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*Weathering the Storm**Pirates of the Caribbean*
and Transnational Corporatism*E. Johanna Hartelius*

Since 2003 a sensational pirate theme has spread through popular culture. It began with *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, the Disneyland adventure-ride turned action movie trilogy. After its success and massive media attention, audiences were thirsting for more. In July of 2006, the sequel, *Dead Man's Chest*, followed, breaking box office records. It rapidly became part of a promotional pirate frenzy. But why something so seemingly obsolete as pirates? What is it about pirates that speaks to the American audience? Are they the Disney version of James Bond or Indiana Jones? If audiences simply want to experience the thrill of a big-budget action film, what accounts for the failure of the third *Mission Impossible* film, which opened only a month before *Dead Man's Chest* (DMC)?

The reason for the recent popularity of pirates may be more complex than a secret yearning for wenches and rum. It is not as simple as "everyone wants to be a pirate." In an era of declining governmental power and growing corporate influence, the *POC* films formally reflect how Americans are managing everyday life. This current climate of transnational corporate expansion places us in a difficult position. We struggle to find our own place in a world where the same products are sold in Los Angeles, Rio, and New Delhi, where the boundaries of trade and politics are becoming blurry. Even though most Americans grow up learning about democracy—how politicians are elected, how a bill becomes a law, and so on—the actual government often seems a far cry from our daily lives. We don't know who our representatives are, and we may not care. Every sixth

grader has heard that democracy means “rule by the people,” yet, by the time we reach college, we may wonder how much “ruling” the people do. When Congress’s policy initiatives seem light-years away and impossible to understand, our attention turns to other things: buying an *iPhone*, dressing like the stars, and watching Bravo’s newest reality show. We grapple with identity and purpose in the midst of a global tug-of-war, the national government on one side and the transnational corporations on the other.

Rather than simply assume that American audiences secretly wish to be pirates, this chapter posits that the *POC* narratives are homologous to a real-life experience. A homology is a pattern connecting different kinds of experience. The pattern operates at the level of form rather than content, which means that the particular details of the homologous experiences vary. Just as the pirates’ triumphant survival depends on their besting both oppressive aristocracies and greedy trading companies, so, too, does the American spirit’s endurance depend on the ingenuity of its people against the government and transnational corporate interests. By examining specifically the construction and confusion of the characters’ identity, the objects that render their owners uniquely powerful, and the narrative’s unstable sites, one can identify several homologous relationships between the films and the experiences of modern Americans. In the end, the films’ message is clear: the free and entrepreneurial individual in the end out-smarts larger forces. Thus, the films prescribe appropriate strategies for living through a struggle that happens beyond our control.

The chapter begins with a brief synopsis of the first two films’ plots. Following the synopsis is an overview of the historical relationship between the nation-state and corporate expansion. This section introduces a shift in power between national governments and increasingly international business. The analysis then focuses on three specific aspects of the homology: the construction of identity, the negotiation of place and space, and the manipulation of power-objects such as money and other resources. For example, the way in which the films’ main characters struggle with identity ambivalences is formally homologous to the same struggle for contemporary Americans. Complications arise in this process, for the characters as much as for the audience. The concluding section addresses the functions of formal “disguises” and suggests implications of this sort of popular culture analysis for pedagogical purposes.

Synopses

PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: THE CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL

This first film inaugurated the season of pirate enthusiasm. It is an impressive display of special effects and performances by well-known actors including Johnny Depp, Orlando Bloom, and Geoffrey Rush. The drama begins when

Captain Jack Sparrow comes to the Caribbean town of Port Royal, home-away-from-home for British governor Swann and his daughter Elizabeth. On the day of Sparrow's arrival, there is a promotion ceremony for a soon-to-be commodore, Norrington, a close friend of the governor and the presumed future husband of Elizabeth Swann. Norrington attempts a marriage proposal following the ceremony but is interrupted when Elizabeth's tight-fitting gown causes her to faint and fall off the wall into the waves below.

Sparrow rescues Elizabeth and is captured by Norrington's men. Charged with piracy, he is put into the town jail overnight, awaiting the gallows. During the night, however, the *Black Pearl* and its crew come into Port Royal. They plunder the city and capture Elizabeth, who is brought on board and taken to meet the infamous Captain Barbossa. The two bargain for the gold medallion that Elizabeth has kept hidden since the day she stole it off young Will Turner's neck. Taking the medallion and Elizabeth hostage, Barbossa and his men sail for the Isla de Muerta, the island of death, where they hope to dispel the ancient curse that plagues them.

Will Turner is the young man who has grown up to become infatuated with Elizabeth. He seeks Jack Sparrow's help in rescuing her in exchange for springing him free from the jail cell. At this point in the film, Will is still unaware of his pirate heritage. He and Sparrow agree to commandeer one of the Royal Navy's ships, sail to Tortuga to collect a crew, catch up with Barbossa, and save Elizabeth. What Will does not know is that Jack plans to give him over to Barbossa in exchange for the *Black Pearl*. Sparrow realizes that only the blood of Bootstrap Bill, Will's estranged pirate father, can repay the debt and break the curse.

Through a series of sea battles and sword fights, Will learns the truth about his family, Elizabeth is rescued from Barbossa, the curse is lifted, and all of "the good guys" return to Port Royal. The only one who does not fare as well is Sparrow, who in the final scene stands to be hanged in a public ceremony, paralleling the one at the beginning of the film. At the eleventh hour, Sparrow is rescued by Will, who finally embraces his identity and loyalty to pirates. Despite her promise to Norrington, Elizabeth admits that she is actually in love with Will, and the film ends on their sunset kiss. Sparrow, in turn, swims off to his beloved "Pearl," which has finally come back to him.

PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: DEAD MAN'S CHEST

In this second film, the returning characters are joined by a few new ones, and the plot becomes, if possible, even more tangled. It begins with the ruined wedding ceremony of Elizabeth and Will. The East India Trading Company (EITC) has arrived in Port Royal in a scene that looks strikingly like military forces storming a beach. The head of the EITC, Lord Beckett, places Elizabeth and Will under arrest for aiding the escape of a convicted felon, Jack Sparrow. A warrant is also out for the arrest of Commodore Norrington, but we learn

that he resigned from his post and left town a few months earlier. All three are to be executed, but Beckett offers Will a pardon for himself and Elizabeth if he can retrieve Jack Sparrow's magic compass. The compass would grant Beckett power over all the seas and their commercial dealings, including piracy. Will accepts, leaves Elizabeth in a jail cell, and sets off to find Sparrow.

When Will catches up with Sparrow, he agrees to help him find the key to the chest that holds Jones's heart in exchange for the compass. Will does not know that Sparrow plans to use the contents of the chest to call off Jones's evil "beastie," the Kraken, in order to avoid his debt. During a haggling scene, Jones insists that he hold Will ransom until Sparrow delivers 100 souls. Sparrow and his crew head for Tortuga, where presumably souls would not be missed. Here, they are reunited with Norrington, whose appearance and demeanor have changed since the first movie. He is angry and bitter and looking for revenge. He joins the crew.

Back in Port Royal, Elizabeth has escaped and bargained with Beckett for her and Will's pardon. Along with the pardons is a letter of marque, which would render its keeper a privateer in the Crown's service, for Sparrow. She sneaks onboard a merchant ship and hitchhikes to Tortuga, where all are convened. Using Sparrow's compass, they find the island where the chest with the heart is buried. At the same time, Will arrives on the island with the chest's key. All are now joined by Jones's crew of monstrous sea creatures. After lengthy sword-fighting scenes, everyone in the crew except Norrington escapes. He gives up the chest to the monsters on the island but keeps the heart, which, at the film's end, he delivers to Beckett.

The crew makes it back to the *Black Pearl*, but now Kraken is after them. They prepare to abandon ship, but at the last minute Elizabeth realizes that Kraken only wants Sparrow. She gives him a passionate kiss, all the while handcuffing him to the mast. Wielding a drawn sword, Sparrow goes down with his ship. The heart-broken survivors now head "up river" to the lair of Tia Dalma, a sort of oracular good witch, who suggests that there may be a way to save Jack Sparrow, if only they are willing to "sail to the ends of the earth and beyond." In the film's final minute, Barbosa appears in the witch's hut and becomes the rescue mission's new captain.

Transnational Corporatism

The U.S. government has long been struggling with its own EITC: Microsoft. For decades, federal courts have attempted to stem Microsoft's influence, accusing it of violating antitrust laws. A settlement in 2002 was harshly criticized for being too lenient on the corporate giant. This issue with Microsoft raises many questions: Is it possible to break the law if your business has

already surpassed its parameters? If a corporate entity like Microsoft ultimately benefits the American economy, should it be charged with an economic crime? When Microsoft produces and supplies the very information system that government agencies depend on, what happens to relations of power (Murray)? This section of the chapter introduces the idea that economics hold an increasing primacy over politics in global corporatism. It demonstrates the formal patterns of experience that characterize Americans' struggle with forces beyond their control. The goal is to identify an important tension between national governments and transnational corporations—one in which the former increasingly dictates the terms of coexistence—that presents a considerable challenge for citizens.

In modern history and throughout the first half of the 20th century, nation-states were the major site of power from an international perspective (B. Anderson; Hobsbawm). They were the obvious basis for conducting most exchanges between different cultures. More specifically, trade and economic interactions were under the states' auspices. One culture's political dominance over another was traceable to a government power; this was the format for both British and French imperialism and colonialism. In times of heightened intensity, such as war and economic downfall, nationalism surged. Outwardly, the state was a people's representative to the world; inwardly, it was the mechanism for national coherence and identification.

But gradually, the cultural and political circumstances for nation-states have changed. This is particularly true regarding dominance over corporate interests. No longer does a country's government oversee the business conducted within its borders with complete control. The nation-state can no longer be described as an all-encompassing managerial umbrella under which businesses operate just like any other local enterprise. Masao Miyoshi offers a critical interpretation of the development of international trade:

First, domestic companies simply undertake export/import activities, linking up with local dealers. Then, the companies take over overseas distribution and carry out their manufacturing, marketing, and sales overseas. Finally, the transnational corporations denationalize their operations by moving the whole business system including capital, personnel, and research and development. This final stage is reached when a corporation promotes loyalty to itself among shareholders, employees, and clients rather than to its country of origin or host countries. (736)

Miyoshi reveals a significant tension between decision-making powers, one that is at the heart of this chapter. When a corporation functions almost independently of its national home base, there is a hierarchical ambiguity between business and government. This ambiguity is particularly poignant from the citizen-consumers' perspective. We are the ones at the conflict's epicenter. If the

decisions that have the most impact on our lives are made by CEOs rather than prime ministers and political parties, where does international power really lie? What has happened to traditional understandings of a representative democracy with popular influence? Today, the most influential transnational corporations have operating budgets matching that of small nations. Think of those organizations that create an entirely new scale of revenue: General Electric, Exxon Mobil, Wal-Mart, Time Warner, and so on. Their top-level executives travel the world and make deals that easily rival international policy treaties in terms of scope and importance. But unlike the political officials that are elected by a citizenry, the CEOs are uninhibited by mandates of public service when choosing a course of action. Check and balances do not necessarily factor into the corporate efficiency rationale. To the citizen consumers, it almost seems like these executives are untouchables, free to make up their own rules.

Another way to think about this power struggle is by focusing on relevance. To produce a profit, corporations go to great lengths to make their products and services relevant and intelligible to popular culture and everyday life. To examine this notion, ask which is more socially relevant to Americans' lives: an appropriations bill finally passing a congressional vote or a new Pixar film? Which is more likely to be talked about at the water cooler? Being interested in the film is easier, quicker, and more fun. At the same time, we're constantly obligated to appear politically informed. So, while the corporations invest money in making themselves relevant, the government spends energy in making politics a moral mandate. Who, for example, hasn't been told that voting is a civic duty? We are torn between being consumers and citizens.

The producers of popular culture have the people's attention in a different way than do the institutions of traditional politics. On an international level, consider for example the "Americanization" phenomenon. Americanization—the global marketing and suffusion of American culture in other places—does not mean that people in Sweden and Japan are suddenly preoccupied with American politics. Certainly, the dominant presence of the United States in world politics is not lost on the Swedes or the Japanese, but Americanization primarily means that they are wearing Nike, eating Big Macs, watching Disney movies, and listening to Usher and Kelly Clarkson. They are torn between different identities and loyalties. Popular culture's inseparability from global corporations is thus an important part of the tension between national governments and transnational corporations.

These tensions create popular ambivalence and anxiety. When one source of collective identification gradually loses power, it undermines that collective. Those who used to identify as members become unsettled; they have to find a new stable center. The next section of this chapter is a close analysis of the *POC* films focusing on three important narrative dimensions: identity, space, and powerful objects. The depiction of these experiences and objects is homologous to a real-life experience of change and instability. The formal pattern linking

cinematic narrative and reality advises audiences on how to respond in their everyday lives to the “same” phenomena they see on the big screen.

Homologies in *Pirates of the Caribbean*

The tension between real-life transnational corporations and national governments is formally illustrated in the films by the East India Trading Company (EITC) and the British government. As a commercial center, Port Royal represents European colonialism; the importation not only of goods but of English customs and hierarchies is portrayed in both films. As the trilogy progresses, royal privilege is threatened by the independence of the EITC's business. The second film in particular features the company as a major “bad guy” character. It is a real menace, both for the government and for the 17th-century version of a small business owner. For example, a scene onboard an independent merchant ship tells us that “honest sailors” are hard-pressed to survive the EITC's competition.

The EITC is represented primarily by Lord Beckett, whereas the British government is represented by Governor Swann, Commodore Norrington, and their men. In the opening scene of the second film, the two forces illustratively collide. Governor Swann has prepared a lavish wedding for his daughter only to have it spoiled by the rude and brutal intrusion of the EITC. The old and cherished customs of the British aristocracy are left in the rain and mud; in all their dressy glory, its representatives are chained and imprisoned. Elizabeth and Will demand to know what authority Lord Beckett has to arrest them, whereupon he presents a warrant. This becomes somewhat confusing when Elizabeth angrily reminds him that Port Royal's citizens are under the rule of the king's governor. It is word against word as to whose power is mightier, the governor's or the EITC's. When the company's ships come into shore during this opening scene, the flags bearing its emblem are strikingly similar to pirate flags with the familiar skull and crossbones. This similarity may signal a likening of the company to pirates, but not to the sort of pirates with which audiences are invited to identify. In other words, the invasion of Port Royal is a crime comparable to that of piracy. The people responsible for it, however, are not the good-natured pirates that the movie depicts as heroes.

The *POC* films feature both good and bad pirates. Although the good guys clearly are pirates, not all pirates are treated equally in the plot's distinction of good and evil. For example, in the *CBP*, Sparrow's Tortuga crew faces Barbosa's cursed pirates. The former are shown as slightly inebriated but good-spirited men with a healthy sense of humor. The cursed pirates, on the other hand, are meaner and less inclined to spare a life. After all, they were the ones who marooned Captain Sparrow and who seek to sacrifice Bootstrap's offspring as payment for their wrongdoings. The audience can read this ambivalence in two ways: we can

face the dual nature of humanity and recognize the potential for greed and sin in everyone, or we can divert the issue by delineating good and bad even within the group with which we identify. In other words, pirates represent ordinary people in the midst of larger forces, governmental and corporate. The films' depiction of pirates is thus formally homologous to the place audience members occupy in their own reality. Within the category of pirates, however, there may be less appealing factions of which the good guys must be wary.

The power of the EITC is shown as something dangerous but seductive. Several of the characters are tempted by its riches, but the audience understands that any pact with the company means "selling out." As mentioned above, Beckett offers Will a deal in exchange for his and Elizabeth's pardons. According to the terms, Will must serve as an agent of a "business transaction" by finding Jack Sparrow, stealing his compass, and persuading him to accept a letter of marque. When Will asks if he is to recover the compass "at the point of a sword," Beckett smugly says, "Bargain!" thus illustrating his commercial orientation. He proceeds to explain to Will that "the world is shrinking" and that "the blank spaces on the map are vanishing." Meanwhile, a cartographer is hard at work on a giant map of the world in the background. Beckett calls Sparrow a "dying breed" who must "join the new world or perish." A bit later, he has much the same conversation with Elizabeth, to whom he announces that "Currency [not loyalty] is the currency of the realm!" From the EITC's perspective, transnational business is the way of the future, and its expansion is unstoppable.

And yet the EITC needs some measure of support from the old order. Beckett tries his persuasive tactics on Governor Swann as well, after his attempts with Will and Elizabeth. He offers the governor the same letters of pardon. (Notably, when he addresses Swann as "mister," Swann corrects him by saying, "It's Governor Swann still!") In exchange for the safety and freedom of Swann and his daughter, Beckett asks for "your authority here [in Port Royal], your influence in London, and your loyalty to the East India Trading Company." Evidently, the company's growing wealth and international influence are not quite enough, and the audience recognizes the legal system and political history that still occasionally give the government's representative the upper hand. When Swann agrees to the deal, Beckett announces that "everyone has a price."

Norrington's fall from grace is a similar illustration of declining governmental powers. In *CBP*, he is a well-respected member of Port Royal's British aristocracy and about to be promoted. His main adversaries are the Caribbean pirates, whom he has managed nearly to eradicate. Norrington's responsibility to the Crown, moreover, is highlighted in the final scene where Sparrow awaits execution. To justify the seemingly harsh sentence, Governor Swann explains to his protesting daughter: "Commodore Norrington is bound by the law, as are we all." This scene's connection between the enforcement of law and order and the maintenance of royal power is clear.

In *DMC*, Norrington's star has fallen, and his relationships to pirates and authorities have been inverted. Having lost Elizabeth to Will, he evidently resigned his post and left Port Royal. He turns up again in Tortuga, the film's version of Sodom and Gomorra, with a soiled uniform and a half-empty bottle of rum. Elizabeth poignantly asks: "James Norrington, what has the world done to you?" The answer gradually unfolds through the rest of the movie as Norrington's nobility is tested. Even though he joins the pirates, he acts honorably in the bleakest moment and leads Jones's sea monsters away from the cast. In the end, however, he uses the captured booty—Jones's heart—to "buy his life back" from Beckett. When Beckett calls this act the "dark side of ambition," Norrington counters by describing it as "the promise of redemption." In other words, the Crown's redemption and survival depends on its obedient acceptance of the company's conditions.

The characters in these films are complicit in their own fates. They chose sides in the conflict, and their actions have direct impact on the plot. For example, Governor Swann and Elizabeth both choose to cooperate with Lord Beckett, potentially compromising their loyalties to the Crown. Likewise, the EITC chooses to trust the governor and depend on his long-established political influence. The same could be said for modern Americans. Our choices and priorities shape power struggles between the government and the corporations that challenge it. Because business needs consumers and political leaders need followers, we are in a uniquely influential position. More and more often, our loyalties are to the businesses that we patron; we are Saab drivers, Mac users, and Visa-card holders. Occasionally, however, we choose to exercise our nationalist identity. We rally ceremoniously around being American. Whenever the consumer impulse takes precedence over Americanism, the tension between national government and transnational corporations increases.

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND CONFUSION

At the height of the nation-state's power, nationalism was the primary resource for collective identification (B. Anderson). To identify as an American was both necessary and sufficient for constructing social membership and purpose. But, as Peter Marden notes, the decline of the nation-state has had a profound impact on the stability of national identity. "[T]he forces of globalization are making us re-think our old ideas about democracy, sovereignty, citizenship and the state. As traditional allegiances are put aside, new ones are formed that have profound implications for political practice" (4). Institutions of all kinds are established ways of feeling connected. When any of them falter, including the state itself, it throws off processes of collective identification.¹ Identifying with one's social group is a fundamentally human gesture. It does not disappear because the terms of identification change. Put differently, the instability of

national identity does not amount to an “identityless” people. Literature suggests that a new generation of Americans are discovering alternative bases for creating community.

One such alternative framework for identification is consumption. Rather than identify primarily with those who share the same nationality, Americans might identify with those who share the same consumer preferences. It may, in other words, be more telling to reveal one’s choice of car than one’s political orientation. For example, certain automakers have begun to promote their vehicles with clubs and vacation retreats exclusively for owners. Owners of, for example, Saturn get together and socialize based on the bond of driving the same brand of car. So whereas our parents’ and grandparents’ generation considered themselves Americans first and motorists, film buffs, or clotheshorses second, this generation may do the opposite. If so, it is indicative both of the diminishing effectiveness of the nation-state and its government in generating identification and of the increasing role of corporate influence on social connections.

The plots in these films are convoluted, partly due to the characters’ identity-related confusion. For example, Norrington has a rather ambivalent relationship with pirates that features centrally in *CBP*. His actions toward them suggest a sort of subconscious indecision. In the first scene onboard the ship from England, Norrington has just commented on his plans to exterminate all pirates when young Will is rescued from the waves. Will, it turns out, is a pirate’s son. Later, during a confrontation, he orders the men to hang Sparrow, despite the fact that Sparrow just saved Elizabeth from drowning. At the end of the film, he gives Sparrow a two-day head start before he sends his men after him and the *Black Pearl*. Norrington is obligated to persecute threats to the Crown; he is also a good and forgiving man. This conflicted relationship with pirates shapes Norrington’s character throughout the films.

To analyze the films’ construction and confusion of identity, I examine how each of the main characters grapples with identity issues. Because the films rely rather heavily on character development, I spend time on each person individually. Note that the portrayals of Will Turner, Captain Jack Sparrow, and Elizabeth Swann illustrate how identity is subject to external circumstances; that is, the films depict how tensions between the British Crown and the EITC influence the characters on a personal level. For the audience, this functions as a source of identification with the fictional characters. There is a formal homology between their struggles to find themselves and our likewise tumultuous search for identity. Because our experiences are homologous, we are invited to see ourselves in the characters.

Will Turner

Between the opening scene where Will is rescued and the morning of Norrington’s promotion ceremony, 8 years pass. We infer that orphan Will was

taken in as an apprentice by a blacksmith in Port Royal under whose guidance he now makes swords. Will does not seem to fit in anywhere, however. Before the ceremony, he is summoned to the palace to deliver a new sword that the governor has commissioned as a gift for the commodore-to-be. It is evident that Will is out of place in the fancy palace and awestruck by the beautiful but unattainable governor's daughter. He does not quite fill the role of suitor, though, just as the life of the high class is beyond his reach.

Much of the first film is thus focused on Will's self-discovery. When he enters the drama as a little boy, the pirate medallion around his neck is confiscated by his hostess Elizabeth. Not until much later does he learn of his father, Bootstrap Bill, and his pirate heritage. Sparrow, who breaks the news, assumes a kind of older brother role. It is his responsibility to teach young Will the ways of the sea and a pirate's morale. The blacksmith workshop is the stage for a particularly illustrative scene between Will and Sparrow, in which the latter is on the run from Norrington's men. Will, whose feelings for Elizabeth seemingly translates into civic duty, challenges Sparrow, thereby keeping him in the shop long enough to be captured. The dialogue between the two men reveals that Sparrow recognizes Will based on his resemblance to his father. Will rebuts in a scornful manner.

Sparrow: "You seem somewhat familiar; have I threatened you before?"

Will: "I make it a point to avoid familiarity with pirates!"

Sparrow acknowledges Will's fencing skills, but the fight has a noticeable sense of brotherly tutorial rather than confrontation. For example, Sparrow tests Will's footwork while teasing him about "finding himself a girl."

The pirate lessons continue onboard the *Interceptor* when Sparrow and Will are on their way from Port Royal to Tortuga. Sparrow claims that there are only two things to consider in life: what a man can do, and what a man can't do. He tries to get Will to accept that his father was both a pirate and a good man and that "pirate is in your blood." He asks Will, "Can you sail under the command of a pirate, or can you not?" This choice, for Will, becomes definitive of his identity. If his father was a pirate and he himself awaits the same fate, his affectionate bond with Sparrow is permissible. But the intense negotiation of righteousness and loyalty carry through both films for Will.

Will is in many ways the quintessential young man character. His background is ambiguous, which causes problems for him particularly in terms of class. His fatherlessness leads him to seek other male role models, in this case Sparrow. He is infatuated with a woman, but his insecurities prevent him from pursuing her. In fact, the American film audience frequently is encouraged to identify with exactly this form of the young male hero. We have seen movie after movie with basically the same figure in different circumstances and time periods (*Good Will Hunting*, *Save the Last Dance*, *Almost Famous*, *Wonder Boys*,

Scent of a Woman). In each film that features this character, some aspects of the form are present, and some are left out. The important thing is for the audience to experience the cinematic homology and relate its own versions of the fictional challenges.

Captain Jack Sparrow

Sparrow is at once an underdog and a legend. When he docks in Port Royal at the beginning of *CBP*, his vessel is a leaky old dinghy. Introducing himself as Mr. Smith—a nobody—he does not have the demeanor of a scary pirate or a mighty captain but, rather, a prankster. Nonetheless, he is emphatic about his captain title even without a proper ship. As Norrington, upon realizing that Sparrow's effects consist of a gun with no additional shots or powder and a compass that does not point north (see below), announces: "You are by far the worst pirate I've ever heard of!" To this, Sparrow replies with glee: "But you have heard of me!"

Sparrow's reputation precedes him. For example, when Norrington rolls back Sparrow's sleeve and spots a bird tattoo, he immediately identifies him by name. The films reinforce this legendary impression of Sparrow many times. One segment of *DMC* depicts Will looking for Sparrow through a sort of interviewing montage. A series of people tell Will when and where they last saw Jack Sparrow and the circumstances of their relationship. Most of the stories are less than flattering, but no one is confounded by the pirate's name. In another segment, Elizabeth and Sparrow swim ashore the very same island where Barbossa once marooned Sparrow. She wants him to get them off the desert isle the same way he did the last time and exclaims: "You're Captain Jack Sparrow! You vanished from under the eyes of seven agents of the East India Company! Are you the pirate I've read about or not?!"

Sparrow of course deliberately perpetuates his own mythical status. Upon reencountering Barbossa and the *Black Pearl* crew, his mutinous former confederates, he proclaims: "When you marooned me on that godforsaken spit of land, you forgot one very important thing, mate. I'm Captain Jack Sparrow!" Sparrow may be an institution of pirate lore, but, as one of the pirates says, "Not much is known about Jack Sparrow before he showed up in Tortuga." The mystery is part of his appeal and a major feature in the plots; no one seems to be able to figure him out. He is either a good man who happens to steal things for a living or a bad pirate who occasionally does the right thing. He has no solid connections to the other characters, which is how he manages the freedom to appear and disappear in the story. Sparrow's identity, in other words, is a strategic puzzle.

This may be the character with which the audience wants to identify. We see him on the screen and wish that our own lives were more like his: exciting,

dangerous, and full of adventure. If so, it is this desire that inspires us to be extra sensitive to formal homologues linking Sparrow's reality and our own. When these become salient, the content-based details are less important; we can see past the eye liner, the pirate ship, and the accent. Instead, we may focus, for example, on Sparrow's continuous survival and triumph in the face of his enemies. Those audience members that fancy themselves underdogs who beat the odds can relate to the form of Sparrow's identity. Moreover, they may experience this form as a way of dealing with uncertain external circumstances. The form of Sparrow's character becomes a response to external tensions.

Elizabeth Swann

Elizabeth has a strange attraction to all things having to do with pirates. The audience learns this about her in the *CBP*'s opening scene, when a ship's fore is shown emerging in the fog. A little girl stands at the railing singing the emblematic pirate tune: "Yo-ho, yo-ho, a pirate's life for me." As mentioned above, Elizabeth keeps Will's pirate medallion. On the morning of the promotion ceremony, she sneaks it out of a hidden drawer and puts it around her own neck. When the *Black Pearl* pirates attack Port Royal, her pirate knowledge actually saves her life. She is captured but invokes the prisoner's right to parlay: "According to the Code of the Brethren, set down by the pirates Morgan and Bartholomew, you must take me to your Captain. If an adversary demands parlay, you can do them no harm until the parlay is complete." Her fascination with pirates is drawn into her own identity. Even Sparrow calls her a pirate at the end of *DMC* when she cuffs him to the mast and sacrifices him to Kraken.

Another aspect of Elizabeth's identity ambivalence is her romantic conundrum. This is portrayed as a thoroughly classic choice: the "smart match" with Norrington or the puppy love she shares with Will. Notably, this confusion comes up when Elizabeth is captured. To avoid becoming the pirates' hostage, she introduces herself as Elizabeth Turner, using Will's name and claiming to be a maid in the governor's household. Of course for the pirates, the name Turner suggests that she might be the offspring of Bootstrap Bill, whose blood they need to break the curse. Since the pirates think she is Bootstrap's child for a good portion of the film, her plan ultimately backfires.

Additionally, Elizabeth's identity construction is a matter of gender. In the second film, she disguises herself as a man to sneak onboard the merchant ship to Tortuga. Her abandoned dress is discovered by the other sailors, who make up a story about a woman's ghost haunting the ship. Elizabeth's sexual ambiguity, moreover, stretches beyond her appearance. In Tortuga, for example, there is a bar brawl in which her sword fighting ends up saving Norrington. He has foolishly challenged half the town folk to a duel in his drunken stupor. Her "skills with a blade" continue as a theme through the movie. Thus, Elizabeth's

character oscillates back and forth between the hyper-feminine aristocratic lady and a pirate-like tomboy.

Elizabeth is the only heroine, which means that she is the female audience's only source of identification. Her struggles to find herself and negotiate her romantic relationships are featured as major elements in the plot. At one point or another, she has romantic affairs with all three major characters: Will, Norrington, and Sparrow. She is torn between suitors of different calibers, which contributes to the sense of tension in the films. One important formal aspect of Elizabeth's personality is her attraction to the films' "bad boys." Both as a girl and as a young woman, Elizabeth is drawn to pirate lore. For the female audience, this allure of forbidden love becomes a potential homology and a point of identification. The films ask, Who hasn't been tempted by the wrong kind of romance? In response, we may consider how our own identities are a function of the tensions going on around us, many of them fueled by romantic interests.

Negotiating identity is a challenge for these characters, especially because the external circumstances constantly change. This is part of the homology between their fictional selves and the audience's real experiences of change. For example, Elizabeth's identity construction is shaped by her father's predicament in Port Royal. When his position of power there is threatened, so is the stability of her origin. The second dimension of this chapter's analysis, in fact, concerns the impact of unstable spaces. In the following section, I discuss how the sites for the plot contribute to the impression of tension and change. Particularly noteworthy is the homology between these fictional spaces and the real-life spaces wherein the audience experiences the same thing.

UNSTABLE SPACE

Saying that the world is shrinking may be to resort to cliché, hence insisting that it is "under construction" is more helpful. Geographical space does not have the same meaning to contemporary Americans as it did for our predecessors. It is not as stable or absolute. If you are born and raised in the same town where you later work, marry, bear children, and live out your old age, your personal experience of space is rather restricted. Chances are good that most of the people you interact with share the same experience. Your bond is affirmed by a perspective on the world that rarely if ever is challenged. A challenge only occurs if a stranger comes to town, if the familiar space is infiltrated by foreign persons or symbols.

The scenario I described above is true for fewer Americans today than historically. Urban areas are becoming international metropolitans, and small towns are going out of business, for better or worse. In short, people are encountering cultural diversity (in friends as well as music, food, and religious convictions) and are experiencing space as something considerably more pliable. For example, a truly exotic vacation destination today may be Thailand or

Australia, whereas 50 years ago the equivalent may have been London or Paris. International travel has become faster, cheaper, and more convenient. This, in turn, alters the way we think about space—both when we are staying in one place and when we are in transit. No place is as permanent as it was when you knew you might only leave it once or twice in your life.

Tortuga

In the *POC* films, space becomes another variable for the heroes to negotiate. At times, it almost becomes a character in itself. For example, Tortuga represents all that is pirate. It is a no-man's-land, a place literally off the map, where misfits and rejects convene. The scenes set there construct it as a cross between a battlefield and a brothel, where danger and pleasure exist in a tumultuous mix. This mixture is not entirely objectionable; Sparrow mentions to Will that, if every place on earth were like it, no man would ever feel unwanted. In a sense, Tortuga and Isla de Muerta are depicted as interchangeable. They contain extremes—in gold or in hedonistic decadence. Both occupy a plot position that might be described as “pirates'/criminals' lair away from safe places like Port Royal.” The description of Isla de Muerta as a spot that “cannot be found except by those who already know where it is” might be applied to all pirate lairs. They are mystical and not entirely physical spaces.

The Ships

Much of the *POC* plots take place onboard either pirate ships or navy ships, which illustrate the films' incorporation of unstable spaces. For both camps, a ship is much more than “a keel and hull and a deck and sails.” As Sparrow explains to Elizabeth, those are the things that a ship *needs*. He insists that a ship really *is* freedom, suggesting that the audience's hope to be free does indeed depend on something quite unstable. This image is reinforced in the *CBP* jail scene. Sparrow, who has a unique relationship with his ship, hears its cannons in the distance and says that he “knows those guns.” He then announces: “It's the *Pearl!*” For Sparrow, the *Pearl* means relief from the shackles of civilization. For the audience, a ship represents the independence and self-sufficiency that require mobility. We are discouraged from committing to a fixed spot, like a port or a home. Being free, the films insist, means negotiating the unsteadiness of a ship and the proverbial rough waters surrounding it.

A ship like the *Black Pearl*, moreover, epitomizes both freedom and danger. Perhaps its very allure lies in that threat. One of the early Port Royal scenes shows two navy men describing the myth of the *Black Pearl*: a ship with black sails that is crewed by the damned and captained by a man so evil that hell itself spat him back out. It is supposedly “non-catchable,” which refers to the military's inability to bring it to justice. Another myth about the ship is that it “never leaves any

survivors.” What becomes confusing for the audience is the interchangeability of the ships throughout the plot’s twists. It is difficult to keep track of whose ship is overtaken by whom, and which ship is the stage for each new battle scene. This adds to the general impression that ships are indeed unstable spaces.

POWERFUL OBJECTS

In a discussion of corporate globalization, money is of course a principal motivating object. Moreover, a struggle between national government and transnational corporations makes money an accessible symbol. As such, it is “a universal media of exchange and is ‘passed around’ transferring value from context to context, without regards to specific local settings” (Marden 6). Of course, resources like oil, land, and infrastructure are other examples of powerful objects, but in a capitalist system, these are by definition measured in terms of potential for profit.

Although it means belaboring the obvious, it is important to mention money as a pawn in the game between corporate and governmental interest taking place both nationally and internationally. Doing so draws attention to the basic form of a powerful or desired object around which competition is organized. This form recurs throughout the *POC* films, as I shall discuss in more detail below. Audiences thus recognize the powerful-object pattern and activate their experience of being in the midst of a tension that can in effect be reduced to that object. In other words, the experience of the films’ powerful objects and that of the powerful objects in the real-life struggle resonate with one another.

To analyze the formal homology between these films and a growing influence of transnational corporatism, it is important to emphasize certain objects of power. As explained earlier, a capitalist system requires that transactions be reducible to a common denominator or currency. In the films, currency assumes several different forms. Put differently, there are a number of objects around which the plot revolves. These objects motivate the characters and become the victors’ spoils. They are thus presented as homologous to whatever objects motivate the audience.

The Gold

As formal recurrences go, this may be the films’ most thinly disguised theme. The gold, especially central in the *CBP* story, illustrates our simultaneous attraction and aversion to wealth. In the *CBP*, the gold is not just any gold but the cursed treasure of Cortés. Barbossa tells Elizabeth the story: The treasure contains 882 pieces of Cortés’s gold. As a punishment for his cruelty against the Aztecs, the heathen gods placed on the treasure an evil curse. Any mortal who removes a single piece from the stone chest must suffer eternally; anything bought

with the cursed gold brings misery. The cursed pirates, Barbossa laments, are neither living nor dead. They are doomed to hunt for the last remaining pieces of the treasure and return them. Barbossa explains, "Compelled by greed we were, but now we are consumed by it."

The "undead" pirates are irresistibly drawn to the gold. Whenever a piece is in the open, the ocean quells, and the winds turn, presumably as a sort of beckoning for the pirates seeking to restore the treasure. This beckoning signifies our preoccupation with the accumulation of wealth. As one of the pirates says, "The gold, it calls to us!" The curse, on the other hand, represents the pursuit of something that cannot be definitively gained. Consider the homology to an American audience. For a true capitalist, there is no such thing as enough money. More is more. Accumulating money is an inexhaustible enterprise. Barbossa describes how the pirates cannot enjoy the gold but also cannot stop seeking it. They are controlled by a greater force. Because this force is present in the audience member's lives, its irresistibility resonates. We understand how the cursed pirates must suffer and how their actions seem beyond their own control. But there are "objects" other than gold that motivate men, in the films as well as in real life. . . .

The "Girl"

Sparrow says to Will when he accuses him of being well on his way to becoming a pirate: "You're completely obsessed with treasure." When Will objects, Sparrow smiles and replies: "Not all treasure is silver and gold, mate," and they both turn to admire Elizabeth. In the *POC*, two different storylines characterize a woman as a treasure or, in this analysis, as an object of power—that is, a woman is the object of others' actions. In the first film, Norrington and Will compete for Elizabeth's heart and hand. In the second film, Sparrow half-heartedly joins this competition as well. Elizabeth, however, is the films' only active female, which is to say that she is the only heroine among the main characters. Thus, she is both a subject and an object. In some ways, she pursues the men in the films; ultimately, however, her role conforms to being that of a "treasure."

Another woman plays an important role in the second film, but this character is notably absent. When Tia Dalma tells the tragic story of Davy Jones, it turns out to be one of unrequited love; he succumbed to "that which vexes all men"—a woman. Tia Dalma explains that he fell in love with a woman "as changing and hard and untamable as the sea" and, when she betrayed him, cut out his own heart. He put the heart in a chest, buried the chest on a deserted island, and now always carries the key to the chest. According to this story, a woman is to blame for Jones's evil character, which makes him seem more humane and his actions more intelligible. Such an "off-stage woman" may be more of a cause than an effect in the plot, compared to Elizabeth, but she is

nevertheless an object of power. In short, she generates power for others' benefit instead of her own.

Sparrow's Compass

This object of power appears several times in the films, but its centrality in *DMC* warrants separate treatment. The trick to this magic compass, which originally belonged to Tia Dalma before Sparrow bartered for it, is that it only works if its keeper knows what he/she seeks. When the crew travels upriver to the witch, she immediately notices that Sparrow does not know what he wants. To some, then, the compass appears to be useless and broken, since it does not point north. But, as one of the pirates knowingly points out: "We're not trying to find north, are we?" The compass leads to whatever you desire most, which causes many twists in the plot.

The significance of such a compass is potent. For instance, it is of no help to those who are truly lost. In a sense, it is an insider's trick. Just as the Isla de Muerta can only be found by those who already know where it is, the compass can only be used by those who already know what they want. This object befits a culture that nurtures mystery. As stated, tension between the national and corporate interests creates a confusing environment for ordinary people; this confusion, which is exceedingly mysterious in itself, is exacerbated by the fact that navigational aides only serve those who do not really need direction. In reality, people without Sparrow's confidence and certainty have no help, the film suggests. They would simply misinterpret the compass and remain lost.

Davy Jones's Chest

This object and the key that opens it are the central power sources of the second film. Whoever has it and/or the magic compass controls the sea. The entire plot thus becomes focused on bargaining and trade. To name a few examples: Beckett offers to grant royal pardons to Elizabeth, Will, and Norrington in exchange for Sparrow's compass. He of course wants it for the EITC's commercial benefit. Will agrees to help Sparrow find the key to Jones's chest in exchange for the compass, which he will then give to Beckett to free Elizabeth. Sparrow wants the key to use Jones's heart against him and cancel his debt. Bootstrap Bill commits himself to an eternity of service to Jones in exchange for his son's freedom. And, finally, Norrington delivers Jones's heart with the promise that he will be readmitted into the British establishment.

The subject of trade is prevalent in the first film as well. Elizabeth uses the pirate medallion as a bargaining chip to negotiate "cessation of hostilities against Port Royal." Sparrow wants to trade Will with Barbossa for the *Black Pearl*. Barbossa, in turn, wants to offer up Will to break the curse of the Aztec treasure.

The rapid exchange of one thing for another may complicate the plot, but it nevertheless underscores the films' main theme—the expansion of commercialism and international trade. This theme is the ultimate foil for the characters' challenges and triumphs.

Conclusion

I argued in this chapter that *Pirates of the Caribbean* offers a pop culture lesson in one of our time's most important political changes—the shifting powers of national governments and transnational corporations. The films instruct American audiences on how to negotiate our place amid these great forces, whose struggle is carried out largely beyond citizens' control. I focused especially on three themes—the construction and confusion of identity, the pursuit of empowering objects, and the manipulation of unstable space—to demonstrate a homology between the films and real-life experiences. This analysis showed that identity is a highly fluid construct in a culture that has relinquished the traditional institutions around which citizens form social networks. The films, I argued, reflect this ambiguity in their treatment of the characters' identities, many of which change in various ways throughout the story. Further, I illustrated the pattern of behavior that is centered on valuable objects and indicated how this struggle is shaped by the mobile sites that serve as context.

There are alternative ways of discovering this connection between the life of a pirate and the complex position of modern citizen consumers. Indeed, drawing attention to the recurring homology throughout different texts substantiates the argument linking discourse and experience. Consider, for example, the use of the term “piracy” to describe the illegal downloading of MP3 files (Spitz and Hunter; Taylor). As the introductory chapter of this book explains, language is one of the most important means of disguising social issues, whether intentionally or not. Choices in vocabulary reveal a lot about social attitudes toward the issue being disguised. Thus, using a phrase like “online piracy” suggests how the film and music industries conceptualize this phenomenon. By comparing such a term to the homology identified in this chapter, we might recognize the tension between federal laws regarding intellectual property on the one hand and large media conglomerates on the other. While the former decides what is legal and what is not, the latter has staggering control over popular culture and its profitable dissemination. Between the two interests are the consumers. In short, the term “piracy” here buttresses my analysis of how Americans behave when subjected to larger forces and the underlying forms that express those behaviors.

It is worthwhile to inquire about the benefits of this disguise in the first place. What is the point of a film about pirates if it is really about ordinary people? The introductory chapter describes how disguises sometimes offer a way

of dealing with issues that are particularly painful or dangerous. A film's specific content, for example, can be a disguise for something with which audiences would have a difficult time engaging. In the *POC* trilogy, displacement is a protective strategy of disguise. The plot is set in a fictitious past far from the audience's real lives. As long as the bad guys are the stuffy British aristocrats and the East India Trading Company, the film is harmless. Americans have no reason to fear oppression from either one. A film about pirates thus poses no threat. No one is going to see the films and riot against the government or even the corporations that the EITC represents because manifestly they are simply fictional.

It would be preposterous to claim that *POC* teaches modern Americans to be pirates; rather, the reading I offer in this chapter suggests that there are formal ways of being a pirate that are profoundly influential to the American audience. Such formal patterns offer audiences "equipment for living." They instruct us on how to live in the midst of conflict. According to Kenneth Burke, symbols are our arms against perplexities and risks (61). When it provides means of handling difficult situations in everyday life, art, including movies, protects us against the unfamiliar.

Each time a story is told, the content or information is poured into certain formal patterns. Burke explains, "A given human relationship may be at one time named in terms of foxes and lions, if there are foxes and lions about; or it may now be named in terms of salesmanship, advertising, the tactics of politicians, etc. But beneath the change in particulars, we may often discern the naming of one situation" (302). The point is this: In the *POC* films, the particulars are pirates with eye patches, cursed Aztec treasure, and giant, tentacled sea monsters. These are not the circumstances of modern America, yet the situation has clear relevance. Like the pirates, we are encouraged to struggle against oppression, whether aristocratic or corporate. The films imply that we must always embrace our individualism, cherish freedom, protect our treasured things, and strive to maintain a sense of humor in the face of adversity. "Don't let 'em getcha down!" is the trilogy's Burkean proverb.

In closing, let me underscore an important implication of this rather celebratory analysis. To be sure, the justification for studying artifacts of popular culture has been made many times; it need not be reiterated here, except to note the pedagogical value of taking seriously a film about pirates. For many students of cultural criticism, detecting formal recurrences is a difficult and sometimes painful lesson. They are discouraged by the realization that popular texts (television, music, film, advertisements, etc.) often perpetuate the mainstream negative attitudes of racism, sexism, and so on. This in turn generates a reluctance to think in depth about everyday texts and experiences. Without diminishing the importance of critical insight, we must allow for other, more positive discoveries in cultural analysis. We might remind ourselves that being a critic means paying attention not only to the destructive

characteristics of popular texts but also to their productive potential. Others might then consider them instrumental rather than simply entertaining and pursue cultural criticism more vigorously in the future.

Note

1. Of course, nationalism is not gone as a resource for identification. In fact, as Miyoshi argues, the myth of the nation-state remains vital long after the reality has lost its force. The point here is that, while “Americanness” may still connote a variety of symbolic resources for constructing identity, other symbolic systems are competing with it at greater rates than previously. There are more systems of identity to choose from today.