



Katarzyna Małecka

University of Social Sciences, Łódź

In Praise of Slacking:
Richard Linklater's *Slacker* and Kevin
Smith's *Clerks* as Hallmarks of 1990s
American Independent Cinema
Counterculture

ABSTRACT

Some people live to work, others work to live, while still others prefer to live lives of leisure. Since the Puritans, American culture and literature have been dominated by individuals who have valued hard work. However, shortly after its founding, America managed to produce the leisurely Rip Van Winkle, who, over time, has been followed by kindred spirits such as, for instance, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Twain's Huck Finn, Melville's *Bartleby*, Jack Kerouac, Diane di Prima, the Hippies, and Christopher McCandless. With the rise of the Indie Film movement of the 1990s, so came the rise of the slacker film. Films such as *Slacker* (1991), *Singles* (1992), *Wayne's World* (1992), *Reality Bites* (1994), *Clerks* (1994), *Kicking and Screaming* (1995), *Mallrats* (1995), *Chasing Amy* (1997), *The Big Lebowski* (1998), and *Office Space* (1999) filled theatres over the decade with characters who take an unorthodox view of work and stress the importance of leisure in life. This essay discusses two slacker films, Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1991) and Kevin Smith's *Clerks* (1994), which defined the slacker phenomenon in the 1990s and constituted two important landmarks in American independent film. While many of us may find the slacker pathetic and annoying, this essay argues that there is much value to be found in this healthy counterculture. By offering their perspectives on issues such as the Puritan work ethic, work-incited self-importance, leisure versus idleness and human relationships, Linklater and Smith join the preceding generations of slackers, providing a much needed balance to the American obsession with work and success.

Ronald Reagan once joked: “It’s true hard work never killed anybody, but I figure, why take the chance?” (Berecz 136). Enjoyable as the quip is, its opening premise could not be more wrong. A rather drastic example of how deadly work can be is the number of post office massacres in America in the 1980s and 1990s, the most tragic of which in Edmond, Oklahoma, in 1986 took place during Reagan’s presidency. As Mark Ames observes, these killing sprees, as well as the majority of the 1990s office shootings, cannot be blamed on the mentally fragile perpetrators, lax gun control laws, and violent culture alone—“something deeper and unexplored in the culture was causing these murders to take place” (85, 84). Ames argues that most of the massacres can be linked, directly or indirectly, to the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970 signed by Nixon as well as to Reaganomics, the economic tactics of the Reagan administration privileging the rich, creating an even bigger wage disparity, and enhancing new work regulations, some of which increased the already stressful atmosphere and “institutionalized top-down harassment” at the workplace (Ames 68, 71, 73–75, 77). “[A] recurring theme in rage massacres” which comes up during the interviews with people who knew the individuals responsible for the killings is: “He was stressed, yet he didn’t talk about it” (Ames 86). “Even when the stress is too much,” Ames adds, “the sufferer doesn’t want to talk about it, since even admitting one’s unhappiness or inability to deal with the stress is to be a loser” (86), and even more so in modern America. Of course, the killing rampages are not the only side effects of longer work hours and unfavourable working conditions. Americans generally seem not to know how to relax. “The United States, unlike a mere 137 other countries, has no annual leave statute on the books” (Robinson), and, consequently, Americans remain one of the most vacation-deprived nations in the world, which is directly linked to, among other ailments, a higher risk of heart attack and, unsurprisingly, death (Gini 5). The advance in technology has not solved the problem either, and Nixon’s 1956 prophecy about a four-day workweek for Americans “in the not so distant future” never materialized (Honoré 188), as with the advent of the World Wide Web Revolution in the 1990s, which was supposed to create more free time, people actually started working more than before. “Anyone who has worked in the 1980s and 1990s,” Ames observes, “knows that technology—through cell-phones, pagers, Blackberries, the Internet, and so on—has blurred the line between work hours and off hours” (95). Today, Americans deprive themselves not only of off hours and vacation time but also of “free time within the office: the traditional one-hour lunch break has fallen now to an average of twenty nine minutes” (95).

Luckily, the 1990s did not go down in American history only as the period of work-related mass murders, low-paying jobs, the doubling of required overtime work, and the Internet craze which failed to “free up the American worker to spend more time . . . with his or her family, at home or on vacation, reaping greater benefits for less and less work” (Ames 77, 95). To paraphrase Newton’s third law, for every action there is bound to be an opposite reaction. The Transcendentalists in the 1830s, the Beats in the 1950s, and the Hippies in the 1960s are probably the three most widely known American movements which in their respective times rejected various social norms, most of all materialism, the traditional work ethic, and a stressful lifestyle. In the 1990s, American movie theatres were flooded with so-called slacker films. Such culturally significant works as *Slacker* (1991), *Singles* (1992), *Wayne’s World* (1992), *Reality Bites* (1994), *Clerks* (1994), *Kicking and Screaming* (1995), *Mallrats* (1995), *Chasing Amy* (1997), *The Big Lebowski* (1998), and *Office Space* (1999) all feature characters whose relation to work is rather unconventional. Although all of these titles deserve much more than a brief introductory mention, two of them have become unquestionable hallmarks of the decade’s counterculture. Richard Linklater’s *Slacker* (1991) and Kevin Smith’s *Clerks* (1994) defined the slacker phenomenon in the 1990s, primarily by taking as their “informing ethos the idea that work was worthless, depressing, and unredeemptive” (Lutz 8), and created two important landmarks in American independent film due to their uncommon themes and exceptional budget limitations. As 2014 marks the 20th anniversary of the release of *Clerks* and 2015 the 25th anniversary of the completion and first public screening of *Slacker*, it is a good time to look back at these two indie cult productions and remind ourselves what singles them out among other films of that period and how their perspectives on issues such as the traditional, Puritan work ethic, work-incited self-importance, leisure versus idleness, human relationships, and creativity continue to provide a much needed balance to the American obsession with work, career, and success.

RICHARD LINKLATER’S *SLACKER* (1991)

Set in Austin, Texas, *Slacker* has no plot, no particular character focus and, seemingly, no distinct lessons or constructive conclusions to offer. Using “the fluid camera and a kind of ‘baton-passing’ among the characters as they [run] into one another” (Macor 96), Linklater follows a motley of rather eccentric individuals, most of them under 30, who amble around Austin without any purpose, identifying themselves by what they say and in what situation the viewer meets them. The audience has little chance to bond

with any of the characters as the story, or rather lack of it, stays with each for only a few minutes and then moves onto the next, more or less engaging, conversation. After one of the first screenings in Austin, a dissatisfied filmgoer, probably a hard-working member of the community, expressed his opinion about Linklater's loafers in rather unambiguous terms: "Why are the lives of these unproductive, pretentious, and boring people documented on film? What have they done to make the world or even the city of Austin a better place?" (Macor 105). This sentiment must have been shared by many more viewers, including various potential investors and film festival organizers, who were initially reluctant or bluntly refused to screen *Slacker* when Linklater tried to promote some of the film's footage to gather funds for its completion (Macor 106).

Linklater's production struggled much more than many other independent cult films to receive its deserved recognition, partially due to the reasons expressed by the disgruntled Austin viewer, who was not alone in his observations. As many reviewers point out, Linklater's characters do not do much in the sense of being socially productive: "They sleep late, go out for coffee and a newspaper, hang around in bookstores, watch movies, lie around in bed arguing, practice the art of the guest list pickup" (Walters). The characters' names, featured in the end credits as a collection of descriptive identification labels, also speak volumes about their daily schedules and approach to the traditional work ethic. The list includes over one hundred individuals among whom the following few seem representative of the community portrayed by Linklater: Should Have Stayed at Bus Station (played by the director), a broke individual who rides on a bus into Austin one morning and, after getting into a taxi, talks for three full minutes about different separate realities that might be existing in different thoughts we have and choices we consider but do not decide to follow; Street Musician, a relatively self-explanatory name; Dostoyevsky Wannabe, a coffee shop customer whose line "Who's ever written a great work about the immense effort required in order not to create?" (*Slacker*) has become one of the film's trademarks; Been on the Moon Since the 50s, an aging, slightly paranoid beatnik walking around with a glass of coffee in hand and offering random passersby a monologue on conspiracy theories involving alien abductions, the greenhouse effect, and secret government interventions such as, for instance, "antigravity technology" Americans supposedly "stole from the Nazis after the end of World War II" (*Slacker*); Pap Smear Pusher, a female hustler trying to scam Ultimate Loser and Stephanie from Dallas, two of the film's other loafers, by selling them what she says is Madonna's pap smear; Recluse in Bathrobe, a random apartment dweller who goes out to get his pre-noon coffee and newspaper in a robe and loafers only to return to his apartment and get back

in bed; and, last but not least, Hitchhiker Awaiting "True Call," who, asked by Video Interviewer if he voted in the most recent election, quips, "Hell, no. I've got less important things to do" (*Slacker*), and then, asked about what he does for a living, retorts:

You mean "work"? To hell with the kind of work you have to do to earn a living. All it does is fill the bellies of the pigs who exploit us. Hey, look at me. I am making it. I may live badly, but at least I don't have to "work" to do it. . . . I'll get a job when I hear the true call. (*Slacker*)

Similar attitudes underlie the daily activities of all the film's characters. They are all busy but not with what is traditionally considered "work," and all of them seem to live if not badly then at least very modestly.

Social critic Bertrand Russell claimed that "[c]onsistent purpose is not enough to make life happy, but is almost an indispensable condition of a happy life" (218). Since work is the most common means of providing such "consistent purpose," one may assume that work is a necessary ingredient of happiness. Those who "wander," Russell states, "are less likely to achieve satisfaction" (218). Looking at Linklater's characters, however, one does not get the feeling that they are particularly unhappy or dissatisfied with their lives. To an outsider with a steady job and daily duties, they may seem pathetic, useless, depressing, and annoying in their loitering, but to themselves and those who come in contact with them within the baton-passing narrative, they are just everyday people going about their more or less exciting business, some even with a true calling, like Video Interviewer. Still, as the work ethic is an inherent part of most economically developed Western cultures, all this ambling, philosophizing, and apparent inaction made *Slacker* travel an exceptionally bumpy and unsure road before the film gained wider public recognition, most probably because having to witness for almost 100 minutes a strolling parade of characters who have no cause or purpose may eventually become tiring. After the film's premiere, one of the critics observed:

Mr. Linklater apparently sees his characters . . . as somehow representative of our time. . . . Their charm and humor, however, are not inexhaustible. After a while, a certain monotony sets in, as well as desperation. It isn't easy being eccentric, and it's even more difficult to remain eccentric in the company of other eccentrics. A terrible transformation occurs: the unusual begins to look numbingly normal. (Canby C8)

In other words, like too much work, too much slacking can also be dull. *Slacker*, it seems, could have antagonized some potential film investors not

only because the film has no story or plot and, according to one producer, suffers from an “absence of compelling dialogue” (Macor 102), but also because the traditional work ethic is not represented in the film at all, leaving many slacker-hating viewers only with what they already feel towards non-productive individuals in their everyday reality without the necessity of paying for a movie ticket.

Paradoxically then, Linklater’s portrayal of peaceful, toil-free existence, which most overworked people should theoretically relate to, had to work hard to be noticed and appreciated on more than the local and campus levels. Yet, its apparent drawback, the total rejection of such an integral part of life as work, is what, in fact, made *Slacker* the most unique film of the 1990s slacker era. The director defends his characters by claiming that this seemingly unproductive kind of lifestyle can still be appealing, especially when compared to what one observes today in most public places where people do not talk to each other any more but stare at their laptops and phones (Savlov, “Slack”). The community presented in *Slacker* embodies on a local scale what Marx might have had in mind when he wished the working class would develop a class consciousness that would help them unite and prevail over the capitalist class promoting various forms of divide. Linklater’s protagonists unite by unanimously doing nothing, refusing to adopt a consumerist approach to life, and not letting anyone trick them into believing that a laidback lifestyle is socially unconstructive. According to the director, this attitude of communal slacking has managed to empower more lives than expected:

I was always kind of pleased when I had people come up to me and [say] something like, “Hey, you know, seeing that film, it really kind of validated my life.” Because it was, really, how a lot of us were living. You didn’t have a lot to show for yourself, but you weren’t an uninterested, unintelligent person, either. It sort of documented . . . a lifestyle that wasn’t unique in itself but had had a long continuum from the Beats and beyond. That kind of got lost in the go-go Eighties and the materialistic culture that sprang from out of that. You may have worked a busboy job but really you were in a band, you were a writer, you were an artist. That’s how you defined yourself. And that sort of culture should always be that way, and to a large degree, it probably still is. (Linklater qtd. in Savlov, “Slack”)

Linklater’s characters, and the culture they sustain, position work as an additional element to life, as something that everyone should, but does not have to, do, as a construct that exists and can be attended to, but should not interfere with thoughts, ideas, unrushed conversations, and joyous artistic experimentation. Such relaxed activities, unlike most standard labour,

belong truly to their creators, who, poor, pretentious, idle, and unnerving as they may seem to others, know how to relate to each other without resentment and aggression. They may not always be entirely engrossed in one another's philosophizing, but they do not discourage or mock it. In his 2004 review, celebrating the DVD Criterion Collection edition of *Slacker*, Marc Savlov points out that, in spite of its general pejorative meaning, back in the early 1990s, "the term 'slacker' was a badge of honor."

After the Sundance and Berlin festivals rejected *Slacker* in 1990, Linklater decided "to show the film in the open market section of the Berlin Film Festival" (Macor 102). When only two people showed up to the first public screening, "a miserable Linklater wandered around the city and tried to consider other career alternatives" (Macor 102). Fortunately, like his characters, he patiently trudged on, refusing to believe his film had "no theme" (Macor 102). Finally, *Slacker* found a wider and more enthusiastic audience at the Seattle Film Festival (Macor 103) and gradually gathered more attention and positive critical comments from audiences and film professionals nationwide. It turns out promoting laziness as an alternative lifestyle is as hard as being able to slack in real life with everyone around working and looking down on the unoccupied, yet Linklater managed to make his unorthodox vision about a bunch of slackers succeed, providing American culture with yet another rags-to-riches story. While a hard and accomplished worker himself, around the time *Slacker* came to life, Linklater proved he could live very cheaply (Macor 90), not to say "badly," and succeed on his own terms, relying mostly "on community and help and favors" (Macor 92) and completing his project for the notable amount of \$23,000, which remains one of the lowest film budgets to date. This spirit of human cooperation, reciprocity, and thriftiness is what Linklater's characters, as well as most slackers, base their life philosophy on. In 2012, *Slacker* was selected by the National Film Preservation Board to join the National Film Registry as a culturally significant film and is preserved as national heritage in the Library of Congress. Linklater's low-budget enterprise continues to encourage its old and new viewers to re-consider life less in terms of work and consumerism and more in terms of human relationships and exchange of ideas. It is true that the two sometimes go hand in hand, yet, generally, work tends to predominate, often reducing life to a monotonous race.

KEVIN SMITH'S *CLERKS* (1994)

Slacker was launched nationwide by Orion Classics on July 5, 1991. In her interview with Linklater, celebrating the tenth anniversary of *Slacker*'s release,

Marjorie Baumgarten points out that since 1991, Linklater's nontraditional narrative "has been frequently cited by writers and other filmmakers as an inspirational forebear of the low-budget American indie film movement (perhaps stated most famously by Kevin Smith in his credits for *Clerks*).” Over the years, in different interviews, Kevin Smith often admitted how, after having seen *Slacker*, he thought that if people went to see Linklater's eccentric film, which Smith considered very funny, he could make a similar low-budget film and present it, as Linklater did, at the Independent Feature Film Market in New York, where potential producers and distributors would take interest in it, and the rest would be just another success story, enabling Smith to make a real film for real money. While the first screening of *Clerks* was rather unpromising, the rest was indeed a success story. Made for \$27,575, *Clerks* was nominated for numerous film festival awards, won several of them, and grossed over \$3 million nationwide in its theatrical run. Little did Smith know that his first film, which was only to open the door to his future, glamorous career, would in fact become what is possibly his best work to date and one of the top American cult classics. *Clerks* follows a workday of two 22-year old underachievers: Dante Hicks, a convenience store employee, and Randal Graves, a clerk at a video rental store. Most of the time, instead of doing their jobs, they just talk to each other about subjects as various as *Star Wars*, annoying customers, career choices, and hermaphroditic porn. In contrast to Linklater's film, *Clerks* is set in a workplace environment and is much more focused on the frustrations of daily work. Roger Ebert observes that "one of the many charms of Kevin Smith's *Clerks* is that it clocks a full day on the job," whereas in most movies, with the exception of "cops, robbers, drug dealers and space captains," "hardly anybody ever works."

We meet Dante when he crawls out of his closet, where he was apparently sleeping, to answer a phone call from his boss who needs him to come in on his day off, one of the film's many reminders that one should not let work intrude upon one's life. Throughout the whole day, Dante keeps complaining about his situation, repeating "I'm not even supposed to be here today" (*Clerks*). He does not care that an extra day of work equals a few extra dollars—the job is so debilitating that no amount of money can make up for having the free day ripped from his life. Randal is over half an hour late for work, and one may easily assume it is a common occurrence. Unlike Dante, he is not bothered by the drudgery of his job. He simply treats it as an opportunity to make some money while mostly watching films and hanging out with his best friend. One of the very first conversations the two clerks share about the work ethic is after Randal comes into the convenience store to collect the tapes a displeased customer left with Dante due to Randal's turning up late. Randal takes the tapes

back to the video store and, off screen, meets the frustrated customer who complains about Randal's customer service skills. Back at Dante's store, Randal summarizes the exchange for his friend:

Randal: Some guy just came in refusing to pay late fees. Said the video store was closed for two hours yesterday. So, I tore up his membership.

Dante: Shocking abuse of authority.

Randal: Hey, I'm a firm believer in the philosophy of a ruling class. Especially since I rule. (*Clerks*)

Randal is not particularly polite to most of his customers, yet, in his defence, many of the video store clients seem to treat life too seriously and have too little imagination and empathy to put themselves in Randal's shoes. The gangly video store clerk knows a lot about films, and, if approached by someone who really wants to rent a quality film, he would most probably come up with some excellent recommendations. As this seldom seems the case, Randal treats his job with very little respect and responsibility, which, as the above dialogue asserts, does not stop him from laying down some mock ground rules. By tearing up the disgruntled customer's membership, while being partly responsible for the customer's late fees, Randal exposes the unwarranted self-importance many jobs evoke in people. He, of course, seems to be using his "abuse of authority" mostly to entertain Dante.

Obnoxious self-importance, however, is a serious social issue, and very few people know how to control this unappealing personality trait. The work ethic to which many economically successful cultures ascribe, with the United States at the head, and which is the root of the insufferable self-importance most people take on along with their jobs, dates back to the Puritan doctrine of predestination and the contorted logic it instigated: "By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which . . . [a]ll are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation" (Calvin 742). Although theoretically no one knew which group they would eventually join, industrious American Puritans finally assumed that all kinds of affluence could be typologically deciphered as a sign of salvation. As a result, many people still "take on the idea that worldly success and wealth are outward signs of God's approval of your conduct," which frequently leads to a feeling of self-importance (Hodgkinson 262), causing individuals to act less nobly than one might expect from the chosen ones. By destroying the membership of the dissatisfied customer, who prior to lecturing Randal lectures Dante on how irresponsible the clerk from the video store is, Randal mocks not only the abuse of authority many people tend to exhibit in their jobs, but also the

fact that many people take their self-importance almost entirely from the jobs they do, the money they earn, and the things they buy. “The job system,” Tom Hodgkinson points out, “with its rigid hierarchies of juniors and seniors, deputies and directors, executives and managers, . . . feeds self-importance. No, you are not just a quintessence of dust, you are Senior Brand Manager! . . . You are a *somebody!*” (267). Randal sees his and most other jobs for what they are—a way to earn enough money to do much more pleasant things than work, even while working. He says to Dante who sometimes treats his clerical position too seriously:

Jesus, you overcompensate for having what’s basically a monkey’s job. You push fucking buttons. Anybody can waltz in here and do our jobs. . . . You’re so obsessed with making it seem so much more epic . . . than it really is. Christ, you work in a convenience store, Dante! And badly, I might add! I work in a shitty video store, badly as well. (*Clerks*)

198

In spite of working a menial job and having little respect for it, Randal indeed “rules.” No self-righteous customer is going to rub his shortcomings in his face because, even if Randal is negligent, the unimportance of his job gives him the freedom to risk losing it. Professing half seriously, half tongue-in-cheek that he is “a firm believer in the philosophy of a ruling class,” Randal exploits the term “ruling class” mainly to support his slacking, which precludes anyone from ruling over him. When after another mistreatment of a client Dante calls Randal a danger to society, “to both the dead and the living,” Randal tells him that he likes to think of himself as “a master of his own destiny” and, regardless of what Dante or any other employee, employer or customer might think, to him “title does not dictate behavior” (*Clerks*). As a result, Randal’s belief in his ruling position and disregard for artificial work hierarchies weave into what seems to be a healthy form of self-worth, a standpoint that greatly differs from pompous self-importance.

Randal’s attitude towards work lets him enjoy the “monkey’s job” he does, and one has a feeling that he would be equally happy working any job that does not interfere with his social life, and if it did, he would probably quit it, because Randal’s frame of mind is that of leisure. In *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, philosopher Josef Pieper argues that leisure differs from idleness, but many people have a distorted understanding of both concepts. “In the High Middle Ages,” Pieper writes, “it was precisely lack of leisure, an inability to be at leisure, that went together with idleness; . . . the restlessness of work-for-work’s-sake arose from nothing other than idleness” (47). In other words, in Pieper’s view, if someone does not know how to be at leisure, does not let his or her mind wander freely and ponder creatively, then he or she is bound to fall

prey to “the restlessness of a self-destructive work-fanaticism,” which, in turn, makes one idle not only to oneself but also to society (47–48). Numbers support this theoretical assumption. For example, one of the studies conducted at the beginning of the current millennium estimated that stress caused by work “costs the American economy \$300 billion in diminished productivity, employee turnover, and insurance” (Ames 112). Stress-induced idleness, according to the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, results in “more than half of the 550 million working days lost annually in the United States from absenteeism” (Ames 112). In contrast to anxiety-triggered idleness, which, ironically, is predominantly work-related, to be leisurely means to allow oneself to be calm and in agreement with one’s own thoughts, “to be disengaged from the tedium of tasks—to be open, observant, and receptive to issues outside of self and one’s immediate needs” (Gini 24). What truly opposes the concept of idleness is not “business ethos,” Pieper states, “not the industrious spirit of the daily effort to make a living, but rather the cheerful affirmation by man of his own existence, of the world as a whole” (49). Pieper believes that only from such a relaxed state of mind can rise “that special freshness of action,” which, however, should never be confused “with the narrow activity of the ‘workaholic’” (49). In this light, Smith’s Randal is the epitome of Pieper’s concept of leisure—he is respectful of his own current needs and never does anything that could endanger his peace of mind, which, in turn, helps him do his tedious job efficiently enough, stay open to his best friend’s dilemmas, and offer him clever solutions. Randal’s state of mind lets him work or not work without remorse, be creative or less creative with an equal feeling of satisfaction.

In contrast, Dante is a slacking specimen who, as his name implies, is lost in life and ridden with uncertainties and contradictions. His frequently voiced dissatisfaction with his job, as well as with Randal’s behaviour, distorts Dante’s work and slacking equally, or, to use Pieper’s nomenclature, opposes that “special freshness of action” and, thus, becomes one of the “Seven Capital Sins” (cf. Pieper 49). Dante handles his work duties a little more responsibly than Randal, and even comes in on his free day to comply with his boss’s request, yet he constantly complains about his life situation. At the end of their workday, when many things go wrong, including Dante being fined for selling a packet of cigarettes to a little girl, which was actually Randal’s doing, Randal and Dante argue, mainly because of Dante’s growing frustrations:

Randal: Oh what, what’s with you, man? . . . What the hell’s your problem?
Dante: This life. . . . I’m stuck in this pit, working for less than slave wages. Working on my day off, the goddamn steel shutters are closed, I deal with every backward ass fuck on the planet. . . .

Randal: That's all bullshit, man. You know what the real problem here is? . . . You should shit or get off the pot. . . .

Dante: What the hell are you talking about?

Randal: I'm talking about this thing you have, this inability to improve your situation in life. . . . You sit there and blame life for dealing you a cruddy hand, never once accepting the responsibility for the way your situation is. . . . If you hate this job and the people, and the fact that you have to come in on your day off, then why don't you quit?

Dante: Oh, like it's that easy.

Randal: It is. You just up and quit. There's other jobs, and they pay better money. You're bound to be qualified for at least one of them. So what's stopping you? . . . You're comfortable, right? This is a life of convenience for you, and any attempt to change it would shatter the pathetic microcosm you've fashioned for yourself.

Dante: Oh, like your life's any better?

Randal: I'm satisfied with my situation for now. You don't hear me complaining. You, on the other hand, have been bitching all day. (*Clerks*)

Dante admits that his constant dissatisfaction with work and life is his own fault because since childhood he has been unable to initiate change. "I don't have the ability to risk comfortable situations on the big money and the fabulous prizes" (*Clerks*), he declares melodramatically, but when Randal assures him he does, Dante meets his friend's support with another round of excuses. While there are moments when Dante succumbs to Randal's influence and manages to have a good time at work, like when they close the store to play hockey on the store's roof or to go to a funeral wake, ultimately, Dante is a remorseful, self-pitying slacker. Fortunately for Dante, Randal's belief in his lost slacker friend brings balance to their relationship, elevating their daily conversations and activities from the pit of Dante's despair to a level that is uplifting enough to make the audience look more closely at, and possibly revise, their own attitudes towards work.

Because *Clerks* indeed focuses on work much more than Linklater's *Slacker*, or most films in general, the question of advancing one's life status and career resurfaces in Smith's story as well. One of the reasons why Dante is not such a happy-go-lucky individual as Randal is that Dante's girlfriend, Veronica, who attends college, triggers his remorse by frequently pestering Dante about making something of himself. Her pep talks are well-intended and, at the end of the day, she is a positive character, but Dante does not want to follow the path she has chosen for herself because, as Randal puts it, he actually enjoys his "life of convenience" (*Clerks*). While "the question of ambition hovers" in Smith's film (Lutz 93), the director's own career story shows that low-paying

jobs can be more than inspirational. At the time when he came up with the idea for *Clerks*, Kevin Smith had been working on and off for three years in the very convenience store where he eventually shot the film. Smith “saw dramatis personae in the people hassling him for Pick-6 tickets” and ended up writing *Clerks* in 30 days and shooting it over 21 nights (Smith 52). He exceeded the limit on a dozen credit cards and “pawned his precious comic book collection,” which was not an easy decision, but the risk paid off and *Clerks* made him an almost overnight success (Smith 52). Traditional education and a conformist career path work for many people, but Smith’s story proves that so do less orthodox ways of earning a living. Tom Lutz observes that in many cases the creators of slacker characters tend to be workaholics, and by the time Smith was in his mid-thirties, ten years after the success of *Clerks*, he had already produced “eighteen films, written, directed, and acted in twelve of them, and edited eight” (295). This may make the driving idea in *Clerks* appear slightly hypocritical at first. Yet, as exemplified by Randal, slacking does not have to equal doing nothing or having a dull personality—many slackers, among them film buffs, musicians and many other artistic individuals, oppose the Puritan work ethic by living creatively and setting their own work terms. Their *raison d’être* is not to make a one-track career, but to open themselves to a range of possibilities, frequently by doing very little for extended periods of time. Following the advice of one of his characters, Smith found “a job that makes a difference” both for him and for others (cf. *Clerks*). The character who voices this wisdom says she “masturbate[s] caged animals for artificial insemination” (*Clerks*), which puzzles the clerks and provides another, in the film’s overall context, rather ironic perspective on the significance and insignificance of what work we choose to do.

It would be too idealistic to assume that *Slacker* and *Clerks* changed many people’s attitude towards work in the 1990s, or that they can influence the present career-obsessed culture in America and other Western countries. The films did, however, reflect the social and economic changes in America at that time and inspired many other artists to join the slacker club, giving rise to probably one of the last memorable artistic counter-cultures which opposed a work-focused lifestyle and consumerism. Linklater’s and Smith’s respective visions of the unimportance of the traditional work ethic appeal to some but probably anger even more people, as work is what conditions and gives identity to most lives. Americans, Al Gini writes, are “dutiful soldiers” who live out “the virtues of [their] Puritan past and pioneering forefathers” and perceive work as their defining national feature:

Like it or not, too many of us, out of desire or necessity, choice or chance, put too much time in on the job. We have made a fetish out of work. It's now part of our character and culture. We have become addicted to the *promise* of work. . . . Work *promises* power, money, and influence. Work *promises* we will be accepted, respected, successful. And so, we work. (1)

In this context, a slacker lifestyle turns out to be a rather unattainable American dream which only the chosen few may be brave enough to live. “[M]ost Americans,” Ames states, “are more comfortable at work . . . than they are on vacation, on their own, with their families” (95). Away from work they have to be creative and look at their lives more closely; “they have to make conversation not directly linked to the office, invent plans that result in pleasure, and keep themselves entertained rather than merely busy carrying out other people’s orders” (Ames 95). In other words, outside work, overworked Americans have to do what to Linklater’s loafers and Smith’s clerks comes easily, but, sadly, many of them do not know how.

Of course, the United States is not the only country which has been plagued by overwork and stress-related accidents and deaths. *Karōshi* has been a widely discussed phenomenon for many years, and one of its recent famous victims was Mita Diran, a 24-year-old copywriter from Indonesia, who, on December 14, 2013, tweeted: “30 hours of working and still going strooong” (Diran), only to collapse into a coma and die the following day. Tom Hodgkinson, a strong advocate of reduced work hours, claims that work, especially in the service sector, is extremely dangerous, killing around four hundred people and injuring an additional 30,000 a year in the UK alone (315). Although Reagan’s witticism on avoiding hard work seemed unintentionally to have heralded a new *zeitgeist* for the 1990s, his assumption that hard work never killed anybody can be refuted *ad infinitum*. Linklater and Smith, as well as many other creators of American slacker films made during the 1990s, voiced a hidden need for more leisure and an alternative lifestyle and thus rebelled against new job regulations, stress, and tragedies which permeated the American workplace at that time. *Slacker* and *Clerks* continue to urge their old and new viewers not to take any job too seriously and not to yield to a common faith in the redemptive power of hard work, because fulfilling the goals or ideals that other people set for us is hardly the best road to healthy self-esteem and happiness. Bronnie Ware, an Australian palliative-care nurse, who spent several years looking after dying patients, asked many of them what were their main regrets in life (Steiner). Among the top five were: “I wish I’d had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me”; “I wish I hadn’t worked so hard”; and “I wish I had stayed in touch with my

friends" (Steiner). By asserting their socially different lifestyles, providing alternative perspectives on the role of work in life and putting human relationships before work, Richard Linklater's rambling, Whitmanesque individuals and Kevin Smith's eloquent, uncompetitive clerks offer their audiences a chance to revise this list before it is too late.

WORKS CITED

- Ames, Mark. *Going Postal: Rage, Murder, and Rebellion: From Reagan's Workplaces to Clinton's Columbine and Beyond*. Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull, 2005. Print.
- Baumgarten, Marjorie. "Slack Where We Started: Richard Linklater and John Pierson Ponder *Slacker* and Its Aftermath." *Austinchronicle.com*. Austin Chronicle 29 June 2001. Web. 20 Jan. 2014.
- Berecz, John M. *Character in Chief: Personality and Character of George W. Bush and Past Presidents*. Atlanta, GA: Humanics Trade Group, 2001. Print.
- Calvin, John. *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Trans. Henry Beveridge. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1845. Web. 25 Jan. 2014. PDF file.
- Canby, Vincent. "Some Texas Eccentrics and Aunt Hallie." *New York Times* 22 Mar. 1991: C8. Print.
- Clerks*. Dir. Kevin Smith. Perf. Brian O'Halloran, Jeff Anderson, Jason Mews, Kevin Smith and Marilyn Ghigliotti. 1994. Buena Vista, 2005. DVD.
- Diran, Mita. "30 hours of working and still going strooong." 14 Dec. 2013, 2:47 a.m. Tweet.
- Ebert, Roger. Rev. of *Clerks*. *RogerEbert.com*. Reviews 4 Nov. 1994. Web. 12 Dec. 2013.
- Gini, Al. *The Importance of Being Lazy: In Praise of Play, Leisure, and Vacations*. London: Routledge, 2003. Print.
- Hodgkinson, Tom. *The Freedom Manifesto*. New York: Harper, 2006. Print.
- Honoré, Carl. *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed*. London: Harper, 2005. EPUB file.
- Lutz, Tom. *Doing Nothing: A History of Loafers, Loungers, Slackers, and Bums in America*. New York: Farrar, 2006. Print.
- Macor, Alison. *Chainsaws, Slackers, and Spy Kids*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2010. Print.
- National Film Preservation Board. National Film Registry Titles 1989–2013. 26 Sep. 2014. Web. 22 Nov. 2014.

- Pieper, Joseph. *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. Trans. Gerald Malsbary. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's P, 1998. Print.
- Robinson, Joe. "The Vanishing Vacation: Why You Need a Break." *Nationalgeographic.com*. 2007. Web. 10 Jan. 2014.
- Russell, Bertrand. *The Conquest of Happiness*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1932. Print.
- Savlov, Marc. Rev. of *Slacker* (DVD Criterion Collection). *Austinchronicle.com*. Austin Chronicle 10 Sep. 2004. Web. 11 Jan. 2014.
- . "Slack to the Future: Austin gets older; *Slacker* stays forever young." *Austinchronicle.com*. Austin Chronicle 21 Jan. 2011. Web. 5 Jan. 2014.
- Slacker*. Dir. Richard Linklater. Perf. Richard Linklater, Rudy Basquez, Jean Caffeine and Jan Hockey. 1991. Criterion, 2004. DVD.
- Smith, Chris. "Register Dogs." *New York Magazine* 24 Oct. 1994: 50–53. Print.
- Steiner, Susie. "Top Five Regrets of the Dying." *Guardian.com*. Guardian 1 Feb. 2012. Web. 20 Jan. 2014.
- Walters, Chris. "*Slacker*: Freedom's Just Another Word for Nothing to Do." *Criterion.com*. Criterion 13 Sep. 2004. Web. 10 Jan. 2014.