

Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs in Print and Film: Imaginations, Catastrophes, and the Being-with of Being

MIKE PIERO

“There are no more natural catastrophes: There is only
a civilizational catastrophe that expands every time.”

—Jean-Luc Nancy, *After Fukushima*

This article sketches some of the narrative, visual, and ideological tensions between the print and film versions of *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* in how they disparately appeal to “imagination” in an era of ever-expanding, networked catastrophe(s). With over forty years in print, Judi and Ron Barrett’s *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* (1978)—hereafter *Cloudy*—and Phil Lord and Christopher Miller’s film adaptation (2009) tell tall tales of food falling from the sky. While the book still captures the imagination of children and adults, the *Cloudy* film, its entertainment value notwithstanding, functions to restrict the imagination of the child-viewer by refusing the pleasure of suspending disbelief, and thus forecloses imaginative capacities for rethinking the world and its problems. This article analyzes how the texts differ in portraying natural disasters and demonstrates that this popular culture text perhaps does a disservice to our world as we face the incoming natural disaster of climate change.

Through its narrative reworkings and adaptation, the cinematic *Cloudy* conflates the book’s emphasis on what I refer to throughout as “unproductive imagination” with a productive imagination centered around neoliberal innovation

MIKE PIERO is an Associate Professor of English and Honors Program Coordinator at Cuyahoga Community College in Cleveland, Ohio. He earned his M.A. in English from John Carroll University and is a PhD candidate in English at Old Dominion University, specializing in game studies, cultural studies, and critical theory. His work has recently appeared in *Media Tropes*, *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* and *What Philosophy Can Tell You About Your Lover*. His dissertation involves work toward a theory of chronotopicity in video games, and he is preparing an edited collection of critical essays on *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. He can be reached at Michael.Piero@tri-c.edu.

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 7, No. 1
Copyright © 2019

and commodified invention. The film also illustrates that the story's natural catastrophe is more far reaching as it involves interconnected economic, political, technological, cultural, social, and geographical networks, producing networked catastrophes. In this article, I trace changes from the print to film version through a series of tensions between shared imagination and individualistic invention; between *being-with* and *being of*; and between neoliberal capitalism and unproductive imagination. My intent is to show how these tensions foreground the need for imagination uncoupled from current socio-economic determination with the capacity to imagine new relations, positions, and political paradigms more closely aligned to just relations among beings, whether human or otherwise.

These changes document the historical changes in social relations occurring today, more specifically the increasingly technological mediation of social life. The grand narratives of techno-scientific progress under late capitalism stifle the unproductive imagination of childhood experience. Without attempting to fetishize imagination, I consider unproductive imagination and the ability to think new worlds and realities into existence toward more just social relations to be the best chance humanity has to counter the neoliberal commodification of everything, including all aspects of culture and thought (Harvey 47, 165). In a world that has fashioned technology as its new mode of existence, people become entangled in an environment of ever-expanding networked catastrophes (Nancy, *After* 34). The differences between the print and film version indicate tensions in how the texts frame the changing landscape of social relationships and their impact on shared imagination, which includes unproductive imagination. Drawing upon critical theory, Marxist thought, post-structuralist semiology, and phenomenology, along with Jean-Luc Nancy's "singular plural" ontology, I navigate these tensions to understand the nuances present in this particular film adaptation.

The Barretts' *Cloudy* continues the imaginative religious tradition of raining food through a much-loved bedtime story that a grandfather tells his grandchildren the night after a breakfast mishap causes one of the pancakes he has prepared on a Saturday morning—"Pancake morning" (1)—to fly through the air and land upon young Henry's head. The laughter enjoyed by the family after the flapjack incident—who "all laughed, even Grandpa" (3)—ushers the reader of this framed narrative from a deceptively simple domestic scene to the tall-tale world of Chewandswallow, where food just falls from the sky. After the heavenly

food menu becomes a threat, the residents of the small town must abandon their homeland and migrate to a new coastal town that welcomes these refugees.

Food falling from the sky—reminiscent of the narrative of God’s providence for the starving Israelites in Exodus—requires an imaginative suspension of disbelief as well as the self-control to resist the temptation to “explain” everything.¹ The bedtime story of Chewandswallow, and the children’s experience of suspending disbelief, later transforms their perception of the sun rising over a snowy hill: “we thought we saw a giant pat of butter at the top, and we could almost smell mashed potatoes” (29). This imagery illustrates how narrative iconography enables new ways of seeing. Every thought is a “virtual reality,” able to “oppose reality” through its imaginative constitution (Schaeffer x). The overarching problem taken up in this essay is how the potential for imaginative creation is largely lost in the film adaptation, and what that communicates about the social and cultural changes since the original children’s book was published.²

Shared Imagination and Individual Invention

The film adaptation of *Cloudy* begins with a harmony of stringed instruments and choral voices moving toward a crescendo that creates a mood of opportunity and progress, and includes this narration: “Have you ever felt that you were a bit different, like you had something unique to offer the world if you could just get people to see it? Then you know exactly how it felt...to be me.” The cultural script governing the film’s opening moment deals with the lonely, isolated child-scientist Flint Lockwood, who wants to change the world through his inventions and innovations.³ From the opening moment, the film overwrites the book’s communal engagement, favoring a strictly individualistic positioning of the scientist who invents alone. Flint’s mom, who dies early in the film, encourages

¹ Like Barrett’s framed narrative, the Biblical narrative of manna functions to frame the forty-year period the Israelites spent in the wilderness. The connotative meaning and mythology surrounding this falling food has captured the imagination of scientists, artists, worshippers, and scholars for several millennia. Food falling from the sky—whether imaginary, misunderstood, or otherwise known—presents a space for one to think and imagine what else might also be possible (Wooley 175).

² A few thoughts developed throughout this essay appeared in a short, occasional piece published in the *MediaCommons Field Guide* in 2016. See Piero “Cloudy.”

him by saying, “The world needs your originality, Flint” after one of his experiments—spray-on shoes—goes terribly wrong. Laughter, however, in the film is condemned to isolation, public humiliation, and human-robot relations (as in Flint’s simian lab assistant, Steve, who speaks via a robotic voice modulation gadget). Gone is the representation of laughter as a shared, social solidarity. In the book, the family shares laughter, making it part of a narrative frame that emphasizes play. The playful laughter of the flapjack incident opens the narrative, and the book closes with the playful activity of the family sledding in the snow in a playful state happening on the threshold between reality/fiction: they reimagine the sledding hill and sunrise as a mound of mashed potatoes with a pat of butter atop it. The child-reader is invited by the book to imagine a world that does not exist, to imagine with others, and to refashion the world around them through the playfulness of fiction.

For the child-viewers of the film, they construct meaning in a different way. Wolfgang Iser discusses narrative gaps as open spaces for literary readers to construct meaning imaginatively (280-281). Iser calls this phenomenon “the virtual dimension of the text” that occurs when text and the reader’s imagination collide to produce meaning in those narrative spaces that require the reader to fill in the gaps (284). These “gaps” can also be conceived as invitations to read and construct meaning. The primary invitation in the *Cloudy* film is to follow an isolated, lonely, and individual scientist who, in a sense, is very imaginative, though such imagination takes a much different form.

The film replaces the book’s invitation to imagine and play with material and market-driven innovation. Flint uses science not to imagine a possible future but to receive social acclaim for a profitable, public good. Unproductive imagination involving defamiliarization, daydreaming, and play (*paidia*, not *ludus*) is replaced by innovation and invention subjugated to three largely invisible demands (Caillois 14). First, Flint’s “imaginative” inventions must meet the demands of market capitalism, like when the film positions the spray-on shoes as meeting the need of an epidemic of untied shoes amongst his peers. Secondly, imagination in the film often figures as improving already existing objects in the adult world, hindering the imaginative and demiurgic machinations of children who play with linguistic signs as their capacity for thought develops in the sociocultural realm (Vygotsky 94; Bathes, *Mythologies* 54). Thirdly, imagination is confined to the realm of technology, and which points the viewer to technology as the primary means of solving social problems. Gone is the invitation present in the book to

imagine a world that does not (yet) exist, or even that could not exist. Gone is the shared experience of such imagination during a bedtime story, replaced with the starkly individual pursuit of “changing the world” through productive, individual, and techno-scientific inventions. Imagination, in short, is condemned in the film to the adult world of objects, institutions, discourses, and problems.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the imaginative story in which food magically falls from the sky becomes reformulated into a more individualistic and pseudo-scientific narrative. Individual invention requires reliance on facts as depicted in *Cloudy*, with sensory observation and bodily-rooted perception pushed to the background. The film presents viewers with a very tangible, probable situation in part to “entertain” adults who take their kids to see the movie. The film explains how food falls from the sky because audiences have grown to expect the “scientific” explanation, the unknown made known, and the comforting resolution of ambiguity: in the “restless rush of facts,” as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer write, “no scope is left for the imagination” (127). The film even erases an economic or environmentally sound reason for the sardine market crash (like systematic depletion due to fishery exploitation [Zwolinski and Demer]), preferring instead the whimsical notion that people suddenly found sardines “super gross.” This explanation indicates a hidden anxiety and preoccupation with capitalist cycles of production, consumption, image, and resiliency. Tastes change, and while that becomes a problem in the town of Swallow Falls, those changes present new markets and opportunities on which the town might capitalize.

The *Cloudy* film subjugates imagination to the universalizing, self-legitimizing, self-propagating, and self-reproducing “grand narratives” of Enlightenment thought and modernity, mediated by, in Jean-François Lyotard’s words, “success [as] the only criterion of judgment technoscience will accept” (18). Always afforded the role of “delivering” people from suffering, technoscience has developed an aura in its discourse that is at once collective—scientific advancement will save us—and individualistic. Flint embodies the faith placed in individualistic progress via his isolated work as a child-scientist. The book’s emphasis of shared, communal relations that mediate an imaginative life—from “Pancake morning” and bedtime stories to “sledding with Grandpa”—becomes reduced to an individual, techno-scientific pursuit that the town’s community can either despise, as occurs early in the film in response to Flint’s inventions, or embrace, as they eventually embrace the food-producing machine.

To be sure, the representation of “science” in *Cloudy* is thoroughly unjust to science proper, as the scientific process is often collaborative and not isolated in the ways depicted in the film. Whether the representation matches “reality” or not is less important than precisely how the film’s representation both expresses and influences the cultural zeitgeist of lives lived as technological subjects and of the faith placed in grand narratives that come to resemble religious belief more closely than any scientist would ever admit. This “image” of technoscience—one illustrative example among many aimed at garnering faith and trust in the idea of advancement and development—erases the reality that scientific research is largely contingent on reproducibility, self-interrogation, and resolution of conflicting data (and the emergence of new data). This representation of technoscience, however, also brings about a comfort and ease within viewers at the thought that science has the world, nature, and uncertainty under human control. The cinematic world of *Cloudy* positions the viewer as necessarily complicit in progress-driven projects of modernity.

The opening question posed to the audience of “Have you ever felt that you were a bit different...?” works to indoctrinate children to see themselves for their use-value in a capitalist structure and prepare them to experience life with and as technological objects. Roland Barthes addresses this very dynamic in *Mythologies*, writing that “faced with this world of faithful and complicated objects, the child can only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator [...] there are, for him, actions without adventure, without wonder, without joy” (53-54). Imagination is reduced to neoliberal innovations that result in material or non-material commodities for consumption (and waste). Unproductive imagination is imagination that does not serve the market and is not tied to production/consumption, to affluence, or to some necessarily practical end. This shared, unproductive imagination has already largely been dispensed with to favor individual, materialistic invention.

This emphasis on use-value presents itself in the narrative and iconographic shifts surrounding the iconic “Jell-O sunset” scene in *Cloudy*.⁴ The scenic view of the Jell-O sunset in Barretts’ *Cloudy* is appropriated as a Jell-O castle in the film, created by Flint as a strategic move to seduce Sam Sparks (a stereotypical science “nerd” at heart turned “attractive” weather reporter). The creation and use of the food-producing machine acts as a kernel event in the film’s narrative, insofar as it

⁴ Both the book and the film narrate this scene in idiomatic American fashion by referring to commodities by their brand names instead of generic nouns, as in using “Jell-O” instead of gelatin.

signals the shift from Flint's "useless" inventions to an invention that is incredibly useful—in seduction, in resuscitating the town's livelihood, and in providing food—and redeems his past inventions. Success becomes singular, and failure is "positivized" as not only necessary to life but as part of some personal journey, at the end of which awaits a full redemption through success. Once more, the film focuses on offering a plausible explanation of the original story's kernel events. The very essence of explanation involves imposing singular meanings that foreclose the polysemic potential of the text, which reach the reader's imaginative capacity through the gaps in the text (Iser 285). These self-legitimizing, self-perpetrating, and self-fulfilling terms (e.g., progress, objectivity, success, factuality, etc.) of techno-scientific advancement promise advances to help meet all human needs and usher in a more just, equitable world (Žižek, *Violence 2*). And it is precisely these facts that offer the false comfort of a world more progressive and under "our" control. For this reason, the film version of *Cloudy* bases its narrative structure on explanation of "scientific" fact, instead of on imagination, even while it proffers itself as an expression of imaginative innovation.

Imagining Shared Ways of Being: *Being-with* and *Being of*

The film's narrative explains food falling from the sky through Flint's technological achievement of inventing a machine that turns water into food. The failure of the town's capitalist economy leaves the city on the brink of financial ruin, until technology saves the day and provides "hope." For children watching, the film heralds technology and science as saviors and safe places in which children can place their hope. Flint's food machine gets accidentally launched into the sky, which Sam describes as "manna from heaven," made possible not by God this time but by scientific progress. Only after Flint's machine changes Swallow Falls' weather patterns (raining quintessential American fare including hamburgers, hotdogs, steaks, and even scoops of ice cream) does the town get renamed Chewandswallow as a part of a marketing campaign set in motion by the ambitious mayor who desires to court tourism revenue to advance his political career.

Even the name of the town must be made logical and explained in ways amendable to adult audiences who purchase film tickets/rentals/discs. In the book version, the imagined world is named Chewandswallow from the beginning.

Readers, like the children in the narrative, are invited to imagine this imaginary world that could never actually exist, whereas in the film, that suspension of disbelief is foreclosed by the film's rampant explanations that supplant the imaginative play of the original story. The tension speaks to an important difference in ontology or the nature of reality between the book and film narratives, one I characterize, following Jean-Luc Nancy, as between "being-with," on the one hand, and a "being of" on the other hand (*Being* 33-35). The being-with of being emerges in a moment of close contact instead of a permanent social organization predicated upon the fundamental split of self/other. *Being-with* involves relation built upon the paradoxical foundation of existence as always being simultaneously singular and plural. *Being of* relegates Being to a relationship of self and other within a network of various people, animals, objects, and technologies that relate to one another like nodes on a network. *Being of* imposes, at bottom, a distance and a mediated relation (instead of the contact preserved in being-with). The important difference between these two phrases has everything to do with distance and contact.

Throughout *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy makes a convincing case for an ontology that locates the origin of being beneath or before the split of self/other. *Being-with* should be understood to occur in an instant, always contingent, emergent, and situation specific. Any attempt to systematize, solidify, or permanently organize beings creates a problem. While a sense of community among a group of people, for example, is preferable to hostility and violence, this social organization ultimately creates distance among people and groups. By attempting to organize and unify, the instant of contact between singularly plural beings is forfeited for an organizational relation predicated on an essential distance. Justice, I would argue, emerges through the instant of contact between singularly plural beings, when distance is minimized. An ontology that fosters distance and not contact runs the risk of turning relationships into non-relationships.

The *Cloudy* book offers a representation of being-with in various moments throughout the narrative. The instant of shared laughter over the flapjack incident illustrates a collapsing of distance among singularly plural beings. The bedtime story of Chewandswallow begins with a visual illustration of the touch, the contact, between family members: the grandfather's arm wrapped around Henry's shoulder while the granddaughter who narrates the book, Kate, sits next to her brother, her knees held to her chest leaving her feet and ankles in contact with her

grandpa's knee. At the end of her grandpa's tall tale, Kate writes, "I remember his [Grandpa's] goodnight kiss" (27). *Being-with* is not limited to humans, and that instant of being also occurs in the shared contact in the penultimate scene between Henry and his dog sledding together. Importantly, the book maintains the essential "togetherness" of singulars, as Nancy puts it, in these instants of contact (*Being* 60-62).

These moments enable the imaginative experience of Chewandswallow, of bringing new worlds into existence. The hyphen in *being-with* signals both union and division, the paradoxical essence and experience of being singularly plural (37). These moments of contact recall and represent this ontological relation. Nancy also describes *being-with* in the context of art, particularly in how "it is the birth of a *world* (and not the construction of a system)" (*Being* 14-15, italics in original). The creation of a world in the book originates not from the grandpa's invention of the imaginary world of Chewandswallow. Instead, the birth of a world occurs in the contact shared between the grandfather and his grandchildren; this being-with enables the very possibility of imagination in ways not limited by modernity, techno-science, "progress," or other aspects of the modern world to which adults have become accustomed.

The "of" in *being of* designates the measured distance between a part and the whole, as in one person (i.e. Flint) among a whole (i.e. a town, society, "global community," et cetera). Rather than allow for the emergent instants of contact found in *being-with*, *being-of* systematizes and hardens social distances into a network of equivalent relations or relationships among various "actors." If singularly plural beings are reduced to flattened or equivocal actors on a network among various other actors, then two things happen. First, the contact zone between beings, from which justice and ethical relationships emerge, is foreclosed into a measured distance of one node's relation to other nodes on the network. This is the distance that Nancy designates with "of" in *being of*. Secondly, the flattening of social relations and voices runs the risk of further marginalizing already marginalized voices within the network, as they now must fend for themselves as mere actors on a network that is always already attuned to hegemonic discourses. That is, if all actors are equal, then the marginalized voices cannot be heard over the powerful ones.

In the *Cloudy* film, we see the distance between self/other preserved at every turn in how Flint relates to his community, and this social distance and *being of* is presented in the film as natural. The *Cloudy* book resists this distancing, and

instead offers the imaginative contact zone of a bedtime story and its narrative emphasis on specific moments shared between grandfather and grandchildren. The film erases *being-with* in favor of *being of*; this erasure is marked by Flint's isolation as a scientist and by situating the whole story around how Flint's inventions place him in relation to others in the town. These relations, then, work to propel the neoliberal ideologies that counter unproductive imagination.

The most pronounced ideological achievement in the *Cloudy* film is how the networked catastrophe establishes a sense of solidarity among the people of the town with a newfound faith in Flint, technological advancement, and science. The film presents such faith primarily through two patriarchal figures: Tim Lockwood (Flint's father) and Earl Devereaux (the town police officer). The film presents both as initially suspicious and critical of Flint, so that their acceptance of Flint and his inventions, based on their usefulness to the town, parallels neoliberalism and the commodification of imagination. Subjectivity itself becomes impossible in the sense that subjects become objects of the market, flattened actors on a larger network. These relations are typical of a *being of*, that is, of a social relation predicated on preserving (and measuring) distance. Relations with distance preserved can be measured and, therefore, fashioned into markets for exploitation and control.

The book and film versions of *Cloudy* both maintain the absence of parents—the father is inexplicably absent from the scene in the book, and the mother is absent from most of the movie, sans her inspirational words to young Flint. The absent father and somewhat stoic but kind-hearted grandfather in Barretts' book, combined with the "simple fisherman" who isn't "good with his feelings" in the movie, both trade on the same tradition of performing the expected codes of masculinity: austerity, absence, and silence in family settings, learned behaviors, to be sure (Ouellette par. 7). By the end of the film, Flint's father needs the monkey's thought translator to express his love for his son. The film positions the social problem of absent fathers and toxic masculinity that prevents intimacy among men as being remedied by technological mediation, which suggests a technological deterministic solution. Thus, Flint's technological innovations are proffered to the audience as a means not only to improve society, but to improve the family unit as well.

In the film, Flint's primary antagonists are the patriarchal figures of family (i.e. his father) and the Law (i.e. the police officer). Perhaps the film positions family and Law against science, or at the very least as offering some resistance to

science. Flint is only ever reconciled with both after achieving “success.” His technological success earns him a place among the men in the film, a representation of masculinity that reinforces the role that the “libidinization of gadgets” figures in codes of masculinity (Adorno, *Stars* 100). What Adorno describes concerning the psychosocial effects of gadgets should also be articulated as being an activity wrapped up with patriarchy and masculinity. The circulation of gadgets within markets and industries are dominated by men, and this circulation becomes ways of relating among men—beginning with male children—that instill a penchant for aggressive control of the other. This aggressive control becomes the central type of social relationship in the film.

The relations of people to people, people to environment, and people to (nonhuman) animals all change in striking ways from the print to film versions of *Cloudy*. Without a technological savior-figure like Flint, the book depicts the town working together once the food storms overpower them, and they build ships out of peanut butter sandwiches with sails of Swiss cheese and pizza to reach a new land. In the film, the people manage to escape the food disaster, although the calm solidarity of townsfolk in the book is replaced by mass panic. The real reason for their salvation, however, is Flint’s selfless and risky act of destroying the machine, which allows the inhabitants to return to their town. Within the networked catastrophe, technoscience becomes the only hope for salvation from the disaster that the very same technology created. The relations among people in the film are removed from a *being-with* in communal solidarity and replaced by a *being of* in which distance, rather than contact, mediates social relations.

Neoliberal Capitalism and Unproductive Imagination

The book and film versions of *Cloudy* take two different mimetic approaches to representing reality, approaches that map onto Erich Auerbach’s paradigm of mimetic technique. The film version offers explanations for everything. The viewer is left with a narrative that fully explains 1) the science and technology that causes food to fall from the sky, 2) the human and bureaucratic control over nature that reverses the book’s relation to nature, and 3) ultimately the human failures (or at least some of them) that cause the uncontrolled situation. Because its narrative is oriented toward realism, the details of Flint’s lab, his experiments, his calculations, and relations to others in the town are detailed and foregrounded

for the audience to leave few narrative gaps. Why Flint must be a scientist, why he and his father are distant, and why he has trouble fitting in with his peers are all clearly explained. The viewers know how he feels; they know his insecurities; they know his triumphs and failures. The audience has little need for imagination when everything is explained.

Instead of an attempt at accurate realism, the book involves an openness rather than an overt invitation: read and imagine what another world could be like (Borradori 128-9; Derrida 361). The book offers its readers a chance to defamiliarize the world they have grown used to and instead imagine a world outside the technological and economic mediation of public and private lives (Shklovsky 12-13). In other words, the book offers children a glimpse into a life of art, which invokes the process of perception. For unproductive imagination, the process matters, not just the end result, and the process of art is a process of *jouissance*, of painful-pleasure; perhaps better written in light of the singular plural origin of being, as Nancy does, as “*co-jouissance*” (*Being* 75). The narrative gaps that Iser describes in his phenomenological approach enable Barthes’ *jouissance* of the text to emerge: the pleasure of reading *Cloudy* comes precisely from its activation (and even disruption) of the reader’s imaginative capacity rather than the imposition of meaning or explanation upon the reader (Barthes, *Pleasure* 14).

By means of its framed narrative, Barretts’ *Cloudy* leaves readers with more questions than answers. Where is the father? How did food come to fall from the sky? Does the Grandpa live with them, or does he just visit on the weekends? And so on. In a similar way to what Auerbach identifies as an Old Testament style of mimetic representation, *Cloudy* leaves much unsaid, obscure, unexpressed, and unexplained. Unlike the defined and revealed details characteristic of secular texts oriented to realism, which Auerbach illustrates with a close reading of Homer’s *Odyssey*, Biblical texts orient the reader to make interpretations through the narrative’s gaps, absence of details, and ambiguity (13-14, 20). Similarly, the *Cloudy* book offers the reader narrative gaps, a lack of detail, and thus a space to consider the universality of “unproductive imagination” that operates according to a principle of *being-with* and promotes the co-creation of virtual realities and new worlds. The importance of imagination is the historical “truth” of *Cloudy* that the film adaptation forecloses. While the film version is oriented toward realism with a plot that “makes sense” to the audience and explains the gaps in the original story, the book stands apart as a striking example of how the sublime and the

everyday become inseparable, as Auerbach notes about Biblical narratives (22-23). Despite the explanations, logic, and illuminations of the *Cloudy* film, the book remains more influential in its orientation to the “truth” of the humanimal capacity to invent worlds, stories, fictions, and signs out of nothing.

In the modern world, imagination is increasingly subjugated in American popular media, business culture, and cultural scripts to a use-value and exchange-value, which nullifies the beauty and pleasure of a slow, imaginative process (Vico 378). This is not to say that imagination should not serve useful projects—on the contrary, it always has—but that an ontology of *being-with* necessitates the “indeterministic processes of imaginative generativity” that belong to humans to “provide a ground for claims of freedom” (Pitman 369). Phrased another way, “unproductive imagination” is important because it provides a generative space for thought and artistic investigation outside the confines of deterministic reality. Imagination allows one to think outside of political paradigms and mimetic realism, outside a system that says food cannot just fall from the sky, and to suppose the potential “what if.” If a human, who is always acted upon by deterministic forces like technology and capitalism, loses the ability to imagine from nothing, how could that person possibly live in any way towards others except under conditions of unfreedom? Unfreedom is experienced when one cannot imagine oneself outside the roles and subject positions in which one is initiated. Imagination is not limited though to thinking oneself only outside of deterministic positions; it also offers a means to think oneself into the lives of others, or, to empathize.

Empathy, however, does not always trade on the practical, productive, or profitable. If “we have become all too practical” as Adorno writes, this occurs because “anything that is not reified, cannot be counted and measured, ceases to exist” (*Minima Moralia* 44, 47).⁵ Techno-scientific advancement creates and cures the problems, yet it only takes credit for the cure, perpetuating itself as the limitless source of power to cure all biological, social, and economic ills. Driven

⁵ Within the post-Fordist, information economy-driven society, “there is nothing in reality that can be encountered in its pure state; everything has already been formed, transformed, reflected by man” (Levinas 209). The need for measurement, data, and counting—besides its age-old function as a social mechanism of control (Porter 49)—also takes on a new immediacy through the movement of technology, which works as a gradual process, antithetical to the movement of science, which is “associated with periods of explosion” (Lotman 88). I have discussed the history and relation of measurement, counting, and narrative gaps in “Dialogical Numbers: Counting Humanimal Pain in J.M. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*.”

by networked technological advancement and supported by scientific breakthroughs, late capitalism claims for itself the tools and processes to fix the problems that it unintentionally creates, a claim reinforced by the *Cloudy* movie at every turn. The devastating decisions made by those in power—Flint’s experiments and the mayor’s political decisions—are largely remedied by the requisite faith in technoscientific advancement: Flint’s scientific work is the only hope for the city. The manna from heaven once provided by God is replaced with the gadgets produced by humans. The empathetic potential that lies in the context of being-with is lost.

The cultural logic and narrative emphasis on placing one’s trust in a cultural institution, however, seems to differ very little between the religious and technoscientific demands for trust and faith. To say so is neither to conflate science and religion, nor by any means to argue for a return to the religious. I suggest that a similar, structural parallel can be drawn between the two in how they figure in the public imagination.⁶ This is the promise at the end of the film: though the thirst for fame and profit resulted in some problems, mainly at the hands of a corrupt politician, technological innovation will always save the day, allowing in this case the citizens to return to the town and not have to migrate to another city. Innovation and invention of material commodities requires the maintenance of disbelief in everything except neoliberal capitalism, not ever allowing for its slightest suspension, or the contact of *being-with* that could suggest other directions for social organization.

In the film, the catastrophic food-weather events result directly from the “misuse” of Flint’s technology, which ultimately releases the grand narratives of technological progress and science themselves from any responsibility in the Anthropocene. While Flint, the townspeople, and the mayor are all complicit in this disaster, the film’s narrative casts blame for the disaster singularly upon the mayor. Personal ambition—that dangerous cousin to the individuality proffered at the beginning of the story as admirable—becomes the danger to progress. The film redeems capitalism through technological advancement, individualism, and heroic self-sacrifice saving the day. When the machine creates natural disasters of

⁶ My argument here parallels a common phenomenon in ideological warfare: a group often becomes similar to the very thing it struggles and fights against, often unknowingly so. Slavoj Žižek details this well in *The Year of Living Dangerously* (2012) in a section that addresses how religious and secular activists often both end up sacrificing their own values for which they fight (religious experience for the former, freedom and democracy for the latter).

food, Flint must destroy it, which he does at risk to his own life and with help from his earlier spray-on shoes invention that clog the machine. While the audience is momentarily led to believe that Flint dies in the food machine's explosion, he ends up being saved by another earlier creation—his genetically engineered rat-birds, which up to that point were seen as a nuisance, another failed invention. The ending thus effects a full redemption of Flint as an individual and of the scientist's production process as the authentic location of hope.

The mayor—whose corruption and greed are located visually in his morbidly obese body, which grows excessively larger in each scene—figures as “the corrupt politician,” a Girardian scapegoat figure and common rhetorical trope of populist rhetoric. This trope becomes important because corruption is atomized at the level of the individual and essentialized as a problem of bodily desires not kept in check. The mayor alone is punished, sailing off into the ocean on his bread boat (which all the townsfolk in Barrett's book use to flee the town) and self-destructively eating it. The film's conclusion illustrates how neoliberal capitalism appropriates critiques against itself, and against the political systems that support its economic policies; in this case, representative democracy.⁷ The rejection and distrust of politicians and political institutions in the U.S. are reduced to one idea: this all could have been avoided if it had not been for one, greedy, corrupt politician. The mayor's corruption serves as the twofold signifier for the cultural crisis of exploitation and greed that is seen within the spectacle as disrupting the otherwise peaceful community and the collective violence of corrupt politicians against the middle class (Girard).

The *being-with* of Being—the shared consciousness at the origin of Being—runs the risk of being replaced by a pseudo-solidarity (even under the guise of “community”) of ends and means (Nancy, *After* 32). Imagination, for instance, becomes a mere shadow of its former demiurgic glory, reduced simply to the equivalency achieved between X's imaginative capacity to create material or immaterial commodities and Y's capacity to do the same, all monitored,

⁷ David Harvey provides a succinct history of the rise of neoliberalism, citing its emphasis on self-regulating markets and personal freedom (19-21). Imbricated with neoliberal thought is the concept of “late capitalism,” a term originating from the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and expanded by Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. It designates the phase of capitalism from the 1950s onward that is characterized by globalized business, mediatized culture and relations, automation, military domination, and systems of economic and political organization that are “late” because they are inherently unsustainable.

measured, and calculated (Žižek, “Seeds” 272). This is the problem Swallow Falls encounters when their sardine market crashes and the mayor seeks to regain that lost prestige. It is easy to see how caring for human needs gets lost in the process. The end of the world—a common apocalyptic trope in popular culture today—is easier to envision and accept than alternatives to capitalism or the narratives of progress. Slavoj Žižek argues that “[w]hat today’s radical left needs are such ‘seeds of imagination’ that would enable it not only to provide a new vision of a Communist society, but also to break out of the terrifying impoverishment of our power of imagination in our late capitalist society” (“Seeds” 268). More difficult to discern, of course, are what “seeds of imagination” could prompt revolutionary new ways of political and economic organization that take into account the *being-with* of Being. Such was not found in this film, which speaks to the children who shall inherit this world.

Climaxes: Beginnings Yet to Come In-Between-Us

In the film, what is lost is the time to think, consider, reflect, ruminate, and imagine. The book preserves the gaps needed for imaginative interaction with the text. These gaps have the effect of slowing down the reader, an aesthetic certainly possible in children’s cinema as well.⁸ The loss of unproductive imagination runs the serious risk of subjugating the abstract to the practical, the latter of which easily becomes complicit in the neoliberal processes of production, consumption, waste, and destruction. Marshall McLuhan identifies this risk in his concept of *being-in-the-technologically-mediated-world*, which, to Marcelo Vieta and Laureano Ralon’s critical attention, must involve an accounting of sensory impact—or how particular sensory perceptions are foreclosed or dimmed—by the medium (41-42). Another way to conceive of the “unproductive imagination” needed is as a full use of sensory perception, which a slow aesthetic helps cultivate, as in the “changescapes” that Ross Gibson describes: those artworks that function as systems when the complexity, mutability, and beauty are “marshaled by deliberate human care for mainly contemplative or aesthetic ends

⁸ The difference here between slow and quick aesthetics can also be observed in the differences between Hélène Giraud and Thomas Szabo’s *Miniscule: Valley of the Lost Ants* (2013) and Eric Darnell and Tim Johnson’s *Antz* (1998). The cinematic technique differs in speed, but the narrative gaps present in *Miniscule* create the space for the life-affirming practice of “slow reading” to occur (Nietzsche 5).

rather than pragmatic purposes” (11). Sensory perceptions (McLuhan), bodily-rooted imaginations (Vico), and changescapes (Gibson) are all various ways of thinking about how the *being-with* of Being requires an attention to the instant, the moment, and our place within it.

The imaginative work needed now requires time to reflect; time unshackled for the constraints, pressures, and anxieties of labor. Here it is worth considering what Lyotard writes: “In a world where success means gaining time, thinking has a single, but irredeemable, fault: it is a waste of time” (36). Thinking—and imaginative, poetic thinking, particularly—is “actually and above all the force of resistance, alienated from resistance only with great effort” (Adorno, “Resignation” 202). Thinking rests on the ability to decide, at crucial moments, to suspend disbelief and think new worlds into existence—even eccentric ones in which manna falls mysteriously from the sky, or snow-covered hills that come to resemble mashed potatoes shared at a family meal.

Like the sardines, we face systemic depletion from climate change and other threats resulting from our modern technoscientific and neoliberal conditions. To address the Anthropocene by creating new worlds requires the resistance inherent to unproductive imagination. Despite the opening narrative of Flint’s romanticized “difference,” the audience ultimately receives a full serving of very common ideological food. Beyond the limited and limiting image of the scientist as white, male, and isolated, the film version of *Cloudy* invites us to consume media in altogether familiar ways that operate against the life-affirming imaginative processes involved in *being-with*, which is the *co-jouissance* of artistic practice, the *co-jouissance* of creating meaning in narrative gaps, and the *co-jouissance* of contact in a given moment. The very real networked catastrophe we face cannot be met without such *co-jouissance*.

Acknowledgements

For insightful conversations, reading recommendations, or feedback that helped shape this essay, I thank D’An Knowles Ball, Brian Macaskill, David Metzger, Kevin Moberly, Marc A. Ouellette, Jason Wise, and the readers and editorial team at *PCSJ*. For a childhood filled with imaginative experiences and life-affirming moments of being-with, I thank my grandpa, Thurl R. Craddock (1936-2014).

Works Cited

Adorno, Theodor. *Minima Moralia*. Verso, 1974.

---. "Resignation." *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, edited by J.M. Bernstein, Routledge, 1991, pp. 198-203.

---. *The Stars Down to Earth*, edited by Stephen Crook, Routledge, 2002.

Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated by John Cumming, Continuum, 2002.

Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by Willard R. Trask, Princeton University Press, 1974.

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*, translated by Annette Lavers, Hill and Wang, 1972.

---. *The Pleasure of the Text*, translated by Richard Miller, Hill and Wang, 1975.

Barrett, Judi and Ron Barrett. *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*, 1978, Antheneum, 1982.

Borradori, Giovanna. *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, U of Chicago P, 2003.

Caillois, Roger. *Man, Play and Games*, translated by Meyer Barash, University of Illinois Press, 2001.

Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs, directed by Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, Columbia Pictures, 2009.

Derrida, Jacques. *Acts of Religion*, edited by Gil Anidjar, Routledge, 2002.

Gibson, Ross. *Changescapes: Complexity, Mutability, Aesthetics*, UWA Publishing, 2015.

- Girard, René. *The Scapegoat*, translated by Yvonne Freccero, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Iser, Wolfgang. "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." *New Literary History*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1972, pp. 279-299.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, 1991.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, translated by Seán Hand, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.
- Lotman, Juri. *The Unpredictable Workings of Culture*, TLU Press, 2013.
- Lytard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985*, University of Minnesota Press, 1992.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *After Fukushima*. Fordham University Press, 2015.
- . *Being Singular Plural*, translated by Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne, Stanford University Press, 2000.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, edited by Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, translated by R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Ouellette, Marc. "Run Hugs, Squeeze Hugs, and Jump Hugs: Playfully Professing Parenthood and the Self-in-Relation." *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2018.
- Piero, Mike. "Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs in Print and Film: Technology, Imagination, and the Networked Catastrophe." *MediaCommons Field Guide*, December 3, 2016, <http://mediacommons.org/fieldguide/question/what->

- [elements-do-you-believe-motivate-reaction-fan-culture-and-how-do-they-relate-recent-10.](#)
- . "Dialogical Numbers: Counting Humanimal Pain in J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*." *Transnational Literature*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2018, pp. 1-19.
- Pitman, Michael. "Freedom, Indeterminism and Imagination." *South African Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2012, pp. 369-383.
- Porter, Theodore M. *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*, Princeton University Press, 1995.
- Schaeffer, Jean-Marie. *Why Fiction?* translated by Dorrit Cohn, University of Nebraska Press, 2010.
- Shklovsky, Victor. "Art as Technique." *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, translated by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, University of Nebraska Press, 1965, pp. 3-24.
- Vico, Giambattista. *The New Science*, revised version (1744), edited by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, Cornell University Press, 1968.
- Vieta, Marcelo and Laureano Ralon. "Being-in-the-Technologically-Mediated-World: The Existential Philosophy of Marshall McLuhan." *The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1&2, 2013, pp. 36-60.
- Vygotsky, Lev. *Thought and Language*, edited by Alex Kozulin, The MIT Press, 1986.
- Wooley, Alexandra. "Nicholas Poussin's Allegories of Charity in *The Plague at Ashod* and *The Gathering of the Manna* and Their Influence on Late Seventeenth-Century French Art." *Medieval and Renaissance Lactations: Images, Rhetorics, Practices*, edited by Jutta Gisela Sperling, Ashgate, 2013, pp. 165-185.

Žižek, Slavoj. "The Seeds of Imagination." *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* by Fredric Jameson, edited by Slavoj Žižek, Verso, 2016, pp. 267-308.

---. *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Picador, 2008.

---. *The Year of Living Dangerously*, Verso, 2012.

Zwolinski, Juan P. and David A. Demer. "A cold oceanographic regime with high exploitation rates in the Northeast Pacific forecasts a collapse of the sardine stock." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 109, no. 11, 2012, pp. 4175-4180.