

# “Where we are in America”: Unlocking the Political Unconscious in Harry Crews' *Car*

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In memory of Harry Eugene Crews (1935-2012)

## Abstract

This article discusses the political implications of Harry Crews' 1972 novel *Car*. Like all superstructures, Crews' novel is a reflection of a self-divided base, often appearing ambivalent towards the dominant mode of production behind its form. Using the symbol of the automobile as a mastercode, I demonstrate how *Car* utilizes a carnivalesque literary mode to disrupt the power of consumer capitalism encoded within its pages. To substantiate this claim, I facilitate a dialogic between Fredric Jameson's *Political Unconscious* and Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque. Following Jameson's interpretive apparatus, I discuss the implications of Crews' novel from the perspective of class (ideologemes), modes of production, and literary modes (ideologies of form). In addition, I discuss the limitations of all symbolic acts as they become commodities under capitalism. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate the ongoing relevance of Marxism as an illuminating force in both literature and in society.

**Keywords:** *Car*, Harry Crews, Marxism, *The Political Unconscious*, the Carnavalesque, Consumer Capitalism, Mikhail Bakhtin, Fredric Jameson.

## 1. Introduction

In *Marxism and Form*, Fredric Jameson writes, “The works of culture come to us as signs in an all-but-forgotten code, as symptoms of diseases no longer even recognized as such, as fragments of a totality we have long since lost the organs to see”(Jameson, 1971: 416). The works of culture may indeed be like the symptoms of a disease, but these works can occasionally disrupt the ideological conventions of their time. In doing so, they might also reveal how this unnamed disease remains hidden; even while manifesting itself in the problems and contradictions underpinning daily life. Terry Eagleton observes that “signifying practices of all kinds [. . .] shape forms of consciousness and *unconsciousness* which are closely related to the maintenance and transformation of our existing systems of power,” (Eagleton, 1976: 183) but as a refracted mirror of society, I believe that literature can reveal how this same dynamic might play out in the real world. It should come as no surprise that below the ivory tower of academia, the very people who Marxism aims at liberating are often as oblivious to the discourse of emerging Marxist ideas as they are to the dominant mode of production that oppresses them every day. As a result, some might be as deluded as Plato's cave-dwellers, doomed to be interpellated into the system, thus

remaining in a constant state of false consciousness. In this case, such people might sense that there is something terribly wrong with the world, but without the proper means of diagnoses, are left swatting at shadows on a cave wall. As cult-writer Harry Crews observed in an interview—"that's what all fiction is about, a guy doing the best he can with what he's got" (quoted in Watson, 1974: 66), and this statement has never been truer than it is in Crews' most infamous novel, simply titled *Car*.

In *Car*, the automobile is the ultimate consumer fetish—the physical and metaphorical embodiment of the American Dream—a symbol for freedom, power, individuality, ingenuity, and man's Promethean conquer over metal and fire. But the dominant ideology fueling Crews' *Car* leaves many contradictions begging to be resolved. Despite the promises of power and freedom, Crews' characters live in a industrialized South where people and entire landscapes are being consumed and alienated by the automobile. In a carnivalesque attempt to resolve these contradictions, the protagonist Herman Mack undertakes the task of physically consuming a 1971 Ford Maverick, half an ounce a day, in front of a live audience on national TV. Conspicuous in its absence however, is the mention of the driving force behind the automobile and its consumption. "In Crews fiction, large organizations tend to disappear. Power is mystified and machineries of exploitation are hidden" (Long, 1998: 27). Just like real life consumers and automobile-enthusiasts, *Car*'s characters are never able to transcend the fetishism and ideology encoded within the automobile, for, as Herman Mack insists, "The car is where we are in America"(27). In this analysis of Crews' novel, I propose a hermeneutic in which the automobile serves as the master code for what I believe to be a political allegory—one that unconsciously attempts to subvert the power hierarchy, but ultimately reproduces the very ideology it attempts to negate.

To accomplish this, I employ a dialectical approach that relies heavily on Fredric Jameson's interpretive apparatus known as the Political Unconscious. Jameson argues that "all literature must be read as a symbolic meditation on the destiny of community"(Jameson, 2002: 56) and this meditation takes place on three horizons—the political, the social, and the historical. The political or *textual* horizon deals with the text as a symbolic act where the individual narrative [. . .] is to be grasped as the imaginary resolution of real life contradictions (Jameson, 2002: 62). These contradictions begin to manifest themselves in the second, or social horizon. It is in this horizon where Jameson coins the term *ideologeme*, which he defines as "the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourse of the social classes" (Jameson, 2002: 61). In simple words, the ideologeme represents the array of opposing voices that may be present in a text—e.g. king/peasant, bourgeoisie/proletariat, corporate executive/secretary, pimp/hooker, etc. The third or historical horizon deals with the existence of residual, dominant, and emerging modes of production. The object of this final and ultimate horizon is what Jameson calls the *ideology of form*, that is, "the symbolic messages transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production" (Jameson,

2002: 62). In other words, every genre or literary mode of production is shaped by the discourse that takes place between residual, dominant, and anticipatory modes of production—e.g. primitive communism, feudalism, capitalism, socialism, etc.

The social and historical horizons are the primary concerns of the first part of my analysis. Here I use Marxist dialectical criticism to pierce through the chrome plated armor of *Car*, thereby illuminating the conflicting ideologemes and modes of production lingering under the hood of Crews' novel. From the perspective of Jameson's second horizon, *Car*'s ideologemes give voice to a dialectic between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. These ideologemes manifest themselves in the developing tensions between the representations of alienated, reified laborers in the novel—Herman Mack and Margo; and the entrepreneurs who exploit them—Homer Edge and (albeit to a lesser degree) Mister and Easy Mack. However, since *Car*'s characters have been interpellated by the hegemony of the automobile, they remain oblivious to the dominant mode of production that is the real source of their woes. Rampant consumer capitalism fuels the car and its excesses, and this dominant mode of production is portrayed as having dire social and environmental ramifications. In *Car*, privately owned automobiles are depicted as consuming communal spaces, giving rise to an internal conflict between alienated individuals and their disappearing rural community. This conflict, I interpret as the manifestation of an unconscious struggle between two modes of production in the novel—consumer capitalism and a more communal mode of production.

The second part of my analysis will discuss the ideologies of form present in *Car*, in particular, Crews' use of what Mikhail Bakhtin coined as the carnivalesque. The carnivalesque refers to a literary mode which aims at subverting the dominant assumptions of the "official culture" through humor, chaos, the celebration of bodily functions, and the grotesque. The term has its origins in the rituals of the "low culture" of the common people who performed at the folk carnivals of old:

One of the essential ways of describing carnival focuses upon the ritual inversions which it habitually involves. The reversible world or the world turned upside down are phrases to denote the way in which carnival inverts everyday customs, rules, and habits of the community. Hierarchies are inverted, kings become servants, boys become bishops, men dress as women and vice versa. The elements associated with the bottom part of the body (feet, knees, legs, buttocks, genitals, belly, anus) are given comic privilege over the spirit and the head. The 'normal' rules of moral custom are overturned and license and indulgence become the rule: the body is granted a freedom in pleasure normally withheld from it, and obscenity of all kinds, from mild innuendo to orgiastic play and a robust reveling in mud [and] excrement. (White, 1985: 346)

Bakhtin believed that certain genres such as "Menippean satires" preserve "traces of an archaic carnival gesture" and these genres act as "representatives of carnivalized literature"(quoted in Lachman, 77). The traces of carnival gesture are self-evident in much of Harry Crews' fiction, and in *Car*, they manifest as Herman Mack attempts to subvert the power hierarchy by ritualistically eating and

defecating pieces of a car in front of a live audience. This carnivalesque mode conflicts with the automobile fetishism and theme of individualized destiny in the novel. Like most of the characters in *Car*, the implied author seems to have a love/hate relationship with the automobile, never entirely transcending the ideologies of the dominant mode of production behind the car's fetishism.

Ultimately I hope to facilitate a dialogic between the discourses of Bakhtin and Jameson, thereby illuminating what I consider to be a unique and overlooked piece of American literature. In *Car*, Harry Crews paints a (fairly) accurate picture of a consumer culture being consumed by the very thing that it loves. His work explores the many tensions that exist in a capitalist society while providing a modern example of how so-called "common people" might employ carnivalesque acts to cure the "symptoms of a disease no longer recognized as such."

### **1.2 Class, Ideologemes, and Modes of Production**

With its focus being primarily on Herman Mack and his family, *Car* offers a deceptively complex look at social classes and conflicting modes of production. Though they love and defend each other at times, the Macks are portrayed as a family whose ties are often undermined by greed and economic dependency. In fact, their family dynamic almost sustains Marx's original claim that "The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family to a mere money relation" (Marx, 2010:16). Though some might view the Macks as mere working class rednecks, they give voice to conflicting ideologemes that resonate at different levels in American society. From this second hermeneutic horizon, Crews' text can be grasped as a "symbolic move in an essentially polemic and strategic ideological confrontation between the classes" (Jameson, 2002: 70-71). This confrontation first becomes evident in the internal ideological conflicts of Easy, the patriarch of the Mack family.

Easy Mack demonstrates how conflicting ideologemes can resonate in one character—even after that character has gone through a process of class migration. *Car*'s backstory reveals that he came from humble beginnings (he started his career as a shade tree mechanic" (79)) and was interpolated by the hegemony of the automobile as a young man. As a result, he spends much of his life adhering to bourgeois ideology, eventually becoming an entrepreneur and acquiring some capital of his own. As the owner of Auto Town, Easy makes a transition to petty bourgeoisie and indoctrinates his children with the ideologies encoded within the car: "He *had* said that the car would save them all. Back when Junell and Herman and Mister were just little things and their mother was alive, he had said that America was a V-8 country, gas driven and water cooled, and that it belonged to men who belonged to cars"(79).

Like many Americans, Easy soon becomes aware of the contradictions inherent to capitalism's promise of prosperity. Due to rampant automobile consumption, there is a surplus of wrecked cars and Auto Town is not making him rich like he had originally hoped it would: "nowadays a junked car put through the crusher, packaged and delivered to the barge, only brought 50 cent for a hundred pounds"

(79-80). When we first encounter him in chapter one, the patriarch of the Mack family appears to be a broken down old man who is content simply making a living. Though he never completely denounces the car and its ideology, it becomes obvious that he is a conflicted man when he forces Herman to shut down his car exhibition proclaiming, "there is no joy. No love" (12). Easy's conflict, though often expressed through the mastercode of the car, gives voice to the ideologemes of those who have been left behind by the very system that they remain loyal to. His array of ideologemes set the tone for the many individual utterances, internal conflicts, and ideological tensions that manifest throughout the rest of the novel.

Herman's twin brother Mister believes in everything the car represented for his father, hoping to one day fulfill Easy's naive dreams of prosperity for his family. Though he appears to be alienated by the monotony of his labor, (he is a mere appendage of the car crusher) he insists to his brother that, "I own a quarter interest in the largest car wrecking business in the state. That's good enough for me"(49-50). Nevertheless, we soon learn that for Mister, working at Auto Town is just a means to an end. His attitude towards life and labor confirms the idea that under capitalism "work is just a means to attain a goal [ . . . ] some income to be able to buy the consumer goods necessary to satisfy your needs" (Novack & Mandel, 2010: 25). However, unlike his father, Mister is willing to achieve this goal by almost any means. Even as his own family and community are being torn apart, he remains indifferent to the suffering caused by the selfish, profit-driven ideology encoded within the car. This is depicted most vividly as Herman and Mister watch a truck crash through an autocade, resulting in vehicles literally "falling from the sky"(48). Instead of showing concern for the potential loss of human life, Mister starts dancing the jig, proclaiming: "Hot Damn, that's making money"(48). As horrific as this might seem, Mister's ideologemes seem to reflect the dominant "dog eat dog" ideology that has been perpetuated by the bourgeoisie and adopted by many working-class Americans. Though he is primarily an alienated laborer, Mister's false consciousness and mimicry of bourgeois ideals helps perpetuate the suffering of his family, community, and (as we will discuss later) himself.

The predominant ideologemes in *Car* manifest in the developing tensions between alienated laborers and the entrepreneurs who exploit them. At first, the conflict is between the black sheep of the Mack family—Herman, and its patriarch—Easy. Unlike his other family members, Herman refuses to "have his life measured out in cars"(49). He grows bored working for his father and participating in labor that is not a true expression of himself:

Herman had always felt himself special, felt himself being saved by a force bigger than himself and outside himself, saved to do some fantastic and special thing that would set him apart from other men. He had felt it as a youngster when his father got Mister, Junell, and him a job washing cars on Flint's Honest Deal Used Lot every morning before school, and he felt it later when he worked in the parts department of the Downtown Ford Agency, and he still felt it the day he was taken into the business at Easy Mack's Auto-Town. (47)

Gary Long writes that "Car is a tale about alienation, of modern people diminished by the automobile and the culture of symbolic consumption dominated by things"(Long, 39) and I believe that it is Herman's *alienation* —from his labor, his family, and the automobile—that drives him in his crazy endeavors.

The alienation of the worker and his labor means that something basic has changed in the life of the worker. What is it? Normally everybody has some creative capacity, certain talents lodged in him, untapped potentialities for human development which should be expressed in his labor activity. However, once the institution of wage labor is prevalent, these possibilities become nullified. (Mandel & Novack, 2010: 25)

We learn that prior to leaving the family business, Herman first tries to remedy his alienation by creating an exhibition called *Car Display: Your History on Parade*. However, like all of his previous ventures, his father forces him to shut it down and return to the alienated labor of the junk yard. Feeling exploited by his family and that he is being "measured in cars" Herman concludes, "If there is any measuring to be done I'll do it"(49-50). This back-story suggests that it is Herman's pursuit of non-alienated labor that first drives him away from his family and his job. It also suggests that commodity fetishism—a commodity's almost uncanny ability to enhance human desire—plays a role in driving him forward as he attempts to become one with the car.

The conflict between ideologemes comes to a head as Herman encounters Homer Edge—the owner of the Sherman Hotel and one authentic representation of the American bourgeoisie in *Car*. Though it is not clear how wealthy he really is, Edge has enough capital to hire Herman as a performer, remodel the front end of his hotel to build a special platform for him, and even persuades Ford to donate a vehicle to be eaten (21). Though he pretends to be concerned for Herman's well being, it soon becomes apparent that he is only interested in making money at his expense. Even after Herman has his "asshole split" (114) and complains about a pain in his stomach, Edge pleads with him to continue eating the car. No matter how low he sinks, his unethical behavior is always justified by his claim that he is "just trying to run a business" (20). His exploitation of Herman is very similar to how wealthy Hollywood producers or Professional Wrestling promoters might exploit writers/actors/performers and others who have a creative drive. Mr. Edge gives voice to the ideologemes of the ruling class and the ideology behind the car and everything negative that it represents.

In many ways, Mr. Edge is what Easy Mack and Mister have been working their whole lives to become, and coming face to face with this ugly reality forces them both to reevaluate their own ideologies. At first, despite taking issue with how he is exploiting his son, Easy actually likes Mr. Edge. I suspect that this is because Easy is an entrepreneur who exploits his own children, so he can relate to Homer Edge on some level. It is not until Mr. Edge takes a photograph of Herman and Easy together that Easy begins disliking what he represents: Edge boasts, "I got you and him and the Maverick all in the picture. He's a public

personality, Herman is. I can put the picture anywhere I want to, anytime I want to. And if you sue, it'll just help the sales..." From a Marxist perspective, this photograph reifies Easy's relationship with his son, turning their sacred familial bond into mere commodity. As the novel progresses, Easy becomes even more conflicted as he sees how capitalism, the car, and Mr. Edge are destroying his family. Mister, on the other hand, assists Homer Edge in his exploitation of Herman.

The tension between ideologemes intensifies as Herman's consumption ritual begins. On display for the public behind bullet proof plastic, Herman soon realizes that he is "defined by the car"(113). In spite of his best efforts to break the cycle of alienation and exploitation, he becomes a reified commodity; just like his brother's car crusher, he is a mere tool for others to create surplus value with. Mr. Edge even creates bumper stickers and advertisements that read HERMAN AND THE MAVERICK (60) and after attracting national syndication, Mister brags, "*Herman* has been bought from coast to coast" (81). Returning to his former state of alienation, Herman finds a kindred spirit in the hotel whore, Margo. Together, they give voice to the ideologemes of alienated, reified laborers. Margo, like other prostitutes, is reified in the sense that she is an object for the sexual gratification of men—a mere means to an end. Herman is also mere means, as in the eyes of Mr. Edge, he is simply a mouth and anus for the car to pass through. It is no coincidence that Edge has them examined by the same doctor, for he sees them both as being the same: "Mr. Edge's doctor, the same one that examined Margo every week to make sure she didn't have the clap or something worse, had examined Herman" (54). Much like exploited people in the real world, Herman and Margo sense that there is something wrong, but are never able to identify the hidden mechanisms that are at work against them. Margo, oblivious to the power of patriarchy, blames everything—from getting raped as a young cheerleader, to her current job as the hotel whore—on the car: "He didn't get me, the Vette did. He drove a Vette, and my goddamn pimp here at the hotel drives a Jaguar"(56). Herman is also blinded by the car, but towards the end of the novel, it seems as though he might be ready to investigate the real source of their sorrows when Margo asks, "Do you think anybody ever knows how they got where they are?" to which he replies, "I think they ought to know" (141).

In an ironic twist, Herman's twin brother Mister takes his place after he refuses to eat more of the Maverick. This subversive act turns the exploiter into the exploited, but it is important to remember that Mister is just a proletariat who aspires to be something more. It is Homer Edge who is the true embodiment of the bourgeoisie, and because of this, he remains relatively unscathed. Even when Mister starts hemorrhaging from cuts on his throat, Edge exploits his suffering, claiming that "blood would draw more customers"(145). This final scene between the exploiter and the exploited speaks volumes about the ideology(emes) of the bourgeoisie and how adopting this ideology is to the detriment of the working-class. Like many common criminals who mimic the ruthless "dog eat dog" mentality of the elite, Mister is punished violently for his heresy while Mr.

Edge is rewarded for "just trying to run a business". This reveals the inherent flaw in capitalism—someone must always suffer like the Mack brothers so that the people at the top can make a profit. Even the most ethical or legal employee/employer relations are undermined by the employer's need to create surplus value at the expense of the employee. However, when someone from the bottom of the hierarchy adopts this ideology, they are often punished by the system for their behavior. Any deviation from this pattern is the exception rather than the rule.

Keeping this in mind, I think that a discussion about the dominant mode of production in the world of *Car* is appropriate. Before this discussion can take place however, it is important to realize what the car symbolizes in Harry Crews' *America*. Gary Long observes that in *Car*, "the automobile is the ultimate consumer fetish, people worship it. But how it became dominant is a mystery"(Long, 1998: 33). I propose that the car's dominance is the result of the mode of production that produces it, as well as the ideology encoded within it. In his book on the American Dream, Jim Cullen writes that, "Like the house, the car became widely celebrated as an emblem of democracy. [. . .] Americans took to cars as passionately—and perhaps as irrationally—as they did to houses. (Cullen, 2003: 149-150). It would be an understatement to suggest that consumer capitalism is the hidden force behind the automobile; but as a commodified form of the American Dream, the car also appeals to the American notion of individuality, freedom, technological refinement, and power. As a result of this, it has become the dominant means of transportation for people in the United States, and in many regions such as the South, it is the only viable means of mobility. Though set in an industrialized South in a state of flux, *Car* "moves beyond regionalism to depict all of America consumed in and by automobile culture, eaten by the car and eater of it" (Casey, 1997: 164).

Perhaps no other commodity is as responsible for the transformation of public spaces and attitudes as the automobile. Auto use on the scale practiced in mature capitalist societies requires elaborate and expensive infrastructures as well as an emphasis on the wants of private individual consumers rather than the community as a whole. In describing the phenomenon of auto-centered transport systems, Frank Beckenbach writes:

The private interests of automobile manufacturers and the consumer demand for mobility have led to a destructive process in which government, as an eager executor of private modes of transportation, destroys both countryside and the quality of urban life. This mixed system of privately owned cars and collectively used roads is both inefficient (partly because of traffic accidents and the under/or overutilization of roads) and inequitable (because the costs to the private users are externalized as a result of products that pollute the air and water, as well as through scrapping, and also to public budgets through the construction and maintenance of roads. Public transport systems become increasingly unattractive...they come off as losers in the competition for public resources. (Freund & Martin, 1996: 6)

The environmental ramifications of this phenomenon are apparent right away in

*Car* as the implied author describes Mister's surroundings: "He was sitting on the edge of forty-three acres of wrecked cars. Below him to his left was the roiling excremental flow of the Saint John's River. Ten feet of gasoline on top of fifty feet of shit was the way his daddy described it" (3). Crews portrays America as nation overflowing with automobiles; a wasteland of private properties, junk yards, metal fences, polluted rivers, and parking garages. The only thing connecting this fractured wasteland together are the many freeways jammed with traffic, smog, and car wrecks. As a result, the rural landscapes typical for Southern Gothic fiction are completely absent. Robert Covell writes, "The land on which the wrecks are dumped might once have been farm land. Now instead of producing crops and supporting life, the land has become a graveyard for broken machines (Covell, 1994: 5). In fact, one of the only mentions of the natural environment occurs when a frustrated Easy Mack asks his son if he would eat a tree, to which Herman replies, "Look at that [. . .] "How can you talk about trees and cars in the same breath? [. . .] You don't see a tree down there" (28). Moments like this suggests that there is a conflict between what the car represents and the residual sense of agrarian community lingering in the political unconscious of the novel. Terry Eagleton writes that "just as for Marxist economic theory, each economic formation tends to contain traces of older, superseded modes of production" (Eagleton, 1992: 26). In *Car*, this "older" residual mode of production manifests mostly in gaps, silences and contradictions within the text. Gary Long writes that "Power organizations, economic forces that change mores [. . .] are missing. Crews's critiques of contemporary America tend to be ahistorical and indifferent to persistent features of society" (Long, 1998: 33). Though *Car* may have no unified plenitude of meaning, the text bears marks of what Eagleton describes as, "certain determinate absences which twist its various significations into conflict and contradiction (Eagleton, 2006: 89). From the perspective of the political unconscious, the existence of conflicts and contradictions imply a clash between ideologies—themselves being the symptoms of conflicting modes of production.

Frederic Jameson argues that the fractured state of societies and the isolated condition of individuals may be seen as indication that there originally existed an unfallen state of something that may be called "primitive communism"(quoted in Wofford, 1994: 342). The ideology of the dominant mode of production represses the desire for this unfallen state, now relegated to the political unconscious of the text. A dream sequence in *Car* suggests that Herman Mack may have what Jameson would consider a residual sense of primitive communism lingering in his unconscious. After he eats the first half ounce of the Maverick, he dreams that he is filling up with cars and eventually turns into one. The dream ends with, "Replace everyone with all things until he was nobody because he was *everybody*"(75, emphasis added). In other words, Herman realizes that he is part of something much bigger—a community being filled up and consumed by cars.

By its very nature, private automobile ownership alienates the individual members of a community from one another. In *Car*, this is compounded by the

fact that there is not one mention of public transportation or even car-pooling in the novel. Each member of the Mack family has their own car, accurately reflecting the private automobile consumption patterns in the US: The U.S. is slowly reaching auto-person parity within its households. Between 1977 and 1990, persons per household declined from 2.83 to 2.56 while vehicles per household increased from 1.59 to 1.77 (Frelund & Martin, 1996: 6) Not only does this alienate individual drivers from other drivers, but it clogs up the roads with accidents and traffic jams—producing a highly wasteful, inefficient, and sometimes dangerous mode of transportation. As a result of these contradictions, the automobile becomes an instrument of violence in *Car*. This is illustrated best when Herman's sister Junell arrives at a massive car wreck:

The scream belonged to a six-year-old girl. Or what had once been a six-year-old girl. Or what they thought had once been a six-year-old girl. She was wedged onto the floor in front of the back seat with the stick shift from the Barracuda stuck through her pelvis. [. . .] An enormous piece of the chassis driven up through the body of the car had been cut out of the way by the welder and they could plainly see the rest of the family now. There was a body wearing a bloody business suit, but no head. A woman had been ripped open from the breastbone downward. Her guts lay in her lap. A small boy hung dead from the windshield, hanging half in and half out of the shattered glass. (43)

I read this particularly horrific scene as an unconscious (or perhaps conscious) expression of the inefficiencies of both private modes of production and transportation. Casey writes, "this wreck, the car crusher, and the junkyard itself all bear witness to the car's latent destructive powers" (Casey, 1997: 16). The little girl and her family are literally eaten by the automobile, but despite its inefficiency and destructiveness, "more cars than people" (80) are being produced in Harry Crews' America. In fact, the automobile's inefficiency only creates new business opportunities for private individuals and companies that profit from its carnage. Even the privatized American healthcare system appears to benefit: "There was a little private hospital four mile south that did good business off collisions" (34).

The violence of the wreck points to the contradictions that are inherent in capitalism. Those who claim that the free market is the best system or "the only system that works" often point to the technological innovations and prosperity that it has brought. However, these same people, like many of the characters in *Car*, remain oblivious to the inherent flaws in this system. Terry Eagleton writes:

It is true that capitalism works some of the time, in the sense that it has brought untold prosperity to some sectors of the world. But it has done so, as did Stalin and Mao, at a staggering human cost. This is not only a matter of genocide, famine, imperialism and the slave trade. The system has also proved incapable of breeding affluence without creating huge swathes of deprivation alongside it. It is true that this may not matter much in the long run, since the capitalist way of life is now threatening to destroy the planet altogether. (Eagleton, 2011: 15)

This is certainly true in regards to the automobile. Capitalism created the car and

continues to fuel the car, but it appears to have created a monster. The automobile in America has proven to be a highly inefficient and destructive mode of transportation—one that could inevitably consume the world. Although private businesses might profit (temporarily) from the car and its carnage, the long term effects of this mode of transportation (and production) may be irreversible.

It is important to remember that it is not the automobile itself that is inherently flawed, but rather the consumption patterns perpetuated by capitalism and its ideologies. Since all of *Car's* characters have been interpellated by the hegemony of the automobile, capitalism's contradictions are only noticeable to them when the ideology encoded within the car fails them. This is best illustrated by the internal conflict of Easy Mack. After Mister reveals to Easy his business arrangement with Mr. Edge, he reminds his father "You always said our chance would come and the car would bring it. It's here and I'm going to ride it as far as it goes"(79). Mister then explains to his father that they are "home free at last" (80) and shows his father a brand new Cadillac that he has bought for them. For the Macks, the Cadillac represents the culmination of capitalism's promise of prosperity: "Cadillac: the rich man's car [. . .] You show me a man who can trade in for for a new Cadillac in October of every year and I'll show you a man in the mainstream of America" (2). However, because of the exploitation of Herman, Easy realizes that a new Cadillac comes at too great a cost. This is symbolized by an annoying squeak that only Easy Mack can hear: "And it was true. Mister's 1971 Cadillac car, with twenty-one miles on the speedometer, on whose seat covers no one had ever farted, *squeaked*"(90). This squeak could be viewed as a symbol for the contradictions that are inherent to the mode of production encoded within the car. Easy Mack spends almost half of the novel trying to fix this flaw in the Cadillac but insists, "No matter what you do to it, it'll squeak"(106). I interpret this as an unconscious critique of the dominant mode of production in *Car*. In other words, the defective Cadillac, just like the system that created it, will always produce contradictions—it will always squeak.

### 1.3 Ideologies of Form

As a literary mode of production, *Car* utilizes the carnivalesque in an attempt to "fix the squeak"— i.e. the contradictions of consumer capitalism encoded within. These contradictions manifest themselves in the plot as well as in the *ideologies of form* that comprise the novel. The old bourgeois myth of individualized destiny and the automobile fetishism of consumer capitalism permeate the text, coexisting with its carnivalesque aesthetic. For this reason, *Car* is a prime candidate for what Jameson refers to as a positive and negative hermeneutic. Jameson writes, "a Marxist negative hermeneutic, a Marxist practice of ideological analysis proper, must in the practical work of reading and interpretation be exercised simultaneously with a Marxist positive hermeneutic, or a decipherment of the Utopian impulses of these same still ideological cultural texts" (Jameson, 2002: 286).

From the perspective of Jameson's ideology of form, this double hermeneutic is

necessary because novels such as *Car* are the products of a self divided base—the bastard children of residual and anticipatory modes of production. Like Yeats' widening gyre, its center cannot hold; the novel's tensions, contradictions, and symbolic resolutions give the reader the sense that something is terribly wrong, but does so by working within the accepted system. This dynamic is possible because all novels, like cars, are ideologically encoded commodities. Eagleton writes of literature that, "the author does not make the materials with which he works: forms, values, myths, symbols, ideologies come to him already worked upon, as the worker in a *car* assembly plant fashions his product from already processed materials" (Eagleton, 1992: 69, emphasis added). What makes *Car* particular valuable for a Marxist hermeneutic is that the dynamic that exists within the novel is similar to what exists in the real world. The dominant mode of production influences the novel's plot, ideologemes, and ideologies of form. Just as Herman Mack's performance is commodified and undermined by capitalism, so is *Car* as a symbolic act and carnivalesque literary mode of production.

When Mikhail Bakhtin originally coined the term carnivalesque, he was referring to the use of grotesque humor in literature such as Rabelais. He found precedents of this in the medieval feasts of fools and similar festivals in which "peasants used scatological and sexual imagery to shatter taboos and [. . .] confront and confound the ruling class" (quoted in Santino, 2011: 66). As mentioned earlier, Herman Mack, like many of Crews characters, is a modern version of what Bakhtin would have considered to be a simple "peasant" or commoner. Gary Long writes that, "for Crews, modern America apparently is a mass society populated by commoners" (Long, 1998: 27) and this is certainly the case with all of the characters in *Car* with the exception of Homer Edge. This also appears to hold true for the implied author, who shares the same "low language" and scatological humor as the commoners in Crews' novel. But what makes *Car* unmistakably carnivalesque is not just its language or its absurd premise; but rather the frequent references to eating, defecating, and what Bakhtin referred to as the grotesque body.

The grotesque aesthetic has no respect for the body's hierarchical distinctions because its ultimate goal is to subvert them. For example, the insides of the body such as blood, guts, and feces are sometimes exposed while the lower regions (feet, anus, genitalia) take precedent over the head. Even prior to Herman eating the Maverick, a grotesque aesthetic is apparent as his body is put on display for the public: "Herman was wearing only tennis shorts. He had a great sloping belly, and his skin was whiter than the shorts he wore. A pattern of blue veins showed behind his thick white knees"(64). Grotesque realism, says Bakhtin, is characterized by the principle of degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract..."(quoted in Lock, 1991: 291). In its grotesque and degraded state, the body has no personal boundaries and becomes something universal—the embodiment of a community. This might explain why after eating the first pieces of the car and having his rectum and mouth examined, Herman dreams that he is "everyone" (75). Allan White writes, "Carnival was too

disgusting for the bourgeois life to endure. As well, it was a symbol of community and communality which the bourgeoisie had had to deny in order to emerge as a distinct and proper class" (White, 1985: 346). As the embodiment of his community, Herman's grotesque body is now a threat to the bourgeois ideology of Mr Edge. I suspect that this is the reason why he conveniently overlooks the grotesque elements of Herman's performance. In fact, he even refuses to say "eat a car" and admonishes a reporter who reminds him that Herman's "asshole" will be "under assault for the next ten years"(65). Mr. Edge insists, "There will be no vulgarity allowed here. We will not allow this effort to be tainted by *common*, low remarks" (65, emphasis added). This tension between Mr. Edge's perception of Herman's performance and the perception of the rest of the community hints to a deeper ideological conflict in the political unconscious of the novel. Mr. Edge aims to commandeer and commodify Herman's performance, turning it into a profit driven, "high brow" event. As the consumption ritual proceeds however, the true carnivalesque and subversive nature of *Car* cannot be ignored

Dominick LaCapra writes, "the grotesque body [. . .] enjoys food and sex; it is always eating, drinking, defecating, or copulating either literally or figuratively" (LaCapra, 1983: 39). This is certainly true for *Car*, as the act of consuming and defecating becomes central to the story:

He saw his hand, agonizingly slow, reach out and pluck a lump off the tray and lift it to his mouth. He felt the metal on his lips. He felt his tongue take it, hold it. The taste of metal flooded his throat, his stomach. He felt the taste run, touch his blood, and he almost swooned in the pleasure of it. He swallowed and felt it enormous in his throat, felt it pass, long and unthinkably heavy, down down down and finally stop in his stomach. (72)

In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin writes that "man's encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself"(quoted in Lachaman, 82). At first, the consumption of the Maverick is triumphant for Herman, for it symbolizes a temporary union between himself and an almost God-like commodity. The act of defecation becomes important as well, for it symbolizes a common man subverting the power of the car by transforming it into feces. Robert Covel writes that Crews' characters "feel disenfranchised and powerless to control their own lives. The violent rituals in which they engage provide a momentary sense of empowerment for some of the characters" (Covel, 1994: 2). This is certainly the case with Herman, who tries to explain his feelings of disenfranchisement with his brother: "Goddam cars are measuring me! Me! Don't you see we're on the wrong end?"(49). Through the act of eating and ultimately passing the Maverick, Herman becomes like a carnival performer of old. In addition, he creates a public spectacle, allowing the rest of his community to blow off steam and live vicariously through him. Perhaps this is why even more people show up to watch him "pass" the Maverick: "Everybody understood that passing the Maverick was the key move" (101). This suggests that Herman's defecation of the sacred Ford Maverick has an even

greater symbolic significance to the members of his community.

Peter Flaherty writes that, "Carnival may be viewed as a kind of social unconscious" (Flaherty, 1986: 263) and I believe this to be true of Herman's performance. His consumption and defecation of the Maverick can be read as an unconscious rupture of the hegemony and ideology encoded within it. More importantly, the performance takes place in a public arena, in front of an audience of commoners who become both consumers of and partakers in the ritual. Through the description of the audience and their reactions, *Car* becomes a chaotic spectacle, full of screaming "idiot children"(112), vomiting (69), patriotic rants (116) and thunderous applause. The chaotic atmosphere created by the audience and their reactions gives the text even greater symbolic significance and meaning. Simply put, Herman's one man show of modern day carnival excess could be interpreted as being part of something much greater—the collective unconscious of a community of American "commoners".

What makes *Car* particularly interesting in this sense, is that it is a fairly modern example of carnivalesque literature that also happens to reflect contemporary rituals and performances that are also carnivalesque in nature. One need look no further than to the confrontational nature of Punk Rock performances or to the spectacle of Pride Day events to find traces of carnival still lingering in the public rituals and collective unconscious of marginalized groups:

While a Pride Day gathering appears to be a carnivalesque event, it has at its center a ritualesque dimension. [. . .] The ritualesque and the carnivalesque are not mutually exclusive, nor does the ritualesque exist in opposition to the carnivalesque. In fact, the carnivalesque is often a tool. Very often, festivity, celebration, and the carnivalesque are the modality of the ritualesque: they are the way norms are questioned and alternatives suggested. (Santino, 2011: 67)

I do not mean to suggest that *all* public rituals or performances are inherently subversive or political, however, I do believe this to be the case with many—especially the ritual of consumption that becomes the centerpiece of *Car*. As absurd as this premise might seem, it should be noted that Crew's novel may have been inspired by an actual event from 1966:

Mr Samson, who bills himself a "the man with the steel stomach" recently made a 22,000 dollar wager that he could, within five years, eat an automobile. A family sized car, too. Already Mr. Samson has consumed one front fender, one tire, and one carburetor [. . .] He's also potentially a mighty weapon to have to help rid the countryside of all those unsightly automobile graveyards. (Casey, 1997: 165)

The significance of this actual event is great; for it reveals the symbolic importance of the automobile in modern society. Even if Mr. Samson's motivation was different from that of Herman's, the fact that he chose to eat a car rather than, e.g., a statue of The Virgin Mary, stands as a testament to capitalism's ability to transform a simple commodity into a magical fetish. People's reverence for the automobile and its function as a hegemonic vehicle make it the ideal symbol for carnivalesque games of subversion—both in real life and in literary modes of

production.

From the perspective of Jameson's ideology of form, a carnivalesque literary mode would be viewed as a symbolic act on its own, much like what Jameson observes about the facial art of the Caduveo Indians: "the visual text of the Caduveo facial art constitutes a symbolic act, whereby real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm" (Jameson, 2002: 64). In the case of *Car*, the implied author—perhaps even Harry Crews himself—could be viewed as Caduveo Face Painter or carnival performer: "The clown, the rogue, and the fool are the envoys of carnival in everyday life, and the novelist dones their masks in modern society" (LaCapra, 1983: 40). As a carnivalesque literary mode, *Car* aims to disrupt the ideology of consumer capitalism encoded within its own pages. If the carnival of old was a communal effort to rupture the hegemony of the ruling class, a carnivalesque novel can certainly be viewed as the individual author's attempt to create this same dynamic amongst a community of readers. Like Maurice Blanchot suggests, once a sentence enters the world, it belongs to the community and becomes a "universal sentence" (Blanchot, 1995: 305-306). Blanchot writes: "The reader makes the work; as he reads it, he creates it; he is the real author, he is the consciousness and the living substance of the written thing" (Blanchot, 1995: 306). From this perspective, the novel can play the same role as the public square did for medieval communities and carnival performers. LaCapra writes, "the public square and the streets adjoining it are the proper place for carnival. The public square brings what is marginal or borderline in ordinary life to the very center of the community" (LaCapra, 1983: 41). Like the public square, any novel can facilitate the meeting of conflicting ideologies(emes) while creating an opportunity for a large community of complicit readers to observe and participate in a symbolic act. In this view, *Car's* readers done the mask of modern-day carnival spectators—observing from afar as Herman Mack consumes the Maverick.

Not surprisingly, the existence of this one literary mode does not guarantee that each individual reader will get swept away in the carnivalesque frenzy of the novel. In fact, the complete opposite might occur. The individualistic nature of reading produces interpretations that are never entirely free from the dominant ideology of their time. The same could be said of individual novels, which also bare traces of conflicting ideologies and modes of production. In the case of *Car*, it could certainly be read as being carnivalesque, but just like its characters, it does not entirely transcend the fetishism of the automobile. Despite its use of humor, chaos and the grotesque, *Car* could even be read as perpetuating the love of the automobile and the ideology of the bourgeoisie. Much of the novel's narration seems motivated by its character's love of the sacred car as well as the language of consumer advertisements. At times, the novel even appears like one big elaborate commercial for automobiles and automobile culture:

Wade Bell - "Where we are in America..."

AMERICA . . . YOUR 1971 FORDS ARE READY  
MAVERICK

170-cu. In 1V 6-cyl. Engine (100 hp) 3speeds synchronized manual transmission Locking steering column Flashing side marker Lamps [. . .] The specifications of the 1971 Maverick car filtered through Herman's dulled and dimmed mind like leaves in a slow wind. He had read these specifications again and again, dreamed of them, loved them ... (70-71)

Depending on a reader's ideological persuasion, passages like this could either interpolate them *to* or repel them *from* the excesses of the automobile and consumer culture. According to Eagleton, this dichotomy is possible in literature because the base is self divided, giving rise to conflicts and: "The role of superstructures is to regulate and ratify those conflicts" (Eagleton, 2011: 155). From the perspective of Jameson's ideology of form, this division would explain why *Car* appears to both perpetuate and disrupt consumer capitalism through its fetishistic and carnivalesque modes of production. This dynamic is explained best by Jameson's own observation of how during the carnival, two opposing discourses would compete within the general unity of a shared code. For example, "the shared master code of religion becomes in the 1640s in England the place in which the dominant formulations of a hegemonic theology are reappropriated and polemically modified" (Jameson, 2002: 70). In the case of *Car*, the automobile is the shared mastercode, while consumer capitalism is the historical context (*horizon*) in which Crews' novel can be illuminated. Its carnivalesque aesthetic creates a tension that collapses the book in on itself—momentarily disrupting the ideology of dominant mode of production, yet never quite transcending it.

Aside from its literary modes being influenced by the Bakhtinian carnival and automobile culture, *Car* is also a novel about individualized destiny. In fact, the structure of many of Crews's novels follow a modern trend that is rooted in an old bourgeois cliché—the classic tale of one character who attempts to change his or her life, but does so without the aid of their community:

Crews writing suggests that the enforced realism of the past has been lost in modern society. Out of touch with the knowledge on which life depends, contemporary culture denies limits and ignores human needs. Falsifying experience by packaging history as frontier fantasies, emphasizing personal success, fostering myths of unlimited opportunities [. . .] By persuading people to believe they are solely responsible for their fates, modern society destroys community. (Long, 1998: 36)

The structure of *Car* seems to be equally motivated by the alienating effects of modern capitalism as it is by the idea of individualized destiny through car ownership. For example, prior to Herman's ritual, each separate chapter seems to focus on one particular character, thereby creating a feeling of fragmentation and estrangement. Each member of the Mack family drives their own vehicle and each monopolizes their own chapter like they would a car. When they do come into contact with others, it is usually through some sort of conflict regarding Herman or because of a car-wreck. Though *Car*'s carnivalesque aesthetic breaks down the

barriers and brings the characters and their community together, this sense of shared destiny does not last. As Herman becomes alienated and his performance is commodified, *Car* returns to the plot device of individual characters trying to symbolically "fix the squeak" through the shared mastercode of the car:

The Cadillac had overwhelmed him. All that power. All those lights. All that everything. But then it had squeaked. The fucking thing had *squeaked!* [. . .] And what a squeak in a car required was a *man*. A man who was a mechanic. A man who controlled and understood the car. Understood its weaknesses. Its flaws. [. . .] Either you mastered it or it mastered you. (103)

Though some might view this as a failure, *Car's* inability to completely transcend the dominant mode of production behind its form might actually be its greatest accomplishment. By perpetuating automobile fetishism, Crew reveals the limitations and contradictions of the car and the ideology that it represents. In documenting the hardships and failures of individual characters like Herman and Easy Mack, *Car* debunks the bourgeois myth that one autonomous being is capable of changing the world on their own. In his article *Silences, Criticisms, and Laments: Political Implications in the Work of Harry Crews*, Gary Long writes:

His novels are not about success; instead he writes of false hope and failure. His work implies the existence of obstacles that cannot be surmounted by effort and will. [. . .] Crews exposes the emptiness of America's obsession with individualized destiny, but he also celebrates the determination of characters engaged in hopeless attempts to take control of their own lives. (Long, 1998: 28)

By working within a familiar system, Crews creates a believable work that most American readers can relate to. Crews' juxtaposition of car fetishism, individualized destiny and the carnivalesque gives the audience the sense that a better alternative might exist. His character's failures reveal the limitations that come with working within the capitalist system. However, through conflicting ideologies of form, Crews also discloses the limits of his own writing—the limits of all carnivalesque literature and symbolic acts as they become commodities under capitalism.

Due to capitalism's ability to undermine almost everything, both reader and writer are forced to work within the same system. Novels are not just vehicles of expression, they are also commodities "produced by publishers and sold on the market at a profit" (Eagleton, 1992: 55). In some peoples eyes, the novel as a literary mode reproduces the bourgeois ideology of individualism. Though most Marxists would view this as a partial truth, there is no denying that the novel represents a shift away from shared communal campfire tales to a more individualistic mode of reading and story telling. Jameson writes, "the novel plays a significant role in what can be called a properly bourgeois cultural revolution—that immense process of transformation whereby populations whose life habits were formed by other, now archaic, modes of production are effectively reprogrammed for life and work in the new world of market capitalism"

(Jameson, 2002: 138). Though the creation of a novel represents an act of both non-alienated labor and social unconscious, once it enters the market place, it undergoes a transformation. Much like Mr. Edge turns Herman's performance into a commodity, capitalism does the same with genres: Jameson argues, "commodification turns genre into a brand-name and the social contract into a product guarantee" (quoted in Buchanan, 2006: 74). In the case of a Harry Crews novel, he is known for being a "cult-writer" of dark, absurd, and sometimes disturbing "Southern Gothic Fiction." His loyal cult of readers know what to expect when they buy one of his books, and the publishing industry (whether he likes it or not) has made a commodity out of him and his literature. I suspect that something similar has happened to other artists, performers, and even gatherings that aim at challenging the assumptions of the ruling class. Punk Rock Music, Mardi Gras Celebrations, even Marxist Iconography—all have been transformed into commodities by the Mr. Edges of the world.

Capitalism's ability to commandeer and undermine while remaining clandestine only substantiates the importance of both a positive and negative hermeneutic. A negative hermeneutic should reveal how literature gives the dominant ideology of its time a distinctive form, thereby revealing its limits and contradictions. Eagleton writes that art "should expose rather than remove those contradictions, thus stimulating men to abolish them in real life" (Eagleton, 1992: 70). In the case of a positive hermeneutic, it should locate a novel's subversive nature and utopian impulse. Carnavalesque literature indicates "the necessity of linking ideological criticism to some conception of an alternative (and more desirable) state of affairs, to a 'positive hermeneutic' which expresses our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it now, and as we feel in our bones it ought to be lived" (Gardiner, 1993: 187). Although *Car* is a commodity comprised of conflicting ideologies of form, the novel's ability to personify, question, and symbolically disrupt the social anxieties of its time only substantiates the importance of such literature. Not only is Crews' novel a piece of fiction that tells the story of "a guy doing the best he can with what he's got", but it is also the physical embodiment of a similar dynamic where both reader, writer, carnival performer, and audience member are forced to do the same.

#### 1.4 Conclusion

Like all superstructures, Crews' novel is a reflection of a self-divided base, often appearing ambivalent towards the dominant mode of production behind its form. Using the symbol of the automobile as a mastercode, I have demonstrate how *Car* utilizes a carnivalesque literary mode to disrupt the many traces of consumer capitalism encoded within its pages. To substantiate this claim, I have facilitated a dialogic between Fredric Jameson's *Political Unconscious* and Bakhtin's notion of the carnival. Using Jameson's interpretive apparatus, I have discussed the implications of Crews' novel from the perspective of class (ideologemes), modes of production, and literary modes (ideologies of form). In addition, I have discussed the limitations of all symbolic acts that become commodities under

capitalism.

In the case of *Car*, the novel's resolution (or lack thereof) is equally as conflicted as the array of voices and literary modes that comprise it. In fact, its final pages might even leave some readers with more questions than answers. For example, some might wonder why Herman and Margo return to the very junked car that fostered Herman's ambivalence towards the automobile? Does Easy Mack really kill himself in the car crusher after fixing the squeak in the Cadillac, and if so, what hope of a brighter future does this suggest? More importantly, what is the significance of Herman and Margo's final assertion that you cannot "get rid of fucking by fucking" and if you could, you'd have to "fuck everybody" (152)? Although *Car* offers no clear resolution or praxis, the questions it raises are far more valuable than the neatly wrapped utopian platitudes that many consumers have grown accustomed to.

*Car* is truly a work about failure; about common people remaining oblivious to the forces at work against them, as well as the limitations of individual subversive acts under capitalism. Crews' novel reveals how capitalism can turn something as benign as a car (or novel) into a hegemonic vehicle and destroyer of community. Its cryptic ending suggests that everyone is getting "fucked" by the mode of production behind the car, and while working within this flawed system, only minimal progress can be expected. I suppose that *this* is what *Car* ultimately personifies through its conflicting ideologemes and ideologies of form. In doing so, the novel exposes its own shortcomings, perhaps even inspiring some to find a more communal means of "fixing the squeak" in the real world. Such a deceptively encoded novel substantiates the ongoing relevance of Marxist literary criticism, for it alone holds the hermeneutic key to unlocking the political unconscious in symbolic acts such as this.

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