

From Bridges to Text: *Brooklyn Bridge*, Myth and Symbol, American/Cultural Studies

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At the peak of his narrative in *Brooklyn Bridge*, Alan Trachtenberg projects the text he has been considering all along, the bridge itself, onto its most mythic and idealized textual form, Hart Crane's poem, *The Bridge*. Trachtenberg states that "in no sense of the word is *The Bridge* a historical poem. Its mode is myth. It aims to overcome history, to abolish time and the autonomy of events, and to show that all events partake of an archetype."¹ Therein, so Trachtenberg tells us, lies the poet's failure. Trachtenberg argues that for Crane's poetic vision of the bridge to have succeeded, it would have had to "confirm myth while condemning the actuality of [its] culture," that it would have "required the bridge to rise above history—to rise above itself."² Trachtenberg states that for Crane's vision, "purity was essential; the bridge could harbor no ambiguities."³ By portraying the failure of Crane's attempt to elevate the bridge into the purely aesthetic, idealized, and mythic realm, Trachtenberg suggests that any such attempt will always be doomed, and, moreover, will be doomed precisely because the overcoming of history is never possible. He contends that "Hart Crane completed the passage of Brooklyn Bridge from fact to symbol," and then argues that the poet "refused to—or could not—acknowledge the social reality of his symbol, its concrete relations to culture."⁴ Trachtenberg implies that he has not made the same mistake himself. Rather, in *Brooklyn Bridge*, he recognizes that the bridge does in fact harbor ambiguities. He looks at the bridge and sees both history and myth—or, more specifically, he sees history's face behind mythology's mask. Furthermore, Trachtenberg identifies this history's ideological agenda behind its guise of archetype, an agenda that was essentially the imperialistic conquest of the

continent by and for capitalism, the nineteenth-century American “quest for a new world.”⁵

Trachtenberg’s *Brooklyn Bridge* was the last installment of the myth-and-symbol chapter in American studies scholarship,⁶ for shortly after its publication, the myth-and-symbol approach came under considerable critical fire as a result of the tumultuous cultural events of the late 1960s. As Giles Gunn states, one of the specific criticisms of the myth-and-symbol school was that it too often and too easily “turn[ed] the interdisciplinary study of what was distinctive about, or at least particular to, the civilization of the United States into a subtle interpretation of, even apology for, America’s . . . political and economic dominion.”⁷ Along these same lines, Gene Wise notes that during this period, many saw American studies in general and myth and symbol in particular as “an overly timid and elitist white Protestant male enterprise which tended to reinforce the dominant culture rather than critically analyze it.”⁸ We get a sense of the virulence of this criticism from Christopher Lasch, writing in 1968:

The defection of intellectuals from their true calling—critical thought—goes a long way toward explaining not only the poverty of political discussion but the intellectual bankruptcy of so much recent historical scholarship. The . . . vogue of a disembodied “history of ideas” divorced from consideration of class or other determinants of social organization; the obsession with “American studies” which perpetuates a nationalistic myth of American uniqueness—these things reflect the degree to which historians have become apologists, in effect, for American national power . . .⁹

Lasch expresses more than virulence, here, however. This statement also hints at the source of myth and symbol’s supposed error, its way of thinking that supposedly led practitioners of American studies and myth and symbol into “intellectual bankruptcy”—namely, what Lasch calls the “vogue” of “disembodied” ideas. Bruce Kuklick, in 1972, rooted out this source more directly: “American studies humanists make a strict dichotomy between consciousness and the world” and this, he stated, “is apparent in the intellectual history that (the field) has produced.”¹⁰ What Gunn and Wise document, and what Lasch and Kuklick express, is the view that the fundamental problem of the myth-and-symbol approach was that it was too epistemologically *idealist*, and that out of this faulty epistemology came its nationally chauvinistic political orientation. These and other critics claimed that myth-and-symbol studies tended to ignore material, historical factors in the cultural productions they studied, and claimed that this lack of materialist insight led to the reification and justification of dominant American ideology as somehow natural, transcendent, or universal. Even two prominent myth-and-symbol practitioners, Trachtenberg and Henry Nash Smith,

were themselves critical in later years of the over-emphasis of idealism detached from material determinants in myth-and-symbol studies.¹¹

Wise recalls that after the mid-1960s “students of America . . . turned away from airy myths and symbols” precisely because of their “airy” idealism, and effected a diaspora of scholarly endeavors that attempted to know more materially derived aspects of American culture, and that exploded the American studies field into far-flung and fragmented “subcultural” directions.¹² According to Wise, American studies has never recovered from these “earthquake-like jolts,” and has experienced an identity crisis ever since.¹³

All of this criticism against myth and symbol seems odd in light of what we already know about Trachtenberg’s book. Indeed, the brief analysis above seems to indicate that *Brooklyn Bridge* might be valued as much as a work of contemporary, critical cultural studies as it was a work of myth and symbol nearly thirty-five years ago. In this way the book seems very fresh, since American studies has been headed increasingly throughout the last twenty years or so toward a meeting place with cultural studies.¹⁴ Perhaps this freshness is an indication of a certain confluence between the two areas of scholarship, and a certain continuity between American studies old and new. It is the object of this paper to identify this confluence and to map some of its parameters, to show that myth and symbol in general, and *Brooklyn Bridge* in particular, are similar to contemporary cultural studies in a meaningful way that is empowering to both American studies and cultural studies. Moreover, this paper will attempt to show that the similarities between the two areas of scholarship “revive” the older myth-and-symbol approach by highlighting its contemporary relevance and by answering its critics—those quoted above—directly. Finally, this paper will argue that one result of this revival, this continuity between American studies past and present, may be a lessening of the field’s identity crisis.

Because the problem for myth and symbol, as its critics have seen it, is fundamentally epistemological, perhaps we should begin there. The crux of the debate in this matter hinges on the difference between two types of epistemologies—idealism and materialism. The idealist view claims that cultural production, including but not limited to art, literature, philosophy, and myth, has its foundation and receives its impetus from abstract intellectual concepts, which transcend political and socio-economic matters historically situated in time and space, and which access pure nature and ultimate truth. The materialist view, on the other hand, claims that cultural production has its foundation and receives its impetus from material contexts that are historically located in time and space and are firmly set within socio-political economy. Transcendent, natural truth is not possible within materialist epistemology.

It is at the level of this epistemological dichotomy that we see myth and symbol’s most fundamental overlap with cultural studies. Thinkers in the latter field, like the American studies critics of the myth-and-symbol school, have subjected idealist epistemology to a critique that argues that the transcendent

placement of cultural production masks and legitimizes the material forces of political agendas, while serving the interests of the dominant class. Jonathan Arac and Harriet Ritvo, for example, expose “the political functions of aesthetic containment,”¹⁵ while Fred Inglis states that “the invention of aesthetics as a special zone . . . of significance” is “the key tactical move” whereby the bourgeoisie mask and legitimize their own material “consumption” and “exclusiveness.”¹⁶ According to cultural studies critic Timothy Yates, working with the ideas of Jacques Derrida, “ideology is no longer masking or opaque, but [is] opened up . . . through the tension of the [idealized] structure upon which it is constructed.”¹⁷ And finally, Edward Said, turning his cultural studies critique of idealism to specific anti-imperialist ends, notes “the connection between the prolonged and sordid cruelty of practices such as slavery, colonialist and racial oppression, and imperial subjugation on the one hand, and the poetry, fiction, philosophy of the society that engages in these practices on the other.”¹⁸

However, as much as this body of cultural studies theory and scholarship subjects idealism to a materialist critique, these authors are not solely oriented toward a materialist view. A careful reading of these arguments reveals an epistemological orientation whereby ideal forces do in fact influence cultural production, and do so by influencing material forces, in that they allow the material to proceed about its business masked and legitimized, free to reproduce its own power again through idealized means. Hence we see a cyclical, even dialectical process. Indeed, these scholars and others have argued in support of a dialectical view of idealist and materialist interplay. Working from the Marxist tradition, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall have studied extensively the relationship between idealist and materialist forces in cultural production, and, casting the dichotomy in Marx’s terms of “superstructure” (for ideal forces) and “base” (for material), they have theorized a model whereby the two supposed opposites work in dialectical or oscillating fashion, each mutually constituting and constituted by the other.¹⁹

Significantly, many of those practitioners of American studies who have commented on or themselves utilized the myth-and-symbol approach share this dialectical understanding. Smith, Trachtenberg, and others, while critical of idealism, have also expressed dissatisfaction with a purely materialist understanding of American culture, and have called instead for scholarship that proceeds from the dialectical base/superstructure model. In his “Preface to the Twentieth Anniversary Printing” of *Virgin Land*, Smith amends his earlier, idealist orientation by stating that “there is a continuous dialectical interplay between the mind and its environment,”²⁰ while Trachtenberg, in an unpublished critique of Smith’s work, argues that the notion of two separate ideal and material planes is “too severely fixed and dualistic.”²¹ Furthermore, Giles Gunn, along with Allen Davis and Barry Shank, recognizes the dialectical base/superstructure process as an animating force in myth-and-symbol scholarship of the 1950s and 1960s, Smith’s earlier work notwithstanding.²² The intention of myth-and-

symbol practitioners, claims Gunn, “was to transcend the rather brittle distinctions then in use between social fact and aesthetic value.”²³ Gunn proceeds to identify the project of scholars such as Smith and Trachtenberg as

not simply to differentiate those events that are mental from those that are not but to clarify the way imaginative constructions contribute to the formation of social behavior and social experience colors the nature of the communal as well as the individual life of the imagination.²⁴

Thus, by Gunn’s argument, the myth-and-symbol work of these two scholars involves a model of materialist and idealist forces whereby neither has sole influence over the other. Moreover, the presence of the base/superstructure dialectic in American studies goes back even further: Gunn and Joel Pfister have located it as far back as F.O. Matthiessen’s seminal work in the 1930s and 1940s.²⁵ A careful look at these works, then, alongside those works from cultural studies mentioned above, yields striking epistemological similarities between the two fields, and, furthermore, should address specifically those critics who have accused myth and symbol of being overly idealist in orientation. Further still, these works also indicate at least a thread of epistemological continuity throughout the decades of American studies scholarship, from the 1930s to the present, a thread that may speak, albeit partially, to the field’s identity crisis.

Finding this shared epistemological orientation and this single thread of continuity does not, however, fulfill the aims of this paper in and of itself. In order to fully gauge the possibility of myth and symbol’s revival by way of the shared dialectical understanding—that is, in order to investigate if and why the similarities between myth and symbol and cultural studies *matter*—this paper must locate the specific implications of these similarities, the ways in which the coincidence of the idealist/materialist dialectic *empowers* the myth-and-symbol approach by allowing it to arrive at the powerful end result of cultural studies, specifically, *the critique of capitalist and imperialist ideology and hegemony*. This paper, then, will now assess some specific works from cultural studies in greater detail, most written by or about the work of Roland Barthes, another written by Edward Said. What all of these works have in common is that they operate upon the idealist/materialist dialectic in specific ways as a means of critiquing capitalism and imperialism. In the process of assessing these works, this paper will attempt to show that these critiques might also be achievable through myth and symbol in general, and *Brooklyn Bridge* in particular.

Barthes’ work is especially useful. In *Mythologies* (1972), he critiques the function of myth in twentieth-century capitalist societies, and sees that function as hegemonic, as a means by which the material, political ideologies of the dominant class hide themselves behind the mask of idealized myths.²⁶ By this masking, material forces legitimize themselves as they appear universal instead

of local, transcendent and natural instead of socially determined, and value-neutral instead of laden with political interest. In short, by the process that Barthes apprehends, cultural production appears mythic instead of historical. As archaeologist and Barthes commentator Bjornar Olsen states, “the very principle of the myth is that it [empties] reality of history and [fills] it with nature,”²⁷ and does so, says Barthes, because “history is not a good bourgeois.”²⁸ Thus Barthes evokes the model, reminiscent of our first encounter with Trachtenberg, whereby idealized myth hides material history and purely economic interests, and in the process legitimizes them, while allowing them to continue producing their own masking over and over again.

Barthes contributes further to an understanding of Trachtenberg’s confluence with cultural studies with his structuralist and poststructuralist theories of textuality, as elaborated in works such as *On Racine* (1964), *S/Z* (1975), *Image-Music-Text* (1977), and *The Rustle of Language* (1986). In these works, Barthes expands the definition of “text” to include nonverbal forms, and he argues that texts are both formed by and give form to both ideal and material forces. By Barthes’ model, a text is

a superimposed construction of skins (of layers, of levels, of systems), whose volume contains, finally, no heart, no core, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing but the very infinity of its envelopes—which envelope nothing other than the totality of its surfaces.²⁹

Barthes also refers to the text as “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture,”³⁰ and states that

[its] networks are many and interact, without any of them being able to surpass the rest, this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds, it has no beginning, it is reversible, we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively claimed to be the main one.³¹

What all of this means is that texts, verbal and non, do not have any transcendent, single, idealized meaning (no “heart” or “irreducible principle,” no “signified”). Rather, these passages indicate a view of the text as a site of “superimposed . . . systems,” some aspiring to the ideal and others strictly material, a view of the text as a site of multiple, sometimes blending, sometimes conflicting meanings (a “totality” of “surfaces,” a “tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture,” a “galaxy of signifiers” to which we gain access by “several entrances”). Simply put, the text is a site of *multiple realities*.

Furthermore, as Olsen argues, physical artifacts are even more suited to Barthesian textual analysis than verbal forms,³² precisely because of their easily recognizable practical and material as well as aesthetic “realities.” Here, Olsen

offers the explicit means by which we may view the Brooklyn Bridge as a text in the Barthesian sense. Moreover, Barthes' theories and Olsen's distillation of them also speak of the critical implications of such a view. As Olsen states:

The archaeological discipline aims at a closure of the troubling plurality of the past; it aims at an interpretation, fixing a meaning, finding a source . . . and an ending (the truth). It is interesting to ask why we do have this desire for the true signified of the past, and why we fear the pluralism of meaning as suggested by Barthes. . . . I think the answer is to be found . . . in the fear of losing power as privileged speakers of the past. . . . The desire for power in the present is masked as the desire for knowledge of the past.³³

What Olsen and Barthes suggest is that, by "reading" material artifacts such as the Brooklyn Bridge as a cluster of disparate and oscillating ideal and material meanings, the "reader" has recourse to exactly the kind of critical understanding that Barthes evinces in *Mythologies*, the means with which to see the material and political play of power in the guise of an idealized truth. Trachtenberg seems to have been exactly this kind of reader; moreover, he seems to have been so *a full decade in advance* of the critical developments signaled by Barthes' work. This in itself may indicate how wrong scholars like Lasch and Kuklick were to discredit the myth-and-symbol approach. Add to this the notion that the textual model constructed by Barthes and Olsen frees the reader from dependence upon any authoritative, univocal commentary on the text, and *our* reading of Trachtenberg's *book* as a text—a text about a text—gets out from under the authority of those American studies scholars who have dismissed myth-and-symbol works like Trachtenberg's as being too idealized.

Getting back to the matter of the bridge as text, the similarities between Trachtenberg's reading and Barthes' theories are many. Trachtenberg, sounding remarkably like Barthes would sound approximately a decade later, refers to the bridge as "a monument embodying the ambiguities of its culture,"³⁴ and as a site whose "reality was multiple."³⁵ Furthermore, he stresses that the bridge represented both a transcendent, purely aesthetic work of art as well as the pinnacle of functional engineering, an earthly solution to the earthly problems of its day. Trachtenberg is careful to describe the farthest extremes of both dichotomous poles, both in the bridge's social function and in the mind of its engineer, John Augustus Roebling.

Regarding the idealized, aesthetic components of the bridge, its two stone towers, Trachtenberg states that

Hegel had written: "Art frees the true meaning of appearances from the shadow and deception of this bad and transient world, and invests it with a higher reality and a more genuine being

then the things of ordinary life.” Roebling echoed this idea in his statement that the perception of beauty is the perception of universal harmony. If this is the case, a work of art must represent the “Great Mind”—must function as a symbol of the harmony it embodies. By this reasoning Roebling may have reached his decision to designate the monumentality of his bridge by one of the traditional emblems of man’s aspiration toward the divine: the Gothic arch.³⁶

Trachtenberg further states that “the arches unavoidably call attention to themselves as a form partly independent of the rest of the bridge. This may be, to a strict functionalist, a defect. But in Roebling’s mind it must have been a virtue.”³⁷ Indeed, Trachtenberg claims that to the engineer’s mind, these “independent forms” were not only gateways but “icons, bearing the motif of a gateway,”³⁸ and thus, the stone towers become the transcendent gothic incarnations of the Platonic ideal itself. Furthermore, the bridge’s towers were to “supply what the cities lacked, an emblem,” a visual structure that would symbolically establish “New York—Manhattan and Brooklyn—as the new center of the world.”³⁹

However, Trachtenberg just as readily provides insight into Roebling’s and the bridge’s functional, materialist sides. He states that “what Roebling observed was nothing less than America’s historical need for roads,”⁴⁰ and that the engineer “recognized the capitalist’s self-interest as the foremost cause of progress at that moment in history.”⁴¹ Trachtenberg also quotes Roebling’s prediction of the economic purposes the construction of his bridge would serve, once the Union Pacific Railroad, with its terminus in New York, was also completed:

[The] change will at first be very slow, but the breadth and depth of the new commercial channel will increase with every coming year, until at last the city of New York will have become the great commercial emporium, not of this continent only, but of the world.⁴²

Here, the bridge’s symbolic role, as seen above, finds its material counterpart. Trachtenberg also makes it very clear that one of the primary reasons the construction of the bridge gained support was that it would drive up real estate values in Brooklyn.⁴³ With his weaving together of aesthetic ideals and economic motivations, gothic archways and national systems of transportation, Trachtenberg portrays the bridge as the “fusion of two sets of values: the visionary . . . and the pecuniary.”⁴⁴

This “fusion,” this weaving together of the transcendent and the economic, indicates that Trachtenberg’s view of the bridge is not simply ambivalent—rather, it is dialectical. The two values do not work in opposition, but in synthesis. Trachtenberg states that in the years leading up to the construction of the bridge,

“economic growth did seem to have a visionary aspect,”⁴⁵ and that, regarding the mass-scale building of the nation’s transportation system, the popular view cloaked economic motives in a “rhetoric of myth.”⁴⁶ Thus, Trachtenberg’s feel for his subject matter sets a precedent for Barthes’ not only because of its dialectical nature, but also because both authors recognize, and are critical of, the fact that the ideal/material dialectic operative in their studies has capitalist ideology as its hidden value. It is here that Trachtenberg himself emerges as an early critic in the cultural studies vein, as it is here that, within *Brooklyn Bridge*, the idea of the transcontinental infrastructure, and the bridge’s part in it, comes into play as an essentially materialist project masked and legitimized by myth.

Trachtenberg states that in the years leading up to the construction of the bridge, “economic necessity had led to . . . vast transportation developments . . .,” but that to many, “roads fulfilled the fervent dreams of the West as a new Garden of Eden, as the long sought passage to the Orient. ‘Geographical predestination’ was an argument as persuasive as the needs of commerce.”⁴⁷ Trachtenberg also tells of Thomas Jefferson’s earlier belief that the building of national roadways would facilitate the independent, pastoral, agrarian lifestyle he held so dear, by providing the means for rural farmers to transport their produce to market.⁴⁸ For Jefferson, then, as well as for others, so Trachtenberg tells us, the building of the national infrastructure became the symbol for a return to nature, both literally and in its Edenic sense. Indeed, Trachtenberg fuses both of these mythic ideas about the road and about nature into one with his analysis of Walt Whitman’s “Passage to India,” in which he states that “the most striking feature of Whitman’s poem is its circular definition of progress. Progress is a ‘return’ to the past . . . to ‘reason’s early paradise’ and . . . ‘innocent institutions.’”⁴⁹ He states, moreover, that by Whitman’s view, industry, capitalism, and road building “were not ends in themselves”;⁵⁰ rather, they would lead to the new Eden in America’s virgin West, and would pave the road back to the East, so that Whitman the poet/prophet could lead America there, back to a pristine wholeness. Industry and capitalism, means instead of ends, “opened the way, in short, for the poet.”⁵¹

But Trachtenberg makes it clear, by his dialectical understanding, that it also worked the other way around. The poet made way for industrialism, for capitalism, for the linking of Atlantic and Pacific by the Union Pacific Railroad and the Brooklyn Bridge, precisely by cloaking these essentially acquisitive endeavors beneath the mantle of mythic national destiny. Thus, if Trachtenberg recognizes capitalist ideology as the ideal/material dialectic’s hidden value, he recognizes imperialist hegemony as its clandestine process. While Whitman’s “Passage to India” situated the poet in the expansionist tradition of Christopher Columbus, Trachtenberg states that the Brooklyn Bridge would eventually become that tradition’s “final link, the virtual completion of Columbus’s efforts,”⁵² the idealized physical analog to Whitman’s poem. Whereas Trachtenberg describes the poet’s work as “a quasi-religious vision of national destiny and fulfillment,”⁵³ he bases his own work on the recognition of “the paradox of . . . build[ing] roads

into the wilderness as a way to return to nature.”⁵⁴ He states that both Whitman’s poem and the analogous idealized bridge “led away from history.”⁵⁵ Trachtenberg himself, however, recognizes that the result of this poetry and this idea was precisely that it “brought history to the new world,”⁵⁶ and, furthermore, that it brought the history of material forces in the guise of ideal, the history of aggressive and imperialist nationalism behind a mask of an Edenic and mythic national destiny. Whereas Whitman dreamed of a road leading to Eden, Trachtenberg sees that where these roads really led was into other peoples’ lands, and his work in *Brooklyn Bridge* describes the process whereby the reality became masked by the myth. Trachtenberg employs an understanding of this dialectic to show how Whitman’s poetry idealized and made legitimate the theft of native and Mexican lands in nineteenth-century America, just as he implicates the mythic role of the Brooklyn Bridge in this endeavor.

Trachtenberg states in his epilogue to *Brooklyn Bridge* that “the basic motive of Crane’s poem was to redeem a bad history for the sake of a good myth.”⁵⁷ Edward Said, by comparison, selects a passage from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* to serve as his epigram for *Culture and Imperialism* (1993):

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking of it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only.

Trachtenberg also states that Crane’s doomed motive to redeem amounts to “a paradox no amount of rhetoric can deny: to secure its link with eternity, Crane had to abolish the bridge’s link with the opposite shores—to abolish exactly that which made it a bridge! To serve as America’s symbol it could no longer serve as Brooklyn’s bridge. Crane could not have it both ways.”⁵⁸ Said, again by comparison, states that “the supposed autonomy of works of art enjoins a kind of separation which, I think, imposes an uninteresting limitation that the works themselves resolutely will not make.”⁵⁹ Said also recognizes that

It is difficult to connect these different realms, to show the involvement of culture with expanding empires, to make observations about art that preserve its unique endowments and at the same time map its affiliations, but, I submit, we must attempt this, and set the art in the global, earthly context.⁶⁰

Trachtenberg, evidence indicates, would agree with this; furthermore, he has successfully endeavored to make these “difficult” connections with *Brooklyn Bridge*, to recognize that the bridge does not impose upon itself the “uninteresting limitations” that Said speaks of. Trachtenberg sets the “art” of the bridge precisely within its “global, earthly context.”

Again, in light of Trachtenberg's work, it seems odd that scholars such as Lasch and Kuklick would criticize myth and symbol for being overly idealist in orientation. Ironically, it seems that the criticism that they have leveled at myth and symbol, Trachtenberg levels at Hart Crane. Trachtenberg's work is much more than a criticism of Crane's epistemological leanings, however—it is more generally and more importantly a critique of the process whereby such leanings, commonly held, worked to legitimize nineteenth-century American capitalist expansion and imperialism. In this way *Brooklyn Bridge* functions as a work of cultural studies in the best critical tradition of that field. However, Trachtenberg's work belongs distinctly to American studies as well, because it chooses as the focus of its critique, not a piece of legislation and not a work of literature, but a bridge, an American cultural landmark, whose seemingly functional, aesthetic, and neutral structure emerges, through Trachtenberg's reading of its dialectical properties, as a text that served the ideological imperatives of its time. Trachtenberg's extra-disciplinary contribution to the critique of imperialism, to the project of cultural studies, is unique, and could only have come from an American studies myth-and-symbol sensibility.

Recognition of Trachtenberg's affiliations to both American studies and cultural studies holds singular promise for both fields. The connections made here impact the latter field by making available to it a body of texts for scholarly consideration hitherto unexplored. Cultural studies practitioners who are influenced by the work of Williams, Hall, Barthes, Said, and others might be highly inclined to pursue the avenues of American material culture via myth-and-symbol studies such as Trachtenberg's, and might, for the first time, harness these studies in the service of their various critiques of capitalism and imperialism. Furthermore, as Trachtenberg's anticipation of the views of critics like Barthes attests, practitioners of cultural studies might look back to myth and symbol and find there a nascent form of their own work; that is, perhaps cultural studies owes something of a debt to American myth and symbol. Also, as Jay Mechling argues, practitioners of American studies might help address what he sees as cultural studies' lack of complete applicability to an American context.⁶¹

Further still, the potential implications of the connections envisioned here are even more noteworthy for American studies. First of all, cultural studies imparts to the American field a heretofore untapped source of theoretical sophistication⁶²—in a sense, it lends French poststructuralism to Americanists who can use it. Even more significantly, cultural studies lends Americanists its end of radical critique. Barthes, Olsen, and Said have recognized the value of this critique as it identifies hegemony and levels hierarchized fields of power simply by unmasking them. In this way, cultural studies-style critique offers itself to a United States setting as a means of making a free society more free, an egalitarian culture more truly equal. Cultural studies pushes the envelope of democracy in a society such as ours, and for that reason those who practice American studies have much to gain by coming to terms with it.

This is not an original argument; however, what may be original here is the specific superimposition of a cultural studies sensibility onto a myth-and-symbol text. This paper has attempted to read *Brooklyn Bridge*, and the Brooklyn Bridge, in a new way, but also to show that this new way is really not very different from the old way, Trachtenberg's original writing and reading. As James Farrell points out, "there's still some myth and symbol in poststructuralism,"⁶³ just as there is certainly some Barthesian poststructuralism in myth and symbol. Or, as Farrell also states, "the 'new and improved' American studies are consistent in many ways with the old-fashioned American studies."⁶⁴ If this paper has been at all successful, the old myth-and-symbol approach may become revalidated by its confluence with—or even its anticipation of—contemporary, critically important cultural studies, in that myth and symbol may answer its critics who argue that it reifies American hegemony and ideology by showing, rather, that it subjects American hegemony and ideology to *critique*.

This addresses the matter of the identity crisis in American studies as well, since, as Gene Wise points out, that problem had its origin in the denunciation of myth and symbol thirty years ago. Furthermore, De Witt Douglas Kilgore argues that the identity crisis keeps its vitality by virtue of the ongoing struggles for and against the establishment of American studies as a formal academic discipline,⁶⁵ and this paper also addresses this aspect of the crisis. The connections between myth and symbol and cultural studies as outlined above may lead to a lessening in the identity crisis in three ways: first of all, the reassessment and revaluing of myth and symbol go back to the origin of the problem without doing so in a politically reactionary manner (and this leads to the next point); second, the adoption of cultural studies' means and ends of critique as outlined by the works of Barthes and Said, or the recognition that these means and ends are already shared, could go some distance in unifying American studies under the banner of an important and *progressive* political mission; third, the juncture of cultural studies and American studies does not subject either field to the possibly rigid limits of a formal discipline. Two interdisciplinary fields do not a discipline make,⁶⁶ a fact that should reassure those many American studies scholars who value the openness, indeed the idealist *and* materialist elements, of their field. The connection between myth and symbol and cultural studies suggests a model by which some sense of unity and identity may be gained without openness becoming compromised.

Those in American studies who note their field's current trend toward cultural studies, who envision this as their field's present and future but see nothing with which to connect this in their past, might find comfort here. So too might those who, like Mechling, accept the cultural studies paradigm but have certain reservations about its sensitivity to American cultural phenomena. Alan Trachtenberg's *Brooklyn Bridge* seems to address both of these concerns. This paper's reading of Trachtenberg seems to indicate that American studies might proceed boldly along with cultural studies into the future with a confident look

back to its own myth-and-symbol past. American studies may proceed with the kind of confidence it could only derive from a sense of its own outstanding critical and interdisciplinary tradition, a sense of its own more or less continuous identity, and the sense that it has something uniquely its own to contribute to a crucial critical project.

Notes

1. Alan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* (Chicago, 1965), 148.
2. *Ibid.*, 165.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, 167.
5. *Ibid.*, 148.
6. Giles Gunn, "American Studies as Cultural Criticism," in *The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture* (New York, 1987), 147-72; quote on 148.
7. *Ibid.*, 151.
8. Gene Wise, "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement," *American Quarterly* 31:3 (Bibliography Issue 1979): 293-337; quote on 312.
9. Christopher Lasch, "The Cultural Cold War: A Short History of the Congress for Cultural Freedom," in *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, ed. Barton J. Bernstein (New York, 1968), 322-59; quote on 323.
10. Bruce Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," *American Quarterly* 24 (October 1972): 435-50; quotes on 436 and 440-41.
11. Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York, 1982) and Henry Nash Smith, "Preface to the Twentieth Anniversary Printing" of *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge MA, 1970), vii-x.
12. Wise, "Paradigm Dramas" 314.
13. *Ibid.*
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15. Jonathan Arac and Harriet Ritvo, editors' introduction to *Macropolitics of Nineteenth-Century Literature: Nationalism, Exoticism, Imperialism* (Philadelphia, 1991): 1-11; quote on 3.
16. Fred Inglis, *Cultural Studies* (Cambridge Mass., 1993), 182.
17. Timothy Yates, "Jacques Derrida: 'There is Nothing Outside of the Text,'" in *Reading Material Culture*, ed. Christopher Tilley (Cambridge Mass., 1990): 206-80; quote on 249.
18. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993), xiii-xiv.
19. Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," *New Left Review* 82 (November-December 1973): 3-16; also Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and the Centre: Some Problematics and Problems," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79* (London, 1980); also Hall's "Marx's Theory of the Classes," in *Class and Class Structure*, ed. A. Hunt (London, 1977); and also his "Rethinking the Base/Superstructure Metaphor," in *Class, Hegemony, and Party*, ed. J. Bloomfield (London, 1976).
20. Smith, *Virgin Land*, viii.
21. Cited in *ibid.*, viii.
22. In addition to Gunn and Shank, see Allen Davis, "The Politics of American Studies," *American Quarterly* 42:3 (September 1990): 353-74.
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31. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. R. Miller (New York, 1975), 5.

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34. Trachtenberg *Brooklyn Bridge*, 89.
35. *Ibid.*, 67.
36. *Ibid.*, 80-81.
37. *Ibid.*, 84.
38. *Ibid.*, 85.
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45. *Ibid.*, 34.
46. *Ibid.*, 9.
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.*, 11.
49. *Ibid.*, 17.
50. *Ibid.*, 16.
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*, 76.
53. *Ibid.*, 15-16.
54. *Ibid.*, 169.
55. *Ibid.*, 16.
56. *Ibid.*, 17.
57. *Ibid.*, 167.
58. *Ibid.*, 168.
59. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 14.
60. *Ibid.*, 7.
61. Mechling, "Some [New] Elementary Axioms," 11, 14.
62. See Robert Sklar, "The Problem of an American Studies 'Philosophy': A Bibliography of New Direction," *American Quarterly* 27 (Summer 1975): 245-62.
63. James J. Farrell, "Some Elementary Questions for an American Cultural Studies: Response to Mechling and Kilgore," *American Studies* 38:2 (Summer 1997): 41-47; quote on 42.
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65. De Witt Douglas Kilgore, "Undisciplined Multiplicity: The Relevance of an American Cultural Studies," *American Studies* 38:2 (Summer 1997): 31-40.
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