

Maximizing the Noodles: Class, Memory, and Capital in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon A Time In America*

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I

At the end of Sergio Leone's *Once Upon A Time In America* (1984), Max (James Woods) appears finally to be dead. Max, alias Secretary Bailey, Secretary of Commerce, has been killed on the eve of testifying before a Congressional Investigating Committee, late in 1968. Others due to testify have died in suspicious circumstances. Max has told Noodles (Robert de Niro), minutes before his disappearance, that he (Max) is "a dead man." There is little doubt, it would seem, that he is dead, ingested by a refuse wagon. But he appeared to die once before in the spring of 1933, when Max, the bootlegger and labour fixer, was shot down and burned on his last liquor run before the end of Prohibition. Indeed, a full sized confectionary coffin to Prohibition is seen in the sequence, set in Moe's bar, just prior to his death – one coffin going, apparently, before another. If Max has died once, and lived...perhaps he can do it twice.

Max's last hearse warrants scrutiny, always remembering that the vehicle is shown from the perspective of Noodles who has believed, almost up to his visit to Secretary Bailey's mansion, that *his* phone call to the police, in 1933, unintentionally caused the deaths of Patsy (James Hayden), Cockeye (William Forsythe), and Max (his "dear friend"). Note that the truck is called "MACK", that it is black and that it carries the number 35. In the previous sequence set in Secretary Bailey's panelled office, Max asks Noodles to kill him, insisting "let me settle the debt I owe

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to you,” and assuring him, “you’re the only person I can accept it from.” As inducement, he adds that he stole Noodles’ life and left him only “thirty-five years of grief.”

The clues to Max’s resurrection-trick are all in place. A truck: Max is the US Secretary of Commerce who, in 1968, is rumoured to have made illegal use of the Transport Union pension fund; furthermore, in 1933 (unbeknown to Noodles), he bought into trucks in a big way (the trucks that “used to haul liquor”). Max knows trucks. The truck is a hearse, being black and, as far as we know, carrying Max’s body. Max also knows hearses: in 1933, as one of “Fat Moe’s boneyard boys,” he collected Noodles from prison in a hearse, prompting Noodles to note, “My mother wrote me you was in the body snatching business.” Moreover, the hearse outside the prison (like the truck outside the mansion) contains, in the confined prostitute, a “stiff” who is anything but stiff, and into whom Max invites Noodles “to put life.”

Max’s last hearse is reconditioned when viewed through the stencil of his first; both vehicles “screw” – in the first Noodles did the “screwing,” but in the second (appearance to the contrary) he is screwed. Max has done it again, convincing perhaps us and perhaps Noodles that he has been “stuffed,” but, as he told a passer-by, surprised by the copulatory motion of Moe’s hearse in 1933, “turning over in the grave, they do it every time.” Between 1933 and 1968 Max stole 35 years of Noodles’ life, leaving him to rot in Buffalo, “go[ing] to bed early.” In 1968, needing to be seen to die, he hires Noodles to kill him, knowing that Noodles will do no such thing, but that in doing no such thing he will leave clues which will add up to a revenge narrative on a district attorney’s table. Of course, Noodles must *believe* that he, Max, alias Secretary Bailey, *is* dead, if he is to be a convincing witness before whatever organizations, official or unofficial, are asking. So the refuse-hearse is hired, but the only body it carries is the metaphoric body of Noodles’ wasted life.

All of which may seem slightly speculative, turning on three incidental details (a black truck, MACK, 35) and a number of puns (“screw,” “waste,” “stiff,” and perhaps even “refuse” as refusal). But speculation is reduced once the truck is set within the perspective engineered by the final interview between Max and Noodles in “Secretary Bailey’s” office. Max appears to commission his own death, providing a gun – though retrospectively we may choose to believe that it is not loaded. Noodles studies the gun and remembers four episodes from his Lower East Side adolescence: Max on a cart; Max in the river; the gang oath at the Station; and Dominic skipping in the shadow of a bridge. Together, the images

prove two things, that Max is capable of resurrection, and that Noodles is capable of ignoring it.

Max on a cart: the very same cart which, under his guidance and moving (like the refuse truck) across our field of vision, allowed Max to steal the drunk whom Noodles had planned to “roll.” Noodles told his gang, “the wagon will hide us from Fart Face”; instead, it hid Max, leaving the others exposed. The policeman, Fart Face, demands, “What are you kids doing here?”, to which their replies, “We’re getting it up the arse,” “Yeah, we’re being screwed,” Point remorselessly to the rotating blades at the rear end of the waste disposal truck. In effect, Leone creates an implied associative sequence latent in the single image of Max on the wagon, and lodges it in Noodle’s memory as he studies the gun. That sequence is propelled from the wagon by the word “screwed.” The epithet can be dated: Cockeye and Patsy were born in 1907; they are about 14 at the time of the attempt on the drunk; so, “screwed,” used in 1921/1922 links the wagon to Max’s second vehicle “the-hearse-for-screwing” outside the prison in 1933, which in turn draws the MACK’s truck (another hearse) from 1968 into the iconographic programme.¹ That such a sequence is at least potentially present in Noodle’s mind is confirmed by his second memory while studying Bailey’s gun.

Max in the river: the boat, directed by the wagon, joins the hearse and the truck as another kind of transport by way of which Max affects a mock death and a real resurrection. On the river in a rowing-boat, the boyhood gang were waiting for crates of illegal liquor to rise, like spectres through a mist, from the bottom of the Hudson river. Those crates, at least set within the associative sequence that I have ghosted, look suspiciously like coffins. In redeeming them, Max and Noodles fall overboard. Max ducks under and appears to drown. Noodles panics, crying “Max” repeatedly, only for Max to surface, smiling, on the far side of the boat. Horse-drawn cart, row-boat and refuse wagon perform structurally similar functions, enabling vanishing tricks which in the last two instances appear fatal.

Max, it would seem, controls death and its various vehicles. But Noodles chooses, at some level, not to acknowledge what he quite literally sees. His last two images repress the implied narrative built, by logical extension, into his initial memories. The third affirms an oath of brotherhood, though *we* should remember that the boy’s hands were originally joined under a sign reading “CHECK HERE,” that Noodles

¹ I first came across the phrase “iconic programme” in the work of Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach on museum spaces, “The Universal Survey Museum,” *Art History*, 3, (Dec. 1980), 448–69.

paused before saying “agreed,” and that Max, having proposed the contract, remained silent. In *this* instance, however, Noodles is neither hesitating nor checking his memory: instead, he deploys it to erase his latent recognition of what Max *has* done and *will* do. Erasure similarly informs Noodles’ own resurrection of Dominic, the youngest gang member, whose entirely sentimental demise (“Noodles...I slipped”) will serve to allow Noodles to retain a store of unproblematic memories, with which to counter what he *ought* to know about Max.

The trick works, Noodles looks up from the gun, calls Max “Secretary Bailey” and contradicts, point for point, everything he has learned:

I have a story also. . . . Many years ago, I had a friend, a dear friend. I turned him in to save his life. But he was killed. But he wanted it that way. It went bad for him. It went bad for me too. But it was a great friendship.

Even as Noodles articulates a counter-narrative on the basis of his memory work, Max holds the watch that he took from the drunk in 1922, the watch which should have belonged to Noodles. That particular time-piece can also be set within a brief sequence or programme of images, which adds up to evidence that, just as Max controls death, so he controls time. Summoned from Buffalo by a coded missive, Noodles returns to Fat Moe’s in 1968, where his first act is to restore the key to Moe’s clock. Presumably, that key was held inside the clock, along with the key to the luggage locker (and to the money) and so was taken by Noodles in 1933. Moe (Larry Rapp) winds the clock and restarts time, which, for Noodles, has stood still for 35 years. But time only restarts because Max, by way of a coffin (or, more accurately, the device of the letter from the synagogue on the subject of the relocation of graves) puts another key to the luggage locker in the mausoleum which he had built (under Noodles’ name) to himself, Patsy, and Cockeye. With *that* key, hooked behind the mausoleum door, Noodles is drawn into his role as inefficient hit-man in Max’s carefully orchestrated second death, which death is as false as the first. Max is a master of graves, of time, and of resurrection. Noodles, true to his name, is a “noodle,” “sap,” or “dupe,” who buys the second death, as he bought the first, becoming Max’s necessary fool and fall-guy.

II

I have focused on a number of images seen by Noodles but managed by Max. My reading depends on the notion that a single image, whether of refuse cart or watch, may contain, layered within it, an associative series. Such series are assimilative, each operates so that its conjunctions –

performed by the viewer but prompted by the visual composition of scenes – incline from contiguity towards causality. Witness how Max, rising from the blind-side of a boat in 1922, prefigures his implied emergence from behind the Mack’s truck in 1968. As one image after another becomes one image because of another, so a master narrative forms, in this case belonging to Max.

The claim that seemingly discrete images may be grasped together to form “synoptic judgments,” productive of “retrospective intelligibility” owes something to the historiography of Louis Mink,² given a visual turn by the work of Edwin Panofsky and Erich Auerbach. Each elaborates how the discovery that an item may be set in a series makes that item meaningful. As Panofsky has it, “iconology is a method of interpretation which arises from synthesis rather than analysis.”³ Perhaps the purest exponents of such synoptic programming were the Church Fathers whose figural interpretations linked the Old Testament to the New. Moses and Joshua prefigure Christ, even as Christ is the Passover. Liaisons are often effected within visual representations, so that, for example, “the blood of the lamb,” available in the sacrament, is an icon of dense temporality since it contains, simultaneously, the blood that saved two “flocks” – the Children of Israel and the Christian Churches.⁴ No element in any series becomes an allegorical sign in that each is deemed to retain its own historicity. Auerbach’s definition catches something of the causal capacity of what he calls figural interpretation:

Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfils the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life.⁵

Our need to draw those times and their figures into some conjunction requires that we see bi- or even tri-focally. By omitting from the film the years Noodles spends in prison (1922–33) and in Buffalo (1933–68), Leone effectively ensures that the easy series available through chronology is not available in this case. Temporal disjunction rather than temporal continuity typifies the film’s narrative. Moreover, since Noodles returns in

² Louis O. Mink, “Philosophical Analysis and Historical Understanding,” *Review of Metaphysics*, 20, (1968), 286.

³ Edwin Panofsky, “Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art,” collected in his, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 58.

⁴ Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” collected in his, *Scenes from the Drama of European Life* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 47.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

1933, as in 1968, to the same location (most typically Moe's bar and its environs), we see the same things as being stranded in two or more times. To look at stools piled on tables in a failing light, is to see single objects split and multiplied by their divergent functions in differing periods – Jewish restaurant (1922), speakeasy (1933), neighbourhood bar (1968). To watch Noodles as he peers through a grilled door in the alley beside Moe's, is to notice not simply a series of such grills, occurring across time in the film, but also to trace a genealogical sequence of profiles. Because Noodles is played young by Scott Tiler, and older and old by de Niro, we look at one face and construct others. Initially, such a way of seeing may derive from technical interest in the achievement of continuity: noting the position of the mole on the left cheek of the youth as of the man; enjoying the stretch marks on the neck in 1968 and their absence in 1933. But, increasingly, each face wears its earlier and later face(s), not as a function of casting or make-up, but because Noodles' face is marked by shocking discontinuities of loss and death.⁶ Faces, most often those of Noodles, Deborah, Moe, and Max (each seen across forty-five years) join Moe's furnishings in proposing that we see serially, or in image ensembles which shape our experience, even as each element within the configuration appears either to predict or to fulfill the other elements. A high level of causality emerges among the assembled images because they occur within a visual space – the film – characterized by sudden discontinuities of time. Put crudely, Leone's temporal jumps are so extreme and announced that they command interpretive agility. Like the historian, according to Louis Mink, faced with temporal disjunctions we adopt a "configurational mode,"⁷ grasping images together in order to see within them the "discursive ordering"⁸ which we desperately need.

Few of the devices in the film are quite so abyssive and therefore serially needy, as Leone's leaps in time, involving in at least one instance a gap of

⁶ My view of the faces owes much to John Berger's observation about photography, "Every photograph presents us with two messages: a message concerning the event photographed and another concerning a shock of discontinuity. Between the moment recorded and the present moment of looking at the photograph, there is an abyss. We are so used to photography that we no longer register the second of these twin messages, except in special circumstances: when for example, the person photographed was familiar to us and is now far away or dead. In such circumstances, the photograph is more traumatic than memories or mementos because it seems to confirm, prophetically, the later discontinuity created by the absence or death." *Another Way of Telling* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 86–87.

⁷ Louis O. Mink, *Historical Understanding*, eds. Brian Fay, Eugene O. Golob, and Richard T. Vann (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 50.

⁸ *Ibid.*, eds. Introduction, 12.

forty-five years. In 1922, Noodles enters prison, passing under a portal inscribed from Isaiah (Ch. 3, v. 28); with little indication of transition, we, from the viewpoint of Noodles, read the same inscription above the door to the Riverdale mausoleum, in 1968. More typically, such breaks occur across thirty-five years; Noodles, in 1968, carrying a suitcase filled with cash mysteriously given him for an undefined job, ducks as a frisbee whistles over him; the frisbee is caught by an unidentified hand, which metamorphoses (by cut) into Max's hand, taking Noodles' suitcase from him as he leaves prison in 1933. Popular movies often make temporal leaps, through these are conventionally invisible, and tend to involve hours, days, and weeks rather than decades. In contradistinction, as Stuart Kaminsky observes, Leone draws attention to his temporal effects, "each major transition... [being] underlined by a foregrounded visual metaphor."⁹ The inscribed walls or adroit hands function metaphorically because they bring two terms, involving visual and temporal aspects, into relation: the viewer is confronted with an analogy, or truncated series, which begs a question as to its conjunction.

I have space only to detail in the workings of one truncated series, the writing on the tomb. Taught to see serially, viewers may collect coffins, gathering them at Riverdale Cemetery. Moe's hearse for "screwing"; the cake coffin to Prohibition; Father Samuel's gravestone, torn from the neighbourhood Jewish cemetery by an earthmover in 1968, (as witnessed by Noodles); the Mack's truck.... In Auerbach's terms, the mausoleum fulfills them all even as they prefigure it. The tomb, raised by Max, *is* a confection, by which Noodles *will* get screwed; it is also one element in Max's metamorphosis – via managed death or waste disposal – from Jew to assimilated citizen. Configuring graves does not, however, deal specifically with the temporal and spatial analogy enacted within the quotation from Isaiah. "Your youngest and strongest will fall by the sword," appears on prison and tomb. In its first and capitalized manifestation, it is read by Max; Leone shows Max's eyes rise from Noodles' paddy waggon toward Isaiah (1922). The text, again capitalized, is transported to Riverdale as Leone cuts from the inscription to Noodles reading it (1968). In effect, the gazes of Noodles and Max meet across time in the text. Noodles will tell Deborah, on the beach in 1933, that in prison:

You had to cut yourself off from the outside world, just not think about it. You know, the years that went by seemed like no time at all, because you're not doing anything.

⁹ Stuart, M. Kaminsky, "Narrative Time in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon A Time in America*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 16, 1 (1983), 59–74.

Prison, like death, stops time; but on the beach he adds that during his incarceration (or entombment) he “used to read the bible every day,” on which grounds he may well know the biblical caption beneath which he is forced to study. Rereading, in 1968, he possibly recognizes Max’s hand within the shared text. Were he to follow the clue, he might stumble on the resurrection trick. Noodles, apparently, does not wish to take this option, since to do so would be to recognize that Max, alive and well, has stolen his life (by stopping his time), in Buffalo as in prison, to the greater good of Max’s own revival.

Leone’s tricky image of biblical writings on walls synthesizes two times, and so contains, impacted within it, an interpretive problem approachable by way of hypothetical questions to its recipients. Max configures the series: to what end? Does he build the mausoleum, knowing that Noodles waits in Buffalo, hireable via a cryptic allusion to their continuing tie, should the projected Congressional enquiring get too hot? A plaque on an interior wall affirms, albeit under the false name of Noodles, that the tomb was erected in 1967. A WTA news report, dated Nov. 1968, suggests that, since the investigation into “the Bailey Scandal” involves a “special team of detectives,” it has been complex and extensive. The dates grant Max time for his architectural plotting. Or, does his recollection of Isiah reach back to his Jewishness, even as the rehousing of his notional body in a “very fancy” Christian cemetery affirms his assimilation? Or, perhaps the text carries a split referent, signifying Max’s contradictory need to erase and yet retain his semitic self? Noodles reads the image and presumably sees the series: why then does he attempt no interpretation? Is he a “sap,” or does he prefer “not [to] think about it”?

Proliferating questions, lodged in a single visual image of an architectural feature, give “intrinsic concreteness” and yet “immense persuasive power”¹⁰ to that image. Auerbach, addressing figural series and their reading by biblical scholars, stresses that elements within a predicative series are able to foreshadow and fulfill one another, creating causal density, because they do so within extensive and stable systems of belief:

figural interpretation is a product of late cultures, far more indirect, complex, and charged with history than symbol or myth. Indeed, seen from this point of view, it has something vastly old about it: a great culture had to reach its culmination

¹⁰ See, Auerbach, 52.

and indeed to show signs of old age, before an interpretive tradition could produce something of the order of figural prophesy.¹¹

It would, I think, be a mistake to suggest that the teleological habit of mind capable of finding a Jesus in a Joshua, or the blood of the pascal lamb in the communion wine, belongs only to the like of a Church Father at the time of the Christian break from Judaism. Those who create figural series seek for and find permanence across change; theirs is an aesthetic designed to create an integral view of history. Presumably, if one were to separate the figural impulse from the spiritual, one could argue (as I am about to argue), that any rule-bound system, given sufficient historical reach, will create conditions within which those of teleological persuasion may perceive figurally.

So, the layout of the Louvre according to Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, is an “iconic programme,” designed in order that its apparently discrete items – paintings, sculptures, staircases, ceilings, walkways – may combine around a number of “culminating moments”¹² (*Winged Victory*, *Venus de Milo*, *Mona Lisa*), to establish that the French state is the “true heir to classical civilization,”¹³ and that visitors, if they are French, are the citizens and share-holders of that state:

The stairs to the right of the *Victory* take them to the Percier, Fontaine and Duchâtel rooms which connect with the Salon Carré, where French Renaissance painting is displayed.... As visitors pass through... they can look down at examples of Roman sculpture and mosaics in the Court of the Sphinx below.... Our point is that no matter which route visitors take, within a few minutes they experience an iconographic programme in which the heritage of antiquity and the Renaissance leads to French art.¹⁴

Figurally speaking, the ties which bind the Court of the Sphinx to French Renaissance art, and both to the cultural substance of the visitor, are weaker than those existing between Old and New Testaments, according to Tertullian when he determinedly interprets the two sacrificial goats of Leviticus (Ch. 16, v. 7), as figures of the first and second coming of Christ.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the Louvre remains a visual space organized by a slackened figural imperative, and its central aesthetic may be said to function along lines glossable by Auerbach, Panofsky, and Mink – that is, by series, ensembles, and configurations, in which visual and temporal contiguities cry out for large historical acts of interpretation.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 57.

¹² Duncan and Wallach, “The Universal Survey Museum,” 458. ¹³ Ibid., 459.

¹⁴ Ibid., 458–59.

¹⁵ Auerbach, “Figura,” *Scenes from the Drama of European Life*, 29–30.

To add Leone's "*Once Upon A Time In America*" to the Louvre and the Bible is, to say the least, to frame a problem: what imperious belief keeps its pieces in place? The Louvre is synthesized by a cultural narrative of state formation. The early Church Fathers link Old to New as part of the Christian mission to the Gentiles. I would suggest that Leone's determining narrative, his story providential enough to carry the burden of predicative confidence, while conducting synthetic acts between unlikely objects and across extensive reaches of time, is the Fordist plot. Fordism, in its inception, is peculiarly American, and in its various forms runs throughout what has been called "the American Century." David Harvey identifies the Fordist *telos* as "creative destruction,"¹⁶ apt epigraph for a film whose configurations so conspicuously follow the logic of Max. Before making my economic case, I shall return to Max in order to fix the configurative drive of the film within his purview.

III

Since Leone titles his film generically as a story of "America" and opens and closes it with the song "God Bless America," we can assume that his narrative aims to achieve some kind of typicality, and that it is not simply the story of a number of individuals in a criminal milieu. One way to unpack the larger resonance is to note the class trajectories of the two central male characters. Both rise from the Jewish quarter of New York, but, from the first, Max, true to his name, has more. He appears on a wagon carrying, among other family property, a chandelier and a tripod camera. By way of contrast, we do not see the interior furnishings of Noodles' home; we do, however, see the lavatory his family shares with others on that tenement floor, where Noodles retreats to read Jack London's *Martin Eden* (1908), a novel whose hero rises from the working class to the *hante* bourgeoisie, only to kill himself. The lesson is lost on Noodles who remains committed to his class of origin. Max does not. Arguably, Leone glosses the reasons for his social climb by way of his arrival, camera almost in hand. The tripod plays a crucial part in two early scenes; as Max unloads his mother's goods in the Bronx, and then as Fart Face penetrates Peggy on the tenement roof. First, with Noodles approaching the wagon, Max sets up the tripod and appears to photograph

¹⁶ See particularly, David Harvey, *The Limits of Capital* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), Ch. 7, "Overaccumulation, Devaluation and the 'First Cut' Theory of Crisis," and his *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), Ch. 10, "Theorizing the Transition," 173–88.

him. Noodles spins round and presents his arse to the lens; at which point, Max comments, “drop your pants and I’ll stick it to you again.” We see Noodles upside down through Max’s camera. The moral of this sequence (might well be) that Max will turn Noodles’ world upside down by way of his manipulation of appearances. When we see a newspaper carrying the photographs of the three dead hoods in 1933, Max alone looks straight at the camera, as though negotiating with the maker of the image for the meaning of that image. On the tenement roof he, as the photographer, makes the image of Fart Face’s naked behind and “sticks it to him”; *that* image is the gang’s route to partial control over the authorities who police their territory. My point is a simple one: Leone shows us that Max is a manipulator of the image, by which means he will rise, quitting his place of origin.¹⁷ Note how, as Max and Noodles enter Moe’s speakeasy, on the evening after Noodles’ release, Max throws his friend’s flat-cap – image of the American migrant worker – to the lift man, saying “get rid of that.” Noodles never really does; hence he rejects Sharkey’s suggestion that the gang buy trucks, use the union leader Jimmy-Clean-Hands (Treat Williams) as a front, and go into trucking. Max is angered by Noodles’ refusal to modernize the business through investment in the devalued assets of liquor-hauliers, and a switch in their product:

You’re talking like some shmuck off the street. If we listened to you we’d still be rolling drunks. You’ll carry the stink of the street the rest of your life.

Max is the quintessential boss, with an eye to new lines and new markets. Noodles, ever the blue-collar worker, responds, “I like the stink of the street. It opens up my lungs, and gives me a hard on.” Max may go with Noodles on vacation to Florida, but he will invest as advised, “get the party behind him” and go legitimate, though he will have to transform himself to do it. While, if course, Noodles will be living without any assets, and with only memories, in Buffalo.

By opposing the class imperatives of two key characters, Leone makes a structural point about the necessary relationship between capital and labour, and more particularly about their relation during that period in

¹⁷ The extent of Max’s covert directorial control is implicit in the manner of his death (*circa* 1933). When Carol and Noodles meet in the Bailey Foundation building (1968), Carol’s version of the last liquor run has it that Max, fearing inherited insanity, tipped off the police, and “when the police stopped the truck, he started shooting first just to get himself killed.” The story explains the manner of Max’s disappearance, but, given that he did not die or plan to die, it fits little else. Had Max “started shooting first” he might well have been hit in cross-fire. It seems more likely that, in league with the police, he arranged the raid, shot Cockeye and Patsy himself, and then personally constructed the shoot-out *mis-en-scène* (fires, crases, corpses), from a safe location.

capital's history known as Fordism. Here the film's main dates are crucial and surely calculated. 1922, 1933, and 1968 mark moments of intense crisis for the Fordist principle, moments which capital negotiated by transforming itself even as it forced reorganization on the body of the producing class. Or, in Leone's terms, Max dies to reappear in a different form, while Noodles gets "screwed."¹⁸

"Fordism" is the word widely applied to that regime of accumulation in which centralized and hierarchic structures are developed to manage the processes not simply of production but also of purchase and consumption. The fact that, by the early 20s, Ford's assembly line at Dearbourne could produce a new Model T every ten seconds, made it inevitable that advertizing revenues would increase (thirteenfold) between 1900 and 1930. Enhanced production capacity increased the risk of overproduction, necessitating the standardization of distribution and consumption. But, in 1922, the Fordist principle was in its infancy. Production, stimulated by wartime demand and associated technological innovations, was threatened by sustained labour unrest. During each year of US participation in the war, over 1 million workers struck (more than

¹⁸ My assumption is that Leone's historical sense, his grip on the *telos* of Fordism, informs the visual and verbal organization of his film. The viability of such a claim will depend primarily on whether or not my close readings succeed in sustaining systematic connections between the surface of the film and a larger economic explanation. By way of close work, I seek to establish Leone's intentions and to declare them political, yet of Leone's overt politics I have been able to discover almost nothing, beyond the tangential and rumoured. Tangentially: prior to *Once Upon a Time*, Leone worked with Sergio Donati, a writer on *La Battaglia de Algeri* and *Quiemada!*, noted for his radical politics and for the clarity he brought to political issues. Donati was a significant figure for a group of Italian films made between 1964 and 1978, which were described at the time as "political westerns." Leone has been described as "the father of the Italian western" (See Christopher Frayling, "The Wretched of the Earth," *Sight and Sound*, 3, (June 1993), 27–29). Rumour: at the time of his death (1989) Leone was working on a project centred on Mao's Long March.

On the more general issue of intent, there is ample evidence that Leone considered himself an auteur, and took pains to ensure that his films – often long in gestation – reflected his purposes at visual, verbal and musical levels. Indeed, one of the reasons Leone offered for returning to direction with *Once Upon a Time*, after a spell as a producer, was that producers were no longer able to exercise the degree of control he sought: "The creative producer is a bygone figure even in Italy. Here, less than a handful could really qualify and most of them have migrated. In Italy, even a modest director is considered a film author, inaccessible to give and take" (quoted by Adam Knee, "Notions of Authorship and the Reception of *Once Upon a Time in America*," *Film Index International*, 10, 1 (1985), 5). *Once Upon a Time* was a thirteen year project in which Leone's intentions are central. On the range of Leone's auteurship see also, "A Fable for Adults: Sergio Leone interviewed by Elaine Lomenzo," *Film Index International*, 20, 4 (1984), 21–23. My readings of the film are based on the 218 minute Leone approved, Leone cut version; see Knee, 4.

in any single year prior to 1915). The years between 1919 and 1922 were years of intense and continuous labour resistance as the workforce challenged those changes in working conditions associated with standardization and efficiency (chief tenets of Fordist reorganization). As the economic historian James O'Connor puts it: "Economic recoveries and expansions occur when Capital successfully restores its domination of labour by directly restructuring the producing class itself."¹⁹

By 1922, Fordist capital had only just learned the key trick which, once in place, was to work so well during the rest of the 20s. That trick was summed up in the equation, "Pay them more. Sell them more. Prosper more."²⁰ In a real sense, the "consumer" was the major invention of America's second industrial revolution. By generalizing higher consumption levels (at least to the entire middle class), and by offering the promise of the shop-window to all, Fordism avoided the risk of overproduction, latent in war-prompted technological revolution. During the 20s and 30s, Fordism might better be known as Partial Fordism, since the full consumption basket was not opened to all until after World War II. Partial Fordism was crucial evidence of capital's ability to transform itself, and to mutilate the body of labour from which it took its substance.²¹

There were many mutilations. First (and diagrammatically), to ensure a model T every 10 seconds by 1925, Ford had to establish his famous line, and to do it by "job segmentation," "speed up" and "flow," which amounted to the obliteration of a class. By the mid 1920s, in large sections of American industry, craft-workers had become "machine minders" who were supervised by "managers." Systematic deskilling involved a theft of class knowledge: as early as 1911, Frederick Taylor, guru of time-and-motion studies, insisted that, "the great mass of traditional

¹⁹ James O'Connor, *Accumulation Crisis* (New York: Blackwell, 1984), 29.

²⁰ Christine Frederick, *Selling Mrs Consumer* (1929), quoted by Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: The History and Development of Advertizing* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976) 22.

²¹ My cursory trot through the forms of Fordism owes much to the periodization offered by David Harvey in his *The Condition of Postmodernity*. See also, Stanley Aronowitz, "Marx, Braverman and the Logic of Capital," *Insurgent Sociologist* (8, 2 and 3, Fall 1978); James O'Connor, *Accumulation Crisis* (New York: Blackwell, 1984), Ch. 3, "Origins of the Contemporary Crisis," 56-67; Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The US Experience* (London: Verso, 1979), Ch. 2, "Transformations in the Labour Process," 111-47; David A. Hounsell, *From the American System to Mass Production, 1800-1932* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), Ch. 6, "The Ford Motor Company and the Rise of Mass Production in America," 217-61; and Craig R. Littler, *The Development of the Labour Process in Capitalist Societies* (London: Heinemann, 1982), Ch. 11, "The Development of Work Organization in the USA."

knowledge which in the past has been in the head of the workman” must be transferred to management. Force would prove necessary. “It is only through *enforced* standardization of methods, *enforced* adoption of the best implements, *enforced* co-operation that this faster work can be ensured.”²² Not for Taylor the limp notion that “progress” could be either “natural” or “inevitable.” Fordism progressed in the late teens and early 20s by way of a clash of class wills, during which management stole the head from the skilled hands of labour (or, more abstractly, intellectual and manual labour were increasingly separated).

Deskilled workers were offered window-gazing to compensate their loss. But even here mutilation operated. Central to the success of consumerism was the enforced forgetting of the facts of production. Advertisers recognized that, in order to service corporate wealth, they had to restructure the memory of the producing class, a task involving the suppression both of their labour and of as much evidence as possible that commodities were ever “made” things. The advertisers’ journal *Printers Ink* noted retrospectively in 1938:

The first advertizing sold the name of the product. In the second stage, the specifications of the product were outlined. Then came emphasis upon the uses of the product. With each step the advertizement moved farther away from the factory viewpoint and edged itself closer to the mental processes of the consumer.²³

Amnesia has always been one of the staples of a successful commodity culture. However, as the sales pitch broadened (first in the 20s and then in the 50s and 60s) forgetting became imperative, and what was most typically forgotten was “the factory viewpoint,” or the fact that commodities are manufactured items.

Theft of the head of the working class and reconstitution of the memory of the working class are mutilations enacted by Fordist capital. But capital, too, had to change. The late-nineteenth-century “captain of industry” had to become the twentieth-century “captain of consciousness,”²⁴ since only if he could organize the desire of the consumer could he be sure to sell the level of goods that his technology allowed him to produce.

In 1922, the restructuring of the producing class and the metamorphosis of the owning class were still in progress. Allegorically speaking: Max has

²² F. W. Taylor, quoted by D. Montgomery, *Workers’ Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology and Labour Struggles* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 114, (italics in source).

²³ Quoted by Ewen, 80.

²⁴ The phrase is Ewen’s, *ibid.*

the camera, but he is not using it to full effect. In 1933, Max will die and rise again eventually as a union boss. 1933 was the worst year of the Depression, when capital stared popular uprising in the face and began to realize that some kind of liaison with the state was necessary if private profitability was to continue. Unions were central to that liaison. Leone's decision to make the reincarnate Max a union man draws on the common association of Teamster and Mafia, but, in the larger economic context of the key dates, also suggests an understanding of the logic of the New Deal. Unions were the site where capital, labour, and the state formed an alliance in order to achieve a workable contract whereby private profit might still be made. Read from within the rhetoric of the New Deal, the plot ran as follows: state, capital, and labour combined to create, out of depression and war, the institutional order of collective bargaining which was to characterize the industrial peace and progress of the post-war decades. The New Deal was dealt by an honest broker (the state) who only and ever sought to provide judicial and legislative means towards an equitable contract between labour and employer. It is a tough story to swallow, yet it remains, historically, the master narrative. Consensus blankets the 50s. *Fortune's* reading of the agreement between General Motors and the autoworkers typifies the consensual plot. The magazine described the Treaty of Detroit (1950) as casting "American labor relations in their postwar mould," and as affirming "the free enterprise system":

First the autoworkers accepted, "the existing distribution of income between wages and profits as 'normal' if not as 'fair.'" Second, by explicitly accepting "objective economic facts...as determining wages," the contract "threw overboard all theories of wages as determined by political power."... Finally, "it is one of the very few union contracts that expressly recognize[s] both the importance of the management function and the fact that management operates directly in the interest of labor."²⁵

So read, the contract looked good, and the post-war Fordist system seemed set fair towards "The Age of Affluence" and "The End of Ideology." The resonance of these generic clichés depends upon the giving of credence to the manifestly false homily that "management operates directly in the interests of labour." None the less, the new and increasingly bureaucratized unions existed to make just that case, thereby ensuring the labour peace of the 50s.

²⁵ The Editors of *Fortune* as quoted and commented upon by Mike Davis in his *Prisoners of the American Dream* (London: Verso, 1986), 111–12.

In 1968, Max must die again, quitting the union for who knows what? Again, Leone's eye for crisis-points in the Fordist imperative is accurate. By the late 60s, Full Fordism was at its climacteric, fuelled by an increase in production associated with the Vietnam war. However, inflationary difficulties had begun to imply that Full Fordism would have to become more flexible, if Fordism itself was to survive. I have space only to be extremely schematic. By the late 60s, Fordism was a difficulty. Its long-term, large-scale investment in mass-production systems inhibited flexibility of design. Labour markets and contracts began to seem rigid. State entitlement programmes for workers looked immovable, even as fiscal returns fell. One response was to print money. Another was to explore flexibility. Again my point is rudimentary; Fordist capital is committed to the creative destruction of itself, and, even as it mutates, so it mutilates the class body of its workers. Flexible Fordism (or what we live with now) involves flexibility in labour markets, labour processes, products, and patterns of consumption. Intensified rates of innovation (technological, organizational, and commercial) are the order of the day, while speedier communications make it possible to spread capital's innovative decisions over a wider and more various space. The net effects for labour are casualization, short-contract, part-time work, and cancellation of the career ladder. All of which amounts to a sustained attack on the possibility of collective action by labour, and on its consciousness of itself as a class.

Exasperated by the speculative haste of my economic summations, I return to Leone's dates. 1922, 1933, and 1968 are key dates, because then, or thereabouts, Fordist capital (Max) creatively destroyed one form of itself, to rise again in another (Partial, Full, or Flexible). At the same time, Fordism redispersed the body of labour (Noodles), since only if the working class is actively deprived of its sense of itself and of its collectivity can private capital continue to steal so much from it. Max, by his own declaration, takes "everything," and offers Noodles a revenge-plot which looks suspiciously like one more theft.

Noodles refuses the narrative and is shown into the night via a side entrance which leads down a sizeable drive to where a MACK truck is parked, beyond the mansion gate. Looking back to the gate from the road, he sees Max emerge, but his view is blocked by the movement of the wagon across his eyeline. Once the gate is clear, Max has disappeared, and the truck's rotating screws ominously start-up. What Noodles then sees amounts to his response to an apparent death – a response realized as a sequence of images. He watches the tail-lights of the refuse truck fade into

the headlights of an oncoming car, to the tune of “God Bless America.” It should be remembered that the departing vehicle, for us and for Noodles (at some level), is dense with other vehicles – the wagon and boat from 1922, and the hearse from 1933. As the red lights bleach white and the rear end of one vehicle becomes the front end of another, so, seemingly, 1968 becomes 1933. Three cars pass, towards or from another party in another era, except that the third car, the white car, contains revellers who are merely simulating the appearance of the 30s. Where does that leave Noodles, temporally speaking? As the casually thrown bottle smashes in the road outside Secretary Bailey’s Long Island home, does it break for him in 1968 or in Moe’s bar on the eve of Prohibition’s wake, in 1933? A conspicuously white car *did* pass Noodles in the alley as he first went into the speakeasy.

For us, the question may be simple: as the vehicles pass, we shift from 1968 to 1933, only to be drawn back to 1968 by the final car. It is a cliché that cinematic images manipulate our sense of time and place; but at *this* moment and in *this* film that may prove disturbing, particularly since the sequence in question is seen from Noodles’ viewpoint, and perhaps as though occurring inside Noodles’ head. I would suggest that Leone organizes the materials of his closing sequence so that his film closes in two times at once, or, perhaps more accurately, that it ends caught between two times. What Noodles *does* with the last car and the breaking bottle, appearances to the contrary, is not at all clear. On the surface, the sound carries him from Prohibition’s funeral to the Chinese Theatre in 1933, and to the opiate that allowed him to forget the violent extinction of three friends. But Leone’s shot, as Noodles – a figure in a dark overcoat, seen from behind – enters the theatre in 1933, is unassailably duplicitous – or, quite literally, double. Noodles, characteristically hunched and leaning, also wears a dark overcoat in 1968. The hunch, the lean, the overcoat (dark and in darkness) recur in a shot at least superficially set in 1933. My difficulties are compounded as I watch what looks like a sequence unmistakably from the earlier time: the lighting of the pipe and inhalation of the drug, which culminates in a finally frozen image of a “smiling” Noodles, seen through black gauze or lace. That image, across which credits roll lengthily, recalls not only the black and lacey silhouettes projected onto the screen of the Chinese Theatre itself, but is also an exact echo of a shot of Claudia Cardinale, full face, seen from above, in sepia light through black gauze in Leone’s earlier movie, *Once Upon A Time in the West* (1969). My point is not that Leone tries for intertextual allusion, but that, in playing a cineaste’s trick within what is

absolutely the final shot of his film, he draws attention to the degree to which time itself (and time in Noodles' head) is subject to recreation by images.

By such means, he problematizes any reading of the final smile as it is witnessed through the rosta of its creators. There are conflicting options: Noodles drugged, is out of it in 1933; Noodles recalls Noodles drugged in 1933, and is out of it in 1968 as in 1933. But neither response explains the smile. I would suggest that the smile is a modification, care of 1968, and that Noodles projects it back into the 1930s, as he recognizes and represses all that Max has done and will go on to do. He smiles because reality is changeable, memory is entirely malleable, and in that malleability lies his oblivion; because he changes it, he can bear it (as he said to Secretary Bailey, "I have another story..."). But, whatever the motive for Noodles' smile, larger issues are raised by the double temporality of the closing sequences. Noodles, ever the sap, may choose oblivion in 1968 (as in 1933), but Leone's subject is announcedly "America," god bless it.

Apparently, at the close of *Once Upon a Time in America*, Leone indicates that time is a matter of images, and that in America the camera which controls memory belongs to Max, or to Fordist capital. *We* might like to reassure ourselves that our memories, interior to ourselves, are in some sense "us" – our singularity, a private reserve or historical source, adding up to what is unique about our particularity.²⁶ Leone would oppose such reassurance. Take Max's son: his image, seen twice, is awkward in that he is played by the same actor who played Max as a youth (Rusty Jacobs) – only the hair colour has changed (indeed, it seems as though Leone had him made up badly in what looks like, but is not, a wig). The son's name is David; Deborah, Moe's sister, tells Noodles that he was named for David Aaronson, Noodles' real name. Consequently, Max's son is physically Max, and nominally Noodles (or David), names, which if combined, reveal David Bailey... a name iconic to photography in the 60s. The name might pass for happenstance, were it not that Leone has established the degree to which Max controls and takes profit from "reality" and from the "reality" of Noodle's memories, by way of the camera.

²⁶ Adorno is relevant here, "The pronouncement...that memories are the only possessions which no-one can take from us, belongs in the storehouse of impotently sentimental consolidations that the subject [or individual], resignedly withdrawing into inwardness, would like to believe the very fulfilment that he has given up. In setting up his own archives, the subject sizes his own stock of experiences as property so making it something wholly external to himself" (*Minima Moralia* (London: New Left Books, 1974), 166).

Memory, according to Leone, is plainly malleable under Late Capitalism. Jameson is to the point when he speaks of the “waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some way.”²⁷ Put tersely, what he means is that, in America and particularly under Flexible Fordism (during the late 60s and after), culture becomes so much a matter of images that objects and persons are transformed *into* their own images, at which point any chance of grasping the history of those objects and persons wanes (Adorno called it “receding concreteness”²⁸). History is displaced into aesthetic style; so, for example, if we watch the movie *American Graffiti*, we understand that the film is not trying to be a representation of historical content – but that it is approaching the past through the connotations of a style and conveying “pastness” by the glossy quality of its images.²⁹ Jean Baudrillard might call this effect “a simulacrum” or “an identical copy for which no original has ever existed.”³⁰ In a culture of “copies,” each of which exists first and foremost “for sale” and which therefore must disguise both its real “use” and any sense of the past involved in its own production – in a culture, that is, of simulacra – memory is bound to recede, having little to catch hold of except the gloss on the image. The gloss is often sexualized; which assertion takes me to a difficult area in Leone’s work.

IV

The film contains two violently objectionable rapes. Why? Liberal reactions might range from, “Women are unacceptably objectified,” to “Rape *is* violent and objectionable, and ought to be shown as such.” I wish to go down neither of these reasonable paths. Instead I shall try to show how Leone explores a general sexualization of reality, occurring because sensuality has been appropriated for the purposes of exchange, as one consequence of which genders are locked into potentially violent antagonism. In 1929, Robert and Helen Lynd noted of their “representative” small American city, Middletown, “more and more of the

²⁷ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review*, 146 (July-Aug., 1984), 68. Jameson’s sense of our increasing inability to experience history goes some way to explain Max’s ability to fabricate his own biography and to modify Noodles’ memory of their prior lives.

²⁸ See Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 235.

²⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 19.

³⁰ Baudrillard speaks of “the liquidation of all referentials” and of “substituting signs of the real for the real itself.” Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), 4.

aspects of living are coming to be strained through the bars of a dollar sign”;³¹ as bodies pass through those bars, by way of the consumption imperative, they are transformed. Put crudely, during the twentieth century American culture has become a culture orientated increasingly to “the viewpoint of exchange,”³² in which the sellers’ view is the dominant view. Seen from the perspective of selling, the actual use to which things are put becomes “secondary.” Wolfgang Haug argues that, for the seller, an object’s use is a “transitory phase” or “lure” existing merely to accomplish the vital activity of exchange, smoothly. For this to happen, the use of objects and persons must be subordinated to their appearance, or, in advertizing terms, to their capacity to carry an image.³³ It follows that any commodity’s function as part of the needs of someone is subordinated to the item’s ability to propose a “promise” that will ensure purchase. “Use” therefore takes on a “double reality,” with the emphasis on its second or promissory term, since “use,” taken to market, atrophies to “appearance of use,” “impression of use,” or “promise of use.” Consequently:

[the commodity’s] aesthetic promise of use value thus becomes an instrument in accumulating money....Sensuality in this context becomes the vehicle of an economic function.³⁴

What happens to bodies under such conditions? At one level, voyeurism replaces “seeing.” Caught-up in the spectacle of commodity, the viewer encounters promises everywhere. What Roland Marchand calls “capitalist realism”³⁵ is plainly a realm of illusion, but of *real* illusion, or of illusion made real by the fact that consumers contribute their senses to that illusion. The image fascinates because it takes its sensualized body (in a kind of optic dialogue) from the sensuality of the possible purchaser. In advertizements, people are effectively shown the unfulfilled aspects of their lives by way of commercial images which promise satisfaction – the promissory image works by taking desires from the eyes of its viewer and bringing those desires to the surface of the commodity. Through such

³¹ Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown* (New York: Harcourt, 1929), 81.

³² Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics* (Oxford: Polity Press, [1986], p. 15). My account here is heavily reliant on Haug’s terms: rather than cite a source for each phrase, I would direct those interested to Ch. 1 of *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, and to “Towards a Critique of Commodity Aesthetics,” in Haug’s *Commodity Aesthetics Ideology and Culture* (New York: International General, 1987), 103–20.

³³ See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1973), particularly section 34.

³⁴ Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, 16.

³⁵ Roland Marchand, *Advertizing the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), xviii.

borrowings, commodities take on sexuality as an assistant, and any exchange is ghosted by an aura of sexual enjoyment.³⁶ Of course, the sex of these circumstances is an illusion, whose real substance is the currency it exists to elicit. Disappointment attends such liaisons, at least at the level of use; so much so that satisfaction remains curiously hooked to the level of exchange itself. The *frisson* begins to lie in the moment of purchase, which becomes the climax of sexuality as it is practiced within “capitalist reality.” If objects and bodies become sensual, in so far as they are excuses for exchange, their true sensuality lies their ability to elicit purchase. Money becomes the new sensuality, and bodies are sexual in so far as they mirror the process of exchange. Because value resides in image (or appearance) use is *desensualized* and image is eroticized. Under such circumstances, the body is disembodied as it passes into the “second skin” of the commodity, which is itself simply a guise worn by a profit. Which amounts to saying that money has become more exciting than the body which is its vehicle, and that, as a result, the body itself is sensualized primarily in and through money.

What I have done, by way of Haug, Marchand, and others, is to theorize the promoter’s wildest hope. I do so in order to characterize a cultural dominant from the perspective of those who dominate. Within such a perspective, conditioned by commodity, fetishism is not something that happens to someone else; consider how we are encouraged to forget production, and how, as a consequence, when looking at things, we may well most typically see objects and not the human processes that went into them. This way of seeing is a learned cultural preference, by way of which things are seen which are actually only parts of things. The fetishist is one who objectifies bodies and is excited by bits of those bodies. Culturally speaking, we are all fetishists, which is a cockeyed way of seeing both bodies *and* things.

Cockeye features in Leone’s first rape sequence. His name and his defective eye, like the rape of Carol (Tuesday Weld) by Noodles during the robbery of a diamond merchant, can be read as Leone’s way of exploring how commodities cause us to see aslant. My general claim about the commodification of bodies and of sight adds up to the suggestion that the cock and the vagina are in the eye. Note how Leone structurally elides robbery and sexual penetration, so that, as Noodles enters Carol from behind, so Max breaks into the secret compartment of the safe. To persuade it open, left eye flickering, Max puts a gun to the eye of the

³⁶ As Haug put it, “the background of sexual enjoyment becomes the commodity’s most popular attire,” 56.

jeweller. At the same time Carol's cries drift towards orgasm.³⁷ Patsy comments that the diamonds are as big as "motsa-balls," a remark which sexualizes the rocks even as it objectifies the male genitalia. Withdrawal from the jewellers is marked as withdrawal from the woman, by the obvious play on "coming" and "going." Nothing subtle here, but the crude point is that for the robbers, as for Carol, sexual release is synonymous with the achievement of the gems. With the robbery complete, the gang liaise with Joe-Detroit (Burt Young), the hoodlum who hired them. However, Max intends to retain both the stones and the payment. The betrayal is brutally effected; but just prior to this action, Leone has Joe-Detroit examine the stones through a jeweller's glass. The elongated optic is significant in that, during the scene immediately prior to the break-in, Joe-Detroit had set the robbery up by way of a long anecdote about "cock insurance"; excited by the stones, his eye tumescens, getting literally longer, and thereby insuring that his cock *is* in his eye, before, that is, Patsy shoots both away.

The pulping of the eye is part of a nervousness about erection in the movie, an understandable nervousness, since, if cocks are in eyes, they are unstable, and, in one sequence at least, highly mobile. I am thinking of the switching of the babies in the maternity hospital, when boys become girls and girls become boys, so that the Chief of Police (Danny Aiello) can be persuaded to call off his men, who are protecting black-leg labour and the interests of the factory owners. The scene is comic, but none the less calls into question the exact location of the male sign. The Chief of Police, visiting his first son, browbeats his three young daughters with the knowledge that now there are two "bosses" in the house. He proclaims to his wife that the baby has "balls just like his pappa," only, on removing the nappy, to find no balls at all. His line "What's this!," delivered in a tone which mingles horror and contempt, occurs as Leone shows us a baby girl's genitalia. Given that the whole hospital sequence culminating in the image of an infantile vulva, occurs between the rape of Carol and the rape of Deborah, it could be argued that Leone shows us "this!" in order anatomically to fix that about which so much and such violent male activity *has* centred, and is about to centre. Getting to see versions of "that" has been a major preoccupation of the childhood episodes of the film – Noodles spying on Deborah (Elizabeth McGovern), Cockeye

³⁷ I would stress that Carol is, in effect, part of the gang; her liaison with Joe-Detroit enables the robbery, and in order to avoid detection she demands Noodles' violent attentions. The fact that she wishes to be attacked and marked does not, however, amount to solicitation of rape.

taking a cream cake to Peggy. But “that!” so physically simple, is *never* “that”; it too has been displaced into eyes conditioned to see it *through* commodity and commodity’s “second skin,” the image.

Consider Cockeye’s childhood seduction of Peggy (the girl who sells herself in the tenement). What Cockeye finally fails to pay is her equivalent, a cream cake – displayed behind glass, the best in the showcase, carefully wrapped in wax paper by Moe, and possessed of an ironic cherry. The cake *is* that through which Peggy’s sexual favours are mediated (it is also five cents). At the last, the cake is preferred. Unable to wait, Cockeye eats the cherry, in a serious joke. The “second skin” – the confection, so much a matter of images – is even more satisfying than “that” which it exists to realize.

A similar confusion attends Noodles’ looking through a peep-hole at Deborah dancing. Crouched in the john of the Jewish restaurant, he watches a girl who is training herself to become an image (she has no time to help Moe serve food because she has to go to an elocution lesson). Deborah’s “tuchis” is inextricable, for Noodles, from the peep-hole and the notion of perfected exhibition. But Deborah, too, is caught up in the optic of the image; she seduces Noodles with readings from *The Song of Solomon*, which text elaborates a complete disjunction between Noodles’ body and the body of the “beloved,” eroticized in the verses. Deborah is fully aware of the gap between image and object, indeed, she reads to Noodles in order to instruct him that because he cannot become the imaged body, although he is “altogether loveable, he’ll never be [her] beloved. What a shame.” Noodles, grown up, will attempt to seduce Deborah with a luxurious recreation of the dance, the music, the bleached-out environment that he experienced as he peeped into the flour-whitened store behind the restaurant (*circa* 1922). The opulence of the shore-side restaurant (*circa* 1933) is Noodles’ way of showing Deborah that he can provide the illusory space of desire which is commodity’s second skin, within which space she has educated herself to dance. The lineaments of that space (restaurant, whiteness, music, dance) contain, sedimented within them residual traces of the location and occasion of Noodles’ earliest desires. None the less, the degree to which he is committed to that space, and to Deborah in that space, is the degree to which he has betrayed his own consciousness of class. In the gang, where he is “uncle” and Max is “mother,” and wages are shared, Noodles partakes of collective meanings founded on collective activities on the street. In the image, the confected restaurant, Noodles functions badly (he cannot read the menu or order wine). But, by hiring such a space for Deborah, he indicates that

part of himself at least desires to realize itself through the optic of luxury images. I would add that the luxury in question is archaic, being suited to the desires of an older leisure class. Deborah refuses to stay in the space provided, preferring Hollywood, where the “image” and its manipulation are being perfected in more modern forms. The rape occurs immediately after her line, “Noodles, I’m leaving tomorrow. I have to go to Hollywood.” Leone cuts from her line, delivered on the shore, to the interior of the limousine where the rape happens.

Noodles’ assault is violent and atrocious. Leone uses the contempt of the chauffeur to underline this fact. None the less, Leone’s concern has been to expose what creates the rape. Again, and as with Cockeye, Judy, and the cream cake, he points to the passage of bodies into images, through which desire is realized. Noodles betrays his own residual class consciousness in order to seduce Deborah. Deborah, committed to a modernized image of desire, and to herself as part of that image, rejects his up-market-approximation to the childhood conditions of their desire. Noodles rapes her, and the second skin of the “image” is peeled away; Leone’s remorselessly close study of Noodles’ neck and of Deborah’s face as they struggle reveals acne-scars, shows pores, and details blemishes under the make-up. The camera attends exactly to the skin as the sound track records the noises of body breaking into body. Just as Deborah’s readings from *The Song of Solomon* turned on the gap between the textual and the actual “beloved,” so Leone’s recording of the rape articulates the disfunction between bodies in images and bodies themselves.

Noodles’ act is without justification. Leone condemns it. But condemnation by itself is not enough, we must be enabled to understand what it is that we condemn. Noodles is despicable for tearing into Deborah’s body – but Deborah’s body has, in one sense, long-gone to Hollywood, where she will consort with new images in her own remaking. Noodles rapes in order to reclaim a residual and receding body associated with residual and receding desires for childhood, for neighbourhood, and for places associated with first desires as they are fixed in memory. He rapes to retain the now archaic class body and class desires that he once had; to retain what has been transmuted by the image, which “second skin” is so much the matter and substance of modernizing Fordist capital. It is entirely logical that, since Max holds the camera, Max, not dead but gone to the West Coast, will get the girl who trained her body to be an image. They complement one another; together combining to ensure the ruin of Noodles (one more time), and so, by extension and in Leone’s terms at least, the continuing ruin of the American working class.