

ROGER WATERS' POETRY OF THE ABSENT FATHER: BRITISH
IDENTITY IN PINK FLOYD'S *THE WALL*

Jorge Sacido Romero
Luis Miguel Varela Cabo
Universidad de Santiago de Compostela
iasacido@usc.es
fmluis@usc.es

In spite of being one of the most remarkable and arresting products of late-twentieth-century British popular culture, Pink Floyd's *The Wall* has received little scholarly attention. This paper focuses on how in *The Wall* and in its companion album, *The Final Cut*, the individual life history and the present predicament of its protagonist stand for the postwar period in British history as a whole. The latter represent the identity crossroads at which the nation was placed after the collapse of the welfare state system and the major socio-economic and political transformation it underwent at the dawn of Thatcherism. In order to show this, we draw an outline of the historical context in which *The Wall* is inscribed and attend closely to the film's complex temporal structure and rich symbolism. We conclude with a brief discussion on how *The Wall* leaves in sketch an alternative to the present situation which is based on a retrieval of interhuman affects and on justice as the supreme political virtue. As both love and justice bury their roots in the more humane side of the past tradition of the British nation, the work's Utopian thrust has inevitable conservative overtones.

Keywords: British identity, post-war, welfare state, Oedipal father, ultra-liberalism, Thatcher, Pink Floyd, Roger Waters

1. Introduction

Pink Floyd's rock album *The Wall* (1979) was followed by a film version in 1982 which was written by Roger Waters (the leader of the band and composer of most of the album's songs) and directed by Alan Parker. *The Wall*, both album and film, are intimately connected to the work that marked the end of Pink Floyd's major phase as one of the most important rock bands of the twentieth century: *The Final Cut: A Requiem for the Postwar Dream* (1983). The latter's elegiac subtitle is an explicit reference to the situation in Great Britain during the late 1970s and early 1980s which will constitute the central focus for our close reading of *The Wall*, a work whose intimate, individualistic and autobiographical aspect stands for the identity, trans-individual predicament of postwar British society as a whole.

2. Historical Context.

On the eve of the First World War the condition of British society was ominous: the threat of a nation-wide mass strike in mining and transport, civil war in Ireland and revolt in India and Egypt (Morgan 1993: 582).¹ However, the war would deflect attention from all these conflicts and bring the country together in the effort to defeat the enemy. The strong feeling of national cohesion during the war went hand in hand with a “massive industrial and social transformation” led by a strengthened state apparatus which implemented reforms in all fields that helped to set the basis of a potentially more egalitarian society (Morgan 1993: 587). Indeed, the traditional liberal ideals of justice, freedom and solidarity were endorsed by society at large and resulted in an increase in the degree of social and political relevance of sectors such as women and the working classes who had inevitably joined the war effort. National identity and cohesion and socio-economic and political transformation were strongly connected with the imperial idea, which was greatly reinforced during the war period.² Though it would become more and more impractical to maintain, the British Empire extended its boundaries wider than before.

After the First World War the Prime Minister, Lloyd George tried unsuccessfully to consolidate the socio-economic reforms of the wartime period. He failed in his attempt to build “a land fit for heroes”, a project that included the extension in health and educational services, the rise in pensions, the spread of universal unemployment insurance and even subsidised housing (Lloyd George in Morgan 1993: 596). The renewed ideal of national unity and the programme of reform measures were soon abandoned and the *status quo* previous to the war was restored. Class divisions were reinforced and capital and industry returned to private hands. During the interwar years, Britain went through a period of crisis that brought about high rates of unemployment and episodes of social unrest. However, Britain’s leading role in the international sphere remained apparently unscathed and the country “displayed a surprising degree of stability” in comparison with all the other western nations (Morgan 1993: 613). Besides, of the two countries that would take over world leadership after the Second World War, one was still in the making (the Soviet Union), while the other (the United States) went through a crisis of its own, particularly after the crash of 1929.

The Second World War was indeed a major turning-point in the history of Great Britain. It changed things in a way the previous war had not done. Alistair Davies and Alan Sinfield have neatly summarised the new situation: “In 1939, Britain was the world’s greatest imperial power; by 1945, even though the empire remained intact, Britain was an enfeebled state in a world divided between two new superpowers, the USA and the Soviet Union” (2000: 1). Although the turn of the nineteenth century had already seen the weakening of Great Britain’s power as world leader, it was not until the postwar period that she really lost her hegemonic position in the international sphere

¹ In what follows, we draw heavily from Kenneth O. Morgan’s ‘The Twentieth Century (1914-1991)’ in Morgan (1993: 582-663).

² As an expression of Britain’s solidity and greatness, the Empire became extremely important in political, commercial and symbolic terms (Morgan 1993: 593).

(Hobsbawm 1999: 112-131, 150-172, 185-316). The British Empire crumbled quite rapidly immediately after the war, so much so that by the early 1960s there were left only the remains of what had been a vast territory occupying more than a quarter of the earth.³ This loss pushed post-war Britain into a subordinate position inside the Western bloc that she was unwilling to take. Europe split into two during the Cold War and Britain aligned herself with the superpower that was geographically and historically closest to her.

The new situation forced the British into trying different ways of reinforcing their sense of national identity and continuity with their past that were linked to attempts at retrieving their lost greatness. All these efforts were traversed by contradictions of all kinds that would lead to a socio-economic crisis in the years in which Pink Floyd published *The Wall* and *The Final Cut*.⁴ Thus, the 'special relationship' with the USA was placed *vis-à-vis* a reluctant Atlanticism in which the overtones of a family feud could be heard; integration into the European Community was considered a suitable alternative, while at the same time Britain's insularity was safeguarded in more than merely geographical terms; the final acceptance of the loss of Empire was belied by such victorious episodes as the Falklands War in which the glories of an imperial past were revived. No longer the economic or military superpower of old, Great Britain stuck to a fantasy of unparalleled moral influence in the world's affairs.⁵ Britain's determination to become the world's moral authority was materialised at home in the establishment of the welfare state system, that compromise reached by Labour and the Tories to create a happier and more egalitarian society, a truly alternative model to both the savage capitalism represented by the USA and the totalitarian regimes of the Eastern bloc.

The welfare state system was a combination of mixed economy and social protection that had been outlined by Sir William Beveridge in his Report of November 1942 as a way to build "a land fit for heroes" after World War II.⁶ Unlike the case of the previous post-war, a return to the pre-war situation was no longer a possibility. Britain chose then to re-edit the project that had been rapidly discontinued after 1918 as the way to regain economic prosperity and to safeguard and strengthen the sense of national

³ "By the early 1960s, only a scattered handful of miscellaneous territories –British Honduras, the barren wastes of the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Hong Kong, Aden, Fiji, and a few other outposts– were still under direct British rule" (Morgan 1993: 641).

⁴ For an analysis of how the loss of Empire haunts post-war Britain as reflected in cultural products as varied as George Orwell's 'The English People' (1947) and the film *Love Actually* (2004) see Barbeito and Sacido (forthcoming).

⁵ Thus, for instance, when it turned out that she could not afford an independent nuclear force in her pretension to be a world power, Britain took on the role of leader of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and, in a gesture of moral superiority, abandoned the arms race unilaterally (Davies and Saunders 1983: 31; Morgan 1993: 646 and 653; Bradbury 1994: 275).

⁶ The principles underlying the welfare state introduced by Labour PM Clement Attlee in 1945 had been outlined by Sir William Beveridge in the Beveridge Report presented to the British parliament in November 1942. The main goal set by the Report was the 'Abolition of Want' through the creation of a state-led system of social security that included childcare, the safeguarding of maternity and the coverage of unemployment, disability and retirement. A National Health Service was established in 1948, which meant free medical treatment for all. A national system of benefits was likewise introduced to provide social security, so that the population would be protected "from the cradle to the grave" (WW2 People's War Team).

identity and historical continuity that were under the threat of engulfment by external forces and of destruction by internal weaknesses. In *The Wall*, the protagonist's father, a war hero who was killed in the battle of Anzio in 1944, incarnates this 'national ideal' passed on as a legacy to the post-war generations (with a traditional element attached to it symbolised in his elegant uniform and gentlemanly demeanour). By interweaving the individual with the collective history, the film records how this legacy soon started to undergo a fatal process of erosion and was brought to an end in the present dimension from which the story is told.

Indeed, from 1976 onwards, Britain was finally forced to wake up from what was left of the post-war dream. All ended in an economic crisis (inflation rates rose 20 percent in 1980), a series of strikes (particularly serious in the mining sector) and closedowns (shipyards, for example), a rise in unemployment (2 million people in 1980 and 3 million in 1983), demographic deceleration, social unrest, the loss of prestige and credibility of the institutions, and from May 1979 on, a Tory government led by Margaret Thatcher, who, explicitly and programmatically, took the ultra-liberal road (Fernández Sánchez 1999: 72).⁷ In *The Final Cut*, 'Maggie' is made partly responsible for the country's critical situation. 'England' is a discontented country, a victim of an increasingly 'global' economy, narcotised by alcohol, TV and Hollywood. The nation is heading towards her own destruction along with the rest of humankind ruled by a bunch of tyrants led by Reagan and Brezhnev, who play colonial games and whom the poetic voice in 'The Fletcher Memorial Home' (track no. 8 of the album) would like to get rid of.⁸

3. Pink, or Whither Britain?

The Wall and *The Final Cut* are two deeply interconnected works. Leaving aside the fact that three of the songs in the last album were actually discarded from the previous one,⁹ *The Wall* unifies and condenses through one single subjective perspective all that is expressed in a more dispersed manner in the lyrics of *The Final Cut*: namely, on the one hand, an angst-ridden analysis and open indictment of the socio-political situation in Britain and the world at large, while on the other, the torment of a real or imaginary World War II veteran haunted by the memory of the war and whose dream of a better society has been betrayed by his own country. Through a combination of the personal and the trans-individual, the autobiographical and the historical, *The Wall* sharpens

⁷ Fernández Sánchez (1999) is a thorough and extremely useful study of the period 1975-1990 in British history that revolves around the figure of Margaret Thatcher. 'Thatcherism' meant the endorsement of the spirited and acquisitive individualism rooted in the more monetarist and less humane side of the British liberal tradition and the abandonment of post-war Keynesianism.

⁸ In 'The Fletcher Memorial Home' the list of 'colonial wasters of life and limb' includes the following: Ronald Reagan and his Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, Menahem Begin, Margaret Thatcher and the Reverend Ian Paisley, Leonid Brezhnev and the Communist Party, the ghosts of Joseph McCarthy and Richard Nixon and a bunch of Latin-American dictators that add an exotic note of colour to the group.

⁹ They are the following: 'Your Possible Pasts' (track no. 2), 'One of the Few' (track no. 3) and 'The Final Cut' (track no. 10).

and expands what in *The Final Cut* remains diffuse: namely, how the 'post-war dream' of the generation that fought and died in the war had become a nightmare in the individual and collective present of the 'I' that speaks, sees, thinks and experiences. In the last stanza of 'The Gunner's Dream' (track no. 5 of *The Final Cut*) the poetic voice is haunted by the soldier's dream of a happier and freer society which the present (the future of the dream's past) had finally frustrated. He ends up by preaching in the wilderness of the present, desperately crying out for the retrieval of the ideal expressed in the gunner's dream: "take heed of the dream/take heed", he says.¹⁰

Phil Rose's 2002 analysis *Which One's Pink?* reads *The Wall* from the perspective of object-relations theory. In a rather heavy-handed manner and quoting too copiously from the works of psychologists, Rose concentrates his argument on Pink's individual psyche, on how it goes to the extremes of narcissism, obsession and schizophrenia until it expels the 'bad objects' he had previously incorporated and is finally able to establish normal relationships with others.¹¹ The present study transcends this confinement to the private sphere of Pink's mind to offer a detailed analysis of how the protagonist's predicament *equals* the Nation's predicament.

The other critical piece that comes close to being a scholarly study of *The Wall* is a brief essay by Philip Jenkins on the adaptation of the film into the concert given in Berlin's Postdamer Platz on July 21, 1990 to celebrate the downfall of the Berlin Wall. Jenkins connects *The Wall* to both the work of contemporary authors and to the temporally distant visionary universe of the English Romantic poet William Blake. Jenkins does in fact establish the connection between the protagonist of *The Wall* (Pink) and post-war Britain. He states that "Pink's tragedy reflects that of the nation at large", and that he is "Britain in miniature" (Jenkins 1996: 205-206). Undoubtedly because of space restrictions, Jenkins's approach remains in this connection rather sketchy and limited in scope. He substantiates his thesis by selecting certain details in Pink's story and relating them to facts of (mostly) present-day British history. Our reading attends in a much more comprehensive way to the structuring, systematic interconnections established in the film between the individual and the collective which are presided over by the haunting figure of the absent father that represents the 'national ideal' in its doomed attempt to be realised in post-war Britain. The equivalence between Pink and post-war Britain is therefore coherently maintained in *The Wall* as the way to show the

¹⁰ Here are the elements that make up the ideal post-war society dreamt of by the soldier in the battlefield: "a place to stay/enough to eat/somewhere old heroes shuffle safely down the street/where you can speak out loud/about your doubts and fears/and what's more no-one ever disappears/you never hear their standard issue kicking in your door/you can relax both sides of the tracks/and maniacs don't blow holes in bandmen by remote control/and everyone has recourse to the law/and no-one kills the children anymore/and no-one kills the children anymore." (Emphasis added). "Standard issue" refers to the standard boots worn by the police or by soldiers, while "maniacs" blowing "holes in bandmen by remote control" is an allusion to the I.R.A.'s assassination of six army musicians in Regent's Park, London, on July 20, 1982 (Rose 2002: 145).

¹¹ Rose concludes in a way that, in our view, neither the album, nor the film sustains: Pink is condemned by the Judge in the penultimate song, 'The Trial', for having made others suffer (2002: 133). In this way, figures like the mother, or the teacher (who had pushed Pink into a state of alienation) become victims at one single stroke.

nation's ethico-political situation while moving the audience/public (the English in particular) into a strong identification with the hero and with the reality that is being represented. Both the album and the film place the stress on the personal-national identitary dimension and not so much on the socio-economic base which, on the other hand, is shown as determining the former and constituting its material ground. The British had had to bear heavy existential burdens and to confront a profound and long-lasting identity crisis. Britain had now to 'learn' how to live in a world in which the rules (military, political, economic and, even, social and cultural) were set by the unruly child of a capitalist model that was British in origin – a major challenge for national pride.

The Wall refers to and is part of this historical scenario, in which we find Pink, clearly Roger Waters' fictional surrogate, placed at the very beginning of the cinematic story-line and in the present dimension of the cinematic discourse. The film starts with a slow and smooth 'travelling' through an aseptic and uniform hotel corridor towards the figure of a cleaning lady preparing her vacuum cleaner ready to enter the suite facing her. Behind the door of the room, the wall that protects him from the outer world, we find Pink in a state of depressive and tormented introspection, revisiting his past. On his bare wrist he wears a Mickey Mouse watch, a time image representing some unsolved childhood conflict that has a bearing on the present situation. Pink recreates the circumstances surrounding his father's death in Anzio under German fire. Piped music is heard in the soundtrack: a song telling the sad story of how Santa Claus had forgotten the toy soldiers that a small boy had asked for, a metaphor of the father who had not come back from the front. The lady knocking at Pink's door gives way to counterpoint scenes in which a crucial parallelism is established between the past of the battle (the enemy's fighter planes dropping their bombs on the soldiers who run for shelter and are wounded, culminating in his father's death in the trenches), the present of the concert of Pink's band in the United States (a frenzied mob at the concert venue bringing down gates, shouting and running wild) and an imaginary re-elaboration of Pink's own encounter with the audience attending the concert (those American youths listening in astonishment to a fascist-like Pink who orders them to look into the alienating and oppressive reality hiding behind the ludic and stultifying vertigo of a rock and roll concert).

All these scenes of unbridled savagery stand in radical contrast with images of a rugby field bathed in sunlight in which a person is walking alone. In our view, the sunny field represents metaphorically an open space for an unrealised socio-historical progress, alternative to that followed by postwar Britain, which is one of the meanings of what in *The Final Cut* is called "the possible pasts".¹² The judgement that *The Wall* passes on the present is brilliantly synthesised in this long initial scene: the victory over evil in the past and the promise of a better future have come to nothing as the war continues in a present that is totally dominated by an evil capitalist system, brutally dehumanised and viciously destructive.

¹² 'Your Possible Past' is the title of track no. 2 of *The Final Cut*. The phrase 'possible pasts' has been interpreted in a more negative way: as what could have happened if the war had been lost and Britain had come under Nazi rule (Rose 2002: 137). See also Jenkins (1996: 209)

The plan for *The Wall* was first conceived by Roger Waters after a distressing episode in the 1977 *Animals* tour. At a concert in Montreal, Canada, the wild behaviour of a Pink Floyd fan made Waters spit in his face. This act of open confrontation with a mass completely given over to the maddening frenzy of a rock and roll concert led Waters to conceive the idea of building a wall between himself and the public.¹³ The artistic result of this was *The Wall*, both the album and the film. In both works Waters' (self-)critical detachment from the unbearable reality that surrounded him, to which he contributed and from which he had benefited, constituted the nucleus of the band's creative universe that found its continuity in *The Final Cut*.¹⁴

Thus, the cinematic narrative dramatises this divorce between, on the one hand, Waters and on the other, his public and the show business of which he was part and parcel. His seclusion in a hotel room in Los Angeles before a concert constitutes the critical turning point for Pink, as he comes face to face with the horrid irrationality of consumerism and materialism. The protagonist, the epitome of the rock star and the arch-priest of vacuous hedonism, becomes aware that he is nothing but a piece in an implacable, dark, voracious, irrational and monstrous machinery. The death of Pink's father symbolises the betrayal and the eventual destruction of the 'national ideal'. The post-war generation is thus portrayed as a generation of orphans, both literally and socio-politically speaking.

We can distinguish three fundamental dimensions in the temporal structure of *The Wall* (labelled I, II and III in Table 1):

I	II	III
PAST	PRESENT	NO-TIME/PLACE
Childhood	Tour trailer/Hotel room	Totalitarian/paramilitary solution vs. Reconstructed society
(Post)-war	Concert/orgy/American TV film.	Craving for purity vs. Love and justice
Britain/England	USA	Britain/England

Table 1 Temporal structure of *The Wall* (1982)

In order to examine the central temporal dimension (II) and clarify its crucial connection with the death of the father, the symbol of the 'wall' and the alternative based on love and justice sketched at the end, it is useful to have recourse to psychoanalysis and its views on the constitution of the identity of individuals, communities and social formations. In *Figuring Lacan* (1986), Juliet Flower MacCannell uses the term 'post-Oedipal' in reference to modern capitalist society and its dominant values, beliefs, regulations and identitary traits (i.e., the symbolic father or the Name of

¹³ "What he [the fan] wanted was a good riot, and what I wanted was to do a good rock and roll show." (Waters in Rose 2002: 85). See also "Pink Floyd: The Wall": <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>.

¹⁴ After recording *The Final Cut* Waters left Pink Floyd because of the irreconcilable disagreements between himself and the other members of the band, David Gilmour in particular.

the Father in Lacanian theory). Modern culture, or the modern symbolic father, carries on, MacCannell argues, its civilising work in an extremely effective way “but no longer in the familiar forms of love, family, sociability” (1986: 70). In the post-Oedipal ‘present’ of *The Wall* the place of the father has been taken over by that unbridled and unstoppable machinery that dissolves all traces of socially binding affection and transforms individuals into simple producers and consumers. ‘Daddy’s flown across the ocean’, the first line of ‘Another Brick in the Wall (Part I)’, means both the father’s physical death and the relocation of the symbolic father in the USA, the capitalist superpower on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. The protagonist *qua* present-day Britain is subject to a law that does not give love (that is, recognition, affection, etc.) in return for obedience. The consequence of this is ‘the wall’: that is, discontent, frustration, materialist fetishism, isolation, narcissistic introversion, disorientation, vacuous hedonism and irrational (self-)aggression. An orgy of sound and fury sweeps away all traces of critical conscience and pre-empts the desire to build a better society, more humane, balanced, happy and just, the society dreamt of by the soldier at the front and announced by Vera Lynn, a popular wartime British singer, in her songs about a hopeful future for the British nation after the war.¹⁵

In the song titled precisely ‘Vera’, the poetic voice asks what had become of Vera Lynn, what of the future “sunny day” in which “we would meet again” (an echo of Vera Lynn’s song ‘We’ll meet again’). In the opening song of *The Final Cut*, ‘The Postwar Dream’, Margaret Thatcher is repeatedly interrogated in order to express the profound conviction that the promise of a happy has been completely shattered. The blood of the British soldiers has been shed in vain. The poetic voice asks: “Tell me true, tell me why was Jesus crucified/Is it for this that daddy died? [...] What have we done Maggie, what have we done/What have we done to England?/Should we shout? Should we scream?/What happened to the post war dream?/Oh, Maggie, Maggie, what have we done?” The refrain in ‘Your Possible Pasts’, track no. 2 of *The Final Cut*, condenses in an interrogative way the nostalgia for a society which had not been, based on affective ties and continuous with the tradition of the past: “Do you remember me?/How we used to be?/Do you think we should be closer?” (Emphases added). In the last stanza of this song, we come across a metaphor for the ‘possible pasts’, the alternatives opened up for Britain after the war that had been thwarted by the course of history. This metaphor is that of the ‘flags’, the symbol of national identity *par excellence*. The poetic voice concludes his lament by saying: “Now our feelings run deep and cold as the clay/And strung out behind us the banners and flags/of our possible pasts lie in tatters and rags”. It is revealing in this connection that the long initial scene of the film is presided over by the US flag. The hedonist-consumerist paroxysm illustrated by this scene is, therefore, clearly associated with United States of America. In the historical present of *The Wall* Britain is swallowed up by the inhumane and incessant vortex of capitalist production and consumption which dissolves the defining features of individual and national identity. All the traces of the ideal England of the ‘possible pasts’ are wiped out by this process. Britain/England has taken the road of the crudely amoral capitalist model epitomised by the United States of America and Pink/Waters is painfully aware of having contributed to and benefited from this self-destructive craze.

¹⁵ See Urlick 1997-2001.

All the torment expressed in the film's opening is expanded in the first animation scene in which the plump and lovely White Dove of Peace mutates into a sharp, metallic and menacing Eagle that flies around post-war London. The ominous Eagle represents, of course, the nuclear threat of the Cold War period, which had another main protagonist: the Soviet Union. But the Eagle is and has always been the symbol of Empire. In this context, the Eagle is also the Bald Eagle of the Seal of the United States of America.¹⁶ The damaging effect that the post-war period had on British identity is symbolised in this animation scene in the rapid disintegration of the Union Jack that ends up with St George's Cross (England's emblem) shedding its blood, incapable of fertilising the devastated field of the Nation. The blood of the cross, both the sacrificial blood shed on the war front and the essence of a nation passed on from generation to generation, is squeezed by implacable superior forces and drained in the sewers of history.¹⁷

The individual and collective pasts (dimension I in Table 1) start out being two neatly differentiated pasts: on the one hand, the real, historical past and, on the other, the alternative, 'possible' past that never was. The latter is represented in the film by an open field, a luminous space of possibilities where we can find an unequivocal mark of British/English identity: the rugby goalpost. This is the site of hope, of the postwar promise, in which the son-child (the new generation) waits for his father and for other children to start playing, to get involved in a collective activity regulated by rules inherited from tradition and accepted by all. But the game is over before it starts: the father does not come back and other children do not join him. Instead, the field is invaded by all the spectral figures of the real past that lie at the root of the present discontent: the ghost of his dead father; the battle in which ordinary people died; a repressive and extremely violent educational system that transforms children into automata; a disgusting rat that represents post-war shortages, disease and poverty; the doctor and the castrating, protective mother that lays the seed of distrust and undermines his capacity to love the woman that loves him and who leaves him for someone else,¹⁸ and so on. The space for hope, happiness and justice mutates into a

¹⁶ To be both fair and historically rigorous, we must concede that America's intervention in World War II was instrumental in the victory against the Nazis. We must add, however, that the USA knew how to use this victory to achieve and reinforce its hegemony in the Western world by, for instance, telling the story of its role in the war in the way it found most convenient for its purposes. All those war films and documentaries with which America bombarded and goes on bombarding the Western world constitute (d) a major ideological tool in this connection. It is not by chance that the scene of Pink's seclusion in the hotel room is punctuated by short scenes from an American war film that Pink is watching on television.

¹⁷ The theme of discontinuity with, and betrayal of, the past is further reinforced by another recurrent motif in the film: namely, the phone call. Pink's father tries to call someone on the phone from the trenches but fails. He is killed by enemy fire and the telephone is left hanging. Later on, when Pink calls his wife, who had left him, in a desperate attempt to come out of the wall, he likewise fails. The war of the present, like the war of the past, silences the word that binds human beings to one another.

¹⁸ Revealingly, this other man is an antinuclear activist. In Britain during the 1970s there was a revival of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament of the 1950s which, along with the protests against the Vietnam war, constituted a movement of resistance against the Establishment that was going the way of ultra-liberalism.

scenario of depression, desperation, fear, anguish and profound dissatisfaction. In our view, Pink's journey through this shiny space of promise, which progressively loses its brilliance, stands for Britain's course through the waters of history after the war.

While the open field of the possible past(s) imagined by Pink is being invaded, we hear the song 'Comfortably Numb'. At the same time and in the present dimension, Pink's agent and his team break into the hotel room bringing along with them a doctor, or someone who looks like one. The way in which the latter breaks open the lock of the door is a visual echo of the Nazi bombing in Anzio and of the mob running wild at the concert venue. The agent and his crew embody the excessive and incessant movement of dominant capitalism that wrenches Pink away from his tormented state. The doctor gives Pink some drug that forces him into a state of pleasurable lassitude so that he becomes once again the obedient piece in a money-making machine that he had been up to that point.

On the way towards the actual concert in Los Angeles there is a leap into the imaginary plane on which Pink's transformation into a totalitarian demagogue takes place. At this point the narrative action moves into dimension III of our temporal schema (Table 1). Pink's feverish concert/speech takes place not before a real audience of American fans, but before an imaginary British audience. Pink's mind becomes at this point the site for the rehearsal of what we call the 'totalitarian-paramilitary solution', a way out of the situation of identity collapse brought about by the course that his personal life had taken, which, according to our central thesis, is the correlate of Britain's historical progression after the war. This solution rehearsed in the no-time/place of the songs 'In the Flesh', 'Run Like Hell' and 'Waiting for the Worms' is a potential ideological drift towards an ultranationalist, imperialist and racist stand that calls for the resurrection of a Britannia that is both pure and almighty. In a hall adorned with paramilitary paraphernalia and full of ensigns showing two hammers arranged crosswise,¹⁹ the concert becomes an imaginary mass gathering. The British crowd is stirred by the dictates of a providential and vehement leader and is ready to undergo a process of purgation. In a Hitlerite attitude, this imaginary Pink has supplanted the real Pink to address the mass and urge them to wake up from their stultifying hedonism and show their adhesion to him. Political purges start *in situ* right before an army of 'worms' takes to the streets. The worms invade the civic sphere in search of inferior beings that must be eliminated. These rallies and raids are an explicit indictment of totalitarianism in the century of totalitarianisms and a warning against the temptation to fall into tentative totalitarian solutions to the problems of the present. A totalitarian regime was considered by some a viable possibility as the traumatic shadow of loss of the Empire was still hanging over a society undergoing profound and rapid historical changes.

We must add that this totalitarian-paramilitary solution rehearsed in the no-time/place of *The Wall* did find some correspondence in the Britain of the times: on the one hand, in the extreme-right fascist movements that wanted to send immigrants back to where they came from and, on the other, in the mixture of ultraliberal capitalism and

¹⁹ The Union Jack is visible only on the T-shirts worn by some people in the audience. The traditional symbol of the British nation seems to have been reduced to the status of a mere commodity.

British chauvinism of the Conservative Party.²⁰ The victory in the Falklands War gave Mrs. Thatcher the opportunity to exhort the British to hold on to the dream of the *Imperius redivivus* while at once warning the nation about the threat of contamination through contact with those people of alien cultures and different races who had come to stay. Therefore, this 'no-time/space' dimension is undoubtedly connected with the time/space that constituted the historical present of *The Wall*.²¹

4. "Tear down the wall!": The possible future.

According to classic psychoanalytical theory, 'guilt' is that mental mechanism which is activated when we disobey or unconsciously desire to disobey the social norm. Guilt puts us back on the track of socially appropriate ways of desiring and acting.²² The problem in this late-capitalist world recreated in *The Wall* is that the father, in the symbolic sense of the set of social rules and values, no longer returns love in exchange for repression and obedience. The more obedient one is, the guiltier he or she feels. In the present dimension of *The Wall*, the Oedipal father is absent, he is historically dead.

Literally speaking, post-war Britain was a country of orphans. At the symbolic/identitary level, the welfare state model was the nation's attempt to keep the caring father alive. But in the historical present as represented in *The Wall*, this symbolic father had been killed in a war won by savage capitalist forces. Pink confronts two modes oppressive authority, the second being subsidiary to the first, which is the dominant one: the maddening, uncontrollable and relentless movement of capitalism and the possessive and castrating mother figure who contributes to her son's subjugation to the incessant dance of capitalism.²³

Pink is racked with guilt and never receives compensation in the form of love from the social order in which he is inscribed. Guilt is the cause of his seclusion within himself. In order to liberate himself from the wall, he must get rid of this feeling that at once traps him in a network of dehumanised relationships and keeps him isolated and permanently dissatisfied. 'Stop', the antepenultimate song in both album and film, is the turning-point towards Pink's liberation. In his exclamation "stop!" a break with the morbid, maddening and psychotic dynamics of the present-day world is performed. In order to walk out of the wall Pink finds it necessary to look into himself and find out if he has "been guilty all this time". Such self-scrutiny is staged in the following song, "The

²⁰ The scene in the streets in which Pink as the leader of the Worms shouts through a megaphone is compared by Waters himself to a march "towards some kind of National Front rally in Hyde Park" (Waters in Rose 2002: 127).

²¹ There are, of course, examples of racial disturbances before the 1970s and early 1980s, like the Notting Hill riots of 1958 or Enoch Powell's speeches in the 1960s in which he stated that if whites were too permissive with blacks, the black man would eventually get the whip and subjugate the whites, bringing about major waves of social unrest and "rivers of blood" (Morgan 1993: 647).

²² See, for instance, Freud (1957: 200) and Freud (1961: 76-77)

²³ The world of giddy production and consumption of the song 'What Shall We Do Now?' is summarised in the phrase "never relax at all", whereas in 'Mother' the protagonist's mother is reported to have told her son in an authoritarian third-person voice: "She won't let you fly but she might let you sing".

Trial', in which Pink is found guilty of "showing feelings of an almost human nature". His liberation is paradoxically achieved through his condemnation in the trial. The Judge sentences him "to be exposed before/[His] peers" and orders him "tear down the wall" that at once protects him and alienates him completely.

Categories turn into their opposites at the end: the condemned are in truth liberated, and those who are not condemned seem to be damned to live in the late-capitalist hell. Furthermore, the noun 'worm', previously associated with the adherents to the supreme authority of the totalitarian leader, becomes the name of the judge in 'The Trial'. The public prosecutor salutes the judge by saying: "Good morning Worm, your honour". The judge certainly is the supreme authority but, instead of decreeing subjection to Evil, he decrees liberation from it. Pink seems to carry out the ethical act of breaking with the *status quo* impelled by a force superior to that which enforces its mandates in a dehumanised social order.

In our reading, the judge embodies the possibility of individual and national emancipation from an oppressive, tyrannical system epitomised by the USA. If, as Fredric Jameson maintains, works of popular culture always contain some "Utopian and transcendental potential" (2000: 142), in *The Wall* the latter is associated with the courthouse, where the two British institutional figures that best embody the values of tradition are present: the Judge and the Crown. 'The Trial' follows the normative procedure in that the prosecutor intervenes in the first place and on behalf of the Crown: "The crown will plainly show", the second line of the song reads. However, the Counsel for the defence, who should speak next on behalf of the defendant, is never heard, as the Judge interrupts the proceedings to deliver his verdict and his sentence. The defendant's silence adds weight to the institutions of Justice and the Crown which are rescued from the past to incarnate and serve as the Nation's rebirth out of the ruins of present-day chaos.

In the film's last scene we see children in contemporary Britain collecting pieces of rubble from a wall that had collapsed because of a truck accident or, perhaps, because of a fascist raid. The setting evokes the ruins of post-war London through which adults walk seemingly unconcerned, ignoring the children and the rubble. It seems as if the past of the (post)-war and the historical present are fused in a space in which the heralds of a future social reconstruction are already at work.

Of course, the image of children collecting bricks and rubble could be interpreted in a negative key: signifying walls of isolation to be put up again as if British society were prey to some sort of inescapable fatalism. Yet, if we interpret the final scene by attending to the song that is about to be played on the soundtrack ('Outside the Wall'), then the whole appears to be pointing in the opposite direction towards the establishment of a happier and more humane society in the hands of those who have the future in their hands. Bricks to build homes, instead of walls of seclusion and desperation. The very limit of the cinematic narrative suggests the possibility of rebirth from within the ruins of the wall: children like brothers, a new generation liberated from alienation and oppression, or some hypothetical post-war generation that had taken a different road in history and journeyed through an alternative 'possible past'. In sum, a society in which love and justice prevail, thus substituting for that of the present envisioned in an apocalyptic fashion in the last song of *The Final Cut*, 'Two Suns in the Sunset': "Like the moment when your brakes lock/and you slide toward the big

truck/and stretch the frozen moments with your fear/and you'll never hear the voices/and you'll never see their faces/*you have no recourse to the law anymore*". (Emphasis added)²⁴

There is a traditional-conservative thread running through *The Wall* manifested principally in the nostalgia for the lost father as a part-whole figure of the British 'national ideal' and in the Crown and the Judge as unifying figures of authority and embodiments of the organic continuity of the essence of the nation. All these elements link *The Wall* politically with the line initiated by George Orwell during World War II in texts such as 'England Your England', where 'British' was subsumed under 'English', as used throughout this essay. In 'England Your England' the respect for the Law and for the authority figure of the incorruptible Judge are underscored as all-important identity traits of the British nation. Likewise the rejection of the totalitarian formula for the Britain of the future is explicitly expressed. However, the idealised post-war England envisioned by Orwell as developing from the germ of the light-industry areas evolved in *The Wall* into the post-Oedipal hell of the present.²⁵

The question still remains as to whether or not *The Wall* offers support to what it openly attacks. Does the final scene contain some seed of social change in any way? Or is it, rather, an escapist withdrawal into a mythic childhood realm of some kind that does not offer a real viable alternative but leaves things as they are? Have Waters and Parker, in the end, merely engaged in a useless exercise of wishful utopianism that distracts political action from its truly effective course? Or, is *The Wall* a constructive example of emancipatory political imagination that could contribute to stopping the maddening dance of the late-capitalist world and help bring about a better society in the future?

²⁴ Jenkins interprets 'The Trial' in a completely negative key. For him the judge's final sentence leaves the hero face to face with "the desolation of reality" and "appears to signify mental and physical annihilation, perhaps suicide, echoing the unravelling of civil society into a new barbarism" (1996: 209-210) Furthermore, Jenkins reaches a conclusion which, in our view, is only possible if one omits, as he does, any reference to the lyrics of 'Outside the Wall'. He states: "The film concludes with images of children picking their way through the detritus of a London riot in the 1980s, growing accustomed to the nights of rocks and gasoline bombs. The Wall is being built once more in a new generation of minds" (Jenkins 1996: 210). Later on in the essay, however, he admits the possibility of a more positive interpretation of the film's conclusion, but does not know how to account for it. He simply states: "The [film's] climax offers some ambiguity, as it is just possible to see the fall of Pink's barrier as a breakthrough to a new kind of liberation, free of past divisions; and this was naturally the meaning which was emphasized in the Berlin production" (Jenkins 1996: 211).

²⁵ The suburban dwellers of "labour-saving flats and council houses" gathered together "in the naked democracy of the swimming pools" do nevertheless preserve the national essence that stems from the past and is projected into the future like "a living creature" or "an everlasting animal" (Orwell 1962: 88, 65, 90). Orwell's use of the swimming pool as a positive symbol (related to democracy and naked humanity) turns into its opposite in *The Wall* (the swimming pool of a luxurious hotel where Christ-like Pink swims in agony in the blood of sacrificial father, of all those who had died in vain to build a better future). Moreover, we could say that Pink-as-postwar-England is drowning in the blood that English-identity-*qua*-living-organism has shed.

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Received 26 January 2006

Revised version received 26 September 2006