

INDIFFERENCE

judith roof

Perhaps, with luck, it will end the kind of thrill-ride movies that exploit what I think of as a comedy of violence. All of that seemed to come out of a pre-Sept. 11 world where people were not really feeling anything, and so the cinema was all about physical sensation. Well, there is no shortage of feeling now.

— Baz Luhrmann¹

PREAMBLE: NO SHORTAGE OF FEELING NOW

On the one hand, we strain against our indifference. Boredom, complacency, lack of compassion, absence of intervention, failures of empathy, willed ignorance, or blindness to distinctions results in a politics and culture of sameness — a dispassionate status quo straining toward the standardized diversity of a global market. This indifference is reflected in everything from American foreign policy to its lack of domestic social programs, from the homogeneous bourgeois ideal that dominates the western cultural imaginary to the increasing homogenization and worldwide distribution of an indifferent American culture. In its extreme resistance to anything disturbing or threatening, indifference leads to tragedy. In its complacent acceptance of inequities, indifference becomes the enabling climate for the Kitty Genoveses of the world, its turned head wasting the last clear chance to avoid violence.² Indifference underwrites the universal subject; enough universalizing seems to produce indifference. Indifference lies in unquestioning accord with ideology as itself an unquestioned set of valences. Indifference erases the violence of indifference itself. The escalating ferocity of attempts to smash complacency mounted by the compassionate of all ilk match the ethical poverty of the indifferent.

On the other hand, we might not care about our indifference at all, remaining indifferent as only the very comfortable or the very beaten down can be. The point when we appear to be most caring may be when we are most indifferent of all. This caring may be a way to ease the inner tensions that disrupt the lovely psychic quiescence Freud characterizes as the pleasure principle. Empathy, then, may well be the mechanism by

which an individual can stave off, defend against, and defuse the disturbances — the differences — that prevent a desirable state of low excitation in the psychic economy. The ambivalent play of empathy and indifference in public discourse and fundamentalist fervor extends the psychodynamics outlined by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The various ways we deploy indifference demonstrate the suggestive inter-relation among psychodynamics, discursive formations, and ideologies. They suggest why and how cultural narratives about empathy and indifference provide both effective defenses against difference of any kind and produce the sustaining fictions of totalitarianism.

THE DIFFERENCE IN INDIFFERENCE

How is it that one manifestation of caring already hints at an indifference? While sympathy itself may be genuine, it is perhaps more directed at comforting ourselves than others. We try hard to equalize our own shock, anxiety, and trauma by extending empathy, generosity, and succor to others. Trying to relieve the pain around us is also an effort to level the pain within. In this cynical economy, humanitarianism is self-preservation, not only in the distant expectation of its return favor or a better culture, but also in the way such actions constitute the individual effort to regain balance and peace.

How is it that this desire for a return to even feeling — for the comforts of sameness — veers towards indifference? And why is indifference simultaneously both deeply and stubbornly sought and the object of outraged sanctimony? On the one hand, those who would wish compassion, empathy, or even mitigating action want to understand caring gestures as pure and unselfish generosity. They refuse to see instances of laudable self-sacrifice as the public resolution of individual tension or the necessary expression of a more self-serving need. On the other hand, indifference, empathy's opposite, evinces an *a priori* lack of feeling and culpable self-indulgence — a willed ignorance sustained in the face of catastrophe. Postures of indifference are interpreted by champions of charity as the selfish self-protective acts of those who refuse to recognize the immediacy and material urgency of tragedy, oppression, and pain. For example, turning tragedy into commerce, marketeers and pirates of trauma and disaster are obvious instances of this outrageous mode of indifference. Less obvious are the politicians who trade on the ill fortune of others by using it as a platform for the public display of compassion. Still less obvious is what Christopher Hitchens describes in *Vanity Fair*: the burst of passion focused on reestablishing community that masks in its communitarian appeal the ways such fervor provides both an emotional cushion and an ideological shield to insulate individuals against the intrusion (violent or otherwise) of differences of all kinds.³

This last, ideological altruism may be the most culpable of all insofar as it resorts to protective ideas that enable a dismissal or denial of the differences and inequalities that produce tragic

circumstances in the first place. Indifference, as a laudable or reprehensible devotion to sameness (depending on one's point-of-view), serves as an armor against any change of status, disturbance of the status quo, or even variation in condition that might suggest there has never really been a same at all. From the perspective of the indifferent who are more than likely either indifferent to their indifference or defensive about it, indifference is an admirably loyal adherence to normalcy as the vestige of a higher principle ("What's wrong with America!?! Love it or leave it!"). The "normal" equate indifference with ideals of devotion, fidelity, consistency, and patriotism. Such normative indifference ignores or elides the differences that might produce tension, contention, or a lack of group unity.

Of course, critics of profiteering and other callous responses to tragedy are right to suggest that commercial indifference enables the perpetuation of evil and social injustice, though most critiques of such behavior are made on the basis of a vague ethical distaste rather than any sense that capitalizing on tragedy is a symptom of a broader malaise.⁴ Further, all species of public indifference are material and political insofar as they become a pretext for ignoring differences in economic power, education, gender, race, class, and religion, which, though threatening the centrality and power of dominant regimes, also anchor the materiality of disparate treatment. Is indifference, then, a matter of degree? When circumstances are extreme, indifference or lack of sympathy becomes maximally culpable. If the status quo reigns, does indifference become invisible as a mere attribute of privilege or a necessary part of group identification?

Indifference can indeed seem minor, taking the form of a willed ignorance of difference or the casual refusal to recognize one's own privilege. This indifference is related to the philosophical generalizations that elide differences, resulting in the categorical homogeneity — the presumption of sameness — that grounds humanist metaphysics. The universalizing gestures of some critics and philosophers, for example, produce an indifference to gender, sexual, or racial differences that also has an effect on the social, cultural, or political well-being of those whose difference is the object of indifference. Indifference, thus, seems a necessary condition for any kind of abstract thinking, but at the same time selfish and/or stupid from the perspective of those who are excluded and upon whose difference or otherness such abstractions often depend. The aphoristic "All men are created equal" is the doctrinarian license for this kind of humanistic indifference, asserting sameness as a desirable, mandated condition in such a way (as the framing condition for national ideology) that it is maintained even in the face of obvious material and social disparities. Thus, patriotism often consists of the stubborn assertion of this idea of sameness in the face of any difference; claims of discrimination are thus unpatriotic, especially in times when patriotism has rushed to the scene like an antibody to the site of infection.

The passionate coexistence of these opposing postures towards indifference — indifference as culpable, indifference as necessary — suggests not only that indifference is an ambivalent concept,

but also that the sameness it fronts is never self-same. Rather, this sameness consists of several intermingled phenomena. Sameness is expressed as two different affects: a condition of inappropriate unfeeling or a sense of felicitous normalcy. In the realms of the social, the psychic, and narrative, sameness is a structural category. In the social, indifference translates into the sweeping homogenizations of ethnic, racial, or gender identity, nationalism, or even sports fandom. In these instances a category organizing a particular aspect of self-identity serves as a point of sameness or commonality enabling the suppression of differences in favor of similarity, which in turn becomes a motivating factor for group identification. Group identification, then, mutes differences as a way of maintaining the illusion of common interest.

As a structural category of both the psyche and narrative, sameness is a happy, alluring, but paralyzing site of low excitation — the pleasure of the pleasure principle or the premature elations of homosexuality or incest, which, according to Freud, should be quickly overcome in the larger heteronormative narrative by the proper aim and object and which dominant culture perceives as threatening the hetero-status quo.⁵ In the social, sameness is a positive feature to be sought — or even forcibly produced. In the psyche, sameness is a respite that becomes an enemy to be overcome, the pleasure principle succeeded by the reality principle and Eros, a sameness replicating itself endlessly in each venue of potential action, its iterations a spectre of stuttering withdrawals across a field of self-reflecting mirrors. In narrative, sameness threatens death — of the subject, of the story — through the absence of productive possibility.

These different samenesses might happily co-exist, were it not for the moral confusion excited by indifference, which becomes an impasse of culpability and truth. As I suggested above, we both blame indifference and seek it. The ways we define, identify, and regard indifference gauge our position somewhere between a Judeo-Christian matrix of compassion and the annals of normalcy and belonging. If we condemn indifference, we are worthy beings; but worthy beings, like deities or justice, are blind to differences. Normal people are not indifferent to the suffering of others; normal people are all the same. How, in this paradox of indifference, can anything ever be the same?

The problem is that the affect of indifference, though ambivalently associated with both social difference (some people suffer) and sameness (people are not really different and all people should care), does not correspond to the psychic laziness upon which culpable indifference is ultimately blamed. Instead, displays of care, which seem like high psychic investment, work toward reestablishing psychic peace as indifference to vicissitudes. This psychic indifference or sameness (sameness because it represents an evenness in excitation) is the product of great psychic labor — a war even — whose impetus is archaic and economic. The psychic economy struggles to return to a state of low anxiety, which might be understood as the individual version of the social felicities and lack of anxiety enabled by group identifications. Psychically, the battle

is for indifference. Culturally, we battle indifference (uncaring) to reach indifference (normalcy and sameness). Resolving this ambivalence, which itself represents a tension among different registers of sameness, sparks the dangerous alignments or strivings toward the sameness of totalitarianisms, which are as deadly to the socius as low excitation might be to the organism. The differences of sameness, hence, sustain a valuable ambivalence, which must exist in all its contradictions as a defense against both truth and death.

NARRATIVE INDIFFERENCE

The conflicts between social and psychic sameness, between sameness and indifference, are sustained culturally through narrative — in stories of the causes of indifference and in tales of the ills it causes. In the narrative (or metanarrative) of ruling indifference, indifference is a luxury enjoyed by a cadre of socially-same dominant and powerful people. Empathy and caring are the lot of the underdog, those whose differences do not permit indifference for long. These two groups clash. Difference dashes indifference from its complacency to become a better sameness that then returns to the bliss of indifference again. We must, for example, now return to our “normal” lives in order to preserve America’s economy. In a competing story of indifference, impoverished or otherwise disadvantaged protagonists struggle endlessly, beaten into indifference by repeated misfortune. The ones who can remain impassioned prevail. This is the pattern of all narratives of reform in which social sameness is linked to an indifference that is linked to wielding power. The first story situates indifference as a cause of suffering, the second locates it as an effect. In both stories, indifference is linked to a group sameness. Indifference is ambivalent, a sameness to be overcome and a normalcy to be wished for, depending upon where one is in relation to empowered agents of discrimination.

But what seems to be a conflict is in fact the story of the interdependency of these samenesses that actually promotes and sustains indifference. Generally, narratives align indifference with the dominant, either as an attitude to wield or one to inflict. This version of indifference as self-same dominance masks the mechanisms of displacement and projection that transfer threats of disturbing difference from self onto others who become their repositories. This reverses the roles of villain and victim, empowered and powerless, aligning the complacent (and culturally dominant) with the position of victim in narratives of suffering. Thus arise reverse discrimination suits as well as such social phenomena as the Promise Keepers, who shift the site of indifference from their formerly indifferent selves who let things slide to liberal forces of evil (such as feminists and gay people) indifferent to basic patriarchal morality and the differences upon which such systems depend; survivalists, who battle public indifference in the face of gluttonous federal power-grabbers; and fundamentalists of all ilk, for whom difference (even and especially sexual difference) is an abomination that must be subordinated in the service of a very monological

truth. Narratives of indifference are offered as justification for “liberating” movements, whose goal is the suppression of gender, racial, sexual, and religious difference. They utilize the very oppression the dominant perpetrate as a way of gaining sympathy and additional power against the interest and at the expense of those whose differences stimulated indifference in the first place. And they are in contradistinction to narratives of oppression that come from the side of the oppressed in which the oppressors are never indifferent, but are rather purposefully invested in racism, sexism, homophobia, patriarchy, nationalism, or religious fervor.

These stories of indifference should look familiar. Not only do they circulate widely in the world, they also have the virtue of working from all sides at once, shifting rapidly across the twinkling, opalescent fields of power, becoming a matter of shifting perspective in realms masquerading as truth. They reflect the basic pattern of western narrative itself, at least as Peter Brooks outlines it as a structuralist dynamic where sameness (as suggested above, taking the form of an object-choice that is too same, as in incest or homosexuality) is a danger to be overcome by difference. Indifference functions as an attribute of both protagonist and antagonist in narrative as well as supplying another analog to the more libidinal manifestations of narrative sameness listed above. On the level of ideology, we are always either included as the indifferent “we” — as in “we the people” — that erases differences of all kinds in the face of a larger opponent, or we are the “we” who see the collapsing ideology that subtends this communal “we.” We are, in other words, either included (and hence same) or excluded from narrative. Our status as protagonist or antagonist shifts depending on where indifference is located. The location of indifference ultimately depends upon point-of-view. In popular culture, indifference is the justifying injustice for most action and adventure dramas, from James Bond to *Die Hard* to *The Matrix*. Bond must fight villains who depend on the indifference of the world to enable their perfidious schemes. John McLean must spend half a movie convincing an indifferent world that insurgents have taken over an office tower, an airport, or a subway system. *The Matrix* develops an elaborate allegory accounting for indifference as a machine-perpetuated pre-partum. Most narratives of social change, like *Lifetime* movies or such 70s favorites as *The China Syndrome*, involve an assault on indifference as at least half the battle.

But while locating indifference as an ethical antagonist, narratives that deploy such indifference tend to assert it as a *fait accompli*, as already a same indifference. The difference against which the good strive is not itself an object of interest except insofar as it provides a moral nemesis, a condition or ground that makes action significant. Indifference, however, is worth examining in itself as the unlikely (because indifferent) knot that links psychical dynamics, narrative, affect, and ideology, thus betraying the difference in sameness itself. As affective indifference takes over the narrative functions of sameness from the permutations of Freud’s aim/object matrix, not only does it screen the far more complex mechanism outlined above by

which cultural power is maintained; it also justifies, complies with, and produces western, white, masculinist ideologies by explaining why the status quo evades disturbance, refuses recognitions of differences, eschews any kind affirmative action, and renders itself the victim.

These metanarratives of indifference are neither incidental nor rationalizing but rather essential to the very production of indifference in the first place. If, as I will argue, indifference is a manifestation of the pleasure principle, then metanarratives of indifference produce its ambivalent positioning and themselves participate in the constant return to indifference as cultural versions of this psychodynamic. As Brooks shows, the psychodynamics outlined by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* both deploy and define the dynamics of western narrative. The pleasure principle as a specific part of that psychodynamic works culturally both as an effect of narrative in that narrative returns us to the pleasure of low excitation and in the ways the pleasure principle is synecdochized by and localized in indifference as an affect. The affect of indifference then stands for all qualities and sites narratively (and ideologically) positioned as same (everything from homosexuality and incest to fascism) in its guise as both a cause of ills to be vanquished and as an ill to be healed by a fresh infusion of difference. In this way threats of sameness such as homosexuality are transformed into an indifference that is simply overcome by heterosexuality (or heterogeneity), the core story Freud himself recounts in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

Reading indifference as a psychical construction with narrative implications anatomizes cultural and political causality, not by way of excusing it, but as a way to understand differently why such postures are so recurrent and resistant to change, even when conscious discourse and societal pressure offer substantial motivation for compassion. (Need I mention the oxymoronic “compassionate conservatism”?) In one sense such a reading situates the hackneyed category of ideology as literally a cultural unconscious that is subject to a species of Freud’s mechanism of the reversal of affect, outlined in his discussions of sado/masochism and voyeurism/exhibitionism.⁶ In another sense, it explains how both psychically and culturally, the ideologically empowered who operate indifference become the heroic and marginalized sites of difference — in other words, it explains ideology as a deployment of indifference. This chiasmus elucidates how it is that the differences represented, at least narratively, as dangers to the body politic (most notably, homosexuality as perhaps the signal example of a social threat evidenced by the accusations of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, but also feminism and multiculturalism) become the sites of a dangerous sameness (stasis and indifference) that signal the End of Culture as We Know It. Penetrating indifference in paradoxically the same gesture iterated in the heroic narratives above allows a more dynamic account of the inter-relations among narrative, ideology, sameness, and empowerment. Understanding indifference as a complex mechanism bound up in psychical and narrative processes might suggest a non-oppositional way around the trap of

wanting simply to assert difference in the face of indifference, a ploy that never works because that oppositional arrangement is the structure that produces indifference in the first place. An analysis of indifference might account for the ambivalence around indifference itself as an affect that is both knowing and unknowing, culpable and incorrigible, but which itself seems to perpetuate indifference as a norm. Finally, looking at the psychonarrative role of indifference provides another way to understand the passionate indifference of fundamentalisms, which are the logical results of the victory of the pleasure principle.

SAME INDIFFERENCE

Indifference is represented as an effect of some sort of disproportion, both in its origins and effects. Representations of indifference's source always evoke questions of scale. Imagined topographically, as Freud imagines the Perceptual System-Conscious/Unconscious, indifference might be described as the affective condition achieved when the scale of an event is vastly out of proportion to a perceiver's self-perceived positionings.⁷ Scale can be geographical distance such as when complacent Americans are indifferent to ongoing ethnic butchery in other parts of the world; numbers as in the vastness of so many tobacco or traffic deaths per minute; ideological worth as in the case of violence against gays and lesbians, which does not merit concern because gays are a small minority who ask for it; or size as when we are indifferent to the formation of arterial plaque or the erosion of the ozone layer because these phenomena are either too small or too large to be seen. This topography also translates into temporality: indifference occurs when events are too close in time (we are stunned and hence do not recognize the import of events) or too distant in time (we worry we will forget the Holocaust and lapse into indifference). Duration or repetition can also produce indifference, for example, when the repetition or perpetuation of terror inures one to its effects. Disparities in scale produce a threat to the conceptual apparatus as a kind of perceptual displeasure, a forced engagement with the world in a scope disproportionate to the human body or its powers of intervention.

Operating variously as a quality of the antagonist (in narratives of oppression where the indifferent cause social ills) and of the protagonist (in narratives of group triumph over dangerous difference), indifference is itself understood through several different cultural analyses, each containing some estimation of its essential liability for cultural ills. Indifference might be understood as a lack of appropriate reaction, a failure to respond to suffering — the heartlessness of the ruling class, for example. Or indifference is a willed and motivated ignorance or failure of recognition of differences from positions of power that threatens the social, cultural, or physical well-being of those whose differences are elided. This occurs in claims of universality or even impersonality made by those in a position to deny difference. A good example of this is

the United States Constitution, which must constantly be revised in relation to previously unrecognized differences somehow not automatically included in the universal subject of America. Indifference might be a sociopathic genetic disorder that produces an inability to recognize the claims of others at all and permits violent and socially irresponsible behaviors. This pathology has been claimed as a defense that has been used in several criminal trials. Or indifference is just a lack of difference, the repetition of averageness, that would seem to represent stasis. Indifference's failures are failures of affect and cause — failures of the subject to act in a properly compassionate and ethical fashion, failures of the perceptual system to pull disparate events together into a sensible chain (narrative) that will provoke a suitably emotional response. Indifference is an affective problem because it is a narrative problem (and vice versa), and the narrative that provides the key to its enigma (or perhaps auspiciously non-enigma) is Freud's account of the dynamics of instinct and libido in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

Despite its ambivalent alignments with power, indifference in all of these metanarratives is a defensive strategy, a retreat figured as a failure of ethics on the side of the powerful and as a failure of spirit on the side of the oppressed. Begetting sameness and begotten from it, indifference is a manifestation of the pleasure principle. For Freud, the pleasure principle means that “the mental apparatus endeavors to keep the quantity of excitation present in it as low as possible or at least to keep it constant” (9). It “is a tendency operating in the service of a function whose business it is to free the mental apparatus entirely from excitation or to keep the amount of excitation in it constant or to keep it as low as possible” (62).

The pleasure principle works in a dynamic that is binary on many levels. On the most elementary level, Freud pits the pleasure principle against outside events that disturb the individual: “the course of those [mental] events is invariably set in motion by an unpleasurable tension, and...it takes a direction such that its final outcome coincides with a lowering of that tension — that is with an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure” (7). Because by itself this course would result in a rather premature quiescence or death, the pleasure principle must cope with another rival, the “reality principle.” “This latter principle,” Freud explains, “does not abandon the intention of ultimately obtaining pleasure, but it nevertheless demands and carries into effect the postponement of satisfaction, the abandonment of a number of possibilities of gaining satisfaction and the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure” (10).

The tension produced by the reality principle in addition to the strains of everyday existence would explain why it is that the individual cannot just subsist in some kind of pleasurable, infantile state — a sort of perpetual indifference. Freud imagines a kind of parallel topography for this basic conflict in the brain, suggesting that tensions take the form of a “*perceptual* unpleasure,” which “may be perception of pressure by unsatisfied instincts; or it may be external perception

which is either distressing in itself or which excites unpleasurable expectations in the mental apparatus — that is, which is recognized by it as ‘danger’” (11). These perceptions, imagined spatially in the Perceptual System-Conscious (*Pept.-Cs*)/Unconscious, are located “between outside and inside” and are turned toward the external world (24). This outwardly-turned borderline takes on a kind of physiological presence as cerebral cortex, the locus of consciousness. This physiological site becomes metaphorically a “crust” or “shield” against outside stimuli and further provides ready-made routes for the passage of certain repeated kinds of excitation (26, 28). According to Freud, the “little fragment of living substance” “acquires the shield in this way: its outermost surface ceases to have the structure proper to living matter, becomes to some degree inorganic and thenceforward functions as a special envelope or membrane resistant to stimuli. In consequence the energies of the external world are able to pass into the next underlying layers, which have remained living, with only a fragment of their original intensity” (27). Manifested organically as a kind of sacrificial death, the surface of the brain becomes indifferent, “resistant to stimuli.” At the same time behaving as a kind of filter, this shield buffers and dilutes external excitements, allowing the individual to survive.

Indifference can be seen as the affective correlate to this cortical defensive structure. Indifference is the attitude that ensues when the individual has been buffeted by too many “perceptual unpleasures,” which take the form of a kind of disproportion that represents either physical or psychical danger. It is probably equally obvious at this point that this is just another version of an old account of the threats occasioned by the perception of sexual difference — castration and fetishism.⁸ But if we put these models together, indifference becomes an automatic and instinctual affective defense to all kinds of differences. If fetishism can be seen as a way of neutralizing or negotiating difference through an object, then fetishism is a correlative of the pleasure principle. Its production of indifference as disavowal is a version of how the psychic system treats excitations coming from within the individual, which, it turns out, are transformed via projection into excitations coming from outside.

More important, these internal excitations “are...in their intensity and in other, qualitative, respects — in their amplitude, perhaps — more commensurate with the system’s method of working than the stimuli which stream in from the external world.” The system’s “working” involves two “definite results.” One is that feelings of pleasure or unpleasure “predominate over all external stimuli.” The other is that “a particular way is adopted of dealing with any internal excitations which produce too great an increase of unpleasure: there is a tendency to treat them as though they were acting, not from the inside, but from the outside, so that it may be possible to bring the shield against stimuli into operation as a means of defense against them. This is the origin of *projection*” (29). Projecting unpleasant excitations onto an outside source enables a defense that alters unpleasure to pleasure, permitting the individual to return to or maintain a

state of low excitation — that is, indifference. If the fetish is an externalized version of this mechanism in that it neutralizes difference in providing a projective site for the disavowal of an absence, then narrative is the cultural version of the fetish, allowing the projection of disturbance outside. Instead of affording an object substitute, narrative as itself already an externalized projection of the same psychical dynamic provides a substitute dynamic that transposes desired indifference (or the pleasure principle) into both obstacle and goal, while its projections of disturbance take a form predicted by a kind of psycho-ideology — as some “other” whose disturbing difference can be substituted as the cause of the disturbance. Difference itself is threatening to the psychic apparatus’s ability to return to quiescence, introducing as it does the “fresh, ‘vital difference’ which must then be lived off” (55).

The sexual difference that haunts this scenario may be less a primary difference and more already a figuration of the terms within which the processes of the psychic apparatus come to be characterized by Freud, who uses the competing models of asexual conjunction and sexual reproduction of micro-organisms to illustrate the complicated dynamics of a restless psychic system. These models, however, import a complex set of narrative hetero-ideologies that both reflect and predict the narrative positions that will absorb psychic projections, not as difference (defined as sexual difference, but also any other kind of difference established ideologically as a constitutive opposition such as race, national, or ethnic origin, religion, sexual preference, and so on), but rather, in a reversal of affect, as sameness — or the sought indifference itself. Reversal of affect is Freud’s term for the way feelings of one kind are transformed into their opposite. This transformation often accompanies a physical displacement from one site or position to its opposite. For example, in “Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria,” Freud analyzes Dora’s negative response to Herr K’s advances as a reversal of affect; that is, in Dora, feelings of lust were reversed into feelings of disgust while genital sensations were displaced upward to the throat.⁹ In a similar manner, sadistic or exhibitionistic impulses manifest themselves as their opposites — as masochism and voyeurism. These, too, involve a mechanism of projective displacement, from self to other, active to passive.¹⁰

Sameness, thus, becomes the enemy to be overcome even as it is the end to be sought. In its projection outward, difference becomes an excessive and threatening sameness. This displacement and reversal transforms difference from the disturbance that starts the story (or the unpleasant emotion) into sameness as an obstacle to be overcome and, at the same time, a threat to the continuation of the story, as Brooks argues. This latter function is the primary dilemma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: how to explain the forces that perpetuate existence if what the psychic apparatus seeks is low excitation; how to provoke interest if what we want is indifference.

Freud explains the necessary importation of difference as a baroque elaboration of the psychic apparatus itself, one that deploys a specifically heterosexual rescue as a way of salvaging

difference. This situates the pleasure principle itself as a kind of stasis or sameness that must be overcome within the psychic apparatus in order to perpetuate the existence of the individual. This recovery comes, however, by way of trying to explain the pleasures of unpleasure. Freud further complicates his dynamic model of the psyche by asking why individuals repeat unpleasurable experiences, a seeming exception to both the pleasure principle and the reality principle. What tendency toward low excitation or survival can come from repeatedly bringing traumatic memories into consciousness? While repetition can provide pleasurable opportunities for mastering trauma (as illustrated by Freud's famous example of the child's *fort/da* game), it nevertheless brings unpleasurable excitation to the fore.

While the pleasures of mastery are Freud's answer to the enigma of repetition, the example provides the pretext for the introduction of another stream of psychic life: Eros as a combinatory principle on the model of heterosexual reproduction. On the one hand, Freud explains Eros as analogous to the urge to reproduce as a kind of sexual instinct whose impetus is to prolong life by introducing difference. "For on our hypothesis the ego-instincts arise from the coming to life of inanimate matter and seek to restore the inanimate state; whereas as regards the sexual instincts, though it is true that they reproduce primitive states of the organism, what they are clearly aiming at by every possible means is the coalescence of two germ-cells which are differentiated in a particular way. If this union is not effected, the germ-cell dies along with all the other elements of the multicellular organism" (44). The introduction of matter from a different organism prolongs existence. "This [the influx of "fresh amounts of stimulus"] tallies well with the hypothesis that the life process of the individual leads for internal reasons to an abolition of chemical tensions, that is to say, to death, whereas union with the living substance of a different individual increases those tensions, introducing what may be described as fresh 'vital differences' which must then be lived off" (55). Difference thus becomes the impetus to life, while sameness becomes an impetus toward death. What has been topographical (sameness inside, difference outside) becomes temporal — difference now instead of sameness so sameness can be reached at a later and more proper time.

This very shifty sameness shifts again to a position after difference, becoming thus both its extension and precursor. As Freud reiterates, "the dominating tendency of mental life, and perhaps of nervous life in general, is the effort to reduce, to keep constant or to remove internal tension due to stimuli... — a tendency which finds expression in the pleasure principle" (55-56). The countervailing sexual instincts or Eros, however, does not originate in the repetitions that would seem to counter the pleasure principle. Rather, Freud locates or relocates Eros as an instinct — as "an urge inherent in organic life to return to an earlier state of things" — that is, as the pleasure principle again (36). This time, however, the earlier state of things to which the organism returns is a mythical wholeness as represented by the doubled beings of Aristophanes'

story cited by Plato. These doubled beings, who consisted of three genders (two men, two women, and one of each) were sundered by Zeus and from that point have tried to come back together — hence sex. Drawing an analogy between these beings and the particulate matter that comprises living flesh, Freud notes a tendency to come together in ever larger pieces and systems that reproduce an earlier state of things instead of forming entirely new structures.

This reconfiguring of sameness as difference links pleasure and the pleasure principle to difference rather than to sameness, which becomes increasingly identified with death rather than inertia. While Eros introduces tensions whose release is a rather spectacular pleasure, the pleasure principle as a site of indifference works “unobtrusively,” Freud observes (63). Aligned with death, the pleasure principle is more on guard against disturbances “from within,” those internal differences and tensions projected outwardly as a danger to be defended against. Internal differences become externalized sameness that threatens a cessation of Eros, which by joining differences produces pleasure and perpetuates life. Sameness in the guise of indifference becomes the enemy of life itself, its valence reversed from its original function of preserving the individual. And yet at the same time, the projection of indifference outside enables internal indifference to continue.

SO WHAT? THE FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCE

In this way sameness or indifference becomes the structural enemy of narrative and ideology even as both work to provide the defense that enables the perpetuation of indifference. But so what? So what if indifference is a manifestation of the pleasure principle? Does this mean we are doomed to oscillate between caring and indifference, roused only by increasingly egregious assaults? Or do we, as in every other scenario, project our differences outwardly in order to preserve a sameness within, the only difference being that the frame of projection has changed from within to without? Does this mean that the recent outpouring of public sympathy is also already really a mechanism for returning quickly to a state of sameness on the level of the social where we all become patriotic and forget our differences? In other words, what seems to be no shortage of feeling is also a mechanism for returning quickly to a shortage of feeling, notably a shortage of the wrong kind of feelings — fear and doubt. This might mean that the direction of our caring is indeed aimed toward self-preservation and in fact the preservation of an undisturbed environment, a status quo of self-sameness — indifference.

As a manifestation of the pleasure principle, indifference accounts in part for the tautologies of our narratives, for the ways they reverse the positions and identities of sameness and indifference. By displacing the indifference wielded by the dominant (indifference as a willed ignorance of difference, indifference as a presumed group sameness) onto those who do not share the privileges of the dominant because they are in some way different, the different become the loci of sameness while the indifferent become the catalytic, active differences generating change and

movement. The displacement of indifference from an indifferent protagonist to an antagonist marked as somehow different that results in this reversal of narrative roles preserves the privilege of indifference (not recognizing difference), which is ultimately rescued by both narrative and ideologies masquerading as agents of progressive change — as the opposite of the indifference that such narrative sustains and protects. This displacement accounts for both the alignment of difference with the dominant and the perpetuation of ideologies that are themselves structured around assignments of difference such as sexism, racism, homophobia, patriotism, and even classism. But as typical deployments of the strategic articulations of indifference, these discriminations are nothing compared to the (w)holistic fervor of various brands of totalitarianism, which in disrupting the very possibility of indifference take indifference to an entirely new level.

The site of disturbance in this indifferent urge is finally quite fundamental: religious fundamentalisms of all kinds. Fundamentalisms bind truth, passion, and uniformity. In other words, fundamentalisms align affective indifference (the mien of an unrecognition of difference) with psychic calm and the social sameness of group identification around a single truth. The combination of an apparent disregard for difference (especially the validity of religious difference) with the psychic and social comforts of doctrine produces a sameness and conformity across the social, psychic, and ideological that relocates sameness from a category of low excitation to a category of high excitation. Indifference is thus transformed from a passive attitude to the active intolerance of differences. Fundamentalism's enabling misrecognition is the truth itself, generally presented as Word, which, unlike other words, is unambiguous, self-same, and tolerates no deviation. The duty of believers is to eliminate any deviation from the Word. Rather than seeing the possibility for any exteriority, totalitarian fundamentalisms (Christian, Jewish, Muslim) work on a universal and eternal scale. Thus, there is no place to project differences: all must be absorbed and/or hidden (as in the case of Afghani women). Passion becomes a feature of a quest for sameness. Though one might argue that these fundamentalisms depend equally on the presence of the infidel of some ilk, the imaginary of fundamentalism entails a total incorporation as the moment of greatest passion. This narrative of a passionately desired sameness plays against the narratives of projected difference that characterize patriotism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, sexism, and racism. However, it is not just another, perhaps more extreme version of them, but a narrative whose extreme scale threatens to render difference inoperable once and for all. If Nazism and Stalinism were, as Thomas Friedman suggests, secular totalitarianisms that orchestrated the greatest disasters of the twentieth century, then totalitarian fundamentalisms threaten with a deadly sameness in the twenty-first century on a scale beyond the political or the racial.¹¹

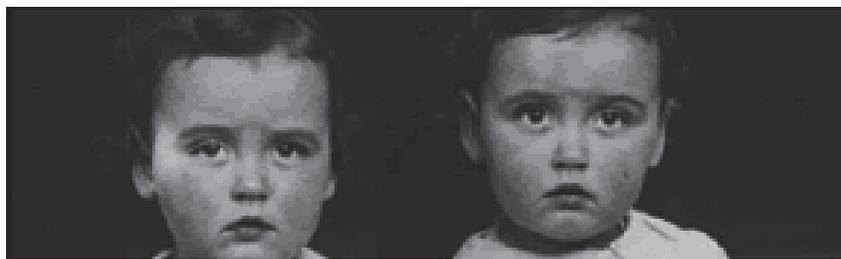
While non-fundamentalists might acknowledge their fear of fundamentalism as a fear of its deadly sameness, fundamentalisms play the pleasure principle differently, reversing the relations

between sameness and low excitation, making sameness passionate, difference deadly, aiming toward death as life, refusing the infusion of difference as life-giving. We might say that in his deployment of narrative, Freud was himself already anti-fundamentalist. Or we might say that resistance against fundamentalism's urge toward sameness is another version of "beyond the pleasure principle" played out in the grandest scale possible. If this is the case, Freud's narrative of psychic life has turned out to be all too accurate a reading of contemporary cultural dynamics.

We have fought this battle for millennia. The battle itself contains the very contradictions with which I began this discussion: same is never the same. But what fundamentalism shows us is the ways sameness is finally not indifference, but a passionately sought uniformity that represents truth as the place of a final rest. The battle then is not so much against indifference, but against the wrong kinds of indifference, the wrong kinds of sameness, which, as Freud suggests, lead to a premature and improper end. In this sense, then, Freud's narrative of the pleasure principle is finally the narrative of fundamentalism, of seeking the best and truest end. And both the narrative of fundamentalism and Freud's narrative of the pleasure principle situate the "wrong" kinds of samenesses — infantilism, homosexualities, incest — as immature, self-gratifying, and ultimately untrue versions of sameness, while the unified sameness of the truth as an inspired unity in difference is the proper sameness with which to end. Obviously, this is another version of overt heterosexual ideology, but it also shows perhaps why it is that homosexualities are among the first practices vilified by fundamentalisms. Homosexualities are competing brands of sameness, wrong destinations, alternate sites of perceived indifference that both get in the way of the real path to truth (represented by fundamentalist unity) and suggest that there is more than one truth to be had (enlightened pluralism). Linking all versions of sameness to indifference, thus, is a way of complying with the fundamentalist narrative of passionate sameness.

This fundamentalist narrative, finally, is itself the master narrative of indifference. It can admit no difference at all just as it must be indifferent to all but its own deadly version of truth. It is the ecstatic version of the pleasure principle; its indifference to all but its own ends terminates all other indifference. At the same time its indifference cannot be broached by either a competing difference or indifference. Resistance is futile; the logic of fundamentalism, like that of *Star Trek's* famous borg, is that difference will be assimilated or destroyed and indifference will simply be absorbed. Unity as a response to this dynamic reiterates — in fact, mimics — the totalitarian unity against which it is formed, a unity which itself no longer permits difference or even indifference but the same passionate drive for a unified truth. This structural stuttering occurs because of the way the fundamentalist narrative aligns the pleasure principle with truth. There is no way to combat this except by doing the same, since the scale of the truth surpasses — is indifferent to — all other scales of difference. The only way, then, to evade the monolithic, universalist

totality of fundamentalism is to eschew the connection between truth and the pleasure principle altogether, not in postmodern opposition (that is, many truths vs. one which is the battle that already plays around contemporary fundamentalism), but rather in detaching narrative from its own ends, from the very idea of an end where truth and/or low excitation reside as the fundamental pattern of human existence. But how do we do this?



1. Rick Lyman, "At Least for the Moment, a Cooling Off in the Culture Wars," *New York Times*, 13 November 2001, late ed., E1.
2. Kitty Genovese, a New York City resident, was stabbed repeatedly in 1964 over the space of an hour and eventually killed by an assailant who returned again and again while her neighbors watched but failed to intervene.
3. "More than I worry about flag-waving I worry about what will happen when flag-waving has to stop. All the ceremonies of emotion, from children's drawings to fund drives, are prone to diminishing returns" (Christopher Hitchens, "For Patriot Dreams," *Vanity Fair* [December 2001]: 156).
4. During the 2002 Winter Olympics, for example, television commentators questioned the Russian pair skaters' decision to pay homage to the tragedy of September 11, suggesting that using the event was an instance of bad taste on the part of non-Americans. This performance was later contested by accusations of rigged voting.
5. See Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 7:123-245. In "Freud's Masterplot," in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 280-300, Peter Brooks demonstrates the ways narrative as a dynamic parallels the categories Freud discusses in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *SE* 18:1-64.
6. Freud discusses the "reversal of affect" most specifically in his discussion of sadism/masochism and voyeurism/exhibitionism in "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," in *SE* 14:109-140.
7. Freud situates unpleasure as a perceptual problem in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *SE* 18:11. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text.
8. See Freud, "Fetishism," in *SE* 21:154-155.
9. Freud, "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria," in *SE* 7:28-29.
10. See Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in *SE* 7:156-159.
11. Examining the problem of fundamentalism, Friedman writes: "All faiths that come out of the biblical tradition — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — have the tendency to believe that they have the exclusive truth....The opposite of religious totalitarianism is an ideology of pluralism — an ideology that embraces religious diversity and the idea that my faith can be nurtured without claiming exclusive truth. American is the Mecca of that ideology, and that is what bin Laden hates and that is why America had to be destroyed" (Thomas L. Friedman, "The Real War," editorial, *New York Times*, 27 November 2001, late ed., A19).

