# Let the Story Begin:
## Cinematic Field and Narrative Act in Richard Powers's *Prisoner's Dilemma*

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## I Introduction

The narrative design of Richard Powers's second novel, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* set in a small American town in the Cold War era, centers on the dilemma in game theory. As the 1988 novel unfolds, it touches on various aspects of the twentieth-century American social landscape—the 1939 World's Fair, WWII, Walt Disney and his films, the internment of Japanese Americans, and the Cold War society. The key concept connecting all those elements is the idea of "cinematic field." Powers's novel, throughout its several narrative layers, describes the nation as a film, in which American citizens can exist only as "actors" who perform predetermined roles in the shared condition of mutual distrust: hence the dilemma. There is no outside room or position that escapes this collective framework; everyone is caught inside this national cinema. The photography-history relationship explored in Powers's first novel, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance,* now expands to a cinema-history connection.[1]

The 1988 novel starts as a typical American family drama. "*Somewhere*,"

1 In American postmodernist fiction, the idea of the cinematic world is indicated in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow,* in which Tyron Slothrop appears as a "conditioned" man in the Zone, where the individual is reduced to a "function" determined in the script of the War; the whole world becomes indistinguishable from a film. This cinematic view of the world does not allow Slothrop any possibility of freedom; he appears as a mere product or construct caught up in the war apparatus. Among contemporary American writing of war, Stephen Wright's first novel, *Meditations in Green,* stands out in its attempt to describe the Vietnam War as a cinematic field.

the narrator begins in an idyllic tone, "*my father is teaching us the names of the constellations.*"[2] In 1978, the Hobson family—the father, the mother, and four grown-up children, the 18-year-old son being the youngest—come together on Thanksgiving holiday in DeKalb, Illinois. Then the father, Eddie Hobson Sr., faints, and has to be helped to bed. The family problem demands a solution; according to the cliché of American culture, the restoration of the ideal familial order always awaits in the end: the family members cooperate and overcome the crisis, and they all live happily ever after. Yet, Powers's novel defects from this expected plot, for the father's illness reveals a deeper problem: the family, as well as the entire American society, is caught in the dilemma, so that every member is a prisoner in the cinematic field. Then, the question arises, where is the possibility of freedom?

According to game theory of "Prisoner's Dilemma," there are two strategies available to both players: cooperation or defection. Four possible combinations of strategies are available, but all presuppose the overriding importance of the individual self-interest; in Robert Axelrod's words, it is "an investigation of individuals who pursue their own self-interest."[3] Simply put, the options given do not solve the paradox itself: they are strategies only available within the framework of the dilemma. The prisoner-player is still caught within the walls—that the "individuals remain fixed in their locations" remains an unquestionable condition.[4] Individual freedom in the cinematic field thus seems like a paradox—as one of the favorite sayings repeated by the Hobsons goes: "*Tell me how free I am.*"[5]

This is where the idea of the narrative act enters the picture: in Powers's novel, the act questions and overcomes the fundamental presupposition in the dilemma, the self/other distinction. Several characters appear as

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2 Richard Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma* (New York: Harper, 1988), 13.

3 Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (Cambridge: Basic Books, 2006), 6. The ideas of cooperation or defection in discussions of the dilemma revolve around the question of how the players can secure their maximum benefit in the given condition, leaving the boundaries of the individual or the self/other distinction unquestioned. Powers's novel, on the other hand, tries to undermine the very basis of the dilemma.

4 Ibid. 159.

5 Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* 153, 251, 312, 348.

narrators in the novel, and each act of re-narrating the past cancels the boundaries of the individual; instead the narrator triggers the mutation of self. In his story of Hobstown, the father fictively recomposes the portrait of Walt Disney and blends his own past in the story, thereby calling the very condition of the his own self in the cinematic world into question; then, the children recount their memory of the father, as well as their past, in their effort to mobilize their own subjectivity. For Eddie Sr. and the Hobson children, the narrative is a break or defection from the continuity of their predetermined roles. In the vocabulary of game theory, the idea of narrative act in Powers is a strategy of *cooperative defection*; through narrating, they *defect* from their given locations in the post-war cinematic world, and *cooperate* to form a new collectivity, thereby undermining the framework of the prisoner's dilemma.

## II The Cinema-Cliché World of the Hobsons

Throughout its several narrative layers, the novel explores the cinematic nature of the setting in which the family drama unfolds. It likens the family's hometown to a film-set: when Lily, one of the two daughters, strolls into the town, DeKalb looks "more movie-proppish than ever" to her eyes.[6] The stage of their lives, the house identical to dozens of others, is a "reality studio." However, this analogy to cinema does not stop at the level of the small town. In the "Hobstown" story narrated by the father, the whole nation is conceived as a gigantic movie-set; each individual is situated in this cinematic field.

The novel also explores the predetermined nature of the characters. The main character in this set, Eddie Sr., is a man of cliché, who speaks to the family "*only in favorite sayings.*"[7] To the children's eyes, Pop is a cynic who has abandoned his hope in the world and instead utters paradoxical maxims. "*'We sometimes need coaxing to act on our own,'*"[8] "*'Suppose the world were*

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6 Ibid. 52.
7 Ibid. 153.
8 Ibid. 153.

*already lost.' Suppose it is, because it is*"[9]—those clichés, all of which cancel out voluntary individual action, abound in the children's words as well. Such "*overused maxims*"[10] constitute their subjectivity devoid of the capacity to act; it is "the reign of clichés internally as well as externally" in Gilles Deleuze's words.[11]

Hence the family's reaction to the father's illness: his fit has a long history, and has already become another cliché or "old refrain" in the family.[12] The children, having witnessed the father's illness from childhood, just wait and see, which is a typical attitude handed down in the family: "the hope that everything would still come clean if you only sit still, understate everything, and make yourself as small a target as possible."[13] Discussing the father's reluctance to see a doctor, Artie, the elder son, and Lily also repeat the paternal gesture of resignation. They unknowingly situate themselves in the familiar/familial plot. "This," Joseph Dewey argues, ". . . is the Hobson clan—each casketed like Snow White, each self-imprisoned, each a solo nation."[14]

The story of Hobstown, which the father has dictated into a tape recorder since the 1950s, is significant in this regard, for it reveals the ontological condition of characters in a cinematic world. Unable to know the exact details of the father's narrative, the children regard Hobstown as another cliché, a utopian project. Thus the reality-fantasy distinction is established—"Her father had lost hold on Here"[15]—which only highlights his despair over reality. It is in the fictitious place, the children assume, that Pop can achieve a sense of meaning. Nevertheless, juxtaposed with the life of the Hobsons, the father's story gradually questions the stage of their lives itself.

Eddie Hobson's narrative begins in 1939, when 13-year-old Bud Middleton

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9 Ibid. 154.

10 Ibid. 153.

11 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1983. trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 209.

12 Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* 19.

13 Ibid. 19.

14 John Dewey, *Understanding Richard Powers* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 41.

15 Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* 51.

is overwhelmed by the spectacle of the World's Fair in New York. The narrator further reveals that Bud is not exactly a visitor from outside but a role produced by the Fair itself. This fictitious American boy completely belongs to the Westinghouse set—his situation is no different from a character in a film. The father's description of Bud raises an ontological question; the boy does not exist outside the fair, being unable to question his world: "*'Who built this place? What put us here? And how to get out again?' Bud has no answer, being just thirteen and himself a creation of that same fair. He has just the degree of insight the fair gives him and no more.*"[16] A cinematic character, Bud is forever bound to play his part in the Fair. In the father's recorded story, this condition also applies to another boy of thirteen who visits the 1939 Fair, the father himself in New Jersey. This time, Eddie the boy is a visitor from outside, but the same principle applies to him: he is also "*only as insightful as the world that made him.*"[17] The Fair defines Eddie's perspective on the outer world, so that he is another "*pure product of this year's World's Fair.*"[18] In Hobstown, the spectacle-reality distinction is blurred.

When the narrative of Hobstown introduces another significant character, Walt Disney, it becomes clear that the escapist spectacle is in fact closely connected to war; in Paul Virilio's words, "War can never break free from the magical spectacle because its very purpose is *to produce* that spectacle."[19] Once the United States is involved in WWII, the initial distance between war and cinema vanishes: movies are now part of "*the battle already called the Home Front.*"[20] Disney and his Burbank studios participate in the sweeping tide of war; Eddie Sr., the narrator, describes Disney's conversation with Henry Stimson, the secretary of war, in which the filmmaker promises "*to turn his studio into one of the most powerful weapons for winning the home front.*"[21] A series of propaganda films follow: "In 1943," as Thomas Doherty points out,

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16 Ibid. 43.
17 Ibid. 46.
18 Ibid. 46–47.
19 Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception,* trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1989), 5.
20 Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* 102.
21 Ibid. 133.

"94 percent of Disney's work was war-related."[22]

Eddie Sr. further elaborates on the war-cinema continuum: though his films win acclaim, Disney worries cartoons alone may not be enough to win the war, and plans a tour de force that shows "*just where they are in time, just how urgent, critical, real, and* present *the present is, just how central each of them is to the large picture.*"[23] In other words, the film-image would make spectators recognize their roles in the war: "the military-industrial cinema took up this heap of signs and information to compound not only the unity of the nation but the personality profile of each new citizen."[24] Therefore, the reality-image opposition is totally untenable: Disney films are part of the enterprise that turns the whole wartime society into a cinematic space.

The paternal narrative touches on the value of the individual in this space of cliché: before the massive social dynamic, a single person stands totally powerless, as in the Foucaultian view of the subject－"this individual is . . . a fabrication by an anonymous technology that turns individuality into an instrument of domination and subjection."[25] Hence the repeated question: "*How much can one vote count?*"[26] Father's apparent cynical attitude toward this issue is demonstrated in "the Voting Fallacy" he introduces to the children: "No matter which candidate I like, the fallacy goes, *my* vote itself will not alter the outcome. . . . So why should *I* swelter for a virtuous but impotent ideal?"[27] Inaction becomes his personality in his children's eyes. Faith in the importance of the individual and active engagement are simply negated.

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22 Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 68.

23 Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* 135.

24 Virilio, *War and Cinema,* 40.

25 Michael Clifford, *Political Genealogy after Foucault: Savage Identities* (London: Routledge, 2001), 6.

26 Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* 100.

27 Ibid, 55.

## Ⅲ *Why We Fight* vs. *You Are the War*

The next morning after the father's breakdown, while the rest of the family discusses and ponders what to do, Eddie Sr. suddenly refers to "The Prisoner's Dilemma," the paradox of game theory, in the following terms: two men are summoned to Senator McCarthy who tell them, "'Fellas, we know that you are both Reds. . . . Let's make a deal. If either of you comes forward with the dope on the other, the man who talks will go free and the other will fry. If neither of you spills the goods on the other, you'll still suffer public humiliation at the very least.'"[28] For each, the way to freedom lies in betraying the other man; on the other hand, should both choose to defect, they would suffer a penalty heavier than the one shared silence would bring them. So what to do? Defect or cooperate? This is the question the father asks the family.

The other Hobsons offer their own solutions to the father's question. "'The two men simply have to trust each other,'" his wife insists, "'not be intimidated, and realize that they're in the same boat.'"[29] Cooperation is her answer, which Lily challenges, saying, "'But they can't be sure the other can be trusted.'"[30] Later, when Eddie Jr. proposes the idea of Tit for Tat, the most successful strategy, which "cooperates on the first move and then does whatever the other player did on the previous move,"[31] game theory touches on the very question of war. To the younger son the father points out the possibility of perpetual revenge: they defect, so we defect, which triggers further defection. . . "Still another problem with TIT FOR TAT is that it is subject to 'echo' effects."[32] The story of Hobstown then explores the dismal aspect of game theory in WWII—the most effective strategy in the theory led to concentration camps. The theory and its effective strategy are actually grounded in wartime reality. The story of Hobstown recaptures this dynamics, and

28 Ibid, 69–70.
29 Ibid, 71.
30 Ibid, 72.
31 Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation,* 20.
32 William Poundsrtone, *Prisoner's Dilemma: John Von Neumann, Game Theory, and The Puzzle of the Bomb* (New York: Anchor, 1992), 243.

then tries to mutate it.

As the war against Japan begins, the father's narrative continues, a massive reorganization of American society occurs—"War now spread not just territorially but to the whole of reality."[33] In reacting to the defection of the Japanese force, the whole society is charged with enthusiasm for the war:

> *Two months after the sneak attack, it seems as if we were itching for it, daring the enemy to do it. Now we set out on a global enterprise, ebullient, charged with energy. . . . The war is about righting wrong with unprecedented industrial production. Tit for Tat.*[34]

The logic of game theory pervades this wartime society: the construction of the cinematic world of war proceeds on the principle of Tit for Tat. Everyone plays his or her part, however small, in the gigantic film called WWII, in which Hollywood is another cog. The interment of the AJAs or the Americans of Japanese Ancestry belongs to this enterprise: as the narrator points out, "*The mass imprisonment is one small and mostly overlooked step in the largest and finest mobilization the world has ever seen.*"[35] Just as the 1939 World's Fair shows the "redesign of the American landscape,"[36] the war re-shapes the visible world of the nation by driving their internal "enemy" into the invisibility of inland camps. The strategy of defection is adopted inside American society.

Here the Hobstown story takes an unexpected turn. As the father's story progresses, the story of Disney deviates from the historical facts: the filmmaker is of Japanese descent, and when he finds the Japanese staff gone, the animator realizes his world is involved in the domestic practice of Tit for Tat. Yet he plans to act upon this situation without resorting to the same strategy. Disney as narrated by Eddie resists the plot of Tit for Tat, trying to de-

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33 Virilio, *War and Cinema,* 57.

34 Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* 130.

35 Ibid, 132.

36 Paul Mason Fotsch, "The Building of a Superhighway Future at the New York World's Fair," *Cultural Critique* 48 (2001): 65–97.

fect from the dynamics of war.

The filmmaker visits the secretary of war and proposes his idea for "*the feature-length, revolutionary motion picture* You Are the War."[37] In his negotiation with the secretary, the fabricated Disney uses the political nature of his identity as an AJA: "*He informs Stimson that if he can't get the ten thousand bodies out, he will publicly demand to be arrested.*"[38] As a result, he is able to free ten thousand Japanese Americans from the camp as the staff of his tour de force. The set called World World is secretly built inland, where the production begins; the wartime film combines the animation character Mickey with a real central actor to be named. The introductory version of *You Are the War* presents Fairy Dust, which has the power to "*bleed goodwill across their condensed country's borders,*"[39] so that the film, confronting the logic of war, deviates from its expected role as propaganda. The film resists the cooperation/defection alternative by combining both options: Disney and his staff cooperate to defect from the war.

When the boy Eddie Hobson is singled out to star in *You Are the War,* the animator explains his task to the boy: "*to set free as many as possible, to coax them to act on their own.*"[40] Here one of the cynical father's favorite paradoxes, "Sometimes we need to be coaxed to act on our own," changes its function: no longer a nihilistic impasse, it becomes a principle of Disney's resistance to the war. From propaganda to *You Are the War*—Disney now aims to mutate the wartime cinema cliché.

In WWII, it is the internal other who is forced to become prisoner, but Disney in the Hobstown story foresees an expansion of this logic in the post-war era. The principle of imprisonment will penetrate every aspect of the world, as Disney explains to the boy.

> *We have reached the point where we imprison ourselves by the hundred thousand, commonly agreed to be in the best collective interest. . . . The*

37 Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* 177.
38 Ibid, 180.
39 Ibid, 214.
40 Ibid, 264.

> *world is now so treacherous and immense that the private citizen in the postwar world will lock* himself *up rather than face the prospect of prison.*[41]

Self-imprisonment－everyone locks him/herself inside the film of fear－would be the basis of individual freedom in the post-war era. As in Giorgio Agamben's Foucault-inspired argument, "Today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West."[42] The father's story thus touches on the very foundation the Hobsons' lives.

## Ⅳ The War－To Be Continued

In DeKalb, to everyone's surprise, Eddie Sr. agrees to go to the hospital, pointing the family crisis toward what seems a desired ending. Yet, intertwined with the story of Hobstown, another problem reveals itself for the Hobsons: their lives are based on the continued wartime logic of war, which subsists as the generalized feeling of fear. As Brian Massumi maintains in his discussion of the founding role of fear in contemporary American society, "What society looks toward is no longer a return to the promised land but a general disaster that is already upon us, woven into the fabric of day-to-day life."[43] Every life participates in this fear and mutual distrust, which breeds and nurtures the post-war obsession with security, as is evident in Lily's letter to her neighbor, Mrs. Swallow. Lily describes her neighbor's fear-driven routine－checking and re-checking the door locked－and concludes, "You could not live without this routine. It orders your remaining days, lends them a motive they would be pointless without."[44] Without any concrete basis, the fear grows and maintains itself; the interlude of peace only doubles fear.

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41 Ibid, 265.

42 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life.* trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 181.

43 Brian Massumi, "Everywhere You Want to Be: Introduction to Fear," *The Politics of Everyday Fear,* ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 11.

44 Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* 205.

As long as society is mobilized in the system of war, the father's story goes on, the period of actual warfare is nothing but a part of it; it hits Disney that the war is "*the first round of a permanent People's War.*"[45] Everyday life is the site where the war is fought. As Eric Alliez and Antonio Negri claim, "everything happens as if peace and war were so tightly enmeshed that they no longer form anything but the two faces of a single membrane."[46] WWII passes into the Cold War, and the social mobilization continues. The secretary of war, Stimson, demands that Disney's film be repeatable in future wars:

> '*Film it for the future, so that a national switch in enemies will make no difference. . . . Don't be too concerned with this little scrap we're having with the Germans. Or even the Japanese, for that matter. They are only today's enemies. This too will pass.*'[47]

The cinema of war maintains itself, changing its foil: Japan will be replaced by the communist forces, ad infinitum. Stimson himself realizes its lasting nature—"*We have given birth to the world of the permanent threat*"[48]—putting the whole nation in the prisoner's dilemma, endlessly engendering the distrust of the other and obsession with "*national security,*" which "*is not separable from budding hatred.*"[49] The culture of security is saturated by Tit for Tat.

In *You Are the War,* the story within the father's story, Eddie as an innocent American boy foresees this situation, in which people "*surrender all event, all involvement in the common project of being alive.*"[50] The only principle of community is self-interest, underwritten by constant fear of the

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45 Ibid. 217.

46 Eric Alliez and Antonio Negri, "Peace and War," trans. Alberto Toscano *Theory, Culture & Society* 20, no. 2 (2003): 110. Though preceding Alliez and Negri's discussion of "War on Terror" by fifteen years, Powers's novel grasps the exact nature of contemporary social conditions.

47 Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* 178.

48 Ibid, 179.

49 Ibid, 218.

50 Ibid, 310.

other. In such a society, the individual only exists in self-imprisonment: the traditionally assumed space of freedom has evaporated. Disney's resistance thus necessarily raises the question of freedom. Every individual is cast in the big picture of war—where, then, is the exit?

One of the film staff, Ralph Sato, questions Disney's project, insisting another "exit" from the camp: "'*You said it was either the concentration camps or this,*" he tells his boss. "'*But there's a third place.* Another way out.'"[51] Sato chooses to join the war, to play a part in the national film of destruction: "*Enlistment: the draft board's offer of freedom.*"[52] One escapes the camp, only to be cast in the gigantic cinema of war. Doherty notices that the "formation of Japanese-American combat units in 1943 and their sterling performance under fire in Italy and Germany the next year were chronicled with appreciation and wonderment in press and newsreel reports."[53] They become actors in the national cinema, failing to exit from the cinematic world.

Two of the Hobsons, Artie and Rachel, also encounter the question of resistance and freedom. Their complaints, when they are caught and fined by a policeman for exceeding the speed limit, reflect the American tradition of individual resistance; Artie throws the ticket away, saying, "'that's just civil disobedience act number one.'"[54] He begins to list his future acts of resistance, including the refusal of TV ads and Muzak, the latter of which gains Rachel's agreement. As they admit, it is not an act of resistance but complaint, another cliché of modern life: "'Our only common culture is complaint. Antisocial small talk. Complaint is the last tool society leaves us for feeling we belong.'"[55] The attitude of inaction runs through them, which they attribute to the cynical father: the children repeat the father's "'[d]iscontent as an art form.'"[56] The children remain caught in "a cinema based on the automa-

51 Ibid, 271.
52 Ibid, 273.
53 Doherty, *Projections of War,* 146–47.
54 Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* 168.
55 Ibid, 169.
56 Ibid, 171.

tion of the state (clichés of history and action),"[57] still playing the role of harmlessly frustrated citizens.

## V The Defecting Father: Narrative Repetition

At this point, suddenly, the father disappears from the Chicago hospital, thereby escaping from his expected role: "There was more to him than anybody suspected."[58] This familiar cliché reveals an unforeseen aspect in the father's character. The father's defection, far from inducing the act of Tit for Tat of the remaining family, leads to the crucial transformation of the Hobsons. The children discover the father's narrative project, which triggers their own act of narrating the memory of Eddie Sr. Namely, the children *co-operate* with the father's project of *defecting* from the dilemma, repeating the paternal gesture. In the process, all the clichés in the family change their functions: they no longer constitute cynical self in the cinematic field, but are now employed in the production of a new subjectivity. The defection from the cliché-cinema is attempted by the narrative act that works on the given contours of the family and the individual.

On the road, Eddie Sr. phones the family from near St. Louis, then from Amarillo, Texas. The children at home try to figure out his destination. To them, the question is how to restore the familiar/familial plot. Their initial goal is to make the father cooperate with the cliché: "Pop was on the loose; what could *we* do to reverse the situation?"[59] Yet, without an appropriate plan, they can only wait, until the youngest Hobson, Eddie Jr., decides to find the father. Inspired by the father, the son rents a car and goes on the road. The former cliché, "We sometimes need coaxing to act on our own,"[60] changes its function, now effecting an action.

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57 Gregg Lambert, "Cinema and the Outside," *The Brain is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema,* ed. Gregory Flaxman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000): 270. Lambert, like Powers, reflects on the question of the "outside," namely the space of freedom, in the world made of clichés.

58 Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* 276.

59 Ibid, 277.

60 Ibid, 305.

Waiting home, Artie discovers the tape recording of Hobstown and notices the event in the father's life which decisively transformed the eager youth into a cynic. Transferred to an inland desert at the end of the war, the father had witnessed the crucial event of modern history, the explosion of the first atomic bomb: "*Too fast, too sharply, too bright, it grows into a light more luminous than noon. The desert blooms.*"[61] His long illness was caused by the exposure to this first glimpse of the ultimate weapon of mass destruction: "Dad's sickness, from day one, came from his being the last man in the Northern Hemisphere who refused to think of the past as *over.*"[62] The past continues in the present: the father's suffering body is a testimony to this simple fact. It is now made clear that their father's narrative has persistently explored the past-present relation through which his existence has been conditioned. The history of war and fear is not so much a detached legacy as the ground of the present－"We *are the present's war*"[63]－of which the children have been unaware.

The internment of Japanese-Americans is a historical fact, Artie learns, whereas Disney's involvement is a figment. The son is faced with the transformative nature of the story; in his narrative of Hobstown, Disney is transformed into a figure of resistance; moreover, by involving his own past in the story, Eddie Sr. tries to detach himself from the ready-made cinematic world of war. As Gregg Lambert argues, "the 'past itself' cannot be determined outside this possibility of being scrambled and entering new combinations with the present."[64] Much more than a mere escape, it is "an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform himself, and to attain to a certain mode of being."[65] Narrative is the production of the transformative subjectivity by which the father mobilizes himself to resist the simple continuity of the present condition.

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61 Ibid, 321.

62 Ibid, 325.

63 Ibid, 245.

64 Lambert, "Cinema and the Outside," 286.

65 Michel Foucault, "The Ethic of the Concern of the Self As a Practice of Freedom," trans. P. Aranow and D. McGrawth, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth.* Ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 282.

Listening to the father's tape, the children realize the true problem: their selves are the silent battlefield of the war. Since the prisoner's dilemma presupposes a walled subjectivity formed in a community of fear, the matrix can be broken by a different practice of self; in Judith Butler's words, "Critique is not merely *of* a given social practice or a certain horizon of intelligibility . . . it also implies that I come into question for myself."[66] Eddie Sr. tries to trigger the transformation of the Hobson community through his story: "The man was fighting for his life: that much was obvious. And more than his life."[67] The father's narrative blurs the boundaries of self and other, thereby inducing a new form of community. Artie is struck by the fact that, "The only way out was to release the us-and-us that was trapped inside the you-versus-he,"[68] but this is not a return to the ideal "We" in the past: a new collectivity has to be freshly constructed out of the cliché of the nuclear family.

When the father's tape ends, Artie rewinds it and starts to record his own narrative: "*Somewhere, my father is teaching us the names of the constellations.*"[69] Then the sisters take over, so that the plural voices are recorded on the tape: "Around they went, all in single file."[70] Another cliché now offers a glimpse of the communal narrative act. It is important, therefore, that the father's story is always renewable through other voices. In *Prisoner's Dilemma,* the lack of finality in the father's story functions as potential for a continually new narrative: there is more to any given story. The Hobstown story, which the father kept renewing for two decades, is now taken up by the children. The children's narrative acts, the beginning of which corresponds to the initial passage of the novel, thus envelop the story of Hobstown. They pick up the father's lone vote to start their own story, in which they constitute a space where a single voice is connected to a new collectivity. This interaction of plural voices found in *Prisoner's Dilemma* is close to the view of M.

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66 Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 23.

67 Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* 317.

68 Ibid, 313.

69 Ibid, 344.

70 Ibid, 344.

M. Bakhtin, who argues that "[e]very novel, taken as the totality of all the languages and consciousness of language embodied in it, is a *hybrid.*"[71]

Thus the clichés in the family are re-deployed so as to eventually engender the children's action. Accordingly, the family transforms itself: instead of re-affirming "*one of the blamelessly median houses where they raised blameless median family,*"[72] the father's narrative act triggers others' interrogations of their own selves. In these overlapping narratives, the principle is to mutate the familiar form of self: the patriotic Disney, the cynical father, and the indifferent children—all are called into question through the narrative act. Several layers of narrative become indistinguishable, making the novel the place where voices collectively transform themselves, without being subjugated to the father as the Great Dictator or the writer himself.[73] The "we" that narrative activates is a transformative space where the individual voices of the family members are opened to their mutations. "Fabulation," as Massumi puts it, "is the attraction of deviant singularities into a new constellation, the crystallization of a new collectivity."[74]

The concept of the individual, which lies at the basis of the dilemma, is thus necessarily redefined. Rather than a bounded entity, the individual is opened to transformation; as the father's single narrative induces the children's questioning of their own being, the importance of the individual—how much one individual can count—lies not in "the humanist idea that the most promising solutions to our problems can be found within,"[75] but in the

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71 M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination.* Ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 366.

72 Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* 249.

73 This dynamic does not allow room for a transcendent narrator who stands beyond narrated events. In the inserted section called "Calamine," another narrator, supposedly Powers, appears to explain the conception behind his narrative. The narrator is the middle son of a family in DeKalb, whose father recently died, which clarifies his similarity and difference from the Hobsons: Therefore, the subjectivity of "Powers," a narrator who speaks of his father in such sections as "Tit for Tat," is also involved: the author is another voice which changes through the narrative act.

74 Massumi, "Everywhere You Want to Be," 34.

75 Scott Hermanson, "Just Behind the Billboard: The Instability of *Prisoner's Dilemma,*" in *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers,* eds. Stephen J. Burn and Peter Dempsey (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008), 62.

capacity to mutate and be mutated by others. Therefore, the individual is connected to the collective dimension through its transformative potential. Singular and plural at the same time, the narrative act undoes the presupposition of the bounded individual in the prisoner's dilemma: "*the possibility of* another *place, the* other *person's story,*"[76] no longer an escapist fantasy, becomes a practice of connecting the self with the new collectivity.[77]

The transformative force of the fabricating act also illuminates the conundrum of freedom. In *Prisoner's Dilemma,* freedom does not lie in the options available to individuals, as in game theory, but in the act of subverting a given situation by re-narrating the past. It is not a right or property, as one of the oldest American clichés holds; rather, freedom is the capacity for transformation: "the freedom opened by counter-memory is a freedom of permanent transformation, of always being able to become other than what we are."[78] The act of freedom in *Prisoner's Dilemma* lies in the transformative act that changes the composition of the individual. Narrative produces a new space where the cliché-subjectivity is opened to its transmutability.

The news of Hiroshima breaks at the end of the Hobstown story—WWII is about to end, and the Cold War is set to begin. *You Are the War* is left unfinished—Disney's project of influencing the whole nation is a failure after all. In the deserted studio office, Eddie finds the filmmaker's dictaphone. "Let's start again, from scratch," he begins his story. "Let us make a small world, a miniature of a miniature, say an even half-dozen, since we screw up everything larger."[79] Eddie is still cooperating with Disney's plan to defect from the war film, but on a smaller scale: the future Hobson father envisions

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76 Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* 79.

77 The blurring of the boundaries of individual voices in *Prisoner's Dilemma* always activates communal moments. However, this indeterminacy does not constitute a labyrinth where the sense of "reality" is thoroughly negated; it causes the interaction of the transforming voices, in which they detach from the domain of clichés. It is important, therefore, that the father's story is always renewable through other voices. In *Prisoner's Dilemma,* the lack of definitive finality functions as potential for a continually new narrative: there is more to any given story. The father's story recorded on the tape is an indicator of such a possibility.

78 Clifford, *Political Genealogy after Foucault,* 137.

79 Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* 333.

his family as a community where resistance to the war will be carried out. At the end of the tape, he describes a future family scene, "It's one of those unrepeatable days in mid-May, and all those who are still at home sit down to dinner,"[80] which is repeated in the beginning of the final section of the novel, "1 979," in which the father-less Hobsons gather at home. By reenacting the paternal words, his family appears as the embodiment of their father's story. Yet, the transformative narrative undertaken by the children has already begun, so that the repetition takes up the movement of detachment from the reign of cliché-subjectivity. Eddie Sr., supposedly dead, abruptly appears at the family table; with his sudden return, the clichés also return to the scene, but now their workings have been changed:

> *"What?" the specter demands. "What am I?" The trademark, sardonic, challenging smile. It occurs to them all that there is more to any of them than any of them suspects. But sometimes we need coaxing to act on our own accord. At last Artie masters the apparition. "Tell us how free we are, Pop," he says, through the side of his mouth. Tell me how free I am.*[81]

There is a potential for the transformation in any given subjectivity (there is more), but the act that activates the potential is preceded by the other (we need coaxing to act), and that act is itself a response to the preceding narrative acts (tell me how free I am). Once indications of total resignation, now the clichés are deployed in a new constellation. The clichés and the familial relations enter into a different community. By cooperating with his narrative, the family defects from the cynical father and from the clichés of the cinematic world.

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80 Ibid, 333.

81 Ibid, 348.

## VI Conclusion

While Powers's novels take up various subjects — history, genes, computer science, and the human brain — the idea of mutation or variation always accompanies his work. His third novel, *Gold Bug Variations,* is an exploration of the idea of mutation, already seen in the Hobson children who are "variations on a theme."[82] In *Prisoner's Dilemma,* every character — Disney, the father, and the Hobson children — transforms his/her self in the overlapping narratives. The novel is designed as an interactive space where the narrative acts echo and involve each other in the processes of mutation in their effort to break the prisoner's dilemma.

"The only satisfying solution to the prisoner's dilemma is to avoid prisoner's dilemmas," Poundstone concludes,[83] but that is not a simple task for those who find themselves already in the dilemma: the prisoners must invent a new space where their selves can be reshaped. The choices given are insufficient in this regard; referring to the narrative strategy of the novel, James Hurt argues that "we must act cooperatively to survive,"[84] but this view is still caught in the paradox: cooperation for survival does not question the fundamental presupposition of the self/other division posited by the dilemma. On the contrary, the act of narration, in its attempt to mutate the workings of the clichés, forms an unexpected space of variation inside the paradox. The novel turns the walls surrounding the prisoners into *membranes,* through which voices affect each other in the process of mutation. As the dilemma's basic assumptions — the bounded individual and his/her self-interest — are transfigured by the act of narration, the values of the individual and his/her freedom are formulated anew. The self and community are questioned and re-organized by the narrative act.

Thus the novel ultimately questions the idea of "America," which still engages contemporary writers like Don DeLillo, William T. Vollmann, and

82 Ibid, 29.

83 Poundstone, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* 278.

84 James Hurt, "Narrative Powers: Richard Powers as Storyteller," *Review of Contemporary Fiction.* 18, no. 3 (1998): 34.

Steve Erickson. In Powers's novel, the idea of the narrative act invents a new space inside the confines of the cinematic world. "*We move, we uproot. We rebuild slowly in a strange place. We tear ourselves up and move again, for reasons only he understands. We strand ourselves, weave between Atlantic and Pacific, a moving target,*"[85] one of the Hobson children says. This statement, seemingly another repetition of the American historical cliché of settlement and expansion, in fact functions as the transformative version of the national experience, by which the Hobsons cooperate in their defection from a dilemma-enclosed cinematic world. Narrative is a movement, an uprooting from the role-subjectivity assigned in the gigantic cinema—the prisoners escape from the cell, because, to quote the father, there is always more to any of them than any of them suspects.

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85 Powers, *Prisoner's Dilemma,* 14.