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“The Whole Thing Is a Merry-go-round”

The Mechanism of Circularity in Horace McCoy’s
They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?

Abstract

Anticipating the tone and the tropes of the classic Hollywood novels, Horace McCoy’s They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?, published in 1935, investigated the condition of marginality of Hollywood’s ‘outsiders’ along with the destruction of their dream. Set during the Great Depression, McCoy’s novel portrayed not only the valuable psychological role of Hollywood in reassuring a demoralized nation but also its dynamic of exploitation and pipedreams, aligning itself with the broader debunking strategy of the hardboiled novel in confronting the contradictions of New Deal Liberalism. McCoy’s fictional account of dance marathons—with their endless circular movement—portrays the commercial exploitation of tawdry events which cruelly exploit young people and that becomes a metaphor or a parody of the Hollywood dream factory.

Against the post-Marxist theoretical background of Guy Debord’s Society of the Spectacle, this essay tries to highlight and question a mechanism of circularity that seems to be rooted in the novel’s narrative function. In particular, by considering Slavoj Žižek’s interpretation of Lacanian desire and drive, I stress the correspondence between the circular movement of the drive and the self-regenerating circulation of capital that the Slovenian philosopher proposed in The Parallax View (2006). Starting from this correspondence, my analysis of the novel aims to uncover its mimetic apparatus with regard to the representation of circularity which affects the whole narration.

Keywords: *Horace McCoy, Hollywood novel, society of the spectacle, capitalism, hardboiled, Great Depression*

*I’m a cork on the ocean
Floating over the raging sea
How deep is the ocean?
How deep is the ocean?
(The Beach Boys, ‘Til I Die)*

1. Introduction

When the journalist Horace McCoy moved from Dallas, Texas to Hollywood to pursue a career as an actor, he immediately found himself having to come to terms with the difficulties of becoming part of the star system. Born in Nashville, Tennessee in 1897, he started to work as a newsboy at the age of twelve, then as a house-to-house-salesman in Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, Arkansas and Texas; he became a taxi driver in New Orleans and Dallas where—after serving eighteen months in the United States air service in France—he worked as a sports journalist on the Dallas Journal. From the 1930s he spent time up and down the California coast, picking vegetables and fruit in the Imperial and San Joaquin Valleys, picketing strikes, jerking soda, acting as a bouncer in a marathon dance contest, and, finally, writing for films and magazines. His experience as a *(un)merry-go-round* worker in California and in Los Angeles will be the basis of the narrative construction of his Hollywood novel, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935), whose film adaptation by Sidney Pollack in 1969 led to a short McCoy revival during the 1970s. Anticipating the tropes and the narrative quest of the classic Hollywood novels—such as Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* (1941) and Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*¹ (1939)—McCoy's novel investigated the condition of marginality of Hollywood's “outsiders” (film extras, would-be actors, etc.) along with the dissolution and destruction of their dream; more specifically, in the context of the Great Depression, Los Angeles itself as the location of the film industry in California quickly became associated with the American dream and Hollywood played a valuable psychological and ideological role in this as it tried to provide reassurance to a demoralized nation (Mintz 2016, 64).²

During the Golden Age of the film industry, while the process of boosting the American West as a place of opportunity and promise was being reiterated, the hard-boiled novel (as a Californian genre), including McCoy's oeuvre, aimed to debunk the inconsistency of the myth of Los Angeles and of its “boosters” (Davis 1990), and to highlight the alienation of certain individuals and their struggle to understand how to relate to the fragmented urban space that surrounded them. Nathaniel West's *The Day of the Locust* was published in 1939 and Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* along with *I Should Have Stayed Home* (1938) therefore offered a first intimation of what would be considered the classic themes of the Hollywood novel, from a sense

¹ Although I agree with Chip Rhodes' proposition that “*The Day of the Locust* established the ideological project of the Hollywood novel, a project that casts the artist as a flawed subject who cannot distance himself from the desire that is generated by Hollywood for an inaccessible, impenetrable object” (2000, 133), I would point out that, chronologically, this project had already been established with Horace McCoy's 1935 and 1938 novels.

² See also Morgan and Davies 2016.

of disillusionment with the American dream to the migration to the West, which from a hope for a new beginning eventually led to a bitter ending.

In particular, in both novels, with his direct and subjective prose and his pulp fiction style³, the author tried to shed light on how the lives of would-be celebrities are governed by capitalist logic and how their aspirations are first produced and then exploited by Hollywood tycoons for their own interests. McCoy’s characters are thus condemned to a condition of marginalization insofar as the projected opportunities almost never come to fruition. McCoy’s nihilistic and existentialist prose was first recognized by the French public,⁴ and in particular by French writer Simone de Beauvoir, who called *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?* “the first existential novel to have appeared in America” (Morgan 2015).

In fact, despite his relationship to the pulp writers of the 30s and to the Black Mask fellows, it soon became clear that McCoy’s literary aspirations transcended his recognition as a tough guy of literature; his literary models were to be found more in Francis Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway than in Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. Not surprisingly, in the Horace McCoy Papers and Tom Sturak Collection on Horace McCoy at the UCLA Special Collection, there’s no record of correspondence or traces of contact with the hardboiled writers (except for the well-known Black Mask group-picture). If anything, an honest association with a hardboiled writer could be made through his colleague James M. Cain,⁵ whose mantra “I belong to no school, hardboiled or otherwise” would better describe McCoy’s position in the American literary panorama of the 1930s. Rather, various pieces of evidence of McCoy’s interest in and relationship with Hemingway and Fitzgerald (telephone messages, copies of *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?* sent to them by the editor) testify to McCoy’s desire to go beyond the tradition of pulp fiction writing; as will be shown in the analysis of the novel, the disillusionment and the dramatic traits in Fitzgerald’s fiction as well as Hemingway’s realism were pervasive elements in McCoy’s writing.

This midway position as a hardboiled and realist/existentialist writer partially helps to explain why the reception of *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?* in the United States, published by Simon and Shuster in 1935, was controversial; the novel was considered by the *New York Times* as the

³ McCoy’s first story “The Devil Man” appeared in the hard-boiled magazine Black Mask in December 1927.

⁴ The first of McCoy’s novels to be published in France was *No Pockets in a Shroud* in 1938. In his 1966 Ph.D. dissertation on Horace McCoy, Tom Sturak, by highlighting the influence of the American author on French existentialist literature, interestingly compares the character of Robert Syverten from *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?* to the figure of Meursault in Albert Camus’ *The Stranger* (1942) (Sturak 1966).

⁵ McCain’s short novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* was published the year before, in 1934.

best and the worst of the hard-boiled books (Fig. 1); it proved to be a popular success but was also negatively received by critics; several articles appeared in popular magazines and newspapers and they largely addressed McCoy’s “partial view of America,” “lack of characterization,” and “not credible writing.”

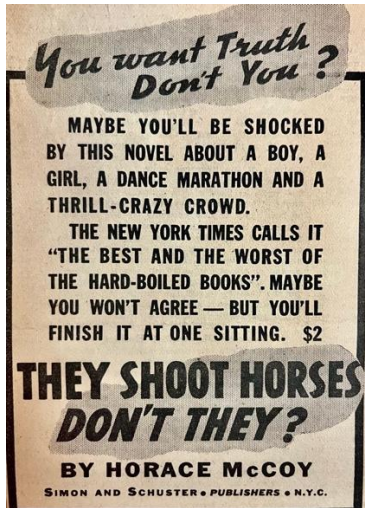


Fig. 1: McCoy’s novel advertorial appeared on the *New York Times* (1935). Horace McCoy papers, Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA

However, it can be argued that this novel is the only one among McCoy’s literary efforts able to hold the critics’ attention over the years, a success that is partially related, in my opinion, to the novel’s quasi-prophetic discourse on the society of images and advertising, on mass culture, and on the New Deal. McCoy’s Hollywood novels not only encapsulated in their nihilist writing much of the *hardboiled* criticism of New Deal Liberalism, but also anticipated the open criticism of the society of the spectacle as a society of illusion in postmodern discourse and questioned the role of advertising in American capitalist society.

In light of this, it seems to me that *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* deploys various precise narrative strategies in order to produce a noir sense of displacement and dissatisfaction⁶ in modern and Fordist society. First of all, McCoy intentionally disseminates—in a very realistic way—a number of devices symptomatic of what Guy Debord identified as the problem of “social relations of people mediated by images” (1995, 4); advertised products, publicity in the newspapers, radio, movie pictures, and photographs are the cultural artifacts around which

⁶ I want to insist on the prefix *dis-* because it serves as a representation of the critique that is at the core of McCoy’s literature and, more generally, of the Hollywood novel. Not accidentally, one of the most important examples of this genre is Budd Schulberg’s novel *The Disenchanted* (1950).

characters construct their relations. Moreover, since the writer’s existential fiction offers compelling accounts of the unconscious and psychological processes in the characters—especially by displaying their desire to enter Hollywood society and the desire-frustration mechanism which directly derives from this process—I find it useful to analyze such strategies by way of Slavoj Žižek’s discourse on desire and drive from a post-Lacanian perspective. Clearly, I am not attempting to reconcile two irreconcilable concepts; in terms of the representation of the images, we know that for Debord “all that was once directly lived has become mere representation” (1995, 12) while “for a Lacanian, on the contrary, all that is directly lived is the result of an act of symbolic representation” (Vighi 2012, 165). Rather, I will focus on some recurrent narratological features of McCoy’s novel involving the image of closed circularity, trying to create a continuity in the discourse of the representation of the desire that can rely on both the Debordian post-Marxist analysis of a “spectacle that regenerates itself” (Debord 2005, 18) and Žižek’s interpretation of Lacanian drive as “the domain of the closed circular palpitation which finds satisfaction in endlessly repeating the same failed gesture” (Žižek 2008, 40). Most importantly, if it’s true that, as Debord points out, “the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images” (2005, 27), it would be worth stepping back from the new forms of capital and of accumulation (reification and spectacle) in order to focus on the circularity of capital itself. It is precisely—on the heels of Marx⁷—who claims this inherent repetition and regeneration of capital: for Žižek, Marx oscillates between the qualification of capital as alienated subject of the historical process and the “qualification of capital as substance which is already in itself subject, i.e., which is not anymore an empty, abstract universality but a universality reproducing itself through the circular process of its self-mediation and self-positing” (Žižek 1992, 99). By insisting on this potential relationship between the closed circularity of the drive and the circular process of capital, I will try to highlight the pervasive elements of circularity in McCoy’s novel as constructive of both the narrative apparatus in terms of time and space and the characterization of the protagonists, Robert and Gloria.

2. The society of the *danse macabre*

In *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?*, the narration begins in a courtroom with the protagonist, Robert, who stands in front of the judge after killing a woman. On the other narrative section,

⁷ In the *Capital* (Volume I), Marx insists on the “unceasing movement of profit-making.” He argues that “The ceaseless augmentation of value, which the miser seeks to attain by saving his money from circulation, is achieved by the more acute capitalist by means of throwing his money again and again into circulation” (Marx 1990, 254).

Robert and Gloria meet in Los Angeles while sharing their attempt to become actors in Hollywood. They decide to join a dance marathon, which represents a last chance for the competitors to be noticed by producers and newspapermen. In her brilliant account of marathons, Carol J. Martin suggests that "in appearance they were modeled on a radical version of social Darwinism, where the fittest would not just survive but triumph and win cash prizes" (1994, 20). The dances were joined not only by amateurs but also by professional performers who sometimes consciously supported what was a mere charade since they knew that marathons were fixed: "During the Depression dance marathons had been a performance of the poverty, cruelty, and chance survival of the disenfranchised. They were both an example and a mockery of the American dream of success. The passion for winning was joined with, was even transformed into the struggle for survival" (Martin 1994, 145).

This ambivalent role of the marathon sheds light on one of the cruelest aspects of the spectacle in its violent manifestation, which Debord can help me to summarize in two comments: "the rise of a new form of poverty within the realm of augmented survival" and the "general acceptance of the illusion of modern commodity consumption" (1995, 47). It must be said that the idea of the dance marathon itself was an expression of escape from the Prohibition and Depression era, a moment in which American men and women could pursue an enjoyable moment of leisure entertainment. However, in his faithful depiction of the marathon dance, Horace McCoy seems more concerned about the exploitative nature of this ritual, whose physical and quasi-masochistic violence is subordinated to the aesthetic appeal of the event. In fact, as Martin points out, "gradually leisure became increasingly commercialized, and 'pleasure' clubs began to sponsor dances that took place alongside the more traditional affairs" (1994, 12). McCoy ironically presents this transition in the novel, succinctly explaining the context to the reader:

'My shoes are wearing out,' Gloria said. 'If we don't hurry up and get a sponsor I'll be barefooted.' A sponsor was a company or a firm that gave you sweaters and advertised their names or products on the backs. Then they took care of your necessities. (McCoy 2012, 23)

The figure through which McCoy deploys the spread of commodity consumption is the marathon's master of ceremonies, Rocky. In fact, it is Rocky who embodies the commercial spirit of the event:

'The second couple to be sponsored,' Rocky said, 'is No. 34, Pedro Ortego and Lillian Bacon. They are sponsored by the Oceanic Garage. All right, now, a big hand for the Oceanic Garage, located at 11,341 Ocean Walkway in Santa Monica.'
Everybody applauded again.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ Rocky said, ‘there ought to be more sponsors for these marvellous kids. Tell your friends, ladies and gentlemen, and let’s get sponsors for all the kids. Look at them, ladies and gentlemen, after 242 hours of continuous motion they are as fresh as daisies ...a big hand for these marvellous kids, ladies and gentlemen.’

There was some more applause.

‘And don’t forget, ladies and gentlemen,’ Rocky said, ‘there’s the Palm Garden right down there at the end of the hall where you can get delicious beverages all kinds of beer and sandwiches. Visit the Palm Garden, ladies and gentlemen...’ (McCoy 2012, 42)

Robert’s first-person narrative in the past tense interestingly insists on reporting Rocky’s monologues throughout the novel by presenting the incursion of advertising into the marathon and suggesting its importance in the economy of both the event and the narration. Rocky’s tone, unlike the psychological representations of the characters and their fragilities, is always rational and serves as a metronome for the events. The necessity of a metronome in the novel and the “hours elapsed, couple remaining” sign⁸ at the beginning of the chapters serve as a reminder of what Debord calls “a total justification of the conditions and goals of the existing system” (2005, 8) or an exploration of the spectacle in its totality. As Debord puts it:

the spectacle is both the result and the goal of the dominant mode of production. It is not a mere decoration added to the real world. [...] In all of its particular manifestations—news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment—the spectacle represents the dominant model of life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have already been made in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production. In both form and content the spectacle serves as a total justification of the conditions and goals of the existing system. The spectacle also represents the constant presence of this justification since it monopolizes the majority of the time spent outside the production process. (2005, 8)

In other words, Rocky, as the master of ceremonies, stands as a *justifier* of the spectacle regime, constantly regulating the dance and the normal course of the spectacle. In fact, throughout the dance marathon McCoy deploys a world in which everything and everyone are advertised, as the spectacle presents itself as “the stage at which the commodity has succeeded in totally colonizing social life” (2005, 21); entrapped in this closed circuit, the dance here, as David Fine suggests, becomes the anti-celebration of life, “a rite of death, a *danse macabre*” (1991, 215) and the general pessimistic tone of the narration—embodied by Gloria’s nihilism—suggests that the only possible movement is that toward death.

⁸ At the beginning of the novel, the narrator explains the presence of the sign: “There was a big strip of canvas on the master of ceremonies’ platform, painted in the shape of a clock, up to 2,500 hours. The hand now pointed to 216. Above it was a sign: ELAPSED HOURS—216. COUPLES REMAINING—83” (McCoy 2012, 11).

From the very beginning, the reader can perceive Gloria’s disenchantment and nihilistic mood with regard to her dream of becoming a star; her words prefigure the possibility of what eventually happens at the end of the novel, a possibility that Robert ignores for the most part.

‘Why don’t you quit the movies?’ I asked.

‘Why should I?’ she said. ‘I may get to be a star overnight. Look at Hepburn and Margaret Sullavan and Josephine Hutchinson ... but I’ll tell you what I would do if I had the guts: I’d walk out of a window or throw myself in front of a street car or something.’

‘I know how you feel,’ I said, ‘I know exactly how you feel.’ (McCoy 2012, 16)

In this longing for stardom, however, the characters are forced to distance themselves from what they are compulsively trying to achieve. Gloria’s dream is precisely what Žižek identifies as the “subjects of desire” (2006, 61) and Gloria herself is the “consumer” (2006, 61) to whom capitalism—presented here as the early 30s Hollywood film industry’s production of commodities—offers products in order to satisfy this desire. In the novel, the marathon as the projection or simulacra of the film industry is still what Debord calls a spectacular commodity (Debord 2005, 88); however, in the context of the Great Depression, it is not only an example of the exploitation of leisure time, “*at a distance* and as desirable by definition” (Debord 2006, 89), but also more tragically a chance to survive in a social mechanism ruled by desire. This explains the dramatic situation within which Gloria rapidly constructs her nihilism throughout the narration; her longing for a moment of ‘real life’ and in which she can finally realize her “big break” (McCoy 2012, 67) turns out to be not real but imagined. In fact, the real turning point in the novel is not Gloria’s reproduction of hope but, rather, the awareness that this hope is reproducing itself much as “the spectacle is displaying and reproducing itself at a higher level of intensity” (Debord 2005, 153).

3. Marx and Lacan on the Santa Monica Pier

At the beginning of the story, Gloria joins the marathon because her desire and the hope of attaining it are still present at the back of her mind, but during the marathon she becomes more and more conscious of the futility of both her hope and desire, and of the impossibility of fulfilling them. For this reason, I would insist that what Gloria is still chasing is the simulation of possibility rather than the possibility itself. The marathon, in which the protagonists are continually forced to dance for days, becomes a metaphor for the exploitation of the competitors who move around in circles in accompaniment to their desire which can never be fulfilled. It is precisely Gloria who suggests this idea of closed circularity by using the metaphor of the merry-

go-round—also evoking the famous carousel on the Santa Monica Pier—which alerts the reader as to her intentions: “This whole business is a merry-go-round. When we get out of here we’re right back where we started” (McCoy 2012, 80).

Following Slavoj Žižek in his reading of Lacan’s psychoanalytic definitions of desire and drive, I suggest that what Gloria experiences before and during the marathon reflects, to a certain extent, a shift from a condition of desire to a condition of drive and it is from this shift that the rotary motion derives. In other words, for Gloria, joining the marathon is seen as “the chance of a lifetime” (McCoy 2012, 82), but her former desire to become part of the star system soon turns into a drive; that is to say, “the primordial lack/impossibility, the fact that the object of desire is always missed, is converted into a profit when the aim of libido is no longer to reach its object, but to repeatedly turn around it.” In this sense, Žižek continues, “satisfaction is generated by the very repeated failure of direct satisfaction” (2012, 56).⁹ Early in the novel, during the state of desire, Gloria is not yet caught up in the rotary movement of drive. In this connection, when Gloria replies, “Why should I” in answer to Robert’s question of why she doesn’t quit movies, her reply could be conceived “as a mode of avoiding the circularity of the drive: the self-enclosed rotary movement is recast as a repeated failure to reach a transcendent object which always eludes its grasp” (Žižek 2012, 56).

‘I’m sick of this,’ Gloria said. ‘I’m sick of looking at celebrities and I’m sick of doing the same thing over and over again—’

[...]

‘I’m tired of living and I’m afraid of dying,’ Gloria said. (McCoy, 92-93)

Despite her *sickness*, for much of the duration of the narrative, Gloria continues to dance; the object of desire—or, more specifically, Lacan’s *objet petit a*, the cause of desire—prevents the circle of pleasure from closing, and even when “it introduces a feeling of displeasure, the psychic apparatus even finds a sort of perverse pleasure in this displeasure itself in the never-ending, repeated circulation around the unattainable, always missed object” (Žižek 2012, 48).

However, the condition of hovering between tiredness of living and fear of dying is what pushes Gloria to a full acceptance of her “being toward death” (Žižek 1992, 45) by the end of the novel; her depression is not simply to be intended as a loss of connection between desire and drive but

⁹ Here I focus on the psychoanalytic aspects of this couple (desire and drive) that Žižek discusses in *Less Than Nothing*. However, as Žižek puts it, one could also consider the couple in relation to strict philosophical terms, considering Spinozian drive, Kantian desire or the possibility of a Hegelian “third way” (Žižek 2012, 56) which would engender another type of analysis.

also as an intentional withdrawal, or what Žižek defines as “a separation from the symbolic” (Žižek 2006, 81), as evidenced by her willingness to die.

Gloria is so emptied of her desire to live her life that she cannot even summon up the courage to commit suicide. Her entreaty to Robert to kill her is the only way to free herself from the merry-go-round of the wheel of life. The classic emotional peak we usually experience at the end of the hardboiled novel does not have so much to do with Gloria’s death as with her desire to commit the act of suicide. And the *act* in the Lacanian sense is nothing but a withdrawal by means of which we *renounce renunciation itself* in the knowledge that we have nothing to lose in loss. It is the act of “losing all, of withdrawing from symbolic reality, that enables us to begin anew from ‘point zero,’ from that point of absolute freedom that Hegel referred to as ‘abstract negativity’” (Žižek 1992, 42) Therefore, as Žižek claims: “Is not, in the eyes of Lacan, the ultimate ethical achievement the suicidal ecstasy, the full acceptance of our ‘being toward death’ which evidently suspends the social dimension?” (1992, 45).

In running away from the oppressive social reality of Texas, Gloria encounters in Hollywood the even more horrifying reality of the loss of hope and a sense of isolation. At the end of the narration, she will be—as the Prosecuting Attorney pronounces—“alone except for her brutal murderer” (McCoy 2012, 5).

Within this mechanism of isolation, the Hollywood depicted in the novel is presented as a synecdoche of the “spectacular system” as described by Guy Debord:

the reigning economic system is a vicious circle of isolation. Its technologies are based on isolation, and they contribute to that same isolation. From cars to television, the goods that the spectacular system chooses to produce also serve it as weapons for constantly reinforcing the conditions that engender ‘lonely crowds.’ With ever-increasing concreteness the spectacle recreates its own presuppositions. (Debord 2005, 28)

Moreover, what really fosters the idea of isolation is Gloria’s withdrawal from the dancing couples—which stands, in itself, as a dramatic metaphor of her withdrawal also from the “lonely crowds.” Here again Gloria isolates herself from isolation in a similar way to which, as I mentioned, she renounces renunciation itself.

Since Debord’s definition of spectacle implies a connection between the reigning economic system, commodities, technologies, and the isolation of individuals, it would be useful to trace this circularity back to the circular movement of capital itself. In this regard, it is worth considering Slavoj Žižek’s proposition that “the movement of capital corresponds precisely to the movement of the drive, or to its specific mode of satisfaction” (Hajdini 2014, 237). According to this statement, not only does Robert and Gloria’s drive “inhere to capitalism [...] and propels

the capitalist machinery,” but circulation is the sole purpose—as in the case of capital—“an end in itself, for the expansion of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement” (Žižek 2006, 61).¹⁰

In other words, “just as ‘the drive knows’ that the shortest way to attain its aim is to circulate around its goal-object” (Žižek 2006, 61), McCoy’s protagonists become the physical agents of this movement; the dancers succumb to the capitalist drive but at the same time they act as a simulation for that endless circulation. In this *danse macabre* (the narrator calls Gloria “morbid” more than once in the last chapters), from a narratological point of view, they become more like actants than agents, as the meaning and the direction of their dance have been *fatally* distorted.

4. A Space for/of circularity

I turned around and looked at the building.

‘So that’s where we’ve been all the time,’ I said. ‘Now I know how Jonah felt when he looked at the Whale.’

We walked around the side of the building on to the pier. It stretched out over the ocean as far as I could see, rising and falling and groaning and creaking with the movements of the water. (McCoy 2012, 139)

The symbolic reappropriation of the Bible story of Jonah in the belly of the whale arrives at a moment in the novel in which Gloria and Robert go outside on to the pier to “get a little air” (McCoy 2012, 138), after many hours of uninterrupted dancing. This story of Jonah serves the purpose of highlighting the sense of claustrophobia of the location of the marathon which the reader can perceive as claustrophobic throughout the entire narration. The idea of the compelled and ceaseless movements of bodies in the marathon is further exacerbated by the movement of the water against the pier: “Through the legs of my cot I could feel the ocean quivering against the pilings below. It rose and fell, rose and fell, went out and came back, went out and came back” (McCoy 2012, 51). As noted by David Fine, the ocean thus helps to create a feeling of “futile movement” (1995, 59), providing the marathon with a toneless and sickening soundtrack.¹¹

¹⁰ In this regard, Žižek insists on the difference between Lacan’s well-known distinction between the aim and the goal of drive: “while the goal is the object around which drive circulates, its (true) aim is the endless continuation of this circulation as such” (2006, 61).

¹¹ On the contrary, the abrupt sound that persists in the novel—particularly well presented in the 1969 film adaptation by Sidney Pollack—is the circular sound of the marathon siren that Robert associates, by the end of the novel, with the siren of the police car in which he sits after his arrest.

The psychological account of the protagonist, Robert, whose situation he himself traces back to the prophetic figure of Jonah in the Old Testament story—swallowed by a giant fish and remaining in its belly for three nights and three days—becomes a symbolic image of the totality of the cosmos, represented not only by the whale’s belly but by the interior of the pier building. In the marathon, the act of trespassing outside this cosmos—“out there in that black night on the edge of the Pacific” (McCoy 2021, 5)—as the protagonists walk outside the building is a prelude to the final murder/suicide scene. In fact, in the economy of the narration, to escape from the totality and the closed circularity of the marathon by exiting the pier building is already a spatial metaphor of the suicidal pact.

Furthermore, by associating Robert with the figure of Jonah, McCoy helps us to understand the role of the protagonist; Robert is not only Gloria’s murderer—or the one who helps her to end her life—but he also presents himself as both the perpetrator and the witness. Most of all, as the prophet of a tragedy, much like Ishmael, the prophet/narrator of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, he embodies the complex role of the central narrator and shapes the construction of the narrative.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, when Robert murders Gloria he is accomplishing an Act in the Žižekian sense; it is not a compassionate act nor is it unavoidable. In *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, the Slovenian philosopher claims that “the act is not simply something I ‘accomplish’—after an act, I’m literally not the same as before.” In this sense, we could say that “the subject ‘undergoes’ the act (‘passes through’ it) rather than ‘accomplishes’ it: in it, the subject is annihilated and subsequently reborn (or not)” (1992, 44). So far I have focused on Gloria’s psychological agency in the novel and, along with Žižek, one could argue that her suicide pact is “the act *par excellence*” (1992, 44); however I can claim that Robert’s hybrid position of murderer and witness and his act of killing Gloria is what turns him into a narrator, i.e. the basis on which the plot is built and thanks to which the narration begins, after the act, in front of a judge in a court of law.

Ultimately, we can consider Robert’s act as an act that transforms not just Gloria’s subjectivity but also his own. And here I am finally back to the metaphor implicit in the title of the novel: when a man shoots an injured horse as an act of compassion he is not just helping the horse but he is helping a social order in which an injured horse is no longer a useful animal (the subject). When Gloria decides to withdraw from Hollywood society and from the marathon as a spectacle she ceases to exist in that social order, because she gives up being a part of it. What Robert is really doing, through a compassionate act, is help Gloria to separate herself from the social order, suspending and renouncing what Žižek defines as the social dimension. At the same time,

Robert and Gloria’s tragic outlook is symptomatic of the strict relation between the drive and the recognition of the subject. Joan Copjec, revisiting Lacan’s theory of drives, claims that “what’s involved in the drive, Lacan tells us, is a making oneself heard or making oneself seen; that is to say, the intimate core of our being, no longer sheltered by sense, ceases to be supposed and suddenly becomes exposed” (1994, 190). This is particularly true in the case of Robert’s murder of Gloria, which can be considered as an attempt to get exposed and to break the circle of anonymity; once he realizes that, just like Gloria, he too can fail the marathon—“Before I met you I didn’t see how I could miss succeeding. I never even thought of failing. And now...” (McCoy 2021, 142)—he commits an act that radically changes his status in society. From a narratological point of view we witness the same logic of repetition and circularity; in other words, it is not by chance that, in the construction of the narrative, McCoy’s novel both begins and ends with the Prosecutor’s words at Robert’s trial. What the writer wants to highlight is that it is precisely Robert’s act that gives rise to the entire narration. It becomes clear that this circular narrative structure ultimately helps to foster the general idea of repetition as both the circular movement of drive and the circulation of capital or in this case, going back to Guy Debord’s theory, a regeneration of the spectacle.

Finally, I conclude by suggesting that what we can identify as the mechanism of circularity in *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?*—whose title, aside from the question mark, also begins and ends with the repetition of the same personal pronoun—seems to trigger a mimetic apparatus in which the characters’ relation to the social dimension is rendered through the construction of a precise narrative structure and through the deployment of a circularity that affects the characters’ agency.

To the memory of David Fine and Tom Sturak

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