the filmmaker appears to make the argument that change can be brought about through the arts and humanities, a vindication of Palestinian film as a force for social change. This isn't an unfair assumption, either; one of the most effective ways to alter the

minds and thoughts of others is to represent issues through a new medium, as it will often catch people in a more flexible state of mind. Either way, Rana resists her father to strive for a happier future. This is a direct reference to the difference between old and young Palestinians toward resistance: Rana's father is passive in his approach, choosing to leave the country in order to avoid the confrontations of Israel. He even leaves his ultimatum in a note so that he would not have to face Rana directly. Rana, however, believes in something greater, and is actively walking the streets in order to achieve her goals, defying the passivity of her father and the harm it would cause her. In this way, Rana embodies the voice of Palestinian youth who have been raised under occupation and want to bring about change as actively as possible.

After Rana locates Khalil and convinces him that they should get married (a process that doesn't take very long, considering the alternative), Rana, Khalil and his friend Ramzy then begin the arduous process of throwing a wedding together in the span of a few hours. This portion of the film illustrates the unseen barrier between Palestinians and self-actualization: bureaucracy. Under countless sets of restrictions and authorities, Rana and Khalil have so little time to get everything in order for the wedding that Rana very nearly succumbs to the pressure of her situation. This is the exact goal of the constant regulation and limitation of Palestine by Israeli authority: to frustrate and impede until the citizens are too tired and numb to resist, with a primary goal being to either force out Palestinians or keep them locked into designated areas completely. Rana's moment of frustrated screaming while alone in Ramzy's car illustrates the constant struggle for Palestinians in daily life, and the overall impact it has on their well-being. It creates a sense of existential despair, a powerful deterrent to resistance. The fact that Rana waits until she is alone to do this illustrates how deeply held (and bottled up) this resentment and anger has become, and how violently it can manifest. Later, as the couple gathers their families and

tries to get a hold of a justice who can carry out the vows, Rana also has to convince her father that her marriage to Khalil is acceptable, which also doesn't take very long. Her father's passivity won't allow him to fight her for very long, and overall, he only wants what's best for Rana in the long run, another tie back to the older generation of Palestinians. However, once again, the roadblocks and bureaucracy almost prevent the marriage, as the justice cannot reach their location due to closures. If the justice doesn't arrive, Rana's father will leave, and will be unable to give her away to her husband in the marriage, thereby invalidating it under Islamic law. Therefore, Rana and Khalil get resourceful: they actually take the entire wedding party and go to the checkpoint that the justice is stuck at, where he then performs the wedding ceremony in the backseat of a van, with Rana's father begrudgingly giving her away to her lover. The film then ends with the wedding party celebrating at the checkpoint as a poem by Mahmoud Darwish appears above them, describing how hope keeps the dream of Palestine alive. This is where the allegory deviates from historical precedent in the film; rather than carry on up to the present day, Abu-Asad provides a hopeful future for Palestine: a freedom from the overwhelming outside forces that allows her to remain in her home and be with her family, despite numerous obstacles and losses along the way. This is the hope the filmmaker has for all of Palestine, and Rana's happiness at the end illustrates how beautiful that future could be. The film's urgency, however, is also a call to action: as time passes, the likelihood of achieving this goal becomes small and smaller. In that way, *Rana's Wedding* illustrates that Palestine must remain united in its goals if it ever wants to achieve independence from oppression, no matter how frustrating or difficult the journey may be.

The allegory of Palestinian oppression is even stronger in Saverio Costanzo's 2004 drama *Private*, which tells the story of a Palestinian family whose home is suddenly occupied by Israeli

soldiers due to its prominent position along the West Bank's outer wall. The film heightens the dramatic tension by treating the soldiers' incursion as an actual home invasion story, emphasizing the disruption and fear that comes from occupation by outside forces. The film takes place almost entirely within the family's home, with many scenes taking place at night. Costanzo also uses a very loose directorial style, using a handheld camera to capture moments of action and suspense in an improvisational fashion. The film opens with the family arguing about staying in their home, with the father insisting on staying put, the mother insisting on leaving, and the teenaged children desiring to do more than just sit and wait. This family conflict establishes the divisions in Palestinian thought toward their occupation; many wish to stay and lay claim to their territory, others wish to flee and escape the impending danger, and some of the younger generation believe that fighting is the best way to protect what they love. These divisions play a major role in how the rest of the film plays out. That night, as the family eats dinner, the camera creeps along the outside of the house to peer through a window at the family as they eat. This shot creates a sense of predation, like something is about to attack or pounce on them, and illustrating the impending invasion. Indeed, that night, the father gets up to get a drink of water and finds himself face to face with a group of soldiers, who promptly strike. They run through the house and capture the entire family, dragging them into the living room while shouting angrily. Although the family tries to resist, any dissent is promptly silenced through kicks and shoves, all while the soldiers insist they aren't going to hurt them. This ends up as a strong allegorical connection to military "peace-keeping:" violent action being taken to prevent violence is only violence in the end. The captain of the group informs them that their home now belongs to the Israeli army, and they will be commandeering the upstairs. During the day, the family will remain on the lower level, and at night they will be confined to a single locked room.

This partitioning naturally is representative of the actual partitioning of Palestine; within a short span of time, Palestine had half of its land taken away, and are confined to significantly small spaces. The fact that they are locked up every night illustrates the mandatory curfew that Israel has forced on Palestinians, one whose violation is punishable by imprisonment and death.

The rest of the film then follows different family members on their own journeys as they deal with the invasion. The father struggles to remain strong and masculine in the face of emasculation by the soldiers, who beat him whenever he talks back. This emasculation represents the interference with traditional family roles as patriarchs are left hindered and unable to work or provide for their families. The mother tries to deal with the isolation, as her friends can no longer visit the house, at risk of being arrested. This represents the separation that Israel has forced upon Palestinian families, with many unable to reach friends and family that have ended up on the wrong side of checkpoints or walls. The daughter deals with curiosity, regularly creeping upstairs and hiding in the closet, watching the soldiers as they eat, sleep, and interact with each other. This particular exploration of the allegory is interesting, as the daughter can only see whatever is visible from the slight crack in the door. This represents the Palestinian desire for more, or the notion that they are in fact being deprived of things worth having. The soldiers are carefree and unafraid, never once considering that an unknown presence can see them. Thus, these scenes with the daughter sneaking upstairs illustrate the divide between Israel and Palestine: one group is so utterly in control that they do not consider that there is an underlying threat from an oppressed people who know they are being deprived, and wish for what they have lost, much like the teenage daughter longs to have her room upstairs back. And finally, the teen son begins to consider actively fighting back against the soldiers in bloody uprising. This is especially emphasized by a scene where he stays up late and sees a montage of

violent explosions and battles on the television, with a shot of him standing with a rifle and a resolute look on his face. The son represents the younger generation that has harbored resentment and anger toward Israeli occupation and wants to take direct, violent action against them. In a scene that can be interpreted as the literal planting of the seeds of uprising, the son buries grenades under the posts around their small garden, knowing that the soldiers will step on them when they come to tear down the tarps covering them. The son's actions only end up endangering his family, however, when his father nearly sets them off himself. The buried grenades signify the buried hatred that will eventually give rise to the First and Second Intifadas, violent uprisings of Palestinian independence advocates that Israel met with bombings, snipers, and mass imprisonment. Finally, near the end, the soldiers are called away suddenly, but before the family can recover, more soldiers burst in and take over, claiming they have only arrived today. This scene can be interpreted as a sign that oppression is cyclical, and when one oppressor is removed, another takes its place. It also illustrates the gaslighting that Palestinians go through, constantly told conflicting and untrue information in order to sow discord in any attempts at organization. The fact that the film closes on such a bleak ending illustrates that hope, in the sense of Palestine, is really only that: hope. It cannot guarantee any sort of respite, and the film's exploration of each family member's response to the invasion of their home shows how divisive the issues can be even among Palestinians. In that way, this home invasion story allegorically explores the conflict in a much more personal light.

To conclude, both *Rana's Wedding* and *Private* are examples of stories set within Palestine also serving as allegories for the conflict as a whole, as evidenced by the characters' search for self-determination and their responses to the occupation, respectively. Other films have also illustrated this concept in lesser terms: Lorraine Levy's *The Other Son* attempts to

illustrate the bond between Israeli and Palestinian citizens, and how many of the barriers constructed between them are entirely fabricated. Eran Rihlis's *Syrian Bride* also shows how difficult self-determination can be when faced with the barriers of bureaucracy. In the end, all of these pieces of Palestinian cinema help make one thing abundantly clear: the occupation dominates all aspects of life, but only in the medium of film can that occupation be explored even further than the physical and the tangible. In cinema, filmmakers have the opportunity to explore how the invasion has affected Palestine on a mental and emotional level, breaking down their feelings of anger and resentment and where those feelings stem from. Therefore, these dramatic interpretations of the conflict help establish feelings that are expressed by the nation, not only the individual. That establishment thus creates a sort of catharsis, allowing the audience to see, feel, and understand how Palestine, as a nation, expresses its trauma for all the world to see.

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The Internet According to Postman: *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and *Brave New World* in a  
Digital Age

Consider the following: a person sits at their computer. They stare at the “To Do” list of different things they have yet to complete. They have so much to get done, and the workload never seems to diminish, no matter how hard they try to keep it manageable. There are thousands of things they’d rather be doing, but they can’t keep putting it off. Their phone buzzes from its place, a mere arm’s length from their work station. A minor wave of relief floods across their fevered brain; they check their phone, happy to be able to relegate the next task to the simple action of lifting the device. They slide their thumb across the screen, knowing that they will return to their work once they’ve finished checking what someone said on Facebook, or Twitter, or Snapchat, or in the news. It doesn’t actually matter to them, after all; anything would be better than staring their procrastination in the face yet again. This hypothetical person has successfully taken in a “dosage” of media before carrying on, and they have demonstrated Aldous Huxley’s fear for the future in one innocent glance.

In Aldous Huxley’s 1931 novel *Brave New World*, technology has permanently changed the world. Reproduction is artificially mechanized, humans are conditioned from birth to be genetically and mentally predisposed into a caste system, and all vestiges of individual freedom have been de-programmed from the minds of the populace. One of the ways this world maintains its new order is through the usage of a drug called *soma*, a widely available substance that stifles intense emotion and negative thoughts, replacing them with a sedated sense of well-being. As described by Huxley:

Now—such is progress—the old men work, the old men copulate, the old men have no time, no leisure from pleasure, not a moment to sit down and think—or if ever by some

unlucky chance such a crevice of time should yawn in the solid substance of their distractions, there is always *soma*, delicious *soma*, half a gramme for a half-holiday, a gramme for a week-end, two grammes for a trip to the gorgeous East, three for a dark eternity on the moon; returning whence they find themselves on the other side of the crevice, safe on the solid ground of daily labour and distraction, scampering from feely to feely, from girl to pneumatic girl, from Electromagnetic Golf course to ... (Huxley 22)

Essentially, *soma* is meant to be a method of coping against the existential dread that plagues humans in times of difficulty. The characters in the novel's world rely on *soma* to face the myriad issues of their existence: Bernard needs it to reach a point where sex is enjoyable again, and Lenina takes a gram whenever faced with a difficult decision or situation; the larger implication of their usage indicates widespread usage among the entire population.

*Brave New World* and *soma* are indicative of a larger narrative surrounding control in a world already dominated by totalitarianism. Rather than a regime enforcing brutal control to prevent any sort of insurrection against their rule, the dystopian novel details a society where personal freedoms and individuality (the building blocks of resistance) have been freely sacrificed in favor of pleasure. Huxley's politics, while austere, bear a sincere question: would people sacrifice what makes them unique for the sake of their own enjoyment? According to Dr. Neil Postman, they not only would; they already have given them up and will continue to do so.

Neil Postman, an educator and cultural critic, gave a talk at the 1984 Frankfurt Book Fair about George Orwell's *1984*, during which he made the case that the totalitarian Big Brother regime in Orwell's book was not the more likely scenario. Instead, Postman made the case that Huxley's predictions for the future were far more prevalent to the age of technology. One year later, Postman published *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show*

*Business*, a cultural critique that made the case that the newly developing mass media would create a new method of control by which the populace could be laid low. As Postman stated in his foreword:

...in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity, and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think...In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us. This book is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right. (Postman xix-xx)

Postman's book goes on to examine the growing medium of television as a potential access point for proto-fascism, detailing the different ways the mass media can influence culture in negative ways. Contrary to popular belief, though, Postman was not a Luddite who believed that technology would be the downfall of society; rather, he goes on to say, "I raise no objections to television's junk. The best things on television *are* its junk, and no one and nothing is seriously threatened by it. Besides, we do not measure a culture by its output of undisguised trivialities but by what it claims as significant" (Postman 16). Postman's theory is that television is not itself evil, but the potential it bears is significantly concerning. This bears some resemblance to Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," an essay in which Benjamin argues that the mass-produced image can share messages of fascism to a populace, disseminating messages efficiently and without context. Benjamin's concerns turned out to be valid, so what of Postman's ideas? With television now more of a household necessity than ever, are Postman's concerns still important? The answer is yes. As it turns out, the concerns Postman shares in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* are still very prevalent when applied to a medium far faster and more widespread than television: the Internet. To return to the hypothetical at the

beginning, the advent of social media and the Internet's constant stream of information have actually illustrated how quickly and indiscriminately information is shared, and people turn to it happily as a distraction from the world around them. Through Postman's concerns involving dissolution of discourse, death of the attention span, and desensitization to controversy, humans willingly sacrifice personal freedoms for the sake of entertainment via the Internet, much like Huxley's *soma*.

First, one of the main concerns expressed by Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* is the dissolution of discourse in the public sphere. As Postman describes:

When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people become an audience, and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility. (Postman 155)

Postman's fear of "culture-death" can primarily be connected to Huxley's vision of a world where people have been conditioned into the complete physical and mental inability to create discourse surrounding their lives. Indeed, his reference to "baby-talk" is directly referencing the platitudes and slogans in *Brave New World*, as seen in a scene below where said slogans prevent Lenina Crowne and Bernard Marx from having a conversation:

"A gramme in time saves nine," said Lenina, producing a bright treasure of sleep-taught wisdom. Bernard pushed away the proffered glass impatiently.

"Now don't lose your temper," she said. "Remember one cubic centimetre cures ten gloomy sentiments."

"Oh, for Ford's sake, be quiet!" he shouted. (Huxley 60)

Huxley's fear of cultural "baby-talk" is echoed by Huxley by applying it to media, using it as the equivalent of *soma* for consumers. Postman argues that television and mass media will reduce public discourse to its basest forms, removing nuance and detail from the equation in the process. At the time when Postman wrote this, the cable news 24-hour news cycle was in early stages, and political pundits and TV experts were beginning to fill the numerous blank spaces between breaking news stories. Postman could see the ways in which the public discourse would soon bend to said pundits and experts, illustrating a way in which public narrative could be controlled, not unlike the "yellow journalism" that was so common in 19th century American media.

Where the Internet is concerned, public discourse via the digital sphere is in a much darker place. Where television allowed for a stream of curated information, the Internet is absolutely open. Information is presented without context, without grounding, and that context can be provided by anyone with access to it. The lack of curation would seem to be a boon for the free spread of information, but instead, the Internet is curated by a series of social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Google, etc.) who can determine what is or isn't relevant to the interests of the people.

The Internet, however, actually deviates slightly from Postman's initial point regarding the sacrifice of freedoms. Postman was concerned with the sacrifice of quality for the sake of quantity, but social media has added a new layer of concern that more closely connects to the comparison to *soma*: the sacrifice of privacy. The Internet not only sacrifices quality of information presented, but the privacy of the individuals who access it. Each of the companies listed above have experienced massive breaches of user information, which have had no effect on their revenues or public opinion about them. This ties back to the primary point made by Postman: "what we love will ruin us." To illustrate this point, one need only return to the concept

of the “post-truth” period as described in modern news. According to Dr. Gleb Tsipursky of Intentional Insights:

Citizens need to care about and know the reality of political affairs, at least in broad terms, to make wise [author’s emphasis] decisions regarding which politicians and policies to support. Otherwise, what reason do politicians have to care about serving the true interests of the citizenry? They can simply use emotional manipulation and lies to procure and stay in power, paving the way for corruption and authoritarianism.

(Tsipursky)

Tsipursky is, of course, referring to the 2016 election cycle, in which factual appeals were overlooked repeatedly in favor of emotional appeals, most often in the case of the campaign of Republican candidate Donald Trump. Thanks to the Internet and its flow of information, the idea of what “informed” means became subjective, and people were able to accept their own truths in favor of generally accepted or supported ones. This idea of a “post-truth” period illustrates the way in which people have sacrificed their ability to be informed in favor of feeling validated.

Postman laments this:

...in saying that the television news show entertains but does not inform, I am saying something far more serious than that we are being deprived of authentic information. I am saying we are losing our sense of what it means to be well informed. Ignorance is always correctable. But what shall we do if we take ignorance to be knowledge?

(Postman 87)

All in all, Postman’s concerns carry on into the Internet as information is altered to be as appealing as possible to consumers, and often that information is not made to be distinguishable

between fact or fiction. Through the curation of information, discourse is diluted in the digital sphere, which leads to our next effect.

From the dissolution of discourse, the next effect Postman expresses concern over is the death of typical communication. If information is being distilled into its most basic form for ease of transmission (and therefore, manipulation), it would make sense that communication would be affected as a result (the “baby-talk” referenced earlier). To connect to *Brave New World*, Postman is connecting to the concept of “feelies” in Huxley’s new world, a sort of movie that has added sensory manipulation into its cinematic experience. He describes one particular feely below:

A labyrinth of sonorous colours, a sliding, palpitating labyrinth, that led (by what beautifully inevitable windings) to a bright centre of absolute conviction; where the dancing images of the television box were the performers in some indescribably delicious all- singing feely; where the dripping patchouli was more than scent-was the sun, was a million saxophones, was Popé making love, only much more so, incomparably more, and without end. (Huxley 104)

The feely is clearly a hedonistic explosion of sensory information, but the novel makes it clear that no one attending them can describe what they are or how they feel. By reducing communication to sensation and pleasure, the feely is representative of the devolution of communication; the people of *Brave New World* can only feel what they are presented, no more or less. In fact, Postman describes the decline of communication using eerily accurate examples: “Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas, they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with good looks, celebrities and commercials” (Postman 95).

Considering that Postman wrote these words in 1985, and died in 2003, these words are actually quite accurate to the ways in which people communicate on the Internet right now. Most of the Internet's texting and messaging apps have the option to communicate using images, or through short videos called GIFs. Many social networks only allow people to post images as their primary means of communication, such as Snapchat or Instagram. Often, people will participate in group chats that consist of jokes, memes and video clips, all for the sake of having fun. These trends in communication definitely fall in line with Postman's prediction. Furthermore, the idea of exchanging images instead of ideas falls squarely into the concept of memes. Merriam-Webster defines a meme as "an amusing or interesting item or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media," illustrating an entire form of online communication that involves an image conveying an emotion or feeling as opposed to simply describing them with words.

Finally, Postman's description illustrates that propositions are not the thing being debated, but far more tangible things instead. In short, Postman is describing the concept of brands, i.e., intangible things, being considered an important contribution to discourse, something that has become more prevalent in recent years as corporate brands use social media to interact with consumers, attempting to make themselves appealing in the process. Postman predicted the downfall of communication, and the lack of attention span that has grown from it. Humans are being conditioned by social media to keep information concise and easy to convey; in doing so, it makes it easier for brands and corporations to interact with people more closely. It's an extensive part of interacting with others on the Internet today, and Postman predicted it a little too closely for comfort.

Finally, we come to Postman's third concern, and possibly the most daunting: the desensitization of humanity toward worldwide controversy. Postman details this concern here:

'Now...this' is commonly used on radio and television newscasts to indicate that what one has just heard or seen has no relevance to what one is about to hear or see, or possibly to anything one is ever likely to hear or see. The phrase is a means of acknowledging the fact that the world as mapped by the speeded-up electronic media has no order or meaning and is not to be taken seriously. There is no murder so brutal, no earthquake so devastating, no political blunder so costly—for that matter, no ball score so tantalizing or weather report so threatening—that it cannot be erased from our minds by a newscaster saying, "Now...this." (Postman 99)

This statement illustrates one of Postman's largest concerns about mass media: the desensitization toward tragedy, controversy and hostility. The media creates a deeper level of separation from the events on the screen and the reality one knows. Thus, the mass media allows people to live in selective reality, free of negativity. *Brave New World* fully realizes this via the hatcheries described in the first chapter:

"We also predestine and condition. We decant our babies as socialized human beings, as Alphas or Epsilons, as future sewage workers or future ." He was going to say "future World controllers," but correcting himself, said "future Directors of Hatcheries," instead. (Huxley 5)

Clearly, there is a disconnect between selectively viewing the world via media and being incubated and indoctrinated into a chosen social class. Postman, however, is not saying these are the same, but are connected. If one becomes willing to sacrifice reality for a safer, easier to digest narrative enforced by others, then one is sacrificing their own freedom for comfort and

pleasure. If one does that for long enough, according to Postman, the incubators of *Brave New World* are the extreme realization of that sacrifice.

To compare to the Internet, the idea of the “echo chamber” comes to mind. The echo chamber is described by David Robert Grimes:

...the data suggests that we play the lead role in driving our own polarisation. We are much more homogeneous than we think, and tend to interact more with people who echo our beliefs. A recent study in *Science* found that we tend to engage most with information that flatters our ideological preconceptions, and that this accounted for much more selection bias than algorithmic filtering. (Grimes)

The echo chamber is an illustration of Postman’s desensitization brought to extremes. Thanks to the Internet, information from all around the world is available to the populace at the click of a button, information that might challenge worldviews and perceptions of reality. Rather than face that disconnect, people choose instead to sculpt their own realities using the information they concur with, regardless of political, religious, or social affiliation. The Internet has allowed people to create a digital sphere that fully supports one’s perception of reality and is not challenging in any way. This is all part of the desensitization Postman describes; by viewing world events as not being a part of your reality, it allows one to remove empathy and understanding from the information they are presented with. While television began these proceedings, the Internet has accelerated them to extreme extents.

With all of this information in mind, we return to the hypothetical situation at the start of the essay, the checking of your phone while staring your workload in its daunting face. Here, the three concerns Postman describes are all present: the discourse one chooses to participate in is relegated to the brief notifications of one’s phone, dissolved into mere interaction. The attention

span has been dulled, as you choose the briefer task at hand instead of the more important yet more demanding work on your laptop. Finally, one's desensitization toward the importance of one's work has placed the phone on a higher priority than the more important work at hand.

Postman is no prophet, of course; even Postman could not have predicted the level of corporate control involved in the advent of the Internet and the information presented on it. However, at risk of this essay sounding less like a point of study and more like an anti-establishment manifesto scrawled on crumpled paper in a Colorado shack: the Internet is Postman's nightmare fully realized. Through the three concerns presented in *Amusing Ourselves*, history has shown that Postman was a bit pessimistic: television only began the process of Postman's fear, while the Internet fully realized it. Postman's words have been vindicated thanks to recent events and the gradual rise of the digital sphere in public discourse. In this way, the Internet has become a kind of *soma* never fully realized by Huxley. It isn't a pill or a powder kept in a special pouch; it's a device, constantly on, watching and listening, nestled safely in our hands, ready to dose us whenever we wish. To quote Huxley once more:

Was and will make me ill,

I take a gram and only am. (Huxley 42)

The Internet is the new *soma*. And with it so easily available and so willingly taken, perhaps Postman is wrong: the *Brave New World* Huxley saw isn't in the distance—it has already arrived.

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