

Conrad, Capitalism, and Decay

CHRISTOPH LINDNER

This essay examines Conrad's vision of decay in *The Secret Agent* (1907) to argue that the novel expresses acute anxieties over capitalism's decadent social and material effects. Set in the seedy underworld and grimy back-streets of London in 1894, Conrad's savagely ironic novel of half-baked revolutionary politics and bungled urban terrorism shows the dark side and damaged face of consumer society as it moves into the twentieth century. Specifically, it envisions the material and social worlds in a state of advanced corruption and decadence that puts them beyond the capacity for repair. Following this thought, the discussion that follows focuses on three key aspects of Conrad's vision of decay: the sex shop, the city, and the anarchist figure of the Professor.

1. The Sex Shop

Conrad begins *The Secret Agent* by introducing us to Verloc's shop—the base of operations for the novel's anarchist movement and, as such, the novel's narrative and symbolic center. It crouches in an anonymous corner of the city. It is stranded in commercial obscurity. It exudes an almost spectral aura. And it houses an outlandish and eclectic assortment of valueless objects, as Conrad's description of its window display throws into high relief:

The window contained photographs of more or less un-dressed dancing girls; nondescript packages in wrappers like patent medicines; closed yellow paper envelopes, very flimsy, and marked two and six in heavy black figures; a few numbers of ancient French comic publications hung across a string as if to dry; a dingy blue china bowl, a casket of black wood, bottles of

marking ink, and rubber stamps; a few books with titles hinting at impropriety; a few apparently old copies of obscure newspapers, badly printed, with titles like the *Torch*, the *Gong*—rousing titles. And the two gas-jets inside the panes were always turned low, either for economy's sake or for the sake of the customers. (13)

The entire point of a window display is, as Baudrillard points out in *Consumer Society*, to assault the gaze with a "calculated riot of colour" that invites passers-by to convert fantasies of material indulgence into "real, economic exchange inside the shop" (166). The dimly lit shop window in Conrad's novel, however, seems to be missing the point entirely. Its monotonous and neglected appearance offers no "calculated riot of colour" to seduce the consumer gaze, nor does it extend any tantalizing invitations to real economic exchange inside the shop itself.

Here, the gratuitous spectacle of the window display that becomes such a definitive fixture in retail practice by the late nineteenth century—and that receives elaborate representation in department store novels like Zola's *The Ladies' Paradise* (1883) and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900)—is conspicuously missing. In Zola, for example, we are incessantly confronted by vivid images of dazzling Parisian store fronts. This passage shows the Baudu family, just arrived in the city from the provinces, instantly waylaid by a succession of fantastically ornate window displays:

They walked down the Rue Neuve-Saint-Augustin, past the shop windows, stopping again in front of each fresh display [...]. But it was the last window, above all, which held their attention. A display of silks, satins, and velvets spread out before them in a supple, shimmering range of the most delicate flower tones: at the top were the velvets, of deepest black and as white as curds; lower down were satins, pink and blue, with bright folds fading into tender pallors; lower down still were the silks, all the colours of the rainbow [...] pieces brought to life by the knowing hands of the shop assistants [...]. (5)

Zola's images of visual excess show exactly what is missing in Conrad, illustrating just what Baudrillard means in *Consumer Society* when he talks about the shop window's "calculated riot of colour" with all

its "glorious *mis-en-scène*" and "sacrilizing ostentation" (166). These window displays are alive with energy and tension. They have form, texture, layers, structure, depth. The colors are intense and brilliant. The commodities look new, glossy, luxurious, and sensuous. They are inviting to the touch and tantalizingly accessible.

This makes the novel's store fronts a "great fairground of display" (Zola 4). Crucially, this fairground has the desired effect on its captive audience. Hit with the full hypnotic force of the window displays, the Baudus experience what Walter Benjamin describes in a comment on late nineteenth century Parisian shopping arcades as "the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers" (Baudelaire 55); and what Dreiser, talking in turn about the visual lure of Chicago department stores in *Sister Carrie*, calls the "drag of desire" (21).

In contrast to Zola's *grands magasins* in *The Ladies' Paradise*, Conrad's little shop in *The Secret Agent* goes out of its way *not* to make a gratuitous, sensational, or even tantalizing spectacle of its public face. And in the absence of that spectacle, this shop gives the public body no incentive at all to stop and indulge in the dreamy ritual of window shopping. It is clear, then, that the appearance of the shop in Conrad is deliberately designed to ensure a state of obscurity and anonymity. The reason is suggested by the character and condition of the objects on display in Verloc's window. Taken together, the semi-nude photographs, nondescript packages, flimsy yellow envelopes, books hinting at indecency, and obscure foreign pamphlets with inflammatory political titles allude discreetly to the shop's real business of dealing in pornographic and anarchist materials—what Conrad enigmatically refers to as the selling of "shady wares" (15), and what in the cultural politics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a socially taboo form of trade. So although it may well look like an ineffective advertisement for the shop's interior, the window display does in fact hint at the shop's business in its own veiled and oblique way. The exhibited objects are shady in character (morally and politically dubious). They are shady in their material condition (damaged and decay-

ing). And thanks to the poor lighting, they are quite literally shady in appearance.

To complete this picture of the shop as a site of shady dealings Conrad carefully matches up the shop's appearance with that of its customers. As this passage highlights, those customers look as soiled and damaged as the suspect goods they consume:

These customers were either very young men, who hung about the window for a time before slipping in suddenly; or men of a more mature age, but looking generally as if they were not in funds. Some of that kind had their collars turned right up to their moustaches, and traces of mud on the bottom of their nether garments, which had the appearance of being much worn and not very valuable. And the legs inside them did not, as a general rule, seem of much account either. With their hands plunged deep in the side pockets of their coats, they dodged in sideways, one shoulder first, as if afraid to start the bell going. (13)

These self-effacing, ghostly forms are the antithesis of the flamboyant and leisurely figure of the *flâneur*—the parading streetwalker, habitual crowd watcher, and inveterate window shopper whom Benjamin sees in *Illuminations* as the embodiment *par excellence* of the late nineteenth century metropolitan consumer (168-69); and whom Deborah Parsons, following Benjamin, describes in *Streetwalking the Metropolis* as an "itinerant metaphor" for urban modernity (2). Darting furtively into the shop with their "collars turned up and soft hats rammed down" (14), Conrad's customers go out of their way to escape the scrutiny of the public gaze. They seek not to stand out from the crowd, but to melt invisibly into it. Like the shop itself, in other words, these faceless customers work hard to ensure their anonymity and obscurity. To this end, they similarly disassociate themselves from consumer society's spectacular practices. They share in none of the eye-catching pleasures of *la flânerie*.

The fact that the shop's customers are exclusively male further hints at its pornographic orientation. As Steven Marcus notes in his study on Victorian sexuality and pornography, the material of pornography has historically been produced in Western culture—as it still is today—almost exclusively "by men for men" (281). That is, as an indus-

try catering almost exclusively to male desire, the selling of pornography targets and attracts a dominantly male consumer body. Even so, the notable absence of any female clientele in Verloc's shop does not in itself betray the presence of a pornographic trade. But it does become strongly suggestive of just such a trade when coupled with the shop's own seedy and secretive appearance.

More to the point, however, Conrad makes it clear in his account of these anonymous consumers that the shop engages in a form of commerce that—however paradoxically—positively requires obscurity and anonymity in order to draw in its customers and shift out its goods:

Sometimes it was Mrs. Verloc who would appear at the call of the cracked bell [...]. Then the customer of comparatively tender years would get suddenly disconcerted at having to deal with a woman, and with rage in his heart would proffer a request for a bottle of marking ink, retail value sixpence (price in Verloc's shop one and sixpence), which, once outside, he would drop stealthily into the gutter. (14)

This passage basically reads as a description of the amateur buyer of pornographic articles. The discomfiting presence of a woman behind the counter makes the insecure customer acutely aware of himself as a consumer of explicit material. It punctures his sense of invisibility. The overpriced marking ink is of course a decoy good that allows him to salvage the embarrassing situation by making an entirely innocuous transaction. That he buys an overpriced item he clearly does not want simply confirms the value he attaches to remaining both inconspicuous and anonymous.

Accordingly, unlike the department store that thrives on the spectacle of goods and the seduction of display, Conrad's back-street shop absolutely needs to deflect and defuse the curiosity of the public gaze in order to capitalize on its merchandise. Rishona Zimring makes this point in a recent article fittingly titled "Conrad's Pornography Shop," noting that "instead of making a spectacle of its goods" Conrad's shop "sells by hiding them" (334). She rightly adds that the shop entices its highly self-conscious clientele "with the comfort of obscurity, not the

seduction of display" (334). The indication is that the shop does not evade the gaze as a way to resist consumerism. Rather, it does so precisely as a way to participate in it.

This disguising of the shop's identity plays an important role in articulating the novel's attitude towards revolutionary politics. Significantly, Conrad does not slip behind the commodity's disguise to disclose any dirty or salient details about the shop's pornographic and anarchist material. In fact, he makes the description of that material increasingly vague over the course of the novel. By the time the Assistant Commissioner of Police—himself in disguise—visits Verloc's shop, the merchandise on display is reduced to an amorphous mass:

[...] another suspect patch of dim light issued from Mr Verloc's shop front, hung with papers, heaving with vague piles of cardboard boxes and the shapes of books [...]. By the side of the front window, encumbered by the shadows of nondescript things, the door, standing ajar, let escape on the pavement a narrow, clear streak of gaslight within. (127)

With its vague imagery, nebulous shapes, and "shadows of nondescript things," Conrad's description in this passage makes it impossible, as Brian Shaffer points out, "to tell whether it is the politically rousing or sexually arousing materials that are being detailed" (444). This, however, is no accident on Conrad's part. From the outset, Conrad deliberately collapses the distinctions between the two forms of merchandise. They share the same physical space, the same material condition of damage and decay, the same look of emptiness and waste, the same forms of disguise, and even the same anonymous consumers.

Brian Shaffer argues that Conrad forges these "bonds between revolutionary politics and pornography" in order "to tarnish the glamour of subversive politics with the smuttiness of tawdry sex" (443). To this end, Shaffer adds, both spheres "are depicted as figuratively or literally masturbatory, and as attracting a morally dubious readership" (443). Conrad's early account of Verloc's customers, with their soiled clothing and suspect behavior, certainly bears out Shaffer's point about a dubious readership. Similarly, something of pornography's

association with lonely and humiliating acts of self-abuse rubs off on these seedy figures.

But although Shaffer makes an important point, he does not follow through to take the relationship between the shady wares and consumerism fully into account. Rishona Zimring does, however, when she argues that Conrad's sex shop fulfills the function of a safety valve for a society that generates "excess desire," desire that "in turn finds satisfaction in the commodification of women and the reproduction of rousing revolutionary titles" (334). This idea that the shop acts as a kind of safety valve is one that Conrad himself touches on when he states that the shop's dubious goods "preserve an imperfect society from the dangers of moral and physical corruption, both secret, too, of their kind" (231). For Zimring, this suggests that Conrad sees "desire, whether sexual or revolutionary," as having "as its object simulations and as its banal relief, an economic transaction: the purchase" (334-35). In such terms, Conrad's collapsing of the distinction between pornographic and anarchist material can be understood not just as a way to satirize and debunk revolutionary politics, but also as a commentary on the social function of catering to 'deviant' consumer desires. In *The Secret Agent* the selling of anarchist material, like the selling of pornography, is about defusing existing desires not fueling new ones.

The effect is a disorienting consumer experience that becomes an obstacle to sociality. The stress on anonymity, obscurity, detachment, and deception positively impedes human relations. It even reduces the human subject to the dehumanized category of an inanimate *thing*. And like the commodities populating the space, the shop's customers are similarly cut-off from their own identities as well as the identities of others. They are dislocated from the wider consumer world. In sum, Conrad sees the sex shop as a deeply asocial space that exerts an alienating and dehumanizing influence over its customers.

2. The City

This sense of alienation and dehumanization extends beyond the confines of the sex shop to encompass the whole of Conrad's vision of the city. In his 1920 "Author's Note" to *The Secret Agent*, Conrad recalls the daydream that inspired the novel's cityscape. It is a vision of London so somber and brooding that it transforms the metropolis into a place of darkness as engulfing and menacing as the African interior in *Heart of Darkness* (1902):

Then the vision of an enormous town presented itself, of a monstrous town more populous than some continents and in its man-made might as if indifferent to heaven's frowns and smiles; a cruel devourer of the world's light. There was room enough there to place any story, depth enough for any passion, variety enough for any setting, darkness enough to bury five millions of lives. (10)

Such images of the city's hostility and indifference towards humanity—of a human population buried alive and suffocating in the obscurity and anonymity of urban existence—recur throughout the novel. In *The Secret Agent*, the city figures as "an immensity of greasy slime and damp plaster interspersed with lamps, and enveloped, oppressed, penetrated, choked, suffocated by [...] blackness" (126). The buildings are "a black, wet, muddy, inhospitable accumulation of bricks, slates, and stones, things in themselves unlovely and unfriendly to man" (54). The streets are like "a slimy aquarium from which the water [has] been run off" (124). Conrad's squalid urban wilderness is, as Randall Stevenson notes, positively Dickensian in its "images of hostility and horror" (45). Certainly, it evokes the opening of *Bleak House* (1852-53) where Dickens, in terms almost verbally echoed by Conrad's, describes the city as a place of gloom soaked in "soft black drizzle," plastered in "mud, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth," and "mourning" by all appearances "for the death of the sun" (1).

Conrad's vision of the city in *The Secret Agent* also brings to mind the distinctively bleak cityscapes of *film noir*. Through dimly-lit photography and shadow-laden camerawork, classic *noir* films such as

John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and Howard Hawks' *The Big Sleep* (1946) similarly see the city in menacing images of darkness, disorder, waste, and decay—images that the *future noir* of films like Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) takes to visual and conceptual extremes. Set in the Los Angeles of 2019, *Blade Runner* envisions a sprawling urban wasteland where, in a classic *noir* gesture, it is always night and always raining. In its dystopian projections, as Ralph Willet notes in *The Naked City*, the film imagines the metropolis of the future as a place where "empty warehouses and abandoned industrial plants drip with leaking acid rain," where "rubbish piles up," where "infrastructures are in a state of disintegration," and where "scavengers roam among the garbage" (100). And though *Blade Runner* does offer some glimpses of another city built high above this one—of a high-tech world filled with flashing neon lights, flying cars, and majestic skyscrapers—it does so only to highlight even further the urban decay taking place everywhere at street-level.

In *The Secret Agent*, Conrad takes the novel's images of urban decay to visual and conceptual extremes of their own. In the following street scene, for example, he exposes the full severity of the city's alienating and dehumanizing effects. The imagery that ensues is so uncompromisingly bleak and brutal that it would not be out of place in the dystopian urban world imagined in *Blade Runner*:

On one side [of the street] the low brick houses had in their dusty windows the sightless, moribund look of incurable decay—empty shells awaiting demolition. From the other side life had not departed wholly as yet. Facing the only gas-lamp yawned the cavern of a second-hand-furniture dealer [...]. An unhappy homeless couch, accompanied by two unrelated chairs, stood in the open. (74)

What is particularly striking about this street scene is the total absence of a human population. The street is deserted. The houses look uninhabited. Even the second-hand-furniture shop seems abandoned. Here, the material degeneration is so acute that the city becomes more than just hostile and indifferent towards humanity. The condition of "incurable decay" also makes human living in this demolition zone

seem unthinkable and even potentially lethal. The word "incurable," moreover, gives the terminal decay infecting this urban space the malignant feel of a cancerous disease.

It is, in turn, through the description of the second-hand-furniture shop that Conrad comments—albeit obliquely—on the impact of that urban space on social relations and human experience. The only visible life in the street is the fetish life of objects. That is, Conrad projects human characteristics onto the shop's collection of used furniture, endowing it with a life-like autonomy and subjectivity of its own. It is significant, then, that Conrad brings material objects to life only to stress their condition of estrangement and paradoxical look of lifelessness. The chairs are "unrelated". The couch is "unhappy" and "homeless". Abandoned, neglected, and unwanted, these commodities are marked by immobility, stagnation, inertia. But most importantly, as unrelated objects, Conrad's mismatched pieces of used furniture have no relationship with each other. That Conrad uses the condition of objects here as an expression for the reified human condition accordingly suggests that in this place of terminal decay human subjects are, like the objects representing them, damaged goods. More importantly, it also suggests that the experience of urban life under capitalism estranges and depersonalizes the individual. The indication is that the city's human population is similarly inhibited from entering into social relations.

These exact ideas inform another key passage in the novel. It is a description of the city's public trade in newspapers that again highlights a breakdown in social relations:

[...] a dismal row of newspaper sellers standing clear of the pavement dealt out their wares from the gutter. It was a raw, gloomy day of the early spring; and the grimy sky, the mud of the streets, the rags of dirty men harmonised excellently with the eruption of the damp, rubbishy sheets of paper soiled with printer's ink. The posters, maculated with filth, garnished like a tapestry the sweep of the kerbstone. The trade in afternoon papers was brisk, yet in comparison with the swift, constant march of foot traffic, the effect was of indifference, of a disregarded distribution. (72)

The language of garbage saturates the entire passage. The newspaper sellers operate out of the gutter. The posters are "maculated with filth." And the papers themselves, harmonizing with the dirt of the people, the streets and even the sky, look "damp," "rubbishy" and "soiled". In short, Conrad is showing the decay of yet another of the city's social spaces. It is significant that he does so by focusing on newsstands. The newsstands represent what should be a hot-bed of social activity—a public place of congregation, gossip, information, and exchange. But they do nothing of the sort. The look of filth and waste disables their potential to stimulate social relations. The news is literally covered in dirt.

The effect, as Rishona Zimring points out in her reading of this passage, is that "the circulation of news" figures "as the flow of garbage" (335). With this idea in mind the dirt of the newspapers can also be seen, as Zimring argues, to represent "the printed words themselves" (335). In other words, the newspapers' trashed condition doubles as a statement about the trashy material they contain, so that the dirt *on* them becomes figuratively representative of the dirt *in* them. In such terms, it makes even more sense that Conrad depicts the news as "disregarded" and its reading public as disinterested. Even this textual social space has deteriorated to the point where it overflows with its own verbal form of garbage.

It is clear from these various street-scenes that Conrad's treatment of the city goes out of its way to emphasize the asociality of urban space, the anonymity and obscurity of urban existence, and the states of alienation and dehumanization that ensue. What follows is a vision of the city dominated, like that of the sex shop, by images of darkness, disorder, waste, and decay that not only draw on the urban imagery of earlier writers like Dickens, but also prefigure that of *film noir* in its blackest moments. In particular, as Randall Stevenson points out, Conrad's images make the city into "a chaotic space in need of [...] order and rule of law" (45)—into the kind of menacing urban "jungle" (126) that the character of the Assistant Commissioner finds it to be when he sneaks about the city streets at night. And it is precisely by

stressing in this way the city's material and social deterioration that Conrad "sets the stage," in Zimring's words, "for corrective visions of cleanliness and order" (335)—visions that emerge paradoxically from the novel's anarchist figure of the Professor.

3. The Professor

It is, significantly, through the figure of the "incorruptible Professor" (249) that Conrad delivers his most explicit critique of anarchism in *The Secret Agent*. In this key passage, the Professor berates his fellow revolutionaries for their hypocrisy, indolence, and corruption:

You revolutionists [...] are the slaves of the social convention, which is afraid of you; slaves of it as much as the very police that stands up in the defence of that convention [...]. You are not a bit better than the forces arrayed against you [...]. The terrorist and the policeman both come from the same basket. Revolution, legality—counter moves in the same game; forms of idleness at bottom identical. He plays his little game—so do you propagandists. But I don't play; I work fourteen hours a day, and go hungry sometimes [...]. I've the grit to work alone, quite alone, absolutely alone. I've worked alone for years [...]. You talk, print, plot, and do nothing. (64-67)

The Professor's tirade identifies one of the main problems with the "game" played out in the novel between the forces of chaos and confusion and those of law and order—namely, that it *is* a game, and one in which "revolution" and "legality" have become nothing more than "counter moves" that cancel each other out, what the Professor also describes as "forms of idleness at bottom identical." In other words, the Professor points out the futility of *playing* at anarchism. Specifically, he suggests that participating in the game means enslavement to social convention. It means selling out to the forces of domination. But above all, it means doing nothing.

The Professor claims not to play at being a revolutionary, but instead to work at it. In fact, he is the only anarchist in *The Secret Agent* who does not subsidize his revolutionary lifestyle through some other form of activity. Verloc has his trade in pornographic commodities, while Ossipon, Michaelis, and Yundt all profit from turning them-

selves into sex objects through male prostitution. By contrast, the Professor's source of income is directly and inextricable linked to his political extremism. He sells bombs. Or to put it another way, he deals in exploding commodities. So although the Professor does participate—however unlawfully—in capitalist modes of exchange, the objects he exchanges have the potential quite literally to explode the system in which they circulate. Unlike the others, the Professor engages in a form of trade that expresses a fanatical commitment to spreading instability, a commitment to the explosive disruption of capitalist order.

Even so, the Professor's vocation is not without its own inner paradox. In its capacity as a sort of safety-valve for consumer society, as Rishona Zimring has suggested, Verloc's shop supplies commodities that defuse volatile desires. Its pornographic material, for example, offers temporary relief from desire through the consumption of the graphic fantasies it contains. By contrast, the Professor's explosive material is designed not to relieve desire through the safety-valve of fantasy, but instead to enable its violent realization. The problem, however, is that the Professor's exploding commodities have the potential to kill their consumers (the Professor designs the bomb that kills Stevie at the Greenwich Observatory). There is, of course, a certain gruesome appropriateness about an opponent of capitalism selling a form of commodity that kills the consumer. But the complication is that the people who 'consume' the Professor's merchandise are themselves opponents of capitalism—so that, in this case, eliminating the consumer means weakening the forces of chaos and confusion working against capitalism. In other words, the Professor's commitment to spreading instability is paradoxically undermined by the instability of the explosive material in which he trades. Hence his sick ambition to invent a "perfect detonator that would adjust to all conditions of action," a "variable yet perfectly precise mechanism," a truly "intelligent" bomb (62).

Conrad's description of the physical space in which the Professor works and lives further comments on the figure's fanatical commitment to the cause of revolution:

The enormous iron padlock on the doors of the wall cupboard was the only object in the room on which the eye could rest without becoming afflicted by the miserable unloveliness of forms and the poverty of material [...]. There was nothing on the walls but the paper, an expanse of arsenical green, soiled with indelible smudges here and there, and with stains resembling faded maps of uninhabited continents. (242)

It is interesting that Conrad singles out the locked cupboard as the only object in the room that is not "afflicted" by material poverty and "miserable unloveliness" of form, since the cupboard is where the Professor stores his explosives. From this it would be fair to infer that the reason the Professor exempts this particular piece of furniture from aesthetic mutilation and material neglect is because it functions as a container for the one and only form of material object with which he allows himself to enjoy a fetish relation: bombs. More to the point, the neglect evident in the rest of the room speaks of the deliberate starvation of all but the most basic human needs in the service of the revolutionary cause. It speaks, in other words, of a dedication not to material comfort, but to material deprivation. The effect this has on the appearance of the room is the same look of terminal decay as the one so graphically represented in Conrad's vision of the city's damaged exteriors. This domestic space is as hostile and potentially lethal to human living as the novel's decaying urban spaces. Even the colors in the room are poisonous.

Conrad carefully matches up the appearance of this room with that of its human occupant, just as he does with the sex shop and its faceless customers. Specifically, he depicts the Professor as "physically very empty" (84):

A dingy little man in spectacles [...]. His flat, large ears departed widely from the sides of his skull; [...] the flat cheeks, of a greasy, unhealthy complexion, were merely smudged by the miserable poverty of a thin dark

whisker. The lamentable inferiority of the whole physique was made ludicrous by the supremely self-confident bearing of the individual. (58)

The description of this "miserable and undersized" (73) human figure immediately recalls that of the domestic space he inhabits. Both are represented in terms of material poverty and physical damage. Both share a look of emptiness and waste. Commenting on the Professor's physique, Brian Shaffer rightly suggests that this figure of "radical alienation" and "creeping insanity" is represented "in a state of degeneration" (454). To this I would add that it is a state of degeneration that perfectly mirrors the images of decay through which Conrad represents urban conditions under capitalism throughout *The Secret Agent*.

In such terms, the Professor can be seen as a human embodiment of the city. He even has the same hostile and indifferent attitude towards humanity. That attitude is evident not only in his mania for bombs, which speaks of a complete disregard for human life, but also in the social views underpinning his anarchism. In this revealing moment at the end of the novel, for example, Conrad shows the Professor fantasizing about mass murdering the masses. In so doing, he provides the novel's most disturbed and disturbing vision of correction:

The weak! The source of all evil on this earth! [...] They are our sinister masters—the weak, the flabby, the silly, the cowardly, the faint of heart, and the slavish of mind. They have power. They are the multitude [...]. Exterminate, exterminate! [...] First the great multitude of the weak must go, then the only relatively strong. You see? First the blind, then the deaf and dumb, then the halt and the lame—and so on. Every taint, every vice, every prejudice, every convention must meet its doom. (243)

The passage is not without a heavy dose of irony. Throughout *The Secret Agent* Conrad repeatedly draws attention to the Professor's physical defects, such as his diminutive stature, his frail physique, and his shortness of sight. In other words, the Professor belongs in every physical sense to the category of the weak he so passionately wants to destroy. But this "agent of destruction" (103) conveniently glosses

over the awkward point that in calling for the extermination of the weak he is also calling for his own extermination.

More to the point, this aversion to the "multitude of the weak" culminates in a vision of social purification disturbingly similar to the final solution envisioned by Hitler. In particular, the Professor's views on the extermination of the physically disabled bring to mind the kind of genocidal thinking behind the Nazi project of racial and ethnic cleansing that led to the horrors of the Holocaust. Equally disturbing about the Professor's homicidal fantasy is the vagueness about where, if at all, the killing would stop. What category comes next after the weak and the relatively strong? We get the distinct impression that the elimination of "every taint, every vice, every prejudice, every convention" means the elimination of humanity itself.

Conrad does not present this corrective vision as any kind of genuine solution to mass culture's decay. Rather, he makes it clear that the genocidal thinking underpinning the Professor's revolutionary politics is just another part of the problem—just another symptom of decay. Conrad ends the novel with precisely this idea. The final scene shows the Professor indulging in apocalyptic daydreams as he walks alone and ignored through the city streets. In reading the passage, it is worth remembering that the Professor never goes out in public without concealed explosives strapped to his body—explosives that he constantly fingers through the pockets of his coat:

The incorruptible Professor walked [...] averting his eyes from the odious multitude of mankind. He had no future. He disdained it. He was a force. His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction. He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable—and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men. (249)

The word "incorruptible" suggests that nothing can or will sidetrack the Professor. He has given up on humanity. He has even given up on himself. And in renouncing his future, he becomes a force beyond reason and control. The idea is reinforced by the knowledge that the

Professor's body is laden with explosives. While his mind caresses "images of ruin and destruction" his hands are nervously fondling the means to create them. The threat of violence hangs over the entire passage. This human time bomb could explode at any time.

Conrad ends *The Secret Agent* on this ominous note and without ever providing relief from the disturbing images of social and material decay present everywhere in the novel. In the end, Conrad offers no potential, however remote, for regeneration and renewal. Rather, through the treatment of the sex shop, the city, and the Professor, he sees consumer society's decay as incurable, its damage as irreparable, its corruption as irreversible, its stagnation as inevitable. The result is a novel that speaks of a profound cynicism over the possibility of resisting or correcting capitalism's decadent social and material effects. And it is, significantly, precisely this attitude that comes to dominate literary representations of consumer society in the modernist period. It leads to the diseased Dublin of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), to the superficial cocktail set of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1926), to the dystopian consumer projections of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and even to the self-deluding scenarios of Parisian retail therapy in Jean Rhys' *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939).

University of Wales
Aberystwyth

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