

Their Time Has Come:
Bad Cinema Nerds as Late-Capitalist Paradigm

Mark Steven

Male Nerd: *Wait! Would you rather live in the ascendancy of a civilization or during its decline?*

Female Nerd: *Poindexter, do you wanna fuck or not?*

Revenge of the Nerds (1984)

Anybody engaged in serious thought about American culture would do well to re-watch the opening scene of Jeff Kanew's directorial magnum opus, *Revenge of the Nerds*. The sequence introduces Lewis Skolnick and Gilbert Lowell, the eponymous nerds who are leaving their parents' homes to board at college where they will both study computer science. Within the film's first three minutes – which ostensibly depict little more than Lewis and his father collecting Gilbert from a suburban home – *Revenge of the Nerds* presents a peculiar though telling series of events. Gilbert reveals a well-nigh pathological reluctance to leave his mother and unconvincingly attempts to mask this condition with concern for her wellbeing, he and Lewis

laugh about ARVs (“average restroom visits”), and with Lewis’ father they crack jokes about genitalia and speculate that soon their greatest concern as “college men” will be “getting laid.”

Even though an excess of bawdy and bodily humour might invite the labeling of *Revenge of the Nerds* as “bad cinema,” this is not why the film’s prefatory moments are significant. Rather, I find *Revenge of the Nerds* particularly interesting from its outset because it opens by throwing the two protagonists down a passage of adherently Freudian psycho-sexualisation. What we witness is Lewis and Gilbert’s evocation of their own progression through the five stages of development mapped out in Sigmund Freud’s “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” (1925). The two nerds rapidly advance from the oral stage through anal to phallic, at which point the narrative pauses for the opening credits, bringing their development into latency.¹ They finally reach genital stage just prior to driving through the campus’ open gates, speeding in with a visual echo of every train-through-tunnel metaphor put to celluloid. It is only apposite then, after this diegetic-developmental charge and upon their arrival at Adams College, that Lewis exclaims, “You know Gilbert, I feel different already. More mature.”

At this point of apparent sexual maturity Lewis and Gilbert enter into a surreal space more akin to the Freudian dreamscape than any real-world tertiary institution. Unlike similar though more mainstream and critically-acclaimed movies such as *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) or *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Revenge of the Nerds*’ setting is comparable to some of the dreamlike cinema directed by Luis Buñuel or David Lynch and is virtually identical to the dream sequences of the early *Nightmare on Elm Street* films (1984, 1985, 1987). As the Freudian dream is full of the most “indifferent and strangest material” while still driven by some fundamental desire, the apparent surreality of dreams is attributed to the transmutation of thoughts via what Freud calls dream-work: the psychological function which transforms latent dream-thoughts into the manifest dream by way of condensation, displacement, and symbolisation.² On first impression, Adams College seems to have undergone the same treatment, as though it too has been condensed, displaced, and symbolised by a cinematic dream-work. Clumsily barging their way across the grounds, Lewis and Gilbert encounter a cavalcade of bizarre characters and *tableaux*: two sartorially identical women, a platoon of marching soldiers, a man being dropped, face first, from the roof of a two-storey building, and a collision involving two bikes, a fully loaded golf cart, and an ill-placed desk. Though the latent meaning of these bizarre images isn’t readily distinguishable their conspicuousity and abundance invites an argument that they serve as manifestations of some impulse buried within *Revenge of the Nerds*’ diegesis.³

I provide these psychoanalytic remarks as initial coordinates for an interpretation modeled upon the work of Fredric Jameson, whose writing combines psychoanalysis and a Marxist theory of ideology. If cinema has as its underlying impulse, to take up Jameson, “albeit in what is often distorted and repressed unconscious form[,] our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it now and as we feel in our bones it ought rather to be lived,”⁴ then what might be manifest in *Revenge of the Nerds* are fragmentary traces of the culture which gave birth to this film and perhaps even desire for an alternative to these conditions of production. The culture in question is that of mid-eighties, late-capitalist America, the epicentral heart of which is Hollywood. Jameson has described this context in decidedly Marxian terms:

... this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror.⁵

This description insists upon the question of whether *Revenge of the Nerds*' surreal imagery and sexed-up protagonists are somehow superstructural articulations of a destructive and blood-soaked mode of production. Because Adams College appears as subject to the same hyperbolic psycho-sexualisation that Lewis and Gilbert underwent in the opening scene (abounding with scantily clad, feminine flesh and hordes of lascivious men), thinking about *Revenge of the Nerds* as cinema's dream-worked manifestation of late-capitalist culture could recast Adams as less a tertiary institution than the hypersexual dreamscape of postmodern America. This would be Tinseltown's ostensible upside to the endemic blood, torture, death, and terror of late capitalism. Psychoanalysis thus provides a point of entry from which it is possible to unfold the latent tensions that underpin *Revenge of the Nerds*, illuminating the destructive underside of its mode of production. Before proceeding, however, a brief aside might clarify my position in regards to Marxism. While I am working within a “base and superstructure” mode of thought, my understanding of this theory is not that of Karl Marx's own “economism” but, rather, Raymond Williams' more nuanced revision. Williams argues that “superstructure” must be revalued “towards a related range of cultural practices, and away from a reflected, reproduced, or specifically-dependent content” and, decisively, “the base” must be rethought “away from [the] notion[s] of [either] a fixed economic or [a] technological abstraction, and towards the specific activities of men in real, social and economic relationships, containing fundamental contradic-

tions and variations, and, therefore, always in a state of dynamic process.”⁶ In light of Williams’ adaptation, I would like to think about *Revenge of the Nerds* as a superstructural articulation of a culture that is comprised of the “real, social and economic relationships” which I will be referring to as “conditions of production.”

Though the nineteen-eighties gave birth to countless bad films, few seem anywhere near as pertinent to what Jameson would have called “postmodern America” as *Revenge of the Nerds*. While nerds initially made their mark in the precursory campus movie, *Animal House* (1978), and certainly played distinctive roles in the science fiction of William Gibson (especially his novel, *Neuromancer* [1984]) as well as in films like *Tron* (1982), *War Games* (1983) and *Weird Science* (1985), *Revenge of the Nerds* appears to be more engaged with its cultural context. Avoiding banal comparisons between George Orwell and capitalist dystopia, the year of *Revenge of the Nerds*’ release (1984) played host to an epochal moment for American nerds – the birth of Apple computers and so the arrival of Microsoft’s first marketplace challenger. This event insinuated nerds – such as Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, the minds behind these two corporations – deeper into a cultural consciousness than ever before and situated their virtual empires as driving forces behind the evolution of capitalism. Most significant for us, though, and relevant to the two dominant character types of *Revenge of the Nerds* – nerds and jocks, whose relationship I will discuss further on – is the means by which Apple broke onto the scene: with a *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) inspired commercial, directed by nerdy icon Ridley Scott, which aired during the third quarter of Super Bowl XVIII on January 22. The prominence and placement of this commercial marks the establishment of nerds as central to postmodern America’s cultural paradigm and so, when released in November that year, our privileged text presented itself as a film sensitive to that moment. *Revenge of the Nerds* thus lends itself to us as a seismograph with which we might measure the ideological tremors of an evolving postmodern culture.

While there is a wealth of scholarship detailing the ideological programs that permeate and proliferate through cinema as well as numerous studies on the psychoanalysis of film, little of that work concerns ideological or psychoanalytic readings of a distinctly *bad* formulation of cinema. It will be my contention that any analysis of “bad” cinema requires the revision and perhaps even inversion of strategies employed by scholars of mainstream, popular, and “good” cinema, and that the adjectival qualifier “bad” necessitates both the refinement of an ideological and psychoanalytical apparatus as well as a clear explanation of what makes a film “bad.” Once these critical steps have been taken it might also be possible to distill, from

bad films, insights into culture that are mystified and repressed by good cinema. Building upon seminal works of ideological film criticism – Jameson’s *Signatures of the Visible* (1992) and Slavoj Žižek’s synthesis of psychoanalysis, cultural history, and Marxist philosophy – this essay takes *Revenge of the Nerds* as the paragon of bad cinema so as to provide, by way of psychoanalysis, an ideological reading of a bad movie. The following analysis should therefore be regarded as a case study, offering suggestions toward the idea of a psychoanalytico-ideological approach to bad cinema.

Bad Cinema under Late Capitalism

Writing about ideology and cinema, Jameson argues that late-capitalist commodity fetishism has reified the experience of cinema itself. The concept of the commodity, he writes, “introduces the possibility of structural and historical differentiation into what was conceived as the universal description of the aesthetic experience in whatever form.”⁷ Implicit with this rule of the commodity is the aestheticisation of culture more generally: commodification, he continues, “has an immediate relevance to aesthetics, if only because it implies that everything in consumer society has taken on an aesthetic dimension.”⁸ The impact of commodification and reification is that mainstream Hollywood films’ diegeses handle their conditions of production – postmodern America – by “producing compensatory structures of various kinds” and “repress[ing] them by the narrative construction of imaginary resolutions and by the projection of an optical illusion of social harmony.”⁹ Following this line of thought, we can argue that mainstream cinema reflects an *imagined* late capitalism, recasting the cultural conditions of postmodernism within an *idealised* and *fictive* cinematic representation. The strength of this argument can be tested against the two mainstream films I cited earlier, *Fast Times* and *The Breakfast Club*. While both are laden with cultural anxiety – *Fast Times* depicts the problems faced by youth in a hyper-sexualised, commodified school while *The Breakfast Club* focuses on social stratification and class tensions – they each conclude in the same fashion: by anesthetically resolving and so cancelling the anxious energy which makes them such interesting works of cinema to begin with.

Though mainstream cinema might be governed by the repressive injunctions of what I called “imaged” capitalism, if I suggest that bad films somehow evade such repression, then prior to considering a bad film in detail it is still necessary to locate bad cinema as a delimited category within the cinematic medium, as antipodean to the mainstream, the popular, and

the good. While there is an ongoing debate as to whether or not the commodity wields enough potency to “dissolve, fragment, and atomize” generic groupings,¹⁰ the “bad” in “bad cinema” isn’t indicative of genre placement as much as it suggests aesthetic judgment. Of course we might prefer or have an aversion to certain genres; however, the only objects which warrant labels of “good” and “bad” are those which have been judged on their own merits irrespective of genre. This implies that “bad” might have its own aesthetic properties. Immanuel Kant offers the best rendition of such an argument, reasoning that objects described as “good” or “bad” have been labeled with “a claim to validity for everyone without the universality that pertains to objects,” or more succinctly, “subjective universality.”¹¹

If “bad” is an aesthetic category within the cinematic medium, then what constitutes a bad aesthetic? Because “bad cinema” is generically diverse, drawing upon the entire cinematic paradigm for its content, any attempt to detail an aesthetic of the bad will be cursory, reductive, and thus provisional. However, Gilles Deleuze offers a devastatingly precise explanation of what he calls the “disgraceful works” of “bad cinema” in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1985). Unlike “good” mainstream films which repress their conditions of production, according to Deleuze bad cinema “has drowned in the nullity of its productions.”¹² Bad cinema occurs when, in an attempt to provide a physical and affective cinema, the affective “violence is no longer that of the image but that of the represented, [and] we move into a blood-red arbitrariness”; or in other words, “when grandeur is no longer that of the composition but a pure and simple *inflation of the represented*.”¹³ Thus bad cinema is that which is flooded by its own concepts at the cost of the film’s overall quality of form, it is that which sacrifices the medium to its own prurient objects of representation.¹⁴ In *Revenge of the Nerds* the most pervasive and no doubt perverted theme is a chauvinistic *bildungsroman*, the trajectory of which is fuelled by arbitrary depictions of procrustean sexuality. While this theme will be discussed in the following section, it is worth pointing out that such a trope has swollen to the point of bursting over the past three decades of bad Hollywood, giving rise to such canonically disgraceful films as *Porky’s* (1982), *Bachelor Party* (1984), and, perhaps most recently, the *American Pie* trilogy (1999-2003).

In more psychoanalytic terms, bad cinema should also be characterised as a medium whose aesthetic is derived from representations that have been condensed to a level of hyperbole as is the effect of dream-work. And while Deleuze writes that bad cinema is predicated on massification,¹⁵ we can also infer its experience appeals to some ultimately shared fundamental desire – after all, to succeed with the masses a film must please an enormous and disparate group of patrons. Hence *Revenge of*

the Nerds presents itself as appealing to a salacious desire, expressed metonymically during the scene when a markedly heterogeneous group of nerds bond over titillating and voyeuristic images of the female students of Adams. Despite differences in class, age, race, and even sexual preference, the group's eyes all transfix upon the television screen as the nerds salivate over softcore and oftentimes unfocused depictions of disrobed sorority girls. By framing female characters as little more than sexual objects as in this scene and, similarly, the male cohort as nothing but bastions of sexual aims, *Revenge of the Nerds* situates itself as bad cinema *par excellence*. In the simplest of terms – and to borrow from the film's introduction – *Revenge of the Nerds* is a movie about college guys trying to get laid. Thus, *Revenge of the Nerds'* diegesis plunges to the depths of “bad” under the weight of its own Rabelaisian object of representation. Though these claims are still somewhat shaky, my analysis in the following section should give weight to any labeling of *Revenge of the Nerds* as bad cinema.

If we agree with Deleuze's definition of bad cinema then we should also stake the following wager with Jameson, for whom cinema is “essentially pornographic.”¹⁶ For Jameson, cinema “has its end in rapt, mindless fascination,” and “thinking about its attributes becomes an adjunct to that, if the film is unwilling to betray its object.”¹⁷ Bad cinema, then, with its condensed violence of the represented, enacts this betrayal of a late-capitalist object, its conditions of production. To express this in psychoanalytic terms, according to Freud, dream-work – such as that which gives shape to Adams College, condensing *Revenge of the Nerds'* underlying tensions – is a psychological process responsible for producing symptoms.¹⁸ Provided the symptom is a blatantly perceptible “cipher of some repressed meaning,”¹⁹ we should be able to locate within *Revenge of the Nerds* those conditions of production that have been repressed in mainstream cinema. If the ideological function of mainstream, popular, or good cinema is, as Jameson has it, “overflowing the night before, staining the morning, and saturating it with half-conscious reminiscence,”²⁰ then bad cinema should be considered the Freudian inversion of this: an overflow of the waking day – characterised by imaginary repression – into the symptomatic excess of dreams. What this means, then, is that while mainstream cinema is largely representation prostrate under the repressive and homogenising radiance of the Hollywood culture industry, bad cinema opens itself up and, if examined psychoanalytically, it should produce evidence of the typically repressive and unrepresented mode of production behind the enterprise itself. If Jameson and Deleuze are correct, then our analysis of bad cinema becomes a mirror which theoretically turns Hollywood's blinding spotlights back against their origins, intensified and incisive, in a violent act underscored by *ressenti-*

ment.

Therefore, and now proceeding (albeit tentatively) with the supposition that *Revenge of the Nerds* is bad cinema, this film might provide insight into the disavowed underside of a rabidly evolving mode of production. However, the dream-work shaping the manifest content of this film operates by the principles of condensation, displacement, and symbolisation, and so despite the apparent symptoms of postmodernism, it is first necessary to analyse the correspondence between this film's diegetic content and its conditions of production.

Nerds v. Jocks

Revenge of the Nerds is a film whose narrative thrust is from the hips, its plot being driven by a series of competing masculine libidos. This is inferred from the nerd cohort of the film – the Lambda-Lambda-Lambda fraternity – all of whom act as though they are exploding with libidinal energy. Consider, for instance, unassuming Takashi's perverse fascination with women's genitalia or what he likes to call "hair-pie." This is but one manifestation of a collective consciousness most apparent at the nerds' frat-party-cum-orgy and metonymised by the accompanying Gleaming Spires' hit, "Are You Ready For The Sex Girls?", a pop-rock anthem backing the night's descent into drug-fuelled, flesh-fondling debauchery. Shifting this sexuality into a governing overdetermination – an overdetermination carried throughout the entire film as initiated during Lewis and Gilbert's drive to Adams – is Booger's interrogation of Gilbert upon the latter's meeting of Judy, whom he describes as a "nice girl." Booger asks, "Big deal, did you get in her pants?", to which Gilbert replies, "She's not that kind of a girl, Booger." Booger retorts, "Why, does she have a penis?" While *Revenge of the Nerds* appears to be seminally glued together into matrix of libidinal energy directed from the male characters toward the bodies of their female counterparts, this matrix might serve as a hypersexual and microcosmic formulation of a torsional moment in economic evolution.

What I have called a matrix is comprised of the antipathetic culmination of two bellicose masculinities – of the nerds and the jocks – whose distinct yet competing sexual economies provide the friction that makes *Revenge of the Nerds'* narrative exciting. I would like to argue that these two sexual economies are also condensed, symbolic, libido-driven manifestations of late-capitalist development. If this is the case, any rivalry between the two parties must be understood as evolutionary rather than merely adversarial. On this ground we begin to advance an argument that interaction between nerds and jocks accentuates the chiasmatic advancement of a

Cartesian mode of production – Cartesian in its ontological evolution along lines of mind/body dualism; chiasmatic for the lines' point of intersection, crossing ascent with descent, prosperity with obsolescence. Though the following deployment of Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian revision of René Descartes' philosophy might seem disconnected from a discussion on film, Jameson's claim that cinematic experience has become commodified invites such theorisation. If the commodity is an object invested with meta-physical properties, to strip the commodity of its non-corporeal value – its *cogito* – is to render it obsolete, at which point it ceases to exist within a Cartesian mode of thought. This is the evolutionary imperative depicted by *Revenge of the Nerds* and the developmental logic governing late-capitalist culture.²¹

For clarity's sake, it should also be said that obsolescence cannot be achieved by way of scholarly critique and nor can the (literal-minded) critic urge its advance. Žižek offers a tight formulation as to why this is the case, arguing that the “fetishist illusion lies on our real social life, not in our perception of it – a bourgeois subject knows very well that there is nothing magic about money, that money is just an object which stands for a set of social relations. But he nevertheless acts in real life as if he believed that money is a magic thing.”²² Commodity fetishism operates on a practical level unimpeded by any sort of demystification and it is here that obsolescence might occur. When I refer to obsolescence and the outmoding of certain forms of production I do so from the perspective of an interpreter looking to understand how social relations take shape within a particular type of film, not as the cynic disavowing my own proximity to that fetishism while implicit in the myth itself.

Žižek writes about Cartesian dualism in his new preface to *The Ticklish Subject* (2008), arguing via Jacques Lacan for the revision of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* and the assertion of its famous reformulation as “I think where I am not.” This, according to Žižek, “decenters thinking with regards to my Being, the awareness of my full presence: the Unconscious is a purely virtual (inexisting, insisting) Other Place of a thought which escapes my being.”²³ The accent, here, is upon “the gap that separates *cogito* from *sum*, thought from being.”²⁴ “Lacan's aim was to undermine the illusion of their overlapping by way of pointing up a fissure in the apparent homogeneity of thinking-being.”²⁵ However, there *is* an overlap between the two – “a negative one, for sure” – conceived of by Lacan as “the most radical zero-point of the Cartesian *cogito* as the point of the negative intersection between being and thinking: the vanishing point at which *I don't think* and *I am not*.”²⁶ If we follow Žižek and apply this critique of Cartesian philosophy to late capitalism it becomes possible to demystify the relations

between thought and being – understood as superstructural articulation and base paradigm respectively – and so we can therefore think to the critical imperative of deconstructing any illusory separation of the two as veiled by the repressive injunctions of postmodernism’s cultural homogeneity.

Working with the differentiation – which in no way implies separation – between *cogito* and *sum*, there is an argument to be made that the jocks personify a culture which gives preference to the body (*sum*) over the mind (*cogito*) whereas the nerds exemplify this culture’s direct opposite: mind’s rule over body, the primacy of *cogito*. If these two modes of being are dream-worked manifestations of our evolving mode of production – hyperbolically condensed instances of late capitalism – then the nerds’ effective defeat of the jocks at the film’s conclusion marks a transition within capitalism. Before thinking about this chiasmatically and consequentially we should first consider the two groups of characters.

The first character type is that of the jocks or, in this film, members of the Alpha-Beta fraternity. “The Alpha-Betas are okay, if you like sweat socks,” sing members of their sister sorority, the Pi-Delta-Pis. “You’re jocks, go live in the gym,” charges the Dean of Adams College at the film’s conclusion. The Alpha-Betas are characterised by athleticism or perhaps even physical labour – by the necessity of muscle power behind any production or, in *Revenge of the Nerds*, their lure for attracting women. This idea is reinforced throughout the film as the Alpha-Betas’ sexual economy is embroiled with exercise. “All American” ringleader, Stan Gable, for instance, adopts the language of Arnold Schwarzenegger’s more muscle-bound days and refers to coitus as “pumping iron.” And as though acting on Stan’s rhetoric with reversed semantic properties, at an Alpha-Beta frat-party men can be seen “pumping iron” in a more traditionally Schwarzeneggerian sense by performing pushups – though only doing so while sorority girls straddle them. If the jocks’ sexual economy is predicated almost entirely upon their physicality it is unsurprising that they appear mentally undeveloped and, if anything, confused and compensatory when it comes to sexuality. We encounter this most overtly toward the film’s conclusion, when the jocks perform in a talent contest as cheerleaders and are afterward berated for being “girls” by their hypermasculine coach. “When you were a baby in your crib, your father looked down at you,” their coach lectures them. “He had but one hope, that someday my son will grow to be a man.” This incitement leads to absolute evolutionary regression, made ironic by the sign painted behind the coach as he chastises them: “Only the strong will survive.” The jocks scream, growl, and chant “nerds,” then proceed to destroy the Tri-Lamb frat-house, tearing apart furniture, smashing possessions, and

smearing faeces across the walls. Such appalling behaviour testifies to is an unevenly developed body-over-mind characterization.

The second character type is that of the nerds. Despite their diminutive stature, the nerds' prodigious intelligence enables partial transcendence of physicality so as to develop a sexual economy of the mind: the (illusory) appearance of a pure *cogito* whose purity is, after all, belied by its employment to the end of sexual conquest (arguably the most corporeal of all conquests). An obvious and somewhat tasteless metaphor for this apparent transcendence is the javelin Lamar throws during the Adams College "Greek Games" and with which he outperforms his competitors. Though seemingly ridiculous in comparison to Stan Gable's stiff, metal spear, Lamar's drooping, flaccid javelin had been engineered to accommodate to his "limp-wristed throwing style," an adaptation which allows for him to post a far greater throw than his opponents. Both Lewis and Gilbert realise what is unsubtly metaphorised by the javelin in the ways they attract their female partners. Gilbert woos Judy in a hyperreal moment during computer class by showing her that "some people create with their hands, but with a computer you build something with your mind, and if you're good, you can make something nobody's ever seen before." What he creates is an image of he and Judy holding hands and dancing, a simulacrum from which their relationship proceeds. Lewis, on the other hand, wins the affection of the cheerleader Betty Childs with a stellar sexual performance for which he quite literally masquerades as her boyfriend so as to introduce her to new and nerdy sexual horizons. In response to her praising his performance, Lewis attributes his prowess to an inversion of the jocks' body-over-mind dualism. "All jocks ever think about is sports," he claims, whereas "all nerds ever think about is sex."

Though these characterisations are immensely reductive and so invite the criticism that I have lost several heterogeneous narratives, *Revenge of the Nerds* presents a formulation of what Žižek would call "postmodern racism," a concept more widely known as "multiculturalism." While the tolerance implicit in multiculturalism condones "the folklorist Other deprived of its substance," writes Žižek, "any 'real' Other, is instantly denounced for its 'fundamentalism,' because... the 'real Other' is by definition 'patriarchal,' 'violent,' [and] never the Other of the ethereal wisdom and charming customs."²⁷ Such logic is tested and proved repeatedly across *Revenge of the Nerds'* narrative though it is never more obvious than during the nerds' musical performance toward the film's conclusion. In this scene a debased aesthetic of alterity is put on display by way of the performers' emphatically fetishistic styling: Booger performs as a late-career-Elvis, Takashi dons a traditional Native American headdress (though he plays a gong), African-

American Lamar adopts the appearance of Michael Jackson. While these folklorist Others perform in harmony, the added irony is that the nerds' song is structured around Lewis and Gilbert's rhythmic and aesthetic pastiche of the post-punk band, DEVO, a group that formed in the late 1970s to win renown for their hyperbolic flattening out of personal expression as a means of satirically critiquing American culture.²⁸ The combination of various trivialised identities as held together by the markedly dispassionate rhythms of Lewis and Gilbert exemplifies the Žižekian take on multiculturalism. Hence, while I might be guilty of reducing a complex array of characters to aggregative groups of nerds and jocks, my doing so should be read in response to the film's own precedent which is symptomatic of a post-modern American condition.

Bringing my two character sketches back to what I described as late capitalism's chiasmatic advancement, as the nerds supersede the jocks by winning governance of the Greek Council by their victory at the Greek Games, the nerd/jock, thinking/being polarities reverse and so generate a chiasmus: body over mind evolves into mind over body. The obvious alternative to this reading is that the nerds do not evolve from one constituent of being into the other but instead dialectically resolve their mind/body dualism into a more unified mind-body existence. Though this is a far more accurate reading of the both *Revenge of the Nerds* and late capitalism, it is not how the film initially presents its own narrative – rather, *Revenge of the Nerds* presents a chiasmatic evolution which forces the jocks' mode of being beyond the dialectic and into non-existence while simultaneously and conspicuously deconstructing this narrative logic.

When the mind/body and body/mind modes of being cross, the jocks succumb to what Žižek calls the “Lacanian zero-point,” the vanishing moment at which “*I am not*” because “*I do not think*”:

I am not. I am not a substance, a thing, an entity; I am reduced to a void in the order of being, to a gap, a *béance*.

[...]

I do not think: here, again, Lacan paradoxically accepts Heidegger's thesis that (modern mathematized) science ‘doesn't think’ – but, for him, this precisely means that it breaks out of the framework of ontology, of thinking a logos correlative of Being.²⁹

With the nerds' triumph over the jocks an existential void forms – that of evolutionary obsolescence, marked by the intersection of the chiasmatic X – and the jocks seemingly vanish into nothingness: their mindless *sum* has been outmoded by the nerds' *cogito*. The final shot of *Revenge of the*

Nerds metaphorises this spatially, with hundreds of nerds bunched into a circle which effectively acts as a vortical lacuna, a vacuum that swallows any energy generated by the jocks, whose physicality was hitherto being celebrated in the form of a pep rally for the Adams College football team. It is at this moment that the jocks' command of the physical implodes under the pressure of its own perceptible contradictions – a gravitational collapse, manifest as a black hole from which their culture cannot return. Is this not a trope typical of bad American cinema from the 1980s – a vanishing point into which the meat of physicality dissolves before the radiant glow of advancing virtual technologies? This tendency appears in action flicks such as *Terminator* (1984) and *Robocop* (1987) as well as, and in close solidarity with *Revenge of the Nerds*, in those films I mentioned earlier: *Tron*, *War Games*, and *Weird Science*.

Following the Freudian principles of condensation and symbolisation, the jocks' physicality should be understood as metonymic of an industrial and laborious form of production whereas the nerds' intellects typify a shift to what Žižek calls "virtual capitalism."³⁰ Taking our definition of this term from Žižek, the virtual embodies ideals of a "frictionless capitalism" for "a post-industrial society in which we witness the 'end of labor.'³¹ This model's supersession of its primitive, industrial predecessor is clearly at work across Adams College. Consider, for instance, the dormitories of the two character types. The Alpha-Beta frat-house bears a striking resemblance to the festering slaughterhouses of Upton Sinclair's disgusted critique of industrial capitalism, *The Jungle* (1906). When Gilbert and Lewis are brought to the house for hazing, Lewis' intrepidity – like that of Sinclair's protagonist, Jurgis Rudkus, a Lithuanian immigrant just arrived at Chicago's meatpacking plants – is soon crushed by what stands before him: a Fordian production line of paddles, jocks working to a division of humiliating labours, and, once more evocative of Sinclair, a sacrificial beast (a goat, whose position is akin to that of the nerds, soon to be tortured, sexually, by physically stronger beings). The message broadcast here is that jocks are the embodiment of postmodernism's merciless underside, its blood, torture, death, and terror. Emblematic of this sentiment is the gore-red signage above a line of cloaked jocks: "Altar of Sacrifice."

The nerds' house is more akin to the imagined offices of Google, Apple, and Microsoft, places where former hackers and technocratic whiz-kids "work long hours and enjoy Starbucks coffee in green surroundings."³² What this new, virtual mode of production has over its industrial predecessor is enhanced palatability, the idea that while "the cruel businessman destroys or buys out competitors, aims at virtual monopoly, employs all the tricks of the trade to achieve his goals," the "greatest philanthropist in the

history of mankind quaintly asks: ‘What does it serve to have computers, if people do not have enough to eat and are dying of dysentery?’³³ Little wonder that the virtual triumphs – hegemonically winning support, as do the nerds – and so relegates the physical, industrial mode of being to the Cartesian void. “Software is winning over hardware and the young nerd over the older dark-suited manager,”³⁴ writes Žižek. This is precisely what *Revenge of the Nerds* represents in surreal dream-worked form: the transition of capitalism from production sustained by physical labor to an era of intellectual creativity and, with this transition, the cancellation of any anxiety about the latter’s destructive underside. This is an ideology *Revenge of the Nerds* simultaneously deconstructs.

Industrial and virtual are still two periods of the one mode of production and neither can relinquish the other absolutely. Like cultural and economic advancement, *Revenge of the Nerds*’ narrative is dialectical. The fission of thinking/being is, as Žižek pointed out, illusory and, within the context of late-capitalist evolution, the repository of an enormous ideological freight. By setting the personified manifestations as competing opposites and by aligning the audience with the victorious nerds, *Revenge of the Nerds* enacts what Jameson calls the utopian dimension of cinema. Jameson would argue that the conflict between nerds and jocks, and the displacement of negativity onto the jocks followed by their consignment into the void touches on “social contradictions and anxieties only to use them for a new task of ideological resolution,”³⁵ urging the audience to respond to an “image of political partnership which projects a whole new strategy of legitimacy.”³⁶ The utopian victory of nerds over jocks – of virtual over industrial – effectively displaces any contradictions or anxieties we would otherwise attribute to the victor, and so assures the virtual’s manifestation as the idealised and idyllic (though imaginary) capitalism. To conclude here, however, would be treating the film as mainstream cinema. As bad cinema, *Revenge of the Nerds* ought to betray its conditions of production. It should, recalling our wager with Deleuze and Jameson, draw attention to the repressed and destructive underside of imagined capitalism; it should expose the anxieties and contradictions of the virtual. This betrayal is very much apparent in *Revenge of the Nerds* and it solidifies into what I’m going to call the “virtual nerd-phallus.”

Erecting the Virtual Nerd-Phallus

The phallus, according to Žižek, is an object that not only symbolises power but which puts the “subject who acquires it in a position of effectively exercising power.”³⁷ “One has to think of the phallus not as the organ that

immediately expresses the vital force of my being,” he argues, but “as an ‘organ without a body’ that I put on, which gets attached to my body, without ever becoming its ‘organic part.’”³⁸ If this is the case, and within the context of *Revenge of the Nerds*, the organic attachments the nerds and jocks employ to bolster their sexual economies should be read as phalloi. Thus, the nerd’s phalloi are their intellects – their ability to harness *cogito* – with which they exercise hegemonic domination over Adams College come the film’s conclusion. Despite their apparent supersession of the seemingly mindless and absolutely physical jocks and in the face of their hegemonic victory – won through sheer sex appeal of the virtual – the way nerds exercise power over the exemplary sexual objects of Adams College – the Pi-Delta-Pi sorority – is telling of what might be repressed by virtual capitalism.

In a retaliatory attack on the Pi-Delta-Pis and, by extension, against their brother fraternity the Alpha-Betas, the nerds unleash a primitive and obscene sexuality very much akin to the jocks’ mindless physicality as well as being redolent of some unreservedly distressing moments from cinema of a higher caliber. Terrorising the Pis with libidinal excess, the nerds raid their sorority house, erupting from behind shower curtains in a chillingly Hitchcockian intertext, screaming demands at cowering girls to expose their “muff” (evoking the sickening libertines of Pasolini’s *Salò* [1975]), and stealing the women’s underwear, symbolic of the exposed genitalia they so desire. What takes place with the nerds’ raid on the sorority house is nothing short of terrifying and replete with suggestions of gang rape. If this is the aggressive (under)side of virtual capitalism – perhaps evoking America’s militarisation, to recall Jameson’s diagnosis of postmodernism – then it also serves as evidence to a critique of the virtual. In light of such articulations, virtual capitalism should be compared to the industrial when it comes down to assessments of primitivism or, as *Revenge of the Nerds* puts out on display, any hegemonic push toward obsolescence. As though overtly announcing this equivalence of nerds and jocks, before raiding the Pis’ house Lewis declares that “we [the nerds] have got to beat them [the jocks] at their own game.”

Where the nerds *do* differ from jocks is at the level of intellectual capacity and so they exert power over the Pis in a way the jocks cannot. While five nerds conduct this raid, two more install CCTV cameras looking down into the Pis’ bedrooms and bathrooms. The live recordings are relayed back to the nerds, who sit stupefied in the white-light glow of their television, now broadcasting images of naked, female bodies, often depicted from the neck down. During the Greek Games the nerds win a college fundraising competition by selling pornographic images of topless

Betty Childs, arms above her head as though to emphasise exposure, gazing unaware into the eye of their camera. Recalling Guy Debord's assessment "that the ultimate form of commodity reification in contemporary consumer society is precisely the image itself,"³⁹ the images of Betty signify not just a disturbing and voyeuristic perversity but wholesale exploitation. The gesture's tasteless humour is compounded by a punning delivery as Betty's image is concealed within a cream pie. More significant, though, is the symbolic gesture of consumption made by the men of Adams College who rapaciously lick and lap at whipped cream until her flesh is unveiled in the bottom of their pie-tins and at the tips of their tongues. Though Betty's image might be reified and consumed by the nerdy economy of virtual capitalism (supposedly having superseded flesh itself), at the very moment when her naked image is being spread about the college, Lewis, as though consummating domination and following the precedent of simulation set by Gilbert and Judy, rapes Betty. Such aggressive and violent exploitation to the ends of sexual and financial profiteering is evidence to an accusation that the virtual nerd-phallus is identifiable with the more primitive, industrial, and perceptibly destructive jock-phallus. While the jocks' phalloi are visibly and disagreeably violent, should the nerds not be subject to the same judgment and indictment as commensurate with their own ferocity?

This identification and incitement invites evocation of a curious psychological phenomenon. According to Žižek, functional subjects are mentally sound because, while developing psychologically, they unconsciously identified themselves with the "primordial father" into whom they might develop.⁴⁰ The primordial father is an obscene figure whose carnal enjoyment is subject to no repression – a figure who likely attended the jocks' bacchanalian party at the beginning of the film and who, without any doubt, would act the primitive Neanderthal just like Ogre, a jock whose appearance and actions – brutish, unkempt, constantly grunting, seemingly poised to explode from his own clothing – situate him as the overt manifestation of everything upon which a physical subjectivity is predicated. A comparison might also be made between Ogre and Booger, both of whom appear as the embodiment of a darker formulation of their respective modes of being – jocks and nerds – yet despite their groups' mutual enmity they are effectively the same character: utterly vulgar manifestations of both the nerds and jocks' physicality. Does the symptomatic nature of bad cinema not transparently substantiate nerds unconsciously and thus repressively identifying themselves with the primordial father and so with the jocks? Considering the comparison already made between nerds and jocks, the logic of primordial identification implies that nerds have taken the most essential and so physically libidinous elements of the jocks' sexual economy to bol-

ster their own. The nerds employ their minds to suggest the transcending of physical underdevelopment and to hide their own aggressive, exploitative, and lascivious physicality. Hence they effectively become virtual jocks or virtually primordial. This is bad cinema's betrayal of the late-capitalist object: its unveiling of the virtual nerd-phallus as little more than a cosmetically inflated industrial jock-phallus.

Our deconstruction of late capitalism's evolutionary ideology has been enabled and encouraged by the delineation of bad cinema and a reappraisal of how this filmic category might be approached. Recalling that bad cinema is comprised of those films in which the represented swells beyond the frame of representation, and combining that idea with the psychoanalytic concept of symptomatic betrayal, the approach developed in this essay offers itself to be taken up against the ideological programs of postmodern Hollywood. Bad cinema theory and criticism are therefore sites of resistance, to be worked subversively and interrogatively against the late-capitalist enterprise to which their object is bound. In light of this provocation might we finish by reconsidering several jokes made at the expense of a delightfully literal manifestation of the virtual nerd-phallus: Bill Gates' genitalia.

When Gates championed his commercial empire with the public statement of "I am Microsoft," Whoopi Goldberg added the stunning postscript that Gates' wife refused to comment. Both *Revenge of the Nerds* and this obscene confusion between physical-anatomical and virtual-economic should be kept in mind when thinking about an elaborate prank played back in 2001. Controversy flooded the media when a Welsh teenager named Raphael Gray hacked a Microsoft website in order to send Bill Gates a bottle of Viagra. His motivation for targeting Microsoft and Gates especially, Gray informed the BBC, was to take revenge for the appalling work conditions he suffered while employed by a Microsoft partner.⁴¹ The message resonates not only with my deconstruction of virtual capitalism but, and perhaps more interestingly, with an understanding of bad cinema: both Goldberg and Gray's wit is directed toward that which is disavowed by the injunctions of postmodern Hollywood's imaginary representations only to manifest in disgraceful symptoms. Engorged as the virtual nerd-phallus might seem, like its industrial predecessor it cannot disavow the tensions and contradictions of its conditions of production. As Gilbert declares at the end of the *Revenge of the Nerds*, though "we [as nerds] are smart" and while "we look different... we're not." In this crucial respect, virtual capitalism, although appearing the more attractive option as it ideologically souses the globe, is only a superficially remodeled form of that which it rendered obsolete. If this is the case then bad cinema lights up the virtual

as it trembles at the threat of obsolescence and strains under the weight of inconsistency. To build upon Goldberg's split between two semantic constituents: though perhaps not micro, while serving the late-capitalist mode of production, the virtual nerd-phallus will always be soft.

The University of Sydney
mr.m.steven@gmail.com

NOTES

- 1 Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (1925) in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (Vintage: London, 1995) 259-83.
- 2 Freud, "On Dreams" (1911) in *The Freud Reader* 151.
- 3 In this context it is worth clarifying my position in solidarity with Theodor Adorno for whom surrealism exemplified psychoanalytic dream theory. For Adorno, surrealism often worked in ways analogous to dreams, but was always framed by the expectations of art: "in the dream the object world appears in a form incomparably more disguised and is presented as reality less than it is in Surrealism, where art batters its own foundations." Theodor Adorno, "Looking Back on Surrealism" (1956) in *From Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence S. Rainey (Wiley-Blackwell: Oxford UK and Massachusetts US, 2005) 1114.
- 4 Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (Routledge: New York and London, 1992) 46.
- 5 Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Verso: New York and London, 1991) 5.
- 6 Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory", *New Left Review* November-December 1973, date of access: 14 June 2009, <<http://www.newleftreview.org/?issue=81>>.
- 7 Jameson, *Signatures* 14.
- 8 Jameson, *Signatures* 15.
- 9 Jameson, *Signatures* 34.
- 10 Jameson, *Signatures* 14.
- 11 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2000) 94.
- 12 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Continuum: London, 1985) 159.
- 13 Deleuze, *Cinema 2* 159. My emphasis.
- 14 Another name for this formulation is the "high concept" film. High concept refers to those movies built almost entirely upon a simply stated premise rather than any

- sort of considered deployment of cinematic technique. A recent and extreme case of the high concept film (and also a wonderful example of bad cinema) is David Ellis and Lex Halaby's *Snakes on a Plane* (2006), a movie whose entire premise – the entirety of its arbitrarily inflated object – inhabits its snappy though literal title. See Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).
- 15 Deleuze, *Cinema 2* 159.
- 16 Jameson, *Signatures* 1.
- 17 Jameson, *Signatures* 1.
- 18 Freud, "On Dreams" 163.
- 19 Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! : Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 226.
- 20 Jameson, *Signatures* 2.
- 21 This idea is developed by Žižek in regards to the economist Jeremy Rifkin's concept of "cultural capitalism." For Žižek, "cultural capitalism" turns around "the relationship between an object and its symbol-image" so that "the image does no represent the product; rather, the product represents the image." Thus, he writes, "[w]e buy a product – an organic apple, for example – because it represents the image of a healthy lifestyle... Along the same lines, the main reason people still continue to go to 'real' shops is not so much that you can 'see and feel' the product itself, but that you can 'enjoying browsing itself as a recreational activity.'" Žižek quoting Rifkin's *Age of Access* (2000) in *Revolution at the Gates: Žižek on Lenin, The 1917 Writings* ed. Žižek (Verso: London and New York, 2002) 285.
- 22 Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London and New York, Verso: 2002) lxxi.
- 23 Žižek, *Preface to The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (Verso: London, 2008) xxi.
- 24 Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* xxi.
- 25 Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* xxi.
- 26 Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* xxi.
- 27 Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, eds. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Continuum, 2006) 162.
- 28 The best illustration of DEVO's emotionless performance is their cover of The Rolling Stones' hit "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" (1965). While the original is a spirited expression of Mick Jagger's discontentment with capitalist society, DEVO transform his discontent into a kitsch, digitised, and synthetic pop song.
- 29 Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* xxi.
- 30 Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (Profile Books: Britain, 2008), 14. Žižek did not coin the term "virtual capitalism," as it has held currency in Business Studies since the 1990s. See Nigel Thrift, "Virtual Capitalism: The Globalisation of Reflexive Business Knowledge" in *Virtualism: A New Political Economy*, eds.

- James G. Carrier and Daniel Miller (New York: Berg, 1998) 161-86.
- 31 Žižek, Violence 14.
- 32 Žižek, Violence 15.
- 33 Žižek, Violence 19.
- 34 Žižek, Violence 14.
- 35 Jameson, Signatures 38.
- 36 Jameson, Signatures 38.
- 37 Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (Routledge: Britain, 2004) 87.
- 38 Žižek, *Organs* 87.
- 39 Debord in Jameson, Signatures 15.
- 40 Žižek, Violence 148.
- 41 "Teen Hacker Escapes Jail Sentence", BBC News, 6 July 2001, date of access: 14 June 2009, < http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/wales/1424937.stm>