

A Sickness Called America—Thor Garcia's The News Clown by Jim Chaffee:

This is a coming of age novel. Its protagonist Thor ascends to manhood not by battling Don Cossacks, Bashkirs and Kazakhs along the Russian steppes like Pyotr Andreyich Grinyov or by following the way of the picaro as does Augie March during the Great Contraction, but instead as a cub reporter, pursuing his dream of ascension to literary lionhood from one of society's lower rungs, that of a news clown gathering actual events, the accounts of which are sold to the parasitic plagiarists known as the major media.

Thor's coming of age is not set against an adolescent nation establishing borders or growing through hard times to become a major power, but rather against a decaying and degenerate nation populated with inbred, narcissistic adolescents long past their second decades. A tapestry of a post-apocalyptic society whose debt-bound, clueless denizens are so anaesthetized from noise, shopping and drugs, prescription or otherwise, that they are unaware the calamity they fear as bogymen has already overtaken them. It is the United States of America, coast to coast third-world intellectual trailer park of violent, superstitious, uneducable functional illiterate turds-in-a-punch bowl, smoking ruin of an air-conditioned nightmare. The ambient background is portrayed through news articles, many written by Thor who exists in a limbo of squalor equivalent to Ferdinand, protagonist of the hilarious picaresque coming of age novel by Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Death on the Installment Plan*. However, unlike Ferdinand, Thor seems not angry and bitter but resigned to the senseless brutality of his fellow primates, which gives him as well a different approach to survival amongst them, more amenable to and inviting of their punishment from behind a veil woven of alcohol and other drugs.

Also unlike Grinyov, Thor does not save from marauding Cossacks a virginal blushing ingénue to whom he has professed love and who later returns the favor by saving him from false imprisonment. He does not even manage successful liaisons with a string of lovable dingbats as does Augie, and he never learns the secret of surviving the female human favored by Ferdinand, to strangle his dick rather than let it weep in yearning. Instead he falls for a wealthy, man-eating lawyer who collects testes. After emasculation, he becomes as bewitched as the crew of Ulysses by Circe, a pig never learning the lesson of Ferdinand: "Cock that wets will suck eggs. . . ." He does, however, gain enough sense to not repeat an encounter with a chubby, promiscuous tattooed and pierced Asian college student who, like his enchantress, has a predilection for dicks up her asshole but whose nates are infested with acne.

It is unfair to compare turn of the millennium America with 18th century Russia or with turn of 20th century France. Nor is Saul Bellow the one to honestly depict US social milieu, given he was after all a student of sociology and anthropology and hence wore a filter regarding the society of the human primate, a conceit that seems finally to be lifting from anthropology.

The reader will point to Gilbert Sorrentino, a more astute observer of modern human

behavior than Bellow, and to his novel *Steelwork*, the protagonist of which is a neighborhood of Brooklyn during the period 1935 through 1951 when America began its path to global empire, feudal corporate dominance of society and government with a citizenry in indebted servitude, and built a constant war culture around a mythical enemy from which the US is required as knight-errant to save the world. Perhaps this path was forged when the US conquered Western Europe by liberating it. After waiting for the Soviet Red Army to exhaust itself demolishing Hitler's military before invading against minimal resistance, intercession to prevent the Soviets from liberating Western Europe was a clever, though perhaps only fortuitous, move on the path to hegemony. Certainly the US had shown imperial ambitions for many decades, though it had previously exercised them locally, but more than half a century after the respite resulting from its Civil War the power of the US industrial juggernaut manifested itself by causing a global depression when its own financial and industrial base collapsed.

Awareness of this growing global financial power likely awakened the slumbering ogre. After the second world war, Hollywood promulgated the myth that the US defeated Hitler (no one speaks of the reality that the US and British allies faced four German divisions while the Soviets faced 140), cementing an unholy alliance of Hollywood as mythmaker for US government and corporate propaganda purposes, becoming a model for what was to follow: television, pop music, the internet, all major commercial media replacing education as socializing force and becoming commercial propaganda arm of the corporate fiefdoms interwoven within the fabric of government.

Moving into Western Europe after Hitler had been neutered and the Soviets heavily bled was a brilliant and bold stroke that has paid dividends as the US took advantage of the "iron curtain" and the "cold war" to create its first convenient dangerous enemy. Middle eastern terrorists are more of a stretch, though with the help of Hollywood and major news outlets the indebted consumer class (no longer really citizens in any meaningful way) are terrified and duped into submission. With this propaganda assist, the ragtag band of terrorists suffice to justify the money printing machine in the name of "small wars, big defense" as constant fiscal stimulus and jobs program, stepped up a notch by Reagan and institutionalized by Bush the Younger after his father had tried to rein it in by taking advantage of the so-called "peace dividend."

At any rate, Sorrentino approaches the portrait locally, studying the transformations of a neighborhood in Brooklyn with vignettes woven into a montage across time. Garcia presents his global study juxtaposing news stories against the quotidian existence of Thor the gatherer. The news grows more surreal as time elapses and events progress, but never becomes more outlandish than what appears literally in the US press on a daily basis. I cannot think of comparable bridges from the end of the Korean War and beginning of the so-called Cold War to the beginning of Garcia's narrative, but likely due to my ignorance. This is my own period, being a child of the "cold war" who served in Vietnam, was a GI Bill student in the 70s and worked in the jobs program otherwise known as the "defense" industry through the eighties and nineties. Many of the events around which Garcia builds his narrative have remained in my memory, given that I became a careful observer of events as reported versus as they happened, the discrepancy sometimes recounted in buried

retractions. I learned to be especially observant after surviving up close the reality behind bogus news reports while in Vietnam.

This was the period when the CIA began to run drugs into the US as part of national security, beginning with heroin in Vietnam. This continued with cocaine from Latin America during the Reagan presidency as a means of supplementing the clandestine income “earned” by selling weapons to “terrorist” nations like Iran as a means of funding the war in Nicaragua, legitimate funding for which had been cut off by Congress. CIA drug running becomes a major background story for Garcia documented by Thor’s friend, a crack investigative journalist who is destroyed with a smear campaign run by the *Washington Post*, *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* most likely managed by the CIA which (another news theme Garcia explores) had been planting agents within the major media for decades (remember Judith Miller who filled the *New York Times* with Bush administration lies and propaganda to support the ill-fated invasion of Iraq?). In the real world, Gary Webb’s livelihood as a journalist and his family life were destroyed exactly as Garcia recounts. Webb committed suicide with two gun shots to his brain, a fate worthy of a bearer of bad news in imperial Rome. It should be noted that in the case of Webb, the CIA later admitted to nearly all the crimes he uncovered and reported; the major media followed this partial admission with the obligatory late, buried stories after most of the few citizens who had paid attention forgot about it. The collateral damage was a crack cocaine infestation of mainly ghetto neighborhoods that some believed was intentional, though that would never be admitted if true. The fuller confessions of the CIA were made behind closed doors to special committees of Congress that published reports censored by the CIA after the committees negotiated with it what could be made public.

The news stories that establish the ambient field of background noise are akin to the excursions of a Brownian motion generated by a manic depressive skew Laplacian lurking unseen in the recesses of twisted fibers. Not an explicit thread woven into anything in particular except for the CIA drug running story, these excursions intrude nonetheless via the deterioration of Thor’s mental condition, especially after hooking up with the shark of a lawyer. They build the sort of flow of random coincidences one gets from taking too much acid. Thor sets out to drink himself to death, a true booze-head living in a worm-infested apartment in the heart of a ghetto, alienating most of the women he encounters if given enough time, spurning the rest, often beaten up and otherwise brutalized while somehow carrying more than his load at work and rising to byline level yet never realizing enough money to escape his environs, though it is not always clear he wants to escape.

This drinking is not the joyful rebelliousness of Hunter Thompson in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* while amidst the law enforcement convention as a reporter. Anyone who mistakes this joyless banging on the head with booze with Thompson’s drug excesses misses the point. It is brutalizing the self; bludgeoning consciousness, not enhancing it.

One of the striking differences between the time painted by Sorrentino and that of Garcia is the obsession with constant audio and visual noise as distraction from self in Garcia’s world. In Sorrentino, music is something mostly listened to, as in the introductory vignette when Charlie Parker’s *Koko* comes on as revelation. Television is not a factor. It seems quaint that

one character can disturb the quiet of a neighborhood by playing a tenor sax at the window of his apartment, rousing indignant calls to quit his adoration of first Lester Young and then Arnette Cobb. In Thor's world, no one would notice. People silence their thoughts with the dual bludgeon of blaring television and music, often simultaneous benumbing noises, while they imbibe alcohol along with other drugs. This behavior cuts across characters and is indicative of the present where one cannot escape pumped-in noise except in the home or by wearing silencing headphones. Americans hate to be alone with their thoughts. But then that is no wonder, given the dark place they inhabit.

This is a dark novel, though not painted as such. Less irascible than Celine, it nonetheless portrays a sick society. Sicker than what Celine presents, for certain, but then the world is sicker now than in Celine's day by any rational measure. The sickness festers in Thor, erupting again and again as he submits to brutality or even conjures it against himself. This is how it ends, in fact, with Thor daring more violence against himself even as his companions move away from him, seeing it coming.

In a single news article, Garcia captures the US as a society: "In tune with an increasingly mentally-ill society, America's leaders are demonstrably the most warmongering on the planet. They appear bent on a course of foreign policy blundering and fiscal mismanagement that is almost certain to lead to bankruptcy and the irreversible decline, if not total impoverishment, of the nation and its people. The US population, crippled by its mental illness and made impotent by conglomerate control of the mass media, appears incapable of offering any meaningful resistance when their politicians nonsensically announce the start of another overseas war in the 'interests of peace and free markets,' but which only serves to further endanger the future livelihood of the average American citizen."

Amen.