

«AIN'T IT WEIRD TO DIG FERRARO»: POLITICAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE 1980S IN *IN COUNTRY*

JUAN JOSÉ CRUZ
Universidad de La Laguna

The funeral, black granite Vietnam War Memorial in the Washington Mall is the stage for the climactic scenes in *In Country*. It closes both Bobbie Ann Mason's novel of 1985 and Norman Jewison's 1990 film bearing the same title. The readers of both texts are expected to share the emotion Sam (Samantha) Hughes, Emmett Smith, and Mamaw Hughes experience when they encounter their past –as daughter and mother of a soldier killed in action and, in the case of Emmett, to expiate the emotional disorder that has affected him from his experiences as a soldier and a veteran. In sum, one can be prepared to meet the final passage of a rite of initiation that began when Sam graduated from High School (film) or when Mamaw felt the urge to go to the restroom (novel), in their way to Washington.

Neither text is strictly related to the US experience in Southeast Asia. Ostensibly a Vietnam novel of the home front, Mason's *In Country* became an example of the («dirty») neorealism wave in American fiction that explored life in minimalist, intimate tones. Mason studied the everyday lives of a group of common folks in Hopewell, Kentucky, as though it was Smalltown, USA. Jewison, for his part, ignored the whole subgenre of Vietnam movies in his vision of the veteran's postwar. Both texts thus confer the Vietnam Veterans Memorial a special meaning.

In Country works as a hypertext that crisscrosses the political arguments that permeated the 1980s. Mason and Jewison certainly criticize the conservative ascendancy in the decade; but their comments do not stop at blind attacks on Reaganism. A political reading may give clues to understanding the failure of liberalism and the rise of personal politics. That the cinematic version is more compliant with issues of the individual's sacrifice and American optimism is not simply a concession to the political economy of popular culture in the United States. The different conclusions than can be drawn from either reading of *In Country* should

refer us to the public's reflections in the following decade, that alternatively elected Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich.

Mason's novel criticizes a model of democracy that by the 1980s could be judged to be wholly discredited. Ironically, it had been that democracy based on liberal precepts that constructed the social and political ills that affect the characters of *In Country*. «Washington» had little to do with the Smiths and the Hughes of Hopewell, KY. The breach opened between the civic education of the protagonists, Emmett and Sam, and the realization of what «America is all about» can best be understood by their inclusion in a historical period when capitalism has reached its purest form. *In Country* discloses many keys of multinational capitalism, or as more conservative thinkers prefer to call it, the postindustrial society. These characters have to come to terms with the rupture between their expectations as inhabitants of Mid-America and the disruption of former submodes of production, economically nonviable, and therefore socially irrelevant for the logic of corporate capital (cfr. Jameson 35).

The neoconservative discourse that was gaining ground from the late 1970s had it that the five successive administrations between 1960 and 1980 exemplified the failure of liberalism. Enter Ronald Reagan to revolutionize the political system, and his charisma ensured his reelection. The story in Mason's novel takes place in the middle of the 1984 campaign. The President's optimism resurfaces in the characters' discourses, be it Sam's wonder at all the «American energy» that circulates on I-66, Lonnie's illusion about becoming a self-made man, or the determination of Irene, Sam's mother, not to look back on her past. Jewison transposes his reflection to a later period. The film dates the story in the summer of 1989. Here the characters do not vindicate or discredit the administration's populism. Now they feel betrayed, or complacent with the political heritage of the «Great Communicator,» or they just imply that his «legacy» passed them by. A cultural archaeologist could well understand the «flatness» of the Bush administration –especially before Desert Storm– in, say, the more cautious approach of the young characters in the film to their future. Here the lack of expectations in the American promise is more recurrent than in the novel, where the readers confront the aggressive conservatism of the Reagan agenda.

Reagan's simple truths for a homogeneous, pre-Sixties nation where «hard work and private charity were all that anyone needed» (Schaller 51) touched conservative Hopewell, where no one would rock the boat; as Emmett used to say, «the Sixties never hit Hopewell» (Mason 234). The conservative longings for a more decent, plain America, however, did not realize how the country's economy was being irredeemably incorporated. Reagan's America witnessed the craze for international merging as *the* instrument for progress in late capitalism. But the liberal administrations were not to blame; the division of labor that precluded the negotiating capacity of the independent worker has political homologues not in the Great Society, but in the Coolidge and Hoover administrations with which Reagan's used to be compared. Sooner or later globalization in the making reaches Hopewell, and the town has its share of urban decay. Flag Day fairs are but pathetic efforts of the town's merchants to keep their businesses running. They will end up closing down, due to the

oligopoly held by the shopping center outside the town and the mall in Paducah, a location nearby. As we will see, the clash between nostalgic yearnings and economic liberalization will create an untenable situation for several characters in the microcosm the town represents.

Hopewell's inhabitants do not seem to have the ability to circumscribe the failures of the Democratic administrations. Even Mrs. Briggs, a neighbor of Emmett's and Sam's who lives on welfare, feels terror at the prospect that Jesse Jackson be elected President. The novel confirms the conclusion political commentators used to draw about the democrats' turning into victims of their own success. They attempted to establish an American version of the European welfare states, but ironically they lost social supports in the long run. As Irene proves in her decision to live in suburban Lexington and forget her past, a significant section of the American middle classes felt that plans for extending the social safety net beyond those devised by the Great Society threatened their status. Tax-conscious Americans were determined to resist the cost of any further growth (Dolbear 95; Derbyshire 45-6). Irene and her husband Larry Joiner express an attitude akin to that of the objectivists, for whom welfare anchored people in their misery, and only themselves and not the state could overcome their fate (Hamby 359). And the Reagan administration responded to the expectations of the social groups represented by the Joiners: while the top 20 percent of American households enjoyed an inflation-adjusted advance in their overall incomes of over 15 percent, the real income of the poorest 20 percent had fallen (Derbyshire 115).

Both texts recall other forces that shaped the Reagan revolution in Mid-America. The opening scene in the film, that of a Methodist minister at Sam's graduation eulogizing the spirit of sacrifice for a strong America, invites the spectator to reflect on the manipulation of religious feelings that the Christian right accomplished in the first years of the Reagan administration. Although scarcely less indicting, the written text comments this scene in passing, as one more element in the testing of Sam's anti-Establishment discourse. Jewison's text enjoys the hindsight that permitted the viewer to contrast the marching spirit at the ceremony with the actual succession of fiscal fiascoes and sexual scandals that surrounded the religious side of the New Right in the United States. More clearly than Jewison, however, Mason relates to the ascendancy of the Christian conservatism, including its influence on a legislative agenda that opposed abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, and that eventually would make up a grand coalition with other single-issue conservative movements and grassroots organizations. They may belong to the American folklore via the Monkey Trial, but Christian fundamentalists also managed to enter the suburban middle classes (Derbyshire 46; Hamby 356). Mason illustrates both instances in her novel. On the one hand, the mailbox of the cable-TV company clerk was destroyed, allegedly because the station exhibited R-rated movies; and an acquaintance of Emmett and Sam claims he does not let his wife watch HBO. On the other, Mason exposes a still more worrisome example: students call up Rock-95, the university FM radio station, to defend the Ku Klux Klan's hate speech, «they have a right to express their opinion,» they say (Mason 151). Religious fundamentalism becomes bourgeois also in the character of a former Vietnam veteran in Lexington,

who eventually redressed his life by taking an active part in his religious community. The construction of conservative extremism in *In Country* predates Alan Brinkley's reflection on the cultural wars of the 1990s. Brinkley points that a dormant but powerful section of the population had not assumed –much less legitimated– a set of elementary values about tolerance (Brinkley 1998:296; 1994:424-6). But as (even a conservative like) V.S. Naipaul recollected from the Republican convention that renominated Reagan for reelection («enthroned» him, as critics quipped), fundamentalism transcended religion. A streamlined laissez-faire program such as Reagan's needed to be based on dismissing the actual roots of the social and economic ills that persisted in the nation. The absence of debate produced a platform that overexpanded the conservative myths of the day and renamed such shibboleths as «pro-life.» To be pro-life, recalls Naipaul, «was to turn away from the gloom and misery of the other side, who talked of problems and taxes» (Naipaul 5) in reference to the democrats' proposals.

The intersections between a bottom-upwards populism and the dispersion of acquisitive, bourgeois values in the social strata –that Dana Polan described as the «reinvestment in great myths as much as in a proliferation of tactical games,» (Polan 55) to secure the working of economic liberalism– supplies both versions of *In Country* with a range of opposing, colluding and complementary fields of discourse. It is in this sense that Bruce Springsteen's «Glory Days» –and the whole *Born in the USA* album– captures ambivalent meanings, depending on who and how. Both texts of *In Country* overlap two different semiotic groups. First, we witness the appeal of many individuals for consumerism, spurred by «the assurance that self-gratification was not only acceptable but desirable» (Johnson 196). In other words, the individual as consumer assumes the opportunity to become socially relevant. Lonnie's daydream about becoming a self-employed successful man looks like the initial stage in the way to material fulfillment that culminates in Irene's affluence. Her lifestyle is sustained on the capacity of her husband, Larry, to make fast money as a computer executive. Her status is certified by her cars, her home, the check she nonchalantly writes to buy Sam a second-hand, jalopy-like Beetle VW.¹ But Irene's transformation from a war widow and antiwar activist into the caricature of a yuppie is even more evident in the way she raises her second daughter, a baby on whom Irene assumes femininity (cfr. Bates 154, Schaller 75).

Reagan's dialectical opposition to the big powers that catered to privileged groups (i.e., welfare recipients, members of the minorities protected by affirmative action legislation, etc), has other referents in *In Country*. Lonnie's hope for a brilliant future for himself if he struggles enough to achieve it has been mentioned. Dawn, Sam's closest friend, wishes a shopping mall were built in Hopewell, because it is a

1. Sam's VW becomes a rather facile symbol of her (and Emmett's) political assumptions, especially in the visual construction portrayed in the film. The Beetle takes Sam, Emmett, and Mamaw to Washington to visit the Memorial. No less symbolic, but more problematic for the interrelation between the characters and the power structure, is the fact that nonconformist Sam and nihilist Emmett feel secure and at ease spending on Irene's credit car.

space where she might become socially relevant, with attachment to no specific class –until she decides to purchase goods, of course. Her attitude confirms that the mall is the space corporate capitalism has provided for subordinate groups to become visible. Its open spaces foster a degree of freedom that cannot be found in the downtown district. Also the competitive prices permit these consumers to allow a delusion of pursuing material happiness through consumerism. There is a reactionary, contradictory move, to counter the affluence of the professionals, the Easterners, the suburbanites –all they would want to be, because the former represent the social norm of the bourgeois American state. It also helps them to dissipate the possibility that they lose their status because other still more subordinate groups (racial minorities, for example) may catch up with them. Mrs. Briggs' apprehension that Jackson might win the election in November is not just a hoax on American conservatism. As George Lipsitz has recently concluded, the strategy to divide the votes on race lines secured the affection of numerous blue collar «Reagan Democrats» in 1984 (Lipsitz 15-6) whose social reward arrives, one assumes, on the immediate gratification that installments can procure. Continual references to fast-food chains, beverages, film titles, TV series, television stations, videoclips, etc., could transform Sam's «country» in the paradise of a textual postmodernist. However both the novel and the film underline that the cultural resources of the power elites attempt to secure the affiliation of the individual (Fiske 34-5) and harness the signs of subcultural disaffiliation back into cultural consensus. Mason's narration reminds the reader that Hopewell accepted only the surface of protest: men wearing long hair were accepted only when it lost its countercultural significance. Another example can be seen in Sam's fad for earpiercing. In the 1980s such a practice began being adopted as a token of radical personal protest: Sam's practice seems to be odd and unhealthy for many in Hopewell; but there is a point in the narration when her practice becomes fashionable and it no longer fosters malicious comments. In the film this is quite explicit in the scene when Cindy, the wife of a reaganite Vietnam veteran, feels not repulsion, but feminine fascination. Unable to see the point of Sam's radicalism, Cindy can only devise an innocuous Madonna-like aesthetics as a sign of generational identity.²

All of this reminds us of the usual comment on the lack of consciousness of the working class in the United States; *In Country*, however, problematizes the approach to freedom through consumerism. In the novel Sam and Dawn have different approaches to Springsteen's 1984 album. Sam rewrites «Born in the USA» so that the story becomes one of a loser whose «brother gets killed over there, and then the guy gets in a lot of trouble when he gets back home. He can't get a job and he ends up in jail» (Mason 42). Actually the hero ends up in a more intriguing, conformist position,

2. Milton Bates sees another case of domestication of cultural dissidence in the HBO video version of *Platoon*, sponsored by Chrysler. Lee Iacocca –another hero of the times– introduced the film by paying a tribute to the veterans and comparing their performance with that of the Chrysler automobiles. Released after (and to counter) the *Rambo* and *MIA* films, Oliver Stone's vision of the war therefore entered the American homes in a far more conciliatory way than initially expected. See Bates 109. On the domestication of cultural protest in more general terms, see Fiske 150-1.

«I am a cool rocking daddy in the USA.» Dawn, whom Mason describes as «much more domestic than Sam» (Mason 40), redefines the meaning of Springsteen's record and chooses as her favorite an apparently melodramatic song, «Downbound Train.» But this song does not seem to relate only to what Dawn summarizes as «it rains all the time and he lost his job and his girlfriend.» «Downbound Train» also relates to the emotional distress that economic insecurity provokes in individuals unable to hold a steady job in a competitive society. The contrast between their approaches to *Born in the USA* helps us to map their respective degrees of affection to an America Reagan's discourse has given a transhistorical condition. The political right worked hard and in many ways succeeded in neutralizing Springsteen's texts.³ He may sing about the injuries of the recent past, the social costs of recession or, as in «My Hometown,» the listener is reminded of racism and urban decay; but it was the image of the humane Springsteen who donated money to *noble causes* (an example of private charity), or the patriotic cheers that the title song rose in flag-waving audiences heedless to all the lyrics but the chorus.

The texts give a central position also to the aggressive rhetoric of the administration in foreign policy issues. The different moods in the film and the novel no doubt respond to the realignment of the relations with the Soviet Union on account of Gorbachev's rule. Whereas Jewison focuses primarily on the veterans as pawns of the Cold War fought in Asia, Mason is mystified by Reagan's hawkishness, and how a part of the population replicated his verbal aggressiveness. Vietnam veterans are expected to adjust to normal life, no matter how seriously Emmett is affected by chloracne (derived from his being in contact with agent orange).

Both rhetorically and literally, Ronald Reagan's formulas for stopping communism reached a focal point in Grenada. The invasion of that tiny island by US marines was reformulated in cinematic terms as a military operation destined to rescue it from Soviet influence by proxy. By terminating Maurice Bishop's regime, so the rationale went, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the revolutionary movements in Salvador and Guatemala should lose a most precious beachhead. Those terms rendered an epic dimension to the efforts of the administration to stem leftist movements in Latin America. Certainly Grenada was a favorite stage for representing Reagan's model of foreign policy, which he used to understand in vague, binary terms. He did not show interest or eagerness in understanding matters of detail. (Mervin 163; cfr. Schaller 55). Unlike Vietnam, the intervention in Grenada was brief and predictably easy. It had been Reagan's only foreign policy triumph – *Glasnost* was almost two years ahead yet. But it seemed enough for a public opinion that had become extremely suspicious of external military entanglements (Hoffman 34). It especially satisfied the «hawks,» who made a political pageant out of the invasion. Like «Born in the USA,» Grenada becomes an emotional rally-cry for Sam's

3. In the high tide of popularity of «Born in the USA,» Reagan praised Springsteen in a campaign act in the latter's native New Jersey. The President underscored the patriotic reading of the song and set Springsteen as an example of the self-made man. Cfr. McKey-Kallis and McDermott 7; Cullen 14.

classmates, who overwhelmingly supported the intervention. She is shocked that Lonnie, her boyfriend, admires Emmett for going to Vietnam, not for turning into an antiwar activist. Still more excessive than Lonnie, his father even feels ill-at-ease for belonging to a generation that did not have to go to war, «I felt like I missed out on something important.» (86)⁴

In Country confirms Christopher Lasch's redefinition of the state as the provider of goods (be they factual or ideological) to be consumed, by cooption, coercion, or repression (Lasch 27). The power elites of the Reagan era were not simply a part of the «complex» Eisenhower dreaded by the end of his mandate. Their answerability is diffused throughout the chain of power, and the outcome is «an interlocking, self-contained structure ... impervious to criticism and change» (Lasch 34). Emmett, then, understands that the same powers that allow him to chuckle with the dialogism implicit in the *M*A*S*H** TV series, will never accept they poisoned him in Vietnam with herbicides: «they're trying every way they know how to prove Agent Orange is good for you, like a big orange drink» (Mason 59).

Emmett becomes a most unlikely example of adjustment to the postwar. But other veterans apparently more balanced than him, who ostensibly fitted in ordinary lifestyles, are also harmed by the confusion between myth and reality. Emmett's veteran friends are working-class. They all experience the comparative grievance of their position in comparison with the veterans of other wars, and they were definitely marked by the discrepancy between the expectations they anticipated while in the army and what they received after their discharge (Helmer 227, 239). But no general conclusion can be drawn from their conforming to the social position they occupy in the novel. Two emotional and political extremes can be perceived in these characters: on the one hand Pete, a veteran reaganite who holds a neoconservative reconstruction of the war; on the other Emmett's cynical approach to the postwar. In between, characters like Tom, Jim and Earl, could well refer to the individuals who do not identify with either archetype; as Earl comments in a veterans' gathering, «you never forget it, but you go on living. You have to. You have to think of the future. Your kids. You have to make sure they don't get sucked into a war they can't win, like we did» (Mason 113).

Despite their being central in the President's restoration of the American myths, they resent the economic changes of the period. Jewison is attentive to the economic

4. Mason's construction of the Malones as warmongering yokels was farcical on purpose. The story thus underlines the perils, not the real consequences, of Reagan's aspersions against the «Evil Empire». A more thorough construction of the Malones as members of the working-class should have qualified their patriotism. It was expected from them to feel exhilarated for a safe military operation on the Caribbean. However, their comments on the duty to defend the country would probably be more sophisticated if the issue were raised of who used to go to the wars «Washington» declared. The conservative populism among the working-class groups opposed to the antiwar movement had expressed a sort of class antagonism against the middle class whose sons were exempted from the draft. In fact, the more cautious approach of the Reagan administration to fighting the leftist movements in Central America (ruling out direct intervention) is suggestive of the popular mood towards taking part in another land war. Cfr. Appy 38-43.

stagnation of those years, especially in the cut when Sam is jogging in an area of economic decline; the ensuing meeting at the bar recreates a topical scene of working-class disorganization. They were not underemployed or held low-paid positions just because they were veterans; but for Tom and Jim their condition as losers has repercussions long after they returned from the war. The dead-end jobs that occupied them would not guarantee adjusting as they have been expected to do. On the contrary a conservative Pete, who admonishes Sam not to worry so much about Vietnam, is comforted with the thought that he cannot get a steady job because the economic slump is general in the region.

But the veterans are not the worst-off. We are suggested that precariousness and even poverty have been increasingly feminized. Putting Mrs. Briggs aside, Dawn catalyzes the trend for women to be pushed downwards in the social scale. First, her situation at home as the only daughter of a widower with three sons who abuse her; second, her precarious job as a waitress at a fast-food franchise; third, she gets pregnant and for a moment is afraid she will have to raise the baby alone if Ken may not want to marry her. She replicates the statistics that confirmed the increase of children raised in one-parent households, and the gloomy prospects for unwed mothers to improve their social position, as a 25 percent of them received incomes beneath the poverty level. Like Dawn at the Burger Boy, other waitresses and supermarket cashiers in the texts suggest the narrow possibilities of employment for working-class women. Only Anita, Emmett's former girlfriend, seems to be on a more steady position as a secretary. In any instance they all are occupied in the personal and clerk services sector (Kessler-Harris 318). And Irene, on her part, has decided to embrace domesticity.

As shown in *In Country*, the sexual division of work intensifies the proletarianization of women, and keeps them as permanent non-skilled workers, with a perennially low salary, conceived as a side-pay, never as the main source of income of the family unit. But the franchises were increasingly lucrative. They offered inexpensive meals for a growing number of customers who took their meals outside the home. By the time Mason was writing her novel, McDonald's employed more workers than the entire American basic steel industry. As Mike Davis remarks, the surplus extracted from a large number of workers who took a job in a fast-food franchise as a last resort assured affordable meals for the public (Davis 215). The local McDonald's in Hopewell, where Emmett and his friends use to take their breakfast, becomes a space of social expressions. Sam recognizes there that the veterans have difficulties in coming to terms with their past.

Along with the feminization of poverty and the decline of the industrial and construction sectors, farmers were also targeted by the economic crisis. As a transitional region between the industrial and the agricultural areas of the Midwest, fictive Hopewell recalls the population hit by the economic readjustments the administration's liberalizing policies propitiated. Sam's grandparents are struck by the agricultural decline provoked by the green revolution, that devalued the price of produce raised outside agribusiness. In fact, Emmett's parents represent a portion of the American population whose income diminished to a point below that they had enjoyed in 1970 (Schaller 69). Ironically Mason alludes to the solution the Reagan

revolution had found for individuals like Granddad. A factory nearby –the «cookie factory» that offers temporary jobs for the underemployed in Hopewell– has extended its sewage system on his fields. The only compensation he receives is the promise of the factory to let him hook when he decides to develop the land. «That would be never, Granddad told them. With a spirit of resignation, he had signed a permission paper» (Mason 148). The different perception of the land as provider (the Smith family) and estate (the corporation) recalls one of Reagan's most polemical appointments, that of James Watt as Secretary of Interior. In another section of the novel, we can see how Watt's ways intruded in Cawood Pond, a semirecreational area outside Hopewell. The Pond has pivotal importance in the story, because it reminds Emmett of the war's «country» –a parallelism Jewison managed to reproduce very effectively. However, this parody of a jungle is being developed and its ecosystem altered for the sake of progress.

The social problems provoked by the administration's policies arouse a perception in the protagonists that runs counter to that of conformist Hopewell. Their participation is tenuous, actually; but until they see through the workings of the American political system, Emmett and Sam identify not just with the democratic ticket, but with the most extraordinary element to ever contest the presidency to the Republicans in 1984: a liberal woman like Geraldine Ferraro.

The Ferraro image attracted many Americans in the weeks after her nomination as running mate of Walter Mondale. She could well draw Catholic, Easterners, ethnic groups, and most especially women like Sam, who is not of age to vote, but believes that Ferraro encloses the possibility to erase patriarchy from the United States, «she wouldn't get us in a war» (Mason 18). There was a problem though, which Sam could grasp only partially: Ferraro became the instrument of a political machinery whose only goal was to wring power from the GOP. The Democratic ticket offered the surface of rebellion against the conservative status quo; however, its performance in the campaign must have been disappointing for those who expected a bold change in the regime. Mondale is referred to in the novel because of his choice as running mate, not for his agenda. His liberal charisma (including his initial and audacious promise to raise taxes in order to fund social programs) was considerably diminished in his final speeches, where the social democratic elements of his campaign vanished: he had deleted references to social spending, and included increases in defense budget instead. As one biographer has quipped, «Mondale failed to distinguish himself from Reagan» (Gillon 362). And then came the financial scandal that involved Ferraro's husband and doomed the democratic ticket. The summer of 1984 proved that even on American standards, «if the Republicans are the Right, the Democrats are in no way the Left», as Burnham commented on the demise of liberalism in the United States (Burnham 9-10; Dolbeare 99).

The fluid political identity of Mondale and Ferraro, (and in the context of the film, that of Dukakis) meant a deviation from the progressive tradition of American liberalism in the Twentieth century. The elections gave Reagan a landslide victory –but half the electorate abstained. Both texts describe an atmosphere of political frustration in the characters, whose public lives run on referents different from those of the two-party system. Sam's position on patriarchy, Emmett's denunciation of the

administration secrecy, Jim's vindication «to take charge of our lives» (Mason 60), and Tom's resentment at their having been ostracized, claim for a kind of politics the Democratic machine cannot allow itself to patronize, because it would mean risking votes from the middle class that abhors paying for the poor. They would never manage to inculcate the Mrs. Briggs types where their interests are; their leftist populism, outlandish for the Establishment, could initially respond to projects like Jesse Jackson's «Rainbow Coalition», not yet established in 1984, and with a less than central relevance in Dukakis' neoliberal agenda four years later. I think that in a more general sense they explore a radical interpretation of the relations between them and the groups that subordinate them

These characters cannot afford to be revolutionaries. There not being a class-based political affiliation they may join (or prospects for it to exist in the future) they need to map tentatively their social situation with newer paradigms (cfr. Moody 344). Mason's minimalist realism does not allow for wishful thinking in her chronicle; nor can Jewison exploit subversive undertones in characters whose political faith is already depleted. Instead of resisting, they negotiate and extract the meanings that supply them a subaltern, complementary, set of values. Their common goal should be to reach what Chantal Mouffe has described as «the construction of [...] a new hegemony articulated through new egalitarian social relations, practices, and institutions» (Mouffe 327) in a manner that transcends essentialist understandings along lines of gender, class, race, etc. Sam's discovery that Ferraro had also thrilled her mother, however, disturbs a reading of the novel that primes «woman» over «man» as homogeneous and opposing blocs.

The commodities-as-values are penetrated by the Establishment, but the protagonists manage to decode them (cfr. McGuigan 132; Fiske 105-6). By contesting consumerism as the way to transcend history they manage to redefine their position against the power structure. They oppose the meanings of the cultural productions created for them not with the tension of the class struggle, but through the confrontation between the power bloc and the citizen (Fiske 20 passim 27; cfr. Kaplan 33). It follows then that they establish what Nancy Frazer has labeled a «subaltern counter public», that empowers them to formulate oppositional interpretations of the identities, interests, and needs (Frazer 291). They resist by means of a semiotic guerrilla warfare on the prefabricated meanings of the social and cultural surrounding.

Mason and Jewison suggests there is no uniform deconstruction of the Establishment, and we might well face contradictions between meanings each character may take from the same signifiers. We have already seen the contradiction in Dawn's and Sam's appreciation for the *Born in the USA* album; we can also see that *M*A*S*H** does not always hold the same significance for Sam and her uncle. But it is in the personal exploitation of cultural texts that the negative universals of these individuals can best be tested.

Particularly clearly in the case of the two protagonists, cultural revisionism empowers the individual to rearrange his or her life experience. This fact claims importance in a moment when the distinctions in the American party system have waned. Otherwise, as Jameson explains, those cultural productions would be no more

than «heaps of fragments» fixed to no teleology but that of the text as a consumable (Jameson 25). *M*A*S*H** for Emmett is more than black comedy. Emmett's presentism constructs a different sitcom that reinforces his condition as an unadjusted veteran. He even legitimates his ambiguous sexual identity by imitating a character in the series who wears skirts. If the series had been designed—overtly or covertly—to reify war making, Emmett managed to decode that textual meaning. In his exchange with the TV set he introduces the issues the Veterans Administration does not allow him to vindicate. In a similar way he decodes the Memorial in Washington and tests his independence from the Establishment. It may be more than an oversight that Mason and Jewison only focus Maya Lin's granite wall when the Washington Memorial is referred. They dismiss Frederick Hart's sculpture of three soldiers, which was included in the compound after much pressure from the right.

If Emmett excorporates his cultural purchases, so does Sam. MTV can work as a postmodern stage where images spatialize time (Jameson 300) with the sole object of catering for a segment of the consumer public. For Sam MTV becomes instrumental in her liberation from dominant discourses. Billy Joel's social comments on «Uptown Girl»; Chrissie Hynde's subversion of gender roles in «Back on the Gang Chain»; Springsteen's invitation to celebrate her sexuality in «Dancing in the Dark»; Freddie Mercury himself. These texts counter Lonnie's reluctance to question TV programming. Springsteen ceases to be a messenger of the American Dream, as the Reagan campaigners tried to construct him for the audience that cheered at «Born in the USA.» Instead, the social meaning Sam is extracting from her life experience underscores the signification of The Boss who criticized Reagan because «there are people whose dreams do not mean much to him, that just indiscriminately get swept aside» (Cullen 17; cfr. Mackey-Kallis and McDermott).

Besides, as she is being convinced of the role of gender in the current celebration of aggressiveness and the return of domesticity, she hints at the connection between domestic cooption and imperialism. Only after she spends one night on Cawood Pond in order to imagine how Vietnam might have been and to help Emmett to recover from his neurosis, does she see through the spree of violence on MTV. A generation of teenagers who admire President Reagan is nurtured «with everything flying apart, shifting, changing in the blink of an eye. The random images on the screen were swirling, beyond anyone's control» (Mason 230).

However, if the climax of the texts arrives at the Washington Mall, Sam's reaches her declaration of independence from the power bloc when she deconstructs her father-hero. From the very beginning we understand that she introduces feminist paradigms to break down the prevalent institutions. If the conservatives wished to turn back emotionally to the «glory days» of the Fifties, Sam wishes to have time stopped in 1969, the year she was born and her father was killed. But as the story is disclosed, she recognizes that nostalgia does not recreate the past, but mystifies it. To admire the hippie robes her mother used to wear does not return Irene to the prelapsarian stage she longs for (and which Irene dubs «the Dark Ages»). Dwayne is de-mythologized too. First he is a crippled father/boyfriend figure, a victim of the power structure with whom Sam establishes a sympathetic relation. But that construction of her father as her favorite antihero halts to a stop when she reads the final pages of his diary. There

she senses Dwayne's gradual but relentless fall into barbarianism. That handsome boy in the portrait she holds to dearly ended up committing atrocities in Vietnam; and she dreads Emmett would have done the same. Even if Dwayne had adjusted to civil life after the war, she could never attach him to any «noble cause.» It is then that she manages to articulate her personal politics: the state becomes a political entity that exerts coercion inside and terror outside. Sam infers that the security of the state is not restricted to policing the nation. Culturally it has reproduced the Victorian separation of public (male) and private (female) spheres to the point of anachronism. Sam saps the foundations of that conviction when she spends that night at Cawood Pond in order to claim that she has «also humped the boonies,» she has been there, too. At the Pond she even finds out that the literary canon has been an insidious instrument for articulating coercion. Thoreau meant no radical chic in his retreat to Walden Pond, he just cultivated the «masculine» civic republican virtue of personal sacrifice: «In Sam's opinion, Thoreau was a paranoid» (Mason 210). Highbrow culture, then, can be as manipulative as the Uncle Sam poster that claims soldiers for the US Army at the recruiting station. And it did not escape Sam's poaching into the public sphere of responsibility for the nation: «Sam gave [it] the finger back and raced by» (Mason 76).

The social experiences that attended Sam in that adventurous summer enabled her to realize that corporate democracy leads the citizen towards skepticism. The «New Mandarins» of the 1960s and the «decent Americans» of the 1980s exhausted the political system of any coherence, and the individual needed to rebuild his or her network of social significations by contesting the meanings provided by the Establishment. Thanks to her political independence, Sam is able to comprehend newer meanings reflecting on the glistening granite of the Wall: «If she moves lightly to the left, she sees the [Washington] monument, and if she moves the other way she sees a reflection of the flag opposite the memorial. Both the monument and the flag seem like arrogant gestures, like the country giving the finger to the dead boys, flung in this hole in the ground» (Mason 240).

I have tried to comment on the political implications that underlay the production of *In Country* as two cultural texts that replicated the ideological debates of the 1980s, –which became more virulent in the 1990s. The characters that made up a «counter public» in the two texts represent the losers in an America that assumed success as the social norm. One decade later, they continue losing ground in the social arena: in 1996 a Democratic president sanctioned a Welfare Act Ronald Reagan might not have dared to sign. But this fact does not mean that the individuals represented in the microcosm of *In Country* are invisible. On the contrary, they are referents for shaping future political designs. In this sense Mason and Jewison released texts that document the making of postliberalism in the United States and the rationale of the quest for practices and institutions more sensitive with the citizens.

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