

Cantor, Paul A. *The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture: Liberty vs. Authority in American Film and TV*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2012. 488 pp. \$35.00 (cloth). ISBN: 978-0-813-14082-7.

In the introduction to Paul A. Cantor's *The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture: Liberty vs. Authority in American Film and TV*, Cantor, a Professor of English at the University of Virginia, makes a startling admission, although it is not clear that he sees it as such. Despite his book's thematic organization, title, cover image of A. M. Willard's *The Spirit of '76* with crudely superimposed faces of Cartman, Captain Kirk and John Wayne, and frequent disquisitions on the subject of freedom, *The Invisible Hand* is not actually about the interplay of liberty and authority in U.S. popular culture. Instead, his main goal "has been to identify and try to overcome the prejudices we have inherited from the tradition of Romanic aesthetics" (22). This tradition, which "has been anticommercial since its inception [...] set[s] up the autonomous creative genius in opposition to the vulgarity of the marketplace." His tactic in breaking down this false dichotomy between so-called high and low cultures, then, is to examine artifacts of popular culture—*The Searchers*, *The X-Files*, *Star Trek*, *Mars Attacks!* and *South Park* among them—for the ways they examine serious themes, which thus proves their artistic worth. By proving this artistic worth, Cantor hopes to redeem capitalism as a creative force for good from the descendants of the Frankfurt School who would seek to denigrate it.

Those descendants are seldom named, and almost never quoted. The citation-free straw-manning comes early and often in *The Invisible Hand*. It first arises in the book's preface, in which Cantor speaks out against (and Red-baits) a cabal of unnamed cultural critics who "even when they are not strictly speaking Marxists [...] adopt a Marxist position: that American pop culture serves the cause of capitalism," and is thus "debased entertainment to numb the American people into submission" (xvi). Two hundred pages later, Cantor is still at it, accusing "the academic world, much of the media, and a large part of the entertainment business—especially the Hollywood elite," of harboring "anticapitalist views" (201). He provides as his sole evidence Ludwig Von Mises' *The Anti-Capitalistic Mentality*, an essay from the era of black and white television that is itself long on assertion and short on evidence.

Never made clear is who, outside of the most eldritch depths of tenured academe, still believes any of this. The wall between so-called high and low culture, dynamited by the postmodernists, has never fully been rebuilt. Research universities regularly host humanities conferences on science fiction, television, and video games. The cultural studies departments that Cantor lambasts are more likely to teach courses on "The Cyborg in The American Imagination" or "Vampirism as Metaphor" as anything else, and a quick glance through such bastions of high and middlebrow culture as *The Paris Review*, *The New Yorker*, or *The New York Times Magazine* will yield few articles about abstract dance, but plenty of pieces about *Orange Is the New Black* and getting high at Disneyland. Marxism is dead. Poetry is dead. Captain America, on the other

hand, is very much alive, thawed out of his iceberg just in time to rule the box office with a gentlemanly, democratizing fist.

Cantor's war for freedom, capitalism and the marketplace has already been won—one of the odder aspects of *The Invisible Hand* is that most of its cited works of criticism and theory are forty to fifty years old—yet the book seethes with grievance towards liberals, cultural critics, and oppressive entertainment gatekeepers. In his chapter on *South Park*, Cantor is so inspired by Trey Parker's and Matt Stone's mockery of the Hollywood Left that he writes that the Left "does not want people to have fun in any form, whether laughing at ethnic jokes or indulging in fast food." But Cantor then uses Rob Reiner, the director of such fun-destroying works as *This is Spinal Tap*, *When Harry Met Sally*, and *The Princess Bride* as his one example. Reiner's crime, for the record, is his advocacy on behalf of increased cigarette taxes in the State of California.¹

This seeming contradiction—a deeply-held feeling of oppression coupled with a reality of triumph—underpins the two communities whose interests intersect in *The Invisible Hand*: Fandom (especially geek fandom) and the George W. Bush-era American Right. Both communities possess a historic grievance that was once based on reality. The obsessions of fandom—Marvel and DC comics, *Star Wars* and *Trek*, heroic fantasy in general, various animated television shows, etc.—were once widely derided by our culture. Similarly, during the Johnson Presidency—a time, not coincidentally, when many Bush-era conservatives came of age—people self-identifying as conservatives were reviled, particularly in academia. As Rick Perlstein points out in *Nixonland*, his social history of the 1960s, even Melvin Laird, who wrote Barry Goldwater's convention platform, thought that refusing to tack Left on many issues would be "suicidal" to the Republican Party in 1965.²

This feeling of oppression has persisted, however, even after both groups have proven triumphant. Hollywood studios would not survive today without superhero films, and *Game of Thrones* remains the most culturally important show on television. Meanwhile, *The Walking Dead* is so popular, a talk show about it that airs after each episode has higher ratings than most of NBC's "Must See TV" line-up. In politics, our consensus has drifted so far to the Right that supposed liberal lion President Obama enacted the Heritage Foundation's plan for universal health care, resisted heavier regulation of banks, and escalated Bush-era domestic espionage.

Cantor, of course, is not exactly a conservative; he is a libertarian. But the libertarianism espoused in *The Invisible Hand* is indistinguishable from the socially liberal zones of the Republican Party in the 21st century. The book treats "political correctness" as a serious threat to liberty,³ but relegates its one brief mention of the PATRIOT Act to an endnote. The Republican Party is almost never criticized, and its anti-libertarian stances are treated with equivocation ("whatever one's attitude may be regarding the rights and wrongs of immigration, it is a simple fact that the American people are deeply troubled by the issue" (304)), when they're mentioned at all. Al Gore's career-long advocacy on behalf of the environment is depicted as his "seiz[ing] on alarmist issues as a way of clinging desperately to [his] celebrity and feeding [his] vanity," (134) while the book remains virtually silent about the Bush regime's sanctioning of indefinite detention, extrajudicial assassination, and torture.

An author's politics is his or her business and none of this would matter were it not for *The Invisible Hand's* pesky habit of slipping into libertarian polemic. For Cantor often seeks reification within the foci of his obsessions. These fictive thought experiments are held up as qualitatively good when he believes they prove the hypotheses of doctrinaire libertarianism. Thus, *The Aviator*, Martin Scorsese's biopic of early career Howard Hughes, "becomes one of the great American motion pictures because it celebrates the freedom and the entrepreneurial spirit that made America great" (188). Meanwhile, *South Park* is to be lauded for its favorable depictions of Wal-Mart and Starbucks (205).

This strain within *The Invisible Hand* actually places it well in line with a contemporary trend on the online Left: the abandonment of consideration of aesthetics and form in order to focus almost exclusively on plot and political content. In this kind of writing—found most frequently online—what matters about a work of narrative art is whether we agree with what we perceive it as saying. The process of viewing a television show or reading a book thus can devolve into a kind of checklist exercise wherein a work is to be judged according to its, well, *political correctness*.⁴

With the exception of deliberate agitprop, art isn't an argument, however, and in treating it solely on argumentative terms, criticism runs two risks. The first is stripping away everything of artistic value from art, shrinking it until it is roughly the size and scope of a college freshman composition essay. The second is misreading the work in question because its artistic power must be explained in ways that are comforting to the critic's politics.

Discovering and unpacking the politics of a work of art is an important endeavor, but it is most valuable when it expands our understanding rather than contracts it, complicating rather than simplifying. Hiding within *The Invisible Hand* is a much better book that seeks to plumb the contradictions, internal tensions, inconsistencies and impossibilities of art grappling with political issues. This better book is most clearly on display in Cantor's masterful reading of John Ford's *The Searchers* through *The Oresteia*, looking at how both examine the tension between lawlessness and order without ever comfortably settling on either solution for societal organization. Within Aeschylus' nightmarish transition from familial structures, filial duty, and revenge to an organized society in which our Furies must be sublimated, Cantor finds a fascinating lens through which to view Ford's classic Western. Cantor convincingly shows the tragedy and complexity of Ford's vision, recognizing the necessity of civilization while remaining "troubled by what is lost in the civilizing process, as shown by the painful image he creates of [protagonist] Ethan [Edwards]'s exclusion from the very world he has labored so hard to protect" (56).

This critical eye for complexity, this search for the illuminating tension, surfaces again in Cantor's discussion of Gene Roddenberry's work as a staff writer on *Have Gun Will Travel* and creator of *Star Trek*. In covering both of these television shows, Cantor accurately diagnoses a central tension of well-meaning, aristocratic liberalism, namely that it seeks to safeguard freedom and equality, but can only envision doing so through top-down management and authority. Cantor demonstrates how *Star Trek* in particular appears to be a celebration of liberal

UN-style internationalism, but rests on a protagonist whose actions are indistinguishable from imperialism. And while Cantor and I are unlikely to agree on much beyond our taste in television, his detailed analysis of how *The X-Files* reflects, embodies and performs late twentieth and post-9/11 American anxieties about globalism, immigration, and the loss of an essential American self is a must-read for anyone who seriously watches or would want to teach the show.

Perhaps most emblematic of the ways the book's three agendas—libertarian polemic, pop-culture elevation, and incisive thematic critique—compete with and ultimately undermine each other in Cantor's free market of ideas are the two essays on the work of Austrian director Edgar G. Ulmer. Both are chock-full of trenchant observations, cultural context, and fascinating finds. In particular, his look at *The Black Cat*—a horror-film-cum-meditation-on-post-Great-War-Europe starring Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff—wonderfully takes the reader through Freud, Heidegger, Adorno, Mark Twain, Percy Bysshe Shelley, incest, war, American-abroad tropes, and Goethe without ever going off the rails. Here, for example, is his fascinating look at how the protagonists of the film (a honeymooning American couple who wind up spending much of the film unconscious) and the Europeans whose web they are drawn into are portrayed:

The contrasts Ulmer develops between Europeans and Americans are not all to the advantage of the latter. To be sure, the Europeans in *The Black Cat* are deeply neurotic, obsessive-compulsive, and self-destructive, not to mention downright evil and even satanic, while the Americans are free, open, good-natured and optimistic. But at the same time the Europeans are clearly more interesting than the Americans. The Europeans are intelligent, cultured, and artistic, while the Americans are bland, prosaic, and more than a little obtuse. [...] We are not convinced that the Europeans are better off for all their insights into the depths of human evil. They seem to have been corrupted by their encounter with evil, perhaps even driven insane. The Americans might be healthier for turning their backs on this glimpse into the heart of darkness. (235–7)

Later on in the same essay, he turns to how *The Black Cat* enacts aristocratic continental European anxieties about American culture, and the way that “the decay of the aristocratic culture of Europe” is seen by Ulmer's film (and Heidegger) as the inevitable result of democratization. The blandness of the Americans, then, is both their saving graces and “ominous [...] on a meta-level in the movie, American pop culture is obliterating European elite culture—the mass-produced mystery novel is taking the place of the European Gothic tale” (241).

Moving on to Ulmer's seminal noir *Detour*, Cantor notes how the film is a deconstructive assault on the American Dream. Reading it as a dark nightmare of manifest destiny, Cantor shows how Ulmer takes the tropes of Hollywood fable (boy goes west in search of love and happiness, meeting strangers, acquiring material goods, and having adventures along the way) and upends them, thus showing how “the hero's quest for happiness [...] leads only to corruption

and eventually to his destruction” (244). Using the work of the Frankfurt School as his flashlight, Cantor spies how “the characters in *Detour* seem incapable of generating authentic desires. They are always setting their goals on the basis of the models that American society offers them” (250) and how these manufactured desires come to undo them.

Unfortunately, this second essay about Ulmer is soon overwhelmed by tendentious assumptions about art, *Detour*, and the relationship between Europe and America. For example, Cantor wants to critique “Ulmer’s vision of America in *Detour*,” and the genre of noir in general by asking whether they provide a “truthful” and realistic portrait of American society (259). But he is unable to show that the goal of noir was ever to do so. Noir—a genre filled with stylized camerawork and lighting, larger than life characters, and pulpy, melodramatic plots—is not concerned with verisimilitude. Like *The X-Files*, noir is largely concerned with enacting our anxieties of what lies beneath American society, rather than a realistic portrayal of what American society is actually like.

Cantor proceeds from there to question the genre’s validity because it was largely made by foreigners. “One must also wonder whether [many important noir directors’] status as aliens did not also work to color, cloud, and even distort their view of the United States” (260), he writes. A page later, he insinuates that noir is un-American because “many of the great noir films were directed by Europeans [...] however American the subject matter of film noir may seem to be, it was often presented through European eyes behind the camera,” and thus that noir “may be one more example of a long tradition of European anti-Americanism, or at least a tendency to fault the United States for failing to measure up to European standards of civilization” (261). Oddly, given that *The Invisible Hand* wants to argue the marketplace’s validity as an arbiter of substance and quality, the book never stops to consider that hundreds of film noirs were made because the genre was popular with the very American people supposedly disliked by its directors, or the complexity of Ulmer using a pulpy genre picture to critique American mass culture.

The Ulmer section of *The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture* also reveals a final irony, one that points back to the book’s overall project. Cantor argues that capitalism is necessarily a force for good. It creates the abundant splendors of American mass culture, and allows individual artists to achieve fulfillment and greatness, no matter how trying their struggles with the system might be. He praises the widely derided second half of Tim Burton’s career for its financial successes, and writes of Ulmer’s career:

[T]he fact that the Hollywood Ulmer came to despise nevertheless made it possible for him to make two films by which he is remembered today as an artist suggests that America does not break all its promises to its immigrants [...] Ulmer’s career illustrates just about every obstacle that can stand in the way of artistic achievement in commercial culture, and yet ultimately it is a tribute to the ability of a talented and determined individual to be creative in any system of production. In the end, the aesthete from the Alps managed to fulfill himself as the king of the B-movies. (222)

What, then, are we to make of *The Invisible Hand*'s existence? For the marketplace has no use for this book. Its existence is only possible because of a network of government-supported nonprofit universities have forgone the principles of the free market in order to support important scholarship for the benefit of society. Perhaps Cantor, then, is right. Universities *are* hotbeds of anti-capitalist sentiment. *The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture*'s very existence is living proof.

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[Parabasis](#)

Notes

1. *South Park* is indeed a satirical work of libertarian agitprop—and a hilarious and frequently brilliant one at that—but this is noteworthy in light of Cantor's jeremiad against humorless liberals because American comedy is dominated by liberals and often comes from a generally progressive point of view. During the time that *South Park* has been on the air, Comedy Central has also aired *Chappelle's Show*, *Key & Peele*, *The Colbert Report*, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *Inside Amy Schumer*, among others, all of which have a solidly left-of-center point of view.
2. Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 7.
3. Like the libertarianism it advocates for, *The Invisible Hand* has a serious blind spot when it comes to race. Beyond Cantor expressing that not being able to tell ethnic jokes in polite company is an assault on freedom, the book is often silent when it comes to racial matters, except for a brief ode to how the free market will make all races able to get along in its chapter on *Deadwood*.
4. For an incisive jeremiad against this kind of writing, *New York Magazine* and rogerebert.com's Matt Zoller Seitz issues a plea for discussion of form here: <http://www.rogerebert.com/mzs/please-critics-write-about-the-filmmaking> while my own short take on this issue can be found here: <http://parabasis.typepad.com/blog/2014/02/the-incredible-shrinking-artist.html>.