

This article was published as:

**James Annesley. Market Corrections: Jonathan Franzen and the "Novel of Globalization". *Journal of Modern Literature* 2006, 29(2), 111-128**

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2<sup>nd</sup> February 2005

Market corrections: Jonathan Franzen and the "novel of globalization"

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Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) makes a very deliberate attempt to locate its account of the Lambert family within defined social and economic contexts. There is the shift in American economic fortunes at the end of the twentieth century affected by the market correction alluded to in the novel's title. There are internet technologies and the force of the operating system developed by the all-conquering "W\_\_\_ Corporation" (not M for Microsoft on, one assumes, legal advice, but W for Windows instead). There is the transformation of post-Soviet states, particularly Lithuania, and the impact of new economy money on old economy infrastructure ("What survived of Midpac's trunk lines had been sold off to enable the company to concentrate on prison-building, prison management, gourmet coffee, financial services; a new 144 strand fiber-optic cable system lay buried in the railroad's old right-of-way").<sup>1</sup> There are observations on the ever-greater refinements of consumer society and an exploration into the potential of new and more powerful pharmaceuticals. Reflecting Franzen's stated commitment to the "social novel" and his belief in fiction's "cultural authority", *The Corrections* (2001) thus connects the private with the public and individual psychologies with material realities.<sup>2</sup>

Franzen does more, however, than simply project his characters onto a backdrop drawn from general views of contemporary society. Offering precise descriptions of a world shaped by international politics, new technologies, consumer economics and the free market, he sets out instead to link his portrait of the Lambert family with a vision of globalization's complex combination of forces. The familial and the domestic are thus known in relation to broader panoramas of global change. It is this approach that that encourages Susanne Rohr to read *The Corrections* as "a new form to the genre of the novel: the novel of globalization."<sup>3</sup> Franzen's desire to write a "social novel" has required, it seems, an engagement with the contexts and conditions of a globalizing world. The result is a novel so heavily embroidered with patterns and themes linked to global economics, consumerism and international politics that Rohr's position appears both convincing and

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002), p.177.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Franzen, "Perchance to dream: in the age of images, a reason to write novels", *Harper's* (April 1996), Vol.292.1751, pp.35-54, p.37; Jonathan Franzen, "The reader in exile", in *How to be Alone: Essays* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002), pp.164-178, p.178.

<sup>3</sup> Susanne Rohr, "'The tyranny of the probable' - crackpot realism and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*", *Amerikastudien/American Studies* (2004), Vol.49.1., pp.91-105, p.103.

un-contentious. Such a view is not, however, as unproblematic as it seems. The suggestion that *The Corrections* is a "novel of globalization" raises a whole host of questions about not only the ways in which Franzen's fiction is read and understood, but, on an even more fundamental level, the meaning of the term globalization itself.

By its very nature, the idea of globalization seems to defy easy definitions. Providing an explanatory context for phenomena as diverse as tourism, climate change, Jihadi terrorism, the power of international brands, mass migrations, the spread of the English language and the rise of trans-national media conglomerates, and understood as the product of intricately inter-related changes in the organisation of social, political and economic spheres that are in turn linked to technological developments, the danger is that globalization will find itself offering both a theory of everything and an explanation of nothing. Used in some contexts as the foundation for complex readings of the meaning of modernity in the contemporary period (Anthony Giddens and Arjun Appadurai) and/or imperialism (Nestor Garcia Canclini, Leslie Sklair, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri), and in others as a simple shorthand for a culture that can be characterised by cliched images of a child wearing a Chicago Bulls T-Shirt in a remote corner of the Amazon, there is little doubt that globalization is a concept that is porous, unstable and potentially overstretched.

Despite these concerns, it is still possible to identify a consensus. Though many have contested his conclusions, few would argue with, for example, the way Giddens frames the debate by suggesting that

Globalisation can [...] be defined as the intensification of world wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa. This is a dialectical process because most local happenings may move in an obverse direction from the very distanciated relations that shape them.<sup>4</sup>

The globalization thesis thus argues that a combination of "engines" or "drivers" linked to technology, economics and politics are creating a world that either is, or appears to be, ever smaller and more homogeneous.<sup>5</sup> Growth in patterns of investment that cross national

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<sup>4</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), p.64.

<sup>5</sup> David Held, *Global Covenant: The Social Democratic Alternative to the Washington Consensus* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p.3/4.

boundaries and a related reduction in the power and influence of the nation state produces, according to these accounts, a globalized market that in turn provides the fuel for the creation of increasingly internationalised forms of culture. It is these forms of culture that have become central to understandings of globalization's processes, processes that are, as commentators like Appadurai and Roland Robertson have emphasised, grounded not just in economic and infrastructural changes, but in transformations that affect the cultural representation and social perception of the world.

Beyond this point the debate becomes much more fractured. Arguments about, for example, the relative importance of different causal factors compete with discussions of the effects of particular changes and questions about the extent to which these changes can be said to have taken place at all. From all of these clashing perspectives it is, however, possible to draw one conclusion, namely, that the term globalization refers not to a stable, defined reality, but to a complex debate about social, political and economic processes in the contemporary period. With this in mind, the attempt to read *The Corrections* as a "novel of globalization" involves not a simple process of measuring the accuracy of its representation of the realities of globalization, but an analysis of the ways in which it engages with the globalization debate. Appadurai's emphasis on "*the imagination as a social process*" is thus fundamental to the analysis of the "novel of globalization".<sup>6</sup> As Thomas Peyser explains in his reading of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), "we need [...] to think about novels ... depicting a globalized world not simply because we can show that art is 'grounded' in social circumstances, but because novels themselves may have a crucial role to play in the very process of globalization."<sup>7</sup> The extent to which *The Corrections* can be read as a "novel of globalization" thus depends, not on the suggestion that the text can be said to reflect known conditions, but on an analysis of the extent to which it adds to knowledge about and understanding of the discourses and debates around globalization.

In general terms, *The Corrections* offers a critical image of contemporary social and economic conditions. Malign, inhuman and corrupting, globalization is seen as a destructive force. With Chip the focus for many of his insights, Franzen includes comment upon the comic

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<sup>6</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.31.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Peyser, "Globalization in America: the case of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*", *Clio* (1996), Vol.25.3, pp.255-71, p.256.

excesses of a Grand Street food emporium ("The Nightmare of Consumption") which offers "Everything - for a price!" and the disastrous impact of capitalist enterprise on the life of Lithuania's citizenry.<sup>8</sup> Working for Gitanas' "Free Market Party" and practicing wire fraud on American investors, Chip's experiences in Lithuania teach him that "the more patently satirical the promises, the lustier the influx of American capital."<sup>9</sup> This is a time in which the market holds absolute sway, a world in which, as Franzen observes of the penniless Chip, "without money he was hardly a man."<sup>10</sup> In these and many other similar episodes, Franzen conjures a dark, satirical portrait of the impact of consumerism and economic liberalism across the globe.

These straightforwardly critical perspectives are supported by a sense of the networks and circuits of complicity and responsibility that characterise contemporary society. This complexity is exemplified by the relationships different characters have with The W\_\_\_ Corporation. Having shown Chip pillorying their advertising in his class on "The Consuming Narrative", the novel then describes Billy Passafaro's violent, politically-motivated assault on Rick Flamburg, the W\_\_\_ Corporation's "corporate-image vice president", an attack prompted by the corporation's donation of free desktops and operating systems to all of Philadelphia's schools in return for the "exclusive right to employ for promotional and advertising purposes all classroom activities within the school district."<sup>11</sup> This situation is complicated by the fact that Billy's sister, Robin, finds herself married to Brian, a man who has sold a piece of music software to the W\_\_\_ Corporation for \$19,500,000.00.<sup>12</sup> With this money, Brian is able to finance the launch of a new restaurant, The Generator. Employing Denise Lambert as his head chef, he both enhances her professional status and furnishes her with a salary large enough for her to provide financial support for Chip, her now unemployed brother, the man who once mocked the W\_\_\_ Corporation in the seminars he ran at his Connecticut College.

A similar circuit of associations surrounds the role of the Axon Corporation in the novel. Alfred's patent is bought by Axon and used in the Corecktall Process, a treatment that may, the Lamberts believe, cure his growing mental disorder. These relationships are complicated by Gary's intervention. Believing that Axon are paying too little for his father's patent, he tries to stall the sale and raise the price. Part of his bargaining involves an attempt to have his father included in clinical testing for the Corecktall Process as a form of recompense for

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<sup>8</sup> Franzen, *The Corrections*, p.107.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.505.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.121.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.45; p.396; p.397.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.401.

what he sees as the miserly price they are offering for his patent, a suggestion that he tries to sell to Axon on the basis that it offers a marketable human interest story. While conducting these negotiations, Gary is also using the information he has gained about Axon's prospects as justification for a series of heavy investment in their stock. "To Gary the fact that the company had bothered to buy his father's patent at such an early stage on Corecktall's development was sign of great corporate confidence. He saw an opportunity here to make some money and avenge Axon's screwing of his father and more generally, be *bold* where Alfred had been *timid*."<sup>13</sup> In the end, however, not only is Alfred both forced to accept \$5,000.00 for his patent and identified as an unsuitable candidate for the free clinical trial of the Corecktall Process, but Gary's heavy investment in Axon proves unsuccessful as the stock slumps in the market slide. The search for a cure Alfred's mental disorder, or the desire to finally see the rest of his family compensated for the domestic costs incurred as a result of his dedication to chemistry is denied, and even Gary's pursuit of financial gain comes to nothing as the market adjusts. In this part of the novel, the search for corrections leads nowhere.

In terms that owe a debt to the intricacies that characterise the fiction of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, *The Corrections* thus uses these complex sets of inter-relationships to create a portrait of the all-pervasive and pernicious influence of the modern corporation. Reaching into all areas of contemporary life and capable of integrating and co-opting in subtle and often unseen ways, these corporations operate in terms that seem to shadow the kinds of arguments that Naomi Klein offers in *No Logo*, a book that suggests "logos, by the force of ubiquity, have become the closest thing we have to an international language [...] [a] select group of corporate Goliaths [...] have gathered to form our de facto global government."<sup>14</sup> These are views shared by many of Klein's fellow critics of contemporary capitalism. George Monbiot, for example, argues that "the world's biggest companies have chosen a new route to growth: consolidation. By engineering a single, 'homogenized', global market in which they can sell the same product under the same conditions anywhere on earth."<sup>15</sup> Clearly Franzen's representations of corporations and his sense of their power to assimilate and control can be connected with this reading of contemporary social conditions. Like Klein and Monbiot, *The Corrections*

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.217.

<sup>14</sup> Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), p.xx/xxi.

<sup>15</sup> George Monbiot, *Captive State: the Corporate Takeover of Britain* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p.9.

presents a world increasingly colonised and co-opted by the power of commerce.

The novel's critique of corporations can be linked to its tendency to represent relationships between individual psychology and economics in terms that suggest that even these areas of personal experience are increasingly finding themselves coordinated and controlled. The moods and attitudes of many of his characters are often described in terms that rely on financial metaphors. After spending the night with one of his students, for example, Franzen describes Chip's awakening as follows: "In a matter of seconds, like a market inundated by a wave of panic selling, he was plunged into consciousness."<sup>16</sup> In Gary's case, Franzen's fiscal language focuses on his mounting depression and his relationship with Caroline. Looking to cheer himself up, Gary heads for the liquor cabinet, thinking, "*What this stagnating economy needs, thought Federal Reserve Board Chairman, Gary R. Lambert, is a massive infusion of Bombay Sapphire Gin.*"<sup>17</sup> Franzen uses the same kind of approach to describe his marriage, observing of their dispute over Christmas with Gary's parents in the Midwest, that "the till of their marriage no longer contained sufficient funds of love and goodwill to cover the emotional costs that going to St. Jude entailed for Caroline."<sup>18</sup> Enid's guardianship of the failing of Albert also prompts Franzen towards metaphors of boom and bust. Sitting at a dinner party with friends so preoccupied by the condition of their stock portfolios that one of them, Joe, calls "three different brokers from the restaurant", Franzen suggests that Enid "was the same way with Alfred; painfully attuned to every hopeful upswing, forever fearful of a crash."<sup>19</sup> The cumulative effect of these observations, and of the many similar moments in the text, is to reinforce Franzen's sense of the inter-relationships between private life and wider social and economic forces. In these details, the individual's sense of self reads like a balance sheet. So powerful, it seems, are the forces of global coordination and incorporation that even the interior world of the individual is subject to the logic of the market. Similar perspectives on the influence of the corporation and on the relationship between commerce and private lives inform Franzen's work in his earlier novels *The 27<sup>th</sup> City* (1988) and *Strong Motion* (1992).

Set in St. Louis, Franzen's hometown, *The 27<sup>th</sup> City* pits Martin Probst, an honest and upstanding real estate developer, against the forces of corporate and political corruption that are taking hold in

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<sup>16</sup> Franzen, *The Corrections*, p.66.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.186.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.222.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.544.

city hall. Led by a new police chief, S. Jammu, a woman hired on the strength of her work as a Bombay police official, the conspiracy, rooted in an awkward mixture of capitalist greed and socialist politics, starts to threaten both the body politic and the lives of St. Louis's citizenry. Focusing on these events, *The 27<sup>th</sup> City*, Franzen's first novel, thus offers a critical exploration of the effects "free enterprise" and privatisation on the public sphere and introduces concerns that prefigure those developed in *The Corrections*.<sup>20</sup> The fact that the novel links these themes to a plot that trades on the social and economic relationships between the United States and India strengthens this parallel and offers early evidence of Franzen's interest in globalization. This preoccupation with corruption and corporate power is even more obviously articulated in *Strong Motion*.

Jack Kernaghan's work with the chemical company Sweeting-Aldren and the intricacies of his \$22,000,000 legacy link the different strands of *Strong Motion* together. Kernaghan's will allows Franzen to establish the connections between plate-tectonics, environmentalism, Louis' relationship with Renée and the tensions within the Holland family. In terms that prefigure the function of the W\_\_\_ Corporation, Axon and Orfic Midland in *The Corrections*, Franzen establishes the money generated by Sweeting-Aldren as the axis around which the rest of the events in the novel revolve. Underneath the strong motions felt by all of the novel's different characters (whether love, the shaking of the earth, or the turbulence of family life) is the irresistible gravitational force of the corporation's stock. Using the will as a Dickensian device thus not only gives Franzen a way of bringing these different themes together, but also creates a structure in which economic realities are seen to shape and determine all areas of social experience. It is through the novel's reading of the impact of the profit motive on the environment, and indeed the fundamental geological fabric of the planet itself, that these positions find their most potent evocation. Finding their fullest evocation in Bob Holland's epic account of the environmental destruction of America, this reading of the relationship between nature and business becomes the touchstone for the novel's critique of capitalism.

Like Herman Melville and Henry David Thoreau before him, Holland, a professor of history, sees the rapid consumption of America's astonishing abundance by European settlers "for the sake of short-term profit or convenience" as the sign of the malignant influence of commerce.<sup>21</sup> With his radical eco-consciousness fuelled by a rigorously

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<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Franzen, *The 27<sup>th</sup> City* (1988) (London: Macmillan, 1991), p.13.

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Franzen, *Strong Motion* (New York: Picador USA, 1992), p.380.

materialist reading of economic history, Holland analyses the individual's relationship with the environment in the following terms:

It takes a long time to build a house from nothing; it takes a lot of calories to transport yourself from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. Even if you're not rich, you're living in the red. Indebted to Malaysian textile workers and Korean circuit assemblers [...] Indebted to a bank, indebted to the earth from which you've withdrawn oil and coal and natural gas that no one can ever put back [...] Indebted to the grandchildren who'll be paying for your conveniences when you're dead; who'll be living six to a room [...] and knowing, like you don't how long it takes to get from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh when you're living in the black.<sup>22</sup>

Once again it is the metaphors of profit and loss, "red" and "black", that inform this reading of the relationship between the priorities of business and the condition of the environment, an approach that enables Holland to establish chains of responsibility that connect contemporary conditions back to the first contacts between Europe and America.

Having made an effort to restore his own garden to a pristine wilderness state by planting white pine trees on the lawn and encouraging it to "regress into the Illinois prairie that had predated ... the arrival of the Europeans", the feeling is that Franzen is using humour to distance himself from Holland's critique of American capitalism. There is, however, a more general impression that despite the hyperbolic nature of Holland's attitudes and behaviour, Franzen is deeply sympathetic with his view of the world. In the long description of Sweeting-Aldren's corporate malfeasance that follows Bob Holland's eco-history of American capitalism, a section in which Franzen's writing has a wide-ranging energy and force that is missing from other parts of the novel, *Strong Motion* both echoes Professor Holland's approach and mirrors his arguments by describing how Sweeting-Aldren's willingness to privilege profit over public duty sacrifices the safety not just of Boston, but of, perhaps rather implausibly, the geological fabric of the whole planet. Franzen writes:

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.382. Franzen's acknowledgements note the debt he owes to William Cronon's book *Changes in the Land* (1983). See, for example, William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), p.170: "The transition to capitalism alienated the products of the land as much as the products of human labor, and so transformed natural communities as profoundly as it did human ones. By integrating New England eco-systems into an ultimately global capitalist economy, colonists and Indians together began a dynamic process of ecological change that had in no way ended by 1800."

Sweeting-Aldren's M Line [...] was operating at capacity, the U.S. armed forces having discovered hundreds of thousands of square miles of South-east Asian jungle in urgent need of defoliation. It took the rest of the industry four years to catch up with demand, and in the interim Sweeting-Aldren never saw earnings growth of less than 35 percent annually.<sup>23</sup>

Identifying the connections that link Sweeting-Aldren's malpractice with processes of environmental destruction so severe that they lead in the end to shifts in the earth's mantle, Franzen thus creates a vision of a sweeping apocalypse that has its origins in human greed. The 71 deaths and 1,300 injuries that result from the earthquake caused by their illegal waste management practices are thus signs of the failure both of this particular company and of American business itself. Capitalism, *Strong Motion* suggests, is a malign force with incalculable destructive power.

These views, developed in *The 27<sup>th</sup> City*, vigorously articulated in *Strong Motion* and central to the vision of contemporary society constructed in *The Corrections*, also have a powerful presence in many of Franzen's essays and articles. In "Scavenging", for example, he celebrates his stubborn reliance on what he calls a "whole dysfunctional family of obsolete machines" and builds this point into a broader critique of the processes of built-in obsolescence that drive consumption.<sup>24</sup> Connected with these priorities are the ideas raised in "I'll be doing more of the same", an essay in which Franzen offers an explicit critique of technology and modern society and asks, "Who wants to look to the future when every laptop-toting junior exec is looking to it and angling for his share of the profit? What self-respecting artist in Germany in 1935 was interested in celebrating the really fascinating changes that were sweeping German culture?"<sup>25</sup> Gesturing towards what he identifies as a kind of corporate-sponsored techno-fascism, he locates himself in direct opposition to these processes. Shadowing the themes developed in his novels, Franzen thus develops his contempt for consumption and his critique of the social realities created by a globalizing consumer culture.

Such positions are not, however, without their contradictions. As far, for example, as "Scavenging" is concerned, the enthusiasm for older

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<sup>23</sup> Franzen, *Strong Motion*, p.393/394.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Franzen, "Scavenging", *Tolstoy's Dictaphone: Technology and the Muse*, Ed. Sven Birkerts (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1996), pp.3-15, p.4.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Franzen, "I'll be doing more of the same", *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (1996), Vol.16.1, pp.35-38, p.38.

forms of technology may seem like an assault on consumer capitalism but is in the end the expression of a desire that is actually continuous with the forces of consumerism. Not only is Franzen still reliant on machines, but in choosing a form of conspicuous abstinence he actually reaffirms one of consumer society's central principles - that identity is a function of the ownership of specific products. Underlining the power of choice and echoing the belief that goods provide a route to self-definition, Franzen thus finds himself strengthening the foundations upon which consumer society rests even as he is trying to attack them. Further evidence of Franzen's contradictory relationship with consumer society and the market can be found in the controversy generated by his response to an invitation to join Oprah Winfrey's Book Club.

Having initially accepted her offer and begun to participate in the making of the show, Franzen made a series of disparaging remarks about Winfrey's role in the American literary scene that led to the withdrawal of her invitation.<sup>26</sup> The focus of Franzen's criticisms lay in a belief that Winfrey tended to sponsor books that were not sufficiently high-brow (and thus implying that his association with her would dilute the putative seriousness of his own novel), and that his participation would involve a form of corporate co-option that would compromise the efficacy of his social message. What makes Franzen's objections so interesting is the wholly contradictory nature of his attitude, an attitude that offers revealing insight into both his own understanding of his place the literary marketplace and his wider reading of consumer society as a whole.

The most obviously inconsistent note sounded in his response to Winfrey can be heard in the tension between Franzen's own sense of himself as a writer of serious Literature and the easy readability of the folksy family saga he has produced, a novel that would seem to make an ideal addition to the tales of love, loss, struggle and redemption so often favoured by Oprah's Book Club. Despite the author's claims, *The Corrections* is not a complex or aesthetically innovative work of literature, but a fairly conventional novel that features a whole range of stock characters and situations (like, for example, the Christmas reunion, a college professor's illicit liaison with a student,

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<sup>26</sup> Franzen's own account of these experiences can be found in his essay "Meet me in St. Louis", *How to be Alone*, pp.258-274, p.272: "I'll experience the bodily discomfort I felt when we were turning my father's oak tree into schmaltz, and I'll complain about the Book Club logo [...] I conflate 'high modern' and 'art fiction' and use the term 'high art' to describe the importance of Proust and Kafka and Faulkner to my writing. I'll get into trouble for this too. Winfrey will disinvite me from her show because I seem 'conflicted'. I'll be reviled from coast to coast by outraged populists."

gangsterism in the former Soviet Union and the mid-life despair a wealthy corporation man). The "easy journalism" of Franzen's straightforward prose is equally unchallenging.<sup>27</sup> There is little experimentation and nothing in the ways in which it cuts between descriptions of moments from the lives of each of its five central characters that would be out of place in any mass-market paperback or even a TV mini series. In this context, Franzen's sense of his own elite status as a creator of literature betrays a strange lack of insight into the nature of his own work.<sup>28</sup>

These anxieties can be connected with Franzen's enduring anxiety about the relationship between art and commerce. Turning away from the financial rewards that would have followed an appearance on Winfrey's show, Franzen chooses to identify himself as a romantic artist, rather than a worker or a producer. The problem is, however, as Thomas Edwards suggests:

He thinks he's protesting the contamination of serious art by commerciality: surely the seal of her club, if added to the jacket of *The Corrections*, would constitute an advertisement for her TV show and what he calls the 'corporate ownership standing behind it'. But corporate ownership already stands behind any commercially published book, high or low, and no publisher withholds its own name from the jacket; Franzen's publisher is in fact a division of an international conglomerate.<sup>29</sup>

Unable to recognise the nature of the commercial relationship he has with Verlagsgruppe Georg von Holtzbrinck, owners of a controlling stake in Franzen's publishers, Farrar Straus and Giroux, and determined to identify his novel as a form of culture that is somehow resistant to commerce, his response to Winfrey's invitation is thus confused. It is, in these terms, easy to see why James Wood suggests that "Franzen partly has himself to blame for the idiocy of his coverage."<sup>30</sup>

This "idiocy" seems to have its origins in Franzen's belief in a distinction between literature and other forms of contemporary culture that rests upon a conviction that the novel is superior because it stands outside the market. He writes:

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<sup>27</sup> James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the novel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), p.201.

<sup>28</sup> Cf., Christopher Ribbat, "Handling the media, surviving *The Corrections*: Jonathan Franzen and the fate of the author", *Amerikastudien/American Studies* (2002), Vol.47.4, pp.555-566.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Edwards, "Oprah's Choice", *Raritan* (2002), Vol.21.4, pp.75-86, p.77.

<sup>30</sup> Wood, *The Irresponsible Self*, p.197.

The consumer economy loves a product that sells at a premium, wears out quickly or is susceptible to regular improvement. And offers with each improvement some marginal gain in usefulness. To an economy like this, news that stays news is not merely an inferior product; it's an *antithetical* product. A classic work of literature is inexpensive, infinitely reusable, and worst of all, unimprovable.<sup>31</sup>

Not only does Franzen see the novel as a kind of non-product, he adds to this suggestion with the argument that reading is a leisure activity that is itself both somehow incompatible with the processes of consumption and at the same time constantly threatened by the "rising waters" of a consumer society that has "flooded the basements and kitchens of that hard core of readers on which we writers placed our last desperate hopes, and the culture's oily pools are gliding slickly across the bedroom floor, rising up around the bed."<sup>32</sup> Dangerous and corrosive, Franzen thus portrays consumer culture as a broken sewer polluting the minds of delicate readers. Based, in part on the flawed assumption that fiction from an earlier age was somehow untouched by market forces, it is his opinion that the modern period is characterised by a uniquely invasive form of commercial co-option, more invasive, it seems than the commercial pressures that saw pages of advertisements included alongside the text of the first serial edition of a novel like, for example, Charles Dicken's *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857).<sup>33</sup>

Motivated by an ingrained contempt for the market and consumer culture, particularly the poisonous "gas" produced by television, Franzen's views are thus dependent upon value judgements and the naïve sense that the novel is not a commodity. Unable to recognise the place his fiction has in the globalized terrains of the contemporary media and refusing to accept that, as a writer, he is both contributing to the production of media texts and benefiting from their dissemination and consumption, Franzen displays a strange lack of awareness. The very fact that the controversy generated by his dealings with Winfrey provoked a brief flurry of media interest that promoted his book in ways that possibly equalled (if not eclipsed) the publicity that would have been created had he actually appeared on Oprah's Book Club adds an additionally ironic dimension to his position. Creating a marketable context for his work and prompting specific forms of reception, the events surrounding the publication of *The Corrections* thus seem to

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<sup>31</sup> Franzen, "Perchance to dream", p.39.

<sup>32</sup> Franzen, "Scavenging", p.9.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Charles Dicken, *Little Dorrit* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1855-1857), Vols 1-19.

provide an explicit demonstration of both the depth of the author's relationship with globalized forms of the contemporary media and the extent to which these structures shape and condition the kinds of responses that greet his or her work. In this context, despite being a media figure and a man who works in the production of forms of international media, it seems particularly strange that only Franzen himself seems unable to grasp the implications this brush with notoriety raises for understandings of fiction's relationship with publishing, the media and globalization. Though interesting in themselves, it is the ways in which these attitudes can be seen to spill over into Franzen's fiction in terms that compromise the "social reportage" offered in his novels that makes them even more significant.<sup>34</sup> The process of identifying the inconsistencies that dog both Franzen's essays and his public profile thus becomes the starting point for a more critical analysis of the representation of consumer culture and globalization in his fiction. As the following discussion will suggest, the presence of these contradictions in *The Corrections* weakens its portrait of contemporary society, restricts its "social" ambitions and raises questions about the extent to which it can be read as a "novel of globalization".

Franzen's desire to create a text that traces the ways in which the contexts of globalizing consumer society inform all areas of social life finds its most obvious expression in the different uses of his title. Like "strong motion", a phrase with a wide variety of different meanings in Franzen's earlier novel (including the movement of tectonic plates, the power of money and the force of emotional and sexual attraction), the idea of "the corrections" can be interpreted in a large number of different ways. Not only does the phrase link together many of the novel's major concerns (the dream of healing mental illness through the use of the Corecktall Process, transformations and developments made by different members of the Lambert family [particularly Edith] and, most significantly as far as this discussion is concerned, "the market correction" at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century), it also applies to a whole host of other details in the text.<sup>35</sup> The "correction" Chip imagines he needs to make to his film script, the correctional process that will see the execution of Khellye Withers for the murder of Sylvia Roth's daughter (a story prefigured in the young Gary's Popsicle stick model of the electric chair and the presence of a facility belonging to the Connecticut State Department of Corrections across the river from Chip's

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<sup>34</sup> Franzen, 'Perchance to dream', p.42.

<sup>35</sup> Franzen, *The Corrections*, p.216; p.653; p.647.

college), and the sense that Denise offers her parents "a last opportunity to learn from one's mistakes and make corrections", all serve to complicate and deepen the reader's understanding of the meaning of Franzen's title.<sup>36</sup> Creating these relationships, Franzen thus creates an organisational framework for his action, a structure that seems to suggest that everything involves a correction of one form or another. Networks and linkages of different forces operating outside the apprehension and control of individual members of the Lambert family, are these patterns of associations suggest, seen to give shape and direction to their lives. The result is a novel that uses these patterns of coordination and inter-relationship to gesture towards the existence of defined and defining networks of material relations, patterns that can in turn be aligned with the kind of homogenising and coordinating structures that are, for many commentators, characteristic of globalization. Corrections operating on a global scale are thus seen to determine the local experience of individuals.

In this respect Franzen's approach seems to shadow the reading Anthony Giddens offers when, as earlier parts of this discussion have suggested, he identifies globalization as "the intensification of world wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa". Linking "distant localities" (like St. Jude and Vilnius) and suggesting that "local happenings" (particularly the domestic events in the Lambert family) are "shaped" by larger forces (technological change and the market correction), there is clear a sense that Franzen's structure and the ways in which he uses the word "correction" can be related to accounts of the globalization thesis offered by a commentator like Giddens. Exposing the complex processes of incorporation that define contemporary experience and the determining power of the world market, the relationships Franzen creates are thus interpreted as part of his wider desire to produce a social novel and, by implication, to engage with the conditions of globalization. The concern is, however, that Franzen's design is too dense, weighty and convoluted to achieve its goals. This is the point James Wood makes when he criticises the "tentacular ambition" of this attempt "to pin down an entire writhing culture", a critique that raises important questions about the nature of Franzen's social novel.<sup>37</sup>

Suggesting that its grand social, political and economic themes sit awkwardly alongside the human story of Alfred and his family, Wood is unconvinced that the Lamberts' "inner corrections are akin to the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.119; p.347; p.315; p.323.

<sup>37</sup> Wood, *The Irresponsible Self*, p.201.

economy's, or to the society's".<sup>38</sup> Probing at the heart of Franzen's overarching scheme, he argues that the framework is too insubstantial to sustain its global ambitions. Instead of a fully convincing account of an increasingly integrated social realm defined by different forms of correction, Franzen offers play on words, a pun too flimsy for the task in hand. Related to this position is Wood's suggestion that a "novel that 'engages with the culture' is one that tells the culture things that culture already knows."<sup>39</sup> Arguing that such a project produces a kind of circularity and implying that the social novel offers what is in effect an inferior expression of ideas that are more properly understood through approaches based in the discourses of, for example, sociology, politics and economics, Wood concludes that *The Corrections* sails "a glass-bottomed boat" through contemporary America.<sup>40</sup>

Damning as these comments are, the most concerning thing for Franzen is not the ferocity of Wood's criticism, but the fact that *The Corrections* seems to deserve such a response. Featuring satirical observations on such frequently pilloried aspects of contemporary life as the overpriced health-food emporium, the liquidation of old economy assets in the service of new economy ambitions (like, for example, the building of an up-scale restaurant in a disused coal-fired generating station) and a software company intent on dominating the world's computers with its inferior operating system, it is easy to see why Wood feels that Franzen has not extended himself in the search for examples of either the absurdities of contemporary consumerism or the activities of corporations.<sup>41</sup> Tending towards causal commentaries, Franzen's approach thus seems, as Wood suggests, shallow and inclined towards simple restatements of commonplace opinions.

Beyond the insight generated by these criticism, Wood's argument is also interesting for the ways in which it creates an additional level of debate by moving from a critique of the hollow circularity of Franzen's sociology into a broader commentary on what he regards as the failure of the "social novel" as a whole, a type of fiction that is, as he puts it, "weak" because it privileges the "sociality of art" over the "autonomy of art". In his terms, the desire to "create something permanent" from modern culture is doomed because that culture "is itself ephemeral."<sup>42</sup> Though Wood is right to suggest that Franzen's novel stretches the idea of correction too far, his critique of the "sociality of art" and his desire to see Franzen's "social news" switched off

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.205.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.206/207.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>41</sup> Franzen, *The Corrections*, p.107; p.177.

<sup>42</sup> Wood, *The Irresponsible Self*, p.199; p.196.

altogether is much more problematic.<sup>43</sup> Not only does it betray an awkwardly ideological refusal to engage with the social dimensions of particular forms of aesthetic production, but, in terms that have a more relevance to the specifics of this discussion, it suggests that the search for a novel that is able to offer an adequate engagement with the conditions and contexts of globalization is futile.

Clearly some of the difficulties identified by Wood could have been resolved had Franzen able to produce a more convincing blend of the private with the public. In these terms, it is not the "social novel" that is at fault *per se*, but this particular social novel, a novel that fails because it represents society in thin and unsophisticated terms. His wider questions about the validity of the social novel as whole are, however, much less easily addressed. Identifying a strict division between the aesthetic and the social, Wood thus condemns Franzen's belief in the social novel. Despite the finality of Wood's position and the sense that these his views stand in irreconcilable opposition to Franzen's social objectives, there is a way of taking this debate forward and using these conflicting perspectives to help refine the understanding of the "novel of globalization". The irony is that this approach depends not on further discussion of the conflict between these incompatible points of view, but upon a reading that identifies the existence of the similarities that unite Wood's argument with Franzen's point of view. These points of comparison can be brought into focus by looking in more detail at the nature of the relationships between *The Corrections* and the social contexts of globalization.

In pursuing the "social novel" Franzen links his account of the experiences of the five members of the Lambert family with a strong sense of the relationships that lead from social realities to individual experiences. This approach is informed by a sense of determinism. Private lives are tied to social change, with the stock market providing a dominant and defining correction. The result is a homological novel that sees capital, technology, politics and industry as parts of a base upon which the superstructures of individual lives are built.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.209.

<sup>44</sup> Lucien Goldmann's essays from the 1960s provide the key statement on the meaning of "homology". See, for example, Lucien Goldman, *Towards a Sociology of the Novel* (1964), Trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), p.7: "The novel form seems to me, in effect, to be *the transposition on the literary plane of everyday life in the individualistic society created by market production*. There is a *rigorous homology* between the literary form of the novel [...] and the everyday relation between man and commodities in general, and by extension between men and other men, in a market society." These

Globalization is thus represented as an irreducible reality that the novel is powerless to either interrogate or resist. The consequence is a text in which the characters are, in a phrase borrowed from James Wolcott's reading of DeLillo's *Underworld*, "stuck in whatever national mood is prevailing at that moment, like lost souls to flypaper."<sup>45</sup> A character like Chip, for example, becomes a token who finds himself pushed back and forth by commercial forces he can neither fathom nor control. Franzen's attempt to use contemporary economic conditions to help not only define his novel's context, but also as a focus for its moments of authorial comment and as a template for the organisation of its narrative, thus reads more like a novel about globalization than one of globalization.

The central problem for Franzen is that in adopting this approach he portrays globalization as a defining and definitive reality. In the same way that he refuses to recognise the novel's place within consumer society, preferring to see it as an autonomous entity that reflects the realities of social experience from a position outside the market, he closes off the possibility that his characters (and indeed his own writing) may have a dialectical relationship with the conditions of globalization. This belief in the autonomy of fiction, a belief that, ironically, he shares with James Wood, means that he, like Wood, is unable to appreciate that the novel is a social form (produced by an individual in a specific context and published into a literary marketplace) that participates in the construction of society even as it might set out to represent and reflect that society. It is the defiantly undialectical quality of this approach that is its chief weakness. Sharing Wood's idealistic belief in the autonomy of art and imagining that the novel can offer a mirror to social realities, there is no sense that aesthetics and society might be connected through complex inter-relationships and dependencies. The fact that Franzen should maintain this approach even as he is engaged in an attempt to write a "social novel" not only provides further evidence of his naivety, but also suggests that he is a long way from producing an adequate and effective "novel of globalization". The result is a novel that offers a static and over-determined vision of forms of social organisation that operate from the top-down.

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positions have been widely criticised for their vulgar Marxism. See, for example, Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1976), pp.33-34. See also: Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p.375. The use of the term in this context suggests that, like Goldmann, Franzen's approach exhibits reductive tendencies.

<sup>45</sup> James Wolcott, "Blasts from the past", *The New Criterion* (1997), Vol.16.4, pp.65-70, p.68.

If these criticisms are damaging enough for any novel with social ambitions, then they are even more serious for a text looking to engage with globalization. Dependent upon a complex series of fluid exchanges between the top and the bottom, the local and the global, the private and the public, globalization is, as the discussion of Giddens' definition has already suggested, a "dialectical process". In this light, the rigid and deterministic nature of Franzen's scheme appears uniquely unsuited to the task of representing these concerns. Though, he can, for example, echo the kinds of arguments offered by commentators like Naomi Klein and George Monbiot, he is not able to probe the limits of their perspectives, or ask questions about the validity and utility of the kinds of approaches to globalization proposed in their work. Unable to engage with globalization's complex dialectics, *The Corrections* can, as a result, only offer a two-dimensional reflection of familiar versions of the globalization debate. The difficulty for Franzen, however, is that the problems with his approach are not simply confined to weaknesses with its representation of social experience. Of greater concern is a sense that his fiction seems to work in terms that actually strengthen the ideological and conceptual foundations of globalizing consumer capitalism itself, a suggestion that can be developed by pausing to consider Roland Robertson's reading of globalization.

Robertson's argument is that "globalization as a concept refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole."<sup>46</sup> His reading thus identifies a relationship between discourses on globalization and the mechanisms of globalization. Shadowing Appadurai's sense of the role of the imagination in the social processes of globalization, the implication is that the willingness to identify globalization as an unquestionable condition of contemporary life must, in these terms, be regarded as a process that participates in the facilitation, reproduction and expansion of globalization's coordinating processes. Franzen's view of globalization thus merits criticism not simply because it is static and deterministic, but because its vision reinforces deterministic, coordinating processes. With its characters stripped of agency and its reading of globalization tending towards a mute reflection of what it sees as the defined and defining realities of the contemporary world, the concern is that this vision feeds a wider social perception that the processes of globalization are hegemonic and incontestable. If Canclini is right that "globalizing politics arrive at consent, in part, because they excite the imagination of millions of persons promising that two

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<sup>46</sup> Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992), p.8.

plus two which until now made four can be extended to five or six", then the account of globalization offered in *The Corrections* can be seen to contribute to these processes of affirmation.<sup>47</sup>

Problematic not simply because of its narrow determinism and its undialectical reading of globalizing consumer society (and its equally undialectical reading of the relationship between aesthetics and society), but because its vision actually works to reproduce and stabilise a certain version of the globalization debate, *The Corrections* thus seems to lack the "cultural authority" needed to make it an effective "social novel". Its failure does, however, offer some insight into the kind of qualities a "novel of globalization" would require. One obvious pre-requisite is a portrait of globalizing consumer society that is alive to the complexities of the dialectical forces that link top with bottom and local with global. This general requirement can be related to a need for a subtle sense that the novel has, in Peyser's words, "a crucial role to play in the very processes of globalization". Such an appreciation would not only foster an awareness of the relationships that connect the imagination with social processes, but a recognition that globalization is not a brute reality that can be measured and reflected, but a network of competing powers, discourses and debates that are subject to the influence of dialogue and discussion. Instead of following these paths, however, Franzen chooses a narrower route. Though this approach allows him to generate satirical comment, it is in the end unable to offer anything in the way of a corrective to or even critical insight into the expansion and reproduction of internationalised forms of capital.

Despite these concerns, the ways in which Franzen brings his novel to a close suggests the stirrings of an attempt to qualify and moderate the deterministic dimensions of the main body of the text. Though the novel has made great play of its idea of "the correction" and has led the reader to expect dramatic realignments that effect both the private and the public sphere, the actual conclusion is much more subtle. Of his economic context, for example, Franzen writes:

*The correction, when it finally came, was not an overnight bursting of a bubble, but a much more gentle letdown, a year-long leakage of value from key financial markets, a contraction too gradual to generate headlines and too predictable to seriously hurt anybody but fools and the working poor."*<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Nestor García Canclini, *La Globalización Imaginada* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1999) [My translation], p.31/32.

<sup>48</sup> Franzen, *The Corrections*, p.647.

Unlike the dramatic elections that dominate the conclusion to *The 27<sup>th</sup> City*, or the earthquake that not only provides *Strong Motion* with a spectacular ending, but also offers Franzen one final chance to make a striking restatement of the novel's key theme, *The Corrections* ends on a quieter note. Alfred dies, but there are no astonishing changes or reversals. Instead of the expected crash, the novel closes with slower and more gradual changes taking effect. Franzen's conclusion reads:

All of her [Enid's] corrections had been for naught. He was as stubborn as the day she'd met him. And yet when he was dead, and when she'd pressed her lips to his forehead and walked out with Denise and Gary into the warm spring night, she felt that nothing could kill her hope now. She was seventy-five and she was going to make some changes in her life.<sup>49</sup>

In making it clear that the search for a dramatic correction has "been for naught", this ending thus qualifies the narrow determinism and tight sense of causality that has informed so many of the preceding pages. In these final moves, as if sensing he has overplayed his hand, Franzen allows the novel to unravel its rigid scheme and correct itself.

This process of qualification and readjustment, that works both in terms of Enid's ambitions and with regard to the novel's strict overarching scheme, is significant because it suggests that Franzen is turning away from determinism and homology and recognising that these approaches offer both inadequate understandings of social life and unconvincing models for the writing of fiction. Balancing this conclusion against the ideas that inform the main body of the text can, as a result, be used to shape a real insight into the relationship between fiction and globalization. Though much of the *Corrections* cannot be interpreted as an example of what a "novel of globalization" is, this sense of the weaknesses with Franzen's approach can be combined with a reading of these concluding moments in ways that generate a sense of what it might be. When Franzen's conclusion eschews determinism and inclines towards a more subtle reading of private lives and social experience, he gestures towards a more complex and dialectical sense of the relationships between the literary text and material conditions. The conclusion is that if Franzen can pursue the implications raised in his ending, he may yet muster the "cultural authority" needed to write a "social novel" that offers an effective engagement with globalization.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.653.

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