

**Michael W. Clune, *American Literature and the Free Market, 1945-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 220pp. (Paperback edition 2015)**

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In *American Literature and the Free Market*, Michael W. Clune argues that there emerged in the period between 1945 and 2000 a genre called “the economic fiction,” or artwork that opened “a space in which market relations are set to work organizing experience” (4, 15). An example is William Gaddis’ *JR* (1974), in which the eleven-year-old title character constructs a financial empire over the telephone. From there, the discussion moves through Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963), Paul Thomas Anderson’s movie *There Will Be Blood* (2007), and texts by Frank O’Hara, William Burroughs and Kathy Acker, all of which, along with rap music, supposedly witness iterations of the “economic fiction” with which the book is concerned. For Clune, such works constitute aesthetic spaces in which inter-subjective relations based on visibility and recognition are conspicuous only by their absence, for the only relations present in the “economic fiction” are market relations. Indeed, Clune goes further, arguing that the “economic fiction” “turn[s] market forces into the structuring principle of subjectivity,” rendering all of a subject’s “experience and intentions” indistinct from an “awareness of market value” (25, 18).

Clune deploys an impressive range of supporting material in pursuit of this argument, including, on aesthetics, Heidegger and Adorno; and on politics and political economy, Polanyi, Arendt, Hayek, and Marx. It is upon Marx, for example, that Clune draws in a concluding chapter that answers the questions that hang over much of this book and ought to make it of particular interest to this special issue on economic inequality. Those questions concern the relation between Clune’s “economic fiction” and the market-dominated world that most of us now inhabit. The period that *American Literature and the Free Market* covers witnessed the entrenchment first of Keynesian liberalism and then, from the 1970s onwards, an epochal shift towards neoliberalism: a vision of markets increasingly liberated from the supposedly deleterious constraints imposed on them by the state. This shift has

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contributed in no small measure to the yawning inequalities of the present, and just how American literature has responded to the emergence of free market thinking has now become the subject of an important critical debate. So what of the “economic fiction”? Has it provided a site of ideological resistance to free-market thinking? Has it, perhaps, been complicit in it?

The answer is intriguing. For Clune, the “economic fiction” is not only *not* a site of ideological resistance; it appears to have no ideological function at all. In envisioning their spaces of pure market relations, *JR* and the other examples of the “economic fiction,” Clune claims, may create “a fascination with the market” but remain “unconcerned” with the “extremely unequal distribution of resources among individuals” that markets themselves create (148). To suppose that they were so concerned would be to ignore these works’ autonomous aesthetic condition, for “the economic fiction . . . is not a mimesis of actual economic conditions” (148). Apparently, then, these works neither serve the ideological interests of the system nor critique that system – and in an interesting rhetorical flourish, just what might be the “social effects” of “the economic fiction” is a question that Clune leaves literally (and strategically) unanswered in his book’s final sentence (164).

One wonders what to make of this. The argument is certainly original, traversing its way in and out of Clune’s chosen materials with epigrammatic aplomb. And some of the readings are impressive. The chapter on Acker, for example, skilfully compares the representation of blood and money in *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) with Hayek’s critique of monetarism as a form of state control. However, the simultaneous insistence that the works Clune discusses constitute an “economic fiction” but that that fiction neither reflects nor comments upon socio-economic conditions becomes more problematic the more one dwells on it. Can it really be the case, for example, that *JR* abandons “mimesis of actual economic conditions” altogether? Clune’s own reading of the text proposes that for all its postmodern experimentalism, Gaddis’ novel depicts a fictional “market” that “looks like a subject” (22). Yet does that fiction not look something like the “reality” that capitalism in its neoliberal configuration has been saddling us with since at least the 1970s? And do we not now, in fact, inhabit a world in which the market looks something like a subject?

Even if one wanted to hold the line on the unadulterated, non-representational aestheticism of some of these works, more convincing argumentation than Clune offers would be necessary. As it stands, we are asked to credit that these fictions function in the way Clune claims because Heideggerian aesthetics suggest that art “opens up a world for us” and constitutes “a way of organizing experience” (14). That in that world “the economic” becomes detached from “the social” is too often an assertion supported more by Clune’s confident insistence that it is the case than by any really compelling (con)textual evidence.

Consider the pressure placed on Frank O'Hara's treatment of "the economic." To the extent that he was an urban poet, O'Hara undoubtedly engaged with the commercial life of the city, but the twin invocations of "a subway" and "a record store" in O'Hara's "Meditations in an Emergency" are hardly sufficient support for the claim that, for O'Hara, "the distinctive feature of urban space. . . is the density of commerce" (61), especially if one is familiar with the rest of the poem, in which a far more complex view of urban life discloses itself than the one Clune proposes. The claim about O'Hara is important because Clune wants to explore similarities between the poet's sense of the role of commerce in urban space and that of Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), but here again, the use of Jacobs is reductive, condensing her nuanced critique of urban planning into a desire to see city streets "saturated with commerce" (60). In both cases—and, in fact, in several more besides—there is a privileging of parts over wholes, as complicating detail finds itself subordinated to the interests of the larger argument.

The cumulative effect of all this is to undermine what is already a rather convoluted argument until one begins to suspect that there might be something decidedly fictional about the "economic fiction" itself. At the very least, it is only fair to acknowledge that Clune repeatedly struggles to reconcile the heterogeneity of the works he discusses with his own argumentative construct of the "economic fiction." His texts, after all, are refreshingly different from one another, yet we are asked to believe that everything from Sylvia Plath to the entire "rap form" (141) constitutes a stage in the evolution of a distinctive fictional genre that he characterizes as "economic" but which itself represents not an engagement but an aesthetic disengagement from the shifting socio-economic conditions of more than half a century of U.S. history. One can certainly admire the panache with which Clune goes about his business here—and the confidence with which he shifts between literary, economic and theoretical material—but the overarching argument of the book never really convinces.