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## THE CRISIS OF THE SOCIAL REALIST NOVEL IN THE UNITED STATES: THE “TRAGIC” CASE OF JONATHAN FRANZEN’S *STRONG MOTION*

Jonathan Franzen’s production is characterized by a body of non-fiction writing that has greatly contributed to the heated debate about the declining relevance of the social realist novel in contemporary America. In his famous essay “Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels,” published on *Harper’s Magazine* in 1996, he laments the diminished cultural role of high-profile fiction in a nation dominated by consumerism, mass culture, new media, and instant entertainment. He, therefore, makes a public call for highbrow novels to rise to the challenges of the late twentieth century. What is particularly relevant within the scope of the present article is that Franzen equates such novels with the “tragic” mode. The expression that best defines his *Weltanschauung* is, in fact, “tragic realism” (Franzen 1996, 52-53); this wording designates a fiction that “raises more questions than it answers” (Franzen 1996, 53) and, in so doing, emphasizes “its distance from the rhetoric of optimism that so pervades our culture” (Franzen 2002, 91).

Nostalgically looking back to “the conscious and critical organizing of social knowledge which began in the first half of the nineteenth century” (Orr 1978, 4), the author favors a conception of the novel which “shares with Tocqueville, Comte, Spencer, Marx, Proudhon and Mill a vision of progress that contains an immanent critique, a sense of the historical transformation which it then challenges through skepticism and disillusion or revolutionary exhortation” (Orr 1978, 4). Much of his literary production, which participates in the same discourse that is developed in his essays, especially his early work, is, in fact, infused with large-scale social and cultural critique. His second novel in particular, *Strong Motion*, having been completed in the early 1990s, at the height of his frustration with the then-current American literary scene,<sup>1</sup> appears in this respect of particular interest. As the present paper intends to demonstrate, *Strong Motion* decries what the author believes to be the failure of the United States of America, a nation endowed with great promise and potential, which, since the earliest phases of the European colonization, has embraced a form of “predatory” capitalism (Mies 1998, 74) that has negatively influenced, among other things, the notion of progress and the ensuing attitude to the natural world, with a catastrophic impact on the environment in particular. In so doing, I argue, the novel stands as an example of the aforementioned “tragic” mode.

### 1. The Crisis of the Social Realist Novel

The debate about the crisis of the social realist novel in the United States started as early as the late 1940s. In 1948, Lionel Trilling proclaimed the impending dissolution of the genre in an essay entitled “Art and Fortune.” Trilling ascribed the novel’s reportedly inexorable decline to the ongoing changes in the post-war society: firstly, to the sociocultural homogenization of the burgeoning mass society, which, he believed, was evening out those dynamics of social friction that, from his standpoint, had always endowed fiction with “intention, passion, thought, and [...] substantiality” (262); secondly, to a general weakening of intellectual life in the country, a “falling-off in the energy of mind that once animated fiction” (262); thirdly, and more importantly, in his thinking, to the unprecedented horror of the Nazi death camps – a reality that exceeded the novel’s traditional proclivity for the representation of the “depravity” of the human race (263).

A part of this final argument was resumed over time by novelists the likes of Philip Roth, Tom Wolfe, and Jonathan Franzen, who all took to the pages of popular literary magazines to announce the crisis of the

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<sup>1</sup> In “Perchance to Dream” (35) Franzen locates the beginning of his “despair about the American novel” in the winter of 1991, right about the time he was writing “the last two chapters” of *Strong Motion*.



genre. In 1961, Philip Roth followed in Trilling's footsteps by publishing the article "Writing American Fiction," where he stated that the multifarious oddity of current events in America, as presented by the mass media, caused reality to be perceived as unreal by the public and impossibly challenging by the novelists.

The American writer [...] has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make credible much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist. (223)

In Roth's view, this phenomenon constituted "a serious occupational impediment" for the writer. "For," he wondered, "what will be his subject? His landscape? It is the tug of reality, its mystery and magnetism that leads one into the writing of fiction – what then when one is not mystified, but stupefied? Not drawn but repelled?" (225).

More than ten years after this declaration, Tom Wolfe published the anthology *The New Journalism*, in which he raised a new alarm over the threat of obsolescence to the social novel in the United States. It was, in fact, his contention that "serious American novelists would rather cut their wrists than be known as 'the secretary of American society'" (1973, 27), because "by the mid-1960s the conviction was not merely that the realistic novel was no longer possible but that American life itself no longer deserved the term real. American life was fragmented, random, discontinuous; in a word, absurd" (1973, 49). In other words, novelists shied away from the undoubtedly difficult task of portraying the complexity of the coeval reality (1973, 28-29), to the utter detriment of the novelistic genre: "In abandoning social realism," stated in fact Wolfe, "novelists also abandoned certain vital matters of technique" (31). In so doing, he observed, by the end of the 1960s, writers had already lost terrain to journalists, who had, in turn, "gained a technical edge" (1973, 31), thus becoming their new competitors.

Wolfe returned to the subject in 1989, when he published the essay "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel." In this text, he urged writers to rediscover the strength and willpower required to grapple with current reality and work it into a novelistic form with the same factual accuracy that was typical of the journalistic profession. The conclusion of his essay reads, in fact, as a literary call to arms to his fellow "serious" novelists to take on what he wittingly labeled the "billion footed beast" – i.e. the protean reality of contemporary America (1989, 55):

At this weak, pale, tabescent moment in the history of American literature, we need a battalion, a brigade, of Zolas to head out into this wild, bizarre, unpredictable, hog-stomping, Baroque country of ours and reclaim it as literary property. Philip Roth was absolutely right. The imagination of the novelist is powerless before what he knows he's going to read in tomorrow morning's newspaper. But a generation of American writers has drawn precisely the wrong conclusion from that perfectly valid observation. The answer is not to leave the rude beast, the material, also known as the life around us, to the journalists but to do what journalists do, or are supposed to do, which is to wrestle the beast and bring it to terms. (Wolfe 1989, 55-56)

## 2. Jonathan Franzen's Position in the Debate

Wolfe's exhortation is the starting point of Jonathan Franzen's "Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels," published in 1996. The piece raised a lively public discussion – which included an epistolary polemic between authors the likes of Kurt Vonnegut and David Foster Wallace – that suddenly made Franzen a national celebrity. "Perchance to Dream" is based on the writer's disappointing personal experience with his early novels, *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion*, two highly challenging and thought-provoking works that he had hoped would leave an indelible cultural mark. To his surprise, the abrasive sociopolitical critique lying at the heart of both went totally ignored, a phenomenon that, in Franzen's own self-deprecating terms, mirrored "the failure of [his] culturally engaged" work "to engage with the culture" (1996, 37-38). Besides "sixty reviews in a vacuum" (1996, 37-38), *The Twenty-Seventh City* earned him a glamorous package of privileges, such as money, [...] hype" and a "limo ride to a Vogue shoot," all of which he had thought would be but the "fringe benefits" of authoring a "great novel," but which



turned out to be “the main prize” instead, “the consolation for no longer mattering to the culture” (1996, 38). It is therefore no wonder that, when his second novel *Strong Motion* met the same “silence of irrelevance” as his debut one, Franzen came to the drastic conclusion that “there was no place in the world for fiction writers” (1996, 41).

In the *Harper’s* essay Franzen despairs above all of writing what he calls “substantive” fiction (1996, 49) – i.e., texts which are capable of capturing, analyzing, and responding to the complexities and contradictions of contemporary culture, and of unlocking new possibilities for a critical rethinking of actuality. He contends that the exponential growth of electronic entertainment culture that characterized the 1990s – television, photography, and radio – ended up usurping the domain of the literary, thus relegating novels to a marginal role – a position he shares with Alvin Kernan, the author of *The Death of Literature* (1992, 182). For instance, as Franzen explains, the media seized the educational function that had been traditional of the novelistic genre up until the late Victorian age (1996, 51-52). What is more, the visual media in particular, being characterized by an immediate delivery and consumption of a high amount of news, limit the recipients’ processes of recognition and comprehension to the surface level, thus engendering a widespread “tyranny of the literal” (Franzen 2002, 66) over the figural and the speculative, realms which traditionally pertain to literature. To put it succinctly, the media have caused “breadth of knowledge” to become “more important than depth” (Birkerts 1994, 184). This phenomenon becomes more evident when one is confronted with major collective and individual issues, existential problems and/or conflicts, which, in Franzen’s opinion, have ceased to be the object of critical reflection, analysis, and speculation, but are, instead, regarded as symptoms to be treated with the comfort of some kind of instantaneous panacea. For Franzen, contemporary culture shows, in fact, a “therapeutic” propensity to “flatten out sorrows in a tyrannical, one-dimensional banality of comfortable technological consumerism” (Dix, Jarvis and Jenner, 14).

The author’s solution to this crisis is presented in “Why Bother?” – the revised version of the *Harper’s* essay reprinted in 2002 for the collection *How to Be Alone*. While, on one hand, he disregards Wolfe’s suggestion to conflate reportage and novelistic techniques as a way to revitalize the social novel and ensure its continuity, he does comply with his exhortation to engage with the American “beast” (Wolfe 1989, 55). Franzen finds a reason to “bother” writing “serious” novels in his unflinching faith in the power of art. In what he believes to be the desolation of the current cultural panorama, the novelist’s function becomes first of all to preserve the ability to see through ideologies – i.e., through the illusion of the “technological and economic systems and even [...] commercialized religions,” which have become “sufficiently sophisticated to make us the center of our own universe of choices and gratification”; secondly, to raise and maintain the collective awareness of the multifarious complexity of existence, and the ensuing “recognition that improvement always comes at a cost; that nothing lasts forever; that if the good in the world outweighs the bad, it’s by the slimmest of margins” (Franzen 2002, 92).

### 3. *Strong Motion’s* Polemical Streak

A “highly plotted, extensively researched and markedly political” (Green 2005, 91) five-hundred-paged tome, *Strong Motion* came out in 1992 to a mixed reception. Even though the critics acknowledged Franzen’s talent, they also, almost unanimously, objected to what they deemed to be the excessively ambitious scope of the novel, and criticized him in particular for infusing his work with too much cultural critique and didacticism, to the point that, from their perspective, some sections bordered on petulance. According to Richard Eder (1988, 7), for instance, Franzen “writes beautifully for the most part; though sometimes to excess,” while Jonathan Yardley believes that “however laudable Franzen’s intentions, and however strong his narrative gifts, he has not been able to transform them into a convincing novel” (1992, 3). “Jonathan Franzen,” he concludes, “is a writer of abundant energies and not-inconsiderable gifts, but he has turned them here to trivial purpose: a tired anti-American screed masquerading as a novel” (1992, 3).

Franzen himself admitted (Franzen in Weich, 2004) that, by the time he completed *Strong Motion*, his fierce political opinions had started to tax his creative writing, so much so that he, eventually, chose to move away from large-scale sociocultural critique, and pour his vehement opinions into essay writing instead – a decision that contributed greatly to his career, as shown by the critical and commercial success of his third book, *The Corrections*, published in 2001. Even so, the vibrant sociopolitical analysis that informs *Strong Motion* should not be dismissed as a token of artistic immaturity. On the contrary, as I contend, the novel’s polemical streak retains a precious aesthetic function. The expansion of the narrative into a series of critical



digressions, which has been seen as the novel's major aesthetic fault, actually forms the privileged backdrop for the representation of what the author, in his definition of "tragic realism," has aptly defined as "the dirt behind the dream of Chosenness" (Franzen 2002, 92) – that is to say, the downside of the optimistic rhetoric of exceptionalism that characterizes mainstream American culture (Walker Bergström 2014, 111). This is reflected, in Franzen's opinion (1996, 50), in many of the best-selling works on the national literary scene.

#### 4. *Strong Motion* and the "Discomfort Zones" of American Civilization

It is useful to begin the present analysis by clarifying the significance of the novel's title. 'Strong motion,' an expression that pertains to the seismology jargon, is a "ground motion of sufficient amplitude and duration to be potentially damaging to a building or other structure" (*Earthquake Glossary*). Intense seismic activity is indeed the leitmotif of the text, which is characterized by a string of increasingly destructive quakes that, as we will see, rock New England in the late 1980s, during the Reagan era.

The initial string of tremors, which hits the Boston area, turns Louis Holland's world upside down. When his grandmother perishes in the first earthquake, his mother Melanie inherits a manor and a multimillion-dollar share capital in Sweeting-Aldren, a top chemical company based north of Boston. The news comes as especially shocking to Louis, a young man who has always had a "tortured relationship with money" (Franzen 1992, 43) and has been opposing the period's notorious emphasis on "unfettered capitalism" (Rossinow 2015, 1) and its obsession with power and social image since his adolescence. From the age of fourteen on, Louis has been financially independent, refusing his family's support and earning his living from temporary jobs around the neighborhood. An electronics wizard with a promising future in engineering, Louis spurned the elite expensive colleges his family was willing to put him through, and, rather than pursuing a career in business or industry, majored in French at a less fancy but equally well-reputed school. Though remarkably talented, he lacks the competitiveness and drive that is crucial to succeeding in the current epoch; at the age of 23, he therefore contents himself with a job well below his qualifications at a local radio station. Away from the rampant consumerism and materialism of the world he lives in, he, in fact, feels that

A person accustoms himself to what he is, after all, and if he's lucky he learns to hold in somewhat lower esteem, all other ways of being, so as not to spend life envying them. Louis had been coming to appreciate the freedom a person gained by sacrificing money, and to pity or even outright despise the wealthy. (Franzen 1992, 43)

The unexpected inheritance further unsettles his already strained relationship with his family, bringing old grudges and resentments to the surface, and causing an escalation of conflicts. As his father withdraws from the increasingly hostile atmosphere with the aid of marijuana, Louis starts feeling besieged by a recurring pornographic nightmare featuring his own mother with three prominent members of the Sweeting-Aldren board of directors. The lurid oneiric content, vividly described by Franzen in the novel, seems to evoke the "casual vulgarity and the aggressive displays of sexuality" that characterized the unrestrained, "sometimes crass" cultural climate (Rossinow 2015, 3) of the 1980s in America. The coupling of Melanie Holland with the three directors – with one of them contemptuously transformed into a dog – might represent what the protagonist perceives as his heiress mother's obscene connivance with the beasts of capitalism, materialism, and corporate greed:

The setting was a paneled boardroom or club room furnished with red leather chairs. His mother had leaned back on one of them and, raising the hem of her yellow dress, allowed a fully clothed Mr. Aldren to stand between her legs and pump semen into her while Mr. Tabscott and Mr. Stoorhuys looked on. When Mr. Aldren was done, Mr. Stoorhuys mounted her, only Mr. Stoorhuys had become an Irish setter and had to strain and prance on hind legs to maintain an effective mating position. Mr. Aldren and Mr. Tabscott stood watching as she reached around to steady the eager dog between her legs. (Franzen 1992, 45)

The second tremor leads to Louis's chance encounter with Renee Seitchek, a 30-year-old Harvard graduate student and seismologist. Though more poised and mature than Louis, Renee shares his deep intolerance of



the current culture, especially of its consumerist and overly materialistic ethos. As a consequence, she, too, like him, rejects anything superfluous, leading a sternly disciplined and frugal existence in

a bare, clean place. There was nothing on the counter but a radio/cassette player, nothing in the dish rack but a plate, a glass, a knife, and a fork. That the light was warm and the four chairs around the table looked comfortable somehow made the kitchen all the more unwelcoming. It was like the kitchen of the kind of man who was careful to wash the dinner dishes and wipe the counters before he went into the bedroom and put a bullet in his brain. (130)

Both Renee and Louis seem to embody a condition that Franzen himself described in the *Harper's* article (Hermanson 2001, 123). In the text, he recalled the early 1990s – right about the time he was completing *Strong Motion* – as an era of deep personal turmoil, during which he could not even locate the actual origin of his discomfort: “Did the distress I was feeling,” he wondered, “derive from some internal sickness of the soul, or was it imposed on me by the sickness of society?” (Franzen 1996, 36). The two characters seem to embody a narrative response to the aforementioned dilemma, as both of them suffer from a pathologically severe intolerance of what they perceive as being the sickness of the capitalistic socio-cultural milieu of the late Reagan years.

The sudden intensification of earthquake activity in an otherwise non-seismic area such as New England prompts Renee to undertake extensive research into the phenomenon. When she retrieves a study hypothesizing a correlation between deep drilling and earthquakes, she starts suspecting Sweeting-Aldren; her theory is that, despite its carefully crafted, PR-built reputation of having “the best environmental record of any player in the industry” and its well-advertised ecological mission to recycle all toxic waste (Franzen 1992, 89), the corporation has long been pumping its discharges in an injection well located in the Boston area, thus causing increasingly destructive phenomena of induced seismicity in the region.

As the two protagonists embark on an investigation to find evidence of such protracted malfeasance, they retrieve and examine the historical, cultural, and economic roots of the present-day catastrophe caused by Sweeting-Aldren. In so doing, they become a function of Franzen’s “tragic realism” (Franzen 1996, 53) in that they uncover patterns of corruption that exceed the history of the company to encompass the history of American civilization.

The longest and most significant instance of the author’s cultural criticism in the novel begins when Louis’s father, Bob Holland, a professor of history and an expert in the economy of New England, snaps out of his drug-induced stupor to shed light on the origin of the corporation, especially on its long record of criminal business, which actually extends further back in the past than the two young protagonists suspect. Holland’s contribution to the narrative takes the form of a long historical excursus that begins in sixteenth-century New England, at the dawn of the European colonization of America. Through an unconventional style of speech adorned with archaisms – with the linguistic flourishes being the nostalgic remnants of a better time – the character employs a standard trope that describes America as a mythic paradise still unspoiled by civilization and a land of unlimited natural resources, as opposed to an Old World stifled by history, where most, if not all of the resources have run out:

The Countrey, according to the first Englishmen to see it, more resembled a boundless green Parke than a Wildernesse. From the rocky shores inland as farre as a man could journey in a week, there stretched a Forrest suche as teemed with Dere, and Elke, and Beares, and Foxes; with Quailes and ruffed Grouse and wilde Turkie so innocent and Plentiful that a man could cast aside his Musket and hunt hem with bare hands. (Franzen 1992, 373)

Yet, what the European colonizers envisaged as an abundance of opportunities actually clashed with the way of life that had rightfully been practiced by the Native Americans for centuries on end. In order to capture that coveted imaginary Eden, the settlers installed a civilization based upon violence – with the most common forms being domination, subjugation and, eventually, genocide. They justified these barbarities by proclaiming the New World and its legitimate inhabitants “wild, savage nature, waiting to be exploited and tamed by the male civilizers” (Mies 1998, 3).



The violence inherent in the process of colonization (Mies 1998, 5) takes center stage in Franzen's novel, where the arrival of the Englishmen on American shores is portrayed as an out-and-out invasion conducted in the name of a purportedly God-given civilizing mission:

"Fill the earth and subdue it," God had commanded in Genesis. His Englishmen came to Massachusetts and, seeing that the natives had disobeyed the commandment – the place was all trees and no fences! No churches! No barns! – felt justified in tricking them and blackmailing them and massacring them. [...] In the space of a generation, more than 80 percent of the Indians in New England died of European diseases. Vermont was essentially depopulated. "God," said John Winthrop, "hath hereby cleared our title to this place." (Franzen 1992, 374-375)

The quote from the Genesis shows that the colonizers perceived America both as the original paradise of their past and, at the same time, the promise of a future Eden on Earth which they could build with their own hands. Indeed, such religious imperatives played a major role in the rhetoric of colonization, by providing "an important foundation for the legal sanctioning of occupation of lands" (Harrison 2005, 4) and by legitimizing the violent dispossession of native peoples by the English settlers. The accomplishment of the settlements' objectives also depended on the then-current upsurge of modern science and technology, for instance on the possibility to "master the land, transforming the virgin territories into something else – a farm, a village, a road, a canal, a railway, a mine, a factory, a city, and finally, an urban nation" (Kolodny 1975, 7). This presupposed a dramatic change in the relationship between human beings and nature that had characterized the New World until then. While "pre-contact North American Indigenous communities maintained a preeminent Mother Earth ideology" (Gorecki 2015), according to which external nature and the earth were conceived as a living organism, the development of modern science promoted instead a "mechanistic and physical world-view [...] based on the killing of nature as a living organism and its transformation into a huge reservoir of 'natural resources' or 'matter', which could be analyzed and synthesized by Man into his new machines by which he could make himself independent of Mother Nature" (Mies 1998, 5). What emerges is a "predatory mode of production," based on "warfare and conquest" and on the "violent attack and rape of Mother Earth" (Mies 1998, 74-75).

Such a ruthless logic plays a major role in Franzen's novel, first of all in his representation of eighteenth-century America. At the heart of the Enlightenment, the immaculate pre-colonial paradise has, in fact, definitively been wiped out, the Indian populations have been decimated and most of their villages leveled, forests have been destroyed to make room for the settlers, and intensive agriculture and livestock farming have dramatically impoverished the soil:

So it happened that the country whose abundance had sustained the Indians and astonished the Europeans had in less than 150 years become a land of evil-smelling swamps, of howling winds, of failing farms and treeless vistas, of hot summers and bitterly cold winters, of eroded plains and choked harbors. A time-lapse movie of New England would have shown the wealth of the land melting away, the forests shriveling up, the bare soil spreading, the whole fabric of life rotting and unraveling, and you might have concluded that all that wealth had simply vanished — had gone up in smoke or out in sewage or across the sea in ships. (Franzen 1992, 379-380)

Contrary to appearances, yet, the land's coveted resources did not actually disappear, but were, instead, deprived of their "natural" state and, thanks to the swift advancements of modern science, transformed into various kinds of manufactures and seized by the greedy and rapacious hands of an oligarchy, part of which also includes the family dynasty that eventually went on to found Sweeting-Aldren:

If you'd looked very closely, though, you would have seen that the wealth had merely been transformed and concentrated. All the beavers that had ever drawn breath in Franklin County, Massachusetts, had been transmuted into one solid-silver tea service in a parlor on Myrtle Street in Boston. The towering white pines from ten thousand square miles of Commonwealth had



together built one block of brick town houses on Beacon Hill, with high windows and a fleet of carriages, chandeliers from Paris and settees upholstered in Chinese silk, all of it occupying less than an acre. A plot of land that had once supported five Indians in comfort was condensed into a gold ring on the finger of Isaiah Dennis, the great-uncle of Melanie Holland's grandfather. (Franzen 1992, 380-381)

The long-term outcome of this protracted profit-driven aggression perpetrated on the land, especially Sweeting-Aldren's "greed-driven rape" of the area near Boston (Weinstein 2015, 81), is represented in the novel as the ecological catastrophe that hits New England in the 1980s, when the country gets permanently disfigured, and the once luscious environment is degraded to mere infrastructure. As Franzen writes, in fact,

There's a specific damp and melancholy ancient smell that comes out in Boston after sunset, when the weather is cool and windless. Convection skims it off the ecologically disrupted water of the Mystic and the Charles and the lakes [...]. It's the breath from the mouths of old tunnels, the spirit rising from piles of soot-dulled glass and the ballast of old railbeds, from all the silent places where cast iron has been rusting, concrete turning friable and rotten [...], petroleum distillates seeping back into the earth. In a city where there is no land that has not been changed, this is the smell that has come to be primordial, the smell of the nature that has taken nature's place [...]: the smell of infrastructure. (Franzen 1992, 189)

The constant industrial abuse, pollution, and littering of the area end up triggering nature's violent reaction in the form of earthquakes, a manifestation of rebellion and "revenge" (Weinstein 2015, 87):

A hillside vomited smashed cars and clots of rusted waste. Proud mansions spread their green velvet skirts on land wedged between the old brick phalluses of industry and the newer plants... The most permeable of membranes separated a country club from acres of bone-colored slag piles streaked with sulfuric yellow, like the pissings of a four-story dog. Low-rise condos with brand-new parking lots and BayBank branches were perched above algae-filled sinkholes littered with indestructibles. (Franzen 1992, 287)

Notably, this long excursus ends with one more reference to the history of American civilization, a passage from John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* that Professor John Holland posts on the door of his office for all his students to read.

For I ask, What would a Man value Ten Thousand or a Hundred Thousand Acres of excellent Land, ready cultivated; and well stocked too with Cattle, in the middle of the in-land Parts of America, where he had no hopes of Commerce with other Parts of the World, to draw Money to him by the Sale of the Product? It would not be worth the inclosing, and we should see him give up again to the wild Common of Nature, whatever was more than would supply the Conveniences of Life to be had there for him and his Family. — JOHN LOCKE. (Franzen 1992, 365)

John Locke saw the New World as the dawn of civilization, the second Garden of Eden, a new beginning for England and its second chance at paradise. More precisely, in this passage he compares pre-colonial America to "an island, separate from all possible commerce with the rest of the world" (Locke 2010, 257) – i.e., a capitalism-free *insula felix*, apart from the corrupting influence of the world of trade. Placed toward the end of the novel, this reference infuses the narration with a nostalgic sadness for a utopian potential that remained unfulfilled and for a promise that was betrayed when America gave in to greed, materialism, and consumerism.

## 5. Conclusion

It is my contention that this critical digression operates in a Gramscian way, by demonstrating how taken-for-granted structures of thinking – in other words, ideologies rooted in the history of the country – contribute to



patterns of dominance that have affected the life of the United States since its foundation. As Terry Eagleton puts it, in fact, “ideologies are commonly felt to be both naturalizing and universalizing. By a set of complex discursive devices, they project what are in fact partisan, controversial, historically specific values as true of all times and all places and so as natural, inevitable and unchangeable” (1991, 9).

Thanks to the above mentioned excursus – which opens in pre-colonial America, goes all the way to the 1980s, and ends with a wistful reference to ‘what might have been’ – Franzen demonstrates how a deeply embedded ideology, which grants white men the privilege of supremacy over everyone and everything else, including the natural world, has been naturalized, taken for granted and, consequently, reinforced with each passing century under the combined influence of religion, culture, and familial relationships, to the detriment of both society and the environment. In other terms, the novel shows how a nation originally regarded as a dreamland outside and beyond history eventually fell prey to an unstoppable process of cultural and moral entropy that coincided with the inception of a “predatory” capitalistic system of power (Mies 1998, 74). The original paradise has therefore been degraded to, as Franzen puts it, a “distant wasteland” that smells of “car exhaust” (1992, 461). In this light, the “strong motion” evoked in the title symbolically threatens the ideological strongholds of mainstream American culture in order to both demystify the myth of the United States as a “Utopia made reality” (Baudrillard 1992, 77) and, at the same time, bring forth, in the author’s terms, its “tragic” condition of a “betrayed Eden” (Buell 2001, 37). To put it in different words, the ‘strong motion’ engendered by the novel’s “tragic” realism serves an essentially antinomic function, in that it undermines what in Franzen’s opinion is the wrongful – but very popular, especially in “the age of images” (Franzen 1996, 1) – conflation of the present-day vision of America and the utopian pre-colonial conception of the nation. Accordingly, the text provides an instance of what the author believes to be the function of high-profile literature: to rise above the simplistic views of the world and the widely received ideologies spread by the popular media and by many best-sellers (Franzen 1996, 50), and unveil the reality of the “discomfort zones” of American civilization, as he aptly puts it in his 2006 memoir (Franzen 2006).

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