

TICKETS FOR THE MICHAEL DOUGLAS'S L.A. WALKING TOUR: IDEOLOGICAL DISCLOSURES IN JOEL SCHUMACHER'S *FALLING DOWN*

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Joel Schumacher's fourth film, *Falling Down*, has been hyped by many critics as a morbid justification of covert fascism. With such prevention I saw the film for the first time to discover that, regardless of the moral lessons each individual can draw from a fictionalized chronicle of how hard life is in L.A., one could be able to gauge the ideological convolutions present in the story.

The main character in the film, D-FENS, seems to behave like a psychopath. Indeed, there is little innovation in manipulating here a psychotic personality into a filter that sieves the failings of society around him or her. Script writer Ebbe Roe Smith dispensed with a phony savior with a messianic mission to fulfil in the social havoc of contemporary L.A. Far from that, we find a naive individual gone nuts because the gap between the promise of America and the fulfilment of his expectations as a «hundred-per-cent» American citizen became too wide to bracket. The script itself is sketchy enough as to enable a character to walk down half of Metropolitan L.A. in a few hours (meaningfully, some span of time between 8:00 am. to 5:00 pm). Truly, *Falling Down* is a positive failure as a *neorealist* text. But I feel its creators well understood that as a «political film» it could only expound and confirm the social ills inherent to postindustrial and post-Cold War United States, not provide a remedy for them —if a path beyond the postmodern can be devised yet in order to find the solution to the evils of the time.¹ As

1. Cfr. Dana B. Polan's argument on the utterly ineffective meaning of political films. See «'Above All Else to Make You See': Cinema and the Ideology of Spectacle.» In Jonathan Arac (ed.), *Postmodernism and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), esp. pp. 62-63.

some critic has asserted, one has the impression that a world bigger than life is created in the film —and one that cannot be controlled but only revealed with no extensive qualification. However simplistic it is at first sight, the microcosm engineered by Schumacher-Smith allows the viewer a grasp of the social stratification of the largest and most complex of American cities.²

The first minutes of the film introduce us to D-FENS's peculiar state of mind, as he abandons his car in the middle of a traffic jam with the alleged purpose of «going home.»³ The remarkable travelling that starts the film displays a kaleidoscope of human gregariousness Los Angeles-style and underscores D-FENS's anxiety in the middle of the jam. Gradually we discover he is weary. Some causes for D-FENS's distress are personal and tips throughout the film help us make the puzzle up. But other causes transcend privacy and directly launch him into the political terrain, more consciously than not.

The traffic stoppage sandwiches D-FENS between messages concurring with the liberal and conservative consensus. Thus emblematic tokens of conservatism, like bumpersticks inset on the screen calling for fiscal disobedience or proclaiming New Christian truisms (others with obscene remarks should not be dismissed, though). These rightist causes, decried by his personal circumstances, are contrasted in D-FENS's consciousness with the school bus that recalls bussing, that liberal crusade. The facile symbol of a big American flag leaning outside the bus suggests that social disintegration, so central a topic in the film, is partly rooted in the liberal educational policies.

In the following sequences the viewer is acknowledged elements in the social structure of L.A. that ridicule D-FENS's outer appearance as an average, homogenized, semi-suburban white and male American citizen. As he abandons his car in search for a telephone booth, the landscape that will surround him for the next 30 minutes of the story prove that Los Angeles is testing the thesis that the United States undergoes a crucial transformation in its ethnic and demographic structures. Hispanics and Asians

I call *Falling Down* a 'political theme' in the sense that its plot is basically sustained on the discredit of the consensus ideology that has upheld the two-party system in the United States during the Cold War. In other words, D-FENS/Bill Foster's deranged condition cannot be fully understood without relating it to the exhaustion of the anticommunist discourse prevalent throughout his life.

2. For a comparison between D-FENS and other psychotic characters in America movies of the last two decades, see Laurent Vachaud's critique of *Falling Down* in «*Chute Libre: L'effacé*» (*Positif*, July-August 1993,), pp. 18-19. It is Vachaud too that ascribes some elements of the fantastic genre to the film, so that Douglas' tour in L.A. shows instances of inner-city decay, violence and bureaucratic deadlock in such numbers that the logical end must be sickness and eventual physical death.

3. Joel Schumacher, *Falling Down*. Warner Bros, in association with Le Studio Canal +, Regency Enterprises, and Alcor Films, 1992. Minute 4:11-19. Hereinafter minute count will appear in the text following footage cited or quoted.

become the human constituents of the gangland D-FENS walks about seeking a way downhill to his final destination, «home.» Accordingly the strata of the population shown in the film so far will eventually account for more than half the growth in the US labor force before the end of the century.⁴ On top of experiencing being a member of a (white) minority, D-FENS' position as male is resented by the fact that his wife's managed to take their child's custody from him, what amounts to denying his theoretical role as head of the home.

The subversion of D-FENS' self-identification as a mainstream, law-abiding citizen is offered from the very moment he gets in touch with the minorities —ironically a majority in the area where he decided to continue his route on foot.⁵

The first non-white person he comes across is an Asian, namely a Korean shopkeeper at a grocery just pulling out of the 110 Freeway from Pasadena, where D-FENS lives with his mother. A curious though fleeting identification between text and character takes place when Lee, the Korean grocer, is onscreen for the first time. A low POV shot scans him and nativist connotations are hinted (7:52) so that Lee appears as a cross of a Chinese brigand and a Vietcong sniper. This blur in the grocer's identity follows an iconographic tradition in American popular culture and political history, especially on the West Coast. Hollywood has not been an exception to this nativist construction, and in a way *Falling Down* hoaxes it. The camera promptly transfers the construction of Lee as 'Other' to D-FENS; the exchange between customer and keeper, climaxed by a violent dispute, is permeated by the anti-alien arguments that the latter utters. One assumes that D-FENS's contention goes in line with the reasoning of a majority of white public opinion regarding the demographic and social decomposition of Los Angeles.

An important clue in the ideological configuration of D-FENS is given when he knows the shopkeeper is a Korean immigrant (9:40). Then he speaks about the responsibility of the United States in fostering the development of the Republic of South Korea, in clear allusion to the economic and military aid offered by successive American administrations as part of the containment policy of the Cold War. From this moment on one is obliged to look on *Falling Down*'s main character in a different and certainly more complex way. The easy, immediate resort to racist remarks on the ability of «Orientals» to take jobs from «Americans,» substitutes for a reflection on the domestic adjustments produced by the ideological battles won against communism overseas.

4. For further information and sources on demographic trends, see Robert Hormats: «The Basis for America's Future». In Steven Gillon- Diane Kunz (eds.), *America During the Cold War*. Fort Worth: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1993; esp. p. 405.

5. Although very few actual place names are given, a tentative reconstruction of D-FENS's journey in L.A. may follow this route: crossing of Interstate 5 and California 110; Angelino's Heights; MacArthur Park, Alvarado St and 4th; some stretch of Wilshire or Crenshaw Boulevards; crossing of Interstate 10 and Venice Boulevard down to Venice beach.

The editing of the text technically supports the intricate nature of D-FENS's political outrage well beyond the limits of a supremacist. The sequence shot presumably in some spot in the area between East Los Angeles, Highland Park and Atwater, where the clash with the Korean takes place, is followed by a crane general view of a coastline neighborhood in Venice. There we realize D-FENS's former home is located. The neighborhood is not affluent, but quite within the social boundaries of what passes as lower-middle to middle class. Once inside the house, the existence of appliances requiring some skill and purchasing power, the liberally lenient way Adele (D-FENS and Elizabeth's daughter) is being raised, etc., lead the viewer to revise some sketchy ideas s/he had formerly raised on seeing D-FENS as an advocate of free violence, especially against alien immigrants.

As new data accumulate in the story, Michael Douglas manages to incarnate an individual whose political commitments gradually get closer to what used to be known as a «Reagan Democrat.» As far and as long as the text outlines the last day of his life, D-FENS fits into the category of what an analyst of the Democratic National Committee described as «a suburbanite, in a house with about \$ 35,000 income, younger than 45, with a child or two and in a marriage in which both partners work.»⁶ All these factors are explicitly or implicitly present in the story. Sociologically, D-FENS belongs to that part of the population whose faith in the American institutions and opportunities had been belied by the evidences of social turmoils and economic transformations that presided the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, and which conservatives have so eagerly blamed on the liberal policies practiced then.

Besides, two concerns resurface that contribute to make up an initial portrait of D-FENS as a genuine exemplar of Middle America. First, his concern about the right destination of the taxpayers' money («D'you have any idea how much money my country has given your country?» he reproaches Lee before their fight [9:25]); second, his being a beneficiary of the massive federal budget earmarked for the Defense Department in the late 1970s and 1980s. He had worked for the government in a missile design plant at Notech (a code name for Caltech, California Institute of Technology?), for at least the last seven years. If we assume that the events take place in 1992, it can be easily recognized that since 1985 and before his recent dismissal D-FENS, as his namesake suggests, worked in behalf of President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative with the conviction that the federal expenses were being properly used.

But his political convictions were not those of a reactionary. Not if the Republican administration, ceasing military contracts, sends him into unemployment; not if social injustice is so pervasive in Republican California. As a member of the white lower-middle class, he might have resented being shunned by a Democratic party securing the

6. Paul Tully, quoted by Joan Didion in «Eye on the Prize.» *New York Review of Books*, September 24, 1992; p. 62.

vote of ethnic minorities and other emerging pressure groups by means of an elitist leftist discourse.⁷ Another thing, however, is that he sent overboard his democratic convictions bolting to the party of law and order. In fact he tracks his ideal America back in 1965. He wants time stopped in that year—so he means when he pretends that the Korean grocer retail the goods at his store with prices current just before the unravelling of democracy became apparent to the public (10:50).

The next stop in this weird urban tour takes place in *Angel's Flight* (*Angelino's Height?*). Here D-FENS encounters a gang of Chicano juveniles. This is the second time he notices his status as member of the white minority in a land that until that moment he had thought belonged to him as well as to the others. L.A. is barely visible from the hill he has arrived at, so heavy is the smog (17:15). Ironically, this otherwise scenic view is not perceived from an affluent suburb but a barrio. The irony goes that the poor have conquered not only the neglected center but the outskirts as well. The short footage that shows this area of the Hispanic neighborhood is meaningful enough to suggest the morphology of a section of the city that digests the continuing trickle in of human beings, who simply do not allow for urban infrastructure to develop. However, the criticism of urban neglect is offset when the narration deals with the human beings who inhabit the area.

Whereas in *Falling Down* Asian-Americans have been broken down in national ethnic groups (i.e., Koreans, Chinese, Japanese), the Mexican-Americans have been portrayed as faceless examples of the Hispanic, their proper identity as children of wetbacks being dismissed. The way the Chicano gang is homogenized in the film within the Hispanic as archetype of the outcast enables D-FENS' encounter with them to take place in their L.A. barrio as well as it could have happened around any block in the Bronx. And this is not the character's fault. Especially in the case of Mexican-Americans many subplots could have been developed as fully as other episodes and themes that show up in the story. Most explicit of Hollywood's simplistic icon of the Hispanic-as-crook type is the shot (23:20-35) that glares at the gang from the inside part of the car windshield. We know they are driving around the barrio in search of the white Anglo; but they are not Mexicans, they are Puerto Ricans. One might be tempted to charge the

7. As Patrick Garry affirms, the politics of group-interest rendered liberals unable to clarify their opposition to radical leftist notions, denounced by the right and distrusted by their traditional political clientele. Consequently, the liberal identity was articulated by spokespersons «who were so leftist that neither FDR nor JFK would have considered them to be within the American liberal tradition.» See Garry, *Liberalism and American Identity* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1992), p. 33. Contrast with Alonzo Hamby's contention that «Reagan assuredly did not achieve a broadly-based ideological revolution,» explaining that way the President's inability to recast his personal victories into a long-standing partisan realignment. See Hamby, *Liberalism and Its Challengers: From F.D.R. to Bush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), esp. pp. 386-388. Quotation taken from p. 388.

film with expounding a rabidly nativist assumption that Michael Harrington once worded accurately, as «there could well be an anti-Hispanic prejudice, even though there is not a unified Hispanic consciousness.»⁸ But the way Hispanics in *Falling Down* are constructed obeys more to the cultural dislocations engendered by the Hollywood Establishment. As Albert Memmi puts it in a different context but perfectly valid for this one, the members of the Chicano gang are stigmatized by the «mark of the plural.» It should not be forgotten, anyway, that the Chicanos are not supposed to control the diegetics of the film: they are experienced by a white, male, middle-aged inhabitant of metropolitan Los Angeles.⁹

Since he left his car in the jam, the human beings D-FENS comes across in his adventuresome trip speak English with an accent. His violent sally at the grocery was triggered by the inability of the shopkeeper to utter the prices properly («eity-fie cents,» [8:50]). In the tension aroused during their exchange it was not surprising that the linguistic issue appeared, and D-FENS became an unwilling representative of restrictionism —such powerful totem of Americanism— reproaching the grocer his inability to speak intelligible English (9:10).

D-FENS's advocacy for English as the sole language of the land is repeated later on, when he «trespasses» the territory of the Chicano gang. Graffiti allegedly warn of their area. But it is the use of English of the bullies, with their slang and their accent that compels D-FENS to renew his defense of English: «if you wrote it in fucking English I'd fucking understand it» (18:14).

D-FENS's insistence on English as official language echoes in fact a bipartisan issue that has been distinctively relevant in California politics. For a majority of Anglos, as is the case of D-FENS, the proliferation of alien cultures and languages must be stopped if the chimera of the melting pot is to be kept alive. Such reasoning is catalized by organizations like *U.S. English*, with the acquiescence of moderate and conservative partisans alike, apart from a lesser number of liberals. Regardless of the ideological connotations that might be lying in the obligatory use of English, *Falling Down* reflects the preoccupation that «hundred-per-cent» Americans experience in California on an issue that transcends linguistics and has been taken to the polls twice in the last decade: first in 1986, when English was ruled as the official language of the state by a wide margin; more recently in the mid-term 1994 election, when proposition 187 was passed that barred illegal aliens or their dependents from access to medical and educational

8. Michael Harrington, *The New American Poverty*. New York: Penguin USA, 1984; p. 157.

9. Albert Memmi, quoted by Ella Shobat in «Ethnicities-in-relation: Toward a Multicultural Reading of American Cinema.» In Lester Friedman (ed.), *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); p. 227. See also Ana López, «Are All Latins from Manhattan? Hollywood, Ethnography, and Cultural Colonialism,» in *ibid.*, esp. p. 405.

services provided by public funding. It is not difficult to infer that those most affected would be immigrants with the poorest command of English.

Obviously the linguistic issue is only one side of the social tensions created among the different cultures that share the territory of L.A.. Schumacher's film provides a political stand ambivalent enough to permit its main character to swerve in his appreciation of the incompatibilities coexisting in the city. In this sense it is relevant that a long-time footage be devoted to the behavior of the juveniles as final products of a failed education, and in a wider sense, a rigid social structure that hinders upward mobility. There is no direct mention in the film to bilingual education as an experiment directed towards the integration of the children into mainstream American society. But there is the inference in the film that those kids loitering at midmorning in a working day were representative of the staggering number of school dropouts among Mexican-American teenagers.¹⁰ The reasoning of the nativist goes that if immigrants or their offspring are unproductive or even not productive enough, they represent a net burden on the community. Thus the logic of passing proposition 187 by a 3-to-1 margin, advanced by previous polls favoring immigration restriction on socioeconomic grounds.¹¹ Not too long before these polling results came out, and in the context of the riots of May 1992, D-FENS clashes with the Chicano outcasts at Angel's Point.

But the ambivalence with which the ethnic problem is assailed empowers an anti-Establishment rhetoric that although it does not celebrate multiculturalism, ridicules the ideological projections of an elusive melting pot. The Chicano kids rankle D-FENS to the point of provoking a fight from an otherwise law-abiding citizen who even apologizes for trespassing their territory.

In their trouble-raising, the youngsters are recalling D-FENS of some values inherent in the American promise that neither is enjoying at that moment. «You're trespassing a private property [and] you're loitering too» (17:40-45). Two tenets are being mocked by them. One, the sacredness of private property (the pursuit of happiness that had led their parents north of the border); two, loitering as anathema to the puritan pattern of behavior, a trait exclusive of Anglos and the assimilated. Finally, their requiring D-FENS a toll to get out safely from their territory is an absurdly extreme example of free enterprise in action. The kids of the gang are expressing their critique of American

10. Maldwyn Allen Jones points out a rate of high school dropout of 35-50 percent among the Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles for the year 1982. See his *American Immigration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) p. 277. In a more recent work, Ramón Morales Sánchez offers a gloomier number referred to the late 1980s: 60 to 70 per cent. See Marilyn Davis: *Mexican Voices/American Dreams: An Oral History of Mexican Immigration to the United States*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1990; p. 282.

11. A study by L.A. County, for instance, found one year after *Falling Down* was released, that recent immigrants accounted for almost a third of the county's net costs. See Margaret Urdansky, «Price of Immigration Alienates Taxpayers.» *USA Today*, July 14, 1993; p. 6A.

capitalism, in the only way they can articulate their anomic sprees. From this standpoint we can assume their resort to violence as the only way they have to express their protest as a collectivity, never as a class. D-FENS's former stand as a citizen of Middle America is more difficult to sustain from then on: he learns that the values he respects and his antagonists despise have passed him by as well as them. It is not for nothing that as one inset shot in this sequence shows, D-FENS is seeking a job. From a practical point of view, his apology for the values he was taught to respect is to no avail any longer. Only as the film proceeds does the viewer understand D-FENS's evolution from law-abiding subject to an individual lost in the recession of the early 1990s —and experiencing the kind of discontent Ross Perot and other latter-day demagogues would cash in on. Also his progressive despair will show the liability of a person hooked on principles dated by a postmodern civilization. His inability to keep up with the new mores runs parallel to the improbable odds that multinational, post-Cold War capitalism provide a job for him or for the Chicano kids.

When finding a way out of Angel's Flight, D-FENS acts as a sensibly changed man; as he will confide to his wife on one of his last calls home, he's on the «dark side of the moon» (1:07:30). As a suburbanite safely sealed off from the others by the isolation of his air-conditioned car, he barely noticed the human decay that mushroomed in the richest part of the most powerful country on earth. As his old convictions crumble he searches for alternatives to digest, assimilate successfully his new rapport with Los Angeles.

The display of decay he left behind is repeated, enlarged and compacted when he arrives at central L.A. There lies the hub of the city's bureaucratic network; but what D-FENS sightsees in some spot around L.A.'s Civic Center is a concentration of the ills that affect America the Beautiful. At a bus stop he glances at a human flood; in no terms can the flotsam there be considered respectable American citizens. Amidst Mexican immigrants peddling produce, black men passing the booze around, and «white trash» freaks pleading for a job, D-FENS' anxiety to «go home» is increased (31:20-32:10), only to reach a peak point when he arrives at a park.

There D-FENS is at the center of the capital city of the Third World. A melting pot in reverse congregates in the park (MacArthur?): Rastafarians playing, a vagrant displaying a placard revealing his HIV infection; an atemporal Vietnam Vet on a wheelchair. Also the homeless are present in this apocalyptic chronicle of post-Reagan's L.A. The recurrent presence of unemployed idling in these areas recalls the declining job market for the unskilled, the kind of jobs that provide entry into employment for the native poor. Thus the young white man who implores to «work for food» (31:38) is less a gross caricature of West Coast freaks than an expressionist evocation of the social consequences of the stabilization of a service-based economy in the postindustrial city.¹²

12. According to Thomas Byrne Edsall, the decline of low-skill jobs were more obvious in the 1970s and mid 1980s in northern cities. This readjustment delayed its appearance in California

The ironical twist in this stretch of D-FENS's walk is that in that moment he is socially (not ideologically) approaching them, whereas until that moment, the economic foundation of his wellbeing depended on the exclusion of the supernumerary. The budgetary rearrangements that closed down centers for the mentally handicapped and cut back or suppressed other social services, simultaneously allowed the Department of Defense to fund more projects to «protect us from the communists,» (79:20) as his mother would say later in the narration.

So, it may be assumed that D-FENS's social position becomes a parody of what it used to be during the expanding 1980s. In America's postmodern city par excellence, he is seeing through the structure of his system of beliefs up to now. In a classless society the identification as consumer becomes a feasible substitute for class consciousness. The polemical sequence at the Whamburger works as the stage where D-FENS discovers the pervasiveness of capitalism as a socioeconomic system based on exploitation on multiple levels. At the same time, the text utilizes the Whamburger as case study of what Jameson coined as the cultural logical of late capitalism.

In our alternative map to actual L.A., the Whamburger is placed somewhere on 4th Street, not too far from that temple of postmodernism, the Westin Bonaventure Hotel. A crane long shot frames D-FENS going into the Whamburger. The length of the take permits us a glimpse of trompe l'oeils, pseudo-Oriental decoration that makes up the firm's logo, Alpine roof, etc., and a flapping American flag towering the premises (this is the fifth time that patriotic cloth has been onscreen so far). The hodge-podge of styles and elements in the building acts as a visual correlate of the multicultural landscape of L.A. seen until now in the film. As Fredric Jameson suggests, the «populist priorities» in these kinds of civil constructions, insert the heterogeneous fabric of the city.¹³ But the area of Los Angeles sightseen until now is one not merely heterogeneous, but crumbling under the contradictions brought forth by a liberal-moderate theory and a

as it entered an expanding process that was exhausted in the Rust and Frost Belts. In his study of poverty in the United States in the early 1980s, Michael Harrington offers fewer examples of destitution in California than in other areas of the nation. See Edsall, «The Changing Shape of Power: A Realignment in Public Policy.» In Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (eds.), *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order* (Princeton, NJ: University Press, 1989), esp. p. 287; Harrington, op. cit. passim.

Schumacher's and Smith's thesis in their portrait of L.A. in the early 1990s tentatively confirms that the stabilization of the economy goes hand in hand with the social decomposition of the least skilled. It partly explains the ideological amorphousness of the 1992 riot; also, it projects the overstock of lumpen population present on the weekly toll from urban violence.

13. See Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke U.P. 1991). His now classic article bearing the same title as the book is reprinted here as the first chapter.

The crane shot on the Whamburger premises proves an example of Jameson's further political explanation of Baudrillardian 'simulation.' See. *ibid.*, p. 18.

praxis that obliterates and dates old ideological considerations. In this sense the squalor of the inner city, tentatively covered up by the gleaming premises, is however unveiled by a rap soundtrack —the tune of urban squalor.¹⁴

The phony outside is a frame, moreover, of the personal relations that take place inside, and D-FENS draws ideological consequences during his breakfast-lunch. At the beginning of the film, when the argument with the Korean grocer started, he brought up the issue of consumerism as a right of the American citizen (10:55). But his morning walk has alerted him of some truisms that he did not dare denounce before. My feeling is that the scene at the Whamburger does not seek a simplistic mimesis of numberless massacres provoked by psychopaths in crowded places in the United States. More than this, at the Whamburger D-FENS sees through consumerism as a right and a defining feature of the citizenry in a technologically overdeveloped society. Marketing techniques create artificial paradises, and the «customer is always right» only if his power to purchase is profitable for the corporation. Jameson's metaphor of postmodernism as a fiefdom of surfaces is accurate here. The superficial personal relations the firm takes for granted in its patrons (Sheila and Rick, the Whamburger's employees, are heedless of D-FENS's complaint) give off the emergence of a new layer in human nature, presumably fostered by the political economy of multinational capitalism, as Todd Gitlin suggests.¹⁵ The incident set off when the machine gun triggers adds pathos to a situation already climaxed by D-FENS's discoveries of the day. The most audacious implication of this scene is that the customers who cannot sue corporations for misleading advertising, are incapable of mending the failures of corporate democracy. Such reality of superficial and replaceable contexts offers no hook for D-FENS/Bill's principles to hang — and they fall on surfaces too.

Only after he exhibits his (lack of) prowess at gunhandling D-FENS receives the treat he wanted to: the fascist temptation is rather facilely implied here. But his behavior is one of political vagueness actually, and for a few minutes after the incident he is sheltered in the alcove of populism: anticorporatist, antibourgeois, messianic, and most important of all, with no clear alternative to the current status quo.

His criticism of corporate democracy is most evident in the scene that takes place along presumably Wilshire, or Crenshaw, Boulevard (46:40-49:00) in his way homewards to Venice. It is here that we find D-FENS's most evident expression of sympathy with the human havoc that he has gotten to know. A black man is protesting

14. Cfr. *ibid.*, p. 32, 62.

15. Todd Gitlin, «Postmodernism: Roots and Politics.» In Ian Agnus and Sut Jhally (eds)., *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America*. New York: Routledge, 1989; p. 352. This argument related to the exhaustion of D-FENS in a new political economy can be noticeably enhanced in *Falling Down* by means of substitution: taking into account the codenames that make the story 'fictive' we may replace the big «W» of «Whamburger» with, for instance, golden arches (by simply turning «W» upside down) and find a clear reference beyond Schumacher's text.

outside a bank because he was not granted a loan: the board decided he was «not economically viable.» This means he is experiencing the same economic ordeal as D-FENS. Reference is given to previous seven years when the protester was «viable» as a customer; the same period of time D-FENS was productive for the institution he worked for; the same seven years that rendered California the most affluent land in the world.

That black man's denunciation in front of the bank entranceway supports D-FENS' tirade at Whamburger: a faceless, nominally democratic capitalism voids the individual human being of his/her condition, beyond economic profitability. As far as this scene is inset in the totality of *Falling Down*, no racial discrimination can be blamed on the bank's refusal. The dissenter's attitudes, speech, wear, etc could well be considered as middle-class as those of D-FENS's. As the latter watches two policemen take the black man away, he articulates his criticism of late capitalism in terms other than personal. The text invites us to see racial issues in a different light than has been suggested until now. D-FENS identifies with the black at Wilshire to the point that he will eventually define himself as «not economically viable» too (83:30). Contrary to the critics of multiculturalism, (who in rather apocalyptic terms talk of «culture wars,» and even Balkanization) the adscription of the individual to a definite cultural and ethnic group must be seen more as a social consequence of postindustrial or multinational capitalism than a cause of the United States's fading status as *the* superpower.¹⁶ The disclosure that both men belong to the same social stratum and that 'class' as shelter for their world becomes inadequate, leaves open the suggestion for the viewer to brood upon the divisive effects of multiple hyphenization as a substitute for class consciousness.

His wordless rapport with the detainee then offsets the traces of racism that could have been sensed in his previous recognitions of non WASPs. Moreover, D-FENS's reputation as an antifascist will be definitively tested during his shopping in an army surplus store, where he gets in to purchase a pair of boots. The equation that the text provokes between militarism and fascism has many associations, some of them simple, others not so. Frederic Forrest managed to incarnate a bigoted, supremacist, and sexist shopkeeper, who ends up revealing his pro-nazi sympathies. Such revelation leads the viewer's former suspicions on D-FENS's political credentials to a dead end. One of the most tense in *Falling Down*, the sequence at Nick's store renders the turning point in the protagonist's self-disenfranchisement from the political game in the United States as well as from the American chimera. Technically three scenes close to this one (Angelina's confession at the Police Department, D-FENS's attack on a freeway under

16. A title that immediately comes to one's mind is, for instance, Arthur Schlesinger's *The Disuniting of America*. The pessimistic overtones of his indictment of the multicultural project is apparently blind to the fact that the collectivities who most persistently vindicate their hyphenation are those who for generations have experienced their failure as members of Middle America. See Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: Norton 1992), esp. ch. 5, «E Pluribus Unum?», pp. 119-138.

repair, and the police query at his mother's home) create a chronological continuity. Inasmuch as the ideological deconstruction of D-FENS is concerned, such juxtaposition of sequences contributes to our ordering the puzzle created. But to arrive at that stage, D-FENS must pass the acid test of American domestic fascism.¹⁷

The display of violence at the Surplus Value's stands two opposing readings that correspond respectively to the purpose of violence-as-politics in either customer or shopkeeper. When horrified by Nick's fascistic big talk D-FENS proclaims his faith in freedom; but his line of argument has not retreated to the formalities of liberal democracy: «I am an American, you're a sick asshole . . . In America we've Freedom of Speech, the right to disagree» (60:40-61:10). Here he reaffirms two of the pillars of traditional American liberalism: the freedom and dignity of the individual (from the victims of the Holocaust in Europe to the non-whites patronizing the Whamburger) and consequently, the social contract (that he naively performs by discussing his disagreements with an extremist). The fascist's reply cannot be but platitudinous, «Fuck you and your freedom!»

This tension-rising take contributes to the resolution of the scene in Nick's death. But it is important from the point of view of the exposition of two differing arguments whose only shared assumption is opposing the Establishment. If D-FENS vindicates the first Amendment to the Constitution, Nick's violence implements a distorted interpretation of the Third, as cherished by a network of conservative pressure groups. His apology of violence as an instrument of power is focused from the very beginning of the sequence, as we meet him leaning on the counter and gleefully listening to the police intercom he has managed to dial on a radio set. His is an extreme case of a mental frame that believes in power-directed violence. Worse of all is that Nick cannot be marginalized within the film, since violence is appraised by a plurality of individuals on the right side of the law as well: D-FENS's little daughter Adele is recurrently flashing a water pistol onscreen; in the beginning a cooperative driver at the jam comments to Prendergast he regularly watches the reality show *Cops*; think also of the black kid who instructs D-FENS on bazooka handling (72:30-73:15 -an unpardonable blunder for a missile designer that may have justified his dismissal from the job at Notech!)

Outside the narration, Nick sociologically embodies not so much a freak as a reminder of the hazardous position of democracy on account of the social conformism fostered by late capitalism. New apostles of corporate, organic democracy have sprung

17. For further commentary on the opportune inclusion of Nick to balance the ideological commitments of D-FENS, see Carol Clover's critique of *Falling Down*, «White Noise,» in *Sight and Sound*, May 1993, esp. p 8. column 2. Notwithstanding Ms. Clover's assertion that D-FENS's sense of reality prevails (unlike his self-control), I tend to believe that the character's former *Weltanschauung* started to erode since the moment he went out of the Korean's grocery, and muted dramatically during his witnessing opposite to the Golden Bank office.

since the last decade and they have been haunted by slips in their conduct and rhetoric.¹⁸ Most of the citizens of Cincinnati or those of the state of Colorado who have favored homophobic legislation in the last two elections, or the Californians who have revived nativism by passing proposition 187, would feasibly never identify with a fascist bigot. However, by sanctioning their security as 100 % Americans they have tried to vent away their frustration because their values and social constructions are allegedly sapped by other sociocultural realities. Qualitatively, Nick expresses a similar kind of defeat when he complains about miscegenation at the Whamburger. Presumably the «Others» there are to blame for the failures of the American way: only they and their practices hamper the actualization of the nation's promise.¹⁹ D-FENS used to belong to that majority actually, as his exchange with the Korean testified. The incredible swing in his sociocultural realizations produced in so short a stretch of time is one more example of his disaffiliation. As racial issues are concerned, the rapport he has had with representative members of different non-WASP groups has varied, from the violent exchange with the Korean, his invisibility in the Mexican barrio where the driveby shootout took place, through his solidarity towards the black man and cordiality with the South Asian peddler from whom he bought a trifle for little Adele. Apparently, the more race-blind he gets to be, the more his attitudes compromise the subterfuge of classlessness. At this moment John Higham's thesis is confirmed that the troubling contradiction between the ideal of a classless society and the realities of ethnic degradation has long tempted Americans to use race as an antidote to class divisions.²⁰

Other scenes mentioned above qualify the critical evolution in the main character of the film, to the extent that as the footage proceeds even his name is changed: D-FENS's codename is replaced by his real name, William Foster. Maybe a coincidence,

18. The ambivalence with which conservative Republicans have regarded the relation between the individual and the state deserves a comparison with earlier examples of political biases in the American party system, the Dixiecrats' apologies for supremacism in especial. Patrick Garry suspects that although individual sovereignty has been the real safeguard against tyranny, «in a striking paradox, modern conservatives seem to fear individual freedoms more than they fear totalitarianism» (*American Liberalism*, p. 114). Notwithstanding arguments of conservative persuasion, President Reagan's visit in Bitburg cemetery, Pat Buchanan's antisemitic slips, Jerry Falwell's leverage on the media and President Bush's tepid comments on the Xian Anmen massacre, confirm the hypothesis pointed out by Garry.

19. As Ishmael Reed ironizes in the more restricted focus of black-white relations, «Without blacks taking the brunt of the system's failures, where would our great republic be?». Reed et al., «Is Ethnicity Obsolete?» In *The Invention of Ethnicity*, ed. by Werner Sollors (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 229. Instances like Nick's racist tirade put the question of the otherness of non-WASPs in L.A. as an aspect of the urban-social condition of the city, itself inextricably linked to its economic structure.

20. John Higham, «Multiculturalism and Universalism: A History and a Critique». Reprinted in *American Quarterly*, 45:2, June 1993; p. 203.

a namesake of former Secretary General of the Communist Party of the United States has managed to subvert the system of beliefs that had sustained him until that fateful morning. Intertextuality between the character's discourse and that of the camera-narrator contributes to strengthen Foster's new assumptions. The changing politics of ethnicity in D-FENS/Foster is complemented by two scenes at the police precinct edited in two different sections of the film. In the first one (37:57-38:55) Angelina's being inquired by officer Sánchez—and beyond that, the irregular development of officer Sandra Torres (officeress, as Nick would have it) as a Hispanic character—imply that the individual's racial/ethnic status may be renegotiated, but his/her social entity cannot. In this aspect the film underscores the insistence with which by all means the Establishment aims to efface the correspondence between an individual's socioeconomic status and his/her construction of reality.

This aspect is enhanced later in the story, when Angelina is interrogated by Prendergast himself: her position is now punctuated by her mother's admonitions to her in Spanish and heavily accented English not to collaborate with the police (56:46-57:20). Angelina and her friends are antimodels of the all-American kid; as they were raised in the twilight zone of Mexican-U.S. identity they cannot belong to La Raza either. At most, they can be organized as a «group» inasmuch as unemployable individuals in a service economy and stranded in an urban environment characterized with distinctive tribal marks. On their part, the Hispanic officers are fully fledged U.S. citizens—and a link to the power structure, as well as examples of uncomfortable integrationism.²¹ The inference offered in this section that violence is inherent to the social stratification of Los Angeles is amplified when the hegemonic discourse of middle-class conformity is turned upside down at Bill's mother's house.

It seems to be that time stopped at this house at the end of World War II. By alternate pan and tilt movements, the camera scans one wall of the living room. Mementos of nostalgia are closed-up: portraits of a soldier and a Purple Heart Commendation hang on the wall; on a shrine-like side table more wartime photographs are displayed, plus more little American flags, (75:00-75:08). The rhetoric that used to justify those tokens of material culture is on defensive: it refers to faith in a Norman Rockwell America threatened by current experiences. Our previous recognition of the world outside drives us to notice Mrs Foster's house in Pasadena as a museum rather than a home. Or better,

21. Even though it does not europeanize their skin, that personal decision fades out their hyphenization as Hispanics. This episteme is clearly expressed by Robert Stam in «Bakhtin, Polyphony, and Ethnic/Racial Representation,» in Friedman's *Unspeakable Images*, op. cit.. In order to grasp a wider view of the multiple apprehensions of reality in the States of the Mexican American community, it is worth comparing, although in passing, the two opposing positions perceived in *Falling Down* with a third way tentatively advanced by the end of *American Me*, when July decides to liquidate her identity as gangster and continue her schooling. See Edward James Olmos, *American Me* (Universal, 1991), min. 104, 107:30.

a home-museum that ineffectually tries to relive the aftermath of the war and only achieves a self-satisfying revival of the best years of her life.

The frozen meanings of Mrs Foster's niche match the beliefs Bill had proclaimed when he challenged the fascist who symbolically mock-sodomized him. It is through his mother that we know of Bill's employment by the military. She words it with a lagged rhetoric that does not seem to acknowledge the end of communism. As a senior citizen, Mrs. Foster projects the strident antiradicalism of the onset of the Cold War into the 1990s, the same way that her son's vital references were measured against the mid-1960s. But her anachronic speech is relevant here in another way. Contrary to Bill, she will not be able to see through the interests that have nurtured the patriotic, almost nativist ideology enclosed within her house.²² The technical tracking around the house tips on her working-class, pauperized social position: no tv set, dated furniture, kitsch 19th-century landscape paintings hanging on the walls, her clothing, etc. That device portrays into the story the right-wing and basically intolerant tradition of the white lower classes in the United States. To such an extent can this be perceived in Mrs Foster that even references to her family affairs are rife with assumptions that do not correspond with the social constructions current outside. Thus, the way she shades her son's divorce with the fact that Elizabeth is an Italian-American, as though ethnic and cultural archetypes popular in the 1940s and 1950s were valid yet.²³

The remaining minutes of the story gradually confirm Bill's guess after killing the fascist shopkeeper, that his eventful walking tour had no return point. Politically the odds are against him too. There being no feasible alternative to corporate capitalism, his sally is to point out why L.A. is bankrupt, as well as the rest of the United States. Let us not lose sight of the fact that he sets off a bazooka missile after arguing with a construction worker that bureaucracy sponged on the taxpayer's money: «I know how it works,» he says in obvious reference to the chapters claimed by Defense from the federal budget (62:16). This kind of reasoning discriminates him from the right-wing demagogues intent in cutting back all chapters but military spending. Seemingly his

22. On a different reading of *Falling Down*, the glass menagerie on another side of the living room polishes the epiphany sought by the sequence at the Fosters': the rapport between Bill and his mother is somehow related to that described by Tennessee Williams in *The Glass Menagerie*. The loss of political identity corresponds with a faltering communication between two human beings, mother and son in both works.

23. Mrs Foster's accusation of her ex-daughter-in-law goes in line with the portraits of Italians as mysterious, ill-tempered, and crime-prone people profusely disseminated in all channels of popular culture in the first half of the century. Of course Elizabeth is no gangster, but the breakup of Bill's marriage proves to Mrs Foster the moral superiority of full-blooded Americans. For constructions of Italians as archetypes of bad guys, especially in cinema and tv., see Allen Woll and Randall M. Miller, *Ethnic and Racial Images in American Films and Television: Historical Essay* (New York: Garland, 1987), esp. 275 ff.

conclusion is that once the outer politically adversary has been defeated, what remains to save is capitalism from itself.

This line of argument is subsequently explained in the scenes at the golf course and the mansion of the plastic surgeon (76:18-79:02 and 81:37-85:26). This is the second time Bill trespasses alien property. His breaking into a high-standing golf course that averts trespassers in correct English, is sharply contrasted with the episode at the Angel's Flight barrio to the point of parody. It is now Bill himself who ridicules tenets hallowed by the American political tradition: he excoriates private property and demands opening up the course as a People's Park. Also the scene at the mansion pool gauges powerfully the transformation of the character, especially because there the emotional breakdown in Bill is more apparent. But the sequence also gives him more chances to continue his criticism of the United States as the Republican administrations left it. He gives a lie to the «trickle-down» mirage of the 1980s: the low-tax economic environment it fostered created an inadequate social safety net that left many people in difficulties, as has been shown throughout the story. The same powers that bonus the pressure groups like doctors, and subsidize strategic spending, have dispensed with him on account of his obsolescence. Like so many other individuals (and not only the black protester outside the bank, the viewer can realize by now) he becomes «not economically viable.» In Althusserian fashion, Bill intends to bridge his formal ideological principles and his actual socioeconomic situation with his last refuge, home, «and everything could be just as it was before» (85:00). At this point of the story Bill has walked through central L.A. and is quite near his final destination, Venice, where his former home is. So far from the indifference and alienation of the beginning, the day's experiences have enabled himself to remap his city, and in so doing, to challenge the social and political structures that have made of Los Angeles that undesirable place to live.²⁴ It is true that wishful thinking cannot change in one stroke the foundations of multinational, postindustrial capitalism, and Bill's formidable feats will be pointless in the end. But his «articulated ensemble» of a private L.A. is an emotional offshoot of the more rational criticism of the Establishment he has produced throughout. As Garry Wills stated roughly by the time the film was being produced, «the question is not *how much* government, but *where* one uses government,» in reference to the schizoid way the Reagan and Bush

24. Bill's renewed though fleeting hopes on a second chance for his family life have ideological implications present in the American grain. Probably as a reaction to the shift leftward implied in the «interest-group» politics so deftly exploited by conservative forces in the 1980s, the Democratic party has tried in the last years to seek mainstream liberal constituencies under the umbrella of local-community politics. Its agenda has given strong attention to vindicating a progressive approach to institutions monopolized by the conservative Republicans: family, Church-State relations, etc.

Jameson derives the personal remapping of a city as an act of «dealienation» from Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City*. See *Postmodernism*, p. 51.

administrations interpreted government regulation.²⁵ As far as his emotional balance permits him to do so, Bill is seeking an answer to the question posed by Wills: one that may restructure the nation within the worldwide change euphemistically known as New International Order. That both terms of the global transformation are incompatible with each other is another question that goes beyond the focus of *Falling Down*.

It adds to Bill Foster's subversive message that he should pronounce his vindication of effective public policies in the most affluent area screened in the story; it is more than a twist of fate that when he articulates his thoughts in an unequivocal way the law-enforcing circle closes in upon him.

Ultimately the fishing pier in Venice beach stages the double elimination of Bill Foster: legally as a criminal and politically and socially as an expendable whose alternative to the status quo is as unreliable as his emotional balance. When Prendergast orders him to surrender, he can hardly believe he is the bad guy; neither did he believe his wife when she called him sick: it is L.A. that suffers from insanity. «How'd that happen? I did everything they told me to» (89:54-59). He cannot understand he has been a victim of the principles he was raised in and he defended his way. It is above his understanding to assume that he is one casualty of the imperial overstretch he cooperated in spreading—and he is convinced he had been doing a good job: «I should be rewarded, but the plastic surgeons took the medals.» Yes, Bill, actually it has been so since shortly after your beloved 1965.²⁶

Actually it could be said Bill has signed his own death sentence, since the legal branch of corporate democracy offers him the alternative of a prison sentence. He decided to finish this doomed journey off in the most expedient way, but with a vengeance. If his life has been a parody of the pursuit of the American dream, he will use up his last minute of life to perform a toxic takeoff of the most genuine, native American myth: a duel in the California sun; Prendergast as the sheriff, and William Foster as the bad guy. The most dramatic teaching from the patriotic pageant is that he aimed at law and order with the water pistol his daughter had been playing with before.²⁷ That way, the Third Amendment and rap calls-to-action go hand in hand, daily toll after daily toll.

25. See Garry Wills, «The Born-Again Republicans.» *New York Review of Books*, September 24, 1992; p. 13. Also of relevant interest in the discussion on the reform of capitalism, see Felix Rohatyn, «What the Government Should Do.» *New York Review of Books*, June 25, 1992; p 27.

26. Thomas Edsall tracks back the antiliberal political change in American politics since the late 1960s. Two central factors mark this shift: first, the gradually diminishing political representation of the bottom of the social spectrum; second, the manipulation of the body politic by PACs, the growing aggressiveness of lobbies, etc. See Edsall, in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*, op. cit., p. 269.

27. In a way Adele's water pistol climaxes the effects produced by the weapons Bill had successively handled: from the baseball bat at the Korean's grocery, through the knife and the gym bag full of light weapons he took from the Chicano juveniles, through the bazooka Nick complimented him with. Beyond the sequence's diegesis, the toy alludes to the violence that

As a conclusion, I think Schumacher's film should not be seen as a homage to the Silent Majority —and its totalitarian derivations. Such reading can be upheld only if the deterioration portrayed in the film of 'consented' American myths is ignored. *D-FENS*/Bill Foster's estrangement is clearcut when he refers to the Establishment collectively as «they,» thus turning upside down the center/margin conventions focalized on the WASPs. His final resolution, then, is too far from the principles of law and order proclaimed by the Nixon-Agnew clique. The Silent Majority allegedly had wearied of the liberal eccentricities of the Great Society, which left a blurred composite of strife at home and stalemate abroad. Bill Foster's fateful tour in L.A. shows a different landscape: that left by the new social Darwinism practiced in the 1980s that did not necessarily follow sinister designs but accommodated to a political and economic structure previously laid out. On a wider sense, the ideological guidelines disclosed by this irate citizen go in line with the social scenery of a city where the melting pot turned into a salad bowl. *In The End*, it has culturally engulfed the products of Hollywood, and in a synecdochical relation it has become a huge studio with millions of extras and stunts, anonymous, replaceable and expendable, as the political economy of late capitalism so presupposes.

pervades the community throughout. Despite what has gone on in the neighborhood, life goes on, and Adele will have her birthday party. This is food for thought for another interpretation of the multiple and replaceable vignettes that make up life in contemporary (urban) civilization. This bleak perspective that story underwrites, as the last takes close up on Bill happily reunited with his own family —on a domestic videotape recording no one is watching.