
The Theory of Infantile Citizenship

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When Americans make the pilgrimage to Washington they are trying to grasp the nation in its totality. Yet the totality of the nation in its capital city is a jumble of historical modalities, a transitional space between local and national cultures, private and public property, archaic and living artifacts, processes of nation making that bridge the national history that marks the monumental landscape and the everyday life temporalities of federal and metropolitan cultures. That is to say, it is a place of national *mediation*, where a variety of nationally inflected media come into visible and sometimes incommensurate contact. As a borderland between these domains, Washington tests the very capacity of anyone who visits there: this test is a test of citizenship competence. Usually made in tandem with families or classes of students, the trip to the capital makes pedagogy a patriotic performance, one in which the tourist “playing at being American” is called on to coordinate the multiple domains of time, space, sensation, exchange, knowledge, and power that represent the scene of what we might call “total” citizenship.¹ To live fully both the ordinariness and the sublimity of national identity, one must be capable not just of imagining but of managing being American.

To be able to feel less fractured than the nation itself would be, indeed, a privilege. Audre Lorde tells a story of her family’s one visit to Washington in

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1. See Anderson (1983) and Caughie (1990).

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1947.² Lorde's parents claim to be making the trip to commemorate their two daughters' educational triumphs, in an eighth grade and a high school graduation. The truth is, though, that Lorde's sister Phyllis was barred from accompanying her graduating class on its celebratory visit to Washington because Washington was a southern, segregated city, not at all "national" in the juridical or patriotic sense. The Lorde family refuses to acknowledge racism as the impetus for its own private journey: rather, the very denial that racism is a national system motivates their performance as American tourists. For at every moment the family encounters its unfreedom to enter certain spaces of private property, the parents refuse to acknowledge the irony that, although "public" monuments like the Lincoln Memorial allow African-Americans like Audre Lorde and Marian Anderson access to a public sphere of symbolic national identification, the very ordinary arrangements of life in America, eating and sleeping, are as forbidden to the Lorde family in Washington as America itself is to those without passports. This is to say that in Washington the bar of blackness effectively splits the national symbolic from the possessive logics of capitalist culture, even as each nonetheless dominates the American public sphere.

Still, they schedule their visit to Washington on Independence Day, and when Lorde bitterly remarks on her patriotic exile from America, symbolized in the apartheid of its most local abridgment, and in particular in a waitress's refusal of the family's desire to celebrate the nation's birthday by eating ice cream they had paid for *inside* of a restaurant, she describes it as the line she steps over from childhood to something else, a different political, corporeal, sensational, and aesthetic "adulthood": "[T]he waitress was white, and the counter was white, and the ice cream I never ate in Washington D.C. that summer I left childhood was white, and the white heat and the white pavement and the white stone monuments of my first Washington summer made me sick to my stomach."³ Lorde's "education" in national culture provoked a nauseated unlearning of her patriotism—"Hadn't I written poems about Bataan?" she complains, while resolving, again, to write the president, to give the nation another chance to not betray her desire for it—and this unlearning, which is never complete, as it involves leaving behind the political faith of childhood, cleaves her permanently from and to the nation whose promises drew her parents to immigrate there and drew herself to identify as a child with a horizon of national identity she was sure she would fulfill as an adult citizen.

That was 1947. Stephen Heath has argued recently that transformations in the production of political consciousness that have taken place in the context of

2. See Lorde (1982:68-71).

3. *Ibid.*, 71.

developments in global media culture have made the category “citizen” archaic, and many worthy theorists of television in particular agree that the ruptural force of its technologies and logics of capital has unsettled norms of signifying national culture and political agency.⁴ It is now a commonplace in television criticism that television promotes the annihilation of memory and, in particular, of historical knowledge and political self-understanding. It may be an ontology and ideology of “liveness,” common sense, banality, distraction, catastrophe, interminable “flow”: it may be the implicitness of capital in generating an ideology of “free” entertainment (which makes the consumption of commercial, “free/floating” anxieties about power, history, and identity the metaproblem *and* the critical promise of the medium), it may be the global lexicon of images that has come to dominate the pseudomulticultural scene of consumption, or—perhaps—some combination of these.⁵ But because in all areas of its mode of production television encounters, engages, and represents citizenship, and because it underscores the activity of animating and reflecting on as well as simply having a national identity, the problem of generating memory and knowledge in general becomes fraught with issues of national pedagogy, of representing what counts as patriotism and what counts as criticism to the public sphere of consumers itself.⁶

If, as I have described, the pilgrimage to Washington is already all about the activity of national pedagogy, the production of national culture, and the constitution of competent citizens, then the specificity of mass mediation in the dissemination of national knowledges redoubles and loops around the formation of national identity. There is nothing archaic about citizenship—its signs and cadences are changing. Margaret Morse (1990) argues that television enters history by annexing older forms of national self-identity, cultural literacy, and leisure. It does this to reacclimate continuously consumer identifications during transitions in media-saturated national and international public spheres: in these conditions of specifically uneven development, the work of media in redefining citizenship and framing what can legitimately be read as national pedagogy be-

4. See Heath (1990:278–79).

5. For the main arguments for the pervasiveness of televisual amnesia or information fatigue, see Mellencamp, ed. (1990:222–39). See also Feuer (1983).

6. The ongoing pedagogic/civic activity of television is more widely appreciated on the right, and the saturated moral domination of the medium by conservatives has been central to the right-wing cultural agenda of the Reagan-Bush era. What counts as “public” access “public” television has undergone massive restrictive redefinition under the pressure of a certain pseudorepresentative form of “public” opinion, whose virtue is established by reference to a supposedly nonideological or noninterest group-based politics of transcendence that must be understood as fundamentalist in its imagination of a nation of pure, opinionated minds. For overviews and thoughtful reconsiderations on the left, see Lipsitz (1990); Morse (1990); Rasula (1990); Schwoch, White, and Reilly, eds. (1992).

comes more, not less, central to any analysis of political identity in postmodern American culture.

This is to say that the definitional field of citizenship—denoting either simple membership in a political identity category or a reflexive operation of agency and criticism—is precisely what is under contestation, as the norms of signifying in what we might call “mass nationality” change the face of power in America (e.g., in the public discussion over town halls versus other modes of national “expert” culture). In addition, the problem of harnessing publicity to struggles within national culture predates the televisual moment—just as *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* predates *Adventure in Washington*, *Born Yesterday*, and more recent narratives like *The Distinguished Gentleman*. These intertexts and many others structured by pilgrimages to Washington all foreground the problem, place, and promise of media in the business of making nationality; they all contain montages and plots that show both the potential for agentive citizenship and the costs of the mediated dispersal of critical national identifications. Television’s role in constructing the hegemony of the national must thus be understood as a partial, not a determining, moment in a genealogy of crises about publicity and the production of “national” subjects.⁷

This essay explores the genre of the pilgrimage to Washington, focusing not on a news or a biographical event but on an episode of the popular weekly cartoon television show “The Simpsons,” entitled “Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington.” This project is about how different modes of national and mass cultural memory specifically intersect in America. As intertexts to this episode, the essay will gesture toward the other tourist/citizenship pilgrimages this episode revises, notably *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Deploying the typical codes of the narrative trope, they hold that the state of America can be read in the manifestations of infantile citizenship and in the centrality to national culture of an imaginary children’s public sphere.⁸

Lisa Simpson wins a trip to Washington (“all expenses paid”) by writing a “fiercely pro-American” patriotic essay for a contest that her father, Homer Simpson, discovers in a complementary copy he receives of *Reading Digest*. The family stays at the Watergate, encounters Barbara Bush in the bathtub at the White House, visits the mint, and generates commentary on national monuments. Then Lisa accidentally witnesses graft (securing the destruction of her beloved hometown national park by logging interests—signaling the realpolitik, the will-

7. This essay is a much shortened version of a longer investigation of pilgrimages to Washington in history/narrative, as one relay into thinking through whether there is, in fantasy or in instrumental practice, something called a “national” culture. The texts mentioned in this paragraph are crucial intertexts to the theory of infantile citizenship.

8. See Negt and Kluge (1992).

to-dominate-nature of the Reagan-Bush era). Lisa then tears up her prizewinning essay, substituting for it a new essay about how Washington “stinks.” Losing her patriotic simplicity, she loses the national jingoism contest. A Senate page, seeing her loss of faith in democracy, calls his senator for help, and within two hours the FBI has the crooked congressman in jail: he rapidly becomes a born-again Christian. On witnessing the evidence of the effects of her muckraking, Lisa exclaims, at the end of the show, “The system works!” We will return to the question of systems later.

I have described the aspects of this plot that are repeated in the other pilgrimage-to-Washington narratives. Someone, either a child or an innocent adult described as an “infant,” goes to Washington: the crisis of her/his innocence/illiteracy emerges from an ambivalent encounter between America as a theoretical ideality and America as a site of practical politics, mapped onto Washington, D.C. All of the “children” disrupt the norms of the national locale: their “infantile citizenship” operates the way Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1992) predict it would, eliciting scorn and cynicism from “knowing” adults who try to humiliate them and admiration from these same adults, who can remember with nostalgia the time that they were “unknowing” and thus believed in the capacity of the nation to be practically utopian.

As it is, citizen adults have learned to “forget” or to render as impractical, naive, or childish their utopian political aspirations, in order to be politically happy and economically functional. Confronting the tension between utopia and history, the infantile citizen’s insistent stupidity thus gives her/him enormous power to unsettle, expose, and reframe the machinery of national life. Thus the potential catastrophe of all visits to Washington: can national identification survive the practical habitation of everyday life in the national locale? Can the citizen/tourist gain the skills for living nationally without losing faith in nationality to provide the wisdom and justice in promises? Is the utopian horizon of national identity itself a paramnesia or a Zizekian “fantasy” that covers over impossible contradictions and lacks in national culture?⁹ The stakes in a text’s answer to these questions have everything to do with the scene of “adult” or “full” citizenship in its historical imaginary.

The transition in Audre Lorde’s life from patriotic childhood to a less defined but powerful rage at the travesty everyday life makes of national promises for justice indeed marks a moment in the education of an American citizen that marks both personal and fictional narratives of the pilgrimage to Washington whose intertextual topography will be the subject of this essay. When cinematic, literary, and televisual texts fictively represent “Washington” as “America,” they thus both theorize the conditions of political subjectivity in the United States and reflect

9. See Zizek (1989:87–129).

on the popular media's ways of constructing political knowledge in a dialectic of infantile citizenship and cynical reason. To extricate the politics of this dialectic on behalf of a history of citizenship, my strategy here will be to work from the negative pedagogical to the utopian, mass-mediated horizons of national identity practice.

Incompetent Citizens and Junk Knowledges, American-Style

"Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington" shares with *Born Yesterday*, *The Distinguished Gentleman*, and other "Washington" narratives a rhetoric of citizenship that locates the utopian possibilities of national identity in terroristic, anarchic, and/or comic spectacles of someone's personal *failure* to be national. The "scene" of citizenship is revealed by way of events that humiliate a citizen, disclosing him/her as someone incapable of negotiating the semiotic, economic and political conditions of his/her existence in civil society. And just as the dirty work of representing the detritus of a white, bourgeois national culture will almost inevitably go to the citizens whose shameful bodies signify a seemingly natural incapacity to become (masters of the) abstract, the plot of "Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington" is embedded not in Lisa's story but in the gross activities of the failed father, Homer Simpson.

The show opens with Homer opening his junk mail. He is reading what the mail says and yelling at the letters in minor sarcastic outrage at their mistakes (e.g., one is addressed to "Homer Simpsy") and their pseudopromises of wealth with no risk or labor. Yet, for all of his cynical knowledge, he also makes a grave optimistic reading error. Rapacious and desiring to the point of senselessness, Homer takes a representation of a "check" in a Publisher's Clearing House-like contest as a real representation of money. He goes to the bank to cash the million-dollar pseudocheck—that says phrases like "void void void" and "This is not a check"—and is devastated to find the "deal" "queered." Homer continues, throughout the episode, to show himself incompetent in the face of money—indeed, in a scene toward the end, he makes the very same error with another check. When the eventual winner of the patriotism contest symbolically shares his prize with Lisa, a prize represented by what the young man calls an "oversized novelty check," Homer yells from the audience, "Give her the check!" and then, amidst everyone's laughter, protests, "I wasn't kidding." Though at every moment money appears in the show Homer has no control over the differences between its symbolic and exchange value—unlike Bart, who understands and exploits to his great pleasure the ambiguity of the word "expense" in "all expenses paid"—Homer is constantly surprised and betrayed at his constant "discovery" that even in Washington money is not "free."

What Homer does well instead is to drool and moan and expose himself compulsively like an idiot relegated to his insipid appetites. Immediately after his humilia-

tion by the advertising check, he becomes, literally, the “butt” of more jokes about freedom and about money: having proved his inadequacy to owning money in late capitalism by miscasting the contest check as a negotiable one, he stands up and shows the “Simpsons” audience the top, cracked part of his exposed rear. Like a bald spot or an unzipped fly, the crack of the butt winks at the cruel superior public that knows how to use money, knows how to distinguish between real and false checks, and can stick to a decorous hierarchy of desires, needs, and appetites, while regulating its body. Homer has no capacity to think abstractly, or to think: as when he drools on the head of a worker at the mint and then sputters “lousy, cheap country!” when they refuse to give out free samples of money.

There are many other instances of Homer’s humiliation by the tacit text of bourgeois nationalism in this episode, as he tries to enter as a master public language and knowledges. His working-class brutishness is disclosed, for example, in the scene of Lisa’s triumph at the “Veterans of Popular Wars” contest. When a contest judge feels suspicious of young Lisa having written such a beautiful essay, she opines, “Methinks I smell the sickly scent of the daddy,” and decides to interview Homer, who becomes entirely aphonic and grunting in the face of her series of questions. Lisa gets extra points for having survived descending from such a brute. Later, snorting down “free” food at the convention in Washington, Homer again loses language at a moment when he explicitly attests to his love of the vocabulary-builder sections of *Reading Digest*: he asks but is unable to retain the information clarifying this chain of signs: “V (Very) I (Important) P (Person).” Why should he? for he is none of these things. With none of the social competences of a person who has knowledge about money or the world, he demonstrates what George Lipsitz has called the “infantile narcissism” of consumer self-addiction: “Who would have thought,” he says to Lisa, “that reading or writing would pay off!”¹⁰

“Have . . . You Ever Run into Any Problems Because of Your Superior Ability?”

When Homer “loses” the million dollars, his wife, Marge, consoles him by showing him the “free” *Reading Digest* they have received in the mail. Like Billie Dawn learning to negotiate the topography of power through print and other national media in *Born Yesterday*, Homer becomes a regular public intellectual while he reads the magazine: he pulls the children away from a “period” film they are watching on television about the Anglo-American theft of land from Native-American nations (which depicts a white preacher telling an “Indian chief”

10. Lipsitz (1990:70–71).

that the tribe's homeland will be more valuable if they abandon and irrigate it) and reads them a true-life adventure story; he is caught reading on the job at the nuclear power plant by Mr. Burns, who asks his assistant, "Who is that bookworm, Smithers? . . . His job description clearly specifies an illiterate!"; and he reads "Quotable Notables" as a substitute for eating lunch. But when Homer reads that the patriotic essay contest is for children, he loses interest in the magazine and throws it out. This is when "Mr. Lisa" takes over the plot: fishing as usual through the garbage of her family's affections to gain some emotional capital, she becomes, as Bart says, ". . . the pony to bet on."

In what does Lisa's smartness and competence consist? When she first attempts the patriotic essay, she tries dutifully to quote Ben Franklin or to extract inspiration from a diagram showing how a bill becomes law. But, quoting *Mr. Smith*, "Mr. Lisa" comes to derive her power from association with a kind of "natural" national property whose value is in its noncirculation in a system of exploitation and profit: the public domain called Springfield National Park. "America, inspire me," she says to the park, and a bald eagle straight from the national seal alights in front of her. This collaboration of the national symbolic and nature enkindles Lisa, and the show provides a montage of such speeches by our "patriots of tomorrow" in which her speech takes top honors.

As a backdrop to this little speech-making montage, the "nation" imagined by its youth is visually signified by a pastel national map marked by the kinds of local-color images that airport postcards often sport, by some regional accents, and by the homely spun-out puns and metaphors of American children:

1. Nelson Muntz ("Springfield"), "Burn, Baby Burn": So burn that flag if you must! But before you do, you'd better burn a few other things! You'd better burn your shirt and your pants! Be sure to burn your TV and your car! Oh yeah, and don't forget to burn your house! Because none of those things would exist without six red stripes, seven white stripes, and a helluva lotta stars!!
2. Anonymous girl (Rosemount, Minnesota), "Recipe for a Free Country": Recipe for a Free Country: Mix one cup liberty, with three teaspoons of justice. Add one informed electorate. Baste well with veto power. . . . Stir in two cups of checks, sprinkle liberally with balances.
3. Anonymous boy (Mobile, Alabama), "The American Nonvoter": My back is spineless. My stomach is yellow. I am the American non-voter.
4. Anonymous boy (Queens, New York), "Ding-Dong": Ding dong. The sound of the Liberty Bell. Ding. Freedom. Dong. Opportunity. Ding. Excellent Schools. Dong. Quality Hospitals.

5. Lisa Simpson (Springfield, T.A.): “The Roots of Democracy”: When America was born on that hot July day in 1776, the trees in Springfield Forest were tiny saplings, trembling towards the sun, and as they were nourished by Mother Earth, so too did our fledgling nation find strength in the simple ideals of equality and justice. Who would have thought such mighty oaks or such a powerful nation could grow out of something so fragile, so pure. Thank you.

There is a certain regularity to what counts as a patriotic essay: the range of tonalities and rhetorical modes notwithstanding, fiercely patriotic citizenship always requires the deployment of analogies that represent the threat of imaginary violence to the national body – of the biosphere; the citizen; the conceptual, mappable nation. Even the feminine essay, “Recipe for a Nation,” carries the implied warning that bad citizenship together with bad government is a form of bad nutrition that threatens the body politic. The national stakes of keeping these domains of the social in at least linguistic conjunction are comically telegraphed throughout the episode: the ultimate contest winner, Vietnamese immigrant Trong Van Din, says, “That’s why, whenever I see the Stars and Stripes, I will always be reminded of that wonderful word: flag!”

But why does Lisa win? Is she simply smarter or more creative than the other kids? She wins with her essay, “The Roots of Democracy,” because she uses not just analogy but a national allegory that links organically the nation’s natural growth to the emergence of its political facticity. In addition, her speech is itself an allegory of infantile citizenship, for the nation grows out of “something so fragile, so pure,” so young. No secular or human power has yet affected its course: apparently, in the national/world “system” natural value prevails, assuring that in the infinite “tomorrow” all systems will exist in the space of America. In this, her “intelligence” is articulated in excess to the jingoism of ordinary Americans – in this episode, these are figured by white, decorous persons carrying protest-style placards bearing messages like “Everything’s A-OK,” “No Complaints Here,” and “Things Are Fine” in front of the White House.

Thus, when Lisa gets to Washington, she feels supremely national, symbolic, invulnerable, intellectual. Although her superiority to other kids derives simply from her capacity to sustain a metaphor, and although in Washington she makes pranks and acts like a kid, she also seeks there an affirmation of her idealized self-image: learning early that the reason people go to national conferences is to find confirming images of their ideal selves, she asks the other kid finalists, “Have either of you ever run into any problems because of your superior ability?” and hugs them when they confirm, saying plaintively, “Me, too!” Her capacity to reflect on language and power marks her as the national Simpson in this episode, even as the public surely knows that it is Bart, not Lisa, who has captured the

minds and money of consumers who identify with his bratty tactical disruptions and exploitations of the bourgeois public sphere. Her already-confirmed failure as a commodity outside of the show surely follows her around every episode in which she imagines that she might find a place for her “superior talents” in the national system. In this regard, she is Homer’s twin, not his opposite: their excesses to the norms of body and language mark them each precisely as American failures, citizens unfit to profit from their drives and talents in a national symbolic and capitalist system.

The End of National Fantasy: “The System Works!”

However, while each of the Simpsons is finding and revelling in her/his level of national competence, the federal nation is itself operating and corrupting both the natural and the capital forms that inspire the Simpson family. National corruption is tacitly everywhere in the show: the family stays at the Watergate; their bank advertises itself as “not a savings and loan”; Homer scoffs, “Yeah, right,” at a sign in the White House bowling alley that claims Nixon bowled 300 back-to-back games there; Teddy Kennedy sits quietly at the Kennedy Center award ceremony, looking formless and dissipated; Lisa’s congressman is shown cynically exploiting her for a photo opportunity (a form of presidential mass mediation invented, naturally, by Nixon).

But when Lisa witnesses graft that threatens to despoil the natural beauty of Springfield National Park, the tacit knowledge of national corruption the show figures via “Nixonia” becomes itself the ground of a new figuration of nationality that she produces. This requires, in two stages, recourse to a genealogy of national forms through which criticism and patriotism have been traditionally routed and mediated. The transformation of consciousness, sensuality, causality, and aesthetics she experiences is, again, typical of this genre, in which the revelation of the practical impossibility of utopian nationalism produces gothic, uncanny, miraculating effects in the affects of the persons whose minds are being transformed by “true,” not idealized, national knowledges.

In stage one of Lisa’s transfiguration, she immerses herself in the national symbolic, preparing to give her patriotic speech by visiting a constellation of Washington monuments. The payoff she sees takes place at the “Winnifred Beecher Howe” memorial, raised in fictive tribute to “an early crusader for women’s rights [who] led the Floor Mop Rebellion of 1910,” who later “appeared on the highly unpopular 75 cent piece.” Howe’s motto, *I Will Iron Your Sheets When You Iron Out the Inequities in Your Labor Laws*, marks the overdetermined and absurd space of Lisa’s imaginary relation to American nationality. It is not only the absurd notion that America would honor a labor activist who foregrounds the exploitation of women as workers, not the incommensurateness of sheets/

labor laws, nor, merely, the wild ungoverned state of Howe's statuesque body, in its messy housewife regalia, nor Lisa's sighing adoration of this spectacle. The violent, nationally authored insult this absurdity hides in sarcasm is reduced, finally, to mere sexual grossness: in the afterglow of the congressman's sale of his favors to the lobbyist at the memorial, they look at Howe and say, on parting, "Woof woof!" and "What a pooch!"

Lisa is heartbroken: "How can I read my essay now, if I don't believe my own words?" She looks up from the reflecting pool at the Lincoln Memorial and feels that "Honest Abe" will "show me the way." But the memorial is overcrowded with Americans obsessed with the same possibility. They crowd around, projecting questions to Lincoln's stony, wise, iconic face; the questions range from, "What can I do to make this a better country?" to "How can I make my kid brush more?" and "Would I look good with a mustache?" Lisa, crowded out in the cacophony of national-popular need, goes to Jefferson's memorial, where the statue yells at her in resentment that his own accomplishments are underappreciated by the American people. She leaves quickly and goes to sit on the Capitol steps. There, magically, federal workers in their white-collar suits are transformed into pigs with skins engraved in the mode of dollar bills, sitting at troughs gorging themselves on dollar bills, wiping their mouths on the flag. This mutation of the cartoon places this episode in a genealogy of critical editorial cartooning, especially where national criticism takes the form of petty sarcasm; moreover, the gluttonous snorting of the pigs refers to Homer's own grotesque greedy excesses, thus reframing the class hierarchies and incompetences of national culture that the Simpsons embody into translations of the patriarchal corruptions of the national symbolic and the federal system themselves.

It turns out, in short, that Lisa was not that smart. I have described how America is split into a national and a capitalist system in "Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington." But this simple description is for infants, just as Bart's opening punishment on the blackboard, "Spitballs are not free speech," reduces the problem of protecting costly speech to a joke, a joke that once again allegorizes the conceptual problematic of freedom and its media by locating politics in a disgusting body. Lisa's response to the revelation of graft is to not become an adult, that is, to disidentify with the horizon of the politically-taken-for-granted whom the nation seeks to dominate. Her first response is to become abjected to America, by visiting Lincoln and soliciting his pedagogy. We have seen there, comedically, how the overidentification with national icons evacuates people's wisdom from the simplest judgments of everyday life; failing this identification, Lisa next invents a countercartoon aesthetic: she changes her title from "The Roots of Democracy" to "Cesspool of the Potomic."

But this first explosion of the affect, causal norms, monumental time, vision, sensation, and aesthetics of American citizenship is followed by yet another dislocation. This montage sequence takes place at the moment the Senate page beholds Lisa's crisis of faith in democracy. He telephones a senator; the FBI entraps the corrupt congressman, on videotape; the Senate meets and expels him; George Bush signs the bill; a newspaper almost instantly reports the congressman's imprisonment and conversion to a born-again consciousness. Lisa says, "The system works!"

As in the telephone, telegraph, newspaper popular media montage sequence of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, "The Simpsons" produces national criticism through another countertransformation of time, space, and media that involves shifting from the lexicon of patriotic monumentality and classical national representation to accelerating postmodern media forms: video, microchip bugs, cameras, late-edition daily newspapers. In addition, here the FBI's mastery of the media establishes it as the guardian of America, much as in the extraordinary 1933 film *Gabriel over the White House*: in contrast to the corrupt and lazy print media of *Mr. Smith*, "The Simpsons," and dozens of other pilgrimage-to-Washington films, global media formations are the real citizen-heroes here. Televisual technology itself becomes the representative of the "average man" who rises above his station, protected by FBI agents who seek to clean out and preserve all sorts of purity: of language (the FBI agent uses a southern drawl in his criminal guise and reverts to a television announcer's pure generic intonations in his "real" persona as the police), of region, and of the purity of the stream of faith that connects residents of the "mythical" Springfield, T. A., to the nation that represents America in Washington.

In two minutes of television time, and two hours of accelerated chronological time, then, the system cleans itself out, and the cesspool itself becomes born again, returns "home" to the discourse of national growth. Nothing complicated about this. The performance of mass media-dominated national political culture reveals a system of national meaning in which *allegory is the aesthetic of political realism* at every moment of successful national discourse, one in which the narrative of that discourse itself, at a certain point of metarepresentation, becomes a conceit that erases aggregate memory as it produces knowledge of the nation as a thing in itself. The competent citizen knows this and learns how conveniently and flexibly to read between the lines, thus preserving both domains of utopian national identification and cynical practical citizenship. This temporalizing mode of resolving questions about the way power dominates bodies, value, exchanges, dreams in the national public sphere is typical of the pilgrimage genre: for the resolution in time takes over what might slowly and unevenly happen in space were the system to be publicly engaged and remarked on in its own incoherence and unevenness. As it is, when Lisa says, "The system works!" she embodies

the “patriot of tomorrow,” because through the randomness we have witnessed she continues to believe a system exists, that “bills” motivated by democratic virtue do, indeed, become law. But to which system does she refer?

“Spitballs Are Not Free Speech”

In “Mr. Lisa,” as in every fictive pilgrimage to Washington, national monuments, traditional symbolic narratives, print, radio, and television news coexist with other popular phenomena: here the right-wing cultural agenda of the Reagan-Bush era is everywhere in the narrative, including in its recourse to sarcasm as a form of criticism and in the tacitness of the Nixon intertext, which “reminds” without interfering with the pleasure of the narrative of a televisual moment when the nation thought it possible to imagine a patriotic mass-mediated *criticism*. It is not just that television histories, children’s textbooks, *Reader’s Digest*, FBI surveillance video, national parks, and national spaces are here brought into conjunction, constituted as the means of production of modern citizenship. It is not even just that the Bushes themselves are portrayed here as benign patriarchs—for this might be coded as the text’s return to the modality of wishful resolution that seems to mark the crisis of *having* national knowledge inevitably produced by the pilgrimage.

But the very multiplicity of media forms raises the question of the genres of patriotism itself, modes of collective identification that have become the opposite of “protest” or “criticism” for a generation of youths who have been drafted to vitalize a national fantasy politics unsupported by a utopian or even respectable domestic political agenda. The construction of a patriotic youth culture must be coded here as a postmodern nationalist mode of production: in this light, Bill Clinton’s recent appearances on “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” MTV, and so on involve merely one more extension of the national aura to the infant citizens of the United States, who are asked to identify with a “youthful” idealism untempered by an even loving critical distance.

This is to say that Lisa’s assertion that the system works counts as even a parodic resolution to her epistemic murk because consciousness that a system exists at all has become what counts as the ideal pedagogical outcome of contemporary American politics: thus, in the chain that links the fetus, the wounded, the dead, and the “children” as the true American “people,” the linkage is made through the elevation of a zero-sum mnemonic, a consciousness of the nation with no imagination of agency—apart perhaps from voting, here coded as a form of consumption. In other words, national knowledge has itself become a modality of national amnesia, an incitement to forgetting that leaves simply the patriotic trace, for real and metaphorically infantilized citizens, that confirms that the nation exists and that we are in it. Television is not the cause of this substitution

of the fact (that the nation exists) for the thing (political agency) but is one of many vehicles where the distilling operation takes place and where the medium itself is installed as a necessary switch point between any locales and any national situation.

Let me demonstrate this by contrasting the finales of *Mr. Smith* and “Mr. Lisa.” It is a crucial and curious structure of infantile citizenship plots that the accumulation of plot leads to an acceleration and a crisis of knowledge relieved not by modes of sustained criticism but by amnesia and unconsciousness. At the end of *Mr. Smith*, Jefferson Smith, played by Jimmy Stewart, is defeated by capitalists’ manipulation of the law, property rights, and the media: Smith, who has been filibustering and improving on what discursive virtue might look like in the Senate, is confronted by a wagon load of telegrams embodying a manufactured public opinion mobilized against Smith and his cause; Smith, dispirited and depleted, faints on the Senate floor. His loss of spirit drives a senator (Claude Rains) to attempt suicide and to confess everything: in the film’s final moments, a hubbub led by Jean Arthur claims victory over corruption, and the mob dances out of the chambers into, presumably, the streets. The film, in other words, leaves Mr. Smith lying there on the Senate floor, unconscious. It might be interesting to speculate about what he would think when he awoke: would he think the system had worked? How could he, when so many systems were at play?

In contrast, it might seem that Lisa’s violation by capital logic produces consciousness: but her belief in the “system” is renewed by the condensation of time and power the television-style media produce for her. By the end the field of waste and excess that has dominated the scene of patriotism makes her forget not just what she knew but what she did not know: and we realize, on thinking back to her speech, that at no point did Lisa know anything about America. She could be inspired by the national symbolic and by the corruptions of capital; she is moved aesthetically by nature’s nation and also by the boorish appetites of both professional and ordinary men; she is not at all transformed by her experience of Washington, though she remembers she had experiences there.

The infantile citizen has a memory of the nation and a tactical relation to its operation. But no version of sustained agency accompanies the national system here. It provides information but no memory-driven access to its transformative use: it is not surprising, in this context, that the two commercials between the opening credits and the narrative proper—for the U.S. Army and for an episode of “In Living Color” that featured the violent heterosexualization of a gay film critic—promote the military life and the Cold War, to the suppression of American gay identity on behalf of national boyhood and heterosexual national manhood; it is not surprising, in this context, that I could pull the script of this episode from a “Simpsons” bulletin board using Internet, a computer network derived from a U.S. Defense Department system that currently frames much of the infor-

mation about scientific and military culture across the telephone lines daily. Just as every pilgrimage-to-Washington narrative deploys information and scientific technologies to link the abstract national to the situated local, underinformed, abjected, and idealistic citizen, so too this system confirms its necessity at every moment for the production of the knowledge that American media perform for the child/consumer who has no “interests” but in touring Washington in order to feel occasionally “free.”

Yet a distinguished tradition of collective popular resistance to national policy has taken the form of marches on Washington: dispossessed workers, African-Americans, gays, lesbians, queers, pro- and antichoice activists, feminists, veterans of popular and unpopular wars, for example. These collective activities invert the small-town and metropolitan spectacle of the “parade” honoring local citizens into national acts, performances of citizenship that predict votes and make metonymic “the people” whom representatives represent, but they also claim a kind of legitimate mass political voice uniquely performed outside of the voting booth. On the one hand, mass political marches resist, without overcoming, the spectacular forms of identification that dominate mass national culture—through individualizing codes of celebrity, heroism, and their underside, scandal—for only in times of crisis are Americans solicited to act en masse as citizens whose private patriotic identifications are indeed *not enough* to sustain national culture at a particular moment. On the other hand, we might note as well the problem mass political movements face in translating their activities into the monumentalizing currency of national culture: in this light, we witness how an impersonation or an icon of political struggle can eclipse the movement it represents, for instance in the image of Martin Luther King on the mall; in the image of the subaltern citizen in the body of the fetus; or in the image, dominating national culture as we speak, of the infantile citizen, too helpless to do anything but know, without understanding, what it means that the “system” of the nation “freely” exists, like “free” television itself.

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