Manifestations of the American Dream: A Secret History

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Pro gradu -tutkielmassani tarkastelen, miten amerikkalainen unelma on Yhdysvaltain historian saatossa kehittynyt yhteiskunnallisen kontrollin välineeksi. Amerikkalaisen unelman yksilölliset ja kollektiiviset kokemukset ovat ristiriidassa unelman sisäisten rakenteiden kanssa, jotka kätkeytyvät sen vahvan retoriikan taakse. Täten unelmasta muodostuu ideologia ja ideologinen valtakoneisto marxilaisen yhteiskuntateoreetikon Louis Althusserin määritelmien mukaisesti.

Tutkielmassani tarkastelen amerikkalaisen unelman ilmenemistä amerikkalaisessa populaarikulttuurissa. Populaarikulttuuri tavoittaa laajan yleisön, ja sen arkipäiväiset aiheet välittävät ja uusintavat amerikkalaista unelmaa tehden siitä luonnollisen ja sisäistetyn osan amerikkalaisia toiminta- ja ajattelumalleja. Populaarikirjallisuutta esimerkkinä käyttäen pyrin selvittämään, miten amerikkalainen unelma ideologisena valtakoneistona käyttää hyväksi yksilön subjektiviteetin rakenteita taatakseen oman jatkuvuutensa. Teoreettisen viitekehyksen subjektiviteetin tarkastelulle luo ranskalaisen semiotiikantutkijan Julia Kristevan psykoanalyyttinen teoria, jonka mukaan subjektiviteetti rakentuu yksilön piilotajunnan ja tietoisuuden vuorovaikutuksesta. Amerikkalainen unelma hyödyntää tätä vuorovaikutusta peilaamalla yksilön piilotajuisia pelkoja ja haluja.

Kristeva käsittelee piilotajuisia haluja käyttäen apunaan ranskankielistä termiä *jouissance*, joka viittaa sellaiseen tiedostamattomaan haluun tai tarpeeseen, joka toimii elämän elinehtona ja selviytymisviettinä. Pelkoja Kristeva puolestaan tarkastelee abjektion käsitteen kautta. Abjekti tarkoittaa sellaista tunnistamatonta pelkoa, joka purkautuu tietoisuuteen piilotajunnan ja tietoisuuden vuorovaikutuksen ansiosta. Sekä abjekti että *jouissance* ilmenevät tietoisuudessa ahdistuksen kokemuksena, johon amerikkalainen unelma tarjoaa ratkaisun asettamalla abstrakteja ja konkreettisia tavoitteita, jotka yksilön tulisi saavuttaa. Amerikkalainen unelma ei kuitenkaan koskaan toteudu. Se perustuu liikkeeseen jonka keskiössä on jatkuva muutos ja kehitys.

Asiasanat: ideologiat, marxismi, subjektiviteetti, piilotajunta, Pohjois-Amerikka, populaarikulttuuri, psykoanalyysi

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1. Introduction

> [T]he American dream that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of merely material plenty, though that has doubtless counted heavily [...] It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class.
>
> (Adams [1931] 1932: 416)

These are the words of the American historian and writer James Truslow Adams who in *Epic of America* (1931) coined and popularized the term *The American dream*. Historically and today, America is presented as a place where individuals not only dream of a better future, but where their dreams can actually come true. It is a place where hope, encouragement and the will and strength to push forward are nurtured by the dream and hard work and struggles rewarded by its achievement. The American dream thus centers on success. Whether it is material, financial, social, cultural, intellectual or spiritual, the goals center on upward mobility and forward progression. Nonetheless, this also reveals part of the dream's internal structure, namely that the dream emphasizes, particularly, the *pursuit* of the dream, in other words, the *movement* towards its fulfillment.

In 2 September 2009, I typed the term *The American dream* into Google and received 73 500 000 hits. In 25 May 2012 the same figure was 439 000 000. The increase is significant. It implies that

the term is globally employed in a multitude of contexts. The American dream, then, seems to be a concept which means something to everyone. For some it is a religious-like passion or an endless source of hope. For others it is a neutral concept with very little emotional appeal, yet for others the dream can signify a failed life or act as justification for their actions. Nonetheless, for everyone, the concept of the dream echoes something very American. The dream is often glanced at or referred to in a subordinate clause where it serves the purpose of clarifying, explaining, justifying and exemplifying the target of investigation or the topic and perspective of the discussion at hand.

Moreover, the dream itself has merited a variety of scholarly research. The scope ranges from race, class and ethnicity (Hochschild 1995; Goldstein 2006; Haggins 1999), immigration, frontier and expansionism (Madsen 1995; Mogen et al. 1989; Brands 2003), education (DeVitis 1996; Hochschild & Scovronick 2003), politics (Wicker 1991; Rivlin 1992), capitalism, economics and financing (Calder 1999; Geisst 1990), freedom, liberty and success through hard work (Saari 1996; Wuthnow 1996), crime (Simon 2002; Messner & Rosenfeld 1997), literature (Hume 2000; Carpenter 1955; Mensh 2000), advertising, media and information technology (Marchand 1985; Levin 1987; Newman 1999), art and culture (Rosenberg 1982; Guimond 1991) to drug abuse (Stevens 1987) and even competitive eating (Fagone 2006). The list is all but exhaustive, which testifies to the dream's resistance, failure even, to be fixed on a certain point of

view or to be harnessed at only a narrow set of perspectives. Conversely, the number and scope of the studies above signify that the American dream presents a vast landscape which can be explored from several perspectives. Nonetheless, a concept this wide-ranging could easily be rendered meaningless, diluted in its power as it keeps appearing in multiple contexts. However, the American dream is all but meaningless. Such versatility gives a certain richness to the American character and serves as constituting an image of a nation which stands united in its diversity.

The widespread understanding of the concept and its continued manifestation on all levels of American culture and society testifies to the dream's resilience, flexibility, fluidity and permeability. These features imply an infinite range of perspectives on the dream and that everyone can find something in the dream to which they can relate. Furthermore, the power of the dream is manifested in the manner it has survived the great changes that have taken place in America during its four hundred year history. However, despite the strength of the dream and the idealism purported by Adams above, the American dream also has another, very different side. The dream operates as a mechanism of control and as an ideology, guiding the dreamers in their quest for success and happiness.

In this thesis, I examine the role of the American dream as a mechanism of social control by studying the dream's manifestations in popular culture. I focus on the relationship between the dream's power structures and the individual's processes and experiences of

dreaming. Whilst I do not wish to dismantle the dream or belittle its meaning, I examine how the dream is constituted of seemingly conflicting dichotomies which make its internal power structures difficult to discern. Moreover, I argue that because the dream relies on perpetual movement, it is intrinsically set to fail in order to maintain itself.

My theoretical framework is created by a combination of Marxist social theories and psychoanalysis, specifically Louis Althusser's notions of ideology and Ideological State Apparatus and Julia Kristeva's notions the manifestation of fears and desires in and through individual subjectivity. Marxist social theories enable me to trace the large structures of control, power and repression in society whereas with psychoanalysis I can examine how these structures influence the mental processes of the individual. These theoretical standpoints do not merely represent two separate entities through which I can identify similarities in the processes of the society and the individual. I claim that the structures of social control, in effect, employ and even abuse the formations of subjectivity.

Popular culture is a powerful conveyor of idea(l)s such as the American dream, to a greater extent than elitist works of 'high culture', because it is widely distributed and it focuses on mundane and very general topics thus infiltrating the individuals' basic, daily operations and thought processes. The 'schizophrenic' notion of the American dream, i.e. the contradiction between the individuals' experience of the dream and the dream's internal power structures, is

widely manifested in popular culture, which thus provides excellent materials for examining the intrinsic complexities of the dream.

My primary text is Donna Tartt's novel *The Secret History* (1992). Choosing this particular novel carries personal reasons. I first read the novel in 1996 when I was 15 years old. Its strangeness and gloomy atmosphere captivated me and I was, inadvertently, affected by the American dream. The novel's success implies that it has also captivated other readers. Upon its first publication by Alfred A. Knopf, the novel reached a 75 000 copy first-printing (Padgett 2002). Within the first weeks of publication in September the novel was reprinted five times and by the end of the year it had sold over 210 000 copies (Maryles 2002) and millions after that. The novel remained on the top-15 bestseller list of *The New York Times* for nine weeks and on the *Publishers Weekly* list for thirteen, and ranked as high as numbers three and two respectively. In the United States, furthermore, in addition to Knopf, *The Secret History* has been published by Penguin, Vintage, Fawcett Books, Ballantine Books, Random House, Penny and Viking.

The motion picture rights were sold to Alan J. Pakula (Fein 1992), who has directed, for example, *All the President's Men* (1976), *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and *The Pelican Brief* (1993). However, at his death in 1998, the production was postponed. Outside the U.S., then, *The Secret History* has been translated into 23 languages (Eiben 2002), which suggests the spread of American ideals and the fascination with American culture beyond the nation's borders.

As I come to show, *The Secret History* simultaneously celebrates the American dream and rejects the possibility of its fulfillment, capturing an idea which was more widely voiced in the wake of the Regan era when the novel was published. The post-Reagan years were characterized by uncertainty and mistrust in State and authority. On the surface level Reagan advocated traditional, conservative American values of individual responsibility, family, community and patriotism. As Karl Rove, the political advisor to President George W. Bush stated, Reagan "made us sunny optimists [...] His was a conservatism of laughter and openness and community" (Rove quoted in Lacayo & Dickerson 2004). However, the Reagan administration also advocated neoliberal economy leaving the nation in great budget deficits and federal debt, which led to economic recession at the beginning of the 1990s. Furthermore, for example the Iran-Contra affair in 1986, when the government sold arms to Iran during an arms embargo in order to free hostages, lessened the public's belief in the government.

The sense of uncertainty and insecurity led to an increased emphasis on self-reliant individualism which is reflected, for example, in the proliferation of the self-help genre during the 1980s. As individuals could not rely on outside powers for security, they had to turn to themselves. Such focus on the self, as well as the rebellion against authority, are visible in the manner the group in *The Secret History* separates itself from the outside community, despise American culture and create their own rules within the group. In the

Synopsis in Appendix 1, I outline the plot of *The Secret History* in more detail. Here, however, I wish to briefly summarize the main events of the novel.

1.1. Summary of *The Secret History*

The Secret History narrates the story of Richard Papen, a twenty-year-old Californian, who in search for meaning in life and a sense of belonging leaves his uninspiring working-class home, his narrow-minded, unsupportive, and distant parents and the dreary atmosphere of Plano, CA, and heads to Hampden College in Vermont, attracted by its dream-like environment and the image of inexhaustible opportunities. As Richard moves from the West coast to the East, the direction of the traditional dream is reversed. Richard longs for a life of intellectualism and old world wisdom and finds these in a tightly knit group of Classics students. Adopting a false identity of a son of a wealthy oil baron, Richard gradually becomes acquainted with the group: Henry, Bunny, Francis and the twins Charles and Camilla.

Having studied Greek in California, Richard is able to find some common ground with the group and navigate himself into their midst. The oddity of the group fascinates Richard. Led by their charismatic and mysterious leader, Julian Morrow, the seemingly mismatched members of the group are isolated both academically and socially, and for the most part physically, from the rest of the

campus. At first it seems to Richard that the characters are bound together by their love of Classical languages and cultures. As the novel progresses, however, Richard senses a tangible tension within the group which, as Richard learns, originates in a brutal, yet accidental murder of a local farmer committed during a successful attempt to perform an ancient Bacchanalian ritual.

At this point in the novel, Bunny, who did not participate in the ritual but has learned about it later, is on the verge of cracking. He has begun to harass and blackmail the others, taking advantage of their financial wealth and emotional weaknesses. When it appears that he might go public with his knowledge of the murder, plans for his elimination are made. Richard, who by now identifies with the group and has been accepted as its member, is pulled into the events and finds no difficulties in participating in the murder.

However, Bunny's elimination was not only an attempt to prevent him from revealing the murder of the farmer. Bunny's behavior had shaken the cohesion of the group and undermined the importance and success of the Bacchanalian ritual. Nonetheless, the characters' efforts to restore unity and continue their lives by murdering Bunny fails, as in the awakening guilt and remorse they become increasingly antagonistic towards one another. Finally, as Henry caves in under the pressure and kills himself, the group is shattered and it disbands.

The Secret History manifests the dangers of pursuing the dream with extreme measures. As such, by showing that the

characters' dreams ultimately fail, the novel does not so much comment on the inherent failure of the American dream, but rather contributes to the definitions of the appropriate methods of dreaming. Throughout American history the ideals of the dream have been disseminated through various cultural artefacts, such as popular culture, and different American institutional and social systems. Moreover, the ideals of the dream have guided and colored the actions, worldview and mentality of individuals and communities. In the next section, I outline the structure of my Thesis and explain how I trace the American dream through the history of the United States in order to discuss how it has become a mechanism of social control influencing Americans' daily lives.

1.2. Outline of the Thesis

I begin by discussing in Section 2.1. how the first Puritans arrived from England in the first half of the Seventeenth Century with a wish to create a prosperous society in which they could realize their religious convictions free from persecution. Similar ideals are written into the founding documents of the American nation, echoing freedom, equality and the possibility to pursue dreams. Thus the American dream has shaped the manner in which Americans have regarded themselves and struggled to achieve their goals. Nonetheless, the dream has also altered to suit changing societal situations. In Section 2.2. I discuss how the turmoil of the Twentieth

Century changed the Americans' understanding and experience of the dream. In Section 2.3., then, I examine how popular culture has influenced this experience and discuss how the structures of popular culture enable the dissemination of the American dream.

Despite the changes American society has undergone, the basic structure of the dream remains unchanged. In Chapter Two I discuss how the dream has become sanctioned, internalized and naturalized as a fundamental part of American culture and identity through American institutional and social systems. As such, the American dream has become an ideology in the Althusserian sense. For Althusser, ideology signifies the discrepancy and relation between 'reality' and the individuals' experience of it. Moreover, the American dream becomes what Althusser terms an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). These are mechanisms of social control which disseminate ideology by presenting it as an unquestioned status quo. The ISAs operate through a system of self-policing, which gives the individual a sense of freedom, which is, in actuality, controlled by the power elites of the society disseminating their values through the ISAs. By connecting the notions of the ISAs to the American dream, I am able to discuss them in a specifically American context. Thus, because the dream is first and foremost a national concept, I discuss nationalism in subsection 2.3.1.

In order to reveal how social mechanisms such as the ISAs are able to exert their power over individuals, I examine the constructions of subjectivity. I focus particularly on two

subconscious processes, abjection and *jouissance*, as outlined by the semiotician, philosopher, French Feminist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. In Section 3.1., I examine abjection as a process whereby the individual's subconscious and unrecognized fears become manifested as emotions of anxiety in the conscious realm of the mind. In Subsection 3.1.1., I discuss abjection specifically in the American context and examine how the Americans' rejected fears reflect the definitions of acceptable social behavior as postulated by the American dream. The American dream proposes to relieve individuals from their anxieties thus pushing the individuals away from their fears towards the dream and, conversely, by pushing the rejected fears back into the subconscious. However, these fears never remain fully repressed and occasionally resurface into consciousness. In Section 3.2. I examine, in the context of *The Secret History*, how the guilt the characters experience over the two murders maintain this cycle of repression and resurfacing.

In Chapter Four, then, I discuss *jouissance* as a subconscious desire which lures the individual into trying to fulfill the American dream. Although *jouissance* denotes several types of desire, its primary connotations are sexual. Therefore, in order to make the concept more comprehensible, after outlining the basic structure of *jouissance* in 4.1., I move on to discuss *jouissance* in the context of the manifestations of sexuality in American culture. As I come to show, the manner in which sexual topics are evaded in *The Secret History* reveals the influence of the ISAs in American society. I

conclude Chapter Four by discussing, in Section 4.2., how *jouissance* becomes manifested in the realm of consciousness through the Bacchanalian ritual performed by the characters in *The Secret History*. In connection with the American dream, the notions of *jouissance* exemplify how the desire for the dream cannot be fulfilled and therefore the dream is destined to fail.

Together, abjection and *jouissance* form a dualism in which the forces of push and pull support one another as the individuals mediate between their fears and desires in a quest for the American dream. This dualism is part of the complicated web created by the confrontation between the individual and the society, the individual's experience of the dream and the dream's internal power structures. I now begin the journey through American history, in order to lay the foundation of an ideology which continues to shape the lives of the Americans today.

2. The Story of the American Dream

> What makes the *American* Dream American is not that our dreams are any better, worse, or more interesting than anyone else's, but that we live in a country constituted of dreams, whose very justification continues to rest on it being a place where one can, for better and worse, pursue distant goals.
>
> (Cullen 2003: 182; italics in the original).

The American dream is a force which has shaped American culture, society and thought throughout the nation's history. The promise of endless opportunities and of the possibility to achieve great success forms the very foundation of American culture, as suggested by Cullen above. However, although the dream has provided hope and encouragement it has also placed a great deal of pressure on the dreamers, creating a competitive environment where the dream can be pursued by any means possible.

In addition to shaping the dreamers' lives the dream itself has altered to adapt to changing circumstances. In this chapter, I examine the American dream in its historical context and discuss how the four hundred years of American history have carried the dream to the Twenty-first Century. I begin by discussing the role of the Puritan community in laying the foundation for the dream's ideals of freedom, equality and opportunity, which then manifested in the American Independence of 1776. During the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century these ideals continued to be vital for the dream. Nonetheless, industrialization, changing demographics, the

redefinition of the public and private spheres and the emergence of free market economy signified the incorporation of new elements into the dream. In Section 2.2. I examine the dream in its Twentieth Century context and discuss how materialism, consumerism and a heightened emphasis on the individual gradually began to define success.

In my thesis, I focus on popular culture and how it manifests and conveys the ideology of the dream. In Section 2.2. I discuss how both high and popular literature have shared similar themes centering on the American dream, but have, nonetheless, viewed them from different perspectives. In Section 2.3, then, I focus on the structure of popular culture. Popular culture deals with mundane topics and is widely distributed and ephemeral in nature, which make it a powerful disseminator of the American dream.

The ideals of the American dream are not uncommon to most nationalities, yet through American political, institutional and social mechanisms these ideals have become naturalized and internalized as part of a specifically American identity. Although I discuss nationalism as a separate concept only in subsection 2.3.1., it is a carrying theme throughout my Thesis, as the American dream springs particularly from national ideals. As such a pervasive element of American culture, the dream adopts the role of ideology. For Louis Althusser, ideology signifies the "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 1970). This implies, that Americans have a very specific understanding and

experience of the American dream which contradicts the dream's inherent power structures.

More than ideology, the American dream is a powerful mechanism of social control, or an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). Althusser argues that the ISAs exert power and disseminate the values of the ruling elites through institutional systems such as religion and educational, legal and political systems. Furthermore, Althusser identifies Ideological State Apparatuses in systems of family, communication and culture (Althusser 1970). Althusser claims that such a variety of societal systems become unified because they function through ideology. He writes:

> If the ISAs 'function' massively and predominantly by ideology, what unifies their diversity is precisely this functioning, insofar as the ideology by which they function is always in fact unified [...] *beneath the ruling ideology*, which is the ideology of 'the ruling class'.
>
> (Althusser 1970; italics in the original)

In the American context, I propose that the unifying ideology of the ruling class is, in fact, the American dream. It becomes an overarching entity which pushes through every other ISA. An example of this is the requirement for American pupils to recite the Pledge of Allegiance in schools. The Pledge was originally written by Francis Bellamy in 1892 and has since been altered several times. In its current form it reads: "I pledge the allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God indivisible, with liberty and justice for all" (The Pledge of Allegiance 2012).

The compulsory reciting of the Pledge of Allegiance in schools have caused a great deal of discussion in America. In 2003, 36 States had laws that made reciting the pledge in schools compulsory (ProCon 2008). Out of those, in 22 States pupils could withdraw from reciting the Pledge if they had parental permission (ibid.). The Pledge of Allegiance as recited in schools is an example of how, first, national rhetoric operates through multiple ISAs, i.e. political, religious and educational ISAs, and, second, how all of these ISAs are permeated by the American dream.

The ISAs function through the mechanism of self-policing. They instill in the individual a sense of voluntary decision-making while, in effect, the ISAs guide that process by defining the parameters of in/appropriate behavior. Although, the refusal to recite the Pledge of Allegiance could be seen as constituting voluntary decision-making, the controversy of the Pledge is not based on a criticism of the values of the American dream. Rather, the lines "under God", which in some opinions violate the freedom of religion purported in the First Amendment of the Bill or Rights (2012), strengthen the ideals of the dream by advocating notions of freedom. Freedom is and has been one of the key elements of the American dream. It has its roots in the Puritan community, and it is to the Puritans that I now turn.

2.1. “A Citty upon a Hill”: The Historical Context of the American Dream

> America is [...] a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved. Everything [...] is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams too.
> (Baudrillard 1988: 28)

The foundation of the American dream, its ideals and complexities, can be traced back to the early years of American nation building when the first Puritans arrived in Northern America in 1607 (Jamestown, Virginia) and 1620 (Plymouth, Massachusetts). The ‘New World’ presented itself as an “enchanted place of utopian designs” (McAdams 2005: 101) where the Puritans could realize their dreams of creating a nation dedicated to practicing a faith purer than that of the Church of England and free from what they considered to be the corruption of the English throne.

The *Puritan Myth,* the belief that the Puritans descended from the biblical founders of Israel and were now on a similar mission, assured the Puritans of their right and obligation to create a better world. Furthermore, they believed they possessed the power and means to enforce their desire of setting an example for others in terms of conduct, governance and religious worship. In the words of John Winthrop (1588-1649), a governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony:

> [W]ee must be knitt together in this worke as one man [...] wee must delight in each other, make others Condicions our owne [...] allwayes haveing before our eyes [...] our Community members of the same body [...] wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people [...] uppon us.
>
> (Winthrop [1630] 1988: 6)

Thus, from its conception the American nation was founded upon a notion of exceptionality and a commitment to change and progress, as well as to unity and collective gain realized through individual effort. Furthermore, the dreams and the ideals of the Puritans became internalized as a way of connecting obligation with practical activity. The Puritan life served a distinct purpose of achieving the established goals and this gradually became naturalized as part of the American's *modus operandi* and the process of dreaming.

The intertwined pragmatism and dreaming, also evident in the quotation by Baudrillard above, is manifested in the position the dream has adopted throughout American history. As diverse events as the Revolution of 1776, the California Gold Rush (1848-1855), the establishment of the Hollywood motion picture industry in the beginning of the Twentieth Century, the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Vietnam War (1955-1975) could every now and then rely on the ideology of the American dream and find justification, support and encouragement from its promises. Conversely, the dream's adaptability to such a wide range of events and developments testifies to the dream's fluidity, permeability and ability to alter according to circumstance.

As a brief example, I discuss the Great Awakening of 1730s and 1740s. The Great Awakening was an era which boosted Protestant ideology and religious cohesion at a time when several Protestant denominations emerged. It was a period of

> super-righteousness, super-morality from a Godly, not social point of view; [and] the preparation of mankind [...] of America, for the coming of Christ's Kingdom.
>
> (Rutman 1970: 2)

Moreover, the Great Awakening was a movement which drew attention to individuality. Although the concept as such was not introduced in America until the publication of the two volumes of the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* in 1835 and 1840, the pre-revolutionary Americans nonetheless begun to experience themselves and their surroundings in a new manner.

The preachers of the Great Awakening, such as Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), George Whitefield (1714-1770) and James Davenport (1716-1757), emphasized a personal, active, and emotional experience of religion. In 5 July 1742, the *Boston Evening-Post* described the followers of Davenport as a "Company of Bacchanalians after a mad Frolick" (quoted in Gaustad 1970: 93). Thus focus was placed on individual expression within the collective experience of religion. Moreover, whereas for the early Puritans salvation had been something which the individual met alone, but which was nonetheless regarded as a reward for a successful communal life, during the Great Awakening the worshippers' lives

became journeys towards redemption where the individual was responsible for her own actions and, ultimately, salvation.

The emerging focus on individuality had, furthermore, political repercussions. In addition to advocating novel religious views, the Protestant clergy was able to infuse these views with the aspirations of the pre-Revolutionary America and notions of American nationalism, thereby regaining part of their foothold in political matters at a time when the Church and the State had begun to separate (Higham 2001: 11). It followed, that each individual, regardless of their class or ethnicity became endowed with a mission to strive for national success in and through their religious endeavors. The individual began to be transformed into a complete entity unto herself, not merely 'member of a body', as Winthrop had preached.

Finally, the role of the clergy during the Great Awakening manifests an element still visible in contemporary America and in the structures of the dream, namely the division between a surface and beyond. In order to distribute their religious ideologies as wide as possible and harness them to American republicanism and nationalism, the clergy had to portray an image of tolerance. Publicly the clergy supported a number of creeds and confessions which, according to Higham, acted as a sign of their solidarity (Higham 2001: 9). Nonetheless, as Higham continues, the clergy believed in "inclusive truths, which required neither debate nor strict definition"

(ibid.). This meant that a good and true Christian would always choose the correct denomination and the correct way of believing.

The notion of a 'correct' way of believing was already visible in the Puritan Doctrine of Preparationism. This Doctrine proposed that although God had predestined the lives of the Puritans, they could follow certain signs, which would ensure them that they were on the right path to salvation (Cullen 2003: 20). During the Great Awakening, then, the clergy assumed a role whereby they were able to disseminate their ideology as a self-evident truth, given from the above, while concealing their own personal and communal aspirations. Added with the notions of individuality, the dream of being a good Christian became a matter of personal pursuit, guided by a system of self-policing in which all the responsibility lay with the individual.

The dual role of the clergy echoes the role of the ISAs, religion being one, in contemporary America. For instance, although the Church and the State in America are separate, even though this is not clearly stated in the Constitution, religion permeates American politics. For example, in his Concession Speech in 2000, Al Gore declared:

> Over the library of one of our great law schools is inscribed the motto, "Not under man but under God and law". That's the ruling principle of American freedom, the source of our democratic liberties. I've tried to make it my guide throughout this contest.
>
> (The Guardian 2000).

This shows that religion permeates and thus influences American politics through the individuals' personal and internalized beliefs. It further manifests how the political, religious and educational systems combine in the manifestations of the dream, as I noted in relation to The Pledge of Allegiance in the introduction to this chapter. The ISAs thus create a framework which guides individual thinking making the ISAs' internal motivations, power structures and the forces behind them difficult to observe.

A strong belief in God, combined with political aspirations, also led the Founding Fathers to draft the documents of American Independence. These culminated in the Declaration of Independence, which promulgated that all American citizens were "created equal [...] endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights [... of] Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness". Thus Americans were not only the builders of the nation but became the beneficiaries of its prosperity already in this life, not only in salvation. Furthermore, the Declaration of Independence was designed to guarantee equality of opportunity, which implied that everyone had the right, possibility and even obligation to pursue the dream with any means possible.

Furthermore, from the promises of the Declaration of Independence emerged the illusion of the attainability of the dream, as abstract concepts such as freedom, equality and success were turned into concrete and obtainable objects (Cullen 2003: 39). Moreover, the concretization of Life, Liberty and Happiness engendered a need for immediate and measurable results. America

began to be shaped into a meritocracy where success and development were not based solely on intellectual or educational merits, but increasingly on material affluence and upward mobility. On the literary scene, such ideals were portrayed in for example the novels of Horatio Alger Jr. (1832-1899), who published popular texts centering on the upward mobility of young boys from humble backgrounds.

Through toil and moral courage the 14-year-old Ragged Dick, as an example, rises from the modest origin of a New York shoe shiner to become a middle class clerical officer. The novel ends with these lines: “Here ends the story of Ragged Dick [... who] is Ragged Dick no longer. He has taken a step upward, and is determined to mount still higher” (*Ragged Dick*: 132). In such stories of social mobility, background became of utmost importance. Cullen suggests that while traditionally in the narratives of ‘rags to riches’ the emphasis was on hard work, not on humble background, in the dream of upward mobility, however, the dream gained its full strength only if the past was miserable (Cullen 2003: 68). By emphasizing the ‘rags’ part of the story, one could draw attention to the ‘riches’ as a personal growth and an endeavor where success was measured in terms of change.

In the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century the budding industrialization, the emergence of the private sphere and the economic and technological progress changed the way Americans experienced themselves and their role in society. On the one hand,

Americans saw themselves as “a nation with a distinctive historical personality” (Fletcher 2001: 59). On the other hand, as the emerging free labor ideology implied that anyone and everyone was socially mobile, Americans began to consider themselves as “more than [...] a collection of individuals” (ibid.). Thus during the four hundred years after the first Puritans arrived, America emerged, first, from the Puritan ideals of collective gain realized through individual effort into emphasizing individual gain for collective benefit, and then, finally into an age where success was pursued mainly for individual purposes. In the following section I examine the dream in its Twentieth Century context and discuss how the American dream retained its power despite the great social and institutional changes that occurred.

2.2. An Enduring Ideology: The American Dream in the Twentieth Century

> One of the amazing things about America is the way it can both undermine you and keep you believing in your own possibilities, pumping you with hope.
>
> (Houston & Houston 1973: 139)

From the beginning America has been viewed as a land of endless opportunities and a place where individuals and communities can express and continually recreate themselves. Despite the inequalities and injustices evident in America’s past and present, these opportunities underlie much American discourse, emphasizing the

role of the forefathers as the builders of the nation and portraying a nostalgic and romantic narrative of struggle, victory and moral courage. Simultaneously, Americans face forward in a continuous pursuit of a better future. In the midst, the American dream remains powerful through its historical, political and cultural traditions which both explicitly and implicitly reproduce and distribute its ideology, adapting it to changing circumstances.

The economic and technological progress of the early Twentieth Century increased personal affluence which enabled a growing emphasis on the self. Gradually, materiality and the focus on physical appearance became markers of success and happiness, as they demonstrated that the Americans had excess wealth and the time and leisure to spend it on themselves. The mass production technologies, such as the Ford Assembly Line set up in Detroit in 1913, enabled affordable goods to be produced and distributed to a wider public. Furthermore, the spread of new inventions, such as the radio and television, not only changed the nature and span of communication, but altered community structures. Home became the central locus from which to connect with the outside world and family the central unit of direct physical contact.

Homeownership and the family are central to American culture and an important part of the Twentieth Century dream. Homeownership, for instance, exemplifies the dream's emphasis on appearance by epitomizing the ability to show one's success and to portray an image of independence and self-sufficiency. The

significance of homeownership can be understood in the light of the Puritan enterprise, which was founded on the possession of land and a notion that those who can benefit from the land are its rightful owners (see e.g. Seed 2001). Cullen suggests that in an effort to expand "an "Empire of Liberty" [...] land [became] the defining criterion of what it meant to be truly free in the United States" (Cullen 2003: 140). For example, the expanding Frontier was conditioned on land and supported by legislation such as the Homestead Act of 1862, which granted American citizens land outside the thirteen colonies. "Go West Young Man, go West and grow up with the country!" (Skagit River Journal 2007) echoed the call for the new Americans to test their limits, expand their physical and spiritual boundaries and explore the riches, realized in terms of land and gold, offered by the West.

In contemporary America homeownership and the vast real estate market reflect the society's ideals of freedom. Nevertheless, homeownership can be used to illustrate the falsity of the dream because it focuses only on appearance and draws attention away from the real conditions behind it, such as the financial difficulties the realtors, the owners and the buyers face during economic recessions, both in the 1930s and presently. *The Secret History* demonstrates the complexity of homeownership through Bunny and his family.

The Corcoran's family home in Connecticut, featured both in *House Beautiful* and the *Time*, as explained by Mr. Corcoran, is

> a large modern house of the "architectural" sort, bleached cedar, its split levels and asymmetrical terrace self-consciously bare [... inside is] an overscaled, *Architectural Digest* sort of room, big and loft-like, with skylights and fieldstone fireplace, chairs upholstered in white leather, kidney-shaped coffee table – modern, expensive, Italian stuff.
>
> (*The Secret History*: 351, 354; italics in the original)

Richard first visits the house at Bunny's funeral. His reaction is not explicitly described, but the reader has knowledge of Richard's awareness of the Corcoran's financial situation. At an earlier point in the text, when Henry related to Richard the details of his and Bunny's winter holiday in Italy, Richard was astonished that Henry had paid for the entire trip. Henry replies to Richard:

> "They may had had money once, but if so they spent it a long time ago. That terrible house of theirs must have cost a fortune, and they make a big show of yacht clubs and country clubs and sending their sons to expensive schools, but that's got them in debt to the eyebrows. They may look wealthy, but they haven't a dime. I expect Mr. Corcoran is about bankrupt."
>
> (*The Secret History*: 117)

Thus the family's luxurious lifestyle and flamboyant manners are based on a false premise. Moreover, this demonstrates how portraying an image of success becomes more important than the financial distress to which it might lead or, in effect, more important than actually achieving the dream.

The new media technology of the early Twentieth Century was harnessed to distribute images of affluence and beauty to the masses showing what Americans could become. Severe economic fluctuation caused by the two World Wars, the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression created a need for hope and

encouragement. Popular culture answered the call. For instance, the emerging Broadway musical tradition alleviated the tediousness and insecurity of the everyday by depicting a life of happiness, leisure and ease. Moreover, cartoon heroes such as Batman and Superman, appearing first in comic books in 1939, as well as the motion picture *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), based on L. Frank Baum's children's book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), responded to a need for safety and strength against overpowering evils.

Nonetheless, despite the hope offered by the ideals of the dream, the hardships Americans faced created a sense of uncertainty which left its mark on the idealism, faith and pride they felt towards their nation, the possibilities it could offer and its position and reputation on a global scale. The challenges towards the traditional dream were reflected in many literary works such as Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1926), which depicts the failure of mere wealth to bring happiness. Ultimately, Gatsby's existence becomes superficial, which is demonstrated by, for example, that no one, in the end, wishes to attend his funeral after he is killed. Other works, such as John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *Grapes of Wrath* (1939), both of which center on the hardships experienced by poor farm laborers during the Great Depression, imply that hard work and a strong belief in the ideals of the dream – independence, self-reliance and stability – nonetheless lead to the failure of the dream.

Thus the social, political and institutional changes of the early Twentieth Century and after opened up new platforms on which critique towards the dream and the prevailing social and institutional order could be voiced. Kathryn Hume suggests that a common theme in literary texts of the time was a sense of loss which culminated in a notion of the *Death of the Dream* (Hume 2000: 288). For some, this signified that the dream was a chain to the past, hindering the nation's development. Others considered these developments in themselves to be morally corrupt and a lapse from the traditional dream because they advocated self-interest and superficiality, yet others saw the dream itself as a mockery which produced and maintained false ideals. Works such as Edward Albee's *The American Dream* and Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*, both published in 1961, attacked the traditional family values of the dream. *Revolutionary Road*, for instance, which depicts the failed marriage of April and Frank Wheeler in Connecticut of 1951, presents the characters as victims of the dream's ideals and criticizes the constraints and expectations these ideals impose on individuals, couples and families.

Snowman & Bradbury suggest that the shattering of ideologies and the structures of society, the "outward certainties", enabled the exploration of identity and the self (1998: 298). Material progress and social mobility became accompanied by a notion of intellectual development and the examination of questions of existence and identity. For example, in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in*

the Rye (1951) the seventeen-year-old protagonist Holden Caulfield experiences alienation from community and rebels against authority as he struggles with the shift from a childhood of supposed innocence to an adulthood of moral corruptness.

The American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom lists *The Catcher in the Rye* as one of the most challenged books of the Twentieth Century (ALA 2012a). Groups and individuals have attempted to remove it from libraries and classrooms on grounds of its alleged obscenity, profanity, sexual references, substance abuse, vulgar language and the violation of moral codes (ALA 2012b). According to Althusser, censorship is one of the features through which the cultural ISA can exert its power (Althusser 1970). Thus self-policing individuals attempt to control and reject cultural products and even language which they feel is contradicting the norms of acceptable behavior and which thus risk harming the individuals engaging with these products.

In addition to high literature, also popular fiction voiced criticism towards the dream and the structures of American institutions. For instance, Robert Ludlum's *Bourne-trilogy* (1980, 1986, 1990) focuses on the corrupt political and legal systems in the United States. The novels depict an ex-CIA agent, Jason Bourne, as he attempts to escape the assassins the CIA has set after him because he knows too much. Furthermore, thriller and horror novels, such as Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977) or Thomas Harris' *The*

Silence of the Lambs (1988), portray the mental disintegration of individuals who suffer from mental disorders and lack of empathy.

Much popular fiction during the second half of the Twentieth Century focused on a dichotomy of good America – evil other, such as Tom Clancy's *Red Storm Rising* (1986), which depicts a military confrontation between NATO forces and the Soviet Union. However, another feature became prominent during this time and is manifested in the above-mentioned novels, namely that the threat to the nation and the individual comes from within the nation's borders. Also *The Secret History* demonstrates this, as it depicts an isolated group perpetrating murder, which results both from their rebellion against authority and their fragmented identities.

Popular and high literature thus share many themes and topics, but, nonetheless, view them from different perspectives. To illustrate this point, I briefly discuss Norman Mailer's *An American Dream* (1965) in comparison with *The Secret History*. *An American Dream* depicts the descent of the protagonist Stephen Rojack from a seemingly successful and happy life of a talk show host, ex-Congressman and war hero into a life deterioration and dark self-exploration, and crime and violence in the Manhattan underworld. Like the characters in *The Secret History*, Rojack feels bound by his success. Gradually, Rojack turns his anxieties on his wife, Deborah, and in a drunken brawl kills her. Rojack, like the characters in Tartt's novel as I come to show, experiences violence as a temporary release. However, although both Rojack and the group in *The Secret*

History are not legally punished for their crimes, their guilt ultimately leads to their mental degreadation. In the end, all of the characters lose what is most important to them: their loved ones, their sense of self and their sense of belonging.

In relation to the American dream, two things in particular set the novels apart. First, although in *The Secret History* the guilt over murder continues to manifest itself in the characters' lives, there is a clear sense of resolve. Popular narratives often have happy or morally encouraging endings in which justice prevails and which thus promote the ideals of the dream. In *The Secret History*, Henry's suicide is an event which finally resolves the tensions within the group. Furthermore, the novel describes how even the minor characters find their place in society and achieve something in their lives after college. In *An American Dream*, however, Rocjak plans to escape to South America, but that is practically all the reader knows.

Second, Mailer's novel mocks and undermines the ideology of the dream by portraying Rojack as an epitome of the dream, who, nonetheless, experiences discontentment with his success. The dream is presented as a false ideal and a threat to the individual. Converesly, in *The Secret History*, the individual becomes a threat to the dream. While the novel depicts the failure of the characters' dreams, this is not because the dream's structures prohibit it but because the characters break the boundaries of accepted behavior. Popular culture thus powerfully reproduces the ideals and ideology of the dream. In the following section I discuss how the structures of

popular culture enables this. Popular culture reaches a vast audience and deals with mundane topics which infiltrate the individuals' daily operations and thought processes thus making the disseminated values internalized and naturalized.

2.3. Manifesting the American Dream: Popular Culture and Nationalism

> Popular literature is [...] a universal forum for the propagation and assimilation of ideas. It refers to and comments on all aspects of contemporary life, in the end informing, and in some cases even forming, the background of many people's values and beliefs.
>
> (Swirski 2005: 32)

Popular culture, as Swirski notes, re/structures individuals' mentality and worldview. Popular culture can crudely be characterized as culture produced for and consumed by the masses. In critical evaluation popular texts are often deemed as vulgar, cheap, uncivilized and lacking in artistic, intellectual or linguistic refinement and value, when contrasted with products of high culture. However, Fiske suggests that popular texts differ from high literature more in terms of their usage and circulation than in their textual attributes and, therefore, evaluations as to their value are unfruitful (Fiske 1989: 121).

Furthermore, the distinction between popular and high culture is always the result of cultural power play, as Storey suggests (2003: 92). For instance, many of today's classics were first written

for the public. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), for example, which depicts the shame inflicted on a woman who committed adultery, was targeted to a wide audience as a cautionary tale of sin, guilt and punishment. Conversely, the contemporary television cartoon series *The Simpsons,* which has been airing since 1989 and which satirizes American culture and society, has acquired an iconic status and moved beyond mere ephemeral consumption.

Regardless of the value assigned to popular culture, the sheer number of publications, distribution and consumption testify to the significance of popular culture. Bowker compiles annual reports on book production in the United States and in 2009 approximately 45 000 new titles or editions of fiction were published (Bowker 2010)[1]. Following Dessauer, Swirski states that in 1999, 31,5% of all the books distributed in the U.S. were popular fiction. Similarly, in 1998, 51,4% of all bought books in the U.S. were popular literature (Swirski 2005: 23-4). These figures suggest that popular texts are commodities designed to entertain for a short period of time. They are easy to digest, affordable and readily available at nearly every petrol station and grocery store.

Furthermore, popular culture can turn complicated and intricate matters into bite-sized commodities. This is reflected in for example the number of popular motions pictures based on canonical literature. Already in 1979 Patricia Holt wrote in *Publishers Weekly* that of all American motion pictures 33% were based on books (Holt

[1] The annual 18 000 page volumes listing all published books by genre are available only in print.

in Swirski 2005: 18). Nearly all of the canonical novels I mentioned in the previous section have been turned into motion pictures, *The Great Gatsby* in 1926, 1949, 1974, 2000, and 2012; *Of Mice and Men* in 1939 and 1992; *Grapes of Wrath* in 1940; *Revolutionary Road* in 2008; *An American Dream* in 1966. The extensive list of American motion pictures based on books published on the Mid-Continent Public Library (2012) website suggests that the situation is likely not to have changed.

Fiske suggests that the structure of popular culture contributes to its wide success because it enables everyone to read into it their own meanings. He argues that a popular text "is a text full of gaps, it provokes *producerly* viewers to write in their meanings, to construct their culture from it" (Fiske 1989: 122; italics mine). The concept of a *producerly* text is useful for me because it signifies a particular structure of popular culture which enables its role as a conveyor of ideologies. By combining Barthes' notions of a *readerly* text, i.e. an easily understood, passive text with ready-given meanings, and a *writerly* text, i.e. a more complex and difficult text with open ends and multiple meanings, Fiske creates the concept of a *producerly* text.

Producerly texts depict the everyday routines of individuals and are thus easy to relate to and digest. Due to their superficiality, *producerly* texts, moreover, remain incomplete and open-ended. Fiske writes that in such texts

> the ideological forces of domination are at work [... and] the economic and ideological requirements of the system determine, and are promoted by, almost every aspect of everyday life.
>
> (Fiske 1989: 105)

This signifies that popular texts contain themes and images which can be understood and interpreted from several points of view. This also constitutes part of the popularity of such texts as individuals can find in them familiar points of reference. However, the mundane topics and incompleteness also mean that the messages distributed through popular culture risk being unquestioned or unnoticed thus turning them into a naturalized and internalized part of individuals' psyche. In a review of *The Secret History* Michiko Kakutani noted in *The New York Times* that Tartt was able to make

> shocking, melodramatic events [...] seem plausible to the reader. [... S]uch seemingly preposterous notions are enfolded [...] into the texture of everyday student life, a familiar, recognizable life of exams, parties and classes.
>
> (Kakutani 1992)

Part of the success of the novel, then, is that its actions take place in a familiar setting. Furthermore, while depicting societally forbidden acts, readers are, nonetheless, able to identify with the passion with which the characters pursue their goals.

In *The Secret History*, the incestuous relationship between Charles and Camilla provides an example of how a text can offer multiple meanings. I discuss this relationship and its relation to the ISAs in more detail in Chapter Four, but wish to quote a passage from the novel in order to exemplify my point here. In the novel, Bunny has just revealed to Richard his knowledge of the

Bacchanalian ritual and the murder of the farmer. Richard attempts to contact Henry, in order to tell him what has happened, but cannot reach him. Instead, Richard visits the twins. The following conversation ensues between Camilla and Charles:

> "Is [Henry at home]?" she said.
> "I know he is [...] Where else would he be at three in the morning?"
> "Wait a second," she said, and went to the telephone. "I just want to try something." She dialed, listened for a moment, hung up, dialed again.
> "What are you doing?"
> "It's a code [...] Ring twice, hang up, ring again." *"Code?"*
> "Yes. He told me once – Oh, hello, Henry," she said suddenly [...] "Why are you looking at me like that?" she said crossly to Charles.
> "Code, eh?"
> "What about it?"
> "You never told me about it."
> "It's stupid. I never thought to."
> "What do you and Henry need a secret code for?"
> "It's not a secret."
> "Then why didn't you tell me?"
> "Charles, don't be such a baby."
>
> (*The Secret History*: 227; italics in the original)

On the surface this dialogue does not amount to much and a naïve reader may well understand Charles' reaction as merely surprise or disappointment that Camilla knows something he does not. Furthermore, while the passage implies that Camilla and Henry have a relationship of sorts, why Charles should be jealous does not become clear until later.

However, placed in the context of the entire novel, the passage inadvertently reveals the incestuous relationship of the twins, as well as Charles' possessive attitude towards Camilla and the tension between Charles, Camilla and Henry manifested

throughout the novel. This passage thus is open-ended and awaits the reader to complete it with her own meanings. In all its forms and through its internal structure popular culture, then, can continuously distribute and reproduce the ideals of the dream and emphasize its specifically American values. As the dream is particularly an American concept, I now turn to discuss nationalism as a founding element in the ideology of the American dream.

2.3.1. E Pluribus Unum: The National Dream

I quoted Cullen at the beginning of Chapter Two stating that the American dream is specifically American because of the way the entire ideology is woven into the fabric of American culture. Moreover, the dream is particularly American through the ideology's tight link with the nation's history. Historical rhetoric and references to the nation's past are prominent in political, institutional, social, educational and other discourses as demonstrated by the following passage from President Obama's Inaugural Address in 2009:

> America has carried on [...] because We the People have remained faithful to the ideals of our forbears, and true to our founding documents [...] For us, they [...] traveled across oceans in search of a new life. For us, they toiled in sweatshops and settled the West, endured the lash of the whip and plowed the hard earth. For us, they fought and died in places [like] Concord and Gettysburg; Normandy and Khe Sanh.
>
> (Barack Obama's Inaugural Address 2009)

Americans are who they are because of their history, Obama seems to be saying, and they aim towards the future within a framework created by this history. Miller sees such historical continuity important in the construction of national identity because it forms an overarching framework of events, which unifies individuals by engendering a common sense of duty, effort and obligation, as well as by creating reference points to which Americans can relate (Miller 1993: 6).

American nationalism as such does not aim at homogenizing practices and conformity, although the notion of the correct way of living the American life to some extent demands this. Rather, American nationalism emphasizes the strength which the "One Nation under God" acquires through diversity. Distinguishing America from other nations requires "the selective incorporation of local, regional, and other differences within the nation, a process whereby difference is represented as the variety inherent in unity" (Edensor 2002: 25). As I noted in Section 2.1., this idea formed the background for American nation building and the Revolution of 1776. Moreover, unity through diversity engenders an experience of commonality and collectivity, which is important in upholding national identities and is epitomized in the phrase from the Great Seal of the United States, first used publicly in 1782: E Pluribus Unum - Out of Many, One.

Hall continues that national identity and culture are, in effect, "cross-cut by deep internal divisions and differences, and 'unified'

only through the exercise of different forms of cultural power" (Hall 1992: 297). American individuals, then, become united through the experiences of culture. Also Miller holds the view that the historical continuity which unites Americans, as I noted above, is mythical in nature and based on

> collective acts of imagining which find their expression through [...] media [...] What holds nations together are beliefs [... and] these beliefs cannot be transmitted except through cultural artifacts which are available to everyone who belongs. (Miller 1995: 32)

Popular culture is such an artifact and a powerful reproducer of nationalism because of its emotional appeal, open-endedness, wide distribution and focus on the everyday, as I discussed in the previous section. Furthermore, Edensor claims that the "mundane details of social interaction, habits, routines and practical knowledge", as conveyors of nationalism are often dismissed because the everyday is taken for granted (Edensor 2001: 17-8). Thus popular culture does not only manifest the American dream, but presents it as an internalized part of everyday dialogue and communication.

Thus through popular culture, Americans are unified under common themes and shared, everyday experiences, employing a rhetoric of nationalism. Individuals are brought together in, for example, through television game shows or competitions, such as the *American Idol,* which rely on the shared experience of mocking those who fail and supporting those who succeed. National sporting events, such as the Super Bowl, unite Americans in the excitement of sports.

Furthermore, as Super Bowl coincides with Thanksgiving, the event has become a culmination of the celebration of American history.

Moreover, for example the motion pictures *United* 93 (2006) and *World Trade Center* (2006) join individuals in collective solidarity manifested during a national crisis, in this case the attacks in New York on 11 September 2001. Popular culture in general distributes nationalism by employing a dichotomy between the good America – evil other, as I noted in Section 2.2.. Often in such settings the day-saving individual hero/ine protects the ideals of the collective nation through self-sacrifice or by revealing the injustices perpetrated by those operating within American institutional systems. Simultaneously, the courage of the characters is a sign of personal redemption and internal growth. This is manifested in for example John Grisham's *Time to Kill* (1989) and *The Rainmaker* (1995) where the protagonists reveal the gross abuse of individuals by the American legal system.

The Secret History does not draw on national ideology only by manifesting the American dream. It shows how American nationalism is reflected in the smaller structures within the nation. The group in the novel can be seen as a miniature model of the American nation. First, the group is separated from the rest of the campus and from American culture in general and is very protective of its borders. Richard has had to work hard in order to have been accepted as a member of the group. Thus the group considers itself as a self-

sufficient entity in which the enemy, i.e. authority and mainstream American culture, resides outside its boundaries.

Second, the group operates on its own set of rules, its own *collective imagination*, as Miller suggested and is unified, on the one hand, in their shared interest in the Classical cultures and languages and, on the other hand, the rejection of American culture. However, the desire and possibility of the characters to operate on their own principles is, to a large extent, only possible because they are wealthy. This notion is deeply engraved in the American dream which purports that success and affluence bring insurmountable freedom.

Another manner in which the group in *The Secret History* reflects American national values is its functioning on similar structures as the family. Althusser identifies family as one of the ISAs which reproduce social values in defining the appropriate behavior and roles within the family. The family is one of the key American values precisely because it reflects the nation in a smaller scale. Although the group in the novel does not constitute a family in the traditional sense, it nonetheless adopts similar social function. All of the characters have either lost their parents or have detached and twisted relationships with them, and the group becomes the social setting in which the characters can experience a sense of belonging. Furthermore, in this context, Julian becomes the parental authority in the characters' lives.

Julian adopts a curious position throughout the novel. In the 500 pages he is not described at length, but rather remains a

somewhat mysterious and undefined character. Nevertheless, Julian has a great influence on the characters. Especially Henry considers Julian to be the most important person in his life *(The Secret History*: 472). I discuss in Section 3.2. how Julian's disappearance, ultimately, drives Henry to suicide. The power Julian has over the group is visible in, for example, the following passage which describes one of Julian's infrequent visits to the country:

> It was always a tremendous occasion if Julian accepted an invitation to dinner in the country. Francis would order all kinds of food [...] Tuxedos went to the cleaners [...] Bunny put away his copy of *The Bride of Fu Manchu* and started carrying around a volume of Homer instead [...] these dinners [...] were a dreadful strain for everyone, the guest included, I am sure – though he always behaved with the greatest good cheer, and was graceful, and charming, and unflaggingly delighted with everyone and everything [...] I found myself less able to conceal the evidences of my stress [...] The others were more practiced at this particular dissimulation.
>
> *(The Secret History*: 81-2; italics in the original)

Julian, then, acts as a force which pushes the others to act according to the principles they assume is expected of them. He is a force, which not only influences their conscious decisions, as in the passage above or by encouraging them to perform the Bacchanalian ritual, as I discuss in the following Chapter, but also affects their subconscious emotions.

Julian becomes the internalized force within the miniature society the group has become. As Richard remarks, Julian has the ability to make the individual believe he is in control, while skillfully manipulating the conversation, eliciting from them the desired information (*The Secret History*: 25). The group as a family, then,

defines the specific roles by which the characters must play within their small community, much like the traditional family in American culture. Henry becomes the visible authority, while Bunny rebels and the others abide to Henry's wishes. Julian remains the invisible force which sets the framework within which the group operates.

On the collective level, in the setting of the family or the nation at large, the individual must mediate between individual aspirations and collective mentalities. This can be achieved by forming multiple, often conflicting identities. According to Castronovo, the public sphere where individual identities are manifested becomes

> at once the place of utopian promise and the site of political injury. These divisions haunt the democratic subject [...] producing a self-alienation in which individuals abject their own particularities [...] as something other than a part of themselves.
>
> (Castronovo 2003: 244)

Thus the self-policing instigated by the ISAs throws the individual on a path of self-control and denial, and the American dream becomes the tool with which the individual "particularities" can be rejected. In *The Secret History*, Richard's fabricated identity, which proposes that he is living the dream and with which he assimilates into the group, is an example of both multiple identities as well as a means to use them to hide one's real circumstances.

Using multiple identities in order to navigate various situations can cause a sense of anxiety as the individual cannot find a stable point onto which she could hold. Edensor suggests that

> national identity is often sought to protect oneself from the anxiety of uncertainty [...] This can involve [...] the expulsion of that which [the individual] fears and the suppression of that which [she] desires.
>
> (Edensor 1998: 25)

While the American dream to a large extent is the source of these anxieties, it nonetheless offers to relieve them by implying that the individual should conform to the collective framework of the dream. On the one hand, then, the dream pushes the individual away from her fears. On the other hand, the dream pulls the individual towards the dream's fulfillment. The following two chapters delve into this dualism of the American dream. In Chapter Four I examine the American dream as a desire which ensures the continuous existence of the dream by constantly creating new objects for the individual to reach, the attainment of which supposedly fulfill the dream. I begin, however, in the following chapter, by focusing on the Americans' repressed fears, and examine how the individual deals with her fears within the framework of the American dream.

3. The Dual Force of the American Dream: Revolt and Disgust

> The struggle to free myself of restraints, becomes my very shackles.
>
> (Meshuggah *Disenchantment* 2005)

The American dream continues to be a force which influences Americans' daily lives. In the previous chapter I examined the development of the dream as a national entity throughout American history and discussed how the dream has altered to suit changing circumstances. Moreover, I discussed how the structure of popular culture enables multifaceted manifestations of the dream and how popular culture becomes a powerful tool for disseminating the ideology of the dream.

In this chapter, I examine the American dream as a force which guards individuals against the uncertainties and insecurities they experience in the competitive American culture. The pressures and anxieties Americans feel are alleviated by the promises of the dream. However, as I come to show, many of these anxieties are, in effect, created *by* the dream. The American dream's essence, as I noted in the Introduction, is perpetual movement and thus it is intrinsically set to fail. Therefore, the objects the dream offers as the means to its fulfillment will never be achieved to the fullest degree. Furthermore, while the dream as an ISA defines the norms of acceptable social behavior it simultaneously turns inappropriate behavior into something which needs to be controlled and rejected.

To discuss the relationship between individual anxieties and the American dream, I employ Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection. Abjection is a subconscious process whereby the individual's unrecognized fears become manifested in the realm of consciousness and experienced as inexplicable sensations of anxiety. Kristeva is specifically concerned with how the abject manifests itself as 'disturbances' in textual language, i.e. those points at which the unspeakable breaks through. Kristeva herself has examined language and abjection in the works of, for example, Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Marcel Proust. Nonetheless the level of linguistic refinement in *The Secret History* does not support a linguistic analysis but rather an examination of how the abject manifests itself within the novel's themes and in relation to the wider context of American culture.

In Section 3.1., I outline the structure of abjection as a subconscious process manifested in the body. The precondition for abjection is the (successful) development of subjectivity, as postulated by Kristeva's formulations of Lacanian psychoanalysis. In Section 3.1.1. I examine how subjectivity emerges, founded on the dialectical relationship between the conscious and the subconscious. This dialecticism, ultimately, enables abjection to emerge. However, it also signifies that the abject never remains fully repressed but re-emerges into consciousness from time to time. In *The Secret History* this manifests as the guilt the characters experience over the two murders occurring in the novel, as I discuss in Section 3.2. By killing the farmer during the Bacchanalian ritual the characters, instead of

being released from the abject and the constraints they experience, in effect, create them, a process which the lyrics by Meshuggah imply.

The guilt the characters experience testifies to the dream-ISAs' influence in their lives as something which defines acceptable behavior. However, the guilt needs to be rejected because it simultaneously contradicts with the promise of the American dream that one can pursue it by any means possible. Despite that the dream, ultimately, creates the guilt, it also acts as that mechanism with which it can be pushed back to the subconscious and which pushes the individual towards the fulfillment of the dream. In this process the American dream also manifests as a desire. I noted in the introduction how the abject operates in tandem with a subconscious desire termed *jouissance.* The two operate on a dichotomy of push and pull within which the individual oscillates as she attempts to manage the emotions arising from the subconscious. I discuss *jouissance* separately in Chapter Four, but I also refer to it in this chapter in order to demonstrate the key moments in which *jouissance* connects with the abject.

3.1. The Emergence of the Subconscious: The Abject of Julia Kristeva

> The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it [...] an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire [... The abject is n]ot me. Not that. But not nothing , either. A “something” that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant [...] It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object.
>
> (Kristeva 1982: 1-2, 4)

The abject is neither an object nor a subject. It lies outside such definable concepts and is, specifically, something which cannot be named or identified. The abject is an abstraction of emotions of fear and anxiety, reflecting the dialectical relationship between the conscious and the subconscious of the mind, as defined by psychoanalytic theory, particularly that of Julia Kristeva. She terms the subconscious the semiotic. It is the pre-linguistic state which contains our primal drives and needs, their relation to and expressions in the body, and their connections to the structures of the society surrounding us (Kristeva 1984: 86). The conscious level, i.e. the symbolic, then, is a realm of language, which structures our subjectivity by providing logic and reason as well as categorical and semantic meaning, which are conditioned both by our subconscious processes as well as the society around us (Kristeva 1984: 86). Together these realms, constantly influencing one another, form subjectivity. Subjectivity is thus always (re)developing and its permeable borders, ultimately, enable abjection to emerge.

Abjection occurs when individuals in (emotional) crisis encounter their deepest, unrecognized fears which have been rejected and repressed into the subconscious and cannot, therefore, be expressed and rationalized in and through language in the symbolic. However, the aforementioned dialecticism signifies that the subconscious never remains fully repressed and that the rejected fears resurface from time to time. Kristeva claims that the abject manifests in the symbolic order as disturbances in language, "in the way one speaks" (Kristeva 1982: 23). Thus the abject becomes visible in the manner one communicates, in gestures as well as word choices, sentence structures and slips of the tongue.

Abject fears, when manifested within the symbolic order, are experienced as inexplicable sensations of anxiety and guilt. In an attempt to come to terms with these emotions, the individual projects them onto objects, i.e. something to which or someone to whom the fears are anchored. Kristeva writes:

> Discomfort, unease, dizziness stemming from an ambiguity that, through the violence of a revolt *against*, demarcates a space out of which signs and objects arise [...] Fear and the aggressivity intended to protect me from some not yet localizable cause are projected and come back to me from the outside.
>
> (Kristeva 1982: 10, 39; italics in the original)

Objects are thus interpreted as something disgusting, which "protects" the individual from coming into contact with the subconscious fears and enables them to be rejected and repressed once more. I will not delve into the nature of 'the object' in this thesis, for it would demand a lengthy phenomenological detour. Rather, in

the context of the American dream and *The Secret History*, I employ the term broadly to encompass concrete things, places and spaces, individuals and communities as well as ideologies such as the American dream.

In *The Secret History*, the characters form close emotional relationships with things, spaces and people which adopt the position of both objects of desire and objects of disgust arising through abjection. For example, the "low-slung dusty lines of Plano" (*The Secret History*: 11), become for Richard an object of revolt. While the environment itself partly affects his emotions, Richard's inability to locate himself in the Californian community and worldview translates into a loathing of his surroundings. This is how Richard describes Plano at the very beginning of his narration:

> [T]he founders of Plano modeled their town not after Paradise but that other, more dolorous city [...] There is to me about this place a smell of rot [...] Nowhere, ever, have the hideous mechanics of birth and copulation and death [...] been so brutal or been painted up to look so pretty; have so many people put so much faith in lies and mutability.
>
> (*The Secret History*: 8)

Ultimately, Plano comes to signify all that is awry in Richard's life and he begins to project his discontentment onto his environment, his actions and the people surrounding him.

His emotions, moreover, become manifested in and through his body:

> I [swayed] through the shopping malls [...] until I was so dazed with consumer goods and product codes [...] mirrors and Muzak and noise and light, that a fuse would blow up in my brain and all at once everything would become unintelligible [...] I would walk like a zombie [...] drive to the baseball field [...] just sit with my hands on the steering wheel staring at the Cyclone fence [...] until the sun went down and it was too dark for me to see.
>
> (*The Secret History*: 8)

The mind-body connection demonstrated here is maintained by much psychoanalysis. Elizabeth Grosz argues that the body grants us our relations with objects, in reflection to which our subjectivities emerge Grosz writes:

> The body is my being-to-the-world and as such is the instrument by which all information and knowledge is received and meaning is generated. It is through the body that the world of objects appears to me; it is in virtue of having/being a body that there are objects for me.
>
> (Grosz 1994: 87)

Thus we thrust our anxieties from ourselves into the world and onto the objects by the means of and by the experience in our bodies. However, precisely because the unrecognized fears cannot be expressed in language, the objects are necessarily false concretizations of the subconscious, serving only as substitutes waiting for the true release of the fears. Merleau-Ponty writes: “an object is an object only in so far as it can be moved away from me, and ultimately disappear from my field of vision. Its presence is such that it entails a possible absence” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 103). When considering the object in this light, the objectification of the abject, then, merely offers a way to discard anxieties and enables the re-repression of the fears into the subconscious.

Employing Kristevan theory of the abject enables me to identify such elements in individual processes of the mind, which larger social systems can use for their own benefit. On the collective level the individual experiences the dream through conforming to its belief system and structures through the mechanism of self-policing. Becker-Leckrone suggest that social and institutional power structures, such as the ISAs, are

> built upon and against the dynamics of abjection [... They] give order to horror [...] push it to the margins of normative meaning and [...] keep it on the margins when it threatens to encroach.
>
> (Becker-Leckrone 2005: 38-9)

Thus by defining what is acceptable and what is not, what is desirable and what is frightful, the ISAs control individuals and play with their subconscious emotions.

In American culture the interplay of abjection and *jouissance* is specifically visible in the manner the dream idealizes materialism and physical appearance. For instance, being unsuccessful or unattractive on the parameters of the dream become revolting because they signify the possibility of the failure of the dream. 'Unsuccessful' or 'unattractive' people might become the target of discrimination and ridicule because this is a way to reject the proximity of failure. Furthermore, unsuccessfulness or unattractiveness become revolting for the individual herself, leading to increased self-loathing. The dream, then, despite having itself created the scale on which success and beauty can be measured and

despite its intrinsic failure, promises to alleviate the emerging anxieties.

The belief in the dream's promises is maintained by the creation of objects with which the dream can supposedly be fulfilled. The objectification of the abject, then, is instigated through the emergence of desire. Kristeva writes:

> [D]esire is always for objects [...] One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims – if not its submissive and willing ones [...] in order to bring fear to the surface, the confrontation with the impossible object [...] will be transformed into a fantasy of desire
>
> (Kristeva 1982: 6, 9, 42)

The abject thus pushes the individual away from fears by creating objects of revolt which can be repressed and objects of desire which can be coveted. For Richard, Plano and Hampden College form a pair demonstrating this duality. As I discussed above, Plano reflects Richard's internal anxieties. Hampden College, then, with its dream-like environment signifies to Richard an inspired, high class intellectualism and a mythical promise of a future which Plano cannot offer. Furthermore, as Richard states, "[e]ven the name [of the college] had an austere Anglican cadence [...] which yearned hopelessly for England" (*The Secret History*: 11). For Richard, the West-East direction signifies the intellectual development of both his self and his dream. Furthermore, the East Coast, echoing the arrival of the English Puritans, as well as Richard's eventual interest in the Classics, create a link to Old World wisdom in contrast to the

numbed existence of the superficial California and the mainstream American culture as a whole.

The dualism of the objects of revolt and desire, and the processes of abjection and *jouissance,* function on the dichotomy of the conscious and the subconscious which together form subjectivity. Next, drawing on Julia Kristeva and her formulations of Lacanian psychoanalysis, I examine how subjectivity emerges and how the dichotomy on which it operates enables the repression of the abject. The anxieties emerging in the process of abjection are, in effect, a misinterpretation of the manifestations of the subconscious in the symbolic order. Furthermore, I discuss how the American dream sustains itself on the anxieties which the individual experiences and the fears which she rejects.

3.1.1. The Repression of the Abject: What Americans Reject?

In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, subjectivity emerges when a child begins to acquire language and, thereby, shifts from the imaginary, i.e. the semiotic, via the mirror stage into the symbolic. During the mirror stage, the child, who thus far has been one with her surroundings as she has lacked the language to express or feel her existence as an individual, begins to develop a sense of separateness by reflecting herself to the outside world and responding to the stimuli she receives. The French semiotician and structural linguist Emile Benveniste states that

> language alone establishes the concept of "ego" in reality [...] Consciousness of the self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast [...] Language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as [...] *I* [which] posits another person, the one who, being, as he is, completely exterior to "me," becomes my echo to whom I say *you* and who says *you* to me.
>
> (Benveniste 1971: 224-5; italics in the original)

Subjectivity thus emerges in interplay with language, the surrounding world of objects and the child's experience of individuality and collectivity.

Lacanian psychoanalysis views the development of subjectivity as a continuum at the end of which subjectivity is fully developed and the imaginary becomes, in the words of McAfee, "a lost territory" to which there is no return (McAfee 2004: 37). However, as I remarked earlier, Kristeva views subjectivity as operating on the dialecticism of the semiotic and the symbolic. The two realms are

> inseparable within the *signifying process* that constitutes language [...] Because the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either "exclusively" semiotic or "exclusively" symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both.
>
> (Kristeva 1984: 24; italics in the original)

Thus subjectivity belongs solely to neither realm. The individual's life is an ongoing mirror stage in which the subject responds not only to the outer stimuli, but also reflects those received from the subconscious, produced by the primal drives as well as that which has been repressed. The Primal drives, such as thirst, hunger, fatigue and sexual desire, sustain life. They function on the basis of primal lack, which emerges at the thetic break, i.e. the point at which the individual moves from the semiotic into the symbolic and begins to

experience her subjectivity through language. Thus primal lack is a life force maintaining existence by creating needs to be fulfilled and instincts to be followed.

The American dream, however, turns primal lack from a precondition of life into a form of dissatisfaction. American culture does not tolerate dissatisfaction well. In effect, happiness has been institutionalized and an entire industry and scientific field has been created to promote and investigate it. For example, Chris Hedges (2009) lists various colleges and universities offering courses on positive psychology and other disciplines focused on studying and measuring happiness. For instance, the University of Pennsylvania and the School of Behavioral and Organizational Sciences at Claremont Graduate University offer Masters and Doctoral programs in positive psychology (Hedges 2009: 118). Dissatisfaction thus becomes commoditized and profit can be made from the objects that are offered as solutions to anxieties.

The individual's subjectivity does not only emerge into the symbolic as a reflection of the environment and her subconscious through language. Language itself becomes the mirror which moulds the understanding of the individual and the surroundings. Thus subjectivity is partly formed by the structures of that language within which it has emerged. Postman writes:

> variation in the structures of languages [... and] the [...] variety of tools for conversation that go beyond speech [...] will result in variation in [...] 'world view'.
>
> (Postman 1987: 10).

This notion gains depth when the American dream is considered as a language in itself. The American dream as an ideology and an ISA is a pervasive entity and it infiltrates all aspects of life. As such, the American dream becomes a discourse in the Foucauldian sense of the term. For Foucault, discourse signifies entire systems of thought which constitute both the subject and the object. He writes:

> [D]iscourses [... are] practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak [...] discourse is not the majestically unfolding of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but [...] a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined. It is a space of exteriority.
>
> (Foucault 1972: 49, 55)

Discourse is something which resides beyond language as mere speech or utterance, and encompasses the speakers' actions, beliefs and attitudes. Moreover, discourse controls the context and the content of speech and thought. Foucault continues:

> [D]iscursive relations [...] offer [the subject] objects of which it can speak, or rather [...] they determine the group of relations that discourse must establish in order to speak of this or that object, in order to deal with them, name them, analyse them, classify them, explain them.
>
> (Foucault 1972: 46)

Discourse thus controls who can speak, of what, when, where and to whom. The American dream as discourse, then, presents itself as a naturalized and internalized system of thought rather than only a rhetoric or a certain vocabulary with which the concept can be discussed. As a pervasive discourse, moreover, the American dream lacks a metalanguage, making its internal structures difficult to observe.

Neil Postman discusses how the various mediums of communication in American society operate like languages, i.e. discourses, and claims that

> the forms of our media, including the symbols through which they permit conversation [... work] by unobtrusive but powerful implication to enforce their special definitions of reality [...] our media-metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, colour it, argue a case for what the world is like.
>
> (Postman 1987: 10)

Thus forms of communication, such as popular culture, shape our understanding of the world by creating and using a certain language which controls the understanding disseminated by that medium. Furthermore, also the repression of language defines and controls such understanding. American culture is characterized by falling silent on matters which are not considered appropriate topics for discussion or which risk to hurt someone's feelings. The rejection of language is an attempt to keep ideologies and connotations under control. The censorship of *The Catcher in the Rye*, discussed in Section 2.2., is an example of this. Another example would be the rejection of the word 'nigger' which draws powerful links to the nation's history of slavery and segregation.

A very recent example is the list of forbidden words in the schools of New York City. The list has 44 items that should be avoided in discussion, as they could be experienced as insulting, distressing or segregating. The list includes words such as divorce, evolution, Halloween, cigarettes, homelessness, disease, expensive gifts, loss of employment, rap and rock-and-roll music, sex and

slavery (CBS New York 2012). The Schools Chancellor Dennis Wallcot claimed that the list is meant only as a suggestion to those drafting the standardized tests and that while such lists are used nationwide, the list in New York City is considerably longer because the schools in the district display more ethnic diversity. (CBS New York 2012). As an idea, banning potentially 'disturbing' words seems benign, but, in effect, it lessens understanding of, for example, diversity or the nations history. It, furthermore, removes the responsibility of critical thinking from the individual herself and creates individuals who risk becoming blind to the manipulation and exploitation of the power elites.

However, Postman also notes: "[e]ach medium, like language itself, makes possible a unique mode of discourse by providing a new orientation for thought, for expression, for sensibility" (Postman 1987: 10). This notion carries with it positive possibilities of transforming existing orders. Kristeva argues that through language the abject can be released as "the Word alone purifies from the abject" (Kristeva 1982: 23). The Bacchanalian ritual performed by the characters in *The Secret History* is an attempt for the characters to emerge into a new medium of expression and thus be released from the discomforts and constraints they are experiencing in their lives. The ritual, in effect, serves as a deliberate evocation of both the abject and *jouissance*. The ritual is a self-induced crisis by which the characters come into contact with their subconscious, and by which they attempt to release their fears and fulfill their desires.

The characters decide to attempt the ritual inspired by Julian, who during a lecture warns them against the repression of primal drives, as demonstrated by the following passage:

> "We do not like to admit it," said Julian, "but the idea of losing control is one that fascinates controlled people such as ourselves more than almost anything. All truly civilized people [...] have civilized themselves through the willful repression of the old, animal self [...] And it's a temptation for any intelligent person [...] to try to murder the primitive, emotive, appetitive self. But that is a mistake [... b]ecause it is dangerous to ignore the existence of the irrational. The more cultivated a person is, the more intelligent, the more repressed, then the more he needs some method of channeling the primitive impulses he's worked so hard to subdue. Otherwise those powerful old forces will mass and strengthen until they are violent enough to break free, more violent for the delay, often strong enough to sweep the will away entirely."
>
> (*The Secret History*: 36)

However, the characters' attempt to free their repressed selves backfires. Instead of being released from their abject fears, in killing the farmer Harry Ray McRee, the characters in effect create the abject and, simultaneously, strengthen the cycle of repression. In the following section I examine how the ensuing guilt over murder demonstrates this never-ending cycle.

3.2. The Return of the Abject

> [W]alking through [Bunny's murder] was one thing; walking, away [...] has proved to be quite another, and though once I thought I had left that ravine forever [...] now I am not sure [...] I have come to realize that while for years I might have imagined myself to be somewhere else, in reality I have been there all the time [...] I have only to glance over my shoulder for all those years to drop away and I see it behind me again, the ravine [...] a picture that will never leave me.
>
> (*The Secret History*: 1-2)

The dialecticism of the symbolic and the semiotic signifies that the abject always returns to the symbolic order forcing us to confront our repressed fears. Kristeva illustrates the cycle of abjection through the corpse, which reminds us of our mortality and the proximity of death. While all cultures have a need to explain death, religion often playing a vital role in accomplishing this, American culture and the ideology of the dream forcefully reject death by emphasizing never-ending progress and change. The admiration of celebrity culture and the emphasis on history, as examples, manifest the importance of being noticed and remembered after death. While (the fear of) death is experienced on a very personal, individual level, the rejection of it is powerfully institutionalized in American discourse and distributed collectively through, for example, popular culture.

The Secret History, for its part, demonstrates the fear of death objectified in the corpse. However, more than the fear of death, the text shows how the corpse induces another form of abjection, namely guilt over murder. The guilt the characters in the novel experience conflicts with the ideals of the American dream, which promise that

the dream can and must be pursued by any means possible. Therefore, the emotion needs to be continuously repressed. In the following subsection, I examine the relationship of the corpse to the cyclical operation of the abjects of death and guilt. I also discuss how, rather than touching the individual alone, guilt as abject is a collective experience, affecting the group dynamics and resulting in the ultimate disintegration of the group in *The Secret History*.

3.2.1. The Cycle of the American Dream: Murder, Corpse and Guilt

Kristeva views the corpse as the ultimate (object) of abjection because it fits comfortably neither to the world of life nor death. She writes:

> [C]orpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live [...] It is death infecting life [...] it is death that most violently represents the strange state in which a [...] subject [...] imagines nothingness through the ordeal of abjection.
> (Kristeva 1982: 3-4, 25; italics in the original)

Corpses *show* death thus bringing the individual closer to its realm, and because the worlds of life and death cannot exist simultaneously for the single individual, coming into contact with a corpse arouses emotions which are difficult to resolve. I discussed in the previous section how the individual in emotional crisis attaches the arising subconscious fears onto objects in an attempt to rationalize them in the symbolic. This implies that objects are the means to re-repress these fears, not directly the instigator of the process of abjection. The corpse, however, adopts a dual position. By first entering the

consciousness of the individual from the outside, it forces the individual into contact with the repressed fears, thus instigating abjection. After that the corpse becomes the object onto which the fear of death can be latched.

While *The Secret History* demonstrates the rejection of death, the corpse also emerges as the object of another abject fear, namely guilt over murder. This is demonstrated, for example, by the fragmentary and superficial manner in which the two murders and the corpses of the farmer and Bunny are described. The actual murder of Bunny, for instance, is not described at all, only hinted at around the edges. The novel begins with a prologue lamenting how Bunny's death blew out of proportion because his body was not discovered at once. Later the characters are described planning the murder, meeting Bunny at the ravine and, after the murder, leaving the scene.

Like Bunny's murder, the depictions of his body are scarce and superficial, as evidenced in the following passage. At Bunny's funeral, when his coffin is being lowered into the grave, Richard watches Henry, who is one of the pallbearers:

> Henry [...] stood [...] quietly, his hands folded before him [...] the same hands that had dug in Bunny's neck for a pulse and rolled his head back and forth on its poor broken stem while the rest of us leaned over the edge, breathless, watching. Even from that distance we could see the terrible angle of his neck, the shoe turned the wrong way, the trickle of blood from nose to mouth [...] One leg jerked in a solitary spasm which quieted gradually to a twitch and then stopped.
>
> (*The Secret History*: 381)

As I note below, this passage from Bunny's funeral is connected to a moment when Richard experiences guilt over Bunny's death.

Nonetheless, the above depiction of the situation and Bunny's murder is somewhat detached and clinical. Only in Richard's dreams does Bunny's corpse appear in a manner which affects Richard both emotionally and on the level of the body:

> The tub was pink [...] and it was full of water, and Bunny, fully clad, was lying motionless at the bottom of it. His eyes were open and [...] his pupils were different sizes [...] I couldn't move [...] I heard footsteps, and voices. With a rush of terror I realized I had to hide the body [...] I [...] tried to pull him out [...] his head lolled back uselessly and his open mouth was filling with water [...] I woke up.
>
> (*The Secret History*: 267)

Richard breaks into a sweat. He vomits and as he washes his face he begins to cry.

However, at the same time Richard begins to repress the experience again. Already in the dream became clear that he had to hide the body. His crime could not be revealed. Now, after he has calmed down Richard's

> sobs were regular and emotionless [...] there was no reason for them and they had nothing to do with me [...] I felt shaky but oddly refreshed. I ran myself a hot bath [...] and when I got out and put on my clothes felt quite myself again [...] *Nihil sub sole novum*, I thought [...] Any action, in the fullness of time sinks to nothingness.
>
> (*The Secret History*: 268; italics in the original)

Such repression of the murder and guilt ultimately carries the characters through the ordeal of the search for the missing Bunny, the ensuing media frenzy and the police interrogations. Moreover, the repression of emerging anxieties allows the characters to carry on

with their daily lives. For a little while, after Bunny's funeral, Richard even feels "strangely free [...] a huge darkness had lifted from my mind; the world seemed [...] entirely new [...] my life, which I had though was lost, stretched out indescribably precious and sweet before me" (*The Secret History*: 386, 391).

Nevertheless, throughout the text, references to Bunny's murder and body are mainly discussed in contexts where guilt becomes evident. For example, the following passage is from the same point in the narration than the passage above where Richard reminisced on how Henry had inspected Bunny's body:

> The grave was almost unspeakably horrible [...] It was a barbarous thing, a clayey hole with folding chairs for the family teetering on one side and raw dirt heaped on the other. *My God*, I thought. I was starting to see everything, all at once, with a blistering clarity. Why bother with the coffin, the awning or any of it if they were just going to dump him, shovel dirt in, go home? Was this all there was to it? To get rid of him like a piece of garbage? *Bun*, I thought, *oh*, *Bun*, *I'm sorry.*
>
> (*The Secret History*: 381; italics in the original)

Guilt, then, sets the tone for the entire novel. Nevertheless, it is something which is outweighed by the motives for the murder. What eventually enabled Richard to participate in the murder was not the lack of concern for the illegality or unacceptability of such an act. It was the

> [i]nsults, innuendos, petty cruelties. The hundreds of small unavenged humiliations which had been rising in me for months [...] It was because of them that I was able to watch him at all, without the slightest tinge of pity or regret, as he teetered on the cliff's edge [...] arms flailing, eyes rolling [...] before he toppled backwards, and fell to his death.
>
> (*The Secret History*: 207; italics in the original).

Thus Richard's fear of not belonging to the group and the unraveling of his true background outweighs the gravity of the murder. On several occasions Bunny comes close to discovering the truth about Richard's background. Therefore, Richard is willing to go to such extreme lengths in the pursuit of his happiness.

Thus the corpses in the novel do not only open a path to the realm of death but also link the characters to their internal control mechanisms. Kristeva writes: "if I am affected by what does not yet appear to me as a thing, it is because laws, connections, and even structures of meaning govern and condition me" (Kristeva 1982: 10). Death, as that which is not yet a thing, is something the ISAs in American culture keep under control because it signifies the ultimate failure of progress. Furthermore, Kristeva claims that murder is abject because it "draws attention to the fragility of the law" (Kristeva 1982: 4). In other words, such acts signify the powerlessness and failure of societal mechanisms to keep the abject under bay. Murder, then, becomes abject because it points to the failure of social control and, moreover, because the murder is abject, guilt emerges. Guilt, in turn, becomes abject and needs to repressed because it contradicts the promises of the American dream.

The repression of guilt in *The Secret History* is accomplished, for instance, by downplaying the murders. This becomes evident in the following passage where Henry and Francis have just told to Richard about the ritual and the farmer's death:

> "It's a terrible thing, what we did." Said Francis [...] "I mean, this man was not *Voltaire* we killed. But still. It's a shame. I feel bad about it." "Well, of course, I do too," said Henry matter-of-factly. But not bad enough to want to go to jail for it."
>
> (*The Secret History*: 180; italics in the original)

I discussed in Chapter Two how placing a value on objects, actions and people is central to the American dream because it is the only means by which any categorization and ranking between individuals can be done in terms of their success. Thus the undermining of the killing is achieved by comparing the farmer to Voltaire, which implies that the farmer was of less value while lifting the others on a pedestal.

The text, however, shows that the emotions of guilt do not remain repressed. Richard's nightmares recur and he has moments of breakdown, for instance while witnessing the sorrow of Bunny's father during the days leading up to the funeral:

> [Mr. Corcoran] was still crying. His face was purple [...] he grabbed me by the wrist, "Gone," he wailed [...] *"My baby."* His gaze – helpless, wild – hit me like a blackjack. Suddenly, and for the first time, really, I was struck by the bitter, irrevocable truth of it; the evil of what we had done. It was like running full speed into a brick wall [...] I wanted to die. "Oh, God, "I mumbled, "God help me, I'm sorry –" I felt a fierce kick in my anklebone. It was Francis. His face was as white as chalk.
>
> (*The Secret* History: 352-3)

In addition to such individual manifestations of guilt, the characters also experience it on a collective level. The crime is theirs to share and affects the tensions within the group. Ultimately, the crime and the guilt become the only threads holding the group together:

> At one time I had liked the idea, that the act, at least, had bound us together; were not ordinary friends, but friends till-death-do-us-part. This thought had been my only comfort in the aftermath of Bunny's death. Now it made me sick, knowing there was no way out. I was stuck with them, with all of them, for good.
>
> (*The Secret* History: 418)

In the aftermath of Bunny's murder, then, the cohesion of the group begins to disintegrate. Charles, whom the police questions the most, falls out with Camilla and Henry. The latter two had been spending a great deal of time together, which had made Charles insanely jealous. Henry and Camilla even secretly move to a hotel in Hampden in an attempt to remain out of reach. Charles becomes increasingly angry and even violent towards Camilla. He, furthermore, drinks so excessively, that he is hospitalized.

The cycle of repression instigated by the Bacchanalian ritual repeats itself in the murder of Bunny and then reappears to reach an apparent stasis in Henry's suicide. On the surface, Henry seemed to handle Bunny's death better than the others. A few days prior to Henry's suicide Richard visits him while he is tending to his roses. Richard confronts Henry on the detached and placid manner in which he has dealt with the crimes and the increasing tensions within the group. Henry declares to Richard:

> "my life, for the most part, has been very stale and colorless [...] I felt dead in everything I did [...] But then it changed [...] The night I killed that man [...] It was the most important night of my life [...] It enabled me to do what I've always wanted most [...] To live without thinking [...] you've experienced something similar yourself [...] That surge of power and delight, of confidence, of control. That sudden sense of the richness of the world. Its infinite possibility"
>
> (*The Secret* History: 448-9).

Through violence Henry has experienced a sense of liberation. He has broken the boundaries of both societal norms as well as those intrinsically controlling him.

Nonetheless, when Julian finally discovers the truth and abandons the group Henry is unable to handle the burden. Julian has been the single most important person in Henry's life. Even though the successful Bacchanalian ritual and the murder of Bunny played a significant part in Henry's dream, losing Julian's acceptance and support outweighs all other concerns. Richard ponders on Henry's suicide as follows:

> It wasn't from desperation that he did it. Nor, I think, was it fear. The business with Julian was heavy on his mind; it had impressed him deeply. I think he felt the need to make a noble gesture, something to prove to us and to himself that it was in fact possible to put those high cold principles which Julian had taught us to use. *Duty, piety, loyalty, sacrifice.*
>
> (*The Secret* History: 490; italics in the original)

Disappointing Julian, then was a guilt Henry could not bear and the extreme sensation of this guilt ultimately drives him to suicide.

Henry's suicide temporarily resolves the tension within the group, as Richard reminisces:

> You would think, after all we'd been through, that Francis and the twins and I would have kept in better touch over the years. But after Henry died, it was as if some thread which bound us had been abruptly severed, and soon after we began to drift apart.
>
> (The Secret History 1992: 491).

Henry's suicide turns abjection into that experience which for Kristeva signifies the emergence of new subjectivity. Death thus signifies the permanent regression to the pre-linguistic stage, and

Henry finally reaches his desired life “outside the prison of mortality and time” (*The Secret History*: 150), as Henry described the motivation behind the Bacchanalia to Richard. The disintegration of the group, followed by the acceptance of the failure of their dream, enables the characters to confront their abject fears. Yet Richard’s narration reveals that he still carries a burden of guilt. The abject can never be fully repressed and so Richard will forever be prevented from fulfilling the Dream.

4. The Dual Force of the American Dream: Fascination and Desire

> If we are strong enough in our souls we can rip away the veil and look that naked, terrible beauty right in the face; let God consume us, devour us, unstring our bones. Then spit us out reborn.
>
> (*The Secret History*: 37)

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the American dream guards the individual against her anxieties, partly created by the dream itself, which emerge through subconscious fears. In order to reject her fears the individual projects the arising anxieties onto an object, which is then experienced as something terrifying or revolting and pushed back into the subconscious. Furthermore, I discussed how the process of objectification occurs through the emergence of desire. Fears always find their opposite in desire. The fear of failure, for instance, translates into a desire to succeed, and fear of death into a desire of eternal life.

In the chapter at hand, I focus on a subconscious desire, *jouissance*, which is a precondition of existence as it creates a need within the individual to strive forward thus keeping her in perpetual movement. In Section 4.1. I discuss how *jouissance* emerges through primal lack. As I noted in Chapter Three, primal lack emerges when the individual is posited as an independent subject in and through language and she no longer has that sense of unity which is experienced beyond language in the semiotic. The loss of this unity creates a void, a desire, which the individual attempts to fill. In the

symbolic order, much like the abject, *jouissance* is experienced through an emotion of anxiety. It arises when the individual misinterprets *jouissance* as a life force, and instead attempts to fulfill the ensuing discomfort with false objects. The American dream, in order to maintain itself, purports itself as such an object towards which the individual is constantly pulled.

Although *jouissance* does not solely mark sexual desire, I examine *jouissance* in the context of sexuality in Subsection 4.1.1. Sexual imagery in America is a pervasive element of popular culture, yet the ISAs effectively control the individuals' experience and use of this imagery, as well as sexuality in general. In *The Secret History* this control is manifested, first, in the manner the novel evades topics surrounding sexual relations and acts, and, second, in the manner the characters in the novel repress sexuality.

Jouissance is manifested in language as a silent space, something which is tangible but not discussed as it lacks language with which it could be described. *Jouissance* seeps into the symbolic at the point when the semiotic and the symbolic are broken. Art has the power to break this boundary by enabling the individual to experience in her body something that finds no words. The intensity of this experience is one of anxiety and discomfort, which results from the close contact with *jouissance*. In Section 4.2. I examine how the characters release *jouissance* through the Bacchanalian ritual. The ritual assumes the role of a sacrifice which for Kristeva, in addition to art, is an act which releases *jouissance* into the symbolic

order. In the ritual, the characters attempt to shatter their identities, face the "naked, terrible beauty" of *jouissance* and be transformed in the process. However, as the nature of subconscious desire prohibits it from being fulfilled, the characters dreams fail. Ultimately, the American dream can never be fulfilled and the characters sacrifice themselves in the attempt.

4.1. Primal desire: *Jouissance*

> [T]he object that satisfies [desire] intensifies it to the exact degree that it satisfies it, so that satisfaction signifies the reactivation of desire rather than its extinguishment [...] Desire thus refers to an originary incompleteness that exceeds everything that can satisfy it.
>
> (Barbaras 2006: 110-1)

Jouissance is a desire embedded in an individual's subjectivity, arising from the subconscious and manifested in the symbolic order. Kristeva uses the term to denote a primal desire, which is engendered by the awareness of primal lack and the desire to fulfill it, as discussed in the introduction above. Primal lack engenders a desire which constantly encourages the individual to develop and strive forwards towards the (supposed) fulfillment of that desire, and is thus a precondition of existence keeping the individual vigilant and always in a state of flux.

In relation to *jouissance*, the American dream assumes multiple roles. The American dream, first, defines the objects with which the dream could be achieved and thus *jouissance* manifests as

the desire individuals have for objects. On the surface, the attainment of these objects is the dream's purpose and, as such, the dream is the vehicle between the primal desire and the obtainment of the dream's objects. Second, the dream is presented as an object of desire in itself. Thus the material and immaterial objects which are pursued mediate between *jouissance* and the dream. Finally, as the ideology of the dream becomes internalized and naturalized as part of the American social, cultural and historical psyche, both collectively and individually, the dream becomes a subconscious desire in itself. It becomes the entity which drives the individual forward and which encompasses the desire for the objects as well as the dream itself.

As evidenced in the quote by Barbaras above, desire can only be filled to the extent that new desire emerges. As I noted above, desire is a primal drive sustaining life. Thus, desire can never be fulfilled as that would signify the end of existence. Within the symbolic order *jouissance*, like the abject, is experienced as a sensation of anxiety because, as Salecl (2003) states, anxiety guards against the fulfillment of desire. Salecl writes:

> [W]hat produces anxiety, paradoxically, is not the possibility of failure but rather the possibility of success [...] anxiety is not incited by the lack of the object but rather by the lack of the lack, i.e. emergence of an object at the place of lack [...] if one takes success not as a blissful state of harmony but as coming close to *jouissance*, anxiety can be perceived as a protective shield from *jouissance* which also allows desire to keep being alive
>
> (Salecl 2003: 97-8; italics in the original, emphasis mine)

Thus the only object of desire is desire itself, or rather the lack engendering desire. *Jouissance* is experienced as anxiety because

where there should be lack, there is an object placed there by the individuals who believe the emerging desire can be fulfilled. It follows that the object in the place of lack is necessarily false and its achievement will not release desire. When considering the American dream as *jouissance* and the object of *jouissance*, this testifies to the falsity of the dream.

Nonetheless, offering false objects sustains the dream. Individuals are lured towards the dream because they cannot deal with the emotions of anxiety in other ways. Furthermore, the rhetoric of the dream specifically emphasizes that anxiety is the result of something missing from the individuals' lives. Salecl states that "anxiety is often perceived as a state of dissatisfaction, an excitation that the subject feels when he or she is not content with his or her life" (Salecl 2003: 98). The American dream, then, as a desire and as an ISA, is built on the constant presence of lack reflecting the notion of a desire that only breeds desire.

Furthermore, the above demonstrates how *jouissance* and abjection work in tandem. Through anxiety the individual, misinterpreting *jouissance* as a life force, experiences it as a threat to her very subjectivity. As Salecl noted above, the anxiety arises from the *possibility* of fulfilling the desire, yet the individual interprets it as a possibility of failure to achieve the dream and a failure to release *jouissance*. Thus desire becomes an abject fear, which is repressed into the subconscious through abjection. This cycle demonstrates how the abject and *jouissance* create and constitute one another. As

an example, Richard's desire to belong to what he regards as an elite group seems to be fulfilled, but as soon as he is welcomed to the group he begins to fear that he will lose it. This is evidenced by Richard's desire to hide his background. Furthermore, Richard's fear of not belonging is part of the impetus for his willingness and ability to participate in Bunny's murder, as I discussed in subsection 3.2.1.

As a subconscious process *jouissance* cannot easily be translated into language. Kristeva suggests that in and through art, including literature, *jouissance* seeps into language and the symbolic order through the "semiotization of the symbolic [... the] cracking [of] the socio-symbolic order [... by] changing vocabulary, syntax, the word itself, and releasing from beneath them drives" (Kristeva 1984: 79-80). Thus, *jouissance* becomes visible in the symbolic order at the point when the boundary between the semiotic and the symbolic is broken. Art has the ability to disrupt the boundary of the semiotic and the symbolic by tapping into and releasing individuals' emotions and showing *jouissance* in the body. Furthermore, Adorno claims that

> [the] power of resistance has become a *sine qua non* of art [...] The socially critical dimension of art works are those that hurt, those that bring to light [...] what is wrong with the present social conditions [...] Art changes consciousness in ways that are ever so difficut to pin down.
>
> (Adorno 1984: 328, 337).

Art thus has the ability to resist and shatter existing social orders by influencing the subconscious emotions and processes of the individual.

In literature, *jouissance* becomes visible as the silent space

within the text, encapsulating what it cannot express because it has no language. I noted in Section 3.1. that the abject manifests in the symbolic as disturbances in language. *Jouissance*, then, is left under the surface, present yet not discussed. Roland Barthes states that in literature *jouissance*

> imposes a state of loss [...] that discomforts [and] unsettles the reader's historical, cultural [and] psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories [and] brings to a crisis his relation with language.
>
> (Barthes 1975: 14)

This reflects Adorno's view on art. Thus *jouissance,* when experienced in the symbolic, shakes the individual's understanding of herself and her surroundings.

Kristeva suggests that *jouissance* manifests itself in the symbolic by attaching itself to a *floating signifier*, a concept she adapts from Claude Lévi-Strauss (Kristeva 1984: 72ff.). The *floating signifier* refers to such signifiers which have not yet been assigned a meaning or been attached to any signifieds. Thus, the *floating signifiers* are a precondition of art because they hold the power to express that which has no meaning or no language to express that meaning. The *floating signifiers* release the intense emotions one can experience when engaging with art.

Generally, popular culture does not receive the status of art because it is considered to represent the masses, and because it is not linguistically or intellectually as sophisticated as high art. Adorno also holds the view that entertainment and art should be kept apart. He claims that if art is to retain its autonomy and the power to

change social order and consciousness on some more fundamental, indistinguishable level, art has

> to give up the use of those communicative means that would make them palatable to a larger public. If they do not, they become pawns in the all-encompassing system of communication.
>
> (Adorno 1984: 344)

Nevertheless, also popular culture evokes individuals' subconscious emotions, tapping into their unrecognized fears and desires. As such, popular culture has the power to alter identities and social orders and thus it operates on similar principles as art.

In what follows I examine how the ISAs control *jouissance* by enabling and prohibiting its seeping into the symbolic. In Section 4.2., I examine the Bacchanalian ritual as an event demonstrating the process by which the boundaries of the semiotic and the symbolic are broken and the individual's identity can be transformed. Next, however, I focus on how ISAs in American culture control sexuality and sexual desires. Although *jouissance* does not solely mark sexual desire, the concept may be easier to understand in such a context, as it is something common to us all.

4.1.1. Sexualization in/of America

Kristeva discusses *jouissance* especially in the context of the body and sexual desire. As a primal desire, sexual desire is manifested in the body but becomes visible in the symbolic order in, for example, the media and popular culture as well as the highest artistic forms

such as art and poetry. On a more pragmatic level, the individuals' need to satisfy their sexual desires become manifest in a language which combines the body, voice and behaviors, such as flirting and other attention seeking behaviors, which are designed to lead to the (temporary) satisfaction of the desires and to reduce the sense of lack. Such individual behavior patterns are reflected in American culture, especially in its use and portrayal of sexual imagery.

Solomon discusses desire and sexual imagery in relation to advertising from a perspective applicable to my discussion of the American dream. Solomon claims that

> [a]ppealing to our subconscious emotions rather than to our conscious intellects, advertisements are designed to exploit the discontentments fostered by the American dream [...] America's consumer economy runs on desire [...] transforming common objects [...] into signs of all the things that Americans covet most [...] By showing the flesh, advertisers work on the deepest, most coercive human emotions of all.
>
> (Solomon 2001: 146, 152)

As I have discussed, the American dream functions in and through the individual's subconscious and manifests itself through a rhetoric aimed at the collective. Sexual imagery in American culture, then, defines what is beautiful and desirable and thus what represents health, success and inner goodness and trustworthiness. Furthermore, these images entice the individual by showing what is missing from their lives and what they need to become in order to achieve that which the dream postulates.

The proliferation of sexual imagery in American culture numbs consumers to its effects and the messages it conveys.

Furthermore, such images, or the lack thereof, make claims about that which is acceptable or prohibited. This is reflected in the different levels of sexuality portrayed in American popular culture, such as in Candace Bushnell's novel *Sex and the City* (1996) and the television series (1998-2004) and the motion pictures (2008 & 2010) with the same title. While the *Sex and the City* deals with various matters of everyday life, such as friendships, careers and financial situations, a carrying theme is the characters' "Great Sexpectations", as the title of the second episode of season six (2003-2004) pronounces.

However, although sex is apparent throughout, the series displays very little nudity. In fact, as Donaldson James reported on ABCNews, the leading actress Sarah Jessica Parker signed a "no nudity" -contract for the entire six seasons (Donaldson James 2008), whereas Samantha, played by Kim Cattral, frequently displays her body. Generally, Parker's character Carrie Bradshaw is taken considerably more seriously than Samantha, who is a somewhat comical character and who consequently displays more open sexuality. Through humor her 'sexcapades' are easier to deal with.

Samantha's behavior can be viewed from two perspectives. On the one hand, she can be seen as a warning example of what happens when one refuses to conform to the parameters of the dream. Although Samantha does find a partner with whom she could form a stereotypical marriage and thus follow the ISA of the family, she is revealed to be unhappy with this decision. Nonetheless,

because she fails to conform to the ISA, Samantha must constantly reassert her desires with each new conquest, which signifies that she has lost the dream.

However, Samantha stands proud behind her decisions and fights against prejudice as well as her right to decide for herself. Sex and sexuality, through Samantha, are portrayed as a natural thing, which signifies that the ISAs can be challenged. Generally, sexual imagery in popular culture does not serve this purpose but, rather, sexuality is conditioned and sexual imagery creates (false) hopes and illusions of what life, relationships and sex are, should and could be. Furthermore, for example *The Secret History,* by evading topics such as Francis' homosexuality or Charles and Camilla's incestuous relationship, defines and controls the boundaries of accepted sexual behavior.

For instance, the twins' relationship evades recognition both on the level of the characters as well as the reader. The incest is never explicitly shown and the twins are never described discussing their relationship. The intensity of their feelings for each other is only hinted at by their behavior such as jealousy, worry and tenderness, but none of these are explicitly sexual in nature and rather examples of a kinship relation. Only once does Richard witness a "not a brotherly kiss" between the twins *(The Secret History*: 413), but the readers only see Richard's subjective view on the matter.

Similarly, the relationship is something that seems uncomfortable for the characters to discuss, as is visible in the

following passage, in which Richard confronts Francis about the matter after having witnessed the above mentioned kiss:

> "Do you think Charles and Camilla ever sleep together?" I said. [Francis] had just drawn a big lungful of smoke. At my question it spurted out his nose the wrong way [...] "What makes you ask something like that?" he finally said. I told him what I'd seen that morning [...] "That's nothing," he said. "He was probably still drunk." "You haven't answered my question." [...] "All right [...] If you want my opinion. Yes. I think sometimes they do [...] Come now," he said. "You must have had some idea." "No," I said, though actually I had, from the time I'd first met them. I'd attributed this to my own mental perversity, some degenerate vagary of thought, a projection of my own desire [...] and the thought of them together brought, along with the predictable twinges of envy, scruple, surprise, another very much sharper one of excitement.
>
> (*The Secret History*: 413-4)

This passage shows, first, that despite Richard's direct question both characters attempt to evade the topic by downplaying the situation, which testifies to the workings of the ISAs. The norms of acceptable social behavior as well as definitions of family are present. On the one hand, the notions of family prohibit sexual kinship relations even when consensual. On the other hand, a brother and a sister, when engaged in a romantic and sexual relationship, cannot form a family in the traditional sense.

Moreover, Richard's reaction to his own denial is revealing. Although he has acknowledged the incestuous relationship, he has deemed it merely an illusion of his own making and, moreover, a perverted one. The relationship has provided him with a guilty pleasure in which he has been able to assuage his own desires for Camilla while emphasizing that the relationship engenders emotions

of moral anxiety. In effect, every occasion where the twins' relationship is referred to are colored by a moral undertone. For example, Bunny, in a bullying rampage, points out the dubious convenience as well as illegality of such relationships:

> "How come you kids live together?" [...] "It's convenient," said Camilla. "Cheap." "Well, I think it's pretty damned peculiar [...] Not much privacy, is there? Little place like this? On top of each other all the time? [...] And when you get lonesome in the middle of the night?" There was a brief silence. "I don't know what you're trying to say," she said icily. "Sure you do," said Bunny. "Convenient as hell. Kinda classical, too. Those Greeks carried on with their brothers and sisters like nobody's –whoops," he said, retrieving the whiskey glass which was about to fall [...] "Sure, it's against the law and stuff [...] But what's that to you. Break one, you might as well break 'em all, eh?"
>
> (*The Secret History*: 206)

The twins' relationship is never discussed form a neutral point of view. Showing incest or homosexuality would signify that the characters might be able to fulfill their conscious desires and subconscious *jouissance*, which would evoke social disapproval. Furthermore, by falling silent on sexuality, the text also attempts to downplay the fact that *jouissance* cannot ultimately be fulfilled and that the pleasure induced by its presence in the symbolic order cannot last.

Furthermore, Bunny's reference to *those Greeks* draws attention to America's role as setting moral guidelines for the rest of the world to follow. This echoes the ideals of the first Puritans who wished to set an example in prosperity and religious worship. It also echoes the division between the old world and the corrupt English throne, and the righteousness and morality of the Puritans which led

them to seek new modes and places of existence. However, America also prides in being a nation in which everyone are equal and can be whoever and whatever they want. The Puritans, in effect, came to America precisely because they were not accepted in England. The rejection of certain types of sexuality, as an example, then, testifies to a division in American culture between the surface which suggests that anything is possible and a beyond which defines the 'correct' way of living and behaving.

Sexuality in general is silenced and suppressed in the novel. For example, only once does Richard mention having had sexual relations with someone *(The Secret History*: 66) and only once is he described before and after the act, but never actually during it (*The Secret History*: 259). The responsibility, then, of recognizing it is left for the reader, who, if she so wishes, is able to disregard it. However, leaving sexuality under the surface foregrounds the absence of sex where we would expect it. This becomes evident in, for instance, the manner in which Richard and Henry discuss the Bacchanal:

> "But these are fundamentally *sex* rituals, aren't they?" "Of course," [Henry] said agreeably, cool as a priest in his dark suit and ascetic spectacles. "You know that s well as I do." We sat looking at each other for a moment. "What exactly did you do?" I said. "Well, really, I think we needn't go into that now," he said smoothly. "There was a certain carnal element to the proceedings but the phenomenon is basically spiritual in nature."
>
> (*The Secret History:* 153; italics in the original)

While in the text other aspects of the ritual are described with some detail, sexuality is suppressed, although both characters acknowledge its centrality in the ritual. On the surface, both Richard

and Henry consider sexuality as self-evident, and as such they discard the matter as unimportant or at least irrelevant in the face of the more pressing matters, i.e. the successful ritual and the killing of the farmer.

However, refusing the sexual element also lifts the spiritual aspect of the ritual higher than the physical, reflecting not only the ISA of social behavior, but echoing the early Puritan ideology of a spiritual redemption as leading to eternal life. Eternal life, in effect, is the motivation for the Bacchanalian ritual. As Henry describes it, the ritual is an effort to

> stop being yourself, even for a little while [...] To escape the cognitive mode of experience, to transcend the accident of one's moment of being [...] to lose one's self, lose it utterly. And in losing it be born to the principle of continuous life, outside the prison of mortality and time.
>
> (*The Secret History*: 149-150)

The ritual, then, epitomizes the characters' desire to change the order in which they live, to disrupt their subjectivities in order to find new modes of existence and to reach *jouissance.* The Bacchanalian ritual acts as the mechanism by which the boundaries between the semiotic and the symbolic are broken and *jouissance* seeps into the symbolic. In the next section I examine this process and link my arguments to the American dream and the notion of regression and rebirth central to the dream's ideals of progress and change.

4.2. Performing *Jouissance*: Semiotic Desire and the Bacchanalian Ritual

> [S[acrifice and art, face to face, [represent] the two aspects of the thetic function: the prohibition of jouissance by language and the introduction of jouissance into and through language.
> (Kristeva 1984: 80)

In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) Kristeva examines how sacrifice and the ritual and trance preceding it mimic the conditions of the formation of subjectivity and thus break the boundary between the semiotic and the symbolic. Sacrificial rituals, such as the Dionysian Bacchanal, enable a two-way movement: the regression of the individual to the subconscious and the infiltration of *jouissance* into the symbolic order. In this process, the *floating signifier* attaches itself onto the execution of the ritual.

Kristeva argues that

> By *reproducing signifiers* – vocal, gestural, verbal – the subject crosses the border of the symbolic and reaches the semiotic [...the] deluge of the signifier [...] so inundates the symbolic order that it portends [its] dissolution in dancing, singing and poetic animality
> (Kristeva 1984: 79; italics in the original)

Thus through performing the ritual the characters envelop themselves with *floating signifiers.* With the help of “drinking, drugs, prayer [...] small doses of poison [...] chitons [...] Greek hymns [... and] fast[ing]” (*The Secret History*: 150, 152) the characters eventually experience in the body that which has no language, and achieve a trance which opens the path to the subconscious. Henry describes the regression as follows:

> It was heart-shaking. Glorious. Torches, dizziness, singing [...] we think of phenomenal change as being the very essence of time, when it's not at all. Time is something which defies [...] birth and decay, the good and the bad, indifferently. Something changeless and joyous and absolutely indestructible. Duality ceases to exist; there is no ego, no 'I,' [...] the universe expands to fill the boundaries of the self.
>
> (*The Secret History*: 153)

As the characters step outside language the duality between the semiotic and the symbolic dissolves. The unconscious is now perceived differently because it is no longer repressed by the symbolic order.

Furthermore, in describing the ritual to Richard, Henry and Francis declare that

> "It was like being a baby. I couldn't remember my name." [said Henry ...] I was fading in and out, nearly went to sleep [...] Francis [...] had a pretty violent attack of the dry heaves." [...]"Camilla couldn't even talk for three days." [Francis said ...] "Yes, that was very strange," said Henry, "She was thinking clearly enough, but the words wouldn't come out right. As if she'd had a stroke. When she started to speak again, her high-school French came back before her English *or* her Greek. Nursery words [...] the same thing happened to all of us."
>
> (*The Secret History*: 153, 155, 160; italics in the original

In order to speak again, the characters must reform their subjectivities and acquire a new language in order for the symbolic to re-emerge. Kristeva suggests that the new symbolic order and thus new language can re-emerge through the victim of a sacrifice: "focusing violence on a victim, displaces it onto the symbolic order *at the very moment* this order is being founded" and the victim is the first symbol of the new emerging order (Kristeva 1984: 75; italics in the original). In the Bacchanalian ritual the characters sacrifice the

farmer as well as their own subjectivities and the social order from which they wish to escape.

Kristeva differentiates between motivated and unmotivated victims. The latter have no meaning or language and as such become manifested as part of the semiotic experience of the sacrifice. Motivated victims become part of *totemism*, which signify the conscious worship of a deity through an already established language (Kristeva 1984: 76-7). In totemism the victim is part of the ritual preceding the actual regression to the semiotic. *The Secret History* displays both types of sacrifice. The social order and the identities which the characters wish to shatter are the unmotivated sacrifice. Despite that these dreams are conscious decisions, they can only occur in the semiotic where subjectivity can be reformed. Conversely, the farmer becomes the motivated sacrifice. Although his murder is accidental and the farmer is unwilling, the sacrifice occurs in the world of the symbolic. Furthermore, it occurs in the old social order from which the characters want to break free, and in which murder is an abject and not accepted social behavior. Thus the murder connects them permanently to the order which they attempted to shatter and for its part prohibits the release of *jouissance*.

I discussed in Section 3.2. how the death of the farmer opens up the path to the semiotic, and how the presence of death and the corpse tie the characters into a cycle in which the abject, in the form of guilt, is repressed but keeps re-emerging. Death for *jouissance*, like for the abject, signifies the place where *jouissance* is, ultimately,

released. Thus death signifies the permanent regression to the semiotic, in which *jouissance* is experienced. Therefore, although the end of *jouissance* might signify death, death itself does not signify the end of *jouissance*. Thus by reminding themselves of the death of the farmer, the characters attempt to prolong the experience of *jouissance* and maintain the fulfillment of the dream. Nonetheless, as neither *jouissance* nor the dream can be fulfilled, the characters experience this failure in the symbolic as an anxiety. This anxiety, resulting from the proximity of the fulfillment of *jouissance*, as I noted in Section 4.1., becomes an abject, which needs to be repressed. Bunny, then, by reminding the characters of the murder, embodies both the abject of guilt and the proximity of fulfilling *jouissance* and, therefore, needs to be eliminated.

In relation to the American dream, the fulfillment of jouissance and the dream becomes a form of death. The American dream holds *jouissance* alive by constantly luring the dreamers towards it. However, as soon as they come close to achieving it, the dream recedes. The dreamer interprets the failure to obtain the dream as an anxiety. The failure of the dream, then becomes abjected. However, as the process of abjection can only be instigated through desires, as "jouissance alone causes the abject to exist as such", as Kristeva notes (1982: 9), the cycle repeats itself. The dream again presents objects with which the individual can reject the anxiety that she will never reach them.

In Henry' death, the cycle of repression of the abject and the

emergence of *jouissance* appears to end. Henry's suicide is a form of self-sacrifice which stands as an autonomous entity within the symbolic order. In most cultures suicide is considered inappropriate and an abomination. Religion, for example, as an ISA attempts to control suicide by considering it as a sin and claiming that only god has the right to determine matters of life and death. The individual's right to herself is never questioned. The contradiction in this is particularly prominent in connection to the American dream. The dream advocates that the individual *is* responsible for her own life, while creating a framework within which this responsibility is realized. Suicide, then, signifies the total loss of the control of the ISAs and the ultimate death of the American dream. Furthermore, suicide makes the re-imposing of this control impossible, as the individual has completely disappeared from the symbolic order. The ISAs can only forcefully reject suicide and signal to individuals that it is intolerable. Henry's suicide, then, challenges the hold of the ISAs and releases both him and the characters from their present lives. Through Henry's death the characters can, finally, re-emerge into the symbolic with a new language, i.e. a new understanding of themselves and their surroundings.

Nonetheless, the stasis engendered by Henry's death is only a temporary one. The dream enters redefinition as the characters attempt to come to terms with the guilt that Henry's suicide engenders in them. As I noted in Subsection 3.2.1., Richard's entire narration of the events is motivated by a sense of guilt. He begins his

story by stating: “I suppose at one time in my life I might have had any number of stories, but now there is no other. This is the only story I will ever be able to tell” (*The Secret History*: 2). Even though the situation in Hampden College culminates and dissolves, and the group disbands, the memory lives strongly in Richard’s mind and influences his decisions about his life. The cycle of repression continues and although Richard is able to carry on with his life, he will never be truly free from the cycle and thus he will never be able to fulfill his dream.

5. Conclusion: The American Dream as (a) Spectacle

> A dream is a vision or an aspiration to which we can compare reality. It may be very vivid, but its vividness reminds us how different is the real world. An illusion, on the other hand, is an image we have mistaken for reality. We cannot reach for it, aspire to it, or be exhilarated by it; for we live in it. It is prosaic because we cannot see it is not a fact.
>
> (Boorstin 1961: 239).

I began my Thesis by tracing the roots of the American dream to the first half of the Seventeenth Century when the first Puritans arrived from England. They dreamt of building a prosperous nation which would set an example for the rest of the world in terms of religious worship and prosperity. During the four centuries that have followed, the ideology of the dream has manifested its strength and resilience and played an important role in the formation of American society, culture, mind-frame and worldview. Even the very founding documents of the nation promulgate the ideals later identified with the concept of the American dream: freedom, equality and the pursuit of happiness.

Simultaneously, the dream has altered to accommodate changing societal and cultural circumstances. In Chapter Two I discussed how during the time of American expansion homeownership was conditioned on the acquirement and acquisition of land, which contributed to national and republican aspirations. During the Twentieth Century, in turn, home became the locus of private individual and family life, a status symbol and a sign for affluence and self-sufficiency.

While I have emphasised the resilience and strength of the American dream, I have also referred to its illusory nature. In this Chapter I examine the dream as an illusion which has come to replace reality, as Boorstin above suggests. The inherent failure built into the perpetual movement of the dream, and the manner in which the ideology of the dream controls and guides individuals as an Ideological State Apparatus, have been overshadowed by its powerful rhetoric. The pervasiveness of the American dream, then, echoes Gramscian notions of Hegemony. In essence, Hegemony signifies the *ideological* control through which the ruling powers of a society can exert power for their own benefit. Gramsci writes that hegemony

> necessarily supposes an intellectual unity and an ethic in conformity with a conception of reality that has gone beyond common sense.
>
> (Gramsci 2001: 642)

As Hegemony, the values of the American dream become accepted as the unquestioned norm. Hegemony, then signifies the largest unity within a system of power and within which the ISAs function as tools for disseminating ideology, such as the American dream.

Functioning as Hegemony, an ISA and ideology, the American dream operates as what the French Marxist theorist Guy Debord terms a *spectacle.* In *Society of the Spectacle* (1983), Debord argues that all life in Western capitalist societies is a spectacle in which reality has been replaced by representation (Debord 1983: 1)[2]. Debord writes:

[2] I use two translations of Debord's work. The 1983 translation has no pagination and the numbers refer to the sections to which the work is divided. Numbers for the 2006 edition are for page numbers.

> The spectacle [...] is not a supplement to the real world [...] it is the heart of the unrealism of the real society. In all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, as advertisement or direct entertainment consumption, the spectacle is the present *model* of socially dominant life.
>
> (Debord 1983: 6; italics in the original)

Thus in the spectacle the imagined becomes reality. Although Debord's notions of the spectacle could be used to discuss most capitalist societies, it is particularly relevant in the American context and the perspective which I have adopted on the American dream. The manner in which the ideology of the dream has been institutionalized in America finds no parallels in other capitalist societies.

The term spectacle appeals to me because it carries multiple connotations. First, it denotes a grand show or event. The illusions in American culture create a scripted play which is marketed as reality. Boorstin writes:

> Demanding more than the world can give us, we require something be fabricated to make up the world's deficiency [...] We risk being the first people in history to have been able to make their illusion so vivid, so persuasive, so "realistic" that they can live in them [...] Our illusions are the very house in which we live; they are our news, our heroes, our adventure, our forms of art, our very experience.
>
> (Boorstin 1961: 9, 240)

Everything in America is a spectacle and on display, exemplified particularly by the American celebrity culture. Second, the term spectacle suggests a particular point of view. In American society, the self, the other, the nation and all aspects of life are viewed through the lens of the American dream. The ideology permeates all American rhetoric.

Finally, the term spectacle denotes a revelation or an apparition. On the one hand, this is manifested in the almost religious-like fervor of the Americans' belief in the dream. The dream can be used to justify the pursuit of an impossible and unattainable goal, as demonstrated by *The Secret History*. On the other hand, the spectacle as an apparition can be related to the illusory nature of the dream, its unreality which has become reality. Hedges writes:

> [W]e neither seek nor want honesty or reality. Reality is complicated. Reality is boring [...] We ask to be indulged and comforted by clichés, stereotypes, and inspirational messages that tell us we can be whoever we seek to be, that we live in the greatest country on earth, that we are endowed with superior moral and physical qualities, and that our future will always be glorious and prosperous, either because of our own attributes or our national character or because we are blessed by God. In this world, all that matters is the consistency of our belief systems.
>
> (Hedges 2009: 49)

Thus to live in the illusion of the American dream is a choice, something that Americans are willing to do and content in doing. Moreover, throughout American history this willingness coupled with the dream's adaptability are precisely what contributes to the *consistency of the belief system* of the American dream.

Debord argues that the spectacle

> presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible. It says nothing more than "that which appears is good, that which is good appears." [...] The spectacle [...] naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense.
>
> (Debord 1983: 12, 18)

Debord does not discuss the American dream, yet that this passage should so aptly characterize the dream, testifies to the dream's role

as a spectacle. First, the dream for the individual is a *positive* and *indisputable* force. Despite that the pursuit causes anxiety in Americans' lives, the dream is something which gives endless hope and pushes the individuals to struggle for a better life. Second, the focus on visibility and appearance in/of the spectacle demonstrated by Debord above, in relation to the American dream, reminds how appearance and appearing have gradually become increasingly emphasized in American culture as means to turn success into something measurable.

Debord argues that the domination of economy over the individual and all social life has led to the shift of existence of the individual from being into having into appearing, in which "human fulfillment" is not dependent on who the person actually is but rather what she possesses (Debord 2006: 10-11). In such a context the individual must receive her "immediate prestige and [...] ultimate purpose from appearance" (ibid.). Furthermore, the emphasis on appearance signifies, for Debord, that all reality has become social reality (Debord 2006: 11). Thus the individual is constantly dependent on her community to function as a point of comparison. Simultaneously, portraying an image of success leads to a rejection of all that is unpleasant because it reminds the individual of the proximity and possibility of failure.

Finally, the dream is irrefutably *inaccessible*. It is built specifically on the concept of a *dream*, not a reality, and it is a never-ending process the end of which would signify its extinction.

Travelling through America, Baudrillard identifies a certain detached and impersonal character both in the desert and in the metropolis, and reflects this to the Americans' experience of themselves and their relation to their surroundings. He writes of

> a journey which is no longer a journey and therefore carries with it a fundamental rule: aim for the point of no return. This is the key. And the crucial moment is that brutal instant which reveals that the journey has no end, that there is no longer any reason for it to come to an end. Beyond a certain point, it is movements itself that changes [...] the centrifugal, eccentric point is reached where movement produces the vacuum that sucks you in. This moment of vertigo is also the moment of potential collapse.
>
> (Baudrillard 1988: 10-11)

The American dream is a never-ending, self-perpetuating process in which its only objective is the process itself. The dream exists only for the sake of existing and its "means are simultaneously its ends" (Debord 1983: 13). Thus the dream balances on a fine line, where the threat of its collapse is ever present. Nonetheless, because the dream functions as such a pervasive ideology and operates on a language which overshadows its intrinsic impossibility, it evades destruction.

In my Thesis I have discussed the power structures of the American dream, examined how the individual experiences the dream and how the dream can use the individuals' mental processes to maintain its existence. In what follows I discuss how the subconscious processes of abjection and *jouissance* become a cycle in which the individual oscillates between the dream's promises and prohibitions. The interplay creates in American culture (of dreaming) a schizophrenic triangle which the individual navigates as she

pursues her dreams. Finally, I conclude my thesis by bringing *The Secret History* back into focus as a novel which emerged at time when America again stepped on a new course towards future.

5.1. America the Schizophrenic: The Interplay of Abjection, *Jouissance* and the American Dream

> Is a dream a lie if it don't come true
> Or is it something worse
> (Bruce Springsteen *The River* 1981)

In Chapters Three and Four I discussed how abjection and *jouissance* as semiotic processes are manifested in the symbolic order as experiences of anxiety. Abjection and *jouissance* operate on a cyclical process in which the two support each other's existence and thus create the sense of perpetual motion which is an intrinsic feature of the American dream. The subconscious fears are projected onto objects, which are then experienced as something revolting and horrific. In *The Secret History*, Bunny becomes the object of the characters' guilt over the murder of the farmer, and is eliminated in an effort to repress that guilt.

Simultaneously, objects are always the objects of desire, which create the movement towards their attainment. Thus Bunny's murder presents itself also as a possibility for the characters to realize their desire, which is to be rid of the guilt. I noted in subsection 3.2.1. how Henry feels a certain release in murdering Bunny. Thus, in violence *jouissance* can be released into the symbolic

order. As such, the Bacchanalian ritual adopts the role of a sacrifice, as I examined in Section 4.2. According to Kristeva, this sacrifice, whether intentional or unintentional, concrete or abstract, represents violence by breaking the boundaries between the semiotic and the symbolic. Nevertheless, *The Secret History* also manifests how, on the one hand, the repressed guilt continues to resurface within the symbolic order and, on the other hand, how *jouissance* in the symbolic order cannot last. The cycle of repression and resurfacing is a continuous one and leads to the ultimate failure of the characters' dreams.

By connecting Marxist theories of society and psychoanalytical theories of the individual I have not only been able to show how the American dream functions on similar principles as the individual, but also how the ideology of the dream simultaneously abuses and benefits from the individual's subconscious operations. As such, the dream has become worse than a lie. It has become a mechanism of repression. Both the American dream and the individual operate on several dichotomies, which can be characterized by the concept of schizophrenia. In general use, the *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines schizophrenia as "a mentality or approach characterized by inconsistent or contradictory elements" (*Oxford Refernce Online, Oxford Dictionary of English,* s.v., *schizophrenia* n.). While I by no means contrast American culture or Americans with the mental disorder, I wish to incorporate some of the medical and psychological definitions of the term as well.

The *Concise Medial Dictionary* defines schizophrenia as a disorder which constitutes, for example, the "disintegration of the process of thinking, of contact with reality, and of emotional responsiveness" (*Oxford Refernce Online, Concise Medical Dictionary,* s.v., *schizophrenia* n.). By using these definitions I am able, again, to connect an individual condition to both the collective experience of the dream, as well as to the dream's structures. Schizophrenia, as such, instead of a mental disorder, signifies a very particular relationship to reality, which is specifically what the notions of ideology, the spectacle, and Hegemony propose. Within individual psyche and the structures of the dream the schizophrenic element manifests as the oscillation between often seemingly conflicting dichotomies. I identify particularly three levels of dichotomies.

First, as I have noted, the American dream is divided into a surface and a beyond. On the surface level the dream advocates elements which assure its continued movement. More pragmatically, this means that the dream defines certain material and immaterial goals and objects, such as money, a house, a car or fame and beauty, the achievement of which supposedly lead to the fulfillment of the dream. Simultaneously, however, the dream actively prohibits this fulfillment by constantly redefining the particularities of those objects and goals. As such, the dream is programmed to fail.

Second, I claim that the individual's experience of the dream is divided along similar lines. The conscious understanding of, and relationship with, the dream constitutes the surface, and it

encompasses the conscious decisions the individual makes as to the goals she must pursue and achieve. The beyond, then, is represented by the subconscious of the mind, which contains the unrecognized fears and desires which push and pull the individual towards the dream. However, the American dream, in its role as an ISA and hegemony, ultimately creates and defines these fears and desires, and as such they are not only manifestations of the primal drives maintaining existence and survival seeping into the symbolic. The dream-ISA and the ruling forces of society are able to abuse these primal drives for their own benefit in order to maintain themselves. The dream-ISA defines the appropriate dream, the appropriate objects of the dream and the appropriate methods of pursuing them. Similarly, the dream-ISA creates fears and discontentment by showing what is not acceptable. The characters' failure of the dream in *The Secret History* is a demonstration of this oscillation. The dream first promises a new existence but when the characters take the liberty to seriously strive for that goal, their methods and dreams become flawed.

Finally, the dream is divided between the individual and the collective experience of the dream. Collectively, both in history and in contemporary America, the dream is the culmination of the greatness of the nation, of its endless possibilities and the freedom and equality of all its citizens despite their class, ethnicity or other background, and the individual becomes a part of this shared experience. On an individual level, however, the American dream presents itself as

something very personal. The equality of opportunity seems to guarantee the right of the pursuit for all, but it simultaneously implies that one does not have to take responsibility for the others' wellbeing. Solomon writes that "[t]he American dream [...] has two faces: the one communally egalitarian and the other competitively elitist" (Solomon 2001: 145). Collectively, then, the American dream is a manifestation of solidarity. On an individual level, however, it places the rights and the importance of the individual over the collective.

While the dichotomies in American culture seem conflicting, they nonetheless support each other. *A Dictionary of Psychology* emphasizes that schizophrenia is not constituted of a mind split in two (*Oxford Refernce Online, A Dictionary of Psychology,* s.v., *schizophrenia* n.). In this sense, the dualism of abjection and *jouissance*, the semiotic and the symbolic, the individual and the collective, the surface and beyond, are the quintessence of American culture. Thus all of the different sides are, ultimately, constitutive of a one single unity created through diversity.

5.2. Spectacular Spectacular

> Spectacular, Spectacular
> No words in the vernacular
> Can't describe this great event
> You'll be dumb with wonderment
> (Moulin Rouge 2001)

Although twenty years have passed since *The Secret History* was first published it remains topical. Very little seems to have changed as the United States again faces severe economic recession. Furthermore, the antidote remains the same: privatization, deregulation and increased consumption as a way to create employment. Moreover, the rhetoric is the same. For instance, Mitt Romney, the Republican candidate for the upcoming presidential elections declared in the Arizona Republican Presidential Debate:

> there was a time in this country when you knew that if you worked hard and went to school, and if you learned the values of America in your home, that you could count on having a secure future and a prosperous life. That was an American promise and [...] I want to restore America's promise.
> (CNN 2012)

Thus the ideals of the American dream are still the answer to the nation's problems.

However, in contemporary America the promises of the government or corporate world are no longer so easily swallowed or quietly tolerated. In the Fall of 2011, I visited New York City and witnessed the Occupy Wall Street movement first hand. A man was standing in salute holding a banner that read: The American dream: To grow up, become president, and kill people. Certainly,

American military operations have caused a great deal of criticism and protests against the government, not least because the cost of such operations is a major cause of the current economic recession. Moreover, Americans have begun to question the justification behind such futile attempts to bring democracy to the world, supposedly assuring the safety of the nation. For example the scandal of the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in 2004 has shaken national credibility. Nonetheless, what becomes apparent, both in the quote from Romney and the message of the Wall Street protester, is that the ruling powers are to blame. While the American nation and the American people might have diverged from the right course, the ideals of the dream remain steadfast, indisputable and unwavering.

Donna Tartt wrote *The Secret History* in a turning point in American history. Although the ideals of the American dream are visible throughout the nation's history, and the term was coined already in 1931, the 1990s marked a new visibility for the dream, and moreover, its power structures, of which the list of publications in the Introduction to my Thesis is a testimony. All of those works were published during the Reagan era or after. The American dream thus became something which merited a closer look. Although the

story of the American dream is not over and its power and influence have not diminished, it can be examined from new perspectives.

The dream continues its existence as a spectacular spectacular. The potential of the dream to be used for harm is evident, as we have witnessed in the countless of injustices in America for which the ideology of the dream has been a justification. Yet, the language of the American dream also carries with it the potential to constantly develop and shape the way the world is seen and understood. While the fulfillment of the American dream is a utopian promise, America without it would regress to a dystopia. The lived dream, then, is the reality in between.

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Appendix 1: Synopsis of *The Secret History*

The Secret History (1992) begins when the protagonist, Richard Papen, sends an application to Hampden College in Vermont and is accepted to study there on financial aid. Richard is dissatisfied with his life in Plano, California. His parents are unsupportive of his studies first in medicine and then in English literature. Furthermore, Richard lacks a sense of belonging as he finds California to be superficial and unintelligent.

Richard finds an old brochure of Hampden College and is attracted by its images of beauty and serenity which imply an intellectual environment and endless possibilities. Originally, Richard had planned to continue with English literature, but he becomes intrigued by an odd group of Classics students, who seem to be isolated from the rest of the campus in their manners, behavior, attitudes and even appearance. Richard had studied Greek in California and, therefore, he is able to find some common ground with the group. After some negotiations, the Classics teacher Julian Morrow accepts Richard as his student on the condition that he drops all of his other classes.

Richard has fabricated a false identity of a son of a wealthy oil baron, which he thinks will merit a place among the group members: Henry, Francis, Bunny and the twins Charles and Camilla. Although Richard gradually becomes accepted into the group, he continues to feel an outsider. This sensation is boosted by the increasing tension

within the group which Richard witnesses but for which he cannot find a reason. Richard is puzzled by the others' odd behavior and, after the winter break, finally confronts Henry with the matter. Henry then relates to Richard the details of a Bacchanalian ritual that the characters had performed in the autumn, inspired by one of Julian's lectures. The lecture had dealt with notions of the self and how the ancient Greeks had been able to throw themselves into a trance which would release their primitive, subconscious selves. Particularly Henry had been fascinated by the idea of losing oneself, as he experienced his life as a constraint. The characters, then, had decided to attempt the ritual.

Mostly because Bunny is not very serious about the ritual, it fails several times. On one evening, then, Henry, Francis, Camilla and Charles decide to attempt the ritual without Bunny, and it succeeds. However, while running in a trance through the forest near Francis' country house the characters encounter a local farmer Harry Ray Mcree. Not knowing what or who the farmer is, Henry attacks and kills him. They leave the body untouched and return to Henry's apartment in Hampden only to find that Bunny had been waiting for them.

Bunny does not seem particularly shocked by the bloody and muddy appearance of the characters and accepts their explanation that they have hit a deer. However, gradually Bunny grows suspicious of the others. He comes across a newspaper article of the murder of the farmer and, although he does not link the

murder with the ritual, he nonetheless evidences the others' distress every time the murder is mentioned. The others, then, feel a great pressure to keep Bunny satisfied and they go to great lengths to achieve this. Henry even takes Bunny to Italy during the winter break. However, while in Italy, Henry suffers from one of his migraines and while he recovers, Bunny reads Henry's diary in which he has described the details of the Bacchanalian ritual and the murder.

Bunny now has concrete ammunition against the characters and begins to blackmail them and attack their emotional weaknesses. One night, Bunny, who is not aware that Richard already knows about the murder, tells Richard everything he knows. For Henry, this signifies that Bunny might be on the verge of cracking and planning to reveal the murder also to others. Thus plans for his elimination are devised and, eventually, in order to make the murder look like an accident, the characters decide to push Bunny off a nearby cliff into a ravine. Originally, Richard was not supposed to participate in the actual murder. However, when Richard realizes that Bunny would not take his usual Sunday walk in the Hampden woods, Richard hurries to tell the others who are waiting by the ravine. Bunny, nonetheless, eventually appears and he is then killed.

The characters had anticipated that Bunny's body would be found quickly. However, the unexpected falling snow covers it and his disappearance escalates into a full blown search with hundreds of volunteers, the police and the FBI. Charles, who was among those of

Bunny's friends who alerted the authorities, is interrogated by the police the most. Also Henry is questioned on the grounds that he had known Bunny the longest. The aftermath of the murder is specifically difficult for Charles. He cannot handle the interrogations or the emerging sensations of guilt. He drinks excessively and becomes hostile specifically towards Camilla, who had been spending a great deal of time with Henry.

Throughout the novel the relationship between Charles and Camilla has been somewhat mysterious and the hints towards an incestuous relationship trickle between the lines. In this light Charles' anger can be understood when Henry and Camilla secretly move to a Hampden hotel to stay out of reach. Charles eventually finds Henry and Camilla and threatens to shoot Henry. When Henry wrenches the gun from Charles, Richard is shot in the stomach. By now the staff and other guests in the hotel have been alerted by the shouting and the gunshots. However, before they burst into the room, Henry puts the gun to his head and kills himself. After Henry's death the group disintegrates. The four of them only meet a few times after Henry's funeral. Francis moves to New York to live with his mother and also the twins leave town. Richard stays in Hampden and is, in effect, the only one from the group to graduate from Hampden College.

Finnish Summary

Amerikkalainen unelma on käsite, joka on levinnyt laajalti arkipäiväiseen keskusteluun ja viittaa vahvasti amerikkalaiseen kulttuuriin ja identiteettiin. Pro gradu -tutkielmassani tarkastelen amerikkalaisen unelman roolia amerikkalaisessa yhteiskunnassa. Väitteeni on, että amerikkalaisen unelman vahva retoriikka kätkee taakseen unelman aseman yhteiskunnallisen kontrollin välineenä. Lisäksi unelman yksilölliset ja kollektiiviset kokemukset ovat ristiriidassa unelman sisäisten rakenteiden kanssa. Tarkastelen myös, miten amerikkalainen unelma näyttäytyy erityisesti populaarikulttuurissa ja miten populaarikulttuurin tuotteet välittävät ja uusintavat unelman ihanteita. Populaarikulttuuri on merkittävä amerikkalaisen unelman ihanteiden uusintaja, sillä se tavoittaa suuren yleisön ja käsittelee hyvin tavallisia ja arkipäiväisiä teemoja, jonka ansiosta populaarikulttuuriin voi lukea hyvin monia merkityksiä. Amerikkalaisesta unelmasta tulee tällöin luonnollinen ja sisäistetty osa amerikkalaisten toimintaa ja ajattelumallia.

Amerikkalaisen unelman juuret ulottuvat englantilaisten puritaanien yhteisöön. Puritaanit saapuivat nykyiseen Pohjois-Amerikkaan 1600-luvun alussa tavoitteenaan rakentaa yhteiskunta, joka asettaisi esimerkin muulle maailmalle vauraudessa ja uskonnonharjoittamisessa. Puritaanien vapauden, vaurauden ja yhteisöllisyyden ihanteet loivat perustan Yhdysvaltojen synnylle. Vuoden 1776 itsenäisyysjulistus suunniteltiin takaamaan kaikille

Yhdysvaltaiin kansalaisille yhtäläiset oikeudet elämään ja unelmien tavoitteluun.

Amerikkalainen yhteiskunta siis rakentui yhteisöllisyyden periaatteelle, jossa yksilö toimi yhteisen hyvän saavuttamiseksi. Teollistumisen, vapaan markkinatalouden sekä yhteiskunnan rakenteiden ja demografisten muutosten myötä amerikkalainen unelma alkoi kuitenkin yhä enemmän merkitä yksilöllisten ja yksityisten päämäärien saavuttamista yhteisön kustannuksella. Materia ja taloudelliset saavutukset nousivat menestyksen mittariksi, sillä ne tekivät menestyksestä mitattavaa ja näkyvää. Näkyvyys ja ulkomuoto ovat juuri tästä syystä amerikkalaisen kulttuurin keskiössä.

Vaikka amerikkalaisen unelman ihanteet vapaudesta, tasa-arvosta ja menestyksestä säilyivät ennallaan, 1900-luvun mullistukset ja talouden epävakaus aiheuttivat epävarmuutta tulevaisuuden ja yksilön yhteiskunnallisen aseman suhteen. Tässä kontekstissa myös amerikkalainen unelma alkoi näyttäytyä vääränlaisena ja epäaitona ihanteena. 1900-luvun korkeakirjallisuus suhtautui kriittisesti amerikkalaiseen unelmaan ja kuvasi yksilöt ja yhteisöt sen ihanteiden uhreina. Populaarikirjallisuus puolestaan kuvasi amerikkalaisen unelman yhteisön ja yksilön uhrina. Esimerkiksi ensisijainen primäärilähteeni, Donna Tarttin vuonna 1992 kirjoittama *The Secret History*, kertoo tarinaa, jossa romaanin päähenkilöt toimivat amerikkalaisen unelman ihanteiden vastaisesti,

jonka seurauksena päähenkilöiden unelmat ja identiteetit pirstoutuvat.

The Secret History osoittaa, miten amerikkalainen unelma määrittelee sosiaalisesti ja yhteiskunnallisesti hyväksyttäviä toiminta- ja ajattelumalleja. Amerikkalainen unelma vaikuttaa voimakkaasti kaikilla kulttuurin ja yhteiskunnan alueilla, ja siten sen voidaan sanoa olevan ideologia marxilaisen yhteiskuntatutkijan Louis Althusserin määritelmän mukaan. Tässä määritelmässä ideologia tarkoittaa yksilöiden kuvitteellista suhdetta heidän todellisiin olosuhteisiinsa. Suhteessa amerikkalaiseen unelmaan tämä siis merkitsee, että amerikkalaisen unelman kokemus eroaa sen sisäisistä valtarakenteista.

Amerikkalainen unelma toimii myös sosiaalisen kontrollin välineenä, ts. ideologisena valtakoneistona. Althusser määrittelee esimerkiksi uskonnolliset, koulutukselliset ja poliittiset järjestelmät tällaisiksi valtakoneistoiksi. Lisäksi perheen rakenteet sekä kommunikatiiviset ja kulttuuriset järjestelmät toimivat ideologisina valtakoneistoina. Nämä koneistot välittävät valtaeliitin arvoja ja näkemyksiä osana luonnollista, vallitsevaa tilaa, ja täten valtakoneistojen sosiaalista kontrollia on vaikea havaita.

Ideologiset valtakoneistot toimivat itsesäätelyn ja itsesensuurin mekanismein. Yksilö kokee, että hänellä on vapaus ja valta omaehtoiseen päätöksentekoon, mutta tämä valinnaisuus on kuitenkin illuusio. Ideologiset valtakoneistot luovat viitekehyksen, joka säätelee ja ohjaa yksilön päätöksentekoa omien periaatteidensa

mukaan. Ideologiset valtakoneistot siis määrittelevät, mikä on yhteiskunnallisesti hyväksyttävää tai sopimatonta.

Pro gradu -tutkielmassani tarkastelen, miten amerikkalainen unelma ideologisena valtakoneistona käyttää hyväksi yksilön subjektiviteetin rakenteita taatakseen oman jatkuvuutensa. Semiotiikantutkijan ja psykoanalyytikko Julia Kristevan mukaan subjektiviteetti rakentuu tietoisen ja tiedostamattoman välisestä vuorovaikutuksesta. Tietoisella tasolla amerikkalainen unelma antaa toivoa ja rohkaisee amerikkalaisia heidän pyrkimyksissä menestykseen. Amerikkalaisen unelman valta-asema perustuu kuitenkin sen kykyyn vaikuttaa yksilön piilotajuntaan peilaten tämän tiedostamattomia haluja ja pelkoja.

Kristeva määrittelee piilotajuiset halut käyttäen apunaan ranskankielistä termiä *jouissance,* jolle ei löydy suoraa vastinetta suomen tai englannin kielessä. *Jouissance* tarkoittaa sellaista tiedostamatonta halua, joka toimii elämän elinehtona ja selviytymisviettinä. *Jouissance* siis luo yksilölle tarpeita, jotka takaavat yksilön kehittymisen. Pelkoja Kristeva tarkastelee abjektion käsitteen kautta. Abjekti tarkoittaa sellaista tunnistamatonta pelkoa, joka purkautuu tietoisuuteen piilotajunnan ja tietoisuuden vuorovaikutuksen ansiosta.

Sekä abjekti että *jouissance* ilmenevät tietoisuudessa ahdistuksen kokemuksena. Näillä piilotajunnan prosesseilla ei ole kieltä tietoisuuden tasolla, eikä yksilö siksi pysty käsittelemään tai purkamaan niitä kielen keinoin. Amerikkalainen unelma tarjoaa

ratkaisun asettamalla abstrakteja ja konkreettisia tavoitteita, jotka saavuttamalla yksilö voi vapautua kokemastaan ahdistuksesta. Amerikkalainen unelma siis toisaalta työntää yksilön pelot takaisin piilotajuntaan ja toisaalta houkuttelee yksilöä kohti unelman täyttymystä. Amerikkalaista unelmaa ei voi kuitenkaan koskaan saavuttaa. Se perustuu liikkeeseen, jonka keskiössä on jatkuva muutos ja kehitys.

Amerikkalaisen unelman ristiriidoista huolimatta sen ideologia näyttäytyy vahvana amerikkalaisessa kulttuurissa. Vaikka Amerikan historia todistaa, että unelmaa on käytetty oikeutuksena hyvinkin epäoikeudenmukaisille teoille, sen tuoma toivo ajaa amerikkalaisia eteenpäin kohti parempaa elämää. Lisäksi, vaikka amerikkalainen unelma näyttäytyy saavuttamattomana illuusiona ja todellisuuden vääristymänä, se on perustavanlaatuinen osa amerikkalaista identiteettiä.