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***The Death of Salesmen:* David Mamet's Drama, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and Three Iconic Forerunners**

This essay places *Glengarry Glen Ross* in the context of David Mamet's *oeuvre* and the whole of American drama, as well as in the context of economic capitalism and even U.S. foreign policy. The author pays special attention here (for the first time in English-language scholarship) to the subject of salesmen or selling as depicted in Mamet's drama and earlier in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, and Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*—each of which also features a salesman among its characters.

Key words: David Mamet; *Glengarry Glen Ross*; American drama; Selling/salesmanship; Americanism; *Death of a Salesman*; *The Iceman Cometh*; *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Introduction: David Mamet's Drama

This essay will first place *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983) in the context of David Mamet's *oeuvre* and then discuss the play in detail, before going on to treat the combined subject of salesmen or selling, economic capitalism, and even U.S. foreign policy as they are depicted or intimated not only in *Glengarry* but in earlier American drama (a subject previously undiscussed in English-language scholarship). I am thinking here of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* (1946), and Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947)—each of which also features a salesman among its main characters.

Subsequent to Miller, O'Neill, and Williams (surely the three best American playwrights of the first half of the twentieth century), Mamet's own rise to the forefront of American drama has been seen as the triumph of a minimalist (Bigsby, *Mamet* 22, 44; Carroll, 54, 67, 124; Kane, *Casebook* 67; Sauer, *Research* 103, 105, 226,

249, 274; Sauer, *Oleanna* 62-63, 65-66, 84, 93), the most obvious component of whose signature style is his dialogue.¹ A reification or materialization of the white, lower-to-lower-middle-class Chicago idiom, that dialogue is carefully abstracted and heightened – its degree of ebullience, of rhythmic confidence or assertiveness, being almost always in proportion, paradoxically, to the extent to which the speaker has been denatured by his social role (a denaturing apparent in the sheer number of obscenities employed).

As for the other salient feature of Mamet's work, his minimalism, it is evident in the compactness of his dialogue, the relative "plotlessness" of his plays, and their dearth of stage directions as well as descriptions. Such minimalism has strong European parallels, and the downbeat tone of Mamet's drama – its articulation of a poetics of loss without any patent compensatory dimension – together with the palpable stasis of many of his endings, does seem to derive from the theater of Pinter, Beckett, and the Absurdist. Unlike them, however, Mamet is more a realist-cum-naturalist and therefore a moralist, who is filled with dismay at the obsolescence and covert predatoriness of certain American myths, particularly the frontier myth as domesticated in the boys' fiction of Horatio Alger.

American Buffalo (1975) was the work that established Mamet as a major voice in the contemporary American theater and framed the distinctive qualities of his drama – qualities that would later be quintessentially reprised in the even more powerful *Glengarry Glen Ross*. These are a nearly exclusionary focus on the sleazy world of masculine power, bonding, and betrayal; a meticulous deployment of his characters' urban vernacular such that, through their fractured utterances and pauses, Mamet is able to chart their inner conflicts and psychological shifts; an examination of the influence of the myths and archetypes of popular culture upon America's citizens, to such an extent that Mamet's characters have commodified cultural myths and consequently "sell carefully packaged narratives as undeniable truth" (Saddik 138); and a recurring concern with the world of American business in its tawdrier incarnations (where even morality is bartered as a commodity).

Set in a rundown, claustrophobic junk shop in Chicago, *American Buffalo* delineates the symbolic relationships among three men who plan the robbery of a valuable buffalo nickel, only to have their plot go awry. Inhabiting an inner city of resident hotels, cheap diners, and pawnshops, Don, Teach, and Bobby are petty crooks without the intelligence or forethought necessary to actually carry out the robbery they propose. Indeed, their strategies for the break-in, which swing between the starkly vicious and the hilariously incompetent, ensure that their venture never gets off the ground. The projected heist does, however, serve to illuminate the values of these characters and to focus attention on the nature of their friendship. For these three low-lives are willing to betray each other on behalf of "business" principles that are, in fact, nothing more than selfish moves to achieve material advantage. In the process, they evoke the same hypocritical pieties and maxims as might any big-time businessman in a corporate boardroom.

¹ Only Sam Shepard has an emphatic signature style comparable to Mamet's, but his depends less on the shape and sound of words than on an offbeat, sometimes surreal use of scenic elements. See Bigsby, *Cambridge* 4, 26, 49; Bottoms 1-3, 153; Carroll 150-51; Cohen 337-38; Cohn 160-84; Saddik 129-50; Skelton 18-19.

Thus does Mamet imply that an entire society—of high-life, low-life, and the middle class in between—is engaged in the pursuit of monetary gain to such an extent that it has supplanted or perverted all other forms of behavior. Even in the midst of their ethical confusion and essential isolation, however, Don, Teach, and Bobby long for the compassionate interaction that their own actions constantly subvert, for the humane connection that they have sacrificed for mere survival in the competitive rat-race known as rampant capitalism. This is *American Buffalo's* pathos, and what makes its otherwise brilliant rendering of callousness and greed, of failed communication, clumsy manipulation, and casual venality, so compelling.

Other plays by Mamet deal more positively with the possibilities of genuine communion in love or friendship. *A Life in the Theatre* (1977) and *Lakeboat* (1970; revised, 1980) are male rite-of-passage dramas and studies of mentor-protégé relationships in which the protégé moves beyond the mentor or removes himself from the mentor's sphere. *Reunion* (1976) depicts the tender meeting between an estranged father and daughter who have not seen each other for twenty years. *The Shawl* (1985) builds to an unexpected communion between a supposed clairvoyant and the wealthy woman he had earlier planned to cheat out of her fortune. *Edmond* (1982), for its part, presents a more complex and even ironic pattern in which "communion" for the protagonist is only reached on the other side of murder, in jail, in a homosexual bond with a black prisoner.

Yet another group of Mamet plays shows nascent love between men and women destroyed by a complicated array of forces not limited to the business "ethics" that dominates *American Buffalo*. In *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974), the romance between an inexperienced pair of lovers is soured not only by the dog-eat-dog atmosphere of the downtown office scene, but also by their own pettiness, hesitancy, and reserve as well as the cynical ministrations of each one's older, same-sex mentor figure. In *The Woods* (1977), Mamet focuses exclusively on two lovers in an isolated cabin, revealing the emotional insecurity together with the metaphysical terror of a male on the verge of deeper commitment. And in *Speed-the-Plow* (1988; followed in 1989 by a sequel titled *Bobby Gould in Hell*), an attraction between a temporary secretary and a jaded film producer is torpedoed by his "buddy," a self-seeking Hollywood agent who decides that the woman's feelings are motivated only by her ego in the promotion of a script, or artistic "property."

The cutthroat world of Hollywood executives is not so different from the equally ruthless milieu of real-estate salesmen in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, who also peddle properties if they do not engage (onstage at least) in the exploitation, objectification, or manipulation of women. Instead, in the process of peddling those useless properties (several of which are referred to in the play's snappy but empty title), the salesmen exploit, objectify, and manipulate one another; like the characters in *American Buffalo*, albeit at a somewhat higher level, they sacrifice friendship for money, fellowship for commerce, getting along for getting ahead. Mamet may express his moral outrage at the various salesmen's tactics and actions, but he also communicates his paradoxical respect for their manic energy, endless resourcefulness, and persistent ability to bounce back. Their struggle for something like existence, for triumph even, within the language they speak creates the real dynamic of this biting, funny, harrowing, and finally purgative play. And that grinding, salty, relentless language—stripped of all idealistic pretenses and liberal pieties—is what stays in the audience's

mind long after a reading or viewing of *Glengarry Glen Ross*. The play is readily available for viewing, since it was filmed in 1992 (though with changes designed to make the salesmen more sympathetic and their world less dark), as were *American Buffalo* in 1996 and *Oleanna* in 1994.

One of Mamet's most controversial works (Bigsby, *Cambridge* 74; Culpeper et al. 112; Fortier 139; Knowles 74), *Oleanna* was first performed on stage in 1992 and investigates the issue of sexual harassment—particularly as it gets played out in an American academy undergoing profound and interrelated social and economic transformations. Mamet's treatment of women in his earlier plays has sometimes drawn fire, and his depiction of Carol, the student in his drama, continues to garner its share. Even the successful female psychologist of his best original screenplay, *House of Games* (1987, also directed by Mamet), came under attack by feminists: for she becomes a compulsive thief after being duped, financially as well as sexually, by a gangster and then murders him in revenge.

Perhaps the later *Boston Marriage* (1999) was Mamet's reaction to such criticism, as it examined a blue-blood Victorian relationship between two women and signaled yet another new direction for this, the most protean as well as Promethean of contemporary dramatists. Then again, that new direction still included—and includes—some of the most ferocious, most unbuttoned, most politically incorrect racial and religious slurs in recent American drama, as evidenced by Mamet's *Romance* (2005), a legal farce in the tradition of the Marx Brothers that features Jewish, Gentile, and homosexual characters against the background of a peace conference between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Ironically, or perhaps aptly, *Romance* opened in New York at the same time as the staccato realism of *Glengarry Glen Ross* was being revived on Broadway—and was followed by such provocative Mamet play titles as *Keep Your Pantheon* (2007), *The Vikings and Darwin* (2008), *Race* (2009), *The Anarchist* (2012), *The Penitent* (2017), and 2018's *Bitter Wheat*, about the provocative subject of the sexual predator and Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein.

Glengarry Glen Ross

Let me give a detailed consideration now of *Glengarry Glen Ross* and the subject of salesmen or selling—a subject apparently dear to Mamet. As he himself has written, “My immigrant grandfather . . . supported his family as a traveling clothing salesman, on the road five days a week, for forty years. His type was an everyday fixture of American Jewish life, in the first and second generations” (Mamet “Human Stain”). Mamet continued the selling tradition as a young man in Chicago in the late 1960s, first selling carpet over the telephone, “cold calling out of the blue book, absolutely cold” (Kane, *Conversation* 114). The other job was when he was just out of college, working for a year “in a boiler room . . . trying to sell worthless land in Arizona and Florida. You follow up leads . . . and make appointments so a salesman can go out and seal the deal” (Bigsby, *Cambridge* 89).

Glengarry Glen Ross has two, very different “selling” acts. In its three scenes, the first act offers three variations, each cast in duet-form, on the theme of persuasion. The setting is a Chinese restaurant in Chicago. In scene one, Shelley “the Machine” Levene, once a leading salesman but now fading badly, tries with increasing

desperation to get the office manager, John Williamson, to give him the best “leads,” or appointments with prospective customers – resorting eventually to (but not succeeding in) bribery. In the second scene, the mutually consoling gestures made by the frustrated no-hoper Moss toward the already defeated Aaronow turn out to be a tactic designed to compromise the latter man – by involving him in a plan to rob the real-estate office and sell the “hot” leads. Scene three, like scene two, also involves deception in tandem with persuasion. Richard “Ricky” Roma, the current star salesman and “ruler” of the office, first hypnotizes a milquetoast called Lingk with some unbuttoned philosophizing, then pounces on his sales prey. Roma seemed to be relaxing as he talked, but in fact he was artfully doing his job. The top prize of a Cadillac in the office selling-contest is almost his. (The second man wins a set of steak knives, while the bottom two salesmen get fired.)

Act II harnesses and combines the dynamic energy of these three encounters in a more or less conventional plot structure. It is the next morning, the real-estate office or “boiler room” has been ransacked, and the leads have been stolen. Throughout the act the salesmen are called into an adjoining room for questioning by a detective named Baylen. Levene joins Aaronow, Moss, and Roma in the office, where he wants to celebrate and recount his “closing” of a big sale – which is later revealed to be a dud. Then Lingk arrives to cancel Roma’s sale to *him*. Roma stalls with Levene’s clever help, but when Williamson mentions that this customer’s check has already been cashed, Lingk rushes out and the deal is doomed. Williamson is abusively berated for opening his mouth, first by Roma and next by Levene, but when the latter lets slip that he knows Williamson lied about the check, he betrays his own guilt for the robbery. Only the thief could have known that Lingk’s check, instead of being deposited at the bank, remained sitting on the office manager’s desk. Williamson reports Levene to the police. Levene squeals on Dave Moss. Roma resumes his predatory quest for the Cadillac – but not before making sure that he takes financial advantage of the pathetic, defenseless Levene. The play concludes with Aaronow entering to complain, “I hate this job.”

Such an account of the plot of *Glengarry Glen Ross* barely hints at the linguistic virtuosity of Mamet’s writing. There is a rich orchestration of voices, sounding the whirling idiom of sales-speak – “leads,” “sits,” “closes,” “boards,” “streaks” – which is rhythmically sustained by a constant stream of highly expressive obscenities. The very opacity of the language – its ellipses, parataxis, and concealment (as opposed to exposition) – makes us aware of speech as *act*, as something that functions rhetorically rather than as a lucid medium of transmission or communication. For the salesman is a rhetorician whose job hinges on the power of speech, the act of utterance, the theater of the word. Whatever the words used, the rhythms, the tones, the pauses, the fragments are designed to bully, to cajole, to advance, to retreat, to seduce, to impress. (High-speed Pinter, one could call this style, and Harold Pinter happens to be the play’s dedicatee.) As Mamet himself has said, “The salesmen [where I once worked] were primarily performers. They went into people’s living rooms and performed their play about investment properties” (Dean 212), just as Roma improvises one fiction after another in order to snare Lingk. Indeed, these men seem never to stop performing, even when they are alone with one another: aggressive selling has become for them not merely a profession but a means of *being*, to the point that they are imprisoned within the sales-talking lingo of their lives.

The fiction that the salesmen play out among themselves concerns the “frontier ethic.” This is the idea that success is attained not only through self-reliance and hard work, through the drive and initiative of the rugged individualist, but also through the partnership, dependability, and fellowship of other men. Thus Levene can declare at one point that “You have to believe in yourself” (Mamet, *Glengarry* 67), and at another that “your partner *depends* on you . . . you have to go *with* him and *for* him . . . you can’t exist alone” (Mamet, *Glengarry* 98). The predatory individualism of these men, however, introduces an inevitable, irremediable contradiction into the frontier ethic, which then becomes a vehicle for the domination of others in relationships founded on professional rivalry. Originally practiced at the expense of the Native Peoples as well as other Americans, the frontier ethic in *Glengarry Glen Ross* is practiced at the expense of bottom-feeders like George Aaronow and their cliental counterparts—like James Lingk. He desperately needs to believe in something or someone and is conned into thinking that, through the existential act of purchase, he is affirming his essential, authentic being. What he buys, ironically, is the very land that was once taken from the Native Peoples and has itself become a waste product of our Manifest Destiny.

***Glengarry Glen Ross* and Three Iconic Plays from the 1940s**

Often called a *Death of a Salesman* for the 1980s (Bigsby, *Cambridge* 78; Dean 189; Kane, *Text* 217; Sauer, *Research* 168), *Glengarry Glen Ross* may surpass Arthur Miller’s play in its assault on the American way of making a living, for it launches that assault without a single tendentious line, without a trace of sentiment, with no social generalizations. At once savage and compassionate, trenchant and implicit, radical and stoical, sad and comic, Mamet’s drama does not feature any deaths at its conclusion. A worse death has already begun for its salesmen, who are metaphorical rather than literal victims of a merciless and venal economic system. *Death of a Salesman* and Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh* do feature deaths at their conclusions, and these two plays about selling call for some discussion, as does Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*—yet another drama that has a salesman as one of its principal figures and that, along with the other two, makes up a triumvirate of the most important plays of the 1940s.

Drawing on the cultural archetype of the salesman at a time when America was proudly emerging as the richest and most powerful country on earth, Miller, O’Neill, and Williams exposed the contradictions underlying our apparent success (even as Mamet chose to do so during the booming eighties). In all three of their plays, significantly, it is at most vague as to what the salesmen are actually selling. As is well known, we never find out what Willy Loman is selling. We know that Stanley Kowalski travels for an unnamed firm that apparently manufactures and markets some kind of machinery, since we hear that Mitch works “on the precision bench in the spare parts department. At the plant Stanley travels for” (Williams 40)—which is all we ever hear of the matter. In *The Iceman Cometh*, O’Neill describes Theodore “Hickey” Hickman as a “hardware drummer,” but we get no further details about his hardware, which seems to have to do more with sex or death (“hardware” is a slang term for, among other things, that archetypal phallic symbol, a gun) than with any real product. Willy Loman, Stanley Kowalski, and Theodore Hickman, then, are disassociated from the merchandise they sell. And the vagueness of their products

underlines the allegorical nature of their selling; each is an American everyman (Loman, an undeclared Jew²; Kowalski, of Polish descent; Hickey, of Irish origins) in an America where what is produced becomes ever less tangible, ever more removed from reality. These three do not sell “stuff,” they sell illusion—or themselves in the form of their winning personalities.

Oddly enough, however, these three salesmen do not see themselves in this way. All three consider themselves clear-eyed realists, devoted to a reality that seems as tangible to them, in the 1940s, as the Brooklyn Bridge. The salesmen of *Glengarry Glen Ross* (of mixed ethnicity, including Roma the Italian-American, Levene the Jew, and Williamson the Anglo) are realists, too, out for all they can get and having no scruples about how they get it; their amorality, particularly in the case of Roma, is the very source of their charm. But these three salesmen of the forties are not amoral; they all have a similar moral code consisting of a stern belief in the necessity of rejecting illusion and facing up to reality. They not only are realists, they preach realism, too—sell it, if you will. Unfortunately for them and those around them, however, their “reality” is an imaginary one, in the end as treacherous as the illusions the salesmen are out to destroy.

Stanley Kowalski himself seems cruder than the other two salesmen. His animal nature is much remarked upon: he drinks beer, copulates, plays games, smashes light bulbs, paws through Blanche’s wardrobe, throws plates on the floor, and even commits rape. Yet he does not just do these things aimlessly or impulsively. His objective is always to deflate pretense: “Look at these feathers and furs that she [Blanche] come here to preen herself in!” (Williams 35). He is proud of having pulled Stella “down off them columns” of Belle Reve, and wants to pull Blanche down off them, too. He is also proud of being Polish, being American, being a Louisianan under the Napoleonic code. As Stanley bellows to his wife and sister-in-law, “What do you two think you are? A pair of queens? Remember what Huey Long said—‘Every Man is a King!’” (Williams 107). Even his rape of Blanche seems motivated more by a desire to pierce her illusions than her body. Stanley is a dark version of the salesman, selling the idealistic Blanche a harsh reality on the specious grounds that it is somehow good for her, and willing to use force, if necessary, to make the sale.

Willy Loman is a more sympathetic figure than Stanley Kowalski, but ultimately he is even more destructive. His vision of reality is that simply being “well liked” is the key to all worldly and spiritual success: “It’s not what you do, Ben. It’s who you know and the smile on your face! It’s contacts, Ben, contacts! . . . That’s the wonder, the wonder of this country, that a man can end with diamonds here on the basis of being liked!” (Miller 86). On the face of it, this is a remarkably cynical philosophy, glorifying personal contacts while scorning traditional values like education and hard work. The odd thing about Willy, however, is that he does not think of these views as cynical, but rather as something fine, “the wonder of this country.” In other words, like Stanley and, as we shall see shortly, like Hickey, he is another realist, preaching his own ideal.

² In an essay about *Death of a Salesman*, David Mamet wrote the following: The greatest American play, arguably, is the story of a Jew told by a Jew and cast in “universal” terms. Willy Loman is a Jew in a Jewish industry. But he is never identified as such. His story is never avowed as a Jewish story, and so a great contribution to Jewish American history is lost. It’s lost to culture as a whole, and, more importantly, it’s lost to the Jews, its rightful owners. (Qtd. in “Interview with Arthur Miller” 821-22)

Another odd aspect of Willy is that his views do not seem to convince anybody else in the play, any more than they do the audience. Charley, for example, counters Willy's modern view with a more traditional cynicism: "Why must everybody like you? Who liked J. P. Morgan? Was he impressive? In a Turkish bath he'd look like a butcher. But with his pockets on he was very well liked" (Miller 97). Furthermore, Willy's philosophy is proved wrong over and over again in the play, as applied to his sons Biff and Happy, to Bernard the boy next door, and to Willy himself, who ends up feeling lonely and not well liked by anybody. "You are the saddest, self-centeredness soul I ever did see-saw," says the tellingly perceptive Woman in the hotel room, Miller's version of the farmer's daughter, who then quickly follows up with the words "Come on inside, drummer boy" (Miller 116). Finally, despite all evidence to the contrary, Willy buys his own warped reality for good by killing himself, foolishly convinced that Biff will benefit materially as well as spiritually from his death.

Hickey in *The Iceman Cometh* is another realist who preaches his own ideal. Like Willy, he too believes that the key to success is in being well liked: "I'd met a lot of drummers around the hotel and liked 'em. They were always telling jokes. They were sports. They kept moving. I liked their life. And I knew I could kid people and sell things" (O'Neill 233). And sell he did, by playing on people's pipe-dreams and making them like him. Yet, like Willy, Hickey repeatedly complains of being lonely. Like Willy, he has taken up with a woman, or women, other than his wife, a fact that hovers around the play in the form of the sex joke that is never actually told, but which nonetheless gives *The Iceman Cometh* its title. There are several versions of this joke, one of which goes like this: a man comes home and calls upstairs to his wife, "Honey, did the iceman come yet?" "Not yet," she calls back, "but he's breathing hard." The iceman is a salesman who beds another man's wife, and who sells ice — a symbol of coldness, hardness, and death. He is another "realist," a purveyor of the cold, hard truth. In popular slang, to "ice" someone is to kill him, and ultimately Hickey is an iceman too, icing his wife and icing himself in the end.

Like Willy, then, Hickey is ultimately selling death. And who are the suckers doing the buying? Certainly the *Lumpenproletariat* in the bar form a group of them, and Hickey, like Stanley, is trying to sell them a harsh reality, puncturing their pipe-dreams in the way that Stanley brutally punctures Blanche's illusions. In the end, however, the people in the bar are not buying Hickey's vision, returning to the pipe-dreams that sustain them. In a sense, they are salesmen, too, trying desperately to sell their dreams to anyone who will listen, as well as to themselves. Their pipe-dreams are not just pleasant reveries to sustain them through life's tribulations; they are ideals that they must repeat, over and over, for each sale quickly wears off and creates the challenge to sell yet again.

A notable difference between Hickey and Willy, like that between Roma and Levene in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, is that Hickey is a *successful* salesman. That is, he *has* been one, until he takes up trying to sell the reality-ideal. Selling was easy for him, so easy that, unlike Willy, he seems to have unlimited amounts of money, and he certainly has not lost his job. He really was "well liked"; his customers, who readily bought what he sold, did not drop him as he aged — instead, he dropped them. Of course, the biggest sucker of all is his wife, Evelyn, who always bought his slick tales and who always forgave him, even when he brought her home a case of venereal disease. In the end, Hickey comes to hate all the suckers, including Evelyn, and he

kills her. It is as if the seller throws the sucker off the Brooklyn Bridge after having sold it to him, in contempt for his being such an easy mark, and then dives in after him, in contempt for himself.

The Iceman Cometh makes a more profound statement about American life than *Death of a Salesman* because O'Neill realized, as he also did in *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941) and as Mamet was later to realize in *Glengarry Glen Ross*, that the tragedy of America is not a tragedy of failure but rather one of success. Willy clings to his foolish ideal until the very end, despite its obviously having failed him; Hickey rejects that very ideal of fitting in and being liked, because it has succeeded for him too easily and too well. Unfortunately, he substitutes for his ideal another ideal, one more insidious because it seems so concrete and obvious. In the end, however, it is just as manipulative and condescending to destroy people's illusions as it is to feed, or feed off, them. A realism that ignores human suffering is no genuine realism at all.

Conclusion: Blinkered Realism, the Drama, and American Life

That kind of selective, blind-eyed realism began, perhaps more than ever before, to characterize America in the 1940s, when the country had reached the pinnacle of its success. The wars that had brought disaster to much of the world did relatively little damage to the United States; in fact, they made the nation stronger and wealthier than ever. At the same time, there was a growing unease in the country. As in Hickey's case, America's success seemed easy, yet finally hollow and frustrating. Why, its citizens plaintively asked, wasn't American success recognized as the solid, realistic achievement it obviously was? Why did alien philosophies like Communism appeal only to those with foolish pipe-dreams? Why did traditional societies not abandon their elaborate social structures, their customs and conventions, their myths and rituals—all foolish pipe-dreams of their own—in favor of the new Capitalist order in which everyone was equal in his opportunity to maximize his gain? Americans, the great pragmatists, apparently would have to sell their brand of realism to the rest of the world for its own good.

This realism, called Capitalism or Free Enterprise, certainly looked solid. What could be more "realistic" than appealing to human acquisitiveness? A society that rejected tradition and culture, turning everyone into a seller or a buyer instead, was tough, strong, genuine, even moral in its way; the rest of the world was populated by old-fashioned idealistic suckers. Indeed, the decade of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, the 1980s, became, more than any other in American history, the "me-decade" of greedy status seekers. Hostile takeovers, leveraged buyouts, and mega-mergers spawned a new breed of rich-and-famous billionaires, such as Donald Trump, Leona Helmsley, and Ivan Boesky. "If you've got it, flaunt it"; "You can have it all!"; "Shop till you drop"; and "Greed is good" (from the film *Wall Street* [Oliver Stone 1987]) were slogans of the decade. Binge-buying and maxed-out credit became a way of life. Expensive labels were everything, even (or especially) for children. Tom Wolfe thus rightly dubbed the baby-boomers the "splurge generation" (Hemfelt et al. 28; Heenan 39).

America would sell its view of people and commerce to the nations of the world and thereby destroy their illusions. Americans were not suckers but do-good traveling salesmen to the global market. Ultimately, America would try to sell its brand of

realism to the Vietnamese, the Nicaraguans, the Salvadorans, even to the Russians, and then to the Iraqis, Afghans, and the Syrians, never realizing that – like Roma, Levene, and Moss of *Glengarry Glen Ross*; like the characters Theodore Hickman, Stanley Kowalski, and Willy Loman – what it was actually selling (and continues to sell) is a kind of death.

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