

Nihilism and Mistaken Identity: (Self)Hate Crime in *The Believer*

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Through an analysis of the (2001) film *The Believer*, this paper develops a theory of (self)hate crime. In *The Believer*, the young protagonist Danny Balint is a Jew who hates Jews. I argue that in Danny's mind 'Jewishness' stands for the indeterminacy of postmodern human social life. In my analysis, Danny's hatred emerges out of a desperate and deeply modernist search for an essential identity, an identity not offered by the postmodern world of what Danny perceives to be 'nothingness without end.' This analysis deepens current theories of hate crime by proposing that the bigotry and strain that purportedly underlie white hate crime can be better understood as an *existential crisis* in the face of radical indeterminacy.

Keywords: "The Believer," Hate crime, Postmodernism, Indeterminacy, Existential Crisis, Cultural Criminology.

Take the great Jewish minds: Marx, Freud, Einstein. What have they given us: communism, infantile sexuality and the atom bomb. In a mere three centuries since these guys emerged from the ghettos of Europe, they've taken us from a world built on order and reason and hurled us into a chaos of class warfare, irrational urges and relativity, a world where the very existence of matter and meaning is in doubt. Why? Because it is the deepest impulse of the Jewish soul to unravel the very fabric of life until nothing is left but thread, nothing but nothingness. Nothingness without end . . .

- Danny Balint

INTRODUCTION

In Henry Bean's (2001) film *The Believer*, the young protagonist Danny Balint (played by Ryan Gosling) is a Jew who hates Jews, a Jewish neo-Nazi who beats a young Jewish student in the street and plots to kill others.¹ Why does he do it? I argue in this paper that in Danny's mind 'Jewishness'—represented by Jewish intellectuals such as Marx, Freud and Einstein—stands for the indeterminacy² of postmodern human social life, a normative order wherein "the very existence of matter and meaning is in doubt" (Bean, 2000, p. 69).³ In the analysis I give below, Danny's hatred emerges out of a desperate and deeply modernist search for an essential identity, an identity not offered by the postmodern world's 'nothingness without end.' In

reaction to this chaos, Danny is moved to commit a (self)hate crime, willing to destroy his (perceived) empty identity in order to feel like a “real white Christian man with roots” (p. 67) rather than a “deracinated Jew” (p. 68), one of those who, according to Danny’s logic, has “taken us from a world built on order and reason and hurled us into a chaos of class warfare, irrational urges and relativity” (p. 69).

In what follows, I develop a theory of (self)hate crime by first introducing the film character Danny Balint’s crisis in *The Believer*. I then discuss the unsettlingly indeterminate constitution of human social reality through a brief review of Berger and Luckmann’s classic (1967) text, *The Social Construction of Reality*. I next turn to Peter Fitzpatrick’s (1992) *The Mythology of Modern Law* to show how the law has been used in the West as a means of masking (or staving off the repercussions of) indeterminacy through a process of negation—of defining ourselves through that which we are not. Next, I borrow from Zygmunt Bauman’s (1992) *Intimations of Postmodernity* to argue that the ‘postmodern state of mind’—the radical dismantling of modernity’s ordering structures—has the potential to cause deep unease, which can sometimes lead to a powerful yearning for a kind of fascist essentialism. Finally, I argue that (self)hate criminals like Danny Balint mistake indeterminacy—and especially those who *illuminate* this indeterminacy (e.g., ‘Jewish intellectuals’)—as The Other (‘Jews’) in an attempt to make themselves essential, *even when that Other is actually themselves*. I conclude with a return to the cinematic narrative of Danny Balint in *The Believer*, suggesting that his story exemplifies a catastrophic response to the ‘postmodern state of mind.’ My goal is thus to understand what it means to be, like Danny Balint, a “living contradiction” (Bean, 2000, p. 13), to be The Other when The Other is already oneself. This analysis deepens current theories of hate crime by proposing that the bigotry, strain, and ‘cultural threat’ that purportedly underlie white hate crime can be better understood, in some cases, as an *existential crisis* in the face of radical indeterminacy.

A methodological note: this analysis relies on a relatively straightforward interpretation of the narrative portrayed in *The Believer*. While I incorporate some of the insights offered by film theorists, and I discuss some ways in which the specifically *cinematic* depiction presented in *The Believer* articulates the protagonist’s crisis, I leave aside a truly hermeneutical approach to the film. Put another way: I essentially take *The Believer* at face-value and mostly avoid, for the moment, an involved discussion of film-theoretical issues such as film technique, semiotics, ‘the gaze,’ psychoanalytical film theory, interpellation, and the larger discursive context in which *The Believer* is situated. I wish to understand Danny Balint, the character, as a method of thinking about hate crime; toward that end, I bracket for now some of the complex film-theoretical issues raised by *The Believer*.

Danny’s Balint’s (Self)Hate Crimes

The Believer made its public debut in 2001 after eliciting controversy from both the film literati and the Jewish community. The film won the Sundance Film Festival’s Grand Jury Prize, and some critics raved about it, but one major Jewish leader, Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, publicly expressed his distaste for the film, declaring: “This film did not work” (Pinsker, 2001, p. 195). Despite the Sundance award and some critical success, Henry Bean was unable to obtain distribution for theatrical release and had to settle with selling the film

to television's Showtime (Pinsker, 2001); *The Believer* was eventually released in theaters in 2002.

Considering the film's imagery and violence, the controversy is not surprising. The film portrays not only neo-Nazi skinheads violently assaulting Jews and vandalizing a synagogue, but also several hateful diatribes against Jews, spoken *by* a Jew. One scene depicts Danny antagonizing two black men at a subway station in a black T-shirt adorned with a huge red swastika. Another shows Danny ruthlessly pointing out (perceived) absurdities in kosher dietetic law to a Jewish deli worker—and then brawling with him. The hatred displayed by Danny in these scenes is especially disturbing because it is articulate and (seemingly) incisive, and most of all, *intimate*. Danny hates with the seething violence that smart and rebellious sons have for their hypocritical and abusive fathers.⁴ It is these qualities that separate Danny's hatred from the oafish and ignorant hatred spewed by the other (non-Jewish) fascists in *The Believer*. Further, it is Danny's *intimate* hatred that separates *The Believer* from films such as *American History X* (1998), in which the protagonist is an articulate fascist who is alienated from those whom he hates, but who is repentant. In *The Believer*, Danny intimately hates Jews/himself and never completely repents.

The plot of *The Believer* follows Danny's transformation from a rebellious New York boy attending *Yeshiva* (Hebrew school) to a ferocious but articulate skinhead, and finally to a miserable "living contradiction" (Bean, 2000, p. 13) who can only escape through suicide. The narrative begins (and is interspersed) with flashbacks to Danny's *Yeshiva* training, where he repeatedly challenges the didactic teachings of the Rabbi. Here we see the origins of Danny's misplaced disgust for what he eventually decides is 'Jewishness.' In the opening scene, the younger Danny objects to God's commanding Abraham to kill his son on Mt. Moriah:

I think the whole Jewish people were permanently scarred by what happened on Mt. Moriah, and we still live in terror . . . Fear of God makes you afraid of everything. All the Jews are good at is being afraid. And being sacrificed. (Bean, 2000, p. 30-31).

Danny's hatred thus begins with a dissident impulse, a rejection of (perceived) emasculating religious doctrine. Danny's rejection of Jewishness here seems based in shame. Indeed, one reading of the film could be that Danny's hatred paradoxically comes from an essential, deep *love* of 'Jewishness.' The film seems to suggest—especially in the *Yeshiva* scenes—that Danny's violence is an attempt to destroy the weakness he perceives to be at the core of 'the Jew.' As one reviewer put it: "Bean's notion here is that Danny's Nazism is both Jewish self-hatred and the ultimate expression of his Jewishness. In his twisted mind, he's a storm trooper fighting God, out to eradicate everything he thinks has allowed Jews to accede to their own destruction" (Taylor, 2002, p. 3). But what is it about 'Jewish weakness' that so enrages Danny? To look beyond mere 'cowardliness,' we need to theorize the source of Danny's deep anxiety.

Living in the Ethereal World: The Consequences of Postmodern Indeterminacy

My argument is that Danny (self)hates because he is profoundly modernist and deeply anxious about the indeterminacy of *postmodern* life, especially as it relates to his identity. He

becomes aware of but cannot tolerate feeling ‘indeterminate’ and lashes out at what he perceives to be the source of this sense of rootlessness, namely ‘Jews’ or ‘Jewish intellectuals.’ But why is Danny so anxious about the problem of indeterminate identity? The interpretation I give here is that Danny, through his dissident reaction to Jewish teachings, has caught a glimpse of (what he perceives to be) complex intellectual machinery propping up the edifice of order in the human social world. Put another way, Danny has noticed that human reality is socially constructed and that (Danny believes) a socially constructed world inevitably leads to total relativism, an intolerably terrifying prospect. In this way, we can read Danny as responding rather badly to a sort of *existential crisis* (in the Kierkegaardian sense of deep anxiety in the face of total freedom). Danny notices that everything he has taken for granted is built upon sand, which presents him with the anguish of total freedom; faced with this intolerable freedom, Danny tries to supplant his anxiety with a comfortably concrete identity, a ‘real white Christian man with roots.’ He violently attacks the source that, accidentally and paradoxically, *illuminated* the intolerable freedom: Judaism. This argument should become clearer as I now turn to some theoretical treatments of the social construction of human reality and its consequences and relate them to *The Believer*.

All Social Reality is Precarious: Berger and Luckmann on World-Openness

In their classic (1967) text, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann discuss the notion of ‘world-openness,’ which describes the human organism’s uniquely social reality. Unlike all other living organisms (according to Berger and Luckmann), humans come into the world without any built-in instincts or imperatives:

Man occupies a peculiar position in the animal kingdom. Unlike the other higher mammals, he has no species-specific environment, nor environment firmly structured by his own instinctual organization. There is no man-world in the sense that one may speak of a dog-world or a horse-world. . . . In this sense, all non-human animals, as species and as individuals, live in closed worlds whose structures are predetermined by the biological equipment of the several animal species. By contrast, man’s relationship to his environment is characterized by world-openness. . . This means that the human organism is capable of applying its constitutionally given equipment to a very wide and, in addition, constantly variable and varying range of activities. (p. 47).

In other words, humans, unlike other animals, can exist in virtually any environment with virtually any social arrangements. In light of this fact, human life in the ‘open world’ ends up becoming necessarily *socially determined* (rather than biologically determined): “Not only is the survival of the human infant dependent upon certain social arrangements, the direction of his organismic development is socially determined” (p. 48). The consequence of Berger and Luckmann’s argument is that human beings create social structures to organize their world, and then promptly *reify* them. Faced with the prospect of total freedom, humans erect something like a faux world-closedness: “The human organism lacks the necessary biological means to provide stability for human conduct . . . One may say that the biologically intrinsic world-openness of human existence is always, and indeed must be, transformed by social order into a relative world-closedness” (p. 51). Human beings thus create institutions for social order that become

reified and obtain facticity (p. 60). This social process of creating a sense of world-closedness is what Berger and Luckmann mean by the ‘social construction of reality.’

But the facticity of social institutions is always at risk. As Berger and Luckmann make clear, the legitimacy of any particular normative order—‘The King’ or ‘The Rule of Law’—may plausibly be exposed as a human creation, not much more than a clever idea:

It is important to keep in mind that the objectivity of the institutional world, however massive it may appear to the individual, is a humanly produced, constructed objectivity . . . The institutional world is objectivated human activity, and so is every single institution. In other words, despite the objectivity that marks the social world in human experience, it does not thereby acquire an ontological status apart from the human activity that produced it (p. 60-61).

We are thus presented with a paradox: human beings produce a world but then experience it as something other than a human product (see p. 61). Ordering institutions, such as ‘Jewish law,’ suddenly can seem rather problematic when viewed through this constructionist lens, for if ‘Jewish law’ does not originate from something external to human beings (such as God), its legitimacy seems considerably weakened—especially to a ‘modern’ person (like Danny Balint) *not* equipped with the philosophical tools to see the potentially liberating or ‘constitutive’ possibilities that a postmodern viewpoint can afford.⁵

The Law as a Precarious Tenet of (Post)modernity

Since the Enlightenment, secular law has become increasingly prominent as one of humanity’s most powerful ordering institutions. Modernity needs law in particular for order because world closedness is (paradoxically) threatened by the discoveries of modernity. In light of the revelations of Darwin, Marx and Einstein, among others, the ordering power of religion is particularly diminished. Along with science, law then becomes one of the most important modern tools for creating order and defining identity. For example, the central principle of modern legal formalism is that society should be governed by an independent legal system, to which everyone (including the ruler) is beholden. This is the idea behind the oft-invoked phrase: ‘The Rule of Law’ (not of men). This theory of the law has its roots in the Enlightenment, when political philosophers such as John Locke were trying to develop social theories for the post-feudal, industrializing world (for a discussion of John Locke, see MacPherson, 1962). Under formalism, the law is theoretically (if not in practice) dis-integrated from politics and culture, separate from the biases of human beings. Legal practitioners are supposed to draw upon an autonomous law while applying their reasoning to a set of facts. The law can thus be viewed as an important example of “man . . . producing a reality that denies him” (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p. 89).

But the reified formal legal order has for some time faced a legitimization crisis. Scholars of many types have for a long time noticed the socially constructed nature of law. Since the realist challenge in American jurisprudence (if not before), questions around the *source* of the law have plagued the minds of those interested in figuring out how the law operates in society. This preoccupation causes tension because the search for the law’s source throws light

upon some antinomies inherent to what Bruno Latour (1999) calls the “old settlement” (p. 24), which refers to modernity’s ontological bifurcation of reality into two domains: ‘words’ and ‘the world.’⁶ Jurisprudences of natural law, based on purportedly universal moral principles, and positive law, based on documents written by human beings (such as the Constitution), have been shown to be illogical by legal scholars since the turn of the last century (See Milovanovic, 2003, Chapter 4 for a good review). These critiques make clear the socially constructed and reified nature of the law. The critical legal preoccupation with radical indeterminacy, for example, shows how politics and culture can be more determinative of legal outcomes than legal reasoning (see Solum, 1997, p. 46).

Peter Fitzpatrick on ‘The Mythology of Modern Law’

One relatively recent and prominent critique of the legitimacy of the law as an ordering institution is Peter Fitzpatrick’s (1992) *The Mythology of Modern Law*. Fitzpatrick’s primary argument is that the law must be seen as a component of modernity’s ‘myth.’ That is, the law is constitutive of modernity and yet the modern ontology is essentially based on a ghost, constituted through a negation of ‘the savage:’

The mythology of European identity is founded in an opposition to certain myth-ridden ‘others.’ These are constructed not as the exemplary affirmations of a classic mythology but in terms of a negative teleology: ‘so far as I know, we are the only people who think themselves risen from savages: everyone else believes they descended from Gods (Sahlins 1976: 52-53). Occidental being is impelled in a progression away from aberrant origins. It is formed in the comprehensive denial of the ‘other’—in assertions of universal knowledges, imperious judgment and encompassing being. Since it is constructed in negation, in terms of what it is not, this being is unbounded and able mythically to reconcile its particular and contingent existence with its appropriation of the universal (ix-x).

The law has thus been used in the West as a socially constructed means of staving off world openness through a process of negation—of defining ourselves through that which we are not. The important point here is that the figure Fitzpatrick calls the ‘occidental being’ (which I read as something like ‘western juridical subject’) has no essential constitution; it is constructed through a discourse of comparison. This imagining of the ‘occidental being’ suggests that it (the being) is non-essential, relative, indeterminate and abstract, just as Danny Balint sees ‘Jews.’ And looking closely at Fitzpatrick’s argument, we can see the negation of the savage is actually a *double-negation*. That is, if we agree that ‘progress’ became defined through the Enlightenment’s negation of savage ‘other,’ we can make the analytical move toward suggesting that the ‘other’ is *itself* defined in negation, as *not* a part of ‘progress.’ Thus, the ‘occidental being’ becomes defined through a double negative: the western juridical subject (occidental being) is defined as that which is not not-progress. The law thus creates order by allowing ‘us’ to define ourselves as that which ‘we’ are not, as not the Other—even when the Other is *itself* created through a negation. But the unfortunate logical or philosophical consequence of this situation is that the western juridical subject’s normative world can suddenly seem to have all the stability of house of cards. This slippery normative world of the occidental being is what

Fitzpatrick imagines as ‘mythical,’ and what I propose some hate criminals mistake for ‘Jewishness.’

This mythical nature can be seen especially clearly if we realize that the law’s famous contradictions—“Law is autonomous yet socially contingent. It is identified with stability and order yet it changes and is historically responsive. Law is a sovereign imperative yet the expression of a popular spirit. Its quasi-religious transcendence stands in opposition to its mundane temporality” (x)—cannot be reconciled by modernist explanations where “reality is unified and truth indivisible” (x). “In short, the enduring contradictions about law correspond to its mythic dimensions, yet cannot be recognized in a non-mythic world” (xi). Ultimately, Fitzpatrick’s argument suggests that modern law, as a constitutive component of modernity—a socially constructed ordering institution—is deracinated and ghostlike, based upon a negation of a negation. If this is true, the law is thus *not* ontologically separate from the ideas of human beings, which contradicts the foundational modernist dichotomy of ‘mind-world.’ The reified nature of the law thus becomes a hint or clue to the indeterminate nature of the socially constructed normative world of human beings. Noticing (or even glimpsing the possibility of) these clues, I want to suggest, can be deeply unsettling to a modernist subject, causing in some cases—in Danny Balint and perhaps also in members of the Ku Klux Klan or their contemporary progeny—a desperate yearning for determinism, roots, and an essentialist ontology.

Zygmunt Bauman on the Potential Effects of Postmodern Indeterminacy

How does it feel to glimpse the intricate human edifices (such as the law) that are draped over world openness? Zygmunt Bauman (1992) argues that such glimpsing is an inevitable and integral component of *postmodern* life:

The postmodern state of mind is the radical (though certainly unexpected and all probability undesired) victory of modern (that is, inherently critical, restless, unsatisfied, insatiable) culture over the modern society it aimed to improve through throwing it wide open to its own potential. Many little victorious battles added up to a victorious war. One after another, hurdles have been taken apart, ramparts crushed and locks broken in the incessant, stubborn work of emancipation. At each moment a particular constraint, an especially painful prohibition was under attack. In the end, a *universal dismantling of power-supported structures* has been the result (p. viii-ix, emphasis in original).

Bauman’s postmodern state of mind—the radical dismantling of modernity’s ordering structures—thus emerges not only through the work of contemporary postmodern scholars such as Fitzpatrick (dismantling the logic of western law), but ultimately out of the most important scholars of *modernity*, such as, for example, Darwin (dismantling the logic of creationism), Marx (dismantling the logic of capitalism) or Einstein (dismantling the logic of Newtonian physics).⁷ Moreover, this dismantling has the potential to take its toll upon modernist subjects experiencing this kind of ‘postmodern state of mind.’ As Bauman argues:

We have been brought up in the shadow of the sinister warning of Dostoyevsky: if there is not God, everything is permissible. If we happen to be professional

social scientists, we have been also trained to share the no less sinister premonition of Durkheim: if the normative grip of society slackens, the moral order will collapse. For whatever reason, we tend to believe that men and women can only be goaded or cajoled by superior force or superior rhetoric, into peaceful coexistence. So we are naturally inclined to view the prospect of leveling up of hierarchies with horror: only universal mayhem can follow the disappearance of universality-claiming truths . . . I propose that it is precisely in that horror and this resentment that the most dangerous potential of the postmodern condition lay in ambush (p. xvii).

Those especially inflicted with the ‘postmodern state of mind’—those who lack a convincing ‘moral order’—may end up feeling and behaving like Dostoyevsky’s Raskolnikov (or Danny Balint), lashing out spitefully against what they perceive to be the source of their malaise. Note that this disintegration of moral order goes beyond the Durkheimian notion of anomie, because ‘the postmodern state of mind’ undermines the *concept* of moral orders. As I discuss in the following section, the fictional character Danny Balint is just such a figure—a sad, spiteful modernist character suffering from too much of a postmodern state of mind.⁸

Nihilism and Mistaken Identity: Danny Balint’s Crisis and Response

Recall that one interpretation of Danny Balint’s (self)hate crime imagines his hatred as a sort of *uber*-love for Jewishness, manifest through a violent retaliation against Jews’ perceived weakness (see Taylor, 2002, p. 3). But a closer reading suggests that Danny is responding to something more complex than disgust for ‘Jewish cowardice.’ After the introductory Yeshiva scenes discussed in the beginning of this paper, the narrative follows a grown-up Danny who has abandoned his Jewish identity and adopted the identity of a neo-Nazi bent on killing Jews. In these scenes we see Danny humiliate and beat a young Jewish student on the subway (Bean, 2000, p. 33), spray paint swastikas with a crew of thuggish skinheads (p. 37), brawl with young black men (p. 50), practice rifle shooting with skinheads at a country compound (p. 79), and plot assassinations (p. 48). But, simultaneously we see Danny demonstrate an unexpected sophistication in his criticism of ‘Jews.’ Danny’s reason for wanting to kill Jews is to stamp out the “Jewish disease [of] abstraction” (p. 42). The grown-up Danny’s hatred of Jews is not focused on the hypocrisy of religious doctrine, or on paranoid fantasies of Jewish control of culture and politics, the foci of other fascists in the film. Rather, Danny hates Jews because they’re “obsessed with abstraction” (p. 42). This becomes clear in an important scene in which Danny talks with Guy Danielsen (A.D. Miles), a reporter for the *New York Times*, in a cafe about his ‘racialist’ philosophy. During the conversation Danny explains that “real people derive their genius from the sun, the sea, the soil,” but that Jews “deracinate society” (p. 68). And since Jews have no roots they are compelled to ‘universalize:’

The real Jew is a wanderer, a nomad. He has no roots, no attachments. So, he ‘universalizes’ everything. He can’t hammer a nail, plow a field. He can only buy and sell, invest capital, manipulate markets. He takes the life of a people rooted in soil and turns it into a cosmopolitan culture based on books, ideas, numbers. This is his strength . . . Take the great Jewish minds: Marx, Freud, Einstein. What have they given us: communism, infantile sexuality and the atom

bomb. In a mere three centuries since these guys emerged from the ghettos of Europe, they've taken us from a world built on order and reason and hurled us into a chaos of class warfare, irrational urges and relativity, a world where the very existence of matter and meaning is in doubt. Why? Because it is the deepest impulse of the Jewish soul to unravel the very fabric of life until nothing is left but thread, nothing but nothingness. Nothingness without end . . . (p. 69).

This is a very different cause for hostility than the hypocrisy of God's command to Abraham, or the perceived arcaneness of kosher rules, or the alleged conspiracy to control the media and the banks, or even 'cowardice.' Danny is angry with Jews because one of them invented relativity, not because they allegedly run Disney or Wells Fargo Bank. Danny equates 'Jewishness' with indeterminacy, venting a confused frustration about what feels to him like a frighteningly shaky ontological situation, a world wherein nothing can be taken for granted—a slippery, upside-down world created (in his mind) by Jews. Danny's choice of examples for the 'greatest Jewish minds' is telling; it is hard to imagine larger figures in modernity than Marx, Freud and Einstein. For Danny, the 'Jewish' ontology entails abstraction, relativism, uprootedness, universalism, cosmopolitanism, etc.—cumulatively comprising the unacceptably chaotic situation where 'real white Christian men with roots' are powerless and irrelevant. Danny's vision of 'Jewishness' sounds like a laundry list of postmodernity's complaints; indeed, these are precisely the characteristics Fitzpatrick attributes to the 'Occidental being.' As Henry Bean discusses in his introduction to his screenplay:

Nazism was, among other things, a reaction against the dislocations of modern life. A number of major twentieth-century literary figures (Pound, Eliot and Wyndham Lewis among them) not only felt a similar anguish at these conditions, but were also attracted, at different times and to different degrees, to various forms of fascist anti-Semitism . . . Sifting through their distress at the breakup of traditional, homogenous societies, the ensuing 'rootlessness' of modern life, the 'degeneration of values,' the coming of pop culture, and especially the rapacious spread of that greatest of all equalizers, money, or better still, 'finance'—it is not impossible to see how they could frame 'the Jews' for the job. For Jews seem to embody modernity in their very being. If, as Jean Baudrillard has said, America was a post-modernist nation from its founding, the Jews have, in a sense, been post-modernists since Babylonian captivity. Long before Jacques Derrida, there was the Talmud, a de-centered, indeterminate text if there ever was one. . . . after you have studied even a single page of Talmud with texts crowding in on and disputing with each other in radical nonlinearity, quantum physics, indeterminacy theory and floating currencies become, perhaps, less mysterious (p. 14-15).

Bean thus offers a hermeneutic reading of the Talmud, of Jewishness. According to Bean (and Danny) 'the Jews' are modern but invented postmodernism three thousand years ago. For Bean, this becomes a source of existential crisis, an unsettling philosophical situation. For Danny (a fictional embellishment of Jewish ambivalence), this is an unforgivable sin, punishable by death.

At the end of the café scene, Danielsen confronts Danny with the allegation that he (Danny) was bar mitzvah'd and is, in fact, a Jew. Danny responds by denying the allegation and

sticking a gun in Danielsen's mouth. Danny tells him he will *kill himself* (not Danielsen)—the ultimate (self)hate crime—if Danielsen writes the allegation in his 'Jew paper.' This scene provides the key moment in which Danny delineates his existential crisis and makes clear his reasons for undertaking violence, what I am calling (self)hate crime.

This scene is also important because it makes clear the relationship between Danny and Danielsen, a relationship that I argue mirrors the relationship between Danny and *the viewer*. Danielsen appears at several points in *The Believer*, in each case asking Danny probing questions about his anti-semitic ideology. In an early scene during which Danny explains to a group that 'modern society is a Jewish disease,' Danielsen asks simply "So what would you propose, then?" (Bean, 2000, p.42), to which Danny responds: "killing Jews." (p. 42).

This scene introduces a back-and-forth interplay between Danny and Danielsen that continues in all the subsequent scenes between the two (most vividly in the café scene) and provides an example of what film theorists refer to as 'suture.' The notion of 'suture' refers to the cinematic process wherein: "Shot relationships are seen as the equivalent of syntactic ones in linguistic discourse, as the agency whereby meaning emerges and a subject-object-position is constructed for the viewer" (Silverman, 1992, p. 200).⁹ The 'shot relationships' described in this quote entail what is known as the 'shot/reverse shot formation' in which the film alternates between points of view as a mode of enabling the viewer to see 'who' exists from the camera's point of view, and thus suggesting to the viewer with whom to identify. In the café scene between Danny and Danielsen, the point of view shifts between the two, as in a conversation. The viewer sees each character roughly from the point of view of the other character as each speaks. The idea of 'suture' is that this alternating shot relationship—the back-and-forth between the characters—enables the viewer to identify a 'stand in' for him or herself (see Silverman, 1992, p. 203).

I argue that Danielsen operates as a stand-in for the viewing subject for at least four reasons. In the first place, and most importantly, Danielsen is privy to secret knowledge about Danny that no other character in the film knows (except Danny's family), but the viewer does know, namely that Danny is a Jew. Second, he repeatedly interrogates Danny about the details of his hateful ideology, much as a viewer subject might be inclined to do. Third, Danielsen is a 'reporter' for the *New York Times* (the so-called 'paper of record' in the United States) and is thus imbued with a trait of 'objectivity' and distance from the other characters embedded in the narrative. Finally—the name: 'Guy' reminds the viewer of 'a guy,' an 'everyman' with whom the viewer can relate. In a sense, Danielsen functions something like a one-person 'chorus' in the cinematic narrative of *The Believer*.

I bring this up not to undertake an involved discussion of ideas about the subject-object relation in film theory, but to explain one way in which the medium of cinema makes for an especially powerful mode of conveying the story of this particular character's violent response to post-modern nihilism. The viewing subject is, in a sense, 'sewn into' the narrative through the shot relationships between Danny and Danielsen in a way only possible through the film medium. There are probably other exclusively cinematic reasons why *The Believer* is an effective narrative, including the obvious point that films are less expository than written narratives; they 'show don't tell' (see Chatman, 1992 for a discussion of this). However, as I

indicated in the introduction, I wish, in the name of brevity, to bracket for now an involved discussion of film theory.

The middle section of *The Believer* follows Danny as he fraternizes with skinheads and quasi-sophisticated fascists while occasionally visiting his ill father in Queens. For the most part, despite some small tender gestures toward his father, Danny seems a violent, committed fascist, but with a special intimacy suffusing his hate. A turning point arrives when Danny and the skinheads trash a synagogue. In this pivotal scene, Danny unexpectedly panics when the skinheads open an Ark and begin handling sacred Torahs (which is forbidden in Jewish law). As the skinheads fumble with and attempt to tear up the Torahs, Danny surprisingly intervenes (the skinheads do not know and cannot imagine that he is Jewish) and describes the significance of the materials to the confused skinheads. When challenged about his knowledge, Danny compares himself to Nazi leader Adolph Eichman, who studied Judaism in Israel in order to ‘know his enemy’ (Bean, 2000, p. 108). This convinces most of the skinheads, but we notice a change in Danny. He seems to realize that, despite his nihilistic dissidence, he is unable to erase an elemental love for his Jewishness. The scene ends with Danny ‘stealing’ the damaged Torahs and taking them home for safekeeping.

After the synagogue scene, the film moves into its final act, which depicts the now conflicted Danny stuck in a dialectical spiral into total despair. During these last scenes, Danny maintains his fascist projects but simultaneously teaches a young lover the Torah and hides prayer robes under the business suit he wears while dispensing fascist lectures (p. 151). When the time comes for Danny to live up to his violent talk, he balks. In one scene, he purposely botches an assassination attempt on a Jewish leader, instead shooting his neo-Nazi comrade (p. 117).

In the film’s denouement, Danny prevents violence against Jews, even in the moment of his suicide. Danny’s dual-life has by now spun completely out of control. The *New York Times* has identified him as a Jew, and he has been implicated in an assassination. He will either be arrested or killed by former comrades soon, but he has convinced an old Yeshiva friend (who seems only partially aware of Danny’s transformation into a neo-Nazi) to let him lead prayers in a reform synagogue. No one except Danny (and the audience) knows that he has planted a bomb under the stage. In the midst of reading the prayers, and apparently waiting for the bomb to explode and kill everyone, Danny panics at the moment of truth. In a frenzied final scene, replete with the urgent and climactic momentum of a thriller, Danny warns the worshippers just before the bomb explodes, and then apparently dies in the explosion on the stage. This climactic scene encapsulates the film’s central thematic message—glimpsing indeterminacy causes nihilism in, and ultimately the destruction of, the one who glimpses.

This ending is dramatic but also florid and somewhat pat. Conforming to Hollywood conventions about screenplays, many of the major characters somehow end up in the synagogue at the end. And, obviously, Danny dies, tying up the loose ends succinctly. Although perhaps too dramatically tidy, Danny’s death seems inevitable. Indeed, Bean’s message about the awful psychic consequences of glimpsing indeterminacy is most powerful if Danny dies—(self)hate crime ultimately means suicide.

Danny thus dies as a deconstructed modernist, a hopelessly decentered subject, a non-essential, totally nihilistic and miserable subjectivity. I hasten to add that it may seem that Danny is, in fact, totally *idealistic*, since he appears committed to a doctrine of fascism. But Danny is less interested in fascism, per se, than a *total rejection* (nihilism) of Judaism. As we see Danny struggle with his dual-identity, we experience him as embodying the type of existential crisis identified by Bauman (and manifest in literary characters such as Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov). Danny *knows* that Judaism is 'a lie' yet he is unable to live with himself as the negation of 'Jewishness.' Danny is acutely aware of his own wraith-like constitution, and tries to 'fill up' his empty self with essentialist fascism, but can't pull it off, leaving him hopeless and eventually, ultimately, inevitably dead.

Mistaken Identity

One way of reading Danny Balint's nihilistic response is an instance of mistaken identity—Danny identifies the indeterminacy of human social life illuminated by Jewish intellectuals simply as 'Jews.' I want to propose here that Danny sees that the source of that which denies him identity, which creates his felt deracination ('Jews'), is *precisely* his identity (a Jew). Danny thus misreads modernist indeterminacy—through the work of Jewish intellectuals who *illuminate* modernist indeterminacy—as 'Jewishness.' Danny Balint thus makes two errors: 1) He mistakes the messenger for the message—Jewish intellectuals, such as Marx and Freud, stand in for the indeterminacy that they illuminate; and 2) he mistakes all Jews for Jewish intellectuals.

Imagine that you, like Danny become aware of the inconsistencies and contradictions that are inherent to the socially constructed ordering institutions surrounding you. How might you react? If you are reading this, you are probably well educated, and you might be aware of such antinomies *because* of your attention to scholarship on 'modernity.' You may live day-to-day as though 'modernity' has facticity, perhaps as a 'thing' to be critiqued, but simultaneously recognize that even proposing to critique 'modernity' reifies it and brackets its social construction. You may believe that you should be slightly uncomfortable with the very discourses you participate in professionally (because they speak in the 'modernist grammar'). Perhaps you are an advocate of constitutive theory, which proposes an affirmative version of 'the postmodern state of mind' that sees the outcomes of 'deconstruction' as an opportunity for 'reconstruction' (see Henry and Milovanovic, 1999, p. 3 – 7). But what if you are a teenage boy in high school, unfamiliar with scholarly treatments of 'modernity' or 'postmodernity,' but acutely aware of a *feeling of indeterminacy*? Imagine that you (the teenage boy) *sense* that your normative world is ethereal and indeterminate, but that you have no idea how to articulate this sense. Imagine that you become vaguely aware of *your own ghostlike constitution*? What constitutes you?

If you were to 'feel' the indeterminacy of illuminated by postmodernity, but lack the grammar to articulate it, you might mistake the source of your tension as something else, something more concrete, perhaps some small cog in your normative world's wheel, perhaps some very obvious hypocritical postmodern institution or another. Is it really surprising that young men go to their schools carrying arsenals with the intention of killing as many students and teachers as possible? Government institutions such as schools do modernity's 'work,'

without ever mentioning it. The unsettling characteristics of modernity that so disturb Danny Balint are delineated in the quotidian dramas of everyday life in institutional locations such as high school or college (even when these institutions sometimes ‘postmodernly’ critique modernity). Some young people see glimmers of what infuriates Danny in their encounters with bureaucrats and teachers, parents and police officers. They vaguely sense that they are overdetermined by modernist culture, politics and institutions, but they feel simultaneously empty, deracinated and ethereal. It is not shocking that some become nihilistic. Perhaps these are the deep mechanisms of some forms of hate crime—terror over deracination leads to nihilism, which in turn leads to mistaking ‘Jews’ as the source of the terror.

From Hate Crime to (Self)Hate Crime

Not long ago, I happened to watch *The Believer* while I was involved in a reading group discussing a variety of sociolegal texts, including Fitzpatrick’s (1992) *The Mythology of Modern Law*. Much of our discussion tended to drift toward the numerous contradictions and indeterminacies of modernist human reality, as illuminated and discussed by professional postmodern academics. While watching *The Believer*, I was struck by how the character Danny Balint sounded something like a distorted version of the scholars we were studying, as well as the members of our reading group. Like Fitzpatrick, Danny developed a ‘postmodern state of mind’ through a glimpsing of something antinomic about his normative order. Like members of our reading group, Danny felt tension in this glimpsing. Unlike Fitzpatrick, or the members of our reading group, Danny was overcome by the existential implications of his glimpses. Instead of driving home from a seminar mildly pondering the mythology of modern law (and also, perhaps, dinner plans), Danny had a bad reaction and decided to do something about it.

This paper is an attempt to use some theoretical treatments of postmodern social reality to better understand the complicated story of the film character Danny Balint. I hope this analysis can be applied to hate criminals in general and also actual ‘living contradictions’ such as Daniel Burros, Leo Felton (a member of the Aryan Brotherhood who had African-American father; see Levin and Rabrenovic, 2004, p. 52) or other real life hate-criminals who hate with a special intimacy.

Theories of hate crime are relatively recent in criminology because, although violence against the marginalized has taken place throughout human history, the notion of ‘hate crime’ as a particular form of misbehavior is itself of recent vintage (see Petrosino, 2004, p. 3). At the risk of over simplification, it is probably fair to say that theorists of fascist white hate crime and ethnographers of hate criminals rely on a form of anomie or strain theory in their analyses. Blazak encapsulates this theoretical perspective: “[Fascist white hate criminals] are experiencing what sociologists refer to as anomie, a sense of rootlessness or normlessness. In part, to combat this state, they join groups and assume identities that, for many, become all encompassing, a form of a ‘master status,’ the core way of defining themselves” (Blazak, 2004, p. 212). Moreover, the theoretical *cause* of the strain or anomie for these persons is *changing norms* about the status quo:

With regard to the racist skinheads, the negative stimuli can be represented in the presence of threats to class and ascribed status. Skinhead belief is based on the

traditional cultural superiority of heterosexual, White men; therefore, anything that could undermine that group's dominance represents a threat. Antiracism, gay rights, feminism, and multiculturalism are all perceived as enemies of the status quo. Therefore, in places where these concepts are a part of the dominant discourse, it can be assumed that a certain segment of heterosexual White men will feel a great deal of strain as their traditional picture of the world and their place in it is threatened" (Blazak, 2004, p. 212-213).

In the minds of hate crime theorists, this type of 'cultural strain' usually operates synergistically with economic strain to produce hate and hate crime (for an interesting typology of 'causes' of strain, see Blazak, 2004, p. 213). From this point of view, to put it most simply, hate criminals are experiencing a 'cultural crisis' because their ideas about persons and social life are under attack from the forces of 'multiculturalism' and economic marginalization.

Other theorists of hate crime have refined this basic position to develop typologies of hate crimes and criminals. For example, McDevitt, Levin, and Bennett (2002) argue that while all hate crimes are fundamentally based in 'bigotry,' hate crimes can be categorized by four specific and discrete motivations, namely 'thrill, defensive, retaliatory, and mission.'

The basic underlying factor found throughout all of the hate offender groups is bigotry (J. Levin & McDevitt, 1993). This is considered a primary motivation for the hate offense to occur. However, each offender category differs with respect to the conditions, both psychologically and environmentally, that ultimately lead to a violent attack. In thrill crimes, for example, the offender is set off by a desire for excitement and power; defensive hate crime offenders are provoked by feeling a need to protect their resources under conditions they consider to be threatening; retaliatory offenders are inspired by a desire to avenge a perceived degradation or assault on their group; and mission offenders perceive themselves as crusaders, who hope to cleans the earth of evil (p. 306).

This typology is essential for the study of hate crimes, and perhaps most important for developing policy strategies for preventing hate crimes and enforcing laws against hate crimes. For example, McDevitt, Levin, and Bennett (2002) make clear that 'thrill' hate crimes are qualitatively different than 'mission' hate crimes—and indeed show how 'thrill' hate crimes appear to be more prevalent than other types (see p. 307). This qualitative and quantitative difference between 'thrill' and 'mission' hate crimes is important because it helps analysts and criminal justice professionals to understand, prevent, and enforce against hate crime. Confused, young, and often intoxicated 'thrill seekers' are very different from delusional loners 'on a mission' and this knowledge should inform hate crime policy at all levels.

However, the important empirical work undertaken by Levin, McDevitt and their colleagues lacks a satisfying explanation of 'bigotry.' In their (2002) update to their seminal (1993) work on hate crime, Levin and McDevitt do not explain very clearly the *fundamental* bigotry that underlies the particular motivations toward violent hate (thrill, defensive, retaliatory, and mission). At one point, they describe a form of 'cultural threat/anomie:' "Nathan Thrill joined a local neo-Nazi organization in Colorado because he resented what 'racial minorities'

were doing to his country. He believed that his success in life was being somehow blocked by ‘those people being here’” (p. 49). Another hate criminal they analyzed “gradually developed the belief that his personal problems were a result of some vaguely defined global conspiracy involving Jewish lawyers, communists, the Federal Reserve system, and international bankers” (p. 50). Elsewhere, Levin and McDevitt (2002) propose that hate criminals have deep-rooted psychological problems (p. 51) and that “hate crimes have a basis in what the members of a society are *normally* taught when they are growing up” (p. 51), hinting at an element of ‘social learning’ or ‘differential association’ in the etiology of hate crime. Ultimately, the authors propose that:

Hate crimes represent the end point on the continuum of prejudice and bigotry. For economic, social, and psychological reasons, countless individuals feel resentful. They have suffered a drop in self-esteem or status and are eager to place the blame elsewhere. The selection of their victim depends a good deal on groups and individuals whom the culture of hate portrays as weak, immoral, or uncivilized (p. 98).

What I would like to propose here is that the anomie and/or ‘bigotry’ described by all of these important theorists can, in some instances, be more deeply understood as a sort of blooming terror resulting from the postmodern realization that modernist conceptualizations of the human social world are mythological. That is to say, the hate criminal’s ‘cultural crisis’ is more than a fear of interloping ‘minorities’ or ‘gays,’ or an anxiety about ‘Jews,’ but is an *existential crisis* in response to radical indeterminacy. To borrow an image from a different Hollywood movie, hate criminals like Danny Balint are a little bit like *The Matrix*’s Neo—except that when they learn of the ‘truth’ behind the façade (which in Danny Balint’s case is, of course, the absence of truth), they adopt a *nihilistic* version of postmodernism (rather than an affirmative one).

One gap in this essay is the relatively limited application of film theory to *The Believer*. While my discussion of ‘suture’ helps show how the particularly cinematic narrative of *The Believer*, in a sense, interpellates the viewing subject into the story, future analyses of *The Believer* might benefit from a more involved use of film theory. Further, my analysis of law as a socially constructed ordering institution begs the question of why *law in particular* is especially important, and also whether my empirical illustration—*The Believer*—is especially connected to the law. Despite these gaps, this essay may have implications for the study of hate crimes and hate criminals, especially those directed against Jews.

The Believer can teach us a lesson about the general problem of ‘nihilistic mistaken identity’ among possible hate-criminals, particularly anti-Semites. In the fictional case of Danny Balint, the hate criminal mistook the source of his nihilism as ‘the Jew’ when it was probably something like ‘postmodern social life.’ Might this nihilistic mistaken identity be taking place today within the hearts and minds of those who constitute groups such as the Aryan Nations or the National Socialist Movement?

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¹ *The Believer* is loosely based on the true story of Daniel Burros, a Jewish neo-Nazi who committed suicide in the 1960's (Taylor, 2002, p. 2).

² By 'indeterminacy,' I refer the noun form of the adjective 'indeterminate:' "1. not fixed in extent, character, etc. 2. left doubtful, vague" (Oxford, 2002, p. 399). I do not explicitly refer to specialized uses of the term, such as the legal concept of 'radical indeterminacy,' meaning: "legal outcomes, for example, judicial decisions, are not constrained by the legal rules, for example, constitutions, statutes, and case law" (Solum, 1997, p. 44).

³ I use the phrase 'postmodern life' sociologically, to mean—in the simplest terms—a social world without universal truths. For a definition of what I am thinking of as the "postmodern state of mind" see Bauman, 1992, p. viii-ix (quoted below in this paper). To a certain extent, then, I am equating postmodernism with total existential freedom, which is not necessarily something postmodern theorists would agree with. It may be, in fact, that postmodernity equates not to indeterminacy but *total* determinism; or that a more affirmative postmodernism equates to an embrace of the pastiche of indeterminacy. For the sake of brevity, however, I rely on a simple definition of postmodernism—no universal truth(s)—and leave a more detailed discussion of the meanings of postmodernism for another time.

⁴ I do not mean to suggest that Judaism is hypocritical and abusive, only that Danny's hatred is *intimate*.

⁵ For a discussion of postmodern constitutive theory, see Henry and Milovanovic, 1999.

⁶ We could probably replace Latour's terms here with other dichotomous categories of reality such as 'interior-exterior,' 'mind-object,' 'reason-nature' or 'of myself-for myself,' etc.

⁷ It may be that modernist intellectuals such as Marx or Darwin do not so much radically dismantle ordering structures as *replace* them with new ones. A ‘vulgar’ reading of Marx might lead one to believe in economic determinism, just as an interpretation of Freud might lead one to believe in the determinism of the unconscious. Nevertheless, for the limited purposes of this discussion, let us say that these figures *problematize* modern ordering structures.

⁸ Those practicing Cultural Criminology have also delineated related arguments about the relationship between the uncertainties of ‘Late Modernity’ (the preferred term in Cultural Criminology) and crime. See Hayward, 2002, especially p. 1 and 5.

⁹ The concept of ‘suture’ does not originate in film theory; it comes from Lacanian psychoanalytical theory. See Sliverman (1992) for a more complete discussion of ‘suture.’