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# Capital and the Fantastic Detective Television Serial

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Capital and the Fantastic Detective Television Serial

by

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## **Abstract**

In this thesis I compare discussions concerning the representability of modern capitalism with a group of television programs that I term the fantastic detective serial. The theoretical problems hinges on a shift in capital's perceived representability. I survey texts in modern Marxist media studies that are studying the transition from physical capital to immaterial global capitalism and how that affects the subject. The primary tension that I explore in the literature is the claim that digital technologies or financial abstractions bewilder the subject compared to an understanding that capital is, and always was, spectral. The fantastic detective serial dramatizes this tension. The four television shows that make up this group; *Fargo*, *True Detective*, *Twin Peaks*, and *The Leftovers* all contain the collision between artisanal local production with global financial capitalism. In addition, the shows all have a detective character that must negotiate an encounter with the fantastic as defined by Tzvetan Todorov. The main point of contact between the shows and the theory is how the show's usage of the fantastic develops a new way for the subject to reckon with the unknown structure of capital. I claim that by containing the encounter with the supernatural to the detective's mission it prevents it from becoming another instance of the capitalist sublime.

Keywords: media studies, television studies, Marxism, detective fiction, fantastic, textual analysis, capital

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I thank everyone who is from the capitalist wasteland, but not of it.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Acknowledgments.....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Table of Contents.....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Theory and Capital.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<i>1.1 Framing the Problem.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>1.2 Fog is Rolling In / Jameson the Wickie.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>1.3 Entering the Hall of Mirrors.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>1.4 Data, Signal, Noise.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>1.5 Well, How Did I Get Here?.....</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>1.6 Capital as Social Form.....</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>1.7 Our Collective Fantasies.....</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>1.8 So What?.....</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>1.9 Back to Media.....</i>	<i>36</i>
<b>Chapter 2: The Fantastic Detective Serial.....</b>	<b>38</b>
<i>2.1 In Brief.....</i>	<i>38</i>
<i>2.2 Breaking Bad: The Tale of Two Montages.....</i>	<i>40</i>
<i>2.3 Considering the Fantastic Detective Serial Holistically.....</i>	<i>48</i>
<i>2.4 Unstable Capital.....</i>	<i>57</i>
<i>2.5 A New Paranoia.....</i>	<i>64</i>
<i>2.6 The Fantastic and Detection.....</i>	<i>67</i>
<i>2.7 Onward to Fargo.....</i>	<i>74</i>
<b>Chapter 3: Fargo in Specific.....</b>	<b>75</b>
<i>3.1 Plot and Problems.....</i>	<i>75</i>
<i>3.2 Two Capitalists.....</i>	<i>80</i>
<i>3.3 The Invisible Detective and the Conspiracy of Capital.....</i>	<i>90</i>
<i>3.4 The Bowling Alley and Seeing Evil.....</i>	<i>95</i>
<i>3.5 Failing Productively.....</i>	<i>100</i>
<b>Conclusion: The Outsider.....</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>109</b>

*Why are there no folk songs about ATM machines  
that produce the likeness of the blazer of the trail of tears?*

Parquet Courts, *Violence: Wide Awaaaaake!* Rough Trade Records. 2018.

## **Introduction**

The year was 2007. Television programs such as *The Shield*, *The Wire* and *The Sopranos* were nearing their conclusion, while others, including *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men* were premiering or were in-production. So many critically acclaimed television programs were present at this time that the terms “Third Golden Age of Television” or “Peak TV” were circulating in popular media discourse.<sup>1</sup> Scholarly writing on this privileged moment in television history arrived at a staggered pace. In the acknowledgements of his book *Complex TV: The Poetic of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, for example, Jaston Mittell mentions having the initial ideas for the book as early as 2005, yet the final product was only published in 2015. Mittell’s text, arguably *the* definitive work on the movement of modern acclaimed television, approaches the shows from the perspectives of narratology and fandom. His interests lie in naming a moment of television history and describing how its complex narratives are interpreted by audiences and then turned into fan culture on the internet.

Such an approach, rooted in contemporary television’s disruptions of the “canonic story format”, clashed with my own experience of watching Peak TV. Mitell’s set of emphases seemed to miss certain critical dimensions of Peak TV that were crucial to my own experience of the

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Peak TV” originated from head of FX studio John Landgraf stating that there is a glut of scripted television program and that the bubble would burst. “The Golden Age of Television” is an inherently subjective term but is used to distinguish between different forms of television. The attributes of ‘quality television’ help us to distinguish anti- filmic, anti-realistic, cliché shows with bad scripts from the ‘new’ quality television that began to emerge in the 1980s” (Reifová 2).

programs.”<sup>2</sup> However, this discrepancy was also a product of when my own personal “Golden Age of Television Watching” took place: starting in the early 2010’s and extending to the present, a period in which *Breaking Bad*, *The Shield* and *The Wire* were replaced with *Fargo*, *True Detective*, and *The Leftovers*. While these new shows still boasted narrative complexity and generated rich fan cultures, they felt nonetheless qualitatively different from the canon addressed by *Complex TV*. The sense that the latter moment in American “Peak TV” represented a potential paradigm shift was an outgrowth of the programs’ unique aesthetic combination of criminality, nostalgia, and, most importantly, the supernatural.

Programs such as *True Detective*, *Fargo*, *Twin Peaks: The Return*, and *The Leftovers* have inspired academic criticism. However, only some of these sources take up the programs’ supernatural ruptures, and none that I have encountered have rigorously considered their formal and thematic interconnections. For example, articles such as Casey Ryan Kelley’s “The Toxic Screen: Visions of Petrochemical America in HBO’s *True Detective*” or Allen H. Redmond’s “This is a [...] Story;” The Refusal of a Master Text in Noah Hawley’s *Fargo*” address what is singular about these respective shows, but do not situate them as part of a broader genre or mode. Perhaps the article that gets closest in this respect is Rob Coley’s “The Case of the Speculative Detective: Aesthetic Truths and the Television ‘Crime Board,’” which discusses a number of the programs I am concerned with in this thesis, but restricts its perspective to studying solely the theme of criminality and is not particularly interested in interpreting the programs holistically.

This epistemological gap left me to speculate about the unique function of the supernatural in this late period of the golden age of television: the surprising UFO appearances in

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<sup>2</sup> For example, in the introduction of Mittell’s book he describes how in age of primarily-broadcast television the showrunners had to assume that from week to week only one-third of their audience would carry over (Mittell 33). This assumption naturally created major limitations on the narratives of the broadcast networks were willing to run.



*Fargo*, the doppelgangers, spiritual possessions, and alternate realities of *Twin Peaks*, the “Departure” that catalyzes the narrative of *The Leftovers*, and all of Rust Cohle’s hallucinatory visions within *True Detective*. What functions does the supernatural serve both within and across these programs? Can the supernatural be registered as something more than a reaction to the often naturalist tendencies of the previous era in American prestige television? Or, put differently, did the supernatural elements of this new moment in television also articulate its own kind of political critique? It was in response to these questions that I considered the programs as a collective phenomenon, which I call in the pages that follow, “the fantastic detective serial.”

All of the fantastic detective serials discussed in this thesis are concerned with the collision between modern capitalism and small-town America. This relationship tends to be thematized either explicitly or implicitly. For example, it is quite explicit in *Twin Peaks: The Return* and *Fargo*, where casinos and organized crime directly confront more antiquated, industrial forms of capitalism. It is slightly more implicit in *The Leftovers* and *True Detective*, in which small town life is disrupted by sweeping conspiratorial forces and overwhelming institutional power that places the heroes’ agency under duress.

In addition, the fantastic detective serials all have at least one character who either is a detective or who acts like one. Often the detectives devote themselves to the destabilizing event in the community, such as the murder of Dora Lange in *True Detective* or the “Sudden Departure” of 2% of the world’s population in *The Leftovers*. The detective’s mission to solve the mystery is where the fantastic interruption occurs. Suddenly, an unexplainable phenomenon happens that prevents the functioning of logical detective work. The fantastic becomes a barrier that impedes the work of the detective. This plot device marks a striking difference from the previous moment in television described by Mittell, Linda Williams, or Brett Martin: the

criminals of *The Shield*, *The Wire*, and *Breaking Bad* were impossible or difficult to catch for a variety of reasons, from personal guile to institutional corruption, but *never* because of supernatural interventions.<sup>3</sup>

The detective as a figure associated with small-town America, the collision between industrial capitalism and a more sprawling, almost sublime manifestation of finance capital, and the appearance of *potentially* supernatural forces, when considered together, form the political backdrop of the fantastic detective serial. It is my claim that these shows use the fantastic and the elements of detection to develop a new way to aestheticize capital. This claim will become more legible when situated in conversation with key debates that remain ongoing in contemporary Marxist media studies.

Marxist media studies has been preoccupied with determining the effects of digital technologies and financialization on the aesthetics of cultural production. Since Marx wrote about the burgeoning industrial capitalism of the middle 19<sup>th</sup> century, applying his economic criticism to the (post)modern world in the West brings some challenges. This tension is summarized by thinkers such as Steven Shaviro, Hito Steyerl, Alberto Toscano, and Jeff Kinkle who claim that modern capitalism's financial abstractions are moving beyond human comprehension. The other side of the debate believes that capitalism has changed with the introduction of financialization, but that it should not be viewed as a move away from Marx's

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3 There are many edited collections showcasing the variety of ways that the modern age of television is being analyzed. Most notably *Interdisciplinary studies on TV Series in the Third Golden Age of Television* edited by Miguel A. Pérez-Gómez as well as *Contemporary Television Series : Narrative Structures and Audience Perception* edited by Valentina Marinescu, Silvia Branea, and Bianca Mitu. There are also texts that study specific themes that are shared across multiple relevant television programs such as; Brett Martin's *Difficult Men*, Geraldine Harris's "A Return to Form? Postmasculinist Television Drama and Tragic Heroes in the Wake of The Sopranos," or Fergal Twomey's "Methodology as Teleology: The Economy of Secrets and Drama as Critique of Systems in the Works of Vince Gilligan and Noah Hawley." My thesis is not about studying modern television as a whole nor about studying one phenomenon's appearance across multiple shows. Instead it is about studying a specific subset of shows with its own set of formal, thematic, and narrative conventions.

theory of capital but rather as move toward its apotheosis. In brief, this tension manifests itself between definitions of capital as comprised of material objects and definitions of capital as a social form. In other words, a preoccupation with the objects of capital—factories and mines turning into data centers, web sites, and stock makes the case for a fundamental change in the realities of capital. On the other hand, an interest in capital as a social form, or how it creates and shapes social relations, is not as interested in the changes of capital's objects. In fact, as I argue throughout this thesis, capital is explicitly hostile to objects. This hostility represents an aesthetic problem, prompting us to question how capital be represented if physical objects get in the way of pure functioning of capital itself? This juncture is where the fantastic detective serial can make its intervention.

The fantastic detective serial uses both the supernatural moments and the detective story genre as a technique to probe the unknowable structures of capital. This intervention can be read as a response to the problem of capitalist realism. Developed by Mark Fisher capitalism realism is “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it” (Fisher 2). I argue that the way the fantastic frustrates the goals of the detective mirrors the way that capital as a social form eludes capture and understanding. I also make the case that the fantastic represents a way to aestheticize capital that is more politically potent as it does not lose the audience in the mire of the capitalist sublime. The fantastic, whether it be UFOs, fish falling from the sky, or sudden disappearances of the population, seems to break the rules of our world but is also easy to understand visually. By making the moments be visually understandable the fantastic detective serial differentiates its usage of the supernatural from the sublime. In addition,

detection as a theme shackles the supernatural moments to a clear and definable purpose; here it serves as the hermeneutic barrier for the detective.

There will be three main chapters of this thesis. The first chapter contains a thorough investigation of the set of theoretical problems that resonate with the aesthetic innovations of the fantastic detective serial. In focusing exclusively on debates in contemporary Marxist media and film studies, the main ideas discussed in Chapter one include: capitalism's relationship to objects, capitalism as a social form, and capital's crisis of appearances.

The second chapter is devoted to defining and analyzing the fantastic detective serial. It discusses *True Detective*, *Twin Peaks: The Return*, and *The Leftovers* to develop the main themes of the fantastic detective serial; aestheticizing unstable capital, paranoia, conspiracy, and the unique combination of the fantastic and detection. The chapter also has close readings of several scenes from the shows to provide specific examples of these devices in action.

The third chapter is devoted solely to a close analysis of the third season of *Fargo*. The reason for this is that *Fargo* is the show that is most explicitly interested in the aestheticization of capital. The chapter discusses how financial and industrial capitalists are portrayed as well as different uses for the fantastic. More specifically, the chapter makes the case that of the two capitalists—it is the financial capitalist that is the true manifestation of capital. This conclusion is reached through a discussion of the commodity as well as how the fantastic frames the financial capitalist as supernatural evil.

Finally, the thesis will conclude with a discussion of *The Outsider* to talk about the limits of the fantastic, and what can be learned from studying these groups of television programs.

I do all my shady business at Zeidman's and that's how I get ahead  
Every road crooked must be made straight  
Every mountain must be made flat ----  
Too Many Jewels  
Not enough fingers

Protomartyr, Too Many Jewels: *No Passion All Technique*. Urinal Cake Records. 2012.

## Chapter 1: Theory and Capital

### 1.1 Framing the Problem

Consider the image on the cover of the Penguin edition of Marx's *Capital*. A fiery machine occupies the center of the image as the scared workers merely *react* to the machine's demands. No end or horizon is visible as the vast network of machinery covers the entire landscape; the three workers look like they are literally within a new world where metal has a precedence over flesh. This image serves as a representation of the complex web of social relations that are now called industrial capitalism. The cover image of *Capital* depicts a time when the antagonisms between classes were legible and clear, a clarity that is no longer available in the age of global capitalism. While totalizing representations of capitalism were never available, it does seem that modern capitalism is even more resistant to aestheticization.

This thesis hopes to establish and describe an interdisciplinary body of literature that is trying to analyze the problem of representing capital.<sup>4</sup> Scholars working in the Marxist tradition

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<sup>4</sup> This trend is wide-spread and is expressed in multiple ways so a completely exhaustive list of all of the thinkers who are trying to analyze the crisis of representation that has occurred under modern capitalism is impossible. This change can be expressed in multiple ways. Aimee Bahng in her book *Migrant Futures* starts her work with the claim that the function of financial institutions is to shock and overwhelm but to not be understood (Bahng 1). Annie McClanahan states in *Dead Pledges* that, large scale and complex events like financial crises are only understood as a total of atomized individual actions and the larger processes remains invisible (McClanahan 12). Hito Steyerl states that getting lost in the sea of data is “symptomatic” of our time (Steyerl 47). The thesis of Mark Fisher's *Capitalism Realism*, that of a failure of imagination can be seen a product of this crisis, where the inability to understand our world strips us of our ability to hope for anything

across media, television, and communication studies have different theories as to the cause of this unrepresentability and equally differing practices that they believe are the necessary political responses to modern capital. The body of literature that I will be surveying can be (loosely) divided into two groups. First, there are those who view modern financial capitalism's resistance to representation as a unique phase of history. The analysis of this group will begin and stay rather proximate to a close-reading of Frederic Jameson's texts; namely *Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* as well as his essay in the *Anti-Aesthetic*. Jameson's position tends to encapsulate a body of thought that usually (but not always) asserts that it is because of the ascendance of financial transnational capitalism and the associated media technologies that our current era has become much too complex to symbolize.

In opposition, there are theorists who consider a resistance to representation as constitutive of social relations themselves. These thinkers are slightly more varied and are either members of the Ljubljana school of psychoanalysis like Slavoj Žižek or more traditional critical theorists like Anna Kornbluh or Susan Buck-Morss. Their position is characterized by the belief that understanding the social 'real' has always been out of the reach of the subject, regardless of condition. A goal of this thesis is to put these two groups of literature in conversation, to see if the political specificities of modern neoliberal capitalism can be acknowledged without resorting to declarations that our current condition is the first to wholly mystify the subjects living through it.

In addition, a major component of this thesis is an analysis of a body of American television programs that are all speaking to the same set of problems that are present within the body of theoretical literature I am analyzing. These shows, which I term the fantastic detective

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else. Steven Shaviro in *Connected: Or what it Means to Live in a Network Society* states that, "representation cannot comprehend the network" (Shaviro 189).

serial are *True Detective*, *Twin Peaks: The Return*, *The Leftovers*, and *Fargo*.<sup>5</sup> There are many thematic similarities and formal motifs shared between these programs that provide clarity and justification for grouping them together. While these themes will be enumerated in more detail in Chapter two I will go over them in brief now to alert the reader as to what issues are most relevant concerning the fantastic detective serial.

- i. All of the shows contain elements of detective fiction. Detection is expressed either in the form of a central mystery as in *The Leftovers*, or through the figure of the protagonist, as is the case with *Fargo*'s Gloria Burgle (Carrie Coon), *Twin Peaks*' Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) or *True Detective*'s Rustin 'Rust' Cohle (Matthew McConaughey) and Martin 'Marty' Hart (Woody Harrelson).
- ii. All of the programs have a distinct connection to small town America. This is often portrayed in an overly nostalgic or anachronistic manner: the naive small-town Northern Midwest of *Fargo*, the decaying and forgotten Cancer Alley of *True Detective*, the anachronistic town of *Twin Peaks*, and the small towns of Mapleton and Miracle in *The Leftovers*. These settings are all shown to be places where cynical violence can flourish.
- iii. Often the shows tie the failures of their protagonists to their masculinity. In *Fargo* the predatorial V.M. Varga (David Thewlis) makes Emmitt Stussy (Ewan McGregor) paranoid about his own impotence to convince him to engage in shadier business practices. The smothering machismo of Rust and Marty conflict with their roles as detectives multiple times. *The Leftovers*' Kevin Garvey (Justin Theroux) is unable to reconcile with his lack of power and his mental condition deteriorates as a result. Even the beloved Agent Cooper is remodeled in the image of Tati's Monsieur Hulot. Cooper acts like a dunce for most of the program, and in his much-anticipated return to form he manipulates a woman into performing his fantasy as the mythical Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee).
- iv. All of the shows include fantastic elements. I am using Todorov's theory of the fantastic as "the hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (Todorov 25). The fantastic is different from other forms of the supernatural in fiction as the fantastic is also a shock to the characters. *Fargo* includes fantastic elements in every season from the raining fish, the brief UFO appearance, or the figure of the Wandering Jew. *The Leftovers* entire story is structured around the unexplained disappearance of 2% of the world's population. In *True*

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<sup>5</sup> A quick note on the scope of my interests in the television programs. Since both *True Detective* and *Fargo* are both anthology programs not all of the seasons are equally relevant to my study as they have different thematic content and a less consistent televisual style than a non-anthology program. I will be primarily focusing on the first season of *True Detective* and the 3<sup>rd</sup> season of *Fargo*. To be less repetitive I will merely state *Fargo* or *True Detective* when I am concerned with the most important seasons. When I refer to one of the other seasons of these programs, I will be more specific and state the specific seasons that I am referencing. In addition, I will mostly be speaking about *Twin Peaks: The Return*, but will bring up the earlier seasons when they become relevant.

*Detective Rust* sees bizarre phenomenon taking the form of bizarre shapes in the sky. And *Twin Peaks* is rife with the fantastic as an otherwise normal America is plagued with the supernatural that shock even the story's inhabitants.

- v. Finally, all of the programs use their fantastic elements to display a certain ontological or epistemological shakiness, or a fundamental doubt that what we are experiencing or seeing is real. Gloria Burgle is not detected by automatic door openers or soap dispensers and feels invisible as a result. The deteriorating mental state of Rust Cohle (and the audience's proximate relationship to his perspective) creates the shroud of an unreliable narrator. *Twin Peaks* usage of alternate realms and doppelgangers constantly creates questions about who is who and what is "real." The disappearance of so many people in *The Leftovers* creates a crisis of confidence in one's very existence and place in the universe.

The thesis will begin with talking about the crisis that is present in theory and dedicate the whole first chapter to just talking about the literature. In the second chapter, I will move onto talking about the television programs more in depth as well as bringing in more dedicated television studies scholarship. The third chapter will be dedicated to an analysis of just *Fargo* as it is the program that tackles the problem of capital's representability most explicitly.

The pairing of the fantastic detective serial with the theory both explains the phenomenon of the fantastic in these programs, while also dramatizing the tensions in the theory. It is my claim that the fantastic functions as a technique to make the supernatural nature of capital visible while also aestheticizing the barrier between the detective figure and the structure of capital.

## **1.2 Fog is Rolling In / Jameson the Wickie**

A good place to begin when discussing the discourse surrounding the aesthetic problem of modern capitalism is with Frederic Jameson. For Jameson—the unrepresentability of capital is strongly tied to the concept of cognitive mapping. In the analysis of Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* Jameson describes cognitive mapping in the following terms:

There is, for one thing, a most interesting convergence between the empirical problems studied by Lynch in terms of city space and the great Althusserian (and Lacanian) redefinition of ideology as 'the representation of the subject's *imaginary* relationship to his or Real conditions of existence.' Surely this is exactly what the cognitive



map is called upon to do in the narrower framework of daily life in the physical city: to enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole (Jameson 51).

Despite the connotations of objectivity and scientific accuracy that is evoked by the word 'map' Jameson instead draws a comparison between the cognitive map and ideological fantasy. He historicizes the development of the field of cartography, which inevitably ran into one of its more recalcitrant problems, the inability to map the spherical world onto a flat surface. Therefore modern mapmaking must contend with the fact that there can be no perfect maps, but Jameson aptly points out that that does not mean there cannot be progress in the field of cartography but rather dialectical progress in the field, i.e, new ways of reckoning with the world's unrepresentability. (Ibid., 52).

Jameson aptly transfers this problem of cartography into the theoretical considerations of Althusser and Lacan. Althusser recognizes the unavoidable problem that one's bodily experience and perspective is by definition restricted from accessing the realm of 'abstract knowledge.' This has clear resonances with Lacan's *subject supposed to know* which Jameson claims is the place where 'abstract knowledge' resides. The *subject supposed to know* functions as the place where 'abstract knowledge' can be subjectivized. This is elucidated by Lacan's introduction of this theoretical subject. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, it is introduced in a discussion on Descartes in which the Descartes statement of 'I think' is opposed to God who has access to the knowledge that Descartes cannot be sure of (Lacan trans Sheridan 224-225). Jameson then pairs this place of abstract knowledge with that of the Marxist process, "what is affirmed [by the subject supposed to know] is not that we cannot know the world and its totality

in some abstract or ‘scientific way. Marxian ‘science’ provides just such a way of knowing and conceptualizing the world abstractly” (Jameson 53).

Further along in this section Jameson references Ernest Mandel’s *Late Capitalism* as an example of how capital is ‘not unknowable’ but rather ‘unrepresentable’ (ibid). This puts us in a curious place, one where Marxist ‘science’ avoids the realm of representation entirely in lieu of entering the realm of ‘abstract knowledge’ free from the fetters of the subject’s experience. Jameson repeats and endorses the Althusserian maxim that ideology inserts itself in-between ‘existential experience and scientific knowledge. Ideology then invents a way to somehow articulate the two distinct dimensions together” (ibid). This is in agreement with the lay definition of ideology, where one conflates their individual experiences and beliefs with objective fact. Jameson’s development, and of paramount concern for our search for modern capital is his addition to Althusser’s statement:

What a historicist view of this ‘definition’ would want to add is that such coordination, the production of functioning and living ideologies, is distinct in different historical situations, but above all, that there may be historical situations in which it is not possible at all—and this would seem to be our situation in the current crisis (ibid).

Here our current historical moment prevents the individual to stitch together their beliefs with the glamer of objectivity, this resonates with Jameson’s concerns with the ultimate aimlessness and lack of history of postmodernism—everything seems cheap and ephemeral without the perceived connection to something ‘actual.’ This contrasts with what Jameson terms “capitalist middle-class society,” he declares “that there emerged something called the sign and with it an unproblematic relation to the referent” (Jameson 95).<sup>6</sup> Conveniently this is a political gesture by

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In Linda Williams’ “Mirrors Without Memories” she succinctly abbreviated Jameson’s critique of postmodernism as a believe that is it now impossible to represent the "real" interests of a people or a class against the ultimate ground of social and economic determinations. The loss of the grand narratives of

Jameson and it does not place the failure of dealing with postmodernism on the doorstep of Marxism, as for him Marxism and its corresponding 'science' are non-ideological. Although, individual living ideologies have failed in the face of postmodernism's cultural logic, Marxist 'science' remains untarnished.

In summation, Jameson believes the inability to understand modern capital is the failure of the individual. While this may mean that Marxism can 'fail' at the level of the individual it is not a failure of the discipline as a whole.<sup>7</sup> For Jameson, we are in a political moment where we are unable to pair our limited perspective with the illusion of objectivity which leaves us unable to effectively make sense of the bewildering set of social relations.

While the issue of pastiche will be discussed later in the thesis, the other topic that Jameson discusses that is relevant to the thesis is the capitalist sublime. Jameson uses both Burke and Kant's definition of the sublime:

The sublime was for Burke an experience bordering on terror, the fitful glimpse, in astonishment, stupor, and awe, of what was so enormous as to crush human life altogether: a description then refined by Kant to include the question of representation itself, so that the object of the sublime becomes not only a matter of sheer power and of the physical incommensurability of the human organism with Nature but also of the limits of figuration and the incapacity of the human mind to give representation to such enormous forces (Jameson 34).

Jameson's then creates his own term, that of the "postmodern" sublime. For Jameson the postmodern sublime involves creating a faulty image of the world system via modern texts.

"Beyond all thematics or content the work seems somehow to tap the networks of the

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modernism turned the mirror of the referent into, a "mirror that can now only reflect another mirror" (Williams 10).

<sup>7</sup> This is expressed earlier on page 53 of "Postmodernism..." in which Jameson states that an individual can existentially 'or empirically' believe that they inhabit a postindustrial society with no traditional production. This failure of individual Marxian 'science' is not a failure of the discipline as a whole, but nevertheless it has severe political ramifications.

reproductive process and thereby to afford us some glimpse into a postmodern or technological sublime” (Jameson 37). Or to put it more explicitly:

The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself (ibid).

Jameson connects the technology that is often used a symbol of post-modernity as complicit with the confusion itself. Here the ‘privileged representational shorthand’ is the sublime of global capitalism. The shorthand offers up simplified ways of understanding the realities of global capitalism, but it fails. It is at this failure that Jameson states is the birthplace of “high-tech conspiracies and labyrinthine paranoia” (ibid). While the usage of conspiracy by the fantastic detective serial will be discussed later, the link between the capitalist sublime and conspiracy theory should be noted. The capitalist sublime that Jameson speaks of leaves much missing in its aestheticization of the “global network,” and what is missing leaves room for conspiracy to fill in the holes. The sublime is another element of the aesthetic problem of capitalism. “Conspiracy theory (and its garish narrative manifestations) must be seen as a degraded attempt -through the figuration of advanced technology -- to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system” (ibid). The issue of the sublime and conspiracy will be of prime importance when discussing the fantastic detective serial, as the difficulty of avoiding the capitalist sublime is one of the limiting factors of the body of shows.

This serves as the first steps in discussing modern capital’s resistance to representation. In simple terms we can see *Postmodernism...* as the text that introduces the concepts of late capitalism’s mercurial nature. The time between the publication of *Postmodernism...* and now serves two purposes. First, it gives time for a field of academics and theorists to grow up and

begin writing who lack the connections to the classically Marxist New Left that Jameson touted. Second, it means more time to live in the confusing world that Jameson describes. The almost 30 years between that have passed have enabled many thinkers to give form to the vagaries that Jameson introduced.

The next section will be concerned with those thinkers who share the Jamesonian belief that there is something in late-stage capitalism in particular that makes it so resistant to representation. I will engage with thinkers who both publicly identify Jameson as their intellectual predecessor and also those who merely share Jameson's attitudes towards late-stage capitalism's uniquely mutable nature.

### **1.3 Entering the Hall of Mirrors**

Moving on from Jameson in particular and towards more modern thinkers affords us the opportunity to view attempts at pinning down the aesthetic problem of modern capitalism. A good place to begin is *Post-Cinematic Affect* by Steven Shaviro's whose stated goal is not within the explicit realm of aesthetics (even though he is talking about films and other forms of visual art) but rather he is concerned with affect and experience. Shaviro surveys the bewildering technological and cultural developments that have occurred, and decides to use cultural texts "to get a better sense of these changes" with a stated goal to determine "what it feels like to live in the early twenty-first century" (Shaviro 2). The parts of Shaviro that I will be focusing on includes his discussion on the representation of the capitalist as well as his affinity for accelerationism. He further develops this agenda by stating that he wishes:

To find films and videos that "give voice" to a free-floating sensibility that permeates our society today, although it cannot be attributed to any subject in particular. By the term *expressive*, I mean both *symptomatic* and *productive*... in the sense they do not

*represent* social processes, so much as they participate actively in these processes, and help to constitute them” (ibid).

To elucidate this stance, we can use the example of his analysis of the film *Boarding Gate* (2007) in which Shaviro states that the film’s ‘difficult’ nature is an attempt to explore transnational financial capital. Agreeing with Jameson that the world system evades our ‘existential grasp’ he states that “it is necessary instead to proceed by abstraction: to ‘diagram’ the space of globalized capital, by entering into, and forging a path through, its complex web of exchanges...it is therefore cartographic and not mimetic” (ibid., 36). This distinction between cartography and mimesis is crucial—Shaviro is not concerned with the pulp film’s ability to recreate financial capital on the screen but rather give us tools to traverse and understand its confounding structures.

This sentiment is repeated in other places. He defends the portrayal of ruthless tech-capitalist Ken Castle (Michael C. Hall) in the 2009 American science fiction film *Gamer*. Critics accused the film of performing the common sleight of hand in which the structural problems of capitalism are transferred onto the moral failings of one individual. Shaviro boldly states that Castle “precisely embodies and condenses the ‘system itself.’” (ibid., 108).

Fortunately, Shaviro does not stop at merely commenting upon the oft-quoted line from *Capital* that “the individual capitalists are often nothing but merely capital personified” (Marx, *Capital* 963). Such a criticism would leave the film with very little political utility as it ignores the reality that most people when watching science fiction films are unfortunately not thinking about Marx’s *Capital*. When the capitalist acts as the stand-in for capitalist structure it moves the structural problems of capital onto the moral failings of an individual. The more compelling defense of the film comes from the fact that *Gamer*’s Castle has literally integrated his brain and

body with technology, thus blurring the lines between his body and the technology that is the source of his position.

Beyond this, Shaviro makes the distinction between an older form of capitalists who controlled society through “hierarchical command” as opposed to those who use “networked manipulation,” this functions to give a “hipster veneer over what still ultimately remains a form of authoritarian management” (Shaviro 106-107). The claim that people like Castle are the “new faces of human capitalism” is wryly humorous (ibid). Both because Castle almost never is forced to act believably benevolent in the film, but also because his face only looks human. Shaviro’s praise is based upon the fact that the collapsing of power relations and technologies into Castle’s body serves as a condensation of the “system itself.” Shaviro claims that the way a media-savvy capitalist like Castle is represented serves as a personification of the impersonal forces of modern capitalism (ibid). The amusing fact that Shaviro underscores is that the human supplement that is used to justify the brutality of liberal capitalism is already corrupted by the system that it hopes to naturalize and ideologically justify.

In addition, Shaviro takes the previously quoted Marxist aphorism about the capitalist being personified capital even further. Juxtaposing the 19<sup>th</sup> century character of the capitalist as a figure of ‘possession and personification’ he posits the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a place where “personalities turn into shells in where social forces can be temporarily contained, or as screens through which they exerts themselves” (ibid., 108). This is an interesting distinction, one that mirrors the cartographic/mimetic distinction that Shaviro uses when discussing *Boarding Gate*. Where in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the image of the capitalist could personify capital and serve as a synecdoche for social relations, now the “representation” is an active agent in shaping social forces. Within Shaviro’s account, the capitalist served a memetic relationship to the forces of

ownership and production present in industrial capitalism, but within 21<sup>st</sup> century relations, the capitalist actively constructs and manipulates their own productive flows.

Shaviro's separation of "representation" into the categories of mimetic and cartographic serve as a way to circumvent the problems that Jameson introduced, while still echoing the assertions that he makes in the beginning of his book. His claim that media texts do not represent reality but rather actively construct them is helped by his cartographic/mimetic distinction. Shaviro provides an explanation as to how the media texts can reference but not represent the bewildering logic of capital, but this ultimately leaves the analysis in an ambiguous place with regards to political praxis. At the end of his book Shaviro states that "accelerationism is a useful, productive, and even necessary aesthetic strategy today" (ibid., 137). He views accelerationism as a corrective to the smothering inability to even imagine other realities or ways of life where capitalism will burn itself out and eventually crumble beneath its own weight. With some hope that an accelerationist aesthetic will improve the subject's ability to locate themselves within the new "spacetime of capital" (ibid., 138). Shaviro closes by stating that the difficulty of translating aesthetics into politics is that which demands the accelerationist aesthetic. As in lieu of politics 'catching up' to our situation, Shaviro states that the media texts he uses in his book are bold enough to take aesthetic risks in a time when "our imagination itself threatens to fail us" (ibid., 139). Without being an arbiter on the political potential of accelerationism, Shaviro does not say much with regards to the political ramifications of the inscrutability of modern capital, rather that it is opaque, and it can only be reckoned with at the level of aesthetics. Therefore, we should move on to a clearer analysis of the confusion of modern capital and what can be done with it.



## 1.4 Data, Signal, Noise

A more lucid explanation of global capitalism's aesthetic problem occurs in Hito Steyerl's *Duty Free Art*. The chapter entitled "A Sea of Data: Apophenia and Pattern (Mis-)Recognition" begins with an ambiguous image from the Snowden files that looks like noise from a VHS tape. Steyerl exhorts the reader to carefully observe the image and then states that "one cannot see anything in it. That is exactly why it is symptomatic. Not seeing anything intelligible is the new normal" (Steyerl 47). Here Steyerl makes the claim that to be symptomatic of the modern era is to be vague and indeterminate. Steyerl claims that apophenia (the perception of patterns that arise within random data) is used by either political actors or data analysts (ibid., 49). Thus Steyerl can make a political case for the harnessing of ambiguities, where political power can come from the interpretation and control of both the "signal and the noise." She references a story told by Jacques Rancière considering the act of separating signal from noise in Ancient Greece,

Sounds produced by affluent male locals were defined as speech, whereas women children, slaves, and foreigners were assumed to produce garbled noise. Those identified as speaking were labeled citizens and the rest as irrelevant irrational, and potentially dangerous nuisances. Similarly, today, the question of separating signal and noise has a fundamental political dimension. Pattern recognition resonates with the wider question of political recognition. Who is recognized on a political level and as what? As a subject? A person? A legitimate category of the population? Or perhaps as 'dirty data' (Steyerl 50).

This example serves two purposes. First, it historicizes this way of making sense of the world as not tied to one particular historical epoch. Ancient Greece was quite different to transnational financial capitalism when considering their use of media technology which is the often-used example as to why our contemporary era is so unique. Steyerl's usage of both the data static and Ancient Greece as examples extends her idea beyond just digital technology. She

implies that data recognition and the separation of information is fundamental to the subject making sense of their world.

Her claim of the data static being symptomatic is more substantive when considering her following comments on the political usage of data. Her anecdotes range from the appropriated labor of filling out endless online forms (ibid., 52), the increasing presence of governmental organizations and corporations assigning private citizens “scores” due to various behaviors (ibid., 53). Or, perhaps the most troubling is her reference to the United States government assigning vast swaths of people as terrorists using nothing more than their digital footprint (ibid., 54). To people who do not have access to the vast troves of data which provide the justification for such violent gestures these political actions seem arbitrary and dangerous.

Steyerl’s claims becomes clearer when it is combines with Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle’s *Cartographies of the Absolute*. Toscano and Kinkle are more avowedly Jamesonian and are explicitly trying to untangle the aesthetic problems of modern capitalism.

Perhaps one of the more explicit explanations on the aesthetic problems of capitalism rises when dealing with capitalism’s fundamental lack of existence:

Capitalism is certainly the dominant mode of production but no one imagines that there is some *homunculus* CEO in command, despite the fact that many events look like they obey some implacable strategy. Precisely, no one – and certainly not theorists like Jameson – imagines that capitalism as a totality possesses an easily grasped command-and-control-centre. That, as we’ve already suggested, is precisely why it poses an *aesthetic* problem, in the sense of demanding ways of representing the complex and dynamic relations intervening between the domains of production, consumption, and distribution, of making the invisible visible (Toscano and Kinkle 53).

This quotation directly follows a quotation from Bruce Latour, who said that capitalism “only exists in the minds of its advocates and critics” (ibid). There is a parallel act between the

amorphous bureaucracy drone-striking a village because a computer screen said so and the critic condensing the vast web of social relations into a word called capitalism, they both involve separating signal from noise. Seeing patterns where there are none is often associated with conspiracy theory and referencing Trevor Paglen *Dark Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World*, Toscano and Kinkle describe the paralyzing fact that it is difficult to talk about the labyrinthine reality of transnational capitalism without invoking the paranoid with visions “of New World Order helicopters, holding facilities for extraterrestrials at Area 51, and anxious visions of obscure elites manipulating history from the shadows” (ibid., 74).

The claim that both the defenders and opponents of capitalism are both gesturing to something that is not fundamentally there introduces the concepts of fantasy and social forms which will occupy a large part of the latter half of this chapter. However, before that part of the literature is discussed I wish to describe how Steyerl and the other proponents of Jamesonian theory can resolve the political problem they describe on their own terms.

The movement from the sea of data to real political action is a mediating gesture. That does not mean that the sea of information that the subject has access to is not real, as Steyerl says that “social scores of all different kinds-credit scores, academic scores, threat scores-as well as commercial and military pattern-of-life observations, impact the real lives of real people” (Steyerl 60). The clear question that arises from all of these mediations is, “why can’t we just tear it all down, and just reach the ‘real’ that is behind all of these mediations?” This is a question that is approached obliquely by Toscano and Kinkle when they ask if “communism is nothing more than a world without, without the very forms that structure what we’ve come to inhabit as a social world” (Toscano and Kinkle 97). They rightly assert that alternate social futures cannot be achieved by merely taking everything around them down, or in their words, that “we should be

wary of an excessively clear link between a theory of emancipation based on the end of mediations” (ibid., 98). Or that, “communism is not a mere negation of abstractions, form and invisibility, it is their refunctioning...the point though is not to abrogate this aesthetic ambivalence of real abstractions, for some abstract, nostalgic desire for ‘true life’” (ibid., 100). If the political act is to destroy the hall of mirrors we now occupy then what is it?

In the beginning of the chapter Steyerl rightly calls seeing definite forms in the vague shapes of data as “apophenia,” or making patterns out of nothing. She also goes on to speak of Google’s Deep Dream programs, deep dreaming and inceptionism, are just Google’s own terms for seeing images out of pure noise. The political gesture is not the paranoid’s response that corporate and government institutions contain secret algorithms that can perfectly wade through the sea of noise to track and surveil you, as by their own admission there is simply too much data out there.<sup>8</sup> Nor should the political act start and stop merely at showing how separating the information-wheat from the noise-chaff is essentially an arbitrary act, since, as will be discussed in the next section, all social structures require arbitrariness and fantasy to function. For Shaviro, the only remaining political action is to create compelling systems of meaning making independent from the current ideological structure. This slightly changes the goals in this next body of literature, where in lieu of trying to find the true nature of modern capitalism beneath the smothering opacity of financial institutions and mediated relations, they are studying the mediation as such.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://theintercept.com/2015/05/28/nsa-officials-privately-criticize-collect-it-all-surveillance/>  
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/10/double-danger-nsa-surveillance>

## 1.5 Well, How did I get here?

A good place to begin when discussing the second body of literature is its shift in priorities between the issues of ontology and epistemology, or answering the question about the relationship between reality and our knowledge of it. In Slavoj Žižek's *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* he articulates this tension with regards to issues of the divine, but with some reworking his thoughts are applicable to the problem of modern capitalism:

In the more traditional terms of the dialectical tension between the epistemological and the ontological dimensions: the gap that separates the knowing subject from the known object is inherent to the object itself, my knowing a thing is part of a process internal to the thing, which is why the standard epistemological problem should be turned around: not 'How is my knowledge of the thing possible?' but 'How is that knowledge appears within the thing as a mode of the thing's relating to itself?' With regard to God, the problem is not 'How can I know God?' but 'How and why does God generate in humans knowledge about himself?' that is, how does my knowledge (and ignorance) of God function within God himself? (Žižek 536).

Replacing God with the perhaps more demanding sovereign of the market reorients the questions of capitalism and representation. Instead of attempting to tear down the abstraction's leap from the realm of epistemology to ontology, this new dynamic rather notices how knowledge of the object is intimately tied to its being. Returning to the previous idea that capitalism does not really exist "out there," this changes representation from being an obstacle that prevents us from reaching the "thing" to that which makes the "thing" (in this case capitalism) exist.<sup>9</sup> As, just like God in Žižek's example, the only way we can access knowledge of this thing is through the

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<sup>9</sup> A similar idea is developed in "Mirrors Without Memories" by Linda Williams. Therein Williams complicates the idea of postmodern confusion by talking about the multiple ways the subject can interact with images. "The contradictions are rich: on the one hand the postmodern deluge of images seems to suggest that there can be no a priori truth of the referent to which the image refers; on the other hand, in this same deluge, it is still the moving image that has the power to move audiences to a new appreciation of previously unknown truth" (Williams 10).

representations that it creates. Žižek credits Hegel for “the reversal of the classic metaphysical question: how can we see through false appearances to their underlying reality? For Hegel, *the* question is, on the contrary: how has appearance emerged out of reality?” (ibid., 131). This section of the chapter will then be focused on how capitalism provides the subject with knowledge of itself through the realm of appearances (i.e, representation and mediation).

Although the scholars I will be discussing in this section all use their own sets of terminology to tackle this problem, they can mostly be summed up as describing capital as a “social form.” Describing capital in this way provides much more historical flexibility as it gives a way for the social form to be expressed in multiple different ways across historical moments. This allows capital to change without making the mistake that a change in material conditions is a radical break from capitalist reality as a whole.

## **1.6 Capital as Social Form**

Reading, Marx’s *Capital* it is easy to get swept away with his description of the vicissitudes of the industrial factory and then conflate Marx’s body of work with a moralistic critique of industrialism.<sup>10</sup> Marx was writing in the time of industrial capitalism and he only had access to so many materials. Being a political organizer, he was writing his analysis of the capitalism he was witnessing and often explicitly responded to specific legislation in his work.<sup>11</sup> The problem that arises is generalizing Marx’s theory of capitalism into one that is less tied to

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<sup>10</sup> This dynamic is not just tied to Marx himself and can also spread to his disciples. American socialist writer and organizer Upton Sinclair most famous for his book *The Jungle* intended for his work to be a critique of exploitative labor practices and about corporate greed leading to unsanitary and inhospitable conditions. Sinclair famously said “I aimed at the American public’s heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach.” As an illustrative example it is easy to get bogged down in the particularities of what is being critiqued instead of seeing the larger social forms at play (Sinclair 594).

<sup>11</sup> This is perhaps most clear when he is discussing the working day and the issue of the English Factory Acts. The relevant sections are Chapter 10: Sections 16 and 17, or pages 389-416 in the Penguin edition.

the specifics of industry. This will be a helpful tool moving forward as instead of using Marx's frame of reference where we imagine capitalism as the fiery machine that is emblazoned on the cover of the book, it instead allows us to imagine capital and capitalism as how we relate to each other.

Therefore, an account of Marx's formalism must be provided. A good place to begin is with Anna Kornbluh's work as both of her books *Marxist Film Theory and Fight Club* and *Realizing Capital: Financial and Psychic Economies in Victorian Form* are explicitly concerned with both a formalist and a Marxist critique. Kornbluh ties Marx "whose thought is invested in composed relations and in new energies of composition, of building things up" (Kornbluh 26). Even though Marx is so strongly associated with the idea of critique, Kornbluh draws attention to the productive qualities of formal analysis:

Perhaps, then, what Marxism builds in the world is a willingness to think about definite forms of relationality as the spaces of existence—rather than to think about forms as police, as order that must be anarchically abolished, as an obstacle to a formlessness fantasized as freedom. What Marxism builds is a practice of thinking infrastructurally, risking dialectical regard for forms, reaching for spaces more adequate for human beings (ibid.)

This idea mirrors the previous comments in the work by Toscano and Kinkle where liberation cannot be tied to the removal of mediations. The concept of mediation and how it relates to understanding capital as a social form is very important to this thesis. Kornbluh defines mediation as:

A relating or relation. A relation can be between two things by way of a third, but it can also be between the two things by the way of each other, or between a thing and itself. In Marx's theory, which we have already noted is centrally concerned with form, we can understand 'mediation' as the work of forms. The commodity form, the money form, the novel form, the state form, etc., are all mediations of the underlying class relations of the capitalist mode of production. They are all what he [Marx] often calls 'forms of

appearance' of relations—they give specific, concrete contour to the diffuse network of relations (ibid., 57).

Capital as a social form uses the “realm of appearances” to make itself visible, as in the most basic form capital is merely a way people relate to each other. Although this is an oversimplification with regards to the true nature of how capital functions, the purpose of this essay is to describe the current era of “the realm of appearances,” or to describe this turn in Žižek’s language, we are interested not in a rigorous analysis of the ontology of modern capitalism but rather the current epistemological image of capitalism. In both Kornbluh and Žižek there is no claim that modern capital is exactly the same as the capital of Marx’s time, but rather that trying to study capital in a completely synchronic way will overly conflate a current iteration of capitalism with the constitutive nature of the social form of capital.

This issue can be addressed by comparing the belief that media technologies are causing the crisis of representations against the idea that capital is inherently spectral or nonexistent. In Shaviro’s writing he makes the claim that media technologies have heralded a change that is difficult to describe but impossible to ignore in both our daily lives and the social field at large (Shaviro 2). However, a belief in the opacity of reality is not a development that is new to contemporary capitalism. Thinkers like Hegel who were definitely not living before the era of the opaque media regimes and institutions of finance that Shaviro is describing, still believed there was a hard limit in the ability to one understand their own existence. One of his more famous aphorisms on the matter is that, “In this sense we regard the Egyptian works of art as containing riddles, the right solution of which is in part unattained not only by us, but generally by those who posed these riddles to themselves” (Hegel trans. T.M. Knox). This quotation has often been altered to the clearer, “the secrets of the Egyptians were secrets for the Egyptians as well.” Hegel is merely stating that there is a gap between the knowledge that one can acquire and one’s given



condition. Historians trying to find the secret truths located in history will run into the hard limit that prevents a direct access to that truth.

This shifts the confusion that we are experiencing from a facet of modern capitalism to a constitutive fact of human existence. However, this does not mean that our current situation is not worth studying as we can never access the truth, but rather we can study the differences in the realms of appearance. Since so many thinkers have noticed a trend it is hard to deny that there has been a shift in aesthetics, but rather the focus of this thesis is to try and develop a way of responding to this shift in aesthetics without turning into a paranoid search for a reality behind the representation.

To return to the claim that there is a connection between mediation and a crisis in capitalism, Žižek is very critical of the separation of mediated and “unmediated” commodity relations:

The highest form of ideology does not involve getting caught in ideological spectrality, forgetting about real people and their relations, but precisely in overlooking this Real of spectrality and in pretending to address directly ‘real people with their real problems.’ Visitors to the London Stock Exchange are given a free leaflet explaining how the stock market is not about mysterious fluctuations, but about real people and their products- this is ideology at its purest (Žižek 244-245).

Here Žižek pairs the place of mediated economic relations *par excellence*—the London stock exchange with the daily toil of the average person. Although from this perspective Shaviro’s claim that media institutions are causing the rupture in capitalism is not exactly committing the ideological gesture of substituting financial abstractions with labor—it is still quite similar. Institutions like the stock exchange and cyberspace are not mutating the logic of capitalism but

merely intensifying it.<sup>12</sup> Žižek, believes that to understand a complex social formation like capitalism we *must* begin with its most developed form, in this case the hypermediated financial capitalism (ibid). This is very clear when we return to Marx himself who also states that the goal of capital is to make more capital, or that “use-values must therefore never be treated as immediate aims; nor must the profit on any single transaction. His aim is rather the unceasing movement of profit-making” (Marx 254). This flips the assumption that the illogical capital of post-modernity is somehow a corruption of rational industrial capital, all capital desires to be endless profit-making, the “friction” of industry was merely getting in the way.

Therefore, as technology gets more and more advanced the frictionless capital also gets closer to the image of capital itself. Žižek notes that frictionless capital does not exist but rather that technology will allow for all of the “frictions” (another world for any of the hiccups that can occur in production in the “real” world of physical commodities) to become invisible in our “postmodern” and post-industrial universe (Žižek 245). As proof he makes the claim that even our current era of digital financial capitalism threatens to implode at any minute as the structural limitations of physical production get in the way of the fantasy of production and accumulation without limits or friction (ibid).

This increasing desire to make capital shed all frictions is all implicit with the main tenets of Marxist theory, that of capital’s inherent desire to decrease necessary labor time. In “The Chapter on Capital” in *The Grundrisse* Marx says that,

Looked at precisely, the realization process of capital-and money becomes capital only through the realization process-appears at the same time as its devaluation process. This occurs because capital

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<sup>12</sup> This is Tiziana Terranova’s point in her article “Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy” Or in her own words “The question is not so much whether to love or hate technology, but an attempt to understand whether the Internet embodies a continuation of capital or a break with it. As I have argued in this essay, it does neither. It is rather a mutation that is totally immanent to late capitalism, not so much a break as an intensification, and therefore a mutation, of a widespread cultural and economic logic” (Terranova 55).

does not increase absolute labor time, but rather decreases the relative, necessary labor time, by increasing the forces of production, to that extent does it reduce the costs of its own production” (Marx 1973 402).

The inherent tendency to reduce necessary labor time which makes the rate of profit fall was one of Marx’s main economic discoveries, as it underscores the main contradiction of capital. If labor is the source of all value in Marx’s theory, then capital’s tendency to decrease labor time is a hefty contradiction.<sup>13</sup>

Tying this contradiction back to our principle concerns makes it evident that this tendency within capital can radically alter the appearances of labor relations. Returning to the workers toiling on the cover of *Capital*, their activities were socially necessary for the valorization of capital. As capital gets more and more advanced it does not need as much labor to get valorized, which encourages deindustrialization.<sup>14</sup> This process of deindustrialization when paired with the belief that labor is the source of all value within capitalism, leads to the assumption that capital is in crisis. However, Marx himself wrote about the tendency for capital to decrease necessary labor time, which in the time of both financial institutions and the internet can take on many different appearances.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Although Marx says this many times a rather clear example is on page 296 of the Penguin Edition of *The Grundrisse*. “Labor not as an object, but as activity; not as itself *value*, but as the *living source* of value” (Marx 296).

<sup>14</sup> Jameson occupies a peculiar point with regards to comparing postmodernism with “post industrial” society. Although he bristles at terms like ‘post industrial society, consumer society, or media society’ he justifies this by claiming that, “Such theories have the obvious ideological mission of demonstrating, to their own relief, that the new social formation in question no longer obeys the laws of classical capitalism, namely, the primacy of industrial production and the omnipresence of class struggle” (Jameson 1991 3). Although Jameson is correct in the sense that we should not view the decreasing prevalence in industrial labor as a failure of classic Marxist theory but rather what must be reckoned with is that so-called ‘post industrial society’ was in fact predicted by Marxist theory.

<sup>15</sup> Many writers have written about the new reality of value creation in the digital and financial age so an exhaustive list and critique of them all is both impossible and not the focus of this thesis. Interested readers can approach the works of Christian Fuchs for an orthodox Marxist account of value creations in the digital age. Nick Srnicek creates a case for value in the digital age that is relatively agnostic to labor in his book *Platform Capitalism*. Shoshana Zuboff in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* removes the agency from the laboring subject and turns value-creation purely into one of surveillance.

This is articulated in an interesting way by Samo Tomšič in his book *The Capitalist Unconscious* in which he states that the “capitalist and scientific development of the means of production does not free the laborer from labor but instead frees labor of its content, which means that labor is freed first and foremost of the empirical laborer” (Tomšič 103). The process that Tomšič describes is the slow-slog to frictionless accumulation that is so desired by the capitalist, but instead of approaching it from the side of how it effects capital, Tomšič describes how it effects the laborer. As capital’s productive power endlessly increases and capital becomes more and more closer to the “true-nature” of capital that Marx describes (a totally abstract process that just makes more capital) so too does labor free itself from its objective content. Once capital reached a point of productivity in which the factory is antiquated and insufficiently productive, the associated labor that occurs in places like factories also began to appear outmoded. Freeing labor of its content is just another way of saying “turning labor into just its social form,” namely that of value creation. Tomšič also makes the claim that “because of the asymmetrical relation between abstract and concrete labor, no return to concrete and presumably more authentic forms of labor will abolish the alienation of labor” (ibid). By invoking the distinction between abstract and concrete labor Tomšič makes the claim that it does not matter how “concrete” or “authentic” one’s labor is compared to abstract labor. Tomšič states that once the form of labor has been captured by the field of commodities, all instances of concrete labor (which are instances of abstract labor, the total ability to produce) are equally diffuse. There are clear parallels between this idea and the fact that Žižek now claims that “really existing capitalism is reaching the level of its notion” (Žižek 245). The removal of industry is allowing the forms of capital and labor to reach their apotheosis through abstraction, this is not a bastardization but rather a purification

The next section of the chapter will be trying to determine how these new sets of appearance become associated with capitalism as a whole.

## 1.7 Our Collective Fantasies

Before we begin speaking about the nature of fantasy and retroactivity at the level of constructing modern capitalism. A historical through-line must be established where the fundamentally fictitious nature of all capital is exposed. Anna Kornbluh states this explicitly in *Realizing Capital* where she says that “we must rigorously refrain from romanticizing the nonfictitious ‘reality’ of earlier capitalism when talking about finance. Our current preoccupation with the extremes of the new world of finance risk forgetting Marx’s revelation that every stage of capital is fictitious” (Kornbluh 30). This claim is supported by her analysis that every act of exchange has a leap of faith where both parties of the exchange act as if value exists before the exchange and it is only created through the act of exchange. Kornbluh’s analysis of Marx states that the ‘most complete fetish’ that is present in finance capitalism is merely the apotheosis of this process (ibid., 29). Of course, this fictitiousness does not mean capitalism cannot have real effects, but Kornbluh’s statements can be seen as distancing capital even further from the physical instance of capital. Just like the ‘leap’ that is involved in exchange, there is a process that must be done before money can be realized as productive capital. A factory with all of the required labor, raw materials, and equipment is not yet capital until it fits itself into the web of expanding commodity relations.<sup>16</sup> Going from the factory to capital, is analogous to the

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<sup>16</sup> Marx approached this point obliquely multiple times. One time in the *Grundrisse* when he was speaking of the guild systems, and said that the guild systems were not capital because they were too devoted to “particular substance” and did not yet contain the infinite mutability or function of accumulation that are the constitutive features of capitalism. Also in his *Theories of Surplus Value* he speaks on the fact that factories that are not being used are not capital. Marx was very careful to never conflate the physical instance of capital with its reality as a form.

retroactive act of exchange that is described by the earlier Kornbluh quotation, value is presumed to exist before the fact, but it is only created by its valorization, or after the act of exchange. At its most basic principles this is the process of capital, it is fictitious whether or not there are “real commodities” involved.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the presence of real commodities may be distracting when trying to determine the true nature of capital. As it has been established there are no physical preconditions before something is considered capital, it is all based on its relational qualities. In this way the totally abstract capital with no physical commodities is more ‘real’ in the sense that it is closer to being a totally formless social relationship.

This avenue of thought prompts multiple questions when considering modern capitalism’s representation. What is the function of representation if capitalism is fictitious? If all capitalism is fictitious why does it seem like there has been an aesthetic shift in capitalism? And lastly, what is the relationship between this fiction and the ‘real.’ To answer this question we must again return to Žižek whose usage of Lacan is beneficial when considering the realm of ‘the real,’ or the inability to completely symbolize a total world system.

We can now see why representation needs to be supplemented by imagination proper: since the field of representations remains within the loop of the subject’s self-relating, it is by definition always inconsistent, full of lacunae, which the subject must somehow fill in to create a minimally consistent Whole of a world—and the function of imagination is to precisely fill in these gaps. Now we can also see clearly the difference between representation and imagination (Žižek 176).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> This is a different opinion from the one offered by David Harvey in his book *The Limits of Capital*. He defines fictitious capital as “a flow of money capital not backed by any commodity transaction” (Harvey 275). Without looking like I am avoiding the issue I do believe that this difference of opinion can be reduced to Harvey’s focus on more economic concerns. When considering economics I concede that there is a difference if one has “real” commodities as opposed to it being totally abstract. However, since the main focus of this thesis is theoretical I do insist that all capital, whether or not it is operating within the realm of commodities, ultimately has this logical leap where value is assumed.

<sup>18</sup> Of note, this lacunae or blight on the subject’s ability to symbolize the world is tied to the figure of the proletariat. It is the part-of-no-part, or the organ of the system that both allows for capitalism to function while also being invisible and denied a discourse. For Žižek the political act can only come from occupying the proletarian position (ibid., 433-434) Žižek owes a great deal to Badiou for this formulation, as this is similar to Badiou’s theory

This process of turning representation into a ‘minimally consistent’ idea of one’s situation via imagination obliquely introduces the concept of retroactivity.

Susan Buck-Morss, in her article *Envisioning Capital* references the ‘invention of the economy.’

Once a scientific object is ‘discovered’ (invented), it takes on agency. The economy is now seen to act in the world; it causes events, creates effects. Because the economy is not found as an empirical object among other worldly things, in order for it to be ‘seen’ by the human perceptual apparatus it has to undergo a process, crucial for science, of representational mapping (Buck-Morss 440).

This has resonances with what Kornbluh says with respects to the metaphysics of capital, in which “‘fictitious capital is illusory... yet it has its own laws of motion, through such laws of motion, a metaphysics that performs anew the physical world, fictitious capital signifies an illusion that has material effects, a *material illusion*” (Kornbluh 31).

Here Buck-Morss and Kornbluh speak more to the contradictory nature of capitalism, one where it was invented yet it has to exist. In addition, even though defense of capitalism is often based on its relationship to human’s ‘real material needs’ that too is problematized by Žižek.

Instead of simply representing the relations of commodities, it enters... into private relations with itself’: the ‘truth’ of its relating to its otherness is its self-relating, in its self-movement, capital retroactively ‘sublates’ its own material conditions, changing them into subordinate moments of its own expansion’ — in pure Hegelese, it posts its own presuppositions” (Žižek 250).

This quotation shows the necessarily corrosive nature of capitalism, where everything that is associated with it becomes part of its own expansion. This distinction is characterized by

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of the event. The event involves a radical rupture from the situation, where something that is thought to be impossible happens. The similarity between this and the invisible proletariat becomes clear as the current situation does not privilege them with a discourse, which makes them prime evental subjects. For more information consult Badiou’s *Being and Event*.

capitalism not just being “universal in-itself, but universal for-itself” (ibid., 361). Capital hijacks and controls all manners of life for its own purposes. Not only do all parts of waking life turn into an aspect of commodity relations, they retroactively become part of its justification.

However, it must be reiterated that just because capitalism has assimilated all social forms and is only visible through mediation, we cannot endlessly pursue an unmediated relationship to the reality beneath the appearances. Capitalist alienation must never be interpreted as mediation as such, but rather a very specific time of mediation. Samo Tomšič discusses this problem in discussing the difference between constitutive and constituted alienation:

Another crucial aspect of Marx’s critique of appearance, to repeat, concerns the break with the humanism and the essentialism of Feuerbach’s conception of alienation. Marx’s mature discussion of fetishism no longer departs from the illusion that the commodity form distorts more immediate and authentic social relations. Here it makes sense to repeat the distinction between constitutive alienation – alienation that is equivalent to structure – and constituted alienation – for instance, commodity fetishism, which follows from the misperception of the relation between the appearance of value and the structure that causes this appearance... The flip side of commodity fetishism is the appearance that there is a more fundamental and unalienated position in the background, a position from which it would be possible to cognize the mistake that determines commodity fetishism (Samo Tomšič 92).

This quotation stitches together many ideas. First it states the difference between an alienation that is both unavoidable and lacks any normative determination, and the alienation that is both contingent and has been consistently criticized in the entire history of Marxism. Secondly, it aptly states that the constitutive alienation, that is, the alienation that constitutes the subject, is equivalent to structure. This has clear parallels with Kornbluh’s explanation of Marxist formalism, where the “forms of life” give space for human existence, they are not immediate, in the sense that they are a relationship between two things, but it does not make sense to try and abolish them. On the other hand, Tomšič leaves room for there being a “bad” alienation, that of



commodity fetishism. Interestingly, Tomšič characterizes the ills of commodity fetishism purely based on its tacit support for a non-fetishized or unalienated position (ibid). This is a puzzling claim, but instructive for the issue at hand. In Tomšič account, constitutive alienation is that form of mediation that is unavoidable and is accepting of the impossibility of the immediate or unalienated position. Constituted alienation is that form of mediation that supports the position of the unalienated true relationship. Commodity fetishism is a form of alienation that implies its negation is possible. For Tomšič this means it serves as a “mask or mystification of constitutive alienation” (ibid). This mystification is remarkably similar to the dynamic that I have been describing throughout this chapter. The abstract mediations and vagaries of financial capitalism have provided an illusion of a more rational capitalism that is accessible only if one traverses and destroys the alienating media structures.

## 1.8 So what?

The acknowledgment of the fictitious nature of capital is not the place where capital ends but rather shows the necessity for a changing strategy in modern Marxist political praxis. As long as a “real” version of capitalism is supported in contrast to the modern cynical industrial capitalism, ideology will always be seen as a failure of knowledge, or the classic Marxist claim that ideology is false-consciousness.<sup>19</sup> Kornbluh is rightly critical of this term, and says that “the term false-consciousness implies the existence of true consciousness. It thus imagines an existence outside of ideology, an authoritative or enlightened position with which to critique the false” (Kornbluh 2019 46).<sup>20</sup> Jameson joins in this critique of ideology as false consciousness.

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<sup>19</sup> For more information on a theory of ideology that is based on a lack of knowledge compared to one based on cynicism, consider *The Sublime Object of Ideology* by Slavoj Žižek, especially pages 27-30.

<sup>20</sup> Kornbluh claims many prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century western Marxists indulged in this idea, namely Marcuse and Gramsci. In her account, despite the caution and criticism with which Lukács approached the term was

Stating in *The Political Unconscious* that “Marx's theory of ideology, which is not, as is widely thought, one of false consciousness, but rather one of structural limitation and ideological closure” (Jameson 37).

This dualism between true and false consciousness allows for a way of thinking of the “true nexus of capitalism” that was so ridiculed in the earlier Toscano and Kinkle quotation. While none of the thinkers that I previously mentioned indulged in using the terms false consciousness (or at least not in the texts that I have read), a heightened preoccupation with a shift in the appearance of capitalism is getting dangerously close. Being overly concerned that a shift in capitalism’s appearance is putting capital in crisis implies a more intimate connection with the appearances and the reality of capital. As I hope it has been established many thinkers have made persuasive cases that capital is only a social form and the “realm of appearances” only makes this social form visible. Therefore, to be overly concerned with a shift in capitalism’s appearance implies that a ‘real’ of capitalism is constructing the appearances, as opposed to subjects an idea of ‘real’ capitalism being forged out of the appearances. The truly dialectic gesture is not a synthesis between these two points but recognizing that the shifts in capital were not only predicted by Marx but a product of capital’s own constitutive features. Or in other words, that capital had to change to stay the same.

## **1.9 Back to Media**

Although the latter body of literature is more theoretically persuasive the case of modern capitalism’s sublime aesthetic very compelling. Despite the vagueness of Shaviro’s account, I am inclined to agree that there has been a shift in the ‘affect’ of capitalism. With respects to political

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insufficient, and misreadings of all of these thinkers became a catch-all term in the 1960s and 1970s to describe why things are the way they are. Kornbluh (44-46).

solutions both of the groups have their own shortcomings. The first is overly preoccupied by the aesthetic excesses of modern capitalism and can resort to claims that a change in capitalism is self-evident purely due to the overwhelming presence of capital. The second can be seen as politically enervating, where the declaration of the limit between ontology and epistemology makes political projects seem grandiose and self-defeating. These issues can be addressed head-on by considering how the fantastic detective serial aestheticizes these problems.

Although often vilified as creating the very set of problems that I am studying, media has the ability to “negotiate the relationship between the particular and the general, both the individual and the social totality” (McClanahan 33). This difficult balancing act is located where the programs must be symptomatic without becoming a gross generalization, how can their aesthetics display the particularities of our condition without indulging in that which they claim to be critiquing?

What I will develop in the next chapter is a robust exploration of the fantastic detective serial as an artistic movement. The themes and devices used by the shows illuminate the theoretical tensions developed in this chapter. Most pointedly is how the show’s usage of both the fantastic and detection aestheticize the barrier between the subject and their understanding of global capitalism.

Watch new blood on the 18 inch screen  
The corpse is a new personality  
Ionic charge gives immortality  
The corpse is a new personality

Gang of Four, 5:45: *Entertainment*. EMI Records. 1979.

## Chapter 2: The Fantastic Detective Serial

### 2.1 In Brief

Chapter 1 addressed key debates in contemporary Marxist media theory concerning the representability of capital. In particular, I devoted specific attention to the tension between, an understanding of capital as a social form and, on the other hand, theories of “unrepresentability” as a constitutive feature of modern capitalism. In this chapter, my aim is to reorient these concepts in view of a recent body of prestige television that I am calling the “fantastic detective serial.” The fantastic detective serial emerged as an phenomenon in 2014, and is distinguished by: its dramatization of the collision between small-town America and global finance; its investment in the figure of the detective in the leading role; and its tendency toward themes and motifs that border on the supernatural. While scholarly writing on such critically acclaimed serials as *Twin Peaks: The Return*, *True Detective*, *The Leftovers*, and *Fargo*, has primarily understood these shows in narratological and generic terms—considering their disruptions of narrative expectations and their innovations in “fantastic horror,” I will show how the fantastic detective serial has an expressly political content, deploying the supernatural as a means to interrupt the morass of capitalist realism.<sup>21</sup> Through a close reading of sequences from *Twin*

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<sup>21</sup> For example, Jessica Balanzategui’s “The New Quality Crime Drama in the TVIV Era: Hannibal, True Detective, and Surrealism” stays in a more platform studies approach, where the surreal aesthetics match up a more diffuse distribution regime. She claims that the now clichéd calm police procedural would not make sense in the cross media world of modern television. Fergal Twomey’s “Methodology as Teleology: The Economy of Secrets and Drama as Critique of Systems in the Works of Vince Gilligan and Noah Hawley,” does have a more political approach which states that the procedural as a form is antiquated in post-Fordist society, and that more complex crime shows mirror the loss of structure that was afforded by Fordism. The scholarship that is written about these shows either takes them individually like in the case of Casey Riley Kelly’s “The Toxic Screen: Visions of

*Peaks*, *True Detective*, and *The Leftovers*, Chapter 2 explores how the intersection between the tropes of the detective serial and the fantastic work to aestheticize the difference between capital as a collection of objects as contrasted against capital as a social form. Chapter 3 will focus exclusively on *Fargo*, which occupies a unique position with respect to the political content of the fantastic detective serial. Specifically, I will show how the core conflict between the two principal characters of V.M. Varga (David Thewlis) and Emmitt Stussy (Ewan McGregor), unfolds onto the very tension between different regimes of capital.

My argument in Chapter 2 will hinge upon a discussion of the major themes of the fantastic detective serial: how it embraces the contradictory or asynchronous aesthetics of capital, the figure of the mentally ill protagonists, conspiracy, and the combination of the fantastic with detection. I will address these themes both synoptically, as they apply to the fantastic television serial as a whole, as well as their distinct instantiations in *Twin Peaks*, *True Detective*, and *The Leftovers*, in order to consider the diversity of the movement. Ultimately, the discussion will culminate by showcasing how the combination of the supernatural with detection aestheticize the tension between the visible capital of objects and the invisible social form of capital.

However, Chapter 2 begins in an unexpected place: with a discussion of *Breaking Bad*. *Breaking Bad* is particularly significant, I argue, because its run-time was poised between the dominance of a *naturalist-realist* aesthetic tendency in the prestige television shows of the early

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Petrochemical America in HBO's *True Detective*" and Allen H. Redmond's "This is a [...] Story, The Refusal of a Master Text in Noah Hawley's *Fargo*." Or, the shows are discussed within the larger movement of the "golden age of television" like in Jason Mittell's *Complex TV*. Mittell stays mostly within the realm of narratology and is interested as to how "good television" influences various parts of television production, from the writing to fan-consumption. The gap that this thesis is addressing is caused by the explicitly political reading of the shows and the naming of a sub-genre that is present in the already studied and named golden age of TV.

2000s and the emergence of the fantastic detective serial the following decade.<sup>22</sup> My analysis of two montage sequences from the show demonstrates a pivot in the representation of capital, from a realist aesthetic to a tendency to confront capital through an aesthetics of abstraction. The techniques used in the second montage predates the more mature interventions of the fantastic detective serial.

## 2.2 Breaking Bad: The Tale of Two Montages

Premiering in 2008, *Breaking Bad* started only one year after the finale of *The Sopranos* and began the same year that *The Wire* and *The Shield* concluded. 2003, the year of its final season's broadcast, was only one year away from the premieres of *Fargo*, *True Detective*, and *The Leftovers*. Beyond *Breaking Bad*'s unique position on the timeline of prestige American crime shows, the way it deals with the aesthetics of capital also warrants further investigation. This section of the chapter is dedicated to a formal analysis of one of the more recognizable features of *Breaking Bad*: the montage sequences of the production and distribution of Walt's famous methamphetamine. The two montages in question are located at different historical phases of the show's evolution and have markedly distinct styles. This distinction will be used to discuss how prestige television confronted the limits of formal realism in representing the structures of late finance capital.

Season 3 Episode 9, entitled *Kafkaesque*, starts with a cold open of a commercial of the fast-food restaurant *Los Pollos Hermanos*. The commercial ends with the suitably tacky

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<sup>22</sup> I am using the term realist as developed by Jameson in his essay on *The Wire*. The realism that I am referencing is a set of conventions. The shows have few appeals to interiority, a gritty documentarian aesthetic, and are from a genre perspective—realistic fiction. Through the usage of the term I am not attempting to make a statement on the long debate between realism and formalism, but rather I am using it to describe the aesthetic of a group of television shows.

cascading wall of fried chicken on a black background which then dissolves into falling methamphetamine crystals. Once the flow of crystals obscures the black background, there is a dissolve to the crystal meth in a plastic tub as we watch Walter White (Bryan Cranston) and Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul) load the most recent batch. Then, for the next 90 seconds of television, the camera follows what happens to the crystal meth that Walt and Jesse have just produced. The process is managed in an assembly-line, almost Fordist fashion, and represented through a film grammar that enables the viewer to grasp exactly how Gus Fring's (Giancarlo Esposito) drug smuggling operation works. After the meth is measured into smaller amounts and put into individual bags, they are subsequently submerged in the fry batter that is used in his restaurants. The buckets are stamped with florescent inks that are tested for visibility under a black light. The buckets are then loaded onto trucks and drive out of the processing facility under the watchful eye of Gus Fring. This sequence stresses order, methodically representing each stage of the process as a nodal point in a rational, causal chain. Beyond the transition from the commercial to the "real world" of the show, there are only simple cuts in the sequence of the processing room. All of this culminates in an attempt to display how the illicit drug operation is interwoven with the legitimate fried chicken business.

The corollary montage is from Season 5 episode 8, *Gliding Over All*. In the narrative, Walt has just been convinced by Lydia Rodarte-Quayle (Laura Fraser) to internationalize his business using her connections as head of logistics at a large multinational German conglomerate Madrigal electromotive. The sequence, famously featuring Tommy James and the Shondells' "Crystal Blue Persuasion," is much longer, clocking in at just under 4 minutes, and includes a protracted montage of Walt and Todd (Jesse Plemons) making the meth that is now part of a new,

globalized distribution process. The montage's length also serves to show the passage of time as Walt accrues impractically large piles of money using Lydia's new distribution scheme.

However, all of these differences are overshadowed by how the formal grammar of the latter sequence clashes with the previous sequence. While Gus' distribution network was slowly shown from start to finish using unobtrusive editing techniques, this sequence uses oblique camera angles, disjunctive editing, and presents the production process in non-linear time. The continuity editing of the first sequence always leaves the camera feeling grounded, and more importantly it clearly tells the audience where we are in the leg of the drug distribution process. In the latter montage, however, the more complex editing and cinematography forge connections that are abstract and associational, rather than causal. Images of sparkling blue liquid dissolve into time-lapsed shots of the sunset. Graphic similarities between objects—such as the opening of a bag and a trunk, a whiskey glass and a vat of meth—motivate transitions in time and space. And procedural images of ledgers, air travel, and invoices placed on barrels are cut in a rhythmically abrupt and spatially oblique fashion. As the scene culminates to a soundtrack about the discovery of God on LSD, an aerial shot gives us a bird's eye view of New Mexico in which meth labs magically appear throughout the city without the seeming intervention of any human capital. The montage turns away from aestheticizing one particular moment of meth circulation but rather functions as a synecdoche of the sublime scale of the global methamphetamine trade.

These two montages serve as a point of entry into considering realism and the limits of showing “structure” in Frederic Jameson's terms. This dynamic is clearly explicated in Jameson's article: “Realism and Utopia in the Wire”. Jameson's gambit is forging a connection between the *Wire*'s realistic mode of television with its attempt to display the interweaving



relationship between the Baltimore drug trade and a conspiratorial sprawl of financial and political institutions. He describes the problems of knowing such complicated systems by stating:

The uniform cops simply know the neighborhoods and the corners on which the drugs are finally sold to customers by teams of juveniles, some of them too young to be prosecuted. But this is, as it were, simply the appearance of the reality, the empirical or sensory form it takes in daily life; it is the most superficial approach to this reality, whose ultimate structure (source, refinement, transportation, sales network, and bulk or wholesale distribution) must remain too abstract for any single observer to experience, although it may be known and studied—and also occasionally sensed in a representational way (Jameson 3)

The distinction between criminality as the product of one guilty individual compared to a corrupt societal web has a long history in postwar police procedurals/crime dramas—dating back to film noir and pulp crime novels. John G. Cawelti states that one of the major differences between the classic ratiocinative detective and the hard-boiled detectives of film-noir is the sociological element of criminality. “The crime solved by the ratiocinative detective is usually that of a single individual whose means and motives can be rationally established. The hard-boiled detective encounters a linked series of criminal acts and responsibilities; he discovers not a single guilty individual, but a corrupt society” (Cawelti 500). The pairing of the hard-boiled detective (who operates by meandering through the criminal world until she collides with the criminal conspiracy) with more widespread systemic crimes as opposed to individual acts, makes more sense when we explicate the fundamental inability for the figure of facts and deduction to reckon with structural problems.

Returning to the two *Breaking Bad* montage sequences, this relationship between realism and structure is illuminating. Although, I earlier stated that the style used for filming Gus’ operation gives the viewer a very clear image in understanding how the methamphetamine goes

from production to distribution, what I hope to now establish is that there is a rupture between the realism that shows the physical act of distribution with showing the structure *as such*. Naturalism fails in showing complex structures that are outside individual perspective because there can never be enough realism. The granularity with which the audience witnesses meth being dipped in fry batter and put in trucks makes their lack of knowledge of other parts of the distribution process that much more visible. For example, how does the meth get from the trucks and into the hands of street-level dealers? Is Gus' entire restaurant chain used to smuggle drugs, or is it only a fraction of the operation? All of these practical concerns are raised on the peripheries of the sequence. While these questions could theoretically be addressed by just making the sequence longer, what remains is the more fundamental problem of how the filmed act of meth distribution is generalized into the methamphetamine industry. Since, the formal grammar used in the first sequence so clearly tells the audience where the camera is in time and space it ties the sequence to that particular act of distribution.

This becomes clearer by moving on to the second sequence which does not prompt the same practical questions that were provoked by the first sequence. Although we know significantly less of the specifics in the new distribution scheme engineered by Lydia, it also leaves less ambiguities. The audience knows that bags of meth are dropped into barrels of chemicals that are shipped globally in the air freight used by Madrigal Electromotive's already existing logistics apparatus. But questions like where the drugs are going (there was a brief reference to the Czech Republic), who picks up the drugs, what the street-level distribution looks like—these are all unknown, but also oddly irrelevant. The out-of-order editing highlights the aesthetic similarities between objects as opposed to their function. The signifiers of the methamphetamine trade breakdown and are reduced to their semblance. This is reminiscent to

Jameson's notion of schizophrenia which is about the deterioration of the relationship between signifiers (Jameson 119). This deterioration is the apotheosis of what Jameson termed the capitalist sublime. The signifiers of industry are reduced to their shorthand. The fantastic detective serial differs from this strategy by making the connection between capitalist structure and the images of the show more abstract. The supernatural moments of the fantastic detective serial do not attempt to mirror the physical form of capitalist structure and instead use the speculative to aestheticize the barrier of the subject's understanding of capital.

In his essay on *The Wire*, Jameson refers to realism as, "always somehow a matter of necessity: why it had to happen like that and why reality itself is both the irresistible force and the unmovable obstacle" (Jameson 13). The contradiction of both the irresistible force and unmovable obstacle mirrors the logic of the asymptote—the function that infinitely approaches a value but never quite reaches it. Using naturalism to show structure is similar, and the contradictions of realism become apparent when considering the two *Breaking Bad* sequences. The more naturalist sequence fails by its own logic, namely that there were still many practical concerns that were not addressed and despite its naturalist visual style it still failed to truly capture the relations of production present in the methamphetamine industry. Therefore, the reliance on naturalism in this sequence is akin to the asymptote, where no matter how much more detail, granularity, or scope is included, it nevertheless will fail at perfectly representing the capitalist structures at work. The second sequence manages to evade such a problem by not concerning itself with the baggage of realism. Rather, the abstract editing serves as an aestheticization of the aspect of capital that is beyond human perceptual abilities, the movement from just meth circulation to capital. Walt's meth entering the global distribution network also influences the perceived representability of the methamphetamine industry. Where Gus's meth

operation stayed in the Western United States, Lydia's is global. Of note is how the DEA investigates the two criminal enterprises. Local DEA branches in New Mexico have maps that indicate where the meth is found but there is no equivalent mapping technique to try and track the flow of Walt's meth once it goes international.

*Breaking Bad's* techniques for aestheticizing capital ultimately shows the need to go beyond a realist approach. As discussed previously, the realist sequence fails by staying so close to human perceptual abilities, and it misses the irrational leap from exchange to capital. The second sequence, while it does attempt to enter a more abstract visual style it stays completely at the level of form. By staying at the level of form it makes a statement on capital's representability through its editing, that capital as such is invisible and it can only be referenced obliquely. All of the objects that are seen in the montage—the planes, the barrels of chemicals, the ledgers—are not reducible to capital but when they are represented through the abstract montage, something bigger than the individual objects referenced starts to manifest itself. This is clearly reminiscent of the Jameson quotation where the sprawling structure of capital is invisible to the individual. The editing, by dislocating the camera outside of time and space shifts the focus away from the images and towards what is missed by the images, the invisible structure of capital.

The fantastic detective serial uses a different strategy for aestheticizing capital. Instead, of eluding to capital's invisible structure through editing, the fantastic detective serial uses supernatural elements in its narrative as a placeholder for capital. The second sequence overwhelms the audience with its scope and its editing, it does not encourage questions about its particularities because it is clear what is being represented can never be understood through human observation. This is reminiscent of the capitalist sublime developed by Jameson that was

described in the previous chapter. All of the formal techniques used are shorthand for the global capitalist system that it is referencing but it overwhelms more than it explains. Here the fantastic detective serial does not think that through soberly showing the objects and apparatus of capital can the realities of the social form of capital become visible. In contrast, the fantastic detective serial uses the fantastic to make us reflect on the metaphysics of capital itself.

The fantastic was first theorized by the literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov, who characterized it as an uncertain reaction to something that is deemed impossible both to the reader and the characters of the narrative.

Which brings us to the very heart of the fantastic. In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to use. Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really exists, precisely like other living beings—with this reservation that we encounter him infrequently.

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experience by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event (Todorov 25).

All of the shows have unexplainable fantastic moments, such as the mysterious shapes that Rust sees in the sky, the UFO from *Fargo*, the Sudden Departure of *The Leftovers*, and the bizarre Black Lodge and its denizens from *Twin Peaks*. These scenes achieve a different affect with regards to the unknowable. The editing of *Breaking Bad* creates images that lose the audience in the bewildering sprawl of capital. The fantastic however, shows impossible images that can be observed but cannot be understood, in other words the fantastic invites a hermeneutic attitude

toward that which cannot be understood. Therefore, the fantastic detective serial manages to make the invisible leap from exchange to capital visible without losing the spectator in the capitalist sublime.

Now that the problem of *Breaking Bad*'s attempts of aestheticizing capital have been explained a holistic discussion of the fantastic detective serial will follow.

### **2.3 Considering the Fantastic Detective Serial Holistically**

Moving on from *Breaking Bad* and its ambivalent relationship to realism creates the opportunity for the fantastic detective serial to stage its intervention. The four shows, *True Detective*, *Fargo*, *The Leftovers*, *Twin Peaks: The Return* appear, at least initially, to be quite similar to the programs that were discussed earlier; *Breaking Bad*, *The Sopranos*, and *The Wire*. They are all American drama television shows that contain, to varying degrees, characters that are criminals and law enforcement officers. The programs also make some statement on the intertwining between American capital and something much more sinister. However, this is where the similarities begin to end. This section of the chapter is dedicated to teasing out the unique attributes of the fantastic detective serial. There are two major things that must be established in this section. First, a case must be made for why it makes sense to consider these four television programs as if they belong in a group. Therefore, a holistic discussion of both the thematic and the narrative content of the fantastic detective serial will establish how these four shows are clearly working through the same problems and are in conversation with each other. Second, this section will also describe how the fantastic detective serials are relevant to the theoretical problems that were discussed in the previous chapter. The main theoretical problem

that will be explored is the different ways that the fantastic detective serial aestheticizes the “leap” from the objects of capital that are visible to the invisible structure of capital itself.

I will begin with a reiteration of the main theoretical problem that the fantastic detective serial tends to confront. As discussed in the first chapter, there is a breach in the theoretical literature between those who believe that there is something new about modern capitalism that makes it so difficult to perceive and another group of thinkers who believe that capital has always been impossible to adequately represent. Thinkers such as Shaviro, Toscano, Kinkle, and Steyerl are preoccupied with modern technologies and the bewildering worlds that they create, while theorists such as Kornbluh adamantly state that capital has always just been a social form. To reiterate the claim that was made last chapter, Kornbluh’s writing on capital as a social form states that capital is a mediating force that structures social relations. It is present only in how it makes connections between people and commodities. It is my claim that the fantastic detective serial does not overtly side with one or the other group but rather dramatizes these tensions.

The theme of misrepresenting or misunderstanding the world is implemented in the shows through the generic device of detection. At the basest level, *True Detective*, *Fargo*, and the original seasons of *Twin Peaks* are all detective shows because one of the central characters (if not the only central character) is a detective. Marty and Rust from *True Detective*, Dale Cooper from *Twin Peaks*, and Gloria Burgle from *Fargo* are all law enforcement officers and a large portion of the narrative is dedicated to their investigations of some criminal conspiracy. However, the theme of detection extends beyond the specific functioning of the legal apparatus and becomes more of a general behavior in which the characters are trying to understand the world itself through their deductive abilities. This is most clear in *The Leftovers* where the show’s catalyzing event—the Sudden Departure in which 2% of the world’s population

disappears without explanation—leaves the characters to try and understand the world that is left behind.

In the shows, the detective figure is disoriented in both space and time. The detectives are often associated with small-town America and its nostalgic trappings and associations. All of the fantastic detective serials involve a collision between a small town and cynical globalized capitalism. In the earlier *Twin Peaks* seasons from the 90's, Dale Cooper arrives in the small town of Twin Peaks investigating the murder of Laura Palmer and he fits right into the community, bringing with him a folksy mysticism and an innocent appreciation for the town's aesthetic. In the *Return*, which came out in 2017, Cooper does not go back to the eponymous small town but rather is trapped in the bodies of doppelgangers and gets lost in the suburbs. Disjointed in history, he departs the show by simply asking “what year is it?” Cooper's affinity for a nostalgic small-town community aided him in his investigation in the first two seasons but was ultimately stonewalled in the bewildering American suburbia or the urban environments of Las Vegas.

This collision between old and new forms of capitalism is at its most explicit in episode 8 of *The Return*.<sup>23</sup> The episode follows the first atomic bomb test in 1945 and its supernatural aftermath. The camera gives us a privileged view in which we enter the mushroom cloud which contains a barrage of abstract imagery. The supernatural extends beyond the interior of the mushroom cloud as the camera changes its perspective to watching a gas station. The gas station is denaturalized through the continuation of the same musical cues as well as its inconsistent frame rate. After the detonation, the spirit BOB, the primary malevolent force in the series, is shown terrorizing the rural communities of the American southwest. The mysterious figures who

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<sup>23</sup> I owe a great deal of my reading to Kate Rennebohm's article “A Little Night Music: *Twin Peaks: The Return*, Part Eight.”



spread BOB's influence look like a disheveled bastardization of the white working class complete with facial hair, flannel, and jeans. The atomic bomb, the culmination of technological prowess, causes the working class of America to return as a symptom to haunt America's rural communities.

The dynamic is also present in *Fargo* throughout all 3 seasons. The main narrative thrust of each season of *Fargo* involves a cynical outside force arriving in small town America. This outsider can be a violent criminal such as Lorne Malvo (Billy Bob Thornton), the villainous banker V.M. Varga (David Thewlis), or the Kansas City Mafia. Things necessarily turn violent after this foreign incursion and it becomes the duty of local law enforcement to sort out the mess. The protagonist-detective of the story has unwavering morals and exceeds beyond the bumbling or corrupt local police force to pursue the criminal. However, despite the strong morals that these characters possess, they are often overwhelmed by the baseless violence and institutions of the modern world. For example, Lou Solverson, (Patrick Wilson) from the 2<sup>nd</sup> season, is a Minnesota police officer who is adamant in his sense of justice but does not understand the burgeoning bureaucracy of the late 70s and early 80s. He does not understand why his wife Betsy (Cristin Milioti) received placebo pills for his cancer treatment. Nor does he agree with how the larger police force diplomatically deals with the local crime family the Gerhards. His confusion reaches its apex when he asks then-candidate for president Ronald Reagan (Bruce Campbell) for guidance but receives only empty platitudes and confusion from Reagan, thus showcasing the inability for political institutions to assist him.

*True Detective* also stages this central thematic collision between the small American town and the bewildering modern world. In the beginning of the first season, Marty was able to balance his career, marriage, and infidelity in a cynical reiteration of a working man from 1960's

suburbia. But by the end of the first season, he has been reduced to an old man removed from the police force and stumbling through the modern world. Now divorced, he clumsily uses online dating services, dines on microwaved dinners, and seems to have somberly accepted his new life. The third season of *True Detective* thematizes the meeting of small-town America with modernity through mental illness. Wayne Hays (Mahershala Ali) who is shown as an adroit detective in the 1980s and 90s, is suffering from dementia in 2015. The scenes that take place in 2015 are mostly framed around a video recorded interview between Hays and Eliza Montgomery (Sarah Gadon). These scenes are filled with examples of modern technology—portable video cameras, laptops, and smart phones—which are underscored for the ways in which they further confuse the already disoriented Hays.

Finally, *The Leftovers* also contains this dynamic. After the Departure, the small town of Jarden, Texas receives international media attention after it is determined that nobody in the entire town disappeared. People across the world flock to the town viewing it as a new holy site that can offer refuge in this new confusing world. The interior of Jarden resembles a picture-perfect American town with an idyllic main street and white picket fences. However, just outside the borders of the town is a squatter's camp of people trying to enter, with people living in abject conditions trying to break into the sealed-off Jarden. In the new cynical world of *The Leftovers*, the small town can only be maintained through violent repression and draconian border maintenance.

This inclusion of the small town is reminiscent of Jameson's critique of the nostalgia film. In his essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in the *Anti-Aesthetic*, Jameson defines this mode's unique relationship to both pastiche and parody. The major distinction between parody and pastiche is that parody revels in the idiosyncrasies of that which it is imitating.

However, this is conditional on their being an assumption of a ‘normal’ style that can be used to compare against the quirks of the parodied target. Pastiche assumes a flattened hierarchy, since where there is no ‘normal’ pastiche hijacks the aesthetic form of its target without using it to draw a comparison. A nostalgia movie is filmed pastiche, in which the modes of previous times are turned into spectacles to enjoy. In using examples such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Body Heat*, and *American Graffiti*, Jameson states that the nostalgia film is symptomatic because:

To find the very style of nostalgia films invading and colonizing even those movies today which have contemporary settings: as though, for some reason, we were unable today to focus our own present, as though we have become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience (Jameson 117).

What does this mean with regards to the fantastic detective serial’s overtures to the signifiers of small-town America? It is quite clear that the fantastic detective serial does not use the small town as a source of pastiche, since pastiche requires its source to be taken at face-value and to not be compared to anything else. Since the idyllic communities in the shows are either disturbed by outside forces or shown to be not as peaceful as initially assumed, this shatters the illusion of them being “normal.” The shows encourage a comparison between the small-town with its folksy denizens with the encroaching global capitalism. This historicizes the communities and prevents their aesthetics from being unproblematically consumed. Having the small towns already be corrupted by evil forces shatters the pastiche. For example, the town of Twin Peaks contains a portal to the supernatural dimension of the Black Lodge and all of the evil forces that lurk within. *Fargo* also showcases the corruption of the small town, there nostalgic naivety leaves the small Northern Midwest communities totally incapable to deal with more modern cynical violence.

This more critical depiction of the American small town is also highly reminiscent of the theoretical tensions that were described in the beginning of this section. The world of the

fantastic detective serial does not keep the artisanal capitalism of Main Streets and Mom and Pop stores separate from the most criminal elements of modern capitalism. This mixture of modern and antiquated modes of capitalism complicates the question of capital's representability.

Different eras of capitalism are present as a series of images: the main streets of Minnesota in *Fargo* are juxtaposed with the expressionless buildings of modern global capitalism, or the comparison between rural Washington and Las Vegas casinos in *Twin Peaks*

These images are clearly referencing stereotypes of different eras of capitalism, but then the shows muddy the stereotypes by showing the close relationship between all forms of capitalism, the store fronts of *Fargo* contain back doors connected to vast financial conspiracies and the ethnically marked gangsters controlling the casinos of *Twin Peaks* are bought out by boring corporate suits. This creation and then destruction of signifiers of different forms of capitalism belie an ambivalence to capital's representability. In the world of the fantastic detective serial capital is visible, yet also easy to misinterpret. The shows create an illusory form of capital that demands to be understood—the missing capitalist core referenced in Toscano and Kinkle's work, yet this is also incomplete. Capital initially appears to be nothing more than a smokestack in the landscape of *True Detective* or a collection of parking lots in *Fargo*, yet this idea necessarily misses the reality of how capital fits into the web of social relations, or how the physical objects turn into capital. The question then becomes *how* is this extra step in capital's creation aestheticized in the fantastic detective serial? To answer that question, we must again return to the topic of the detective figure.

As discussed earlier, this collision also complicates the detective figure's negotiation of the world around them. The folksy detective from small-town America finds herself in a new and bewildering world which is hard to decipher. This device of the protagonist trying to understand

the metaphysical rules of their world is sufficiently similar to what is occurring in the mind game film that the fantastic detective serial must be differentiated from it.

Thomas Elsaesser's essay "The Mind-Game film" in the book *The Puzzle Film* describes the sub-genre as a film in which the "character is being played with, without knowing it or without knowing who is playing with them" (Elsaesser 14). He connects this act of play with the withholding of information from the audience and the characters and uses *Fight Club*, *Se7en*, *The Truman Show* and *The Sixth Sense* as exemplars of the sub-genre. These movies play with the audience by restricting the film to the perspective of one protagonist. *Fight Club*' twist is achieved by keeping the film closely tied to the narrator's (Edward Norton) perspective. Or, as in *The Sixth Sense*, the playful withholding of information is achieved by keeping the film tied to people with altered mental states, in this case, Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment), who sees visions of dead people, and Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) who is dead. The fantastic detective serial, however, does not restrict its weirdness to just one individual and their perspective. It instead extends the madness of the narrative beyond the perspective of one character both by having the shows be more of an ensemble cast with multiple characters and through the incursion of the fantastic.

This difference signifies a movement from an epistemological problem to an ontological problem. Elsaesser's mind-game film forges a connection between a mad character and thematizes a narrative around this character's mental condition. For example, *A Beautiful Mind*, a film about a paranoid schizophrenic, extends the idea of paranoia beyond just the protagonist's mind and has a plot concerned with Soviet espionage. Here the film uses the espionage theme to comment on the protagonist's deteriorating mental condition. This differs from the fantastic detective serial which uses a character's mental state to comment on the condition of the world.

Instead of thematizing an individual's mental condition, the shows move the madness away from the individual and onto the world. This tension between a mad world compared to mad people is best exemplified in *The Leftovers*. In *The Leftovers*, the impossible has happened: 2% of the world's population has disappeared for no reason. But Kevin Garvey's family suffers from mental illness. This is where the fantastic creates a tension between the subject and the world itself.

This tension becomes present even in the pilot. Kevin Garvey, acting in his duties as chief of police, visits one of the townsfolk to inform them that their dog has died. On the walk up to the house, Kevin noticeably reacts to a deer lawn ornament. After knocking on the door, Kevin again looks in the direction of the lawn ornament, and the camera then switches perspective to appear to be coming from the deer's location. As soon as Kevin introduces himself, Mrs. Tunney, the homeowner asks if "he is the one that went crazy?" He responds that that was his father, but this introduces Kevin's family history of mental illness. While getting ready to leave the house and talking to his lieutenant on the phone, Kevin looks up and the ornament has disappeared. In a narrative that was bereft of supernatural occurrences this scene would appear to be an unambiguous instance of the drama introducing Kevin's mental problems to the audience. However, in the show's structuring idea, the Departure—where things that existed suddenly disappeared, the ornament disappearing gains a double meaning. In fact, the thematic similarity of the ornament vanishing and the Departure is so strong that if it were not for the conversation introducing Kevin's mental health history to the audience, the scene could very easily be interpreted as just an aesthetic callback to the Departure. This creates confusion both in the audience and Kevin, where there is a tension between the impossibility of the Departure and the rather mundane explanation of it just being the protagonist's own weak grip on reality.

The fantastic moments serve as the apotheosis of the confusion created by modern capital. Instead of the barrier of understanding being the protagonist's own mental instability it is rather a function of the world. In the world of the mind-game film the madness is displaced upon the individual, which implies that the world could be understood if only the protagonist were not insane. However, the supernatural moments of the fantastic detective serial creates a world that is fundamentally outside the realm of human perception. Certain phenomenon, no matter whether you are sane or insane cannot be understood. The fantastic then serves as what was missing from the previous discussion of aestheticizing capitalism as nothing but a smokestack or a parking garage, since the fantastic functions as the element that is outside of human perception—just like the transition from exchange to capital.

I will follow the holistic discussion of the fantastic detective serial with a more in-depth visual analysis of sequences from *True Detective*, *The Leftovers* and *Twin Peaks*. These will all serve to build up on the themes that the fantastic detective serials share while also acknowledging the shows as individual art objects that can use these themes in different ways. I will discuss the contradictory visual status of capital in *True Detective*, especially how it is framed in the landscape of a multitude of scenes. Considering *The Leftovers* I will discuss the relationship to paranoid thrillers and how the fantastic detective serial uses paranoia differently. Lastly, *Twin Peaks* will be used to discuss the interplay between the fantastic and detection and how the supernatural of the fantastic detective serial differs from Lovecraftian cosmic horror.

## **2.4 Unstable Capital**

Here I will focus on how *True Detective* displays the chemical industry that is so prevalent in Louisiana. When considering the framing of the industry and its presence in the

show, Casey Riley Kelly's "The Toxic Screen: Visions of Petrochemical America in HBO's *True Detective*" provides a foundation. Kelly talks about the connection between the duo's investigation and the pollution that is caused by the local chemical industry.

The story of *True Detective* is a murder mystery. State detectives Martin 'Marty' Walsh and Rustin 'Rust' Cohle investigate the murder of young women in the Deep South. The narrative interweaves several timelines that involve the pair investigating the original murder of Dora Lange as well as the conspiracy that covered up the initial killing. Eventually after Rust's becomes dissatisfied with the original solution to the case he finds evidence of a connection between religious and political institutions that has formed a cult to ritualistically abuse children. This leads the pair to Errol Childress (Glenn Fleshler) the man who committed the murders and who is a distant relative of the wealthy and well-connected Tuttle family. But ultimately after Childress is killed by the two detectives the Tuttle family is disgraced but not arrested.

On the Lange murder, the inciting action of the narrative, Kelly remarks that, "toxic images of ash and aluminum infer that Lange's murder is the byproduct that is physically and symbolically polluted. Lange is found in an incinerated cane field, still smoldering and blanketed in black ash" (Kelly 4). Ultimately, Kelly's comparison hinges upon Dora Lange being a victim in the chemical corporations' pollution, thus pairing together the act of the criminal with that of the corporation. This pairing, according to Kelly also serves to normalize the death of those that are most vulnerable, a statement that is supported by the police department's desire to drop the case.

With these observations in mind the questions that still needs to be addressed is Marty and Rust's investigation: how does the intertwining of capital and institutions effect the job of the detective? How can the figure of the detective make sense in the new bewildering world of



modern capitalism? Answering these questions will involve considering the aesthetics of the process of their investigation.

There are several driving sequences in *True Detective*. These sequences give time to develop the interpersonal relationship between Marty and Rust. However, more importantly, the sequences serve to highlight how remote some of the places that the duo end up visiting can be, whether they are decaying suburbs and strip malls, houses in the forest, or communities on the bayou. Their importance is highlighted by the fact that these driving sequences are not worked around via dialogue and that the remoteness of locations are in fact explicitly referenced.<sup>24</sup> *True Detective* does stick to the assumption that the places farthest from civilization—in this case the Ledoux’s meth lab or the lair of Errol Childress are the locations where explicit violence can erupt most readily. The part that will be investigated further is how the explicit violence that occurs in the remote places that Marty and Rust investigate is paired with the generalized violence of capital that is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere.

The chemical industry occupies a puzzling place in the show, it is a consistent presence—smokestacks and other signs of heavy industry are present in the background of a multitude of shots. However, this industry is also elusive, the prevailing industries are referenced only in brief dialogue with the side characters that Marty and Rust question during their investigation. It is especially notable how industry is *not* present both visually and within the narrative. The investigation never leads the two detectives to enter the locations of heavy industry that are constantly present in the margins of the landscape. In fact, the closest thing to an industrial space that the duo enters is Ledoux’s meth lab, where the fabrication of chemicals that was eluded to in the background finds a darkly parodic parallel.

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<sup>24</sup> For example: Rust’s comment that “this is like someone’s memory of a town, and the memory is fading” (Season 1 Episode 1).

The scant verbal and visual references to industry highlight the contradictory position of capital with respect to the world of *True Detective*. In the beginning of the second episode, *Seeing Things*, Marty and Rust go talk to two people connected to the murdered Lange: her mother Mrs. Kelly (Tess Harper) and her friend Carla Gwartney (Amy Brassette). The conversation with Mrs. Kelly takes place in her cluttered suburban home and is interrupted when she gets a debilitating headache that prevents her from answering Marty's question. Mrs. Kelly comments that the headaches are a product of her working in dry-cleaning and the constant exposure to the chemicals have given her chronic headaches and other ailments. After a close-up on her hands and a comment about her damaged fingernails the camera cuts to another driving sequence as the pair of detectives go to the next lead. Here industry and pollution are shown to be a barrier to the process of detection; Mrs. Kelly's conditions make Marty and Rust's job of finding Dora Lange's murderer more difficult. In the story and not the plot it is likely after her headache episode Mrs. Kelly was able to concentrate enough to answer Marty's questions. The decision to cut after the headache attack but prior to her recovery underscores the destabilizing effect that the play of industry has on peoples' lives.

The conversation with Carla Gwartney goes differently. They do not talk in a domestic space but rather the outside of what appears to be an auto repair shop in a lower-class neighborhood. Of note is how the lot is filled with dozens of used tires.<sup>25</sup> This frames the area as lower-class as well as on the border of lawlessness. The area is highlighted as a dumping ground of capital that is usually not accounted for, as capitalism is consistently concerned with not

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<sup>25</sup> This scene is not alone in its usage of used tires as a signifier of modern pollution brought forth by the anthropocene. In the more bizarre sequences of *First Reformed* (dir. Paul Schrader), Ernst Toller (Ethan Hawke) imagines beautiful natural landscapes before seeing traumatizing visions of modern pollution. While, the image after idyllic forests is a rather bland picture traffic, the first image that truly wishes to signify the horrors of modern industry is a massive pile of tires that the camera cannot see the edges of.

showing people what happens to commodities after their use. The marginal status of the communities that Marty and Rust explore during the investigation signify a complex relationship with the associations between remoteness, capital, and law. While in this neighborhood capital is not present at the level of factories it does directly impact the lives of people who need to try and live in a town covered in used tires. In addition, while the signifiers of traditional civil society are not present, the ability for Carla to give the two detectives a lead shows how the relatively lawless space can help the functioning of law. Even the contents of the lead are also relevant to this dynamic. Carla informs the pair of the existence of a campground that serves as a sanctuary for prostitutes that work and live in the area. The camp is also a continuation of the same theme between the conversations of Mrs. Kelly and Carla. The camp is strictly speaking illegal and bereft of the any of the signifiers of modern capitalism, but it is also sanctioned because of the bribery of the local sheriff which is supported by the exploitation of the labor of the women.

However, nowhere is the contradictory nature of late capitalism better showcased than in the following episode, *The Locked Room*. The episode involves Marty and Rust following clues that lead them to a traveling religious congregation that Dora Lange attended. The drive both to and from the congregation on the bayou involves the usual high-angle extreme long shots which give plenty of space to display the combination of the natural environment and the looming factories in the background. The recurring visual motif is interrupted while the duo is at the Christian revival. In a confusing shot, the police car is seen in the foreground and occupying the background is the now-normal view of the looming smokestacks. As the image lingers, the structure in the background begins to move and reveals itself to be a barge. The surprising visual trick is achieved by the violation of expectations, since there have been many large industrial objects in the background but so far none of them have moved. This is also aided by the angling

of the camera which accentuates the natural topography of Louisiana that makes the barge appear to be above the land.

The image of the surprisingly mobile capital provides a response to the discussion on naturalism that opened this chapter. Strictly speaking the human eye can see the image of the barge that was in *True Detective* yet it still surprises. Here *True Detective* has a more sophisticated way of surpassing naturalism than the second montage of *Breaking Bad*. Whereas the *Breaking Bad* montage used disorienting editing strategies in order to develop a new way to aestheticize capital, *True Detective* stays within the same style to show how capital contradicts itself. This contradiction is created by the exemplar of physical capital, the factory, being not as solid as initially assumed. The “two capitals” that occupy the background of *True Detective*’s landscapes are both shot in the same style, they are both in the background of landscape images and are shot with very deep focus. However, these similarities make the fact that industry can move that much more surprising. This is also highly reminiscent of one of the main problems located in the first chapter, mainly the argument over terms like industrial vs post-industrial capitalism. Here industry as well as its bizarre mobile counterpart are presented in the same way, suggesting that their separation is not so simple.

The sequence is relevant as it highlights the unstable and ultimately contradictory nature of capitalism. Capital in *True Detective* is constantly present yet also elusive, it is an unmoving presence in the background of so many of the landscapes, but it is also deceptively mobile and fluid. This condition is expressed in Mark Fisher’s *Weird and the Eerie*, which states that, “it should be especially clear to those of us in a globally tele-connected capitalist world that those forces are not fully available to our sensory apprehension. A force like capital does not exist in any substantial sense, yet it is capable of producing exactly any kind of effect” (Fisher 64).

While *True Detective* is not concerned with the global tele-connected capitalist world that Fisher references it in fact goes farther in creating this alienating affect. It is assumed that the factory is a form of capital that is more stable and is a 'real object' yet it too is fluid and mobile. Even the exemplars of industrial capitalism are not as solid as initially assumed. The contradictory features of capital are also expressed in *Twin Peaks: The Return* where large institutions like casinos in Las Vegas are shown to be fragile enough to be disturbed by the bungling of the idiot-savant Dougie Jones (Kyle MacLachlan).

This visual theme has many corollaries with the theoretical problems that were raised in the previous chapter. Of particular interest is the question whether or not modern capitalism is especially resistant to symbolization. *True Detective* offers a position on the matter by embracing the contradictory nature of capital that is written about in the works of Kornbluh, namely, that capital is nothing more than a social form. This is achieved by exposing capital as contradictory, as both overwhelmingly present and also absent. Capital is an unmovable object and a slowly drifting image in the background. The fact that these things can be capital in the world of *True Detective* means that there is no one object that makes up capital, but rather it is how the objects relate to society. Despite capital often appearing as a solid stable presence, such as in the case of the chemical factories in the background, it can also be only visible in a pile of tires or a moving object.

The contrast between the moving barge and the solid factories achieves an effect that is similar to the appearance of the fantastic. Like the fantastic moments in these detective serials, the barge scene encourages doubt in the spectator about what they are observing. When Rust is in the lair of Errol Childress and he sees the spiraling galaxy shape, the audience does not know if this a product of brain damage from drug abuse or a constitutive feature of the criminal space he

has entered. This is akin to the doubt that is encouraged when the audience sees the barge move: is this solid capital or something new? I will now turn to this dynamic in the context of *The Leftovers* and how its appeal to the fantastic creates a new paradigm of paranoid thrillers.

## 2.5 A New Paranoia

Kevin Garvey's mental illness was discussed in the earlier section by way of contrast with the mind-game film, and this portion will compare Kevin's portrayal with another character Dean (Michael Gaston). This comparison will highlight how the inclusion of the fantastic in the narrative gives the paranoid elements of the story a new dimension. Many of the other fantastic detective serial's use conspiracy as a narrative device. For example, there is the cult that Rust uncovers in his investigation of *True Detective*, or, and this will be discussed in the next chapter, the portrayal of the unscrupulous financier Varga. However, *The Leftovers* is where paranoia and conspiracy are at its most clear, so this section is dedicated to an analysis of the differing delusions of Dean and Kevin.

The disparity between capital's existence and its effects on people's lives is often described as a key source of paranoia. Fisher states in the *Weird and the Eerie* that feelings of paranoia stem from the fact that capital has such an effect on our lives, yet it is ultimately not present. This causes individuals to place a subject in a place where there is none (Fisher 2016 63). In the case of a paranoid thriller, the protagonist tries to find the subject that is behind all of the machinations that are influencing their lives. In George Wead's article "Towards a Definition of Filmnoia" he states that the essence of paranoia is having an "undefinable 'They' out to get the protagonist" (Wead 1). It must be stressed that Wead defines the essence of paranoia as a fear of

a “they” not an “it.” The paranoid subject replaces the “it” of capitalism with the “they” of a subjective force, *The Leftovers* however does something different.

The case of *The Leftovers* is much more complex. As described earlier, since the impossible has already happened it becomes ambiguous whether or not Kevin is mentally ill. Are his rambling a product of insanity or the result of a new and confusing world? It is in this way that *The Leftover’s* usage of the fantastic and mental illness makes it function as the paranoid thriller of modern capitalism. While the paranoid film’s characters imagine large conspiracies controlled by shadowy individuals, Kevin is unable to even be paranoid about something that explicit, instead his mind unravels without having a clear source of his insanity.

The difference between the two modes of paranoia described here are thematized in *The Leftovers* through the relationship of the characters Dean and Kevin. Dean is introduced as a mysterious man that hunts the dogs that have gone feral after their owners disappear. Kevin only ever meets with Dean when he is alone, and it is easy to assume that Dean is a product of Kevin’s fraying sanity. Once Kevin starts sleepwalking, he joins Dean on his hunts for the feral dogs. When Kevin enters a fugue state and kidnaps Patti (Ann Dowd), a leader in a local cult that has constantly opposed Kevin, he also contacts Dean to assist him. Dean gets annoyed when Kevin wakes up and is not willing to kill her and he subsequently leaves. This is the last time Dean is seen in the first two seasons.

Throughout the first season Dean’s justification for hunting the dogs is explained and is understood by Kevin. This conflicts greatly with his brief appearance in the third season. Dean visits Kevin who is now a police officer in Jarden, Texas. In the meeting, Dean pulls out a cooler with a peanut butter sandwich and calmly tries to explain to Kevin that the feral dogs that they once hunted in Mapleton have begun to evolve and become “more sophisticated.” He then tells a

story of a senator of Wyoming ordering a peanut butter sandwich at a catered event Dean was working. Dean claims that if Kevin tested said sandwich, he would find trace amounts of canine DNA in the saliva. The musical cues communicate an increasing amount of tension which helps create ambiguity in how Kevin will react. In fact, the audience has seen Kevin's possible insanity for two seasons of television prior to this episode, so whether or not he will believe Dean's absurd tale of dog-senators is unclear. However, Kevin abruptly ends the conversation and flatly tells Dean that he is imagining things, that what he thinks and sees is all in his head.

This dynamic helps show two different ways of responding to the realities of capitalism. Dean presents a now almost quaint insanity. Of note is how Dean's paranoia is targeted towards figures of institutional power like American senators while Kevin's own bouts of insanity are much more existential, seeing things disappear, having visions of dead people, etc. While not explicitly referencing capital, the target of Dean's delusions being American senators makes clear the relationships of power in his manufactured conspiracy. Dean targeting senators makes it easy to place in Wead's model of filmnoia. Capitalism determines Dean's life and yet it is not a substantial presence, hence Dean places his manufactured conspiracy of dog-people where the missing subject of capitalism belongs. Kevin recognizing the ludicrousness of Dean's proposition showcases his different relationship to the missing subject of capitalism. He is not sane, yet he does not rationalize modern capitalism to himself by placing a subject in the place where there is none.

The target of Dean's paranoia is the American government, one of the power structures of capital, while Kevin is more concerned with the ontology of the world. This dynamic both uses the fantastic and is reminiscent of the theoretical tensions discussed earlier. The fantastic engenders doubt about the world of *The Leftovers* in a way that is agnostic to Kevin's mental



state, the impossible has happened and labeling him as mentally ill becomes complicated. Meanwhile, Dean's delusion seems vulgar in its simplicity while also implying a simpler representation of capital. Where Kevin's target is the ontology of the world, Dean clumsily targets one specific institution. This difference highlights a change in how paranoia is used in the fantastic detective serial. Dean's nonsensical delusion is naive because of how easily he finds a target to use for the missing subject of capitalism. Dean's solution distills the numerous contradictions and eccentricities of modern capitalism into the absurd force of American senators turning into dogs. Kevin does not imagine one target but rather a diffuse lack of stability in the existence of all things. In other words, Kevin does not experience the missing subject of capitalism clearly enough to replace it with one thing. This is a radical break when compared to the classic paranoid thrillers described by Wead. The paranoia that the missing subject of capital engenders in the fantastic detective serial does not provoke the character to fill in the missing subject but rather to inhabit its absence.

The last section will conclude with a discussion of the interplay between the fantastic and the elements of detection through a visual analysis of *Twin Peaks: The Return*. In addition, there will also be a discussion differentiating the supernatural of the fantastic detective serial with the similar device of Lovecraftian cosmic horror.

## **2.6 The Fantastic and Detection**

Todorov did not believe detective stories could have moments of the fantastic. He said that the "detective story can approach the fantastic but in the end, it leaves no doubt to the absence of supernatural events" (Todorov 49-50). This makes sense if the pleasure of the detective story is in the conclusive investigation of the criminal act. In fact, it is rather easy to

image the incursion of the supernatural into the otherwise straight detective story being labeled as a cheap way to shore up the inadequacies of a weak writer. The question then becomes what do these supernatural elements add to the crime shows? What are they if *not* ways for writers to cheaply get their heroes out of impossibly tight positions, or perhaps even worse, how can they become more than just moments of pure aesthetic excess or spectacle?

Detectives and detection mirror the other themes discussed in the previous sections of this chapter. In the befuddling worlds of the fantastic detective serial where the impossible can happen, the desire to make sense is natural. However, the central narrative mysteries of the shows or the origins of their fantastic elements often end up not being explained. In *Fargo*, *Twin Peaks* and *The Leftovers* the ultimate origin of the supernatural phenomena is never explained. Similarly, in *True Detective*, Marty and Rust are unable to completely unravel the web of conspiracy between the murders and the political or religious institutions. My claim is that the fantastic serves as the gap between the world and possible knowledge of it. However, this gap is not one of pure negativity, but has productive qualities.

To explore this phenomenon, I will begin by analyzing some of the fantastic elements that are in *The Return* that surround the activities of the peculiar character Dougie Jones.

Within the narrative, Dougie Jones is a perplexing creation of the Black Lodges' mysterious forces. He has the physical body of Dale Cooper which was extruded out of an electrical socket in suburban Las Vegas. This being occupies the life of a (presumably) average man with a wife and a child who works for an insurance company. Dougie Jones spends most of the show in an almost brain-dead state; he moves extremely slowly and methodically and can often only repeat the most recent words that were said to him. Nevertheless, he is imbued with supernatural perceptual abilities. These abilities appear twice in the narrative. The first instance

is when the symbol of the Black Lodge appears over slot machines in a casino, prompting Dougie to win a string of jackpots. The second instance occurs when he is completing insurance claim paperwork, as he investigates the veracity of an insurance claim (making the theme of detection quite explicit). While staring at the papers he hears voices from one of the beings from the Black Lodge and is guided by lights that appears on the papers. He uses the lights to draw bizarre lines and connections between them. The scribbles are originally written off as useless, but his boss later uses them to unearth financial malfeasance within the paperwork that was initially missed.

While these examples might appear to be far afield from the discussion of detection, they are all interested with one of its base elements, that of finding relevant information. The act of using rationality to find the meaning behind phenomenon is tied with modernism. This development is described at length in Peter Brook's essay *Fictions of the Wolfman: Freud and Narrative Understanding*:

In the background of my argument lies the assumption that narrative became an integral and often dominant element of most explanatory structures from sometime early in Romanticism on. In large generalization, we might say that this is because sometime after the Renaissance, and with gathering force through the Enlightenment and into the nineteenth century, the sense of a central, organizing Sacred myth was weakened and dispersed. No longer could there be an underlying confidence in a Providential history which subsumed all the errant individual human histories to some justified, if distant, end, and showed passing time as leading to and recuperated by the timeless. With the decline in belief in a sacred masterplot, the life-history of societies, institutions, and individuals assumed new importance. The interpretation of human plots, especially the understanding and justification of their generalizable patterns, became a task of prime urgency. No form better summarizes this urgency than that nineteenth-century invention, the detective story, which implicitly claims that all

action is motivated and eventually comprehensible to the perceptive observer. The urgency of the task of interpreting plot is nicely suggested by a remark of Sherlock Holmes' at the conclusion of one of his cases: "What is the meaning of it, Watson? ... What object is served by this circle of misery and violence and fear? It must tend to some end, or else our universe is ruled by chance, which is unthinkable. But what end? There is the great standing perennial problem to which human reason is as far from an answer as ever" [Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Adventure of the Cardboard Box" in *His Last Bow* (London, 1971)]. In Holmes' question there sounds both the anguish of the investigator who can't quite put all the evidence together in a final explanatory theory, and also the Edwardian confidence that there must be an intelligible end, a pattern both coherent and ultimately detectable (Brooks 1979 74).

According to Brooks, the 'death of the masterplot' leads to an increased need in the individual's own deductive powers. In lieu of this masterplot the individual gains the power to negotiate meaning. Or in Brooks' words "The detective story exhibits a reality structured as a set of ambiguous signs which gain their meaning from a past history which employs the production of these signs as a chain of events, eventually with a clear origin, intention, and solution" (ibid.). The type of detective that Brooks is describing is termed in the writing of John G. Cawelti, as the 'ratiocinative detective.'

At this point we can return to the questions that were in the introduction of this chapter, that of the relationship between naturalism and capitalist structure. The ratiocinative detective's preoccupation with individual crimes is at odds with an ability to show the systemic realities of modern capitalism. Therefore, in order to best communicate the structures of modern capitalism the fantastic detective serial eschews the naturalist mode. Logic fails when trying to comprehend capital, so the shows embrace its illogical nature, either by showing the contradictory reality of capital or entering the realm of the supernatural.

This idea of the inability for the ratiocinative detective to deal with structure did not originate with the fantastic detective serial. To reiterate Cawelti's statement, the object of the hard-boiled detective is not one individual but rather a corrupt society. The hard-boiled detective meandering through the criminal underworld also avoids using logic and instead uses experience in order to solve the crime. The question than arises is where does Dougie fall onto this binary and what does that tell us about the movement of the fantastic detective serial as a whole?

The fantastic detective serial falls closer on the hard-boiled side when considering the object of investigation. For example, in *True Detective*, although the arc starts with Marty and Rust investigating the murder of Dora Lange, the stakes quickly escalate into a more conspiratorial story with an interest in corruption and the intertwining of religious and political institutions. The idea that the hard-boiled detective does not find only one guilty party makes it more difficult to determine how justice can be obtained as there is not just one criminal that needs to be stopped. Dougie Jones' supernatural abilities assist him with systems that are beyond the realm of human perception, that of the institution of the casino and the opaque functioning of the insurance company. This makes Dougie similar to the hard-boiled detective in the fact that he interacts with similar systems that are often used as sources of corruption, but his supernatural abilities allow him to confront them in a way that is different from the detective of pulp novels or film noir. Here the fantastic incursion allows for the previously indecipherable functions of institutions to become visible to human perception.

This usage of the fantastic differentiates it from other, similar usages of the supernatural in fiction. Since the fantastic in this body of television shows is never explained it needs to be distinguished from Lovecraftian weird fiction or cosmic horror. The major differentiating factor is the interest that the supernatural forces have with the lives of the human characters. In Vivian

Ralickas's essay: "'Cosmic Horror' and the Question of the Sublime in Lovecraft" a definite feature of Lovecraft's own brand of fiction is the disinterest that the horrible creatures have for humans (Ralickas 2). One of the major sources of the horror is how utterly small and insignificant humanity turns out to be in the Lovecraftian universe. The creatures are not intent on destroying humanity but rather they are totally indifferent to the very existence of humans.<sup>26</sup> The fantastic moments of the fantastic detective serial is often explicitly interested in the mundane actions of human life. For example, the figures of the Black Lodge assist Dougie in filling out paperwork. Or, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> season of *Fargo* the Wandering Jew figure helps Nikki Swango (Mary Elizabeth Winstead) and Mr. Wrench (Russell Harvard) escape certain death from the pursuing Yuri Gurka (Goran Bogdan).

Connecting this phenomenon to the previous thematic discussions, the case must be made between the fantastic moments and the new unmoored and illogical capital of the fantastic detective serial. The major point of contention that was made in the chapter discussing the theory was the question of capital's representability. When discussing the issue of capital in *True Detective*, capital in these programs is not a substantial thing but rather a diffuse social form. The overwhelming presence of capital is contradicted by its ultimate lack of stability. It is my claim that the fantastic detective serial uses its supernatural elements to aestheticize capital as a social form along with all the contradictions that that entails.

The fantastic detective serial also uses the element of detection to prevent the supernatural moments from becoming a stand-in for the capitalist sublime. The second *Breaking Bad* montage loses the audience in its indecipherability, but the fantastic detective serial's supernatural moments do not provoke such an effect. Returning to *Twin Peaks*, while the bizarre

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<sup>26</sup> For example, in one Lovecraft story, *In the Mountains of Madness* it is revealed that all life on Earth, human's included, are borne from an accidental by-product of a biological experiment (ibid 6).

lights that Dougie sees are outside of the realm of normal human perception they are deployed around an explicit act of investigation which clearly marks them as an aestheticization of the large systems that cannot be seen by regular people. Detection prevents the supernatural moments from becoming the next iteration of the capitalist sublime, as it turns them from being something unknowable to a barrier in the process of investigation. This is quite clear in the presence of the galaxy-like spiral in Errol Childress's labyrinth in *True Detective*. Rust sees it right before he confronts the individual that is responsible for the crimes that he and Marty are investigating. He is unable to completely connect the larger institutions that are outside of his perception to Childress's murders that he can observe. The spiral that he sees is not just an unexplainable phenomenon but a barrier to the process of detection itself, a stand in for the unknowable structure that Rust cannot observe. This also mirrors the epistemological/ontological madness question that was discussed when comparing the shows to the mind-game film. The fantastic is not a function of madness in the individual but rather it is present as the illogical qualities of the world itself, that despite the detective's best efforts the realities of capital will always be beyond the abilities of human perception.

To conclude this section, the fantastic detective serial uses the supernatural by showing the limit in understanding the reality of capital. The machinations of the casino and the insurance company are invisible to human perception and it is only through the intervention of the supernatural forces can they be understood. In the fantastic detective serial the inscrutability of capitalism goes from a capitalist sublime to get lost in, to specific phenomena that can be observed and intuited. This idea will be developed more in the next chapter as the last show to be discussed, *Fargo*, talks about this issue the most explicitly.

## 2.7 Onward to Fargo

While this discussion of the themes of the fantastic detective serial has not been exhaustive it does position the concluding chapter for a more in-depth discussion on *Fargo*, the television show that most explicitly takes up the theoretical problems discussed in the first chapter. The fantastic detective serial works through what happens when one reckons with the reality of capital as a social form, but the 3<sup>rd</sup> season of *Fargo* moves it from a thematic discussion into a narrative discussion.

The next chapter will then be a close reading of *Fargo* (primarily the 3<sup>rd</sup> season). Of particular focus will be how the two capitalists V.M. Varga and Emmitt Stussy are portrayed. Their relationship serves as a synecdoche for all the themes that are being discussed, the representability of capital, the fantastic, conspiracy, and how this affects detection.



A junior exec under a walnut desk  
Calls the local news to tell the world whats comin' next  
"they're takin pot shots 'cross the lawn with the curtains drawn  
But its like shooting at the Chinese Wall"

Tropical Fuck Storm, *Soft Power: A Laughing Death in Meatspace*. Joyful Noise  
Recordings. 2018.

## Chapter 3: Fargo in Specific

### 3.1 Plot and the Problems

Now that I have established the broad contours of the fantastic detective serial, the third chapter will offer a more focused reading of the third season of *Fargo*. *Fargo* provides a rich territory for discussion since it explicitly dramatizes the clash between different forms of capitalism. This tension is primarily expressed in the relationship between Emmet Stussy and V.M. Varga. Here the characters offer as stand-ins for multiple points of capitalism, Stussy is referencing industrial capitalism while Varga alludes to global, financial capitalism. Beyond this relationship, I will also discuss the detective character Gloria Burgle. Gloria as the figure of the small-town hero serves as the foil to Varga. While he manipulates technology, Gloria is invisible to it. Finally, I will conclude by discussing the fantastic moments of the television show and how it equates the capital of *both* Varga and Stussy as something beyond human comprehension. Since the entire chapter will focus on the one season of television, I will begin with an in-depth plot analysis.

Emmet Stussy (Ewan McGregor) and Sy Feltz (Michael Stuhlbarg) operate Stussy Lots, a parking lot corporation in Minnesota. The company was in financial trouble during the 2008 financial crisis and was forced to acquire a million-dollar loan from the suspicious company Narwhal to stay solvent. In the first episode, now in 2010, Emmet and Sy try to find a way to repay the loan to Narwhal. V.M. Varga a representative from Narwhal comes to inform the pair

that it was not a loan but an investment, stating his intention to become a partner and grow the business through any means necessary.

Meanwhile, Emmitt's brother Ray (Ewan McGregor) a parole officer is embittered by his brother's success and wants to steal the last antique stamp in a collection that was part of their inheritance. Ray was left the stamps when the two brothers were just teenagers, but Emmitt convinced Ray to swap the stamps for his father's Corvette. Ray and Nikki Swango (Mary Elizabeth Winstead), an ex-convict he started dating, have aspirations to steal the stamp and start a life together. However, the sibling rivalry grows in scope and the attempt to steal the stamp ends up with an unrelated person, Ennis Stussy, being killed. Gloria Burgle (Carrie Coon) a local police officer begins investigating. She originally investigates the murder of Ennis Stussy (Scott Hylands) but ends up both trying to untangle the ridiculous family feud and eventually the machinations of Varga. Ray is accidentally killed when Emmitt tries to return the last stamp. Nikki subsequently vows to kill Emmitt while trying to evade both the cops and Varga who view her as creating unneeded attention towards the business operations.

The fantastic moment of the season occurs when Nikki, now in police custody, is being bused to a prison. Varga's henchmen attack the bus to kill Nikki, leading her and the man she is handcuffed to— Mr. Wrench (Russell Harvard) to escape into the Minnesota woods. Yuri Gurka (Goran Bogdan), a Russian man working for Varga, pursues them. Eventually, Nikki and Wrench stumble upon a bizarre bowling alley where Nikki meets a mysterious man Paul Marrane (Ray Wise) who Gloria encountered earlier in the season in Los Angeles. The man tells Nikki to destroy evil in the world and gives her and Wrench a car. Later, when Yuri enters the bowling alley, the man gravely informs Yuri that he is a descendant of Cossacks who committed pogroms against the Jews. He then states that he has a message from Helga Obrecht and the Rabbi

Nachman, and Yuri sees a vision of Jewish people staring at him. This is the last time Yuri is seen in the series.

Afterwards, Nikki and Wrench steal information from Varga and use it to blackmail him. They both get the blackmail money and send the information to the IRS. Nikki still wants to kill Emmitt, she tracks him down and stops him on the highway. However, she is interrupted by a police officer and both Nikki and the officer shoot each other dead. Varga leaves Minnesota once Stussy Lots is stripped of value and sold off for a fraction of its worth. After a brief jump in time, Emmitt is seen with his family back together as captions say he declared bankruptcy, but it is suspected he has millions in offshore accounts. The peaceful family dinner is interrupted by Wrench killing Emmitt when he is alone in the kitchen.

In an epilogue, Gloria is now an officer in the department of homeland security and Varga, now going by the name Daniel Rand is brought into her custody. Gloria tells him he is going to prison and Varga tells her he will disappear. The image goes dark making it unknown to the audience what happens next.

As described here the third season narrativizes many of the themes that were described in the previous chapter. Most clear is how the character of Varga clearly represents global financial capitalism, this characterization is achieved by his hostility to the objects of capital as well as his usage of technology. Varga turns the once-legitimate business of Stussy Lots into part of a racketeering scheme. In addition, his henchmen Yuri and Meemo (Andy Yu) routinely intimidate and terrorize the unprepared locals. While not explicitly mentioned, it is likely that Varga is the evil that the man in the bowling alley ordered Nikki to destroy, since she was unable to complete the mission when she targeted Emmitt. Varga also serves as the source of cynical violence that challenges the small-town detective of Gloria. The theme of Gloria confronting modernity is

extended to her friction with various technologies, automatic doors and soap dispensers do not notice her presence and her cellphone calls are routinely dropped. Gloria's relationship to technology is both framed as an inconvenience as well as aiding her in her mission to challenge Varga. The show creates a dynamic where Gloria's technological invisibility allows her to evade Varga's influence, as the immaterial realm of digital technology is shown to be his domain.

Beyond these points the show explicitly dramatizes the interplay between multiple forms of capitalism. This is achieved by using Emmet and Varga's relationship as well as the different responses to Varga entering the small-town Minnesota communities.

This chapter is devoted to the discussion of these two devices, the relationship between Varga and Emmet and how Varga is challenged both legally by Gloria, and extrajudicially by Nikki. The discussion about Varga and Emmet will cover both how their wealth is represented, how they use their capital, and lastly how the two, as representatives of Fordist and finance capital relate to each other. The analysis of the relationship between Varga and Emmet will be working towards a theory to capital's relationship to objects in the world of *Fargo*. What the Varga/Emmet dynamic brings to the discussion is an explicit confrontation of a capital of "things" in the case of Emmet and his parking lots as compared to the immaterial capital at Varga's disposal. My claim is that the show states that not only is Varga the "true" capitalist, but it also shows an antagonistic relationship between the functioning of capital and objects. Of particular note is how Emmet is considered to be a "pillar of the community" while Varga is not. This point is assisted by using Annie McClanahan's analysis of "talking-coin narratives" that she develops in her book *Dead Pledges*. Such an idea stresses the importance of the physicality of the coin "which makes monetary liquidity look like a social good rather than a form of dangerous risk" (McClanahan 165). The parallel to *Fargo* is how the physicality of the parking lot obscures

access to understanding capital as a social form, or as Samo Tomšič's term it "capital as the embodiment of the autonomy of exchange values" (Tomšič 63).

The hostile relationship between capital and objects again reiterates the aesthetic problem: how can capital be made visible if physical objects are antithetical to the function of capital? This is where the fantastic steps in and provides a way to reference capital without resorting to objects. In this chapter, when speaking about the hostility to objects I will mostly be speaking about the factories that Stussy controls as well as the mundane things, such as soap dispensers, automatic doors, and hand dryers, etc.

An important clarification that must be made is the distinction between commodities and objects. In the beginning of Marx's definition of the commodity he defines it as simply "an external thing" (Marx 126). However, the commodity for Marx is that which contains both a use-value and an exchange-value. The exchange-value is tied to its "usefulness, which does not dangle in mid-air but is related to the physical body of the commodity" (ibid 127). The exchange-value "is the quantitative relation, the proportion, in which use-values of one kind exchange for use-values of another kind" (ibid). When considering Tomšič's declaration that capital "is the autonomy of exchange values," this is another way of framing the aesthetic problem of capital. Where the use-value is tied to the physical body of commodities, capital is immaterial as it is purely an expression of exchange-value. This creates the problem of how to make something visible if it is not expressed through the physical body of the commodity. When considering the objects that Gloria interacts with, I will use the term object when talking about how the specific technology fails her. The term commodity will be used when talking about it entering the web of capitalist social relations.

The second part of the chapter will be devoted to how the show's fantastic moments attempt to make the truly supernatural nature of capital visible. It will discuss two of the fantastic moments of the season: Gloria's inability to be detected by various motion sensing technologies, and Nikki's meeting the mysterious man in the bowling alley. While these two examples initially appear separate from one another, they both thematize Varga's control—for Gloria, it is Varga's usage of technology, and for Nikki, it characterizes Varga as a truly supernatural evil. Both moments involve the unique combination of fantastic and detection that was discussed in the previous chapter. In Gloria's case, it is because she is a detective who has to track down Varga while dealing with the inconveniences of constantly being "missed" by all these modern technologies. In Nikki's case it is through the mysterious man telling her to destroy evil that places her in direct opposition to Varga. These scenes both involve an individual negotiating a fantastic moment in order to find and ultimately defeat Varga as the symbol of evil and capital.

### **3.2 Two Capitalists**

Varga and Emmit Stussy initially appear as total opposites. Emmit is a member of the local communities in Minnesota where Varga is a citizen of the world moving around constantly. Emmit appears to enjoy his wealth; he drives an Audi and lives in a mansion in the suburbs. Varga on the other hand wears shabby suits and is bulimic. Sue Short makes the clear connection between Varga's bulimia, and "Capitalist greed, he devours more than he needs or can manage to digest" (Short 218). The manner that Emmit acquired his wealth appears quite clear, he sold some of the valuable stamps in his inheritance to slowly buy properties until he amassed a sizable collection. On the other hand, Varga's wealth is incredibly opaque, it is never clear in what manner he acquired his fortune or even what makes up his substantial assets. Shaviro, who

defines financial transaction in terms of “flows,” states that “these flows are at once impalpable and immediate. They are invisible abstractions, existing only as calculations in the worldwide digital network, and detached from any actual productive activity” (Shaviro 6). Here Shaviro pairs the financial with the side of digital abstraction and opposes it against the notion of ‘actual productive activity,’ a term he leaves unexplored but can be assumed to be physical labor. Shaviro’s idea supports the separation of Varga and Stussy, where Varga wealth is “abstract flows” while Stussy represents “actual productive activity.”

However, this assumption is easily shown to be false. This dynamic is concerned with the issue of capital as a social form as compared to capital as some real “thing.”<sup>27</sup> It is my claim that the aesthetic choices used to represent both Varga and Stussy create a compelling case for why capital cannot be contained within physical commodities. This characterization is relevant as it introduces the aesthetic problem of capital, how can capital be made visible without resorting to physical objects. The fantastic then intervenes as a strategy to make the supernatural nature of capital visible.

The two characters are referencing two different moments in capitalism. This distinction is most clear in the scenes where Varga is working in his mobile office located on the back of an 18-wheeler. In episode 8, ‘Who Rules the Land of Denial?’ Varga is briefly seen working on a multi-screen computer set-up. The screens are heavily reminiscent of *The Matrix*’s green and black visual motif. The screens show long lists of numbers, a map of the world with lines connecting various population centers, and an abstract image of what appears to be some sort of

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<sup>27</sup> This idea is developed clearly in Anna Kornbluh’s work that discusses both Marxist formalism as well as mediation and how it relates to capitalism. Here Kornbluh makes the statement that Marx’s revolution in political economy was his “focus on the *forms* of existing relations” (Kornbluh 14). In addition, *Capital* starts with an analysis of the commodity form, which is a study not of a commodity but rather *how* the commodity form shapes social relations. In addition, Kornbluh states that “the capitalist mode of production is invisible, but we can see the forms that instantiate it” (ibid 57).

network. These images are simultaneously impossible and easy to interpret; the scene only lingers for a few seconds and yet the audience can easily see the visual shorthand referencing financial capitalism. Although the screens are easy to parse as a synecdoche for modern capitalism, they also do not say anything in specific. The images are not on screen for long enough to read any of the numbers, and even if they were it would be impossible to attribute them any specific meaning. It is here that the show complicates the binary between an easy to understand halcyon form of capitalism and the modern era of capitalism that is beyond human comprehension. The show subverts such a dichotomy by using its very opacity to its advantage.

The scene is clearly referencing a form of capitalism, the bewildering screens and lack of specifics are all alluding to the modern capitalism that is assumed to be beyond human comprehension. Here, the show sets up a comparison between Varga and Emmitt's capital, where even though Varga's capital cannot be understood, its visual references still make it easy to recognize. Emmitt's capital, even though it can be considered a "pre-modern" form of capital that is considered easier to understand, is *harder* to reference than Varga's.

As a point of comparison, Emmitt's wealth is surprisingly difficult to abbreviate into one image. There are plenty of scenes that take place in the properties that Stussy Lots controls. Varga moves his mobile office to one of the lots underneath highway overpasses, and Sy confronts Nikki in one of the industrial parking lots alongside the interstate. Beyond the parking lots there is the modern office that Stussy Lots occupies equipped with many of the signifiers that communicate wealth: to-scale models of future projects imply an expanding business and the entire office is clad in an expensive looking stainless and glass aesthetic. Moving past visual signifiers, Emmitt's wealth is also referenced through dialogue. When Varga comes to Emmitt's house to try and convince him to become more aggressive in Stussy Lots' expansion, Varga tells



Emmit that he is only trying to make Emmit rich. Emmit is confused by Varga's statement and tells him to look around and states matter-of-factly that he already is rich. Varga is unconvinced by this statement and flatly tells Emmit that he is not. This shows the different ways that Emmit's resources are represented. Where Varga's capital can be shown in just a several second image of indecipherable computer screens, Emmit's capital is referenced through a collection of objects or dialogue. Of note is how Emmit does not tell Varga to take note of any particular object when Varga comes to his home, but rather to just "look around," here Emmit's attempt at succinctly abbreviating his wealth fails and is reduced to just a gesture towards his entire home.

This point is also strengthened when considering how the two scenes are shot. In Varga's trailer the camera is honed explicitly on the screens. This focus highlights how clearly Varga's capital can be referenced. The formal techniques used in Varga's office strongly conflict with the moment when Stussy tries to convince Varga that he already is rich by gesturing to his home. The camera does not move from its initial framing of the conversation which simply shows the two men with an out-of-focus shot of the doorway in the background. Despite Stussy's insistence that one can "look around" and find evidence of his wealth, the camera implies the exact opposite. Where the camera is hyper-focused on the screens that Varga utilizes it shows no object in particular when considering Stussy.

The different strategies for aestheticizing the wealth of the two capitalists reveal the tension between the invisible structure of capital and a mere collection of commodities. In the case of Varga, his wealth being represented with information finds its antecedent in the work of Toscano and Kinkle. The pair claim that, "in a kind of social psychosis that realizes the dream of cybernetic domination, information is no longer a *post facto* formalization of material exchanges, or a programme for manipulating action, but a feature of the world" (Toscano and Kinkle 201).

In other words, even though the screens that Varga manipulated were meaningless and totally abstract they nevertheless have massive impacts on social relations. In contrast, the camera is unable to capture the source of Emmit's wealth. The question then becomes which strategy is clearer, and what does this say about the larger question of capital's representability?

To begin answering these questions the idea of the leap from objects to capital must be addressed. In the case of the parking lots, what is missing is how these physical objects are turned into capital, or their "relational qualities," in the words of Anna Kornbluh. While the parking lots' physical presence is impressive, what is more important is how they function in the web of commodity relations. When Varga is in Emmit's home he tries to scare Emmit by speaking of "the Mongol hordes" of the Global South rising up to the unjust economic situation and demanding their fair share. In response, Emmit just exasperatedly states that he "only charges for parking." Such an outburst is in fact quite revealing when studied in combination with his earlier attempt to convince Varga that he is wealthy by asking Varga to "look around." Just like how the camera did not listen to Emmit asking Varga to "look around" and see that he is already rich, it also does not attempt to make visible Emmit's claim that "he only charges for parking."

The opaque screens that Varga employs mean almost as much as the empty phrase to "look around," but they are both referencing the same thing, the fact that capitalism cannot be perfectly aestheticized in a collection of objects but can nevertheless be visually referenced.

In the conversation that follows Varga entering Emmit's home Varga tries to convince Emmit to continue expanding his business. Varga makes the claim that the aforementioned "Mongol hordes" would see Emmit's mansion and \$90,000 car and not unreasonably intuit Emmit as their enemy. Varga then states that he wears a \$200 suit and flies coach and asks

Emmit which of the two of them is wealthier. After Emmit is convinced Varga states that the accumulation of wealth *not* money is “action item one” and action item two is to use this wealth to become invisible.

This interchange pushes the tension between capital as form and capital as objects to its absolute extreme. Varga claims that the accumulation of wealth is assisted by being invisible, implies that physical commodities just get in the way. The properties that Stussy owns are not shown to be beneficial to the functioning of capital but in fact are an inconvenience. This shift in understanding is displayed both in Emmit’s relationships with other people as well as the change in Stussy Lots’ business.

Varga constantly stresses the need to leave no trace and to be untrackable. He constantly moves around; his office is mobile and at the end of the series it is revealed that he regularly changes his name. Another instance of Varga valuing untraceability occurs when he meets up with Nikki to discuss her blackmail plot. Varga hires multiple people to occupy the space while wearing the same outfit, making it harder for any possible witnesses to single him out. Varga’s ability to disappear is also present in the epilogue of the show when he is arguing with Gloria, now an agent at the department of homeland security. Gloria tells him that he is going to prison for conspiracy to commit murder and felony money laundering and Varga responds that he will “disappear into the world.” When the conversation is over the light over Varga’s head is extinguished.

Emmit however, cannot disappear like Varga because of the existence of his brother Ray. Ray functions as a doubling of Emmit’s body that constantly frustrates Emmit’s ability to calmly accumulate wealth. Ray’s bungled attempts at stealing from his brother is what attracts the attention of Gloria and other law enforcement officers. More pointedly, Ray impersonates his

brother in the show twice. The first time, he goes to the bank dressed as Emmitt and demands to access “his” safety deposit box, while also walking out with several thousand dollars cash. The second time, Nikki and Ray film each other having sex while Ray is dressed as Emmitt. The pair attempt to use the tape to blackmail Emmitt for money or else they will show his wife Stella. In all of these cases the fact that Emmitt’s physical likeness is so similar to Ray’s makes him especially vulnerable to losing money in Ray’s schemes.

This contrast, where Varga’s physical form is so nondescript that he can disappear, while Emmitt has to deal with his form being duplicated, shows the way in which physical bodies in fact impede the stable accumulation of capital.<sup>28</sup> This relationship is extended into the operation of Stussy Lots itself.

There is a decided change in the business dealings of Stussy Lots once Varga becomes a partner. For example, in the opener to episode 4 *The Narrow Escape Problem* Sy is shown working with a model of a parking lot, presumably to make sure that the lot would function if it were acquired or built. The camera uses extreme close-ups to highlight both the detail of the model as well as Sy’s knowledge of the parking lot industry. Such a scene shows an investment in the idea that the physical object of the parking lot as the source of Stussy Lot’s wealth. This contrasts with the later scene after the expansion and once Varga has become a partner. Varga explains how the new Stussy Lots operates. He states that the corporation has acquired \$50 million dollars in loans and will begin purchasing new lots as well as giving payouts to the three partners. Instead of the physical lots being present at the level of models, the dozen new lots that

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<sup>28</sup> This idea originates with Marx himself, especially when he is writing about the circulation of commodities. Marx states that, “In so far as exchange is a process, by which commodities are transferred from hands in which they are non-use-values, to hands in which they become use-values, it is a social circulation of matter” (Marx 198). Of note is the word matter which clearly alludes to the physicality of that which is being circulated. Since capital must constantly circulate, removing the physical friction of circulation is in capital’s best interests.

Varga referenced have been reduced to mere sketches on a board, line drawings absent of any specifics. Sy objects to the move, saying that it is a lot of debt and that the IRS will be able to catch them. Varga dismisses such a claim stating that the IRS exists to catch middle managers and movie stars and does not have the ability to unravel such a large financial sprawl. He then informs both Emmit and Sy that they were wrong to think that they started a parking lot business but in fact they started a bank. Here we are reminded of Tomšič who states that “capital is neither a subject nor an object but an internally broken process” (Tomšič 224). Varga’s statement that Stussy Lots is a bank reflects such an idea by showing a disinterest towards the original source of capital. The bank is concerned solely with the process of accumulating more capital.

The distinction between the parking lot as a physical commodity compared to it being an asset for a bank is reminiscent of Annie McClanahan’s analysis of the “talking-coin narrative.” Therein McClanahan states that these stories were meant to ease fears about the death of sociality under capitalist social relations. They entailed a physical marker of currency traveling from person to person to make “a new sense of economic life—one forged through trust and interdependence” (McClanahan 164). Here the physicality of the coin subverting expectations about monetary liquidity “turning it into something potentially frightening to a marker of social good” (ibid 165). In the show, Stussy’s parking lots are always shown as a place of criminality, serving as a place for Varga to hide his mobile office, for Yuri and Meemo to kill witnesses, or for Sy to confront Nikki. However, that does not stop Emmit for being interpreted as providing a social good, Gloria herself states that Emmit is “a pillar of the community.” The talking-coin narrative also resonates with the earlier discussion of the use-value and exchange-value of commodities. The use-value of the parking lot is comforting in the face of the amorphous exchange-value.

After Emmet accidentally kills Ray his mental state begins to deteriorate, and he starts to have qualms about his partnership with Varga. Emmet's mental deterioration is showcased through hallucinations related to his brother, such as his infamous Corvette and the stamp that was the source of the feud between them. This culminates when Emmet wakes up with a replica of Ray's mustache on his face. Emmet gets highly distressed about seeing these references to his dead brother. In fact, Emmet's moral compunction is so strong that it prevents him from signing the paperwork that would finalize many deals for Stussy Lots. Again, Ray's presence acts as a barrier to the frictionless accumulation of capital.

By showing the antagonistic relationship between physical objects and the accumulation of capital the show places Varga at the level of the "true" capitalist. Since the goal of capital is always to make more of itself, Emmet's squeamishness caused by his brother is what serves as his limiting factor to accumulation. Instead of characterizing Varga as capitalism gone wrong or an aberration, his disinterest in physical instances of capital characterize him as a function of capital itself. This is the way that Marx himself characterized the capitalist, "that he is only capital personified (Marx 342).

It is in this way that *Fargo* disrupts assumptions about the different forms of capital. The first chapter concluded with a discussion about the tension between the missing object of capitalism as compared to the social form of capitalism. What Varga does to the operation of Stussy Lots is an illustrative example of this problem. The crisis in representing capital seems like it would get more difficult in the move away from physical instances of capital such as factories or parking lots. Varga represents a capital that not only is unmoored from its physical objects but also implicates the other eras of capitalism with this same indifference. Not only does he quickly convert a parking lot corporation into something that functions as a bank, but he also

retroactively shifts the entire purpose of Stussy Lots into one that did not care for the objects it used. This dynamic troubles the idea of the progression of capitalism. The entire time that Stussy Lots was operating, instead of supporting an idea of capitalism that is attached to a particular instance of capital, it was serving Narwhal and Varga. Instead of financial capital bursting out of industrial capital due to technological advancements and increasing market abstractions, the financial capitalist invests in physical capitalism in order to grow his financial capital. In *Fargo* the local and rational business does not become corrupted by finance but rather it was created by it.

This complicates any attempt at dividing capitalism into different modes. In the case of *Fargo* halcyon eras of capitalism are not real but rather are cynically propped up in order to maintain the excesses of financial speculation.

Here is where the problem of representing capital becomes its most clear. Throughout this chapter it has been established that physical commodities only get in the way of both aestheticizing and accumulating capital. While the brief scene showing Varga manipulating finances on his multiple monitor set-up gets close to representing capitalist structure it also has the same problem as the second *Breaking Bad* montage, as it shows only the capitalist sublime. Varga's screens while clear in their opacity do not encourage deeper thought into the manner of what the screens represent, as they are clearly something beyond human comprehension. However, similar to the previous chapter's discussion on the other television shows, the themes of the fantastic and detection combine to find a way to represent capital that manages to show capitalism as more than its physical signifiers while not losing the audience in the sublime of capital.

To deal with this problem we will turn to the figure of Gloria and her supernatural relationship to technology. This discussion will focus on how modernity is often thematized with motion-sensing or digital objects, which are technologies that extend beyond their physical boundaries. The section will then pivot to discuss the most pronounced supernatural moment in the show, Nikki in the bowling alley.

### **3.3 The Invisible Detective and the Conspiracy of Capital**

Gloria Burgle, the police chief of Eden Valley, is an exemplar of the detective from the fantastic detective serial. During the season of television her police department is in process of being absorbed by the county which places her below the sheriff of Meeker county, Moe Dammik (Shea Whigham). When the sheriff enters the headquarters (the building is a dual-purpose library and police station) he criticizes its lack of technology and security, especially noting that there is no room to lock up prisoners as well as no computers.

Gloria's frustration from dealing with the bureaucracy is easily dwarfed by her frustrating relationship with modern technologies. Automatic doors, soap dispensers, and faucets do not seem to recognize her presence, and her calls on cell phones are frequently dropped or unintelligible due to static. These moments naturally give Gloria a great deal of stress, and as early as the second episode she mentions her apparent technological invisibility in dialogue. When entering the police station with her subordinate Donny Mashman (Mark Forward) and automatic door does not open for her, she says, "I'm here right? You see me?" To which Donny responds by asking if that is a trick question.

However, Gloria's technological invisibility is not all negative. When Gloria first enters Stussy Lots to talk to Emmit, she encounters Varga who rebuffs Gloria and her investigative



partner Winnie Lopez (Olivia Sandoval). After this meeting Varga goes online to search for Gloria using both Facebook and Google. All of his searches for Gloria do not reveal any results and it is only when he broadens the search to all of the Eden Valley police department does he find anything relevant. The Eden Valley police department does not have a webpage and this forces Varga to send one of his henchmen to retrieve the case file manually.

This contrasts greatly with an earlier scene where Varga is in Emmitt's home. Varga mentioned information that he knows about Ray, such as the stamp, and the growing family feud. All of this disturbs Emmitt who insists that it is a private matter. While Varga responds to Emmitt's discomfort with the cryptic "I hear things because I listen and I see things because I watch," it is revealed that the information that is available to Varga is a product of simple Google and Facebook searches. Here Varga's power is shown to be associated with digital technologies.

The ability for Varga to learn such minutia and intimidate Stussy is reminiscent of the discussion on the paranoid thriller in the previous chapter. This scene has many elements of the genre, including the idea of surveillance and the individual of Varga who acts as a stand-in for the non-subject of capitalist structure. However, the show has an altered take on the perceived conspiracy of modern capitalism. Even though Varga is an extraordinary person, his use of digital technologies is incredibly mundane. In fact, his searches on Google and Facebook are among his most banal activities. This moves the conspiracy of capitalism in *Fargo* away from a particular individual and towards capitalist relations itself. All one needs to do is act normally in modern capitalism and it will appear like a conspiracy. Such an idea is mirrored in *Cartographies of the Absolute* which states the difficulty in even discussing the social relations of capitalism without being considered a conspiracy theorist (Toscano and Kinkle 74-75).

Gloria's technological invisibility is a device that is used to show Varga's control of capital. Associating Varga with these digital technologies not only places him as a foil for Gloria, but also provides a way to aestheticize capital without it being tied down to the physical form of the commodity.<sup>29</sup> The malfunction of objects like automatic doors or soap dispensers is of little consequence and often Gloria can just open the door manually. However, the scenes show how the use of the object extends beyond the physical boundaries of the thing itself. Mere physical objects are insufficient at representing capitalist structures as such. In Vincent Manzerolle and Atle Mikkola Kjøsén's essay "Digital Media and Capital's Logic of Acceleration" they state that, "for accumulation to take place, capital must constantly move between the two spheres of production and circulation" (Manzerolle and Kjøsén 158). While the usage of mundane technologies such as doors and soap dispensers may initially appear far afield from the circulation of capital, it does thematize the need for constant circulation. Just like capital, the mundane objects that frustrate Gloria need to enter a web of social relations, the physical object is insufficient for capital to circulate.

The technological hiccups that Gloria encounters serves to distinguish the physical object with commodities. As discussed earlier the commodity is characterized as both having exchange and use values. The failure of the technology makes the dominance of exchange values over use values explicit. In the scenes that show the failure of the technology, it is always shown to have no physical flaw. No matter how clear the glass of an automatic door is, or how shiny a motion-activated faucet is, its use value is totally subordinate to the exchange value. As Marx writes, the source of a commodity's use-value is tied to its physical body. The commodity cannot function if

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<sup>29</sup> Gloria's invisibility to Varga's surveillance puts her in a privileged position with respects to what Zuboff terms "surveillance capitalism." Zuboff defines it as "Surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data" (Zuboff 12). Varga's usage of digital technologies underscores his ability to make all waking life productive, just as Zuboff predicts.

it cannot enter the web of social relations of modern capitalism. Under the reign of modern capitalism, the commodity's liquidity, or ability to enter into exchange matters more than its physical particularities.

This idea, that the objects entering use or circulation is more important than the specific physical reality of the object is reminiscent of Varga's hostility for physical things. Varga's antipathy towards objects reaches its apotheosis with his bulimia. In this case Varga is not interested with the particular nutrition or taste of the food but rather uses it purely for its relational qualities, he "relates" to the food by eating it, but after that act he vomits it up due to a lack of care in the food's specific qualities. This sentiment is expressed similarly in the article "Capitalist Bulimia: Lacan on Marx and Crisis" by Fabio Vighi which states that "It is in this respect that the 'objective' logic of contemporary capitalism qua 'automatic subject' can be described in terms of bulimia: the voracious oral drive of capital continues to ingest but is increasingly unable to digest" (Vighi 8). In other words, Varga as a symbol for capital itself feels compelled to consume more and more, regardless of both the particularities of the food or his ability to digest it.

Gloria's failure to interact with these objects serves to make visible that way that commodities circulate and are consumed in capitalism. The persistent failures of the technologies interrupt the seamless circulation of use and exchange in a way that is only made possible by the fantastic. The possible supernatural origins and solution to Gloria's problem are significant since they cannot just be written off as an unlikely set of technological glitches.<sup>30</sup> Rather, the flaw lies in the invisible interaction between objects and how they enter the realm of social relations.

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<sup>30</sup> Near the end of the series when Gloria confides with Winnie Lopez about her fears that she does not exist because of all of the technological misfires that surround her. Lopes comforts her and flatly states that of course she exists. Gloria goes to the washroom and is able to operate the sensor-activated faucet, much to Gloria's obvious relief.

It is through the failure of Gloria to operate technology in this modern world that makes the web of social relations visible. All the small interactions that Gloria has with the technology would have been taken for granted if they occurred smoothly. When writing about the visibility of economic crises, Toscano and Kinkle state that, “it is precisely in crises that the interruption of normal service, and its impact on everyday life and on the symbols of wealth and power, make the abstracts concrete, the invisible visible” (Kinkle 159).

The flaw being in the invisible relationship between Gloria and technology leaves her detective abilities unable to assist her. Throughout the run of the season Gloria is constantly shown as competent and able to interpret the relevant clues of the unfolding story; Ray’s dead body or the piles of corpses left behind from the confrontation between Nikki and Varga. Her deductive abilities are well equipped at dealing with these physical crimes. Despite of this, she is unable to determine what is causing the technologies around her to consistently fail. This again shows the strength of the fantastic in its ability to aestheticize the invisible and irrational structure of capital. Gloria is a figure of logic, but she was unable to understand the new bewildering relations between commodities of modern capitalism because it is beyond the comprehension of one person’s perceptual apparatus.

In summation, Gloria, the figure of logic that is associated with small-town America, is lost due to capital moving beyond the realm of appearances and being expressed with pure invisible exchange. This structure of capital is associated with Varga, who exemplifies capitalism’s hostility towards the physical presence of things. The next section will then discuss the fantastic moment that meets Nikki in the bowling alley. Nikki’s conversation with the man functions in a way similar to Gloria’s technological frustration. Both sequences thematize

Varga's wealth as invisible, but Nikki's moment in the bowling alley does more to pair financial capitalism with something both illogical and supernatural

### **3.4 The Bowling Alley and Seeing Evil**

The most explicitly supernatural moment in the third season of *Fargo* is difficult to pair with the other supernatural moments that were discussed in the show. The reasoning for this is two-fold. The first is that Nikki and Wrench are not detectives, so the fantastic does not just act as the barrier of understanding modern capital. The second is that even though there are clearly supernatural things happening, the look of the scene is quite subdued. This section will be devoted to discussing how even with these points of contention, Nikki and Wrench's time in the mystical bowling alley still has much to say about how the fantastic detective aestheticizes capital.

Since the summary of the scene in the beginning of this chapter was devoted more to the confrontation with Yuri, I will take some time here to summarize the talk between Paul Marrane (Ray Wise) the man in the bowling alley—with Nikki. The scene begins with Nikki and Wrench limping into the bowling alley, as both are severely wounded from their confrontation with Yuri and Golem (DJ Qualls), another one of Varga's henchmen. The harsh lighting from inside contrasts with the darkness from outside, making the aesthetic change very pronounced. Nikki brings the injured Wrench down onto a bench, hides her broken handcuff in her coat, and limps to the bar. The bowling alley is not empty, there is a figure slightly out of focus in the background using a push broom on the bowling lanes, but there is nobody bowling. It is only when Nikki sits down at the bar with her back to the lanes does the camera move to show that sitting next to her is Paul Marrane.

Paul has appeared earlier in the show in the episode where Gloria travels to Los Angeles to investigate the first murder that occurred from the Stussy family feud. Gloria encountered Paul twice in her excursion to Los Angeles. The first time, on the plane, the second time in a bar. On both occasions Paul comforted Gloria, either about the perils of modern life or her pending divorce.

The very presence of Paul in a random bowling alley in rural Minnesota is already suspicious. As the two of them begin talking, multiple abnormal things happen. The first is that Paul shows Nikki a young kitten who he calls Ray. He then tells Nikki about *gilgul* a part of Jewish mysticism where a dead soul can enter a new body. When Nikki looks at the cat and asks it, “Ray is that you?” Paul nonchalantly affirms her statement.

In addition to Ray Stussy reincarnation as a cat being supernatural is the very existence of the bowling alley. Paul states that everyone ends up here, which Nikki finds amusing because she only sees a bowling alley. Paul then goes onto say that here souls will be judged and that some have said that Wrench should stay here but Paul insists that he is on a better path now. When Nikki asks about herself, he begins by reciting Psalm 94 in Hebrew, and continues by asking “who will rise for me against the wicked? Who will rise against evildoers?” Paul does not wait for her to respond before asking her if she needs a ride. Nikki is grateful and asks her what can be done to repay him he then states to deliver a message to the wicked and recites Obadiah 1:4, “though thou exalt thyself like the eagle, though thou make thy nest among the stars, thence will I bring thee down.” Nikki tries to recite the message to remember and Paul tells her that she will be able to remember when the time is right. After leaving cat-Ray with Paul, Nikki and Wrench leave the bowling alley.

Despite the fantastic moments of the shows that have been discussed—UFOs, the disappearance of 2% of the world's population—Nikki's discussion with Paul in the bowling alley appears quite subdued. My claim is that instead of aestheticizing the barrier of understanding the illogical structure of capital like the discussion in the previous chapter, the bowling alley scene in *Fargo* serves as an aestheticization of the attempt to understand capital.

This is clearer when Paul's request is put into context with the narrative of the remaining episodes of the season. Once Nikki and Wrench leave the bowling alley, they go on a path of vengeance against Varga. They steal some of his financial documents, blackmail him, and then send the documents to the IRS. The IRS agent Larue Dollard (Hamish Linklater) investigates the documents as he was one that initially was sent from the IRS to investigate Stussy Lots' books before being rebuffed. Placed inside the envelope that Nikki sends to the IRS is Gloria's phone number. Larue contacts Gloria and he explains to her how once Varga became a partner; Stussy Lots went from being a normal real estate company to something different. Gloria asks if this is money laundering and Larue says it is a bleed-out, in which "an outside entity acquires a healthy company, borrows millions of dollars in its name, gives this money to its partners and then they sell the company now laden with debt, for a fraction of the price." When Gloria asks if that is legal, Larue says it is legal if one follows the letter of the law, but that the partners of Stussy Lots did not pay the appropriate taxes. Larue getting this information to Gloria is a product of Nikki and Wrench's vigilante acts.

The show draws an association between the evil that Paul spoke of and the machinations of Varga. The last words that Paul told Nikki was Hebrew for "go forth," and the first things that Nikki and Wrench do are hijack Varga's mobile office and steal his documents. The question that remains is, does the show make a distinction between the business operations of Varga and

Stussy, or are they both considered evil? Such a distinction is important as it is concerned with what are the correct responses to different forms of capital. While Emmet is portrayed more sympathetically than the grotesque Varga he was still involved in a financial conspiracy that bankrupted a business while he walks away with several million dollars.

Nikki interpreted Paul's order to vanquish evil by targeting both Varga and Emmet. While she was able to steal a substantial amount of money from Varga she failed in killing either of them. When Nikki had Emmet at gunpoint she began reciting the scripture that Paul gave her, and it is at this point that the state trooper interrupts the confrontation that ends with the trooper and Nikki killing each other. Nikki's failure to murder Emmet is puzzling given her previous extraordinary successes ever since leaving the bowling alley with the divine mission. Nikki's botched murder of Emmet implies that he is not the evil that Paul told her to vanquish. In addition, the epilogue ending of Gloria confronting Varga still leaves it ambiguous whether Nikki, Larue, and Gloria's efforts eventually lead to Varga facing justice or whether he succeeds in disappearing from the world. This compounds the doubt whether Nikki was able to harm Varga's operation. The ultimate inability for Nikki to vanquish either of the capitalists belies the way that Nikki understands the violence of capital. Nikki, not unreasonably, interprets the murder of her fiancé Ray as the most violent act that requires a vengeful response. Here the individual violent act of Emmet is easier to interpret than the totally diffuse violence of Varga's capitalist manipulation.

This sentiment is explored in Slavoj Žižek's book *Absolute Recoil* where he discusses the real world of labor compared to the abstractions of capital:

It is far too simplistic to claim that the specter of this self-engendering monster pursuing its ends regardless of any human or environmental concern is an ideological abstraction, and to insist that one should never forget that, behind the abstraction, lie real



people and natural objects on whose productive capacities and resources capital's circulation is based and on which it feeds like a gigantic parasite. The problem is that this 'abstraction' is not only in our (financial speculator's) misperception of social reality, but is also 'real' in the precise sense of determining the structure of very material social processes...therein resides the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism, much more uncanny than direct pre-capitalist socio-ideological violence: its violence is no longer attributable to concrete individuals with their 'evil' intentions, but is purely "objective", systemic, anonymous violence" (Žižek 30-31).

In this description, Varga's presence can clearly be paired with the 'objective' violence that Žižek describes. This pairing is made stronger since it is Emmet who takes the fall in the financial dealings of Stussy Lots. Emmet and Ray's quarrel is what attracted the attention of the police and he is also the one who ends up dead. Varga however, is much more slippery.

*Fargo* uses the supernatural moment of Nikki in the bowling alley to give her a quest that seems ordained with a divine purpose. The quest's failure, from the perspective of the supernatural, forges a connection between the business of both Varga and Emmet. Or in Sue Short's words "We can only conclude that a still more powerful force is protecting Emmet—with little sense of justice possible when outrageous good fortune favours such an undeserving figure" (Short 220). In addition, the reason for Nikki's inability to kill either Varga or Emmet also makes a statement on the two capitalists. Varga escapes under his own power, leaving behind nothing but his trademark overcoat. Emmet however, is left cowering when Nikki stops him and if it were not the intervention of the police officer it is likely that he would have been killed by Nikki. This difference reiterates the difference in the importance of physicality in the two capitalists, where Emmet's physical form is vulnerable, Varga always escapes unharmed.

Since Paul's orders to Nikki were delivered so cryptically it is difficult to pin down the exact ways that Nikki fails or succeeds. However, the fact that she succeeds in stealing and

disrupting Varga's flow of capital but fails to murder either of them is telling. The evil that Paul speaks of is not the lives of the capitalists but rather the structure of capital itself.

This narrative arc provides a way to aestheticize capital in a manner that is not tied to physical objects. Nikki does not understand the logic of either Emmitt or Varga's capital, but she still has an intuitive understanding of the evil that Paul references. Such a move perfectly abbreviates the common aesthetic trap where one substitutes the actual structure of capital with a collection of physical objects, or the lives of individual capitalists. The true ramifications of this scene will be discussed holistically with what has been learned in this chapter. This will serve to prepare the conversation for the conclusion.

### **3.5 Failing Productively**

To conclude, *Fargo*'s uniqueness stems for how explicitly it wrestles with these problems. The show develops the characterization of Varga as the true capitalist as well as showing how capital needs to constantly burst beyond its physical limitations. While it uses the fantastic in similar ways to the rest of the shows, the inclusion of the well-developed relationship between Emmitt and Varga shows why the fantastic is necessary in the first place.

The multiple ways that capital is referenced in the 3<sup>rd</sup> season shows the intractable difficulties in making capital visible. It is so easy to interpret capital as nothing more than the physical instances of its production and its attendant commodities. The fantastic is a way for the supernatural reality of capital to become visible. The characterization of Emmitt and Varga as two different strains of capitalists highlights the fact that considering capital as a collection of parking lots is missing something fundamental, namely, how the physical instance of the parking lot turns into the social form of capital. In addition, the narrative historicizes the development of

capital by stating that it is Varga *not* Emmet who represents the true nature of capital. This grounds the claim that Varga's hostility to objects is truly representative of how capital functions. However, their relationship makes capital's aesthetic problem explicit, as making Varga's wealth visible is difficult after he showed such antipathy for objects. The relationship between Varga and Emmet also clearly links to the discussion of the representability of different eras of capital. The show subverts the earlier Shaviro quotation where he opposed the "invisible financial flows" with "actual productive behaviors" by showing how it is exceptionally difficult to show the translation from Stussy's parking lots to capital as such. Even though the parking lots are always visible, how they enter into a web of commodity relations is invisible. Varga's source of wealth which is expressed as information or his control of digital technologies exemplifies capital as the dominance of exchange value over use value. This theme is extended where the bowling alleys, even though they are visible are turned into pure abstract exchange values once Varga begins controlling Stussy Lots. The fantastic intervenes to show the truly supernatural nature of the dominance of exchange values.

*Fargo's* supernatural techniques that are used to reference capital, Gloria's vexing technology or the evil that Nikki was ordered to vanquish are all interested in the relational qualities of capital.

An attempt to make social relations visible will inevitably miss something, but the fantastic detective serial's strategy of using the supernatural when combined with the theme of detection allows it to reckon with the aesthetic problem of capitalism in a unique and productive way. The fantastic moments in *Fargo* are all illogical and unexplainable, but so is capital. The show fails to provide a perfect schematic of capitalist structure nor does it, to quote from *Fargo's* bedfellow *True Detective*, claim to allow you to "mainline the secret truths of the universe."

Rather, the show uses the fantastic to make capitalist structure more visible. The otherwise invisible dominance of exchange values is narrativized using the fantastic, to make it more parsable.

This shift is ultimately made possible through its inclusion of detection. In the fantastic detective serial, the banal cops and robbers story that frames the supernatural, in *Fargo's* case the domestic quarrel between the two Stussy brothers, provides an easily understandable blueprint to tack on the fantastic incursion. These two elements when combined, turn the incomprehensible nature of capital into a barrier that prevents understanding. This barrier, however, is very pointedly not the capitalist sublime; *Fargo* does not stop attempting to explain Varga's capital at just the scene with his screens. Instead of losing both the audience and the characters with a phenomenon that cannot be understood, the fantastic detective serial makes the unknown a little bit more parsable by placing it in a clear context, that of the barrier to the detective's mission.

This idea, that both capital and the fantastic act as the barrier to making sense of the world will serve as the main topic for the conclusion.

We live in a world where a lot of the toilets flush themselves  
It's for your safety.  
And a lot of the doors, they open themselves for you  
And if you say it's 'cause "Hell is other people."  
Then a lot of other people say, "Hell yeah man, that's true."

Fat History Month, The Future: *Bad History Month*. Exploding in Sound Records. 2013.

### **Conclusion: *The Outsider***

*The Outsider* is a show that, upon first viewing, appears to be an exemplar of the fantastic detective serial. It introduces the murder of a young boy and the detective working the case, Ralph Anderson (Ben Mendelsohn), quickly finds compelling evidence that points suspicion to Terry Maitland (Jason Bateman). This evidence includes multiple eyewitness testimonies as well as security camera footage. However, the Maitland's lawyer hires a private investigator who provides video footage of Terry being out-of-town when the murder took place. The robust but ultimately contradictory evidence that both incriminates and exonerates Terry frustrates the detectives working on the investigation.

As the show develops, Holly Gibney (Cynthia Erivo), an "esoteric detective", develops a compelling theory that a shape-shifting creature that can form perfect doppelgangers of people was responsible for both the killing Terry is accused of, as well as countless others. Once Holly convinces all the other detectives that the supernatural explanation is in fact more logical, they team up and manage to defeat the entity.

Here the fantastic irruption explicitly serves as a barrier to detection. The "traditional" detective initially brushes off any supernatural explanation by saying that he will "look for facts and evidence, you know, dumb cop shit like that." However, the key differences between *The*

*Outsider's* use of the fantastic and the interventions of the shows discussed in this thesis works to highlight the delicate balance that the fantastic detective serial must find.

This difference is best shown in the climax of *The Outsider* where Ralph and Holly confront the creature in the cave system that it calls home. When the pair find the creature in the cave it is in the form of a human and talks to them. Although not exactly a polite conversationalist, the creature responds to some of Holly's questions but is mostly hostile. In *The Outsider*, the creature, which is *the* symbol of the fantastic in the show, talks to both of the investigators. Once the fantastic speaks, it ceases to invoke the same inscrutable barrier to understanding but rather just becomes a subject. The fantastic moments that occur in the shows discussed in this thesis—the eldritch shapes that Rust sees, the UFO, the Sudden Departure—cannot be negotiated with, unlike the creature that Holly and Ralph meet in the caves.

The fantastic in *The Outsider* shifts the problem of the supernatural away from a function of the world to a mere competition between subjects. In the fantastic detective serial, there was something different about the *world* that resisted understanding, as opposed to one individual creature (even if was a polymorphing flesh-eating monster). The closest any of the other shows get to this problem is the figure of Paul in *Fargo*. Here the figure of the fantastic does speak to other characters, however, he himself is not where the fantastic begins and ends. The show contains other supernatural occurrences, like Gloria's technological frustration or Ray being reincarnated as a cat alluding to a world that is truly different and confusing.

In addition, the fantastic in *The Outsider* serves as a way to explain the impossible deadlock created by the evidence. Holly manages to convince Ralph because the contradictory evidence leaves the supernatural as the only possible explanation. Although, the fantastic is the source of the contradictory evidence, it also makes believing in it relatively easy. This conflicts

greatly with the fantastic moments in the programs discussed here, which are agnostic to the evidence of the developing case. The fantastic moments in the main shows appear totally disconnected with the investigation, while the creature in *The Outsider* is explicitly linked to the contradictory evidence. Instead of the supernatural appearing in a way that disrupts the process of detection, in *The Outsider* it follows the path of an axiom Sherlock Holmes states in *The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier*: “when you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth” (Doyle 1011). This amounts again to shifting the fantastic away from an inscrutable barrier to something that helps the investigation.

What do these large differences between *The Outsider* and the other shows say about the conclusions generated here concerning the fantastic detective serial? These small narrative and aesthetic differences in *The Outsider* greatly influence the function of the fantastic. The main argument that was developed in this thesis was that the fantastic detective serial represents a technique to represent capital in a way that acknowledges capital as a social form while not losing the subject in the sublime nature of capital. This technique is expressed through the inclusion of supernatural moments in the narrative that frustrate the mission of the detective.

These moments are analogous to the subject’s understanding of capital. The subject can see all the signifiers of modern capitalism, whether it be a smart phone or a stock exchange ticker, yet the actual structure of capital remains invisible. The reading of the fantastic that I have developed requires that capital remain alien to the subject. The tension between the fantastic moments being unexplainable while still being observable is the delicate balance that all the fantastic detective serials must maintain. It is important that the fantastic remains visible as this distinguishes it from the sublime, where the characters are seeing an explicit and bounded phenomenon. Rust does not understand the shapes he sees yet he can still see them, the Sudden

Departure is never explained yet its effects are easily visible, and the countless happenings in *Twin Peaks*, again while never explained can still be narrativized. The fantastic detective serial is poised in between the *Breaking Bad* sequences and *The Outsider's* use of the supernatural. Where *Breaking Bad* montages use formal techniques to bring the methamphetamine industry to some unknowable divine scale, *The Outsider* strips the fantastic of its mystery, domesticating the fantastic into nothing more than a supernatural foe for the police to vanquish.

This tension reveals one of the more vexing contradictions that plagues any political project that wishes to go beyond capitalism. It is even present, albeit in an altered way, in the difference between Marx's radical political writings and his more sober economic analyses. The problem being to what degree one needs to understand their current reality before going beyond it. When comparing the *Communist Manifesto* to *Capital* it is hard to think of the two writers as being the same person. Where the former is declarative and speaks about making a new world, the latter is strictly about examining the world that Marx occupied. Here the contradiction becomes visible, the *Communist Manifesto* is the more expressly political book, it calls for the abolition of all sorts of political institutions and tries to explain what the future may look like. Yet, it was *Capital* that Engels called "the Bible of the working class." The almost 1,000 page book with charts dedicated to the price of wool and coal was deemed to have massive political utility.<sup>31</sup> Where the *Communist Manifesto* was inspired by the failed revolutions of 1848 it was *Capital* that inspired, at least in part, the Russian Revolution of 1917. But both revolutions eventually ended in a farce of themselves—the revolutions of 1848 yielding only more

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<sup>31</sup> It is perhaps through its apparent sober economic tone that allowed *Capital* to enter Imperial Russia in the first place. *Capital* was ignored by censors because it was deemed a "strictly scientific work of political economy" and not political propaganda. Once *Capital* entered Russia it was quickly noticed by Lenin for its revolutionary potential. Lenin considered Marx to have developed his own theory of political economy in *Capital* that understands current social conditions, which holds revolutionary potential. For more consider Orlando Figes', *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924* or Lenin's "A Biographical Sketch with Explanation of Marxism" (1918).



totalitarian crackdowns or liberal reforms, while the Russian Revolution turned into the nightmare of the Gulag. Using only these two data points it is impossible to determine which is more important, knowledge of the current situation or the will to move beyond it. The fantastic detective serial moves beyond this unknowable question in a way that is not free of problems.

The world of the fantastic detective serial makes itself very clear that its world will never be fully understood. This is where the world of *Fargo*, *Twin Peaks*, *True Detective*, and *The Leftovers* are in fact more realistic than the world of *The Outsider*. The true fantastic detective serials acknowledge the fundamental impossibility of holistically understanding the world by including the supernatural elements. While I have spent most of this thesis defending the fantastic moments as *not* a moment of the capitalist sublime due to the inclusion of the detective figure that puts the supernatural in a specific investigative context, *The Outsider* troubles this conclusion. Compared to Holly and Ralph confronting the creature in the climax of *The Outsider*, all the fantastic moments that I have analyzed appear just as guilty of losing the audience in the capitalist sublime as the second montage from *Breaking Bad*. Even though the capitalist sublime is considered a problem due to its political ramifications, that does not absolve *The Outsider* of its own issues. While the monster briefly acted as the same barrier to understanding for the detectives, its ultimate defeat prevents it from functioning in the same way. If the fantastic problem in the show can be arrested, then it is not the same fantastic we have addressed in this thesis.

The relationship between the fantastic detective serial and *The Outsider* resonates with the theoretical problem that was discussed in earlier chapters. Reducing the fantastic from a product of an impossible world to one creature is similar to the desire to shift the impossibility of capital to either a set of financial instruments or digital technologies. Both elude to a situation

where once the “bad thing” is defeated then everything can go back to normal. While I disagree with this political conclusion, I recognize its ability to provoke a response more than the fantastic detective serial’s verdict, that the world and your place in it are unknowable. To shift the problem away from the structure of capital to how it is currently expressed in the world of appearances is to miss in your attempt to criticize capital.

To conclude, there is a quotation from Anna Kornbluh’s *Marxist Film Theory and Fight Club* that gets to the heart of this matter: “Does the circulation of ideas provide fodder for new sociopolitical acts, or does entertainment deflate any will to act? When we watch a movie that depicts political struggle for social transformation, do we want to go out and generate our own struggle, or do we want to watch more movies?” (Kornbluh 95). The problem that Kornbluh describes redeems the fantastic detective serial even after *The Outsider* puts its defining feature in a different context. Kornbluh responds to the eternally messy problem of translating images to political action, noting “Marxist film theory does not prescribe answers to these questions, but it underscores that they should be the part of any film analysis” (ibid). While still flawed, the fantastic detective serial represents a way to negotiate this jump that does not automatically choose the incorrect target of the struggle. What remains to be done is to study how to use the inscrutability of the supernatural in the fantastic detective serial not as a weakness but as a strength. To accept a political project that is hostile to an invisible social form, not only where that social form is most visible.

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