

**SPACES OF VALUE IN WILLIAM GADDIS'S *THE RECOGNITIONS***

by

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Spaces of Value in William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*

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## Abstract

This thesis provides a thorough analysis of Williams Gaddis's depiction of capitalism and American imperialism in his magnum opus, *The Recognitions* (1955). Often read as a late Modernist, early Postmodernist text primarily concerned with aesthetic and spiritual questions, this thesis argues that *The Recognitions* also exhibits a profound concern with the changing material realities of lived space under intra- and post-World War II American capitalism. The first chapter analyzes the scenes set in New York through the lens of Henri Lefebvre's concept of "abstract space" to relate Gaddis's depictions of urban infrastructure to his critique of the decline of civic culture through alienation and overreliance on mass media. The second chapter argues that *The Recognitions* prefigures the critique of American imperialism that becomes central to Gaddis's mid-career works, *J R* (1975) and *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985). Through a critical examination of the text's depiction of non-American spaces (Paris, Central America, and Spain), it demonstrates how American industries commodify cultural practices and overwrite Indigenous spatial arrangements to subordinate all other ways of life to the demands of capital. The second chapter concludes by examining the scenes set in the Spanish countryside, linking the novel's spatial themes with its aesthetic and spiritual ones through a discussion of Gaddis's descriptions of monumental built structures. Drawing on philosopher G.A. Cohen's distinction between preserving *particular valuable things* and preserving *value as such*, it argues that the depictions of enduring monuments present a spatial metaphor for an attitude toward value more broadly, one that resists the reductive, utilitarian attitude that shapes the novel's other spatial arrangements. In asserting the centrality of space as an important category for understanding *The Recognitions*' depiction of capitalism and identifying the presence of Gaddis's later critiques of imperialism in his earliest work, this thesis enriches our understanding of Gaddis's engagement with the socio-economic realities of his time and identifies an avenue for further inquiry into the global aspects of his fiction.

### **Lay Summary**

This thesis examines the depiction of capitalism, imperialism, and the construction of space in William Gaddis's magnum opus *The Recognitions* (1955), a novel whose overt concerns with aesthetics and spirituality have led critics to accuse it of remaining detached from the social and economic upheavals of its time. Through close examinations of its depictions of New York, Paris, Central America, and Spain, this thesis reveals *The Recognitions*' profound concern with the ways that the imperatives of capital accumulation shape spatial arrangements and cultural practices both in America and throughout the world. In doing so, it demonstrates the centrality of these themes to *The Recognitions* and to Gaddis's oeuvre as a whole, providing a material foundation for his inquiry into the aesthetic and spiritual crises of post-World War II America—crises which, as Gaddis demonstrates through the size and formal complexity of his fiction, expand alongside America's expanding global presence.

## **Preface**

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Jack Williams.

## Dedication

I would like to begin by thanking all of the wonderful teachers I have had throughout the years, from W.S. Fox Public School through London Central Secondary School, Queen's University, and the University of British Columbia. Having thoughtful, caring, and inspiring teachers at every level of my educational journey has been one of the great privileges of my life.

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Thank you to Tilly the cat and Aristotle the axolotl for reminding me to take a step back from the Big Questions and just *be* every once in a while.

Thank you to all of my friends, in Westmount, Kingston, and elsewhere, for helping me learn so many of the life lessons that they don't teach you in school.

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## Introduction

William Gaddis' two major novels—*The Recognitions* (1955) and *J R* (1975)—played a pivotal role in the development of American avant-garde fiction in the postwar period. The two texts' impressive length (900+ pages and 700+ pages, respectively), formal complexity, and biting satire prefigured the rise of the maximalist, “encyclopedic” fictions of authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and David Foster Wallace (see Moore, *Gaddis* 1-3). Though Gaddis' fiction has come to be recognized as some of the most exemplary work in this tradition, it has also been subject to some of the common criticisms levelled at it. In particular, it has been argued that, with their formal complexity and overt concerns about the nature of representation, works in this tradition suffer from an apolitical insularity, ““systematically divest[ing] [themselves] of any ability to comment upon anything other than [their] own ability to comment upon anything”” (Peck in Shavers, 165). While a preoccupation with futility is, indeed, central to Gaddis' work, his novels' vast scope alone should lead us to question the validity of such reductive accounts. Although his novels derive much of their humour and pathos from depictions of chaos and disorder, they also demonstrate a fascination with systems that grounds their formal experimentation in the social, cultural, and material conditions of postwar American life. As Joseph Tabbi writes, Gaddis' fiction “details the supports and structures hidden from view—hidden by the proliferating languages of commerce, law, economics, technoculture and other professions concerned, necessarily, with their self-regulation, their own survival and reproduction, and their distinction from the codes and languages of competing professions” (*Paper* 4). It is perhaps fitting, then, that the proliferating language of Gaddis' novels themselves has, in turn, hidden certain fictional structures from view.



*The Recognitions* is centered on the artistic and spiritual journey of Wyatt Gwyon, whose strict Protestant upbringing leads him to view his burgeoning love of art with immense distrust. Discouraged from pursuing art by his Aunt May's assertion that art-making is inherently sinful because "Our Lord is the only true creator, and only sinful people try to emulate Him" (Gaddis 38), Wyatt makes a failed attempt at joining the priesthood before finding himself drawn back into the art-world. Aunt May's influence still lingers, however, as Wyatt dedicates himself to creating perfect reproductions of old Flemish masters rather than creating "original" artworks. After a brief stay in Paris, during which his marriage disintegrates and he is humiliated by an art critic, Wyatt moves to New York. There, an art dealer named Recktall Brown and his business partner, critic Basil Valentine, devise a scheme to sell off Wyatt's reproductions as originals. Wyatt, who views his artistic practice as a purely spiritual exercise, remains ambivalent about the arrangement and eventually decides to expose Brown during a party. When the attendees refuse to believe Wyatt, he experiences a mental breakdown and flees New York, travelling across North Africa and Madrid to eventually retrace his father's steps through the Spanish countryside. Taking on the name Stephen (the name his mother, who died just before his birth, had intended to give him), he becomes involved with a sex worker, perhaps fathers a child, and resolves, at last, to "live [his sin] through, and deliberately go on living it through" (Gaddis 873). Occurring alongside Wyatt's journey are the exploits of a large cast of minor characters, two of whom—Otto, an aspiring (but vain and derivative) playwright, and Stanley, a deeply religious organist who spends most of his time obsessively revising his *magnum opus*—provide especially important parallels to Wyatt's artistic development.

Stephen Moore and John Johnston, whose early critical works laid the foundation for Gaddis criticism, both read *The Recognitions* as primarily concerned with the status of art and

artists in the mid-twentieth century. For Moore, the novel's concern with the possibility of authentic art is intimately tied to its concern with the possibility of authentic spirituality (*Gaddis* 20). He takes a Jungian approach to the text, arguing that its use of occult and alchemical symbolism "is deployed chiefly for psychological purposes" (22), framing Wyatt's journey as a "symbolic voyage from spiritual darkness to enlightenment" (21) centered on reintegrating the feminine part of his psyche that he had lost through the death of his mother (29). In contrast to Moore, Johnston emphasizes the novel's postmodern themes and its dialogic character, arguing that its central event is not Wyatt's "enlightenment" but his shift from viewing identity according to a Platonic "original/copy" model to a Deleuzeian one of difference established through repetition (39). He argues against the possibility of a coherent allegorical reading, contrasting *The Recognitions*' "shadowy and ambiguous, intermittent and truncated" (114) parallels and analogies with the plainly allegorical ones of Joyce's *Ulysses*. He points out that Wyatt's life never consistently follows the pattern of any of the "metaphysical wanderers" (*Gaddis* 21) from history and myth to whom he is compared, creating an excess of signifiers that obscures rather than clarifies the signified (Johnston 114, 132). While his critiques undermine Moore's Jungian reading, Johnston's overreliance on Deleuze's and Derrida's terms imposes an anti-representational aesthetic onto a novel that features descriptions of places drawn directly from Gaddis's journals (Alberts 17-18) and characters that, though often exaggerated for parodic effect, do not entirely depart from psychological realism. In doing so, Conway observes, Johnston "loses sight of where the novel holds up a symbolic of real presence" (Conway 73). Thus, while Moore's and Johnston's readings contain important insights, their focus on *The Recognitions*' aesthetic concerns has led much of the ensuing criticism to focus on refining and

extending this aesthetic debate, resulting in a general lack of inquiry into the richness of its non-aesthetic themes.

My thesis addresses a gap in current scholarship on Gaddis' depiction of mid-century capitalism in *The Recognitions* by examining the construction of urban and non-urban space in the novel, a theme which has been explored in criticism of Gaddis's later work (especially *J R*) but is absent from criticism of *The Recognitions*. When writing about *J R*'s reception, David Sugarman observes that "[r]eadings of *J R* as a novel of entropy and chaos contribute to a view of postrealist American fiction in the late twentieth century as abstracted from material and economic developments occurring within late capitalism" (266). This reading, he argues, pays insufficient attention to *J R*'s critique of the privatization and financialization of once-public spaces. My thesis claims that interpretations of *The Recognitions* have suffered from a similar oversight, arguing that the tendency to read the novel's treatment of capitalism solely through the lens of its impact on the art-world—a tendency encouraged by Moore's and Johnston's emphases on its spiritual and aesthetic concerns—limits our understanding of Gaddis's engagement with the economic realities of the mid-twentieth century. Although capitalism's tendency to collapse aesthetic and spiritual value into monetary value is a central theme of both *The Recognitions* and of Gaddis's oeuvre as a whole (see Leise, Osteen, and Vanwesenbeeck), *The Recognitions* also exhibits a concern with how the imperatives of capital accumulation impact the structure of lived space. My first chapter reads the New York scenes in depth, showing that, despite their extensive use of mythical tropes and references, they remain grounded in an acute awareness of how the material realities of the built environment structure social experience. Drawing on the work of Henri Lefebvre and Birger Vanwesenbeeck, I show how Gaddis depicts the relationship between

built space and mass media as a reciprocal one that nullifies the possibility of participation in authentic communities, creating disastrous consequences for civic life.

In the second chapter, I expand the scope of this inquiry beyond its American context to examine *The Recognitions*' depictions of alternative spatial and social relationships in Europe and Central America, arguing that the differences between his depictions of these spaces offers crucial insight into the novel's conception of modernity. Building on the work on Gaddis's depictions of travel and tourism (Alberts, Russell), I show how the Paris sections augment the novel's critique of New York's finance capital-driven urban landscape by showing the stultifying effects that the capital-driven tourism industry has on the possibility of authentic social and cultural life in Paris. I then turn to the small but significant work on Gaddis's engagement with American imperialism (Duplay, Sugarman, Tabbi), reading the novel's brief but thematically rich descriptions of life on a Central American banana plantation to show how the banana company's financialization of Indigenous lands and utter indifference to local ways of life presage the critique of American imperialism that is central to *J R* and *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985). Finally, I look at the sections describing Rev. Gwyon's and Wyatt's sojourns through the Spanish countryside, arguing that these sections provide the novel's sole glimpse of a spatial and social arrangement that is not immediately threatened by the incursion of capital. I argue that, though they seem to valorize a kind of anti-modern pastoralism—a view most clearly articulated by Russell (41)—these spaces actually stage a more complicated question about the nature of value itself, demonstrating a conception of particular and lasting value that, though threatened by modernity, is also potentially consistent with it. I argue that this form of value, embodied in the novel's reverent depictions of monumental built structures, may well be metonymic of Gaddis's

own monumental novel, providing a counterweight to the novel's otherwise deeply pessimistic depiction of the ever-expanding influence of capitalist modernity.

## Chapter 1:

### “They did not exist singly”: Urban Space, Mass Media, and Civic

#### Fragmentation

The centrality of spiritual and aesthetic themes in *The Recognitions*, as well as the aesthetic questions raised by the novel’s encyclopedic form, has resulted in a tendency to filter the rest of the novel’s themes through the lens of either art or religion. Thus, critical discussions of Gaddis’s satirical portrayal of “a society too wholly reliant upon exchange value as a definitional principle” (Leise 40) have tended to focus on capitalism’s degrading effect on art. While this is certainly an essential theme for Gaddis, it is only one facet of a broader, multi-levelled critique. Although *The Recognitions* is not so explicit in its critique of American capitalism as *J R*, it nonetheless critiques certain structural and cultural trends (e.g., financialization, the neglect of civics, globalization) following from the economic growth caused by the “embedded liberalism” (Harvey 11) of postwar capitalism. Gaddis’s awareness of these trends, which would be exacerbated by the movement toward neoliberal deregulation that he satirizes in *J R*, establish a continuity between the two novels while providing support for the view that Gaddis’s fictions respond directly to the material conditions of their time. Drawing inspiration from Sugarman’s “structural criticism” (267) of *J R*, this chapter examines the metropolitan environments described in *The Recognitions* to show how Gaddis depicts the relationship between urban space, social alienation, and mass media, arguing that these three elements work in a reciprocal relationship that produces a sustained critique of the degradation of civic life under consumer capitalism.

Although the bulk of Part II of *The Recognitions* (which makes up the bulk of the novel) is set in New York, relatively little critical attention has been paid to Gaddis’s descriptions of the

city itself, a lack which reflects their relative scarcity amidst the dialogue-driven scenes that make up much of Part II. This gap is also partly attributable to the fact that Gaddis's heavy usage of mythological tropes and symbols in his descriptions of the city has led critics to read these passages as examples of Gaddis's "encyclopedic" narrative style (see Johnston 114 and Burn 165) or, in Moore's case, as a modernized backdrop for Wyatt's "symbolic voyage from spiritual darkness to enlightenment" (*Gaddis* 21). For Moore, Gaddis's extensive references to Dante throughout the New York City sections (especially in Part II, chapter 8) "build[] upon the poetic tradition linking the modern city with hell (Milton, Blake, Francis Thompson, Eliot, Hart Crane, and later Ginsberg)" (34) to establish Wyatt's time in New York as the "infernal descent" during which he "confront[s] the dark contents of his unconscious" (33). While the allusions to hell are indeed numerous, the New York City scenes—like so much else in *The Recognitions*—are too layered with other allusions to be convincingly read as strictly allegorical. Thus, rather than functioning as a mere backdrop to Wyatt's dark night of the soul, the New York scenes provide a material basis for the novel's broad social critique of postwar America.

Gaddis's descriptions of New York's infrastructure oscillate between the concrete and the symbolic, grounding the passage's mythical allusions in an awareness of the material realities of urban life under capitalism. One of the first "panoramic" descriptions of the city occurs near the beginning of Part I, chapter VI. The passage opens with a description of the skyline, told in an appropriately mythical register: "[t]he peaks of its buildings reared against the sky seemed to hold that portentous weight at bay, in the great conspiracy of mother and son, the earth and the city, against the father threatening overhead; for it was Cronus the mother conspired with, to free the children suffocated between the intimately united bodies of their parents" (*Gaddis* 209). This elaborate metaphorical sequence both invites and frustrates a straightforwardly allegorical

interpretation: while the association of father with sky and mother with earth draws on a set of dualisms (father figuring as sky, God, reason, mind, and mother figuring as earth, human, emotion, body) that Moore sees as central to the novel's psychological drama (*Gaddis* 28-29), the association of the city with Cronus presents a disruptive third term. Not quite earth (note the separation between "the earth and the city") and not quite sky, but involved with both, the city occupies a liminal space, both physically and metaphorically. Though here associated with the mother, the mythical Cronus is himself a tyrannical father who devours his own children for fear that they will kill him (*Guide* 141), adding an ominous undertone to the suggestion that the city and the mother are conspiring to "free the [suffocating] children" (presumably the citizens). Rather than being reconciled with "mother" earth, then, the city appears at odds with it, and even at odds with the citizens it is ostensibly trying to "free". Thus, the gendered reading that the passage invites does not clearly map onto the reality it describes, serving instead to highlight the city's ambivalence toward the sets of symbolic traits associated with both the earth and the sky.

The metaphor becomes even less stable in the following passage, which, in a stylistic parallel, "descends" into a description of the city infrastructure that draws on the language of statistics and anatomy. The narrator's remarks on the "eighty-five million dollars [spent] on headache remedies," "15,670,944,200 aspirin tablets, carried like phylacteries," and "the smoke of forty billion cigarettes [breathed] that year" (*Gaddis* 209) recast the mythical metaphor of the city "devouring" its children in literal terms, suggesting that, though themselves "consumed" by the city, the citizens are also insatiable consumers. The sheer scale of the figures invoked—as well as their absurd precision, especially in the case of the aspirin tablets—renders the material facts of the citizens' consumptive habits at once tangible and unimaginable. Having moved from



a mythical register to the resolutely anti-mythical register of statistics, the narrator then describes the city's architecture in detailed anatomical language:

[d]escending into the lungs of the reinforced concrete incarnation, the smoke circulated through steel lobules cushioned in pleural cavities of granite (though unlike the lungs of a good giant no concave inner surface was necessary for the heart), and from there it was exhaled from chromium-cartileged larynges to diffuse into the spew of grime with which the ungrateful child affronted the father above. (209-10)

This passage, with its interplay of anatomical and architectural terminology, at once personifies and objectifies the city, foregrounding its brute materiality in a way that further undoes the mythical sequence's gendered symbolism. Although the father/son metaphor reappears at the passage's end, the city's allegorical status remains unclear. Rather than being a mere analogue for hell—which, for Moore (following Jung), is part of the same archetypal complex as the “feminine” night and unconscious mind (*Gaddis* 34)—the city evokes a variety of associations and discourses (that of health and sickness, consumption, and corporeality, for example) that deserve to be explored in their own right.

In addition to these “panoramic” descriptions of the city, which draw on a rich array of metaphorical resources to establish a quasi-apocalyptic vision of urban space, the descriptions of civilian life in the city register the impact of its structures on the possibility of community within such a space. The scenes describing different forms of public transit—specifically, the bus and subway systems—illustrate a form of proximity without community that is tied to a vision of urban space as “flattened” by intense commercialization and an overabundance of visual images, what Lefebvre calls “abstract space” (Lefebvre 38; see also Sugarman 276). While riding the bus, Otto “attempt[s] to appear as vacant as the faces before him while he stare[s] straight

forward at [an advertisement]" (Gaddis 202). Similarly, when Mr. Pivner's subway train is abruptly delayed without explanation, other passengers discuss possible reasons for the delay before they abruptly "sto[p] speaking, embarrassed at the sounds of their own voices" (279). In the ensuing silence, Mr. Pivner stares at an advertisement, while a woman (whom the passengers later, "at dinner tables", claim looked "foreign") has an anxious meltdown that leads her to thrust her own face into others passengers' faces, who all "withdr[a]w, abashed at this articulation of their own terror" (279). According to Lefebvre, abstract space implies "a tacit agreement, a non-aggression pact, a contract, as it were, of non-violence" that "valorizes certain relationships between people in particular places (shops, cafes, cinemas, etc. ) ... generat[ing] consensuses or conventions according to which, for example, such and such a place is supposed to be trouble-free, a quiet area where people go peacefully to have a good time, and so forth" (56). The two passages above demonstrate how the conventions associated with such spaces become internalized, enforced without force: Otto works to assume a demeanour that makes him indistinguishable from those around him, while the subway passengers fall silent of their own accord, experiencing a shame that is not explicitly validated by any other passengers' reactions but is tacitly assumed by virtue of the conventions associated with the space of the subway. It is important to note that the woman in the subway who violates the unwritten code against public expression of emotion (even though these emotions are shared) is seen as "foreign", as this reinforces the association of the obedience to these codes with citizenship—a citizenship that ironically consists in remaining aloof from other citizens.

The role of media is crucial in these scenes, as Otto and Mr. Pivner are able to fill the void left by the absence of social interaction by looking at advertisements placed there for precisely that purpose. These advertisements encourage the "consensus of silence" that governs

these spaces by reducing citizens' engagement with social space to the activity of looking. Rather than engaging with those around them, or with their other sensory modalities, the passengers are tacitly encouraged to focus their attention on visual media, embodying Lefebvre's claim that "the place of social space as a whole has been usurped by a part of that space endowed with an illusory special status - namely, the part ... concerned with writing and imagery, underpinned by the written text (journalism, literature), and broadcast by the media" (52). The omnipresence of visual media thus works in tandem with the forms of transit that structure life in the city to divorce social space from public space, effectively abolishing any sense of collectivity. By reducing public space to a surface across which people travel, rather than an environment in which they exist as social agents, these conventions create a widespread sense of anonymity that ultimately amounts to a form of collective dehumanization.

This collective dehumanization is exacerbated by individuals' sense of alienation from themselves. At the beginning of the subway scene, the narrative voice indicates that the train "stayed there for minutes, as though to iterate to the[] [passengers'] consciousness that they were unprotected, unknown, that they did not exist singly but only in aggregate, material for headlines" (Gaddis 279). The word "aggregate" is crucial here, as it denies the passengers' individuality while nullifying any kind of coherent group identity, establishing the subway as a liminal space that nullifies both individual and collective identity. Moreover, this passage shows how citizens internalize the abstract space in which they live: as habitual consumers of media, they come to view their own lives as potential media to be consumed, applying the logic of media representations of space to their own lived experience of that space. This reciprocal relationship between urban infrastructure and mass media thus creates a sense of one-dimensionality that erases both difference and solidarity from urban space.

While the structures of urban space and the omnipresence of visual and radio advertisements play a central role in the alienation from self, others, and environment that characterizes life in Gaddis's New York, the narrator also connects this alienation to the forms of labour undergirding these structures (albeit in a quite general fashion). Though Gaddis's critique of "the separation of humans from one another, the inability of cultural institutions to unite us, and the consequent commodification of humanity" (Osteen 212) occurring under capitalism largely centres on the art-world's reduction of art's spiritual and communal value to the logic of exchange value, his descriptions of city life gesture toward a broader application of this critique. During a short section describing the dawn in New York, the narrator observes that

[t]he streets were filling with people whose work was not their own. They poured out, like buttons from a host of common ladles, though some were of pressed paper, some ivory, some horn, and synthetic pearl, to be put in place, to break, or fall off lost, rolling into gutters and dark corners where no Omnipotent Hand could reach them, no Omniscient Eye see them; to be replaced, seaming up the habits of this monster they clothed with their lives. (Gaddis 323)

This dense passage employs a variety of metaphors to capture the dehumanization of everyday life in the city. The first sentence invites an ironic comparison with the novel's forgers—especially Wyatt and Frank Sinisterra—whose work, though not "their own" in the sense that both men attempt to pass their creations off as another's, is practiced in the name of "a queer form of aesthetic piety" (Osteen 22) that invests it with a sense of purpose unavailable to the mass of New York's alienated workers. The metaphorical comparison of citizens to buttons on a garment pushes this alienation to an extreme, suggesting that their very *lives* are not their own either, but merely disposable accessories of a rapacious economic system. Moreover, the

passage's subtle confluences of religious and economic imagery—the God-like “Omniscient Hand” recalling the “invisible hand” of the market economy and the term “habits” referring both to nun's garments and fixed patterns of action—frame their working lives as constituting a kind of twisted devotion to a malevolent deity. By portraying the city and the system that sustains it as hollowing out the value of human life and labour, Gaddis roots his critique of postwar American life in an awareness of the increasing dominance of abstract space as the structuring principle of urban living, a process abetted by the imperatives of capital accumulation.

Interspersed among these “panoramic” descriptions of New York, which tend to highlight the erasure of individuality and subjectivity effected by urban life, are scenes that take a more directly phenomenological approach, describing individual characters' experiences of the city. After Otto's disappointing visit to Esme in the wake of the first party scene, Gaddis's narrator describes Otto's progress through the streets in a passage that highlights his detachment from his own sensory experience:

Fly-ash, cinders and sand, tar, soot, and sulfuric acid: six tons a day settled on the neighborhood where Otto stepped forth, his faculties so highly civilized he seemed not to notice the billions of particles swirling round him, seemed not to notice the flashing of lights, the clangor of steel in conflict, the shouts, and the words spoken, timorous, temerarious, eructations of slate-coloured lungs, seemed to acknowledge nothing but his own purpose, which led him east. (Gaddis 210)

This passage mimics the sensory bombardment it describes, beginning with a series of six nouns and proceeding to include another extended list of all that Otto “seem[s] not to notice”. The excessive verbiage combines with the references to staggering numeric values (“six tons a day”, “billions of particles”) to emphasize the city's sheer enormity, which, in turn, highlights the

extent to which habituation and apathy have deadened Otto's senses. By referring to Otto's faculties as "civilized", Gaddis' narrator ironically equates the quality of being "civilized" with the ability to ignore the sensory experience of living in civilization, marked as it is by the omnipresence of both noise pollution and real pollution. This passage thus extends the alienation from fellow citizens described in the public transit passages, subsuming it within a generalized alienation from the structural environment of the city itself.

It is also important to note the role that the concept of individualism plays in the above description. In addition to ironically portraying "civilized faculties" as the possession of a cultivated indifference to one's surroundings (both human and non-human), the passage also connects this indifference to a kind of possessive individualism that both encourages and is encouraged by the alienating, unpleasant character of the built environment. The final sentence ties Otto's lack of awareness of his surroundings to his exclusive focus on his "own purpose". Ironically, the following section emphasizes the purposelessness of his movement through the city, as he unsuccessfully tries to call Max, Esther, and Maude (210-11), begins a conversation in a bar that ends with his being given a business card and left with his drink (211-12), and drops his manuscript off at Max's house before meeting back up with Esme (212-13). This short passage is replete with references to the petty boredom and frustration Otto experiences as he moves through the city. He is described as "mov[ing] between immediate destinations, every address a destination until it was reached, when it offered simply a pause where the next step could be planned, time unbroken by leisure but instead brief spasmodic stretches of emptiness between activities" (210). This passage represents the city as deforming Otto's experience of both space and time, detaching his movements from any reference to a broader journey or pattern (reiterating, on a quotidian scale, a major theme best summed up by the Town Carpenter's

lament that “voyage has lost its meaning” (414) in the modern world) and reducing his experience of time to a series of frantic, fragmentary instants, empty even of “civilized” leisure. As a result, Otto “behave[s] impatiently in the streets, ruthlessly in the subway, merciless [*sic*] in revolving doors” (210), his actions toward others manifesting an impatience that is not a result of his inability to achieve a particular purpose but instead a general disposition encouraged by the lack of possibilities for meaningful connection in the city. What results is a vision of urban experience defined by a kind of feverish purposelessness, an absence of meaningful activity that appears at odds with the city’s constant bustle.

The lack of any coherent sense of community further exacerbates Otto’s anonymity and alienation from his surroundings. Multiple times throughout this section, Otto encounters people he had met and interacted with at the previous night’s party, each of whom ignores him. Two of these encounters are narrated in almost identical terms: “Anselm said nothing; but smiled without recognition as they passed in Washington Square” (203) and, later, “Stanley said nothing; but hung his head without recognition as they passed in Washington Square” (204). The use of repetition emphasises the automatic, habitual character of these interactions (or lack thereof), while the emphasis on their lack of recognition reinforces Otto’s sense of anonymity. This dynamic is further exacerbated when, later that afternoon, Hannah walks by him “without a word” (213). While the party scenes hardly manifest anything like a genuine communal spirit—much of the conversation taking place during them features characters talking past one another, and the parties in Part I, chapter V and Part II, chapter VII both end in fights—whatever pretext they provide for association and engagement disappears when the partygoers encounter one another in the streets outside of the rooms in which they gather. This contrast between the dialogue-heavy party scenes and the deliberate avoidance of interaction in the streets further

develops a dichotomy between semi-private spaces as sites of interaction and exchange (however debased these “exchanges” may be) and public spaces as essentially anti-social. The closest thing Otto has to a meaningful interaction during these sections (his conversation with an anonymous man at a bar) is ultimately mediated through capital: when Otto tells the man that he is a writer, the man immediately gives him a business card for a motion picture company and tells Otto to call him, telling Otto to “just write it down here” (212) when he tries to introduce himself by name. Otto’s utter inability to find any sort of meaningful connection during these scenes, either from acquaintances or strangers, demonstrates how the so-called “civilized faculties” enabling him to navigate the hostile, alienating, and fraudulent atmosphere of urban life contribute to that very atmosphere. Otto’s experience of New York thus exemplifies the relationship between the structure of urban space and the social dynamics arising from this structure, grounding the allusions to poetic visions of the modern city as hell in a depiction of New York’s material conditions.

Despite all of this, Gaddis does not portray private space as a space that is conducive to genuine privacy, leisure, or selfhood—instead, he presents it as encouraging a reliance on mass media that comes to function as a kind of pseudo-community, serving only to deepen individual alienation. This image of a “private life” that remains completely beholden to the outside world through the mediation of consumer goods and popular media finds its clearest expression in the barbed descriptions of Mr. Pivner’s life in his apartment. For Vanwesenbeeck, these sections serve a more general aesthetic project based in appeals to “small but select communities” (144) to avoid the potential “solipsism” of high modernism while “wrest[ing] the creative act from the mass movements with which it has been associated in the past” (Ibid). Given *The Recognitions*’ historical moment, Vanwesenbeeck identifies Nazism as the movement with which it is most



clearly in dialogue. He argues that the “collegiality based around brands and consumer products” (150) that defines Pivner recalls the *Heimat* model of the Nazis, which also sought to create “a sense of homeliness through a unilateral reliance on the familiarizing effect of art” (Ibid). Gaddis thus seeks to avoid the noxious political implications of this “homeliness” by writing in a defamiliarizing form that promotes a sense of “community” in the form of active readerly participation. This view of an active reader-writer relationship, for Vanwesenbeeck, works to counteract the passive sense of community that Pivner derives from “commercial radio ads that address [listeners] uniformly as ‘friends’” (152). The narrator highlights the irony of this model of a mass media-constructed community based around consumer goods, describing Pivner’s favourite necktie as a “[s]ignal of his individuality to the neckties that he met screaming the same claim of independence from the innominate morass of their wearers” (Gaddis 281) and comparing said necktie to his apartment itself, whose only “claims to distinction were mass-produced flower- and hunting-prints” (Ibid). These descriptions both undercut the earlier characterization of Pivner’s apartment as the “secret and private self [he keeps] locked away from eight million others” (280). Both Pivner’s private space and public persona are thus shown to be equally determined by the kinds of advertisements he hears on the radio, leaving him with a sense of symbolic individuality that acts as a replacement for his lack of real individuality—a lack which, it seems, is inevitably tied to his lack of a sense of communal belonging.

While Vanwesenbeeck’s account provides an effective, historically grounded analysis of *The Recognitions*’ critique of the market-mediated pseudo-communities characteristic of postwar American capitalism, it overlooks the crucial role that urban space plays in perpetuating this paradoxically solipsistic form of community. When describing Pivner’s movement from the subway to his apartment, the narrator remarks that “[l]ike the others, Mr. Pivner spent little time

at ground level. He was usually moving rapidly beneath it, or taking his spurious ease some ells above” (280). This common avoidance of “ground level” is both literally and metaphorically significant, as it registers a general lack of pedestrian activity and a symbolic loss of groundedness among the alienated citizenry. Owing to this disintegration of pedestrianism in favour of more efficient methods of travel, Pivner (and presumably his fellow New Yorkers as well) spends most of his time in his apartment, making radio and other media his primary means of access to the public sphere. While Vanwesenbeeck rightly points out that Pivner belongs to a class of consumers “who mediate their social interaction through formulaic self-help guides such as Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*” (152), he overlooks the crucial fact that these books—like radio—are consumed in private, essentially becoming replacements for social interaction rather than supplements to it. The narration records the irony of the fact that these guides to social etiquette are consumed in antisocial circumstances (often by antisocial people), describing the books lining Pivner’s shelves as “[p]rescriptions of superficial alterations in vulgarity read with excruciating eagerness by men alone in big chairs” (Gaddis 281). The use of plural pronouns in this sentence, as well as in the rest of the paragraph describing the attitude and circumstances in which these books are typically read, figures Pivner’s loneliness, powerlessness, and resultant desire for social esteem as being common among men of his station, marking yet another instance of commonality without—and even at the expense of—community. As with the radio’s uniform addresses to listeners as “friends”, the self-help industry’s pseudo-sociality is thus dependent on a social arrangement in which everyday interaction and community is severely curtailed by economic imperatives and the spatial arrangements that arise from them. This series of bitter ironies and paradoxes provides a forceful illustration of Lefebvre’s observation that “[the modern] disposition of things is diametrically opposed to the

real requirements of the present situation. The sphere of private life ought to be enclosed, and have a finite, or finished, aspect. Public space, by contrast, ought to be an opening outwards. What we see happening is just the opposite” (147).

While *The Recognitions* largely avoids explicit engagement with political questions, Gaddis’s portrayal of an aggressively individualistic public sphere and a media-saturated private sphere contains a pointed critique of the decline of civics and political participation under consumer capitalism. The question of civic responsibility arises during a section that describes Mr. Pivner dozing off as he reads a newspaper, his radio playing on in the background as he does so. Pivner’s simultaneous consumption of these two forms of media is reflected in a levelling of their content: the radio’s advertisements blend in with editorials, advertisements, sensationalist headlines, and political news until all of it begins to “run together before [Pivner’s] eyes” (285). This homogenizing effect then extends to the content of individual broadcasts, as when Pivner is listening to a political broadcast and “tr[ies], with all the attention his consciousness could muster under the sameness of their words, to maintain his responsibility as a citizen” (Ibid). Here, political speech, like all other speech in this section, becomes little more than noise amidst noise, functioning, at best, as a kind of advertisement, on the same level as the “Rootsicola” commercial that precedes it. While this passage can be seen as part of what Conway describes as *The Recognitions*’ “general critique of how modern forms of rational perception mediate the complex experience of experience into the simple consumption of information” (79), the emphasis on Pivner’s drowsiness suggests that even this “simple consumption of information” may require more effort than the exhausted, alienated office worker is willing or able to give. By addressing political messages primarily to “private” citizens in their homes during their “leisure”

time, radio and newspapers reduce these messages to the status of yet another consumable, precluding the possibility of meaningful engagement on either an individual or collective level.

The sarcastic reduction of Pivner's "responsibility as a citizen" to his merely listening to political broadcasts combines with the section's broader critique of Pivner's historical hubris to undermine the association between "advanced" capitalism and an "enlightened" public sphere. When describing Pivner sitting in his chair and reading a newspaper, the narrator remarks that he breaks wind and is "untroubled by the notion that this might have been a demon leaving its residence inside him. Not only would he, albeit embarrassed, scoff at this medieval reality; but he could, in all reason, believe that even had he lived then, he would have scoffed" (Gaddis 284). The passage then lists a series of other superstitions that Pivner "could believe that he would not have believed, but would have stood forth, as he was submerged now, in Reason" (Ibid), before remarking that he retains faith in science's ability to eventually solve all of the mysteries that perplex him. Crucially, Pivner himself has no scientific training, treating "Reason" as a cultural inheritance rather than a capacity which one must "stand forth" and actively apply. This passive, second-hand relationship to knowledge suggests that the operation of the world is just as mysterious to Pivner as it was to members of societies he perceives as less "enlightened". The narrator transposes this complacency onto the political realm, stating that, when tuning into political broadcasts, Pivner "ha[s] as much difficulty reconciling his sense of public duty and responsibility with his feeling of total helplessness as a Central American Indian might, upon being told that he shared the responsibility for the [lottery] number drawn in Panama on Sunday afternoon" (285-86). By suggesting that, despite his uncritical faith in progress, Pivner has no more control over his social and political reality than peoples that he views as "backwards", this passage skewers his complacent sense of superiority over other cultures and historical periods.

These parallels between “antiquated” and “advanced” civilizations deconstruct the assumed superiority of the latter category, showing how civic life under “advanced” industrial capitalism can become nearly indistinguishable from earlier social arrangements. The text thus figures Pivner’s passive and heavily mediated relationship to politics as manifesting—like much else in the novel’s avowedly secular society—an essentially religious attitude, albeit one closer to “Nietzsche’s idea of the Christian” (489) than to any of the novel’s more authentic seekers.

Gaddis’ vision of life in the modern metropolis is almost unrelentingly bleak, characterized as it is by a throughgoing alienation from self, other, and environment facilitated by rampant commodification and omnipresent mass media. The New York scenes of *The Recognitions* construct an extensive critique of the impoverishment of communal and civic life under postwar capitalism, tying this decline not to the rise of a robust individualism but to the simultaneous erasure of individuality by a rampant consumer culture. While this double bind, which arises from “the sort of violent critical reductions of human experience [Gaddis] associates with the mass media strategies of his time and the profit motives that drive them” (Conway 84), forms the crux of *The Recognitions*’ engagement with the problems of mid-twentieth-century politics, it by no means exhausts Gaddis’s critique. The following chapter, examines how Gaddis’s concern with the relationship between capitalism and lived space develops through his depictions of non-American spaces. Moving away from Gaddis’s critique of mass media, it examines his engagement with the related phenomena of tourism and imperialism to highlight the global contours of his engagement with postwar capitalism. Following this, it turns to his depictions of the Spanish countryside to consider the possibility of an alternative spatial arrangement to those imposed by the imperatives of capitalist expansion,

considering how this arrangement relates to the novel's broader questions about the nature of value and the possibility of redeeming modernity.

## Chapter 2:

### Tourism, Imperialism, and the Possibility of Enduring Value

Although the majority of Gaddis's works are set in the U.S. and are primarily conversant with North American and European literature, culture, and history, they display an acute awareness of the U.S.'s imbrication in global politics. In fact, Tabbi argues that, while Gaddis's fiction is, in a sense, quintessentially American, "[this] term needs to be defined broadly, on the order of an 'American World Literature'" (*Paper* 10). For Tabbi, Gaddis's attentiveness to the structural conditions that enable both capital and language to circulate with unprecedented scope and rapidity underlies his career-long engagement with the relationship between global capitalism and American imperialism. This engagement is most evident in Gaddis's mid-career novels, *J R* and *Carpenter's Gothic*. Both novels feature extremely limited settings (Long Island and Manhattan in *J R*, a single New England home in *Gothic*) and are composed largely of dialogue rather than traditional narrative description. Both novels concern the devastating impacts of U.S. financial interests on the social and economic fabric of Africa. *Carpenter's Gothic* centres on a movement to gain control of African mining resources conducted under the guise of Evangelical missionary work, while one of *J R*'s sub-plots describes American businessmen backing a counter-revolutionary government in the fictional African nation of Gandia in order to protect their investments. In both cases, these non-U.S. spaces are deliberately erased, reduced to words and scraps of news that American characters cynically manipulate for profit, presenting a vision of Empire consisting "[i]n networks, not in bounded nations; in circulation and redistribution, not in conquest ("Autopoiesis" 97). While the depiction of imperialism in *The Recognitions* has received scant critical attention in comparison to the later novels, it is the only one of Gaddis's works that features scenes set in non-American spaces. His

extensive physical descriptions of these spaces connect the concerns about urban space explored in the previous chapter with the concerns about imperialism addressed above, making them essential to arriving at a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between space, capitalism, and imperialism in Gaddis's oeuvre. In this chapter, I will compare and contrast Gaddis's descriptions of Paris, Central America, and the Spanish countryside with the New York sections to show how these representations of alternative spatial arrangements deepen and extend Gaddis's critique of everyday life in the urban metropolis.

The Paris scenes depict an erasure of active, communal engagement with urban space through the lens of Gaddis's critique of tourism. For Allison Russell, Gaddis's satirical portrayals of tourism reiterates, on a comic level, the novel's serious concern with the dwindling possibilities for authentic journeying (in both a physical and metaphorical sense) in a world dominated by multinational capital and highly advanced technology (27, 36). She argues that the novel's tourism scenes depict a world in which "[p]laces become mere locations, interchangeable landscapes that serve as the backdrop for recycled dramas" (29), as the novel's "New York crowd simply reappears in European cities, doing and saying things similar to those in earlier parts of the novel" (29). However, Crystal Alberts produces compelling historical evidence against Russell's assertion that Gaddis portrays travel as too "fast," "safe," or "streamlined," arguing that her characterization of tourism rests on assumptions about globalization and technology that were either untrue or only incipient at the time of *The Recognitions*' composition (13-14). Drawing on archival material—which, she acknowledges, was not available to Russell at the time of her article (13)—Alberts shows that "Gaddis's personal observations are frequently transcribed word for word within the text and are part of Gaddis's fiction, dispelling Russell's assertions that descriptions of travel and locations within *The Recognitions* are 'inherently



artificial” (17). Instead, she argues, Gaddis’s depictions of place draw from both historical knowledge and Gaddis’s own direct experience to create an “underlying stable structure of the novel” (17-18). While these criticisms of Russell have some validity, Alberts’ shift away from Gaddis’s portrayal of tourism and toward the experiences he recorded in his journals pays insufficient attention to the effect that these descriptions have in the context of the novel. The Paris scenes in fact stage something like a synthesis of both critics’ views: although the narrator does not describe the novel’s various locations as *actually* interchangeable, the tourist characters treat them *as though they were* interchangeable (for an exhaustive list of parallels between the various tourism scenes, see Russell 29). The tourists’ obliviousness and self-involvement renders the actual history, culture, and texture of the place irrelevant to their experience to such a degree that, in some cases, place disappears altogether: “[o]n the terrace of the Reine Blanche, the blond boy said, —Next week he’s promised to take me to Paris... —But baby, this *is* Paris” (Gaddis 921). Thus, the real-world accuracy and concreteness of Gaddis’s depictions of these spaces ultimately serves to deepen his point about the loss of authentic journeying.

Gaddis’s critique of tourism is not limited to simply mocking uncultured tourists, but to examining how tourism as an industry works to render the experience of Paris, like that of New York, commercialized and two-dimensional (or “abstract”, to use Lefebvre’s term). Whereas Gaddis’s portrayal of New York focuses on capturing the congestion, pollution, and proliferating advertisements that mark it out as a commercial capital, his sardonic portrayal of Parisian tourism presents the city as a (decayed) cultural capital. The two Paris sections are replete with references to shallowness and inauthenticity that foreground the premium placed on “iconic” visual scenes as opposed to immersion in the environment itself, highlighting the “ocularity or visual dominance of tourist travel” (Russell 28). The narrator uses the language of spectatorship

to describe the transatlantic travellers' general impressions of Paris, stating that the city presents them with "the spectacle of culture fully realized" (Gaddis 67), a phrase suggesting a collapse of "culture" into "spectacle" that is borne out in the ensuing passages. Significantly, this spectacle consists in a kind of bastardized high culture rather than the mass media culture that dominates the New York scenes. The narrator remarks that "Paris had withdrawn from any legitimate connection with works of art, and directly increased her entourage of those living for Art's sake" (76), showing how the Parisian tourism industry is able to capitalize on an image of a cultured, "artistic" lifestyle (though one centered on consumption rather than production). This ideal is animated by a fetishization of high art masterpieces, which is ironically highlighted by the fact that sales of expensive forgeries are routinely made to "English and Americans[,] 'to whom you can sell anything'...here, in France, where everything [is] for sale" (76). By figuring this relationship as a transactional one, Gaddis produces a two-pronged critique of the tourism industry that demonstrates how the profit incentives behind catering to tourists cheapens not only the tourists' experience of French culture but French cultural production itself.

The tourism industry's commodification of French culture creates a proliferating market for images that further undermines tourists' capacity to engage with Paris as a dynamic social space. Painting, in particular, is reduced to servicing this culture of mere "looking." In the first Paris section, Gaddis's narrator describes "the alleys infested with [painters] painting the same picture from different angles, the same painting varying from easel to easel as different versions of a misunderstood truth, but the progeny of each single easel identical reproduction" (70). This observation is recapitulated during the second Paris scene near the end of the book, in a sentence that uses excessive repetition to mimic the mechanization of cultural production: "where by day picturesque painters infested picturesque alleys painting the same picturesque painting painted so

many times before” (915). In both passages, these painters are described as “infesting” Paris, figuring them as unwelcome intruders to the city, crowding up its actual space in order to create two-dimensional (in both senses) representations of it. At the same time, the painters are described as themselves “picturesque”, suggesting that painters, just as much as paintings, are ultimately reduced to scenery for tourists who seek “sights [which] are prepackaged events” (Russell 28) rather than authentic experiences. The description of the Seine as “diked and dammed across the decorous countryside, proper as wallpaper” (Gaddis 75) parallels this reduction of art and art-making to a part of the landscape by showing how these same forces also reduce landscape to art. Portraying the Seine as merely decorous, and even homely, empties it of any genuine cultural and historical significance, figuring it as a reassuring backdrop for the tourist. Thus, the Seine, like the art and artists of the Parisian alleys, becomes a part of Paris’s cultural capital rather than its cultural heritage, resulting in “Paris, the place itself, [being] less real to the tourist than the reproductions of it, the snapshots and paintings” (Russell 29).

The flattening and commodification of Parisian culture ultimately causes Paris to become a site of inertia in which nothing new can be created. The narrator frequently reuses sentences from the first Paris section (Part I, chap. II) in the final section (Epilogue) to create a sense of stagnation: though set nearly two decades apart, both sections open by referring to a person who resembles (first the young, then the old) George Washington drinking and reading on a terrace (Gaddis 66, 915), suggesting that Paris has remained almost entirely the same over the course of the novel, the passage of time marked only by superficial changes in appearance. This visual echo is complimented by a verbal echo in which the narrator refers to Paris as “accomplished” (66, 915), ironically invoking the language of achievement to critique the complacency that has nullified the authentic development of culture. He writes that “[visitors] regarded it as the height

of excellence that nothing remained to be done, no tree to be planted nor building to be torn down [...], no bud of possibility which had not opened in the permanent bloom of artificial flowers, no room for that growth which is the abiding flower of humility” (67). Just as the people and conversations in the streets (and the language the narrator uses to describe them) remain essentially unchanged, the physical space of the city stays the same, permitting neither growth nor reconstruction. The narrator portrays this situation as the ironic terminus of a culture famed for its lineage of radical thought, describing “this neatly parceled definition of civilization” as “the ostentation of thousands presumed upon the strength of a dozen who had from time to time risen against this vain complacency with the past to which they were soon to contribute” (68). This co-optation of challenges to the status quo results in dissident elements becoming yet another aspect of the spectacle which the tourists come to see, further inhibiting genuine growth. The Paris scenes thus combine the motifs of counterfeit and fraud with those of growth and stagnation. Osteen, arguing against a straightforward endorsement of Wyatt’s critique of “originality” (see Gaddis 91), claims that “like Wyatt, Gaddis believes that there is ‘gold to forge,’ that original art must be valued as an ideal but elevating it into a fetish encourages fraud and enables the collapse of aesthetic value into economic value” (Osteen 226). Gaddis depicts the fetishization of French culture as enabling it to become commodified by the tourism industry, stripping time and space of dynamism and reducing Paris to a static representation of an idealized past that serves to increase its status as a commodity.

While the Paris scenes represent decay and corruption within the European empire, the Central American sections register destruction and exploitation at its periphery. Though short, the sections describing Otto’s experiences in Central America—first while working in the office at a banana plantation, then after fleeing the U.S. with the counterfeit money he received from

Sinisterra—provide a crucial variation on the motif of capitalism’s destruction of public space by situating it within an imperialist context. Although Russell briefly touches on the theme of imperial exploitation in *The Recognitions* in her discussion of tourism (see Russell 42), she does not provide an extended analysis of Gaddis’s descriptions of these spaces. A closer analysis of these descriptions reveals a number of themes and motifs that resonate with Gaddis’s larger project in *The Recognitions*. For one, the banana plantation abounds with images of growth and virility, establishing a stark contrast with the motifs of stagnation and collapse that characterize the New York and Paris scenes. Twice, the narrator describes the bananas using phallic imagery, first when describing the environment surrounding the town (“the jungle [is] held at distance by thousands of pert green erections rearing on the stalks of the banana plants”) (157) and second when describing the growing and harvesting of the crop: “[r]ed flowers drooped at the end of long stalks, then dropped revealing the fruit in infant impotence. Week by week the fruit grew larger, pointed outward, then upward, and was cut in the full erect vigor of youth” (159). Both of these descriptions figure the plantation as a vital, generative space, while the latter passage’s reference to the bananas being cut down in their prime registers an awareness that this vitality is curtailed by plantation agriculture. There is thus nothing truly promising or redemptive about this growth, as it is depicted in the process of being destroyed to serve the interests of the metropolises.

The imagery of growth in the Central America scenes gains in significance when read alongside the metaphorical lack of growth in Paris and New York, reinforcing the association of the latter with consumer culture. In language reminiscent of the “permanent bloom of artificial flowers” (67) in Paris, Benny describes life in New York as inimical to growth and development:

I haven’t seen anything grow for eleven years. You forget that things grow. The vegetables you get in restaurants, you can’t believe that they ever really grew anywhere,

and the flowers, you never think of flowers growing, you see them one way, cut, and you can't think of them any other way except posing, dead. The trees here don't grow, they're ready-made like furniture, [*sic*] that puts on new slip-covers in the spring (594).

Benny's comments reflect how America's exploitation of developing economies turns its citizens into pure consumers, so alienated from the places and processes that produce their goods that they are unable to imagine anything but products. The comparison of trees to "ready-made" furniture—which gains a layer of irony from the fact that trees themselves are cut down and processed into the very furniture to which Benny is referring—completely abstracts them from any ecological context. By showing how America abstracts its citizens from the actual process of growth by exploiting growth elsewhere (and then leaving said spaces to "settle down to a long and uninterrupted decline") (163), Gaddis thus reveals how the imperative for "growth", in the economic and imperialistic sense, requires the destruction of growth in the natural sense.

The scenes on the banana plantation also emphasize the process by which the American banana company imposes its own economic imperatives on the land's indigenous populations and, in so doing, overwrites pre-existing economic, social, and spatial arrangements. In a paragraph describing the plantation's origins, the narrator calls attention to the interdependence of spatial and economic arrangements and their combined role in exerting dominance over the local population. Prior to the company's arrival, the locals subsist on their land while also "selling a consistently inferior grade of sisal, hands of green bananas, and occasional loads of hardwood to ships which came in leisurely to trade" (157). The fruit company, "tired of buying thousands of hands of bananas, [then] set on hundreds of thousands of stems" (157). This shift from "hands" to "stems"—a shift from buying individual bunches of bananas to owning the plants themselves—implies that the company's purchases effectively erase the locals' labour and

agency, as the term “hand”, which refers to a bunch of bananas, also serves as a metonym for the hands of those who harvest and sell them. Having gained control of the means of production, “[t]he Company replace[s] the shaky wharf in the port with two firm piers, [then] clear[s] and plant[s] a tremendous plantation” (157), reshaping the environment to accommodate the imposition of the new agricultural arrangements. The juxtaposition of the “firm piers” and the “shaky wharf” conceals an ironic contrast between the actual stability of the Indigenous economic arrangements and the transience of the company’s exploitative and ecologically destructive tactics.

This fundamental reconfiguration of the town’s infrastructure to accommodate the company’s needs highlights the profoundly unequal nature of the relationship between the American company and the people from whose land it benefits. The Company’s imposition of the piers results in the *de facto* takeover of the town: “[t]he Company ships were the only ones to call, since the company owned the two new piers which the people had been so proud of at first. The local banana market disappeared. It simply ceased to exist” (157). The clipped, short sentences describing the disappearance of the local banana market emphasize the suddenness and irrevocability of the changes imposed by the company, with the term “disappearance” registering its displacement by the spatial regime that the company creates to better suit its economic goals. Although the plantation succeeds in monopolizing the banana market, and so accruing a large economic gain, the narrator emphasizes the operation’s transitory nature, showing how its sheer wastefulness and destructiveness nullifies the possibility of any shared or lasting benefit. After describing the company’s rapid takeover of the local banana market, the narrator hints at its equally rapid demise: “[s]hips passing the coast sailed through the smell of the fruit rotting on the trees miles out to sea” (157). This image of immense, widespread rot (which immediately

follows the sentence “[the local market] simply ceased to exist”) contrasts with the motif of growth and fertility that the narrator uses when describing the plants themselves, suggesting that this growth, taken beyond its natural parameters by the imperatives of the plantation, eventually ends in overproduction, rot, and wastefulness. Thus, whatever potential this space may have represented, it, like the others described in this paper, is brought to stagnation and decline through the ruthless imposition of profit-making imperatives.

Rather than treating this deterioration as an end-point, however, American companies treat it as an opportunity for further profiteering. In a bracketed aside—reflective of the company’s treatment of the local population’s future as an afterthought—the narrator claims that “[i]t was now said that a plywood company in West Virginia was planning new and similar benefits for these fortunate people, so recently pushed to the vanguard of progress, their standard of living raised so marvellously high that none of them could reach it)” (157). Although the company’s plans are left deliberately opaque, their dealing in plywood suggests that their operations will cause further deforestation, capitalizing on the banana company’s initial disruption of the local economy to render it increasingly dependent on American interests. This aside calls attention to how the imperative for economic growth causes companies to treat space as essentially malleable and infinitely adaptable to their changing economic needs, foreshadowing the world of seamlessly fluid, mobile capital in which *J R* takes place (see Sugarman 276). Moreover, the ironic invocation of the rhetoric of “progress” and “benefits” shows how this imposition of spatial and economic arrangements also imposes certain values onto the local populace. The population’s inability to “reach” the benefits supposedly conferred on them reflects an abstract, universalized conception of well-being that ignores—and, in fact, undermines—the forms of well-being particular to that place and those people. Thus, this



passage likens capitalism's utilitarian tendency to "maximize a certain kind of value [i.e., exchange value], in sovereign disregard of the value of any *things*" (Cohen 173) to America's (and any colonial power's) tendency to justify the elimination of particular ways of life by appealing to a universalized, homogenous ideal of high living standards. The statement that "the small town might have had but one place in this world of time, and that to make itself presentable for Otto's departure" (Gaddis 163), though primarily reflective of Otto's Romantic delusions (and reminiscent of the novel's tourists' detached spectatorship), also capture the American companies' general ethos: rather than treating the land as a lived space with inherent value for those who occupy it, the various American interests treat it as a mere backdrop to their own grand economic ambitions.

Gaddis takes up this critique of American imperialism again, in slightly modified form, when describing Otto's emergency landing in the fictional port town of Tibieza de Dios following his flight out of New York. Whereas the previous sections describe the overwriting of an existing spatial and socio-economic arrangement, the Tibieza sections show how colonial powers are able to create entirely new spatial arrangements to suit their economic needs. The narrator describes the makeup of the town's population as being heterogeneous, but calls attention to the concentration of power in external investors rather than in the local populace: "[t]he population is largely black. It is governed by descendants of Spain who live on the central plateau, given work by an American fruit company whose white employees live between ten strands of barbed wire and the sea, and its modesty and sophistication are at once satisfied in acres of brilliant calico provided by the Tibieza Trading Company" (705), a company run by a Chinese family. These different forms of economic power are reflected in the various groups' differing relationships to the space itself. The governors, who possess the most political power

over the space, are the most physically distant from it, while the owners of the economically powerful Trading Company keep to themselves in a large mansion. Meanwhile, the company's white workers are kept segregated from the local populace, who primarily live in "houses of broken bannisters" (705). This lack of integration between the various groups that inhabit the space creates a profoundly hierarchical arrangement that places the local Indigenous population at the bottom, exemplifying the mutually reinforcing character of Tibieza's economic, social, and spatial arrangements. In doing so, this scene expands on the critique of imperialism introduced in the banana company scenes, portraying the commodification and fragmentation of space as enabling outside interests to extract wealth from the land while preventing its original inhabitants from enjoying the benefits of said wealth.

Gaddis's narrator extends the motif of fragmentation to include the town's shoddy infrastructure and even the bodies of its inhabitants, illustrating the lasting social consequences of its profit-driven spatial arrangements. The narrator's descriptions of the town's infrastructure continually refer to its decay and disintegration, characterizing the town as a temporary outpost constructed in the interests of capital rather than as a genuine living space. In a suggestive simile, the narrator describes the town as having "the transient air of a ragged carnival never dismantled" (705). This description links the haphazardness of the town's construction to the singleness of its purpose, figuring the town as having been built to service the port rather than *vice versa*. Moreover, the invocation of the carnival imbues the description of the town with an air of frivolity that ironically underscores its actual immiseration. This general atmosphere of decay and abandonment is not limited to the town itself, however. When describing the harbour—the centre of the town's economic life—the narrator observes that

[t]he steel braces of the pier were rusted to ankle thinness at the water line, and the sea crashed in around it against the seawall with merciless finality, piling its fullness into reckless weights of water and hurling that in, tirelessly. At first sight, the seawall looked ridiculous, a pitiful barrier which the sea could easily swarm over to obliterate this frail town (706).

Read alongside the description of the town, this passage suggests that the pier, and thus Tibieza's viability as a trading outpost, is at the risk of imminent collapse. Having largely served the economic purpose that brought it into being, the port is left to be assimilated back into nature, ironically undercutting the association of economic prosperity (however short-lived) with "civilization". The combination of transience, decay, and social fragmentation that characterizes the narrator's descriptions of the town's and the port's infrastructure also manifests in the bodies of its impoverished local population, who "appear in such states of disintegration that a bit of knotted string round the wrist or neck seems to indicate that even these parts would be lost unless tied on" (705). The image of body parts held together by knotted strings recalls the "ankle-thin" steel braces of the pier, creating a visual link between socio-economic precarity and the loss of bodily integrity. By including this visceral image of the human cost of economic exploitation, Gaddis's narrator provides a concrete illustration of how large-scale, abstract economic systems work to shape the intimate, small-scale realm of the individual body.

Having created this complexly layered description of the reciprocal relationship between space, capital, and the human body, the narrator then describes how this haphazard and uneven spatial arrangement begets political fragmentation and instability. During his stay in Tibieza, Otto witnesses—and gets his arm broken during—a revolutionary conflict, retroactively giving truth to the lie he used to impress his American compatriots following his initial visit to Central

America. The scene describing the onset of the conflict begins with a simple declaration: “[t]here was trouble at Tibieza. No one there wanted it” (708). The phrase “no one *there*” is crucial, as it highlights the extent to which the major decisions affecting Tibieza’s fate are made without the consent, or even the knowledge, of its local population. The “trouble” comes from conflicts based in the central plateau (where the Spanish descendants who govern Tibieza live) and is fought using stocks of weapons made and distributed by Europeans and Americans (708). Although details about the motives for the uprising are sparse—even, the narrator notes, to some of its participants (709)—the little context that is provided links the violence to Tibieza’s strategic importance as a port town. Here, the thematic significance of the town’s fictionality comes into focus. Gaddis’s choice to set these scenes in a fictional town reflects, on a metafictional level, the fact that the town of Tibieza was constructed by European colonists as a means of securing access to the port. Tibieza is thus in a sense doubly fictional, both reflecting and critiquing an imperial gaze that sees non-American or non-European lands as undifferentiated spaces relevant only in relation to the interests of the metropole.

Tibieza’s fictionality also causes it to function as a microcosm of the imperial situation as a whole, as the lack of a concrete historical referent shifts the focus from particular instances of colonization to the broader mechanisms through which colonizers exploit and destabilize Indigenous populations. After describing the townsfolks’ indifference to the conflicts in the central plateau, the narrator remarks that “Tibieza de Dios, in fact the only reason for its existence, was a port, and one of few. Therefore it must be taken” (708). These short statements reveal a crucial connection between economically-motivated spatial arrangements and the political consequences that follow from them. For one, the reduction of the town’s *raison d’être* to its function as a port reinforces the link between its decrepit infrastructure and its immediate,

limited utility to capital, while also showing how this utility enables outside actors to ignore the local population's interests. Moreover, the second sentence, with its decisive "therefore" and "must", establishes an intrinsic relationship between its economic function and its political significance that frames the ensuing political violence as inevitable. This logic of inevitability further deprives the area's inhabitants of the capacity to exercise agency over it, underscoring the process by which the discourse of economic and political reason overwrites the needs and interests of a given space's inhabitants. Thus, whereas *J R* critiques American capitalism by portraying "its continued growth for the sake of growth without regard for consequences or costs on human lives and the environment—indeed, without ever recognizing the existence of an environment" (Tabbi, "Autopoeisis" 107-08), *The Recognitions* provides an in-depth portrayal of how it manipulates the particular physical and political features of a given environment in order to extract profit from it, producing fragmentation and disintegration in its wake.

While the scenes in Central America offer glimpses of alternative relationships to lived space that challenge the dehumanizing ones characteristic of New York and Paris, these spaces are depicted in the process of being overtaken by the same economic forces that render the former two fully commercialized and antisocial. However, the novel also presents another, perhaps more enduring, way of relating to space in the sections describing the Spanish monasteries (San Zwingli and the Real Monasterio de Nuestra Señora de la Otra Vez). These sections employ many of the same formal devices as the Paris sections, though to a qualitatively different effect. Like the Paris scenes, the scenes in the Spanish countryside occur in both Part I and Part III and contain numerous verbal echoes. The most significant of these echoes occurs during the description of Wyatt's arrival in San Zwingli in Part III (where he has gone, after having left New York, to search for his mother's tomb). The section opens with the statement

“San Zwingli appeared suddenly, at a curve in the railway, a town built of rocks against rock, streets pouring down between houses like beds of unused rivers, and the houses littered against one another like boulders along mountain streams” (756), a near-exact recapitulation of the description of the young Reverend Gwyon’s arrival in San Zwingli shortly following his wife’s death in Part I (21). While both Paris scenes open with the same person performing the same activity (the George Washington lookalike drinking and reading a magazine on a terrace) in a different location, creating an impression of stasis, Wyatt’s retracing of his father’s steps instead creates an impression of cyclicity. By likening of the town itself to various natural phenomena, the descriptions of San Zwingli associate this cyclical temporality with the town’s embeddedness in the natural world, starkly contrasting the growth-less cities and their artificial flowers. They thus present San Zwingli as a space that embodies a sense of permanence rather than stagnation, offering an experience of lived space that resists the superficializing forces of consumer capitalism (as in New York) and the tourism industry (as in Paris).

Despite this alignment of San Zwingli with the natural world, Gaddis’s idealized alternatives to modern urban life are not “untouched” natural spaces: rather, they appear to be spaces organized around monumental and enduring structures rather than around the imperatives of capital accumulation (imperatives which, as in Paris, may involve commodifying structures that once had monumental religious or cultural significance). While both Gwyon and Wyatt “realize how [their] senses ha[ve] fallen into disuse under the abuses of cities” (21, 757) as they travel through the Spanish countryside, the narrator spends considerably less time describing the landscape itself than the architecture and the culture of the various towns. The narrator catalogues some of Gwyon’s sights in a telling description:

He saw people and relics, motion and collapse, the accumulation of time in walls, the toppled gateways, mosaics in monochrome exposure brought to colors of Roman life when a pail of water was dashed over them, the broken faces of cathedrals, where time had not gone by but been amassed, and they stood as witnesses not to its destruction but held it preserved (Gaddis 21).

This description captures a way of viewing the relationship between space and temporality that is fundamentally opposed to other sections of the novel. Both the Paris and New York sections embody Lefebvre's claim that "[w]ith the advent of modernity time has vanished from social space. It is recorded solely on measuring-instruments, on clocks, that are as isolated and functionally specialized as this time itself. Lived time loses its form and its social interest" (Lefebvre 95). Gaddis captures this phenomenon by making recurrent references to characters' time-pieces, as "characters in the novel are [frequently] shown looking at their watches, in contrast to the narrator's consistent references to the position of the sun" (Russell 37). In addition to referring to these different methods of time-keeping, Gaddis's narrator offers more phenomenological descriptions of the experience of temporality in New York and Paris, claiming that, in the former, "[n]o fragment of time nor space anywhere [i]s wasted, every instant and every cubic centimeter crowd[s] crushing outward upon the next" (279), while in the latter, "nothing remain[s] to be done" (Gaddis 67). The descriptions of the Spanish countryside provide a counterpoint to both New York's disorienting pace of living and Paris's stagnation, depicting it as embodying a synthesis of space with time that creates the impression of stable, lasting value. This harmony restores "social interest" to "lived time", as well as adding a historical and spiritual interest through the motif of built structures amassing and preserving time. The Spanish

countryside thus presents an alternative spatial arrangement to the forms of experience that Lefebvre sees as characteristic of capitalist modernity.

Through its emphasis on the value of enduring, monumental structures, this depiction of space offers an understanding of value that challenges the reductive desire for profit that underlies the novel's other spatial arrangements. While many critics have argued that Gaddis's critique of capitalist modernity primarily relies on his analysis of the displacement of aesthetic value by commercial value—or of use value by exchange value (see Leise, Conway, Osteen)—the monastery scenes can help us arrive at a more flexible account of value that better captures the attitude that the text displays toward “value”, broadly conceived. This attitude can be nicely summed up by what Cohen calls the desire to “‘conserv[e] of *what has* value’”, as opposed to the desire to merely “‘conserv[e] value’” (153, my emphasis). For Cohen, the former attitude rests on the contention that particular things that have value—such as historically important buildings or pieces of Renaissance art—ought to be conserved at the expense of maximizing value in general (155, 163). He contrasts this view with a utilitarian understanding which is “indifferent between adding to what we have now got, at no cost, something that has five units of value, and adding something worth ten units of value at the expense of destroying something worth five” (154). As alluded to earlier, the banana company sections provide a sardonic illustration of this view by showing how the “raised standards of living” (an abstract, generalized form of value) that the company brings to the area are used to justify the destruction of the Indigenous population's traditional ways of life (a particular set of practices that have value). Throughout the Spain sections, Gaddis offers insight into what the opposite of such a view might look like.

The ruins' metaphorical “accumulation” (Gaddis 21) of time and of history provides a counter-logic to the logic of capital accumulation as the sole metric of value, one which is tied to



the uniqueness and specificity of these structures' relationship to space. The repetition of certain key descriptions during Wyatt's arrival in Spain suggests that "[i]n spite of all that has happened in the time between Gwyon's arrival and that of Wyatt, essentially, the sights, smells, sounds, and physical geography has not changed" (Alberts 21). The setting's continuity emphasizes the narrative's changes, as the descriptions of the landscape gain significance in light of the differences (and similarities) between Gwyon's and Wyatt's experiences. The monasteries thus serve as "static anchors" (25) in a text that depicts a world of continual flux and decay, "communicat[ing] the stability and endurance of the geographical structure (or one might add monument) in comparison to the ebb and flow of human life" (Alberts 18). In doing so, these places—and the ways of life in which they are embedded—testify to the possibility of establishing stable loci of value that facilitate the recognition of change within continuity and identity within history.

This conclusion raises a number of questions about the text's attitude toward modernity more generally. While the Spain sections offer glimpses of a spatial and social arrangement that resists the flattening, commercializing effect of consumer capitalism, it is unclear how this value structure can persist at all in the world that the text describes. If, as Russell argues, Gaddis's "ideal space or territory [...] is characterized by communal and ecological harmony, and a scale of existence that is measurable by nature's rhythms rather than one that is distorted by mechanization and the necessities of the marketplace" (41)—to which we might add the presence of significant monuments and ruins—it is hard to avoid the conclusion that his text portrays modernity as essentially irredeemable, leading Gaddis to exult in a kind of pastoral idealism. As Wilkens points out, however, this straightforwardly antimodernist view fails to capture the complexity of Gaddis's engagement with the aesthetic and philosophical problems of

modernism. Although *The Recognitions* is “built around a crisis in the[] underlying assumptions [of modernist devices and problems]” (597), it does not (as Wyatt tries to do) reject them outright. Instead, the novel “redeploy[s] an existing technical repertoire or vocabulary ... so as to suggest, within a determinate context, the possibility that its elements might be used differently and that they might relate to one another in new ways” (599). This transformation, rather than rejection, of modernist aesthetics embodies an attitude toward the past that is far from the straightforward Romanticism that Russell envisions. The novel’s “encyclopedic” allusions to other historical and literary periods, as well as its reimagining of traditional modernist techniques, present the past as a living record to be actively and creatively reimagined rather than a static set of circumstances to be admired or merely reproduced. As Conway argues, “the excessive accumulation of allusion within the novel strews itself across the page not to wholly lay waste the tradition it inherits, but rather to hold out the option that some droppings from the past may be made useful in the present” (Conway 78). Thus, rather than manifesting a yearning for some idealized, premodern way of life, the Spain sections reflect on the possibility of creating loci of value that endure over time and, through this endurance, accumulate personal, aesthetic, and spiritual significance.

Though expressed through a spatial metaphor—that of the Spanish villages and cathedrals—the desire for embodiments of stable and lasting value is not limited to the desire to preserve ruins, monuments, and pastoral ways of life. Indeed, the novel’s closing image of the collapsing church at Fenestrula seems to confirm the pessimism, expressed throughout the New York, France, and Central America scenes, about the capacity of particular physical spaces to endure amidst the capitalist imperative to maximize value writ large. Although there is little in the ending that seems to counteract this pessimism about enduring spatial and social

arrangements, the novel's closing line sounds a note of cautious optimism about art's capacity to take on this monumental and spiritual function: "[Stanley] was the only person caught in the collapse, and afterward, most of work was recovered too, and it is still spoken of, when it is noted, with high regard, though seldom played" (Gaddis 933). In light of Cohen's claim that "[t]he logics of the market and of planning tend against the truth that people want *particular* valuable things, not just satisfaction of *general* desiderata" (168), Stanley's work can be read as an example of particular valuable work whose value cannot be accounted for by the logics of the market. The fact that his work survives both his own death and the church's ruination suggests that, while physical monuments such as churches must inevitably collapse, great artworks may be capable of taking on the spiritual and aesthetic functions that these monuments once served. Read alongside Gaddis's insertion of a writer-character named Willie, who is writing a *Recognitions*-like book that, like Stanley's organ piece, appears destined to reach a "very small audience" (Gaddis 467), the scenes describing Stanley's composition may well be read as a symbol for *The Recognitions* itself. If so, we might plausibly read the novel as embodying a kind of monumental aesthetic, both in terms of its physical size and in its saturation with references to history and myth. Such an aesthetic "seeks to renew art by forging links with its historical past as well as the influences brought to bear upon art in the contemporary present" (Shavers 177)—a process that is only possible if the text is allowed to accumulate time, history, and value. Thus, while there may not be any physical space within the novel that offers its characters redemption from the flattening of all value into terms dictated by the market, we might see the novel itself as attempting to embody a different kind of stable and lasting value, a kind that, like the crumbling facades in San Zwingli, accumulates over time.

## Conclusion

I have argued that a close engagement with Gaddis's depictions of space in *The Recognitions* is central to a thorough engagement with the novel's critical depiction of twentieth-century American capitalism, which is, in turn, central to its engagement with the problems of modernity and of the nature of value more generally. My first chapter offered a corrective to the tendency to allegorize the New York sections, showing how the detailed descriptions of the built environment in these passages are crucial to understanding Gaddis's portrayal of urban alienation and its reciprocal relationship with mass media. I argued that New York's material conditions work to isolate individuals from one another and alienate them from themselves, creating a dependence on mass media that leads to a deteriorating civic culture. My second chapter examined how the text constructs various non-American spaces, showing how *The Recognitions* enacts a critique of American imperialism that makes its portrayal of the global consequences of American capitalism more closely continuous with the central concerns of *J R* and *Carpenter's Gothic* than previously noted by decades' worth of Gaddis criticism. I then turned to the scenes depicting the Spanish countryside, arguing that their depictions of monumental structures create a spatial metaphor for a form of enduring value that provides a potential alternative to the text's otherwise deeply critical portrayal of a maker-dominated modernity.

In asserting the centrality of *The Recognitions*' depictions of space to its portrayal of twentieth-century American capitalism, this thesis provides the groundwork for further inquiry into Gaddis's engagement with the material and social realities of his time. Being primarily concerned with showing how a spatial reading enriches our understanding some of *The Recognitions*' main themes and demonstrating these themes' underexamined continuity with Gaddis's later works, the present study has largely refrained from situating these concerns within

the historical context in which Gaddis lived and wrote. More work needs to be done to connect Gaddis's depiction of American capitalism and imperialism to the economic realities of the inter- and post-World War II period (perhaps taking cues from Nicholas Spencer's work on *J R*'s relation to the advent of neoliberalism and Mathieu Duplay's reading of *Carpenter's Gothic* in the context of the Cold War). Moreover, close engagement with Gaddis's representations of space provides a strong foundation on which to construct an ecocritical reading of the text, a fruitful lens that has thus far been almost entirely absent from criticism of *The Recognitions* and, indeed, of Gaddis's work as a whole. An analysis of Gaddis's work from an ecocritical perspective would add a much-needed complement to the insightful work being done on his depictions of the interlocking systems of capitalism, imperialism, technology, law, and the art-world. By further emphasizing Gaddis's fiction's rootedness in the material realities of 20<sup>th</sup>-century life, such an analysis would help illustrate the scope of Gaddis's achievement in using modernist and postmodernist technique to represent the intricate complexities of contemporary reality.

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