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“Temi Rose’s *Sympathy* as Reckoning of the Feminist Avant-Garde”

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I would like to look at the question of “what did the year 1981 mean in the women’s movement?” not because of any particular event that occurred in that time, but rather because its vague features, and its position in the historical spectrum of surrounding decades, cast 1981 as a moment in which social progress possibly had reached its limit. Those among us today who subscribe to a more cyclical view of history know these familiar moments of apex in social progress. And we know that the history of liberalism did not evolve by grade but in radical increments. I began thinking of these problems of history in part out of a sinking scepticism about our moment in the United States today in the history of liberalism, humanism and human rights. In such a sceptical mood one day in the summer of 2005, I saw a new play that was set in the year 1981. [full disclosure: I did not see it by pure chance but am husband to the actor cast as Louise] The play, by Dr. Temi Rose, (her Ph.D., as I understand it, is in Educational Technology), is called *Sympathy*.

Sympathy in no uncertain terms, as I will quote in a moment, asks whether liberalism itself is finally crushed under the weight of the new conservative consensus. If this conservatism is symbolized by the election

of Ronald Reagan, then it is manifest in the behaviors of all the people that Temi Rose herself observed in 1981, and wrote into her play about that particular time. At least the setting of the play as well as part of its action are, as I found out from the author, autobiographical. Temi Rose was an actor in 1981. She performed a part in a production of *Medea*, in translation from Euripedes. She was pregnant. The setting of the play is a “tech rehearsal” for a production of Euripedes *Medea*. What makes the historical setting so much more meaningful is that *Sympathy* of 2005 and *Medea* of 1981 share the same actual stage-- The Ensemble Studio Theater in New York. The concern that the era of liberalism has ended is articulated within the first ten minutes of the performance of *Sympathy*, as the character says, “I think we're living in a dark age of the soul. Radiant freedom, a distant memory.” There is hardly any more context in the play for the remark than I have just given, perhaps even less (except perhaps a speculation that John F. Kennedy had been experimenting with LSD when he was photographed in dark glasses on a visit to NASA-- a halcyon recollection of an open-minded and optimistic past). Moments later, in this same scene, in a manner equally abrupt -- and turning to the feminism of the play -- a character suddenly decides to debate the gender of God:

Louise: I think a mother-father god sounds like a good idea.

Angela: I agree.

...

Trudy: But the mother goddess has to be more than a destroyer,

otherwise, we're better off with the patriarchal asshole we have now.
Angela: And shouldn't god be sort of beyond gender anyway?
Trudy: Something should be beyond gender.

What I like about this passage of dialogue is that it describes in terms of metaphysics the historical turn from feminism to gender studies*. On a specific cultural level, *Sympathy* swims in the most radical currents of thought of the New York sub-culture of the 1960's and 70s and 1981 by extension. As such, the play offers an object in which to ground my initial politico-historical inquiry from an interior perspective, not from the perspective of whether progress was extinguished from without. That is to say, I mean less to study 1981 as a history of a moment of liberalism crushed from without by conservatism, but I mean to study *Sympathy* in its setting as evidence of a historical moment of exhausted liberalism. My purpose, I assure you, is not to suggest that liberals themselves are responsible for a lack of progress since 1981; I do not believe that to be the case.

A similar inquiry will open a separate yet I think related category-- that of what is *avant garde*. Though I do not find it in my power to explain the assertion, I would argue that the same social pressures inspiring feminist movements, bring about coincident *avant-garde* movements in art. As we asked of the "women's movement," is there such a thing as "progress" in the social sphere of the women's movement; is there such a thing as exhaustion in progress, or even regress? progress, maturity,

regress, are these necessities in the idea of a women's movement or an *avant garde*, or is culture as set against sub-culture a notion in which time is not an important consideration?

I use this term *avant garde* to have a dual significance. In the primary definition, the term *avant garde* is applied to an artistic technique which is first and foremost innovative. This usage holds the term *avant garde* as antonym of the *neo-classical* that refers to art forms revisited. The conviction of the *avant garde* artist is that only *new* techniques for the production of art either apply to our present world, or are worth expressing, or both. Or, an artist can be said to be *avant garde* to the extent that the artist values innovation. (*Sympathy's* adherence to Aristotlean unity does not preclude avant-gardeism in other techniques.) There have been moments in history when many people at once have taken to this method, and iconoclasm becomes less the activity of a loner with followers (e.g. Richard Foreman today), and becomes more a paradigm for culture. This is the second definition of *avant-garde*. In the first definition, *avant garde* refers not to the moment in history, but to the techniques themselves, or to the theatre performances, performers and audiences (a dubious distinction in the *avant garde*) that participate in the historical moment of *avant garde*. In the second, it refers to a social milieu and a historical moment. And this *avant-garde* applies only to recent history. Linda Ben-Zvi, in her new biography of Susan Glaspell,

refers to 1917 as the “*annus mirabilis* that ushered in the first American avant-garde” (vii). (At best, a European *avant garde* can be said to precede it by, what?, forty years.) Certainly, her use of the word “first” implies that there have been subsequent avant-garde movements in American arts-- specifically theatre. I have not had the opportunity of asking Ben-Zvi when a second American avant-garde is (or was) and whom it might include, but it seems logical that if that of 1917 was the first, the *avant-garde* of the 1960s and ‘70s is the second.

Like the moment of the Provincetown Players and the Little Theater movement in the 19-teens, this second American *avant-garde* can be defined by a conviction that the commercial theatre is corrupted by its profit motive and is pushed into vapid conventionality by that profit-motive. Arthur Sainer, a playwright and theatre historian, writes, in his first hand account of this moment in history, *The New Radical Theatre Handbook*:

The complaints against Broadway and later Off Broadway were many and familiar. Actors felt their talents were exploited in the cause of the commercial product... Playwrights and directors felt that the commercial theatre barely contained the vestiges of a serious art form, that the significant concerns of their lives simply could not be dealt with in any depth in the commercial theatre. (Sainer, 13)

This work, *New Radical Theatre Handbook* is a revision of the Sainer’s earlier *Handbook*, thus the “new” of the title. The earlier *Handbook*, a kind of manifesto, is contemporary to the second American *avant garde* (1975) and addressed to its participants. I have quoted the *New*

Handbook to emphasize the almost wistful past-tense of the passage. *Sympathy* is also, according to its author, a work the writing of which was begun and ceased in the early eighties, and revised and finally produced and directed by Dr. Rose last year. Sainer's *new* book, from 1997, is very clear in its conviction that the moment is over. Writing about the first American *avant garde*, historian Arthur Wertheim points out that one long term result of the Little Theatre movement was to improve the quality of Broadway shows, as playwrights like O'Neill and Glaspell who began in rebellion from commercialism could eventually attract audiences to fill Broadway theatres (*The New York Little Renaissance*, 161). If today's Broadway is better for the innovations of the most recent *avant garde*, that does not mean that the historical moment of *avant garde* continues. Whether a rebellion from commercial theatre is presently extant or warranted, I cannot say. For my purposes, I see that a rejection of commercialism is not practiced by a consistent, identifiable, and geographically locable group of participants. Sainer's recollections of *avant garde* ideals have a wistful air. Permit me another unexemplified generalization: rebellion from the profit-motive as a cultural force has succumbed among theatre professionals to a practical acceptance of the necessity of capital-- even in some non-profit theatres there seems as much innovation in raising funds as in techniques of art. (Perhaps this is just New York).

Sympathy seems aware of this situation, but, because it revisits the avant garde moment as it is lost, it escapes out of the new and relentless economics, opting for an alternative. The text of the play is accessible for free on the Internet. The actors worked without pay; the audience paid nothing to see the show. When asked, Temi Rose said she would like to pay her actors in the future. *Sympathy*, however, I will say, worked for immaterial ideals*. The strength of Temi Rose's diction in *Sympathy* is to articulate *avant garde* ideals in colloquial terms; as the actors who are the characters in the play reflect on their own experience, they convey the weight of these decisions in the very language with which they are weighed in contemporary, commercial culture. My example is a speech by the character called "Chris," an actor playing Creon and Aegeus in the 1981 production of *Medea*. The speech is a soliloquy; Chris reflects on a lover (so we guess) who has died:

Chris (*unnoticed on the upper platform*): He died of AIDS before anyone had ever heard of it. He died before fist fucking was the rage on the waterfront. I was still falling love with him. He wasn't working. He was writing. We argued. What's the difference between work and art? Between work and play? That's easier to define I think. Between art and play? We agreed that work and art could be the same and work and play and art could all be the same but that the whole world would have to change. And how likely is that? And even if it did change, the world, how long would it take? We'd all be dead. So why bother? (*Sympathy*, ACT 1)

Ignore for a moment the explicit reference to a sexual act (I hope to return to a discussion of explicit sexual reference in *Sympathy*, time

permitting). Observe now the confusion about what to call a certain activity. First of all, a distinction is drawn between “working” and “writing”. Chris says, “he wasn’t working. He was writing. We argued.” In this instance, the word “working,” we infer, refers to the activity of generating income. The argument that Chris reveals in recalling, “we argued,” can be either or both a semantic discussion of the differences between “work and art” and/or it is a lovers’ quarrel about money. The discussion of difference is here a division of activities that are presumed to be the same: “work and art” different?. The word “play” has two meanings: “play”, as in a child’s play, or “fun” ; also it is the word for a dramatic performance -- “we watch a play”. If you could imagine the perspective of a person with a purely commercial sensibility, with no sense of value in art on a separate scale from money, work and play are opposed to one another. Play becomes linked to art in contemporary popular imagination in the idea of “entertainment.” The dominance of this idea of “entertainment” is what the *avant-garde* defines itself against.

Let me say more about how I view the *avant-garde* as combative to the notion of entertainment. I will discuss three separate techniques all with overlapping effects: the first I call the phenomenological time machine (an alternative to action in drama), the second is interior monologue, and the third, very related to the second, is graphic sexuality. The assumptions behind my idea of drama and my reading of *Sympathy* in

performance is that the audience goes to a play to involve themselves in a plot. A plot is a schedule.¹ I see the human subject on a phenomenological level as existing in a tension between expectation and present reality. As long as our lives are scheduled, the present moment has meaning for us. When a person who does not appreciate *avant-garde* techniques in theatre finds himself in audience of the techniques, he feels himself “bored.” The present has no meaning for him; his eyes wander restlessly around and finally cease to focus on the moving persons in the black box. If only this individual suffering from boredom in an *avant-garde* black box could have an eye for phenomenological reduction. *Sympathy* creates a phenomenological time-machine. The setting of the play is the same black-box theatre in which it is staged, no fourth-wall. The players enter the theatre as they come to rehearsal; they sit among the audience. In once scene, called “Paradise Lost,” the actors are themselves a bit *bored* at tech rehearsal. Louise and Angela articulate this boredom:

Louise: I hate tech.

Angela: Too much time to think.

This line is very meaningful. (For the character of Angela, I should say, “too much time to think” also means that she will turn to brooding. Later in this scene, she recalls vividly an act coitus so objectifying and humiliating, I would call it a form of rape, if you permit me to suspend

¹ This has been observed by *avant-garde* theatre artists, and as well by phenomenologists. I cite -

questions of consent). Too much time to think is a brilliant description of a form of boredom. Instead of a scene in which the plot is advanced through dialogue or action, many of the players are for lengths of time not involved in rehearsing light and sound cues, and so they sit in among the audience conversing. Though not one bit of their conversation is not thematically interwoven into the formal coherence of *Sympathy*, nonetheless, the illusion of spontaneous and meandering conversation is wholly credible. They discuss the characters in Euripedes' *Medea*. The character of Wilbur has ideas about Jason, calling him:

a progenitor of the whole concept of social, cultural advancement. Before this, society is more or less static....

But this alone does not create the illusion of spontaneity. Wilbur is also at leave to reflect:

Wilbur: Kingship. Kings are boring old farts now. But this is before all that. Kingship was cool, like motorcycle gangs in the 1950's; a new breed of masculinity. Young men, rebelling against restrictions - matriarchy and tribalism - there was no cynicism about it. It's all about adventure.

You can see how a member of the audience might feel that Wilbur's reflection on the time when "Kingship was cool" means he has, in Angela's words, too much time to think. The conversation permits the actors seated in the audience (by this I mean the persons of the drama, who sit among the audience) time for the free association of thoughts. (Can someone help me: who writes about actors as audience to their own performance?) To participate in this conversation of Wilbur and Fred,

Marge adds:

Do you ever look directly at the sun? I do. All the time. If you look long enough you'll see: there's a palace there....

A moment later, characters have even more latitude for whimsy:

Marge: I want to go to a party. All the people there are people I've loved...
Henry & Trudy: I'm looking for a man who treats me better than I treat myself.

Their boredom leads to punning and banter:

Billy: Vanity is definitely an element of heroism.
Fred: Cold? Heartless?
Angela: Not cold, selfish.
Fred: Sell fish. Step up and get your trout right here. Fifty cents, a pound.
Billy: Not heartless, childish.
Fred: A chill dish can be just the right thing on a stifling summer afternoon.

That this conversation does not tend towards dramatic action, but mimics spontaneous and inane conversation activates a phenomenological time machine. In truth, this conversation is a rehearsed part of a performance that is an ordered use of time, however little it may feel that way to the unaccustomed spectator. All six performances of *Sympathy*, for example, ran roughly the same length of time. In that the actors aspire to spontaneous conversation (the distinct method of Meisner, if not also Stanislavsky) and as the conversation does not develop a rigidly ordering dramatic action, it is outside the Aristolean half of Paul Ricoeur's "healthy circle," his two part understanding of time in *Temps et Récit (Time and Narrative, 3)*. More than the illusion of spontaneity, the absence of signs that order the play in a forward direction (think: the plague of Thebes in

Oedipus) allow for a slippage back to 1981. It is only by returning to spontaneity that the play can make real a present-- a present whose pressure becomes boredom in that is free from forwardness. As such, the present is always itself, and now is a present calling for order just as every other moment in history.

The second technique, contributing to the inanity that underlies the phenomenological time machine, and moving us to a more distinctly feminist application, the words spoken by characters in *Sympathy* sometimes seem representative of internal thoughts, sometimes spoken dialogue-- as if an adapted technique from the interior monologue crafted by James Joyce. In addition, part of the cultural mimesis that *Sympathy* performs is to present characters who explore their sexualities through conversation and who recollect sexual experiences in graphic detail. It is therefore preferable to speak rather of a spectrum of public and private sensibility, of internal and external communication, than of a binary distinction between the two. Here is one such conversation:

Fred: I can be a sucker.

Henry: I like to suck things. I don't find it humiliating.

Fred: Straws.

Henry: Nipples.

Fred: Nipples.

Henry: Cigarettes.

Fred: Cunts.

Henry: Cocks.

Fred: Clits. Sucking is not degrading.

Henry: Forced to suck sucks of course.

In both technique and content, the interior monologue and explicit sexuality are as radical now as they were in the era of Joyce's *Ulysses*. Anyone who has ever taught challenging modern literature to undergraduates -- Joyce, Woolf, Stevens, or any kind of abstract expressionism, knows that the innovations of modernism, about a century old, still surprise, still unsettle, still inspire resistance in readers and audiences, still subvert social norms. Again I ask to what extent have we progressed? Yet if this effective, perhaps *Sympathy* with this spectral rather than liminal distinction between public and private, may be exactly the kind of performance that answers Judith Butler, when, in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," Butler writes:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time..., then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style. (*Performing Feminisms*, 271)

At least, I feel confident that the ecstatic and dysphoric disclosures of sexual experiences by the character of Angela are involved in breaking the injunction against women's sexual desire, which, while no longer dominant in western culture is still very present. Its radicalism in *Sympathy*, I would like to say but have no time now to further explain, I think is more blunted than compromised by such commercial expressions of women's sexual desire as *L'il Kim*, or *Sex and the City*.

Finally, I will describe how *Sympathy* problematizes the idea of an

exhaustion of social progress in terms specifically relevant to feminism. The most important engagement of *Sympathy* with issues of great concern to feminism is a thematic one. The action of the play, if it can be said to have an action, is that Louise, the actor who is to portray the Chorus in *Medea*, has been impregnated by Fred the actor who is to portray Jason. I say this is the action of the play, because Louise must decide whether to tell Jason of her pregnancy. I present three pieces of evidence to suggest that this secret and its possible disclosure constitute the dramatic action of *Sympathy*. The first, interspersed throughout the play, are moments when Louise rehearses revealing her pregnancy to the father (talk about performative utterances), confronts this dilemma in soliloquy, or when she is urged to confront it by the other actors in *Medea* who know of her predicament, usually Trudy:

Trudy: ... Have you told Fred yet?
Louise: I am never going to tell Fred.

Later:

Trudy: You're going to have to tell Fred.
Louise: I know! Don't you think I know that?

And still later:

Louise: Does loving Fred mean I have to want to give him babies? Flesh of our flesh. What's the point? What does it prove?

The second piece of evidence that the secret pregnancy of Louise, the Chorus, by Fred, player of Jason, is a moment of dramatic irony late in the *Sympathy*. In this moment, Fred wants to know about fatherhood to

understand Jason, but the audience feels his proximity to -- yet obliviousness of -- Louise's dilemma:

Fred: Iowa. What's it like, being a father?

Henry: Good. Bad. It was a shock, at first. I was scared. But now he's nine and he's amazing. I could have a dozen more. Well, maybe not. You know, there are different kinds of fathers. I think Jason sees his children as extensions of himself.

It is the third piece of evidence, however, that best supports my thesis that *Sympathy* is a reckoning of feminism. Complicating her decision to inform the father, Louise must decide whether to carry the fetus to term or to abort. In one scene, the issue of abortion is reflected in Louise's thoughts on a book she has read, as well as the morbid reflections of Marge on fetuses she has aborted. In this scene, characters' thoughts are interspersed so that the scene has the form of a dialogue though the characters are mostly soliloquizing. I will quote Louise and Marge, and omit the thoughts of the other characters in the scene; however, I must also quote you a longer, uninterrupted tragicomic speech by Angela as it provides an important contrast:

Louise: I read a lot of books. In one of them there was a description of a field of trees whose leaves were baby purgatives.... Chew on a leaf or two and your period would come.

Marge: I think I've killed about ten or eleven proto-people.

Louise: If you had succumbed to a night, a morning, or afternoon of passionate embrace.

Marge: My kills weren't accidents.

Louise: Or if you had succumbed to force.

Marge: They were premeditated murders.

Louise: If it isn't a good time for you to rear a child. Famine, emotional, actual, or imagined.

Marge: Up close and personal.

Louise: The Jesuits burned those fields down to the ground.

...

Angela: The bathroom was covered with those black and white tiles and I was ripped. We were fooling around and I said, just a sec, so I could go put in my diaphragm. It was new -- it came with a stick thing with the notches on it and a rubber spaceship from war of the worlds. You took the spaceship and pulled it tight, like an arrow, then turned it over and upside down, to lock it in place onto the stick thing. I was squatting so I could slide the stick thing inside my vagina, rotate the stick and pop the diaphragm into place. In theory. Every time I'd get the diaphragm loaded on the stick, (I was supposed to spread the sperm killing goo *thickly* so no renegade baby-making spermies could breach the rubber spaceship barrier) it shot across the bathroom, spraying goo, bouncing off the walls. I couldn't stop laughing. Three times I had to retrieve the bouncing rubber, clean the walls and the floor of goo (which was really difficult because black and white tiles move around a lot when you're stoned). Then wash the diaphragm, put more goo on it, stretch it onto the notched thing, turn it over and kapow. He's in the bedroom going, *What are you doing?* All we wanted to do was fuck. I'm hysterical, laughing, trying to get my new plastic slingshot and slimy spaceship to protect me from something I didn't even know I couldn't have.

As I mentioned, this is not the only, nor is it the most explicit, discussion of her genitalia (in this case in preparation for a sexual encounter) by Angela. The comic description of her attempts to employ contraception is in dialogue with Louise's contemplation of "baby purgatives", and yet this comic speech too takes a tragic turn, when Angela reveals that she is unable to reproduce. Perhaps on this one point, the play dramatizes and may even reinforce (or at least does not subvert) common assumptions about liberal sexuality and childlessness. Meanwhile, as Louise longs for

an herbal, homeopathic abortion, Marge voices the guilt of abortion. For Louise, much is at stake in pregnancy. As Louise is a dancer and an actor, a woman whose art, if not also her living, is entirely negotiated through her body, her pregnancy is particularly threatening to her autonomy:

Louise: I have mixed feelings about that. I'm very independent. So then, now, this baby is inside me, taking control over my inner spaces. Then where am I? He's outside me and it's inside me - growing. He seems to determine my outer existence. And a pregnancy will definitely determine my inner existence. Then where am I? What territory is left for me? Where do I locate myself? I mean, what if I need to find myself? Am I only a container and a satellite? Don't I have a sun inside me too? Aren't there any planets revolving around me?

In this way, the play is involved in the present moment. A recent article by Eduardo Porter, in the *New York Times*, debating the role of motherhood, cites statistics of women in the labor-force, identifying a plateau the mid 1990s and slow decline since. This plateau and slow decline arrest the rapid expansion of women in the labor force since the feminism of late Betty Friedan. Can *Sympathy*, written in 2005, locate this same termination of progress in the women's movement in 1981:

Chris: Do you want to have children?

Louise: Yes. But I don't think I'd be a good mother and I can't give up dancing.

Chris: Why would you have to give up dancing? My friend, this may feel remarkably like the dark ages, but it is, in fact, the late twentieth century. You can't give up your art. If you want your family, have it. It will add depth to your dancing. You'd be a great mom. Strange. But great.

We do not know what Louise decides. The action of the play does not end in revelation in the traditional sense. But the problem of abortion and the

tragic catharsis of *Sympathy* is played out in the final moments of the play when Angela performs the child murder scene in *Medea*. This intertextuality as action can be seen in the light of that feminist theory of drama that holds that the structure of action and catharsis is a structure of patriarchy. The only revelation of the action of Louise's secret pregnancy is thematic. Thus, the drama of *Sympathy* is just what its title speaks to: it exists not in the exact outcome of the actions of single woman, but in the sympathetic space between actor and character, woman and woman. Medea's child-murder is not an abortion, nor is the solution to Louise's dilemma enter the specific content of the play. It may suffice to say that the transformation from the character of Angela to the character of Medea-- a transformation that is within the content of *Sympathy*-- casts the idea of abortion less as a specific political problem, and more as a problem of *Sympathy*. That is to say, once we are certain that a woman has a right to choose-- and of this I do not doubt, not would I suspect does the author of *Sympathy* -- we still must deal with the *pathos* of the act. This is a problem for the women's movement, in that today, with the new South Dakota law inevitably going before the Supreme Court remade by George Bush, we see that pathetic reactions to abortion trump rational discussions of human rights.

This situation is discouraging for those who believe in human rights (encouraging perhaps for those who believe that unborn have rights,

which, to disclose my own opinion, cannot be rationally justified until the moment of fetal viability) because we are, as a culture, perhaps about to see a historical regression. By and large, the anti-choice movement, even self-proclaimed pro-life feminisms, want to see the argument that the living tissue of a fetus is as sacred as any other individuality, and that therefore a woman once impregnated has no right to terminate that pregnancy, though to do so is possible. This overturning of a woman's right cannot mean that social progress moves forward to an era the rights of the unborn, because it is necessarily an attempt return to the situation before Roe versus Wade, thus the language in which discussions are often framed, "overturn".

This question is not only important to feminist politics; it is also a very important historical question. There can be no doubt that specific social and artistic movements are born out of specific historical circumstances (this is theoretical basis for the New Historicism). Still, patterns exist in history that involve distinct repetitions. History is governed neither abstract laws nor specific circumstances exclusively--but out of some combination of both. The first American feminist moment, culminating in the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is followed a generation later by the post World War II return to patriarchy. The second feminist movement, which culminated in Roe v. Wade and with women entering the labor market with increasing frequency until the

mid-nineties, is followed by today.

Some days now there seems even more at stake. Liberalism itself -- the secular democratic ideals that followed the Enlightenment --- succumbs to the resurgence of oligarchy and fundamentalism. Other days I am encouraged that intelligent activity such as drama and contemporary scholarship will bear the torch until the masses are willing to take up its cause again.

NOTES

* p. 3. gender studies. A pair of roles in *Sympathy* (Billy and Jean/Gene) are suggested in the dramatis personae for either male or female actors.

* p. 7 rebellion from commercialism. A rejection of profit-motive in *Sympathy* is articulated in a conversation between Marge and Wilbur. Marge asks, "What's the difference between advertising and propaganda?" Wilbur responds, "Nothing. Capitalism is a state that requires propaganda, to keep itself acceptable..."

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