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Salvaging the Subject: Mediant Fiction *Contra* the Mass Media

by

Mario Thomas Trono



A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

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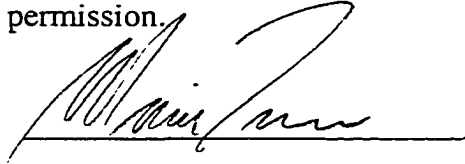
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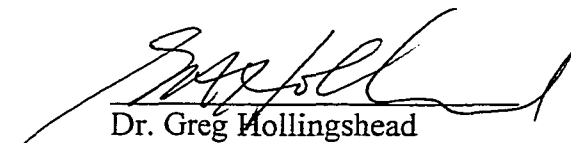
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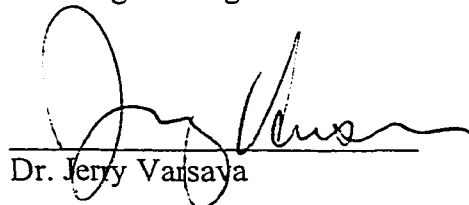
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*Oct. 19, '99*

## **Dedication**

To my wife Loren, my lady of infinite jest and patience,  
and to Joy and Louis Trono for a (near) eternity of support  
and encouragement

## **Abstract**

Drawing on aspects of the French stream of discourse analysis and on poststructural thought in general, this study explores a strain of contemporary American prose fiction that dramatizes and resists the influence of visual, mass media culture on the individual reading-viewing subject. It aims to identify the deliberately modified literary means by which writers respond to the fate of the subject, to an agency which is now configured by both an electronic, commercial media environment and a poststructural paradigm that posits the self as a dissolute and linguistic nexus of repression and loss. From the standpoint of discourse analysis, the argument presents the visual mass media as an ideologically closed mode of unilateral communication that encourages solipsistic contemplation of televisually and cinematically constituted mental image tracks that are installed by a consumerist order decidedly antiegalitarian in nature. From a poststructural purview, the subject is seen as existing in both print and electronic media in a state of flux. "Mediant fiction", so called in this analysis due to the emergent genre's attempted intercession between subjective social agents and corporate semiosis, is presented as embodying both these socio-philosophical positions. However, the manner in which it reconstructs visual media in literary language is shown to open a space for a tentative and idiosyncratic human agency. The subject is denied essential categories but is outlined through the tracing of commercial rhetorics that would fix and control the subject. The mediant fictions of David Foster Wallace, Don DeLillo, Robert Coover, and Thomas Pynchon transpose corporate semiosis into literary language through an adapted form of ekphrasis. This method places the ideologically closed logic of the commercial

imperative within language that forces subject categories to remain open. Keeping in mind Eco's claim that semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie, the argument suggests that the lie that is fiction may counteract the lie that is corporate semiosis, to the benefit of what may loosely be called the democratic self.

An implicit argument is made for a mediant critical approach that can adequately receive mediant fiction and share its conceptual orientations. The critical value of interpretation in the name of interpreters synchronizes with the fiction's literary value of resistance to ideological closure; the two values taken together constitute a literary/critical mode of thought that could infuse with a self-reflexive and egalitarian minded rigor the home space wherein most interaction with electronic social texts takes place. The reader-viewer may utilize this mode of social thought to contend with power on the site he or she occupies, may in short become Foucault's specific intellectual who uses the specificity of that site as a basis for highly individualized political action.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## Pretext

....without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention.

--Donald Barthelme

Questioning builds a way. We would be advised, therefore, above all to pay heed to the way, and not to fix our attention on isolated sentences and topics. The way is a way of thinking.

--Martin Heidegger

If the intention of critical writing is to offer a way of thinking, as I believe it is, in addition to presenting simply the results of research in an organized fashion, we should worry over the manner in which traditional dissertation formats and writing styles attune thinking to themselves. More often than not, dissertations possess a particular and highly familiar structure: an introduction presents the topic and the primary concerns of the sections which follow it; the ubiquitous 'theory chapter' declares hermeneutic affiliations (deconstructive, cultural-materialist, phenomenological, etc.); subsequent chapters then apply the theory and work to prove it germane; and a conclusion, usually epideictic in tone, provides closure by bringing the argument full circle and thereby securing the wholeness that has been a positive value since the *Poetics*. The format sets within each section paragraphs that bear homologous relation to the overall structure, and at the level of style, sentences function as propositions, discrete truth claims that additively appear



and that contribute to the emergent rhetorical brickwork under construction. While this structure and style do not preclude the setting down of sophisticated and original ideas, they are less attractive when one considers their presumptive aspect; the widespread frequency with which each is adopted is not commensurate with the potentially infinite number of forms that thinking itself may assume. My concern is that highly structured expression implies that structure itself is a precondition to understanding, and that non-epistemic experience (such as when one perceives something visually yet remains unsure of what one precisely views) may be captured or expressed through an ordered application of epistemic principles during the act of enunciation. A given structure and style may impose themselves upon protean phenomena and may finally say more about their own operations than about the subject or phenomena at hand. Arguably, this imposition may be an unavoidable aspect of seeing the world intentionally (I here impose a phenomenological matrix on epistemology). But we should nonetheless attempt to ascertain the degree to which thought may be attuned to form rather than to the unique character of individual experiences and thinking instances. An idea, which may have been growing upwards through the desultory pages of rough drafts toward originality (the *sui generis* sought after by graduate students) may be unable to attach itself to a latticework alien to the idea's tentative and idiosyncratic being. One may suspect the reasons it should be compelled to do so.

An analysis such as this dissertation offers, one that studies the structures and styles of iconoclastic fiction and homogenizing mass media, is under more than the usual obligation to generate a way of writing consistent with its claims and with the nature of

its subject matter. For reasons that will become clear, I necessarily (and I hope, imaginatively) transgress that structure of argument which advances in an unself-reflexive manner a strictly ordered sequence of propositions, a structure that insists upon a singular mode of understanding. In this spirit then, I *ostensibly* devote the remainder of this pretext to explaining how linear/causal argumentation--the concatenated narrative sequence--can prove restrictive at times, limited and limiting in its interpretive applications, particularly when fictions under consideration resist such a logic and question the will to it. My *actual* aim is to begin presenting the aesthetic and philosophical preoccupations that characterize my discussions throughout, and to show how a criticism that invites a reader to consider myriad, even divergent and contradictory possibilities, rather than to become convinced of a solitary perspective by what is essentially assertion through structure, is more conducive to the study of egalitarian-minded fiction. On Borges' *Tlön*, a book is considered incomplete if it does not contain its counterbook. Critical instances, too, should weave in elements that contribute to the undoing of claims made. This is not contradiction but openness (or is what I term in my first chapter dilation).

Here, the adoption of an inappropriate form of argument would be tantamount to an akratic action (*akrasia*, a term coming to us from Aristotle, refers to a flaw in character that may be glimpsed when one's behavior is in discord with one's principles or values). It is more the nature of the fictions under consideration here than any abundance of moral fiber on my part that makes this so. I write here on fictions which resist the corporate suasion that arrives through the mass media in familiar forms and which themselves offer

*no* suasion within *unfamiliar* forms. Such oppositional writing competitively codifies the social, not to install its own visions and versions of things but to make sure that social experience remains open to varied interpretations. If I wish to do justice to such fiction, it makes little sense to follow Horace in believing that the source of good writing is ‘to know’, and then to take up a structured certainty uncharacteristic of postmodern fiction and thought in general.<sup>1</sup> I follow instead Donald Barthelme, who claims that “[w]ithout the scanning process engendered by not-knowing, without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention” (12), invention, I would argue, of either the critical or artistic kind.

How may critical writing reflect unanticipated movements of mind and avoid the sublimation of idiosyncrasy by a moribund and predictable structure wherein all propositions are rhetorically anticipated? How may a legible analysis emerge if the critical mind moves in unanticipated directions both in the course of research *and* of writing (not to mention after completion of a critical project, as our general dissatisfaction with our older efforts would attest)? One might start by proceeding along a wending way that is largely free of extensive signposting and other logical contrivance. If *processes* of mind are idiosyncratic, one should question the impulse to present *expressions* of mind as inevitably compatible with standard forms of argument. Perhaps it is wiser to consider reflexively the intentionality that draws us along an expressive way.

Here, then, at the beginning of this dissertation, I wish to explore the issue of critical motivation in order to keep in mind the various ends or aims of arguments in general, for these have everything to do with approach. Introductions are intended to

predispose readers to what is to follow. An ensuing series of claims and proofs, if the language in which they are couched is well-wrought, may be logically irrefutable, regardless of a certain pointlessness that may fray, in the eyes of some, the edges of an argument. Logical cohesion in concert with carefully crafted rhetoric can leave little space for disagreement, and when these are rigorously set down, it is a sure sign that a writer wishes to 'win' the argument. Often, rhetorical engines are engaged to drive a reader quickly past any stops along the way which might detract from the course or progress of the argument. There is frequently a tangible desire in such writing to 'overthrow' the arguments of others (I think of the Sophist Protagoras whose 'truths' are also known as 'throws', a term that comes to us from wrestling). There is an aggressiveness befitting a fugitive positivism in such writing that is entirely at odds with much of the contemporary fiction I discuss here, fiction which seeks with no inconsiderable pains to offer or to endow readers with an augmented sense of agency and which avoids apodictically proclaiming certain attempts to know worthy and others bootless. With such fiction as my subject, I could hardly take up the style of argument described above and must instead develop an approach that suggests rather than insists, one that pauses to consider what may be beside my point rather than to limit all observation to strict service of a point made sharp by the unjustified paring away of secondary considerations.

However, one may not so easily ignore the appeal of an argument that presents a neatly ordered internal logic. Thus, I will indirectly consider the human will to pattern that makes this quality desirable. I wish to understand the ways in which writers of

fiction trouble it while more commercial forms of communication exploit it. There is a danger in following my writers in reifying this aspect of human psychology: I may end up ‘writing’ poststructural theory (since I do not write fiction). If, at the sentence-level, I resist standard forms of logical argumentation, I risk opacity and prolixity. Such language would defeat the argument I wish to imply throughout that critical transparency (or self-reflexiveness) ought to replace wholeness as a positive value. Yet, how do I dispense with logical cohesion and remain legible? My dilemma is made more difficult by my affinity for poststructural dubiousness over the existence of objective truth. In this, I am in truck with the Sophists. But if I follow Gorgias in dispensing with the notion of truth and in believing that only opinion and rhetorical power finally matter, am I not inscribing in my argument the very creed of those corporate entities which suspend all values by keeping them in a constant state of spin, a creed which the fiction I study is at pains to reveal?<sup>2</sup>

In order to reconcile my fidelity to the social aims of the fiction, to readerly criticism, and to the concerns expressed above over rhetoric that does not serve its subject, I will here present my subject, theoretical affiliation, and methodological tendencies in as unadorned a fashion as I can prior to providing a theoretical warrant for the style of argument I employ.

This dissertation studies fiction written by David Foster Wallace, Don DeLillo, Robert Coover, and Thomas Pynchon. Works by these writers are presented as a response to the contemporary mass media and to the impact on human subjectivity of contemporary communications technology. My approach is broadly sympathetic towards

poststructural thought and practice. I do not inscribe poststructural tenets at all points in the argument, preferring instead to imply them through the tensions that result when various logics reveal their limitations: for example, when sociological/structuralist attempts to explain the social impact of television on mass viewing audiences prove inadequate. When I make claims about fiction, television, and cinema, or speculate on the claims made in fiction regarding these modes of communication, or explain the mental operations of reader-viewers in relation to the socioeconomic maneuvers of large entertainment companies, I am suggesting how we ought to think on the above and am not making claims as to sociological verities, philosophical essences, or scientific ‘realities’. I am concerned with discourse in its broadest sense, with the power that inheres in dominant discourses and the ways in which this power may be balanced out through dispersion and reconstruction of it. I present discourse as Pynchon presents film, as capable of sowing seeds of reality in the zone of our being. I follow Pynchon and all my writers in emphasizing the sociopolitical realm while claiming, as Wallace suggests in “Little Expressionless Animals”, that ‘total data’ on any given topic is not available.

I offer that we use the word ‘mediant’ as a term to connote the features of a given medium which indicate or demonstrate the operations of other media. In music, the third degree of a scale which comes between the tonic and the dominant is known as the mediant; what I will call mediant fiction intercedes between subjective social agents and

dominant corporate/consumerist culture. The term ‘mediant’ can be used to describe a painting that deconstructs popular magazines or a song that thematizes cinema. One would not describe a poem about poems as mediant. Criticism, if typographically expressed, is not mediant when remarking on printed texts but it becomes so when discussing the telegraph or the Internet, zoosemiotics or jazz. Criticism of the mediant fiction of, say, David Foster Wallace, can scarcely avoid commenting directly on Wallace’s favourite subject, television, and thus the criticism becomes mediant itself, part of its own subject and compelled to offer remarks on its own condition. That such remarks become necessary is fortunate because understanding that which is mediant necessarily involves the question of representation. A criticism which would elaborate on this argument must confront how itself enacts representational processes.

Heidegger begins “The Question Concerning Technology” by stating his approach (a questioning) before naming his topic (technology):

In what follows we shall be *questioning* concerning technology. Questioning builds a way. We would be advised, therefore, above all to pay heed to the way, and not to fix our attention on isolated sentences and topics. The way is a way of thinking. (3)

His first sentence reinforces a privileging of approach over subject matter that has already appeared in his title, the idea being that attention ought to be paid to the exploratory movement of an argument rather than to the readerly extraction of concepts from the logical flow which sustains them. Such movement opens itself to what is the case, a progression that is the coming into being of an idea. Heidegger’s beginning is entirely appropriate to his argument, to a wending that questions the causal reasoning which underlies the instrumentality that in turn shapes the conventional definition of technology

Heidegger takes as his point of departure. The reader is freed from the necessity of focusing narrowly on individual links in a linear chain of causal reasoning, a series of links that inclines the thinking subject towards one or another finalist determination. The expression of a line that is a way of thinking ought not to place a reader on a forced march that moves from cause to effect. The termination of such a chain involves the assertion that causal anteriority (that arrives through wholeness born of closure) proves an exact correspondence between argument and actuality. Causal argumentation is seductive because it well serves the verisimilar. All expression--verbal utterances, philosophical propositions, literary and poetical works, agglutinations of visual or aural elements presented for apprehension by viewers--aspire to correspond to the isness of things en route to making truth claims about actuality. Etiologically formed arguments bear conclusions that seem to accord well with actuality because they are part of an epistemological *modus operandi* that has long conditioned our view of world. We are predisposed to this mode of thinking, and thus, when it is offered, it appears natural, self-evident, right.<sup>3</sup> When the mode is skilfully employed, then it becomes a cause itself, one which produces a naturalizing effect within rhetoric. Our acceptance of that which then appears true is a second-order effect. But expression may fruitfully proceed along lines other than that of the concatenated narrative sequence, of the consecution that frequently eschews possibilities which arise along a contemplative way in favour of predetermined ends.

Determinism has ever been a shrewd confederate of apparent truth. To entertain the above argument against causality is to partake in the troubling of representation.



Although it is not a style I maintain throughout, these last two sentences are not logically conjoined in an immediately perceivable manner; the latter does not ‘clearly’ follow from the former. With the argument left open in this way, readers may perform certain links themselves, may choose to align conceptually determinism with causality and the critique of representation with the question of truth. One then wonders how these two links themselves may be connected, a question I would hope gets carried forward along the way. The style I demonstrate here is intended to foreground our habit of seeking meaningful connections between things, and to bring into relief whatever a reader believes is prerequisite to meaning. Without this gloss, my point that representation is inextricably bound up in aims, ends, intentions might have arrived through readerly processes, not logical insistence.

Any questioning of representation presents immediate problems for a study which seeks to understand relationships between two different forms of expression such as literary fiction and the mass media. The latter is comprised of television, film, computer communications of a visual nature, and those pictorial aspects of the popular press, namely photography and computer graphics. That which is literary and written and that which is commercial and visual offer what I will term for the moment conflicting representations. Two different modes vying for representational ascendancy--an argument over the manner in which actuality ought to be conjured--calls into question representational processes per se. What Jameson calls “an emergent mediatic conceptuality” (68) is symptomatic of such semiotic clashes and of criticism. The critic must step back to think upon the way of inquiry she has chosen, to look for meaning in

the manner of that looking. To do otherwise is to misunderstand the pervasiveness of the mediant.

Even the wording of a statement of topic will bring into play a number of issues related to representation. To speak of 'the mass media *in* fiction' suggests a capture of the former medium by the latter, an adequate representational capacity on the part of fiction with which it may encircle and present the truth of that which it apprehends. Questions arise: Does fiction possess this power? What are the processes involved when a representation of a representation, rather than of objecthood, is attempted? If fiction attempts to show the representational processes of another medium, rather than that other medium's representations, does it describe these in the verisimilar mode or suggest them through structural equivalencies, through ekphrasis (I suggest in my first chapter that the latter is the case)? Conversely, the phrase 'mass media in fiction' might suggest an infiltration of fiction by the popular media, a disruption of one medium's representational norms by those of another. What, at any rate, is the representational capability of a criticism that would ask such questions? To offer instead 'fiction *and* the mass media' makes each mode roughly equal (though there is the possibility that whichever receives top billing is placed rhetorically at the point of primary or more favourable reference). The seemingly neutral additive connector 'and' does not prevent the easy superimposition of causality on that which is presented at this point only in name. When two subjects are set side by side, the etiologically inclined purview will immediately look for--or more accurately, will impose--causal connections between the two (it is a shortcut along the way of inquiry) rather than embark on an extended, ecological, and holistic examination.

An initially innocent juxtapositioning is thus the first step in setting up a causal argument.

*But what if two things under consideration do not exist within a relationship the initial discovery of which would explain neither the things themselves nor the connections*

*between them?* Wider contexts, invisible when a subject occupies conceptual space

outside narrow interpretive frames, are key, and it is the importance of such contexts

which compels Heidegger to dismiss the instrumental view of technology (technology as

a means to an end) and to ask instead, “[w]ithin what do such things as means and end

belong?” (6). A writing of this kind, then, must acknowledge what both itself and its

subject are a part of, and must let readers know at each point how narrow or wide are the

interpretive frameworks presented.

In his essay on technology, Heidegger is primarily interested in once again setting

up *Dasein*, a process, as locus and medium. This is the wider context in which he claims

technology resides. It is not that technology is of no concern to him, but that his

phenomenological argument is finally his major focus. What if a commentator urgently

wishes to explore a set of relationships without entering into a philosophical examination

of the way in which she attempts to know, of the functioning of her epistemological

situation? May we not sometimes observe and report on phenomena without first

engaging in wide ranging assessment of analytical means? Can we not spare ourselves a

lengthy prefatory and get straight to the matter? The choice to pause or proceed depends

on the subject matter at hand. A large part of my subject here is that when one speaks of

a relationship between fiction and the mass media one remarks on intermedia processes

and the clash of truth claims. *How* we attempt to think on, and speak of, actuality is the

very point of the discussion, so to adopt a language which pretends to the easy and accurate mirroring of things would constitute a serious error, claiming as it would a stability for itself that the mediatic conflict under consideration renders untenable. Yet, an expedience born of the desire to convince, to hold sway, makes it tempting to begin and to end my argument in this chapter with a thesis stated outright (such 'bookending' creates the illusion of closure and aids in the functioning of causal argument), a thesis that might read, 'the fiction of writers A, B, C, and D enters into competitive codification with the televisual or the cinematic in a manner that disperses the power the mass media have accumulated and concentrated'. In such a formulation, the mass media and literary fiction are presented as agents of causality, and thus a causal argument might persuade readers since it rhetorically accords with the actuality *as it itself presents that actuality*. I could begin with the above thesis, and then construct my argument in such a way that we would arrive back at it by the close, by the closure--an inevitable return after proceeding along a false (since highly contrived) way littered by signposts and interpretive markers, each of which would ensure the smooth functioning of a chain of reasoning.<sup>4</sup> Pre-determined and determining ideas will not be set up in this pretext as prime movers at the head of a stream of propositions causally arranged (it will appear at the start of my next paragraph that this is precisely the type of writing I engage in). Instead, this self-conscious working through of approach constitutes a setting out along a way, a taking shape of tendencies.

If one is to write usefully of worrisome corporate suasion on the one hand and laudable literary intransigence to mass media norms on the other, one's rhetorical strategy

should be made as transparent as possible. To do otherwise is to risk adopting the rhetoric of the sale, a mode of persuasion I believe much contemporary fiction concertedly resists. To do otherwise also involves ignoring the ludic, anti-teleological, and anti-etiological impulses that texts put forward by so many contemporary writers enact (perhaps foremost among these being *Gravity's Rainbow*). One also risks setting aside the basic tenets of poststructural thought, the promising arguments put forward this century against foundationalism and totalizing forms of knowledge. I cannot ignore such developments any more than the physicist can turn a blind eye to the apparent winking in and out of existence of matter at the subatomic level (or to the suspicion that subatomic effects sometimes appear to precede causes). The radical critique of language should not, as is frequently the case in cultural studies today, only haphazardly inform analysis because the result is corruption of textual economies of justice and the propagation of versions of the very antinomian discourses cultural theorists so vehemently attack. The impulse to deconstruct the oppressive institutional habits of sundry others is today everywhere in evidence, but increasingly absent is the disassembly of one's own critical and methodological impulses *prior* to their application in a given argument. This absence contributes to the loss of transparency. Pretexts should provide an x-ray of the argument to come, should attempt to reveal informing assumptions as much as is possible when one attempts the act of analysis of the act of analysis. That way arguments would carry with them the keys to their own dismantling, and therefore, could not be used (unless violently perverted) as part of closed and univocal discourses. This approach would ensure that the rifles of antifoundationalism do not face outward only while sundry essentialisms,

disguised in the robes of the skeptic, get admitted through the back door. An aggressive deconstruction of the hegemonic other that does not treat similarly the critical self inaugurates a form of dissembling critique. This form not only fails to meet head on the problem of uncertainty and the difficulty of living upon the shifting middle ground between foundationalism and nihilism but declares and argues a relativity for undesirable cultural practices without any articulated reasons for the grounded objectivity it claims for itself. The often sneering dismissal by cultural theorists of select representations and of representation per se--an antirepresentational impulse--arrives inside arguments that enact all the mechanisms of representational argument, with all the sense of positivist certainty, without explanation of the contradiction thus displayed. The problem is that substantialist thinking does not get reconciled with deconstructive methods. Derrida warns about such Janus-faced critique:

We might say in another language that a criticism or a deconstruction of representation would remain feeble, vain, and irrelevant if it were to lead to some rehabilitation of immediacy, of original simplicity, or presence without repetition or delegation, if it were to induce a criticism of calculable objectivity, of criticism, of science, of technique, or of political representation. The worst regressions can put themselves at the service of this antirepresentational prejudice. (311)

I am tempted here to abandon pretext as reification of approach in order to state my position on the subject of representation prior to later elaboration in my third chapter. This setting up of anteriority lends itself to structural harmony and in turn to persuasion. But to do so would be to transmogrify grossly the wending way my argument took during the course of my research. To suggest through structure that what is obviously a carefully molded rhetoric--wherein modules of argument are painstakingly arranged to maximize

plausibility--follows naturally and easily from reflections that took place during research and study is a vastly common, usually implied, and highly suspect claim. Such critical assertion through structure is a giving in to the urge to overwhelm with the power of an argument, and is a tendency that quite misses the point of works put forward by Wallace, DeLillo, Coover, and Pynchon. Their fictions are highly dubious towards the unself-reflexive living in of structures of thought, and they accord well with Nietzsche's twenty-sixth arrow/maxim from *Twilight of the Idols*: "[t]he will to a system is a lack of integrity" (25). To resist this will involves some level of risk. As Spivak observes in her remarks on cultural self-representation, when you become wary of structure, and when you see that social structures "are organized as narratives which reflect a sort of weave of presence and absence....you lose the confidence of *having* something which is *causing* something or *controlling* something" (51). In order to have and to have not, that is, to hold to a readable argument while retaining a suspicion of rhetorical constructs, this ironically titled pretext is finally confessional: in what follows I often replicate the dialectical movement of critique (the mainspring of representation), frequently speak of effects, and work towards claiming a provisional referential capacity for fictional language. But I want my reader to catch me at familiar mechanisms of argument, for this is the only way to suggest that something is the case without forcing a logic upon another who is seeking her own way.<sup>5</sup> If it seems paradoxical to eschew cause and effect prior to offering what may finally be a cautious etiology, I refer my reader to Barbara Johnson's essay "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida" to her observation there that readers interpret within a paradoxical frame of reference that offers insight and blindness

simultaneously. The same holds, I believe, for writers. I also hope that such a pretext will lessen the need for extensive use of parenthetical asides, myriad other pretexts, and excessive or distracting use of punctuational nods and winks to the reader, the kind so frequently used to acknowledge the philosophical debates now affixed to language. I reserve more extensive remarks on the subject of representation and antirepresentation for my third chapter as I do not wish to yank key remarks from that site, from the contexts in which they are manifest there. To extract them for use here would be mere pretext for a contrived sequence of propositions.



## **Amalgam**

The following conglomeration of propositions is intended to contribute to the taking shape of a way. I avoid both summary here of major points to come and simplification (for the sake of introduction) of the theoretical orientations of the thesis as a whole. Instead, I attempt the incremental revelation of these through pertinent discussion. This is the beginning of an argument which sees loosely knit propositions eventually become part of a pattern of thought, a process more akin to thinking (and researching) itself than is a strictly ordered argument. The mass media are all about structuring patterns of thought through succinct and direct appeals, while the fiction I study seeks to render that particular undertaking transparent. It is hoped here that my style will allow me participation in my writers' project. If the last thirty years of what we may reasonably call postmodern theorizing has taught us anything, it is that meaning coheres out of disparate elements, like the chance bonding of molecules, and that stable patterns of meaning are not a priori or permanent. I do not pretend that there is no design at all guiding my selection of thinkers and quotations, but I am attempting to frustrate the will to a full systematization of ideas.

Heidegger suggests that technology, initially understood as consisting of instruments, of apparatuses, fades, in a conceptual sense, into its operations. What technology precisely is goes unperceived.<sup>6</sup> I suggest that it is when this recession takes place that human attentions shift, particularly in the case of television, from medium to

message (Heidegger helps to fill that lacuna in McLuhan's body of work involving the *reasons* that neutrality gets mistakenly conferred upon the technological). For the majority of television viewers, communications technology is the means to an end, mere camera, current, and cable placed in the service of providing the contents of screen experience, a window on the world. News segments claim to report on events, but entertainment programs are also believed to reflect the realities of a culture, at the very least to reflect its desires. This immediate and apparent utility of programming eclipses those features of the medium which belie its powers of mediation and invention (see my discussion below on how the televisual can only seize upon the correct). Television rarely allows for any serious critique of itself within its own frames of reference, and on those rare occasions when it does, any bid to compromise the format of programming flow which subsumes all to the commercial moment is entirely frustrated. At those times when television allows debate over, say, techniques of news coverage, the arguments serve primarily as a preemptive strike against objections to television's social omnipotence. It seeks ostensibly to reveal itself and thereby to stymie opposition. Although a critic from *The Los Angeles Times* may present in a televised interview a jeremiad against network TV, he will be interrupted by commercial breaks, interviewers, or opponents in debate. Interruption is television's tool of choice when maintaining its surfaces, and is the manner in which opposition to its structures is attuned.

Television is a form of unilateral communication. Critics who share with Umberto Eco the desire to provide critical models and information that would be of assistance to "anyone hoping to restore to human beings a certain freedom in the face of

the total phenomenon of Communication” (1986: 142) have the work of Eco, McLuhan, Chomsky, Fiske, and others to incorporate into their own efforts and to build on. But we would do well to keep in mind Heidegger’s argument in *Being and Time* that art is able to reclaim technological phenomena from instrumentality, and thus, I argue, the formation of individual subjectivities from corporate communications. Mediant fiction recontextualizes the structures of screen experience (as these exist both on screen and in mind) in order to make them as open to apprehension as the superficial contents of programming are. This fiction’s primary tendency is its attempt to recondition the ways in which we understand the mediatic conceptuality that is now ubiquitous. Its enabling contrary is a contemporary human environment characterized by a media saturation largely corporate in character. If we ascribe to mediant fiction, as I do, the power to free the reader-viewer from rigid or under-theorized conceptualizations of such things as technology in general and communications technology in particular, it is important to understand what precisely it is that has ensnared our thinking, what it is that apparently compels various contemporary writers to develop oppositional aesthetics. It would be reductive to suggest that the corporately controlled mass media emerge as primary culprits without due consideration of their mechanistic and social features. To understand mediant fiction, it is necessary to begin questioning concerning mass communications and to understand within what broader human response to being communication itself resides.

In terms of early beginnings, television shares a key characteristic with radio.<sup>7</sup>

From the outset, promoters of each medium sought to convey the message that the

existence and commercial operations of new communications technology were socially beneficial. To aid in the pursuit of profit in a mid-century political climate wherein North American legislators were increasingly passing laws to aid and to augment the perceived social good, preemptive apologia sounded through television on behalf of television. Owners and operators of stations and networks need not have bothered because in each case the medium was, of course, its own message: it was created, developed, and promoted in a western culture deeply positivist in its orientations and confident in its belief in pure perception. Both the medium and its primary illusion--that televisuality presents a clear view of the world--found ready acceptance. This coming into widespread being of a new visual mode of communication was accompanied by an uncritical blindness to the intermeddling between viewer and viewed which all media perform. McLuhan--perhaps following Plato, who used the word *eidos* or 'outward aspect' in an opposite sense to mean that which may never be seen through the physical senses--famously argues that the message or meaning of a medium is not its surface aspect but its broader social functioning. One message of the medium for him, then, is that

the sensory typology of an entire population is directly altered by each and every new extension of the body or of the senses. Each extension is an amplification that in varying but measurable degrees, alters the hierarchy of sensory preference in ordering daily experience and environment for whole populations. (McLuhan 206)

While McLuhan usefully emphasizes what he calls the extensions of man, he overstates the differences between a population's sensory preferences before and after a new technological extension comes into being and widespread use. As well, he does not explain the intellectual or psychological reasons for these preferences which are not

always of physical origins. The notion of the neutral observer that has ever informed scientism and verisimilar art had shaped the social environment prior to the advent of radio or television. Thus, both media found ready acceptance. Efforts to implicate televisual experience with explanations of how ideology shapes and is in turn shaped by media (these efforts resist the naturalizing effect that accompanies the acceptance of new extensions of being) are common but have never reached a wide audience. That these efforts so often fail to do so is one of the dilemmas to which mediant fiction responds. Of course, the very idea that we have come to think of democratic publics as audiences, as passive receptors of spectacles amongst which intellectual debate is but one, attests to the influence of television. Television's special talent lies in creating realistic effects that at first mesh with and then finally reconfigure popular ways of seeing. So well does it camouflage its mediating function that it is treated as an indispensable aid to citizenry, one which vanquishes distance telescopically and which emerges a familiar and friendly conduit through which American realities may be easily transmitted and received, an open window.

Television *does* aid us: through watching, we may discover that there has been a loss of life in a foreign conflict (whatever the elusive 'truth' of the *circumstances* surrounding tragedy, we discover roughly and in outline that something has transpired); we may learn about child care; we may discover that a new medicine is available; we may be told to evacuate our town or city. But there is a problem in that televisual speech acts and visual messages usually only state something that is *correct* and that this correctness is widely mistaken for deeper meaning. Heidegger observes in "The Question

Concerning Technology” that “[t]he correct always fixes on something pertinent in whatever is under consideration. However, in order to be correct, this fixing by no means needs to uncover the thing in question in its essence” (6).<sup>8</sup> For television to claim that a war has begun or that a death has taken place, for it to refer to ancient hostilities or to remark on the social conditions which foster criminality, is to seize upon the correct. But the questioning that might allow us to better understand ‘warfare’ or ‘homicide’ would necessarily involve extended segments of uninterrupted air time in order to delve deeply into a topic, an extended and reflective pause which television’s structural enforcement of shifting surfaces disallows. Chomsky’s refusal, as shown in the documentary film *Manufacturing Consent*, to compartmentalize his discourse into soundbites of the ‘proper’ length when speaking on television (the segment of which he was a part never aired) demonstrates the incompatibility of wide-ranging presentation of ideas with the televisual medium as it is currently configured.

There is also the problem that television provides for the intermixing of object and fact perception. A person’s physical proximity to objects and to the social agents who perform speech acts (I will refer to these acts as objects in the sense of objects of perception) offers a better sense of understanding than television does as regards the insertion of objects into cultural understanding. The televisual object (a new drug, a speech from the president) is glaringly apparent as object but superficially so because the experiential and epistemological contexts required in order to attribute cultural meaning to the object are either refused or are highly mediated by television. The experience afforded by the camera cannot replace being there (this loss of ‘thereness’ is Kosinski’s

lament in the ironically titled *Being There*). The high resolution image calls forth easy resolutions on the part of viewers because the felt ease with which objects are perceived and understood in actual space is not compromised during viewing of that which is at a remove. Television works towards maintaining this sense of ease by assuring viewers that the truth is brought to them in the comfort of their own homes. The medium becomes a type of magic communication the surface of which is made impenetrable, shallow, by a duplicitous realism. What John Ashbery says in his apostrophe to the sixteenth-century realist painter Parmigianino (whose 1524 self-portrait in a convex mirror was a startling advance in the art of creating realistic effects in painting) holds for the experience of television, a medium which renders the on-screen other a corporate emissary whose “eyes proclaim, / That everything is surface. The surface is what’s there / And nothing can exist except what’s there....you could be fooled for a moment / Before you realize the reflection / Isn’t yours” (79-81, 233-35). The power to dictate what’s out there and to create false needs in a large viewing audience that believes itself (and its wants) accurately reflected is television’s exclusive preserve.<sup>9</sup> Parmigianino’s secrets of wash and finish disguised with verisimilitude the philosophical assumptions that informed both the painting medium at the time and its reception. Such assumptions included the belief that man is the measure of all things and that art possesses the capacity to represent the ‘real’. It is an assumption of this writing that the right hand of corporate and televisual enterprise protects its right to advertise through the dissemination of simulacra, just as “Parmigianino did it, the right hand / Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer / And swerving easily away, as though to protect what it advertises” (1-4).

Without the arrival at sites of human reception by codifications that contend with the televisual, viewers passively accept a blank technologism. Mediant fiction can transform our perception of technological, televisual space by opening up its own conceptual zones and by orienting these in relation to sites of reception. What television pushes outside of its frames can be reasserted, but not through any form of dissent that seeks the media spotlight. Television can easily counter a dissent such as Chomsky's simply by refusing to air any segment that involves him and by maintaining its status as a major disseminator of social text. When opposition to the logic of late capitalism manifests itself in the folds of the televisual, it comes to function on behalf of corporate interests. As well, the mass media are adept at presenting radical developments in thought as analogous to innovations in merchandising. All the media need do is obtain an image of a thinker and set it in contexts favourable to its own operations and aims. Beckett's intense and wrinkled countenance appears in ads for a computer and software manufacturer ("Think Differently" is the slogan) and photographic images of Burroughs have been used to sell running shoes. David Cronenberg's film *Naked Lunch* functioned primarily upon its release to popularize Burroughs as a photogenic writer figure who has come to epitomize the image of social radical, an image easily and routinely co-opted for commercial purposes (Burrough's image, not the novel itself, gained greater popularity). Co-option of Burroughs *did* shortly follow the movie's release (the running shoe ad), and we must confront the possibility that the film created the conditions for the Nike company's use of Burrough's image. Ironically, his image now functions on behalf of a system resisted in his works. We must account for the movie industry's effect on public



perceptions; a writer now only truly 'arrives' in popular culture when his or her works are made into movies. Don DeLillo's *Mao II* is a novel that dramatizes, through the figure of author Bill Gray, Salinger's fear of being captured photographically and that presents this fear as a vital and necessary trepidation. On the bookjacket appears praise from Pynchon (a recluse like Salinger) alongside cover artwork from the *Mao* series by Andy Warhol, a master of surfaces whose career is based largely on his embrace of corporate semiosis (shortly before we see the ironic death of the author in *Mao II*, a bar patron asks Bill Gray if any of his novels have been made into movies). But if the mass media can parlay any and all images of writers into an aura which validates one or another brand name, they are less successful at appropriating actual works by writers. Mediant fiction itself, as I will argue, is constructed in such a way as to resist transference of its recombinant elements into commercial media. It thus creates a space for itself in an aggressive and media-saturated communications environment. What it does inside this space is the concern of the following chapters.

## Chapter One

### David Foster Wallace and the Reading of Television

As Parmigianino did it, the right hand  
Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer  
And swerving easily away, as though to protect  
What it advertises.

--John Ashbery

I am proposing an action to urge the audience to  
control the message and its multiple possibilities of  
interpretation.

--Umberto Eco

A dog, if you point at something, will look only at  
your finger.

--David Foster Wallace

How is mediant fiction able to reclaim technology from the instrumental view, a view that untenably construes television as a means to the ends of pure perception and unmediated communication? How does it dismantle this view to prevent it from effacing the broader implications of media? And how does it present the human subjectivity that uncertainly faces the phenomenon of communication and the institutional practices of the culture industries that appear bent on mediating communication? These questions arise out of assumptions that are themselves answers to other questions pertinent to this study.

I will pause briefly to consider these other questions before discussing the particularities and purposes of mediant fiction.

*Given that the mediant fiction under consideration here finds audiences through publishing houses often part of large entertainment conglomerates, is it reasonable to assume that such fiction is outside or independent of commercialization and commodification, enough so that it can mount a critique of what are the economic conditions for its own possibility?* The notion that a text may only help to modify a cultural, economic system when it is in some sense outside that system is an idea based on the flawed assumption that resistant texts are other than, rather than intricately bound up in the institutional texts and practices they oppose. Dominant and minor are enabling contraries for one another and are closely interwoven. To believe that a writer is in some sense compromised by contact with institutions antithetical in orientation to the writer's own is to fall prey to an associative fallacy. This view assumes that the proximity of an institution to a person ensures an untroubled transferal of values from the former to the latter. We need only think on Pynchon's involvement in the scientific-industrial complex, and his rejection in *Gravity's Rainbow* of a wide array of scientific perspectives and practices, to see that complicity does not follow from contact. The fallacy also assumes, untenably, that publishers can anticipate reception and can therefore control the writers they publish. If we are to think of mediant fiction as just another commodity (this is the view that sees fiction sold commercially as politically compromised), then we must allow it the volatility and unpredictability common to all products. Commodities can render whole lines of products obsolete and can, if faulty, result in legal action against

manufacturers. Innovative fiction can lead to the dissolution of an accepted form or style, declining sales figures, or, as with all types of writing, slander suits. The point is that commodities do not always benefit their corporate producers and that agents within a particular corporate structure do not always carry ideological fealty for that system. *Since it is for sale, is mediant fiction not marked by corporate semiosis in some manner and does this scoring of its surfaces and depths not compromise its ability to critique corporate culture?* The extent to which, and the way in which mediant fiction is marked by corporate semiosis is precisely its most interesting feature. It may be deeply marked if by that we mean it chooses to thematize corporations, their products, services, institutional cultures, and public relations campaigns. *That* texts may be commodities is less a consideration than *how* textual operations engage with dominant media culture. When Bret Easton Ellis unironically uses corporate brand names to delineate character, he helps normalize the commercial infusion of such descriptors into both fictional practices and reading experience. A writer like Douglas Coupland appears to worry, as does DeLillo, over those members of North American mass culture who, in the words of Douglas Kellner, "gain primary gratification from consuming goods and leisure activities" (18). However, Coupland lavishes narratorial attentions on consumption and consumer activity in such a way that there is no space for the dissenting reader within the folds of his narrative.<sup>1</sup> His *Shampoo Planet* and DeLillo's *White Noise* provide for an interesting study in contrast. Even their titles signal a key difference in tone and approach, the former heralding a consumerist ethos and the latter declaring the marketplace Babel. *If we decide to pit 'quality' fiction against a 'debased' visual mass*

*media, what standard of evaluation do we use for each?* Even if certain literary and cultural critics attempt to disavow allegiance to political/aesthetic agendas and evaluative criteria, and seek instead to focus only on the production of meaning, their interpretive biases will nonetheless shape their analyses. This inevitability, alongside subject matter such as fiction and the mass media so overdetermined that only discrete evaluations based on specific examples are possible, means that any critical modality of praise must foreground its criteria of judgment. For example, Pynchon uses the phrase ‘serious fiction’ in his introduction to the stories in *Slow Learner*. The phrase would appear elitist or high-handed if Pynchon did not explain that in his view such fiction is characterized by a sober response to death. Once evaluative criteria themselves are presented for evaluation (and are not merely implied through their application), a pluralist critical practice is encouraged. Broadly, I argue the egalitarian utility of a given fiction or mass media project based on whether it functions to leave open or to narrow the ideological purviews of reader-viewers. I use this type of assessment as a basis for an oppositional critical practice and suggest that it is part of my writers’ oppositional aesthetic.

Mediant fiction takes on its distinctiveness in the following ways: (1) by addressing the reader-viewer through a thematization of that figure, an appeal to, and dramatization of the psychology that resides at the site of technological reception; (2) by showing how various media, including the printed literary text, present frameworks of meaning in alternately narrow and broad configurations; (3) by revealing that television, contrary to the medium’s ostensible verities, inscribes solipsism in the perceptual habits of reader-viewers; and (4) by piercing the corporate veil that is corporate semiosis in

order to reveal televisual text as the handmaiden of enterprise, not the aide-de-camp to democratic free choice it purports to be (in piercing the corporate veil as courts sometimes do, such fiction actually performs a type of legal function). In order to address these major tendencies of the fiction, the sections of this chapter are titled as follows and are introduced in brief below prior to further elaboration:

- 1) Site-Oriented Analysis and the Reader-Viewer
- 2) Anamorphic Constriction and Dilation
- 3) Television as Ostensible Medium, Viewer as Ostensive Solipsist
- 4) Piercing the Corporate Veil: Legal/Legalistic Fictions and Postmodern Ekphrasis
- 5) Wallace's Short Fiction

In considering the figure of the reader-viewer, the site of media reception, and the method of site-oriented analysis advocated in this writing (section 1), we should begin with the following lines from Brian McHale's discussion of Pynchon's *Vineland*.

McHale discusses briefly television's emulatory effect on viewers, then says that

*Vineland* mirrors this 'modelling' function that TV has come to serve in our culture. Many of its characters are preoccupied with conforming their lives to TV models. Some, the more self-conscious among them, reflect on the adequacy or inadequacy of TV models to reality, but even the self-conscious ones seem unable to free themselves from TV's grip on their lives. (117)

While we should be wary of McHale's claim that fiction can mirror anything (fiction may make reference through ironically configured structural equivalencies to how we think on the 'real', not through representation<sup>2</sup>), we should follow his lead and look at mediant fiction's construction of the reader-viewer and at how some reader-viewers are depicted as more self-conscious than others in a given narrative, better able to question the truth claims that arrive through the televisual medium. McHale is wrong, however, to imply as

he does that *Vineland* gives us the truth about sites of televisual reception. McHale does not acknowledge the speculative nature of both Pynchon's fiction and of his own critique. He too easily ignores the critique of representation that arrived with postmodern fiction, presenting as he does the notion of a stable text that is able to reflect unproblematically the verities in a large social text. A more tenable approach to mediant fiction (and to mediant critique) should involve consideration of a given work's *suggestibility* rather than its capacity to capture a given truth. Television, fiction, criticism, all carry powers of suggestion that do not so much affirm or discover truth as competitively codify versions of actuality. What is valuable about *Vineland* is that it can become part of the site of televisual reception. It can operate there (as it seems to have operated in my living room and in the TV rooms of literary critics who have written on Pynchon) in relation to visual mass media. It offers versions of individual, media-delineated agency that reader-viewers may reflect upon.<sup>3</sup> Analysis of mediant and site-oriented fiction ideally involves what I term site-oriented analysis, a form of critique that exhibits an ethics of care wedded to text-centered study and directed *through the fiction* toward the technologically delineated subjectivity of individual reader-viewers.<sup>4</sup> A sociological or reader-response approach to the function of literary texts at sites of reception might offer some statistical indication of some responses to mediant fiction but would not explain or promote the suggestive *possibilities* of mediant fiction. My analysis, like the fiction it studies, is engaged in suggestion. I do not argue that postmodern mediant fiction redeems subjugated populations (an argument linked to the Marxist dream of social transformation), nor do I claim that such fiction reaches large numbers of persons (an

argument linked to capitalism's primary value of the high sales figure). Rather, I suggest that this type of fiction is like ball lightning, that it impresses only certain persons, but that these persons--educators, critics, media analysts--can choose to promote such fiction as useful to the study of communications in a late capitalist age.

As regards the demonstration in mediant fiction of how various media alternately narrow and broaden its proffered, interpretive frameworks (section 2), I take my cue from John Fiske who writes that "unity in the [television] program...works to construct an equivalent unity in the viewing subject. As the presenters embody the unity of the program, so we, in identifying with them, are interpolated as unified subjects repressing any discomfoting contradictions...that we make of the program and of ourselves" (55). Fiske importantly draws attention to the process of subject formation by the technological, but required is a better understanding of the unification he suggests takes place. I offer that we are not so much drawn into televisual homogeneity by a textual effect of unity as much as we see (or do not see) our interpretive frameworks shrunk for us during viewing. This constriction creates an impoverished sense of possibility, of the sheer range of ways of seeing and knowing. Our imaginations become circumscribed during viewing of commercial mass media at the same time that what we do imagine appears increasingly to accord with that which is seen on screen. The illusion of untroubled perception of world through television is thus created and evidence of commercial mediation of words and images becomes less visible. To suggest how this process, this spin might be reversed, David Foster Wallace's fiction suggests that we see the televisual as engaged in narrowing the conceptual space that makes up a viewer's



purview. At the same time, his works propose mediant fiction's capacity to broaden such space. Wallace dramatizes the adventures of the interpreting subject who puzzles over social text and who wonders along with Oedipus Maas if one should project a world (that is, see intentionally) or believe in and seek out meaning that exists antecedent to perception--the adventure is finally a philosophical one.<sup>5</sup> The ideological constriction (by this I mean the ideological closing down of interpretive possibility) evident in most televisual texts prevents the manifestation there and in the minds of reader-viewers of discourses discordant to corporate messages. Wallace, as I explain, says that television's message is never that the medium is the message. Of course, not all television narrows and not all fiction broadens the conceptual purviews of reader-viewers. What is required is a means of gauging the extent to which a text is closed or open. I introduce, define, and utilize below the notion of anamorphic constriction and dilation. The terms refer to the basic tendency of both social texts and perceiving subjects to install ideological closure or to resist it by either narrowing (constriction) or by broadening (dilation) frameworks of meaning.

In discussing the challenge issued by mediant fiction to the presumed verisimilitude of television, I will present viewer and viewed in terms of the ostensive and the ostensible (section 3). Taking my cue from Wittgenstein's discussion of ostensive definition, I explain how Wallace presents the viewer of television as caught up, when watching television, not in the world television ostensibly frames but in a cognitive feedback loop wherein experience of television provides confirmation only of that experience. According to the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, we

may point at an object and name it, ostensibly define it (remember that I construe televisual text as object, as an object of perception). But, he argues, the meaning of that name, its connection to the named in varying contexts, depends on how it is inserted into wider--that is, public--linguistic performances. Meaning does not issue from within. Acts of private naming, if they do not eventually result in comprehensible and shared public signs, are essentially solipsistic. When one thinks on a private connection between a word and a perception, no knowledge is pondered. Only the connection is thought on. We see in Wallace the inward turn of the televisually delineated mind, a solitary cognition that mistakes apprehension of corporate semiosis for interaction with broader, public discourses.<sup>6</sup> I hope to build on and further theorize the following claims that Wallace makes in his essay on television and American fiction:

Television has become immune to charges that it lacks any meaningful connection to the world outside it. It's not that charges of nonconnection have become untrue but that they've become deeply irrelevant. It's that any such connection has become otiose. Television used to point beyond itself. Those of us born in, say, the '60s were trained by television to look where it pointed, usually at versions of "real life" made prettier, sweeter, livelier by succumbing to a product or temptation. Today's mega-Audience is way better trained, and TV has discarded what's not needed. A dog, if you point at something, will look only at your finger. (33)

I will mention other connections than the one mentioned above between Wallace's fiction and the thought of Wittgenstein, and will build incidentally on McLuhan's notion of technological narcissism, a perspective widely accepted but generally undertheorized in literary applications of the idea.

When I suggest that mediant fiction pierces the corporate veil (section 4), I am arguing that the fiction quite literally breaks through the legal protections enjoyed by the

modern corporation. Courts sometimes repeal these protections when a particular company violates certain social protocols (or breaks the law outright). Fiction enacts such penetration when corporate practices become its subject and when an interpretive community, akin to the public that attends a trial, is invited into a gap of social/textual ambiguity. This gap is created when corporate agents sunder themselves from the social texts they have produced, circulated, and ultimately benefited from. For example, when Mark Fowler became Federal Communications Commission chairman in 1981 to 1987, he abolished the anti-trafficking rule, a government regulation that ensured anyone buying a television would have to keep it for at least three years. “Networks and stations were subsequently swept up into the maelstrom of stock speculation, mergers, and leveraged buyouts” (Baker and Dessart 26). Fowler became infamous for his remark that television was little more than a toaster with pictures; the view of television as a benign bearer of images usually accompanies efforts to disperse in the folds of market practices any accountability for televisual texts. Communal assessment of such texts does not take place during the act of viewing, for within that which is viewed there are rarely dissenting voices. Other public venues, such as those provided by mediant fiction, can function as a higher court of opinion. The meanings contained in legal language rely on public interpretation and are not in any sense pre-existent to these interpretations. The same may be said of the language of fiction. The corporate veil, consisting of those laws that ascribe certain legal rights of personhood to corporate structures, is often drawn aside in court when corporate behavior excites the righteous anger of a court. Wallace’s fiction performs the same function by enacting corporate semiosis--the messages that emanate

from media corporations--on fiction's revealing terms. If fiction did not enjoy sundry immunities from defamation suits, this vital textual operation could not take place as often as it does in mediant fiction. In this context, the ironic tone of the modified boilerplate disclaimer at the start of *Girl With Curious Hair* resonates:

These stories are 100% fiction. Some of them project the names of "real" public figures onto made-up characters in made-up circumstances. Where the names of corporate, media, or political figures are used here, those names are meant only to denote figures, images, the stuff of collective dreams; they do not denote, or pretend to private information about, actual 3-D persons, living, dead, or otherwise.

"100% fiction" adopts the language of advertising here, and the notion of the real is suspended in quotation marks and undercut. That media images and figures are the stuff of collective experience is precisely the point of his fiction. He avoids claiming private knowledge of individual persons because his concern is the corporate entity and the reduction of the human to television's ephemeral services, the '1-D'. What I term corporate semiosis comes to the television viewer in a unilateral flow that conceals the intentions behind televisual rhetoric. The term functions here to refer to the admixture of 'news' (what I would call, recalling my introductory remarks on Heidegger, 'the correct'), cultural signs (always harnessed to a commercial context), and overtly commercial messages. Mediant fictions generate a flow that is also unilateral and directed at the individual, but it is one which reveals rather than hides the corporate imperatives embedded in televisual texts. Because it is in part self-reflexive fiction, inclined to revealing its own operations at key moments, it resists the rhetorical function per se, seeking to open up possibilities for a reader rather than engrain any specific interpretive protocols. In my chapter on Pynchon, I more fully explore the manifestation

and transformation of corporate semiosis in and into fiction. Here I use the term to suggest that Wallace's short stories function legalistically and that they do so in part by manipulating the products of corporate visual culture through a remodulated form of ekphrasis (this form is the primary mechanism by which mediant fiction appropriates the images of mass media culture).

Broadly, I suggest in this chapter that the postmodern literary value of resistance to ideological closure synchronizes with the ethical value of interpretation of social text in the name of interpreters; the two values operate together both in mediant fiction and here inside a critical mode to promote Foucault's idea of the 'specific intellectual', a figure who grapples with powers felt at the point occupied in a given power network, working with the specifics of that site to confront "the politics of truth in our societies" (Foucault 27).

### **1) Site-Oriented Analysis and the Reader-Viewer**

In a chapter on experimental video and commercial television, Frederic Jameson discusses the mechanical depersonalization and construction of viewer subjectivity for which he holds commercial video responsible. At one point he makes the startling claim that "[t]he living room, to be sure...seems an unlikely place for this assimilation of human subjects to the technological" (74). Since he contrasts living room entertainment with the public movie house, and mentions the Brechtian theatregoer, I can only assume that Jameson believes that individuals are only open to assimilation when situated in public settings. I take the opposite view; mass media technology most effectively delineates

subjecthood and effaces its own operations when individuals experience the products of such technology while alone, and thus it is at the site of reception, in private, where resistance must manifest itself. The polarization that characterizes these contrasting positions is only one in a long running debate over the extent to which mass communications shape individuals. Given the changing conceptualizations of audience that have taken place since the inauguration of communications studies by the Frankfurt School in the 1930s, we should ask how mediant fiction and criticism variously posit readerships and viewerships, and wonder if it is possible to assess the effects of typographic or visual texts on these respective groups. I will position my notion of the media viewer within the changing conceptualizations of this figure over the last century.

At one pole is the theorization that mass media dominate audiences by acting as culture industries which hypodermically inject viewers with messages that are only understood by receivers in the manner intended by senders. This view, which accepts and develops the proposition that mass culture, born of mass media, weakens the social fabric and creates social isolation, arises out of the Frankfurt School.<sup>7</sup> At the other end of the spectrum is the view that no such umbrella pronouncements regarding media effects are viable given the enormous variability in audience response. American researchers in the 1940s conducted empirical research to support the contention that the social effects of the mass media were diverse, complex, and differently manifested amongst widely dissimilar audiences. This view, with its implicit claim that viewers freely interpret mass media messages, challenged an understanding of media effects based on a pre-existing theoretical framework such as the Marxist one (though of course the perspective was

informed by its own politically charged conceptions of free will and individual responsibility). In the 1960s, British cultural critics adapted Gramsci's formulations of hegemony and counterhegemony. This development gave rise in the 1970s to Screen theory, an approach which focused on the contents of film and media texts in strict relation to feminist and psychoanalytic precepts.<sup>8</sup> Useful are the ways in which Screen Theory argues that media texts position or situate viewers, and my argument is indebted to it. My own approach more specifically follows from recent debates over viewership and the issue of choice. Given advances in technological communication and the political ascendancy of consumer, capitalist societies in the west, viewers are considered in some camps to be always active, offered as they are an array of viewing and product choices over which they have control and from which they may freely choose or not choose.<sup>9</sup> But such control is precisely that, remote, and only extends to when and what will be watched. I argue in this section that the reader-viewer is enmeshed in a new form of social isolation that has followed from the advent of television and that medium's inscription of cognitive solipsism on reader-viewer psychology. The extent to which an individual may resist this inscription depends on the number and quality of messages a viewer is exposed to that are not commercial and mass mediatic in nature.

In an essay entitled "Towards a Semiological Guerrilla Warfare", Umberto Eco writes that

As a rule, politicians, educators, communications scientists believe that to control the power of the media you must control two communicating moments of the chain: the Source and the Channel. In this way they believe they can control the message. Alas, they control only an empty form that each addressee will fill with meanings provided by his own

cultural models. The strategic solution is summed up in the sentence, 'We must occupy the chair of the Minister of Information' or even 'We must occupy the chair of the publisher of *The New York Times*'....What must be occupied, in every part of the world, is the first chair in front of every TV set (and naturally, the chair of the group leader in front of every movie screen, every transistor, every page of newspaper). (1986: 142)

Eco's rhetoric of total occupation is obviously ironic, and is intended in part to deflate the Marxist *ignis fatuus*, the dream of total social transformation. Interesting here is his claim that the key seat of social power is occupied by the reader of social text who will inevitably bring his or her cultural (and therefore interpretive) orientations to bear on social texts. Although I agree with Eco that culture "can be studied completely under a semiotic profile" (1976: 26-27), semiotic inquiry at this point in time exhibits some regrettable lacunae. Television culture, for example, is most often treated separately from literary expression. Still required is a method, semiotic or otherwise, by which to understand the competitive codification that takes place between these mediums, one that can account for what fiction says about the mass media and which does not relegate the literary to mere equivalence with advertising and popular cinema, or elevate self-interested commercial texts to the level of art in a misguided strike at elitism.<sup>10</sup> I am concerned that Eco does not appear to acknowledge that the 'cultural models' he says viewers bring to bear on television come less and less today from para-televisual sources but from the mass media. While Eco is correct in resisting the impulse to critique only those social mechanisms which control source and channel, he does not account for how cultural orientations and perceptions are shaped by what takes place on a commercially and technologically delineated site of viewer reception. It is not my aim here to explain the nature of this site, but rather to develop a method that will allow literary criticism to



orient readings of mediant fiction towards this site and towards our conceptions of the individual who reads and watches there.

I use the term 'reader-viewer' to signal a dual significance: it will denote the difference between reading fiction on the printed page and viewing visual texts through the commercial media, and it will draw a distinction between a critical, active *reading* of social text and an accepting, passive *viewing* of same. My notion of the reader-viewer is based on Christian Metz's concept of film as a medium which "conveys messages to which the spectator cannot give an immediate response in the same code" (1974: 83). Television psychosemiotically reduces the difference, even more than film, between the sign and 'real-world' objects. The televisual image approaches magic communication because it appears to reduce the distance between electromagnetic image and actuality; the 'magic' of television is the illusion that the medium can directly frame the real, a supposition arising from a semiotic fallacy that involves confusion over the pragmatic effect of signs and their semantic-object relation. The televisual viewer actually exists in isolation, and is, one might be tempted to say, a voyeur. But the spectacle that awaits the would-be voyeur is staged exclusively for his or her benefit; the viewer is known and is targeted, watched. Viewers falsely believe themselves to be sampling a cross-section of a uniform reality when they manipulate their remote controls, believe they are in control of a televisual message when they are actually engaged in opening themselves uncritically to it. Thus, the term 'reader-viewer' also derives its significance from Eco's only initially paradoxical contention that viewer *control* of a message's interpretation is a first step in opening up interpretive possibilities. Control of a message comes in dispersing and

postponing that message's *and one's own* inclination to closure. Again, Eco is ironic, for 'control' of one's own interpretation cannot take place in any total sense. But one can place the rhetorical devices that guide viewer interpretation of televisual messages on explicit display in order to allow room for a response that is contrary, skeptical, and wary. Control of a message comes from the self-conscious awareness that texts and interpreters can resist or accept ideological closure (a point I elaborate on in the second section of this chapter). A readerly will directed against ideological closure may be engendered in readers by literary works whose authors a) perceive reality as a social construction consistently transmogrified by language, b) craft their fictions to accompany the philosophical difficulties involved in linking literary language to other forms of social text, and c) take aim at social agents of aggressive ideological closure.<sup>11</sup>

What I term 'site-oriented analysis' refers here to a mode of critical investigation that focuses primarily on the signifying operations of literary texts but that orients itself in ethical relation to the socio-historical and technologized site of reception. This site is not considered independently in this analysis but through the fictions I study. Site-oriented analysis arises out of both Foucault's insistence on localized resistance to power and Eco's contention that the "battle for the survival of man as a responsible being in the Communications Era is not to be won where the communication originates, but where it arrives" (1986: 142). Foucault's contention that "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge" (27) operates here in relation to Eco's conviction that critical work undertaken with the observer in mind can potentially

reach all the groups that follow TV and can bring them to discuss the message they receive...[and] change the meaning that the Source had

attributed to the message. An educational organization that succeeds in making a given audience discuss the message it is receiving could reverse the meaning of that message. Or else show that the message can be interpreted in different ways. (1986: 143)

The site is *a real though critically and fictionally imagined* and finally unknowable (in any total sense) node where technologies direct their messages at a reader-viewer who is a nexus of power.<sup>12</sup> The site takes shape here, through suggestion, following the critical triangulation that depicts it as a logical, psychological, and sociohistoric space.

## **2) Anamorphic Constriction and Dilation**

An objection to the argument in this chapter as developed thus far might be formulated as follows: corporate semiosis ought not to be accused of any proto-fascistic foreclosure of social meanings because elements of closure are endemic to most social texts and because reader-viewers usually perform interpretive closure on social texts anyway, regardless of the extent to which a given text works to avoid limiting its own meanings. As well, corporate board members, advertising executives, and network policy managers are themselves reader-viewers, social agents entitled to expression of the limits of interpretation they set down as they read the world in accordance with their perceived interests. And (the counterargument might continue) some television programs actually attempt the deconstruction of televisual and capitalist norms in such a way as to initiate ethical and political debate. To reconcile such objections with my intention of explaining how corporate semiosis, arriving through television, most often limits interpretive and egalitarian participation in the reception and decoding of its social texts, and to show how

the literary texts studied here attest to this process while offering up competing discourses, I suggest the dual notion of anamorphic constriction and dilation.

Let me first explain what I mean by 'ideological closure'. I use the phrase as do theorists of twentieth-century forms of communications, to mark out the ways in which a given text rhetorically directs interpretation of itself. I stress here that it is the *sense* of culmination or closure to which I refer, the comforting, oftentimes necessary (and as often harmful) circumscription of details and narrowing of conceptual frames brought to bear upon a particular subject. There are no interpretive closures which hold across time and cultural space for all interpreters. I agree with J. Hillis Miller that textual instability makes textual closure impossible.<sup>13</sup> My concern is the *habit* of cordoning off meaning, the *will* to closure that Murray Krieger describes in his essay "An Apology for Poetics" as the *illusion* of sealing off meaning, an illusion born of the impulse shared by writers and readers to seek a sense of culmination to one's pattern of thought. Whether closure is actual or illusory is finally not important because it is the tendency toward closure that shapes the social texts which dictate how we dispense or withhold social benefits. It is a tendency that easily outvies, in terms of social prominence, impulses towards pluralism and the radical dis-closure of both deconstructive analyses and postmodern fiction. The inclination towards closure is readily apparent in public language contexts such as the perorations of political speeches, the determinist varieties of economic and scientific theories, the habits of everyday conversation, and the rhetorical dimensions of corporate semiosis. It is a major preoccupation of mediant fiction.

I stress that closure, as a textual feature or a reading practice, is not merely present or absent. One must consider what *stage* of closure or openness, constriction or dilation, a given textual moment exhibits. Constriction involves the ideological narrowing of an intellectual purview to take in less of the complexity of human and non-human phenomena, dilation the broadening of same. Since the fictions I discuss concern themselves primarily with the visual mass media, I use the word ‘anamorphic’ (‘anamorphism’ generally refers to any distorted projection or perspective) to remind one of the anamorphic film lens which squeezes a wide image into the 35mm dimensions of the standard film frame. In projection, the lens on the projector reverses the process and redistributes the narrow image on the screen. The amount of closure one observes in a text will always change, for while the elements of a text remain static, the event horizon (upon which moves whatever is conceived of, a given entelechy or physical object) will change as a reader-viewer does not cognitively, physically, or temporally stand still, is instead mercurial. Nonetheless, it is necessary to speak of discrete moments of closure and openness in texts, as long as these moments are understood to be part of a movement. As well, we may only speak of the extent to which a text’s interpretive framework is narrow or broad in relation to some other framework. In this writing, moments of televisual constriction are considered in relation to ones of literary dilation (though it is possible to perform the reverse operation). As the mundane and the familiar made possible and necessary the Formalist edict to ‘make it strange’, the mass media provides for mediant fiction the occasion for dilation of constricted media texts.

If the intellectual material for meaningful contestation arrives from a non-televisual source, and is experienced in relation to televisual text, a reader-viewer may allow a given social text to place her on the shifting sands of epistemological uncertainty that can result in philosophical re-evaluation of the illusionist effects which play before the eye. Or not, but even the most adamant, phenomenologically intentionalized view of the world will exhibit some level of involuntary anamorphic dilation when encountering contending discourses, evident in manifestations of fear, doubt, paranoia, and defensiveness. These are elements observable in the narrative intrusions and polyphonic proliferation of voices in print-based and visual texts, as well as in the oral patternings, rhetorical nuances, and body semiotics of face-to-face communication. Aristotle's claim in the *Poetics* that a work should be whole and complete signals both a will to closure and the belief that texts can be closed systems of signification, formally complete and wholly knowable. In "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Language of the Human Sciences", Derrida claims the very opposite, suggesting that interpretation is without end and that the meaning of a text can never ultimately be fixed. Aristotle argues the desirability and possibility of closure while Derrida suggests it is only a wish or impulse to be avoided. But it *is* an impulse, and as such is often and humanly given into, to good and bad effect. The concept of anamorphic constriction and dilation serves as a mid-point between these two extremes, and draws attention to the ability to fix and dissolve meanings alternately that is one of humanity's most adaptable and useful habits of mind, as well as one of its most dangerous.

### 3) Television as Ostensible Medium, Viewer as Ostensive Solipsist

The third stage of my argument involves a distinction between *ostensible* and *ostensive language*, one that is intended to set down philosophical terms of engagement when speaking of perceived medium and perceiving subject respectively. Television ostensibly presents the actual but functions instead to set up the conditions for solipsistic mental processes, a function that is similar to what Wittgenstein calls in the *Philosophical Investigations* the ostensive definition of words. If we ostensively define something by pointing to it and giving it a name, the transferability of that definition/name to another individual depends, as Wittgenstein suggests, “on whether someone has taken a definition ‘as I wish’” (*PI* 63). In other words, ostensive definition cannot convey knowledge, for that conveyance depends on the insertion of a naming into a wider linguistic performance. Television viewing involves a process similar to the mental act of ostensively defining a thing perceived, and it encourages a cognitive solipsism. Wallace’s fiction intimates that the televisual must be understood through investigations into precisely what it is we engage with when we watch television. I shall adapt aspects of Wittgenstein’s private language argument to show that, in the case of the perceiving subject, the ostensive definition of private sensory experience that takes place during the bisensuous experience of the visual/aural televisual medium does not adequately intersect with the larger array of public discourses. The cognitive solipsism television encourages, and the important differences between inner and outer speech, are key to understanding Wallace’s intercession between corporate semiosis and the reader-viewer.

Here is the Soviet semiotician L. S. Vygotsky in his account of inner speech:

Speech is first a communicative function. It serves the goals of social contact, social interaction, and the social coordination of behavior. Only afterwards, by applying the same mode of behavior to oneself, do humans develop inner speech. In this process, they, as it were, preserve the 'function of social interaction' in their individual behavior. They apply the social mode of action to themselves. (as qtd. in Wertsch, James V. 58)

Vygotsky takes his cue here from Wittgenstein's private language argument which posits that inner speech, or more specifically, acts of introspection do not create the contents of mental experience. Rather, internal mental dialogues follow from, and develop out of public language interaction. Of concern to me here is the nature of the process wherein an application of a social mode is applied to oneself. What does such an application precisely entail in an age where hot media (McLuhan's term for mostly one-way communication allowing little or no response) such as television are pervasive, and where "the goals of social contact, social interaction, and the social coordination of behavior" are increasingly produced not by engaging in active conversation but in passive viewing? What happens when one applies the mode of corporate semiosis to oneself?

Corporate semiosis is a system of signification that closes down interpretive options of itself even as it expresses itself. It does so in order to naturalize its operations and to render desirable that which it advertises. The rhetoric of advertising (and of programs which refer to the contents of ads and thus reinforce such rhetoric<sup>14</sup>) arrives through a technology which viewers more and more experience while alone. The number of households in North America with two or more sets is increasing, and on-line television and movie viewing increases the amount of solitary viewing. While believing themselves to be holding meaningful, communicative discourse with the social, reader-



viewers are actuality solipsistically alone with their delineated psychologies. "We are the Audience," writes Wallace in his essay on television and U.S. fiction, "megametrically many, though most often we watch alone. E unibus plurum" (23). However, Wallace does not believe that the viewing subject is without recourse, agency, or resistive capacity. His characters fare well or do not depending on whether they realize that media culture mediates. What I describe below as the ekphrastic elements in *Girl With Curious Hair* are part of Wallace's effort to foreground the mediated nature of fictional narrative in order to spotlight the medium-filtered nature of all communication, but particularly of television since, as Wallace points out that "[t]he complete suppression of a narrative consciousness, with its own agenda, is why TV is such a powerful selling tool....notice that TV's mediated message is *never* that the medium's the message" (Interview 137). Psychologically, Wallace's lonely characters are a television audience that strives after ways to understand and affirm the communicability of experience--however imperfect such interlocution may be--outside of mass media systems. Frequently in the stories, characters discover shared language assumptions (often gained through the experience of art) that enable them to resist the logic of commodified simulacra which acts as an engine for the hyperreal. Wallace thus dramatizes the manner in which his own literary art may function socially.

All of Wallace's fictions to date offer sustained critiques of solipsism. Wallace's fiction and statements in interview reveal that he sees a new system of social perception as having developed in a contemporary culture that sees individuals subjected to as many as 3,000 marketing messages a day. He believes that a commodified way of seeing

shares key traits with the closed-circuit, paralogistic character of the solipsistic view. The solipsist assumes a separation between mental and physical worlds whereas the passive media viewer assumes none between perception of a media event and the material, social conditions to which media events ostensibly refer. Both err. The solipsist's withdrawn ego believes that existence is true only of itself, but paradoxically presents itself as identifiable only through the objects presented to it; the 'I' is defined as 'not world', and the external world which the solipsist insists is only nominal becomes the self's defining referent, an enabling and therefore logically real contrary. The view is clearly circular and follows from philosophical attempts to establish verifiable grounds for mental activity in advance of engagement with social and material externalities. Passive media viewers also identify themselves through what is presented to them. Whereas the solipsist is incredulous, the passive viewer frequently believes that mass media signs unproblematically correspond to a stable reality, an actuality verifiable by these same signs. The solipsist knowingly privileges mind over the social while the passive media viewer *unknowingly* privileges mind--now televisually conditioned--over diverse versions of the social. The solipsist is caught in the circularity of a logical fallacy while the viewer of corporate semiosis is caught in a feedback loop where what is viewed conditions the viewer to believe the ostensible actual.<sup>15</sup>

Television ostensibly 'covers' events (the very word 'coverage' implies that total data is on offer), testifies to their existence in acts of indexical, video pointing, a televisual mock-up of the very process that is ostensive definition. The implicit claim of the words 'actual footage' is that actuality in all its particularity is on display. Of course

the *footage* is ‘actual’. The connotative power of myriad senses of the word (valid, legitimate, licit, bona fide) are intended to legitimate the media event itself, to validate that event and equip it with a specific aegis, the designation ‘real’. Perceptually, viewers observe *only* the media event, not the event that is ostensibly covered. Again, we only look at the finger that points.

Wittgenstein defines a private language as one in which “the individual words...are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language” (*PI* 243). The act of introspection that Wittgenstein interrogates is set up in the *Investigations* as a mode of analysis incapable of ascribing meaning to sensation. He shows, for example, that we teach children what pain is by focusing on the contexts in which children are hurt (a pair of sharp scissors is to be avoided, a physician wielding a hypodermic needle is to be tolerated), beginning with individual words and soon moving onto sentences. We do not encourage children to contemplate pain or any other sensation inwardly, away from a social context that is laid down in language. Describing or naming a sensation to oneself in language presupposes a grammar or a technique of employing names and definitions within a particular language game. The crux of the private language argument comes in the *Investigations* when Wittgenstein asks us to think about the assigning of ‘S’ to a certain sensation, to concentrate inwardly on the connection. He asks how this inward repetition of the sign serves to establish a future meaning for ‘S’, then responds to his own question by saying,

Well, that is done precisely by the concentrating of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connexion between the sign and the

sensation. But I 'impress it on myself' can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connexion *right* in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we cannot talk about 'right'. (PI 258)

In the future, the sensation that accompanied 'S' will not be present as a proof or criterion of correctness for 'S'. All the private linguist will be able to go on is memory, and even if that memory remains correct over time, all it attests to is the connection between a given sensation and 'S'—it does not affirm the *meaning* of the sensation. Thus, the speaker's conception of 'S' demands an independent check, something that may only arise out of an analysis of how the speaker utilizes 'S' in the realm of public discourse. We may see in this why Kosinski gives us in *Being There* the figure of Chance the gardner, who is himself the cultural field sown entirely with mass mediatic messages. He only 'likes to watch', and others who still interact with one another in a richer realm of public discourses can only misinterpret a man who lives exclusively within the television frame. Chance is the figure of the solipsist writ large, unable to function in accordance with logics not televisual in nature. Kosinski does not suggest that all television viewers suffer this fate but offers instead a worst case scenario. There is no anamorphic dilation whatsoever in Chance's ideological purview. In mediant fiction in general, we repeatedly see characters depicted in various states of proximity to the mass media and threatened by a way of seeing that would render them solipsistic viewers of their own viewing.

#### **4) Piercing the Corporate Veil: Legal/Legalistic Fictions and Postmodern Ekphrasis**

Barbara Johnson who, in speaking of Poe's "The Purloined Letter", Lacan's essay "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'", and Derrida's essay "The Purveyor of the Truth", writes

[a]ny attempt to do 'justice' to three such complex texts is obviously out of the question. But it is precisely the *nature* of such 'justice' that *is* the question in each of these readings of the act of analysis. The fact that the debate proliferates around a crime story--a robbery and its undoing--can hardly be an accident. Somewhere in each of these texts, the economy of justice cannot be avoided. For in spite of the absence of mastery, there is no lack of *effects of power*. (411)

Johnson argues that a reader's frame of reference simultaneously facilitates insight and blindness, and that this frame is thus paradoxical in its effects on knowing. To support her position, she interrogates Derrida's interrogation of Lacan, cites the former's accusation (leveled at Lacan) of "interpretative malpractice", suggests that there is enough such 'malpractice' to go around (indeed, that it is inevitable), and says that the two philosophers are both an "apparent cause of certain *effects of power* in French discourse" (415). I am interested here in the connection Johnson makes between texts and reader environments (she admits the possibility of textual effectivity), and in her observation that in any critical mediation of textual elements a notion and consideration of justice, however defined, is unavoidable. One's frame of reference is a kind of judgment. Interpretation formulates (and may obey or violate) economies of justness, principles created publicly through communal debates. Such debates revolve around texts that have found their way into public language contexts. Once there, they are known as they are 'commonly understood' or take on a less common aspect when interpreters defy interpretive norms and generate distinct interpretations. Key here is the

point that such hermeneutic depositions are set down by individuals and that the effects of this setting down play out in public discourse. When we consider this general process of textual weighing and judging (which includes literary criticism) in relation to legal processes specifically, we may see that the two share much in common. I shall argue that the mediant fiction of David Foster Wallace illuminates this connection at the same time that it performs a literary version of the legal process known as the piercing of the corporate veil. Since the fiction is primarily concerned with the visual manifestations of corporate semiosis, I explain how Wallace's work carries with it an ekphrastic component. Since any discussion of something we may call an economy of justice—any critical handling of legal fictions and legalistic fiction--necessarily involves conceptions of individual and institutional agency, I will turn first to several questions regarding agency *per se*.

To speak of justice in either a figurative sense (as when we talk of doing justice to a literary work) or a literal one (a reference to the rule of law), it is necessary to affirm or to rejuvenate a notion of author intentionality. Degrees of intention are a primary consideration in prosecution and sentencing, in reading with or against a text and in passing critical judgment. I use the term 'author' in the widest sense, to refer to any author of social text. An author may be an institution such as a corporation or an individual subjective agent. Mediant fiction and criticism, if either is to level charges against specific authors of social texts, must be able to ascribe responsibility to authors. A notion of responsibility assumes, however, the possibility of both a universally applicable ethical standard *and* a stable subject. But "what categories", as Charles Altieri

asks in his essay on judgment and justice under postmodern conditions, “could possibly hold authority in a marketplace defined as the site for maximizing individual benefits” (1990: 61)? And how are we to conceptualize the subject? There is also the problem of how are we to think of the subject which, as Katherine Hayles suggests, is “already beaten up by postcolonial theory, feminist theory, and poststructuralism generally, [and has gotten] the final *coup de grâce* from cognitive and computer sciences and evolutionary psychology”; consciousness itself is now believed to be “a story we tell to convince ourselves the self exists” (1). How may we speak of any kind of justice when publically shared ethical criteria cannot be legitimated and when, even if such criteria could be grounded in some way, they could not be applied to such a dissolute subject?

While it is impossible for both critic and author to know to any full extent an author’s intentions, texts may be traced to various sources, nodes in the power grid of the totality of social text. Their point of issuance may, in imperfect yet demonstrable ways, be known. I will not attempt to prove such claims but will instead draw attention to the extent to which most critics already take agency and intention for granted, even those critics most dubious of such notions and most in the habit of transferring human agency onto various abstractions and away from the individual. Such taking for granted is tacit acknowledgement of the necessity of maintaining agreed upon links between texts and their authors, and of agreeing that criteria of judgment are constantly applied in the social realm even if these remain ungrounded in a philosophical sense. Even a prominent deconstructionist such as Johnson has no trouble attaching the agency of a Derrida or a Lacan to a written text (or, indeed, to a community of interpreters that extends to all those

who followed the debates that took place in *Yale French Studies*, and to those indirectly experiencing the effects of American deconstruction). While she indulges in speculation on these authors' intentions, as these intentions come to us in text, others attempt to efface the subjective agent. Intention, now donning the guise of abstraction, is expressed as an elusive almost mystical textual phenomenon. Consider how Julia Kristeva supplants human agency with a colourful personification of text itself:

Submerged in language, the "text" is consequently...that which changes it, which dissolves it from the automatism of its habitual development....The [poetic, literary, or other] "text" digs into the surface of speech a vertical shaft where the models of that *significance* are sought which the representative and communicative language *does not recite* even if it indicates them....The text is not the communicative language codified by grammar. It is not satisfied with representing or meaning the real. Wherever it signifies...it participates in the transformation of reality, capturing it at the moment of its non-closure. (qtd. in Nöth 1995: 322)

Kristeva palpably gives in to, exhibits but does not consciously acknowledge, the human desire to assign human motivation and intent to media, to tool, to object. Such an endowment of text with human agency is a projection of intentionality upon read objects, and the manner in which this imaginative bestowing takes place speaks to how we extend our individuality towards others through communications media. Media are a conveyance of desire. Consider Kristeva's personifications: the text is 'not satisfied', it chooses to 'participate', it captures, it seeks. Kristeva refuses to name the human subject who proceeds with intent, who is the generator of text. Why not name this agent instead of assigning active verbs to language operations that do not exist independent of the agent? (This transference of responsibility from individuals to texts is precisely what corporate semiosis is all about.) That the self is a complex, problematic and fractured



affair is not in itself sufficient reason to displace consideration for the individual, for that individual's relationship to the social, with analyses of text. The opacity of Kristeva's writing hides, yet bears witness to the fact that a notion of text is now an immanent metaphysic, one believed to endow language with compelling, human significance, except that now, responsibility for significance may in no way be assigned. Language is an unwieldy, complex, and at times, unreliable and dangerous human tool. But it remains a tool, and should not be treated as synonymous with human agency, however much said agency is textually constituted, because to do so is to displace and disguise responsibility and intention, two notions that are of utmost importance to any notion of justice. In an essay entitled "Greatly Exaggerated", David Foster Wallace reviews H. L. Hix's *Morte d'Author: An Autopsy*. Wallace appropriately ends his review by giving the last word to subjective agency and to William Gass: "Gass observes in *Habitations of the Word*, [that] critics can try to erase or over-define the author into anonymity for all sorts of technical, political, and philosophical reasons, and 'this 'anonymity' may mean many things, but one thing which it cannot mean is that *no one did it*" (144-45).

I will now return to my claim that the mediant fiction of David Foster Wallace provides a form of jurisprudential engagement. I do not merely suggest a critical metaphor here, for fiction and its reception function in much the same way as legal discourse. The putative field of legal semiotics has convincingly argued that rhetoric parades as law, and that law itself is not a set of essential propositions but is an amorphous conglomeration of norms that emerge from battles over textual claims to the precise nature of states of affairs.<sup>16</sup> Legal language and fiction are of the same genus:

each is known only through language; each operates in relation to precedent; each is mindful of empowering or restrictive antecedent forms; and each, by functioning, makes explicit or implicit claims as to the proper order of things. In his introduction to legal reasoning, E. Levi writes that "[i]t is important that the mechanism of legal reasoning should not be concealed by its pretense. The pretense is that the law is a system of known rules....In an important sense legal rules are never clear, and, if a rule had to be clear before it could be imposed, society would be impossible" (124), just as mental foundations may not be laid down prior to engagement with world, as Wittgenstein claims. Levi goes on to say that "[t]he mechanism [of legal procedures] accepts the difference of the view and ambiguities of words. It provides for the participation of the community in resolving ambiguity by providing a forum for the discussion of policy in the gap of ambiguity." The mechanism of postmodern fiction is not concealed by its pretense for it is self-reflexive, inclined to the dismantling of its own pretenses. Mediant fiction resides in the gap of ambiguity created by a duplicitous mass media, insisting on the ambiguity of said media so that individuals may take up Eco's proposal to control the message in accordance with one's own interests.<sup>17</sup>

As persons and the practices to which they are linked may be tried in court, so may they be put up for public assessment in fiction to spotlight the ethical lapses that take shape behind corporate veils just prior to finding expression in corporate semiosis. (Persons can also be 'tried in the media', a process notoriously corruptive of due process due to its gross simplifications of complex issues and constriction of legal frames of reference.) Oppositional postmodernism may be referred to as such, as oppugnant,

because of this capacity; rather than attesting only to a crisis in representation, postmodern fictions explain and demonstrate mechanisms of textual , rhetorical duplicity, and thus responsibly go about doing what Lyotard has suggested critics do, and that is to get on with the necessary business of understanding how “[n]arratives...define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question” (23).<sup>18</sup>

Corporations are treated legally as individuals when various crimes and torts are at issue. *Mens rea*, the presence of a guilty mind, is difficult to establish when a corporate legal entity is on trial, for criminal intent must finally be assigned to persons, not limited companies. Shareholders, chief executive officers, company managers, and lower-level employees are at a protected, legal remove from the actions of the company as a result of what is called the corporate veil. Occasionally, judges decide to do what is called piercing the corporate veil, an action which involves allowing legal analysis to operate through and behind the legal protections and immunities that corporate officers enjoy. A company's actions are made the actions of individuals. *Judges only do this when an institutional behavior excites the righteous anger of the court--it is not a function of autonomous legal mechanisms but of a passion born of close proximity to the textual pretenses which disguise aggressive and suspect corporate practices.* Wallace's stories are depositions regarding the link between corporate semiosis and the intentions of entertainment executives (for example, Merv Griffin is a key character in “My Appearance”); they encourage and invite the participation of democratic reading-viewing publics in resolving ambiguity by providing a forum for ethical debate over corporate practices. Televisual text is traced to its corporate source.<sup>19</sup>

As a way of understanding contemporary literary treatments of image culture, it is useful to consider such treatments as ekphrastic in nature. Ekphrasis specifically involves the interplay between visual experience and the printed word, between the physical eye and the eye of the mind. The ekphrastic method as it has been modified and utilized in the latter half of the twentieth century carries with it an enormous number of antecedent employments, evident as it is in the works of Homer, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Keats, Shelley, Austen, Browning, Joyce, and countless others. Writers have always been intrigued by the differences between the outer and inner eye. In *Literary Realism and the Ekphrastic Tradition*, Mack Smith explains how the tradition of *ut pictura poesis* presents the ekphrastic instance as a description within epic and poetry of a work of spatial art. He extends this definition so that it "encompasses a descriptive scene within the novelistic text in which there is a representation of any work of art" (12).<sup>20</sup> By referring to treatments of the televisual in Wallace's fiction as ekphrastic in nature, I do not suggest that the term 'art' be loosely applied to television programming. Rather, I hope to remodulate the notion of ekphrasis to include and emphasize the arrival in the text of elements from a signifying system different from the written, specifically the visual. Intermedia migration of structures of signification may move in many directions; there is the transmutation of novels into films, poetry and fiction (excerpts or whole works) into televisual texts, and film and video into writing. As concerns this last, the process by which image media are translated into literary language involves just that, translation, and techniques such as ekphrasis govern the transformation, highlighting what is unique about the digital abstraction inherent in an alphabetical system, or simply,

the literary mode. Wallace's fiction does not treat TV as an object or process representable in literary language, nor does it 'stage' the operations of non-literary media, for staging, a critical metaphor derived from the theatrical medium, simply refers to the assumptions that a given text exhibits (all writing displays or presents, intentionally or otherwise, one discourse or another in this sense, so the term is of limited use). Aspects of TV, of corporate semiosis, are actually *in* Wallace's fiction. They are not re-presented but undergo a transference that changes their nature and situates them in a new context, a re-setting that appropriates and reconfigures the message supplied by the original context/sender. Wallace's technique translates the structural hallmarks of a rival medium into an ekphrastic system partially built of these hallmarks. The system is cloying and pervasive, thus literalizing on the plain of narrative the immersion of the reader-viewer in television culture.<sup>21</sup> Wallace's narratives place televisual hallmarks and their relational operations in opposition to literary ones that move counter to the spin of corporate semiosis now ekphrastically delineated. This spin is therefore both in and outside the work; there is a further turning in that the fictions are intended to circulate within the culture and there perform as an abrasive. I uphold here James Heffernan's view of ekphrasis as something that "deliberately foregrounds the *difference* between verbal and visual representation--and in so doing forestalls or at the very least complicates any illusionistic effect" (n191), with the qualifier that texts do not 'represent' discourses so much as they, as discourses themselves, participate in signification. The resulting tension between literary/philosophical utterances in the text and commercial ones, where voices resist each other's attempts at parody and co-option, may at first appear describable

with Bakhtin's notion of active double-voicing in hand. However, the analysis of novelistic, dialogized speech focuses specifically on style, syntax, and tone, and while Wallace's fiction may indeed yield instances of double-voicing, critical discussion of dialogism has not accounted for the partial installation of one medium's structural tendencies inside another.

While Smith argues that the works he considers utilize ekphrasis to "dramatize the consequences of confining life according to the false truth claims of a discredited discourse" (10), I claim that Wallace uses the technique not to set up claims of truth or falsity as to the nature of the actual, but to encourage expansive dilation. Key here is the point that corporate semiosis is recontextualized in mediant fiction. Intersemiotic transposition between media may involve the carry over of certain significations, but as Berressem writes,

this process destroys the fixed identification within one system of articulation and reconstructs it within a new sign system...All investigations into the insertion of 'filmic' instances within literature ultimately have to account for the dynamics of this transposition, which is why the novel can never *become* film. (159)

That Wallace's fiction can never become television (it could not be adequately transposed to that medium), is its strength. The image of him as writer may be manipulated, but corporate semiosis is ill-equipped to transform literary texts into its own contexts. We may think of ekphrastic instances in Wallace as models not unlike the legal models that first inspired Wittgenstein's picture-theory of language. The philosopher once read in a magazine (a mass media product with much visual appeal--perhaps the philosopher was pondering the operations of visual culture) that a trial about a car accident revolved

around a demonstration of the accident by council using models of the vehicles involved.

The models in one sense properly ‘contained’ propositions (‘this car was traveling too fast’), and thus, the central premise of the *Tractatus*--that sentences are pictures--was born. When Wallace presents us with the *Jeopardy!* logo or the stylized ‘M’ that represents McDonald’s, we are to consider what propositions those images properly contain. Then, within a judicial frame of mind, we are to judge how these propositions move within the contexts he sets them in and the contexts provided for them by corporate semiosis. Wallace’s ekphrastic delineation of recognizable televisual elements indicates the operations of corporate semiosis indirectly by placing these elements alongside propositions belonging to an egalitarian rhetoric. The result is a competing discourse attesting to effects of power, and the fiction becomes a testimony.

## 5) Wallace’s Short Fiction

Observation of Wallace's method in *Girl With Curious Hair* offers an introduction to the thematization of communication in his work as a whole. The stories bear a relation to the Coover of *The Origin of the Brunists*, in particular to that novel's moment of apocalyptic convergence between human belief and the media event. There is also overlap with the Pynchon of *Gravity's Rainbow*, a work wherein reality is always a media reality. Wallace builds upon the projects of Coover and Pynchon, who have respectively acknowledged in *A Night at the Movies Or, You Must Remember This* and *Vineland* the shift from film to television as regards the cultural dominant. As well, Wallace shares with Don DeLillo an ethical concern for the beleaguered North American

viewer/consumer, worries along with the Burroughs of *The Ticket That Exploded* over Western mechanisms of social control (and mass media complicity in same), traces the corporate penetration into the personal as does William Gaddis, and presents, as does E. L. Doctorow, the perceptual habits of viewers as linked to developments in twentieth-century communications technology. Along with a number of poets ranging from Laurie Anderson to Charles Bernstein, Wallace worries over corporate incursions into the precariously configured precinct of the self and is part of a generation of writers whose works function to counter the primacy of visual experience insisted upon by contemporary image culture. The ekphrastic elements in his fiction are traceable in American fiction back through Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* to Rebecca Harding Davis' *Life in the Iron Mills*, and as regards his stylistic disarray, non-dialectical elements, and thematic concern for the mass media in relation to American culture and corporatism, Wallace finds an early ancestor in Twain. Twain's *Roughing It* (1872) has appeared to critics as a disjointed piece that some have attempted to federate by suggesting that its structure reflects the schism of values between the U.S. eastern urban and western rural communities, civilization and frontier. But as regards Twain's book,

a decidedly different, non-dialectical *Roughing It* emerges when it is read as a work of politico-economic journalism, and, furthermore, when it is contextualized in terms of Twain's earlier western newspaper writing. Focusing attention on Twain's ceaseless interest in business and enterprise turns *Roughing It* into a kind of 'tool box' of nineteenth-century journalistic genres about capitalist development in the West. (Michaelson 101)

A non-dialectical impulse is evident in Wallace's jump-cuts, "parenthetical phrases within parenthetical phrases, chaotic cataloguing, linguistic indirection, and confusing



syntactical structures", and in his "ardent and disheveled processes" (Olsen 207), a style which emphasizes processes of readers' meaning-making practices in relation to his sustained focus on corporate media, their discourses and strategic use of the hyperreal.

The stories "Here and There" and "Everything is Green" set the philosophical tone for the collection by pouring over the minutiae of inner and outer speech and experience. Two poles on the subject of language emerge there due to intertextual play with the thought of Wittgenstein. There is the theory of language from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the theory laid down in the *Philosophical Investigations*; we are either confined to the view of sentences and of speech acts as mimetic pictures (and this is *all* we may speak of, not the reality to which these ostensibly refer) or we must give up the notion of a private language and live entirely inside a public one that cannot exist but for human interaction (a less solipsistic alternative but one which nonetheless places us inside the vagueries and complexities of a system never wholly knowable). "Here and There" chronicles the mental activities of Bruce, a man whose pained musings attest to his unhappiness over the extent to which his immersion in various abstractions, literary and mathematical, has led to a failed romance and to melancholy. The story utilizes a structure adapted from televisual and cinematic documentary, one that sees characters speak to the same issue in turns, to an invisible and silent interlocutor, the camera. Bruce has evidently applied a mode of corporate semiosis to himself, to his psychology, and he has trouble reconciling his now visual and solipsistic cognitive loop with human relationships:

‘Her photograph tastes bitter to me. A show of hands on the part of those who are willing to believe that I kiss her photo....’

‘He didn’t really like to kiss me.’

‘On the back of the photo, beneath the remains of the reversible tape I used to attach it carefully to the wall of my room at school, are written the words “Received 3 February 1983; treasured as of that date.”’

‘He didn’t like to kiss me. I could feel it.’

‘No contest to the charge that kissing an actual living girl is not my favourite boy-girl thing to do...At the time, with her, yes, I’d feel vaguely elsewhere, as a defense against myself. Admittedly this has to do with me, not her. But know that when I wasn’t with her I dreamed of the time I could kiss her again. I thought about her constantly. She filled my thoughts.’

‘What about my thoughts?’ (151)

Her voice later accuses him of an exclusive immersion in the abstractions of critical thought, of poetics in particular: “He just works all the time on well-formed formulas and poems and their rules” (152). The story might have continued on this way, relying on an appropriated structure from visual media while elaborating on the dynamics of a failed relationship. But a third voice intercedes:

“Bruce here I feel compelled to remind you that fiction therapy in order to be at all effective must locate itself and operate within a strenuously yes some might even say harshly limited defined structured space. It must be confronted as text which is to say fiction which is to say project. Sense one’s unease as you establish a line of distraction that now seems without either origin or end.”

‘This kind of fiction doesn’t interest me.’ (153)

The third voice, signaled by quotation marks and functioning dialectically, introduces an important (and comic) element: the figure, evidently a therapist who has advocated gestalt therapy via the writing of fiction, emerges as a type of literary critic. As analyst, he is compelled to encourage his patient to direct his thoughts outside of himself, to think of the other who may be his ex-lover or a disenchanted reader. He encourages Bruce to see his sentences as arising out of, and as part of human relationships. As an accidental literary critic, he expresses his dissatisfaction with the ‘line of distraction’ the solipsistic

self prefers.<sup>22</sup> Bruce, lover of the metafictional, theoretical line of distraction, loves the image of the woman over the actual human being because the image is inner, solipsistic, 'here' rather than 'there'.

The story begins with no degree of anamorphic dilation. At that point, a mass media format is only partially transposed into literary fiction (Coupland stops at this point and does not take the ekphrastic moment any further). Prior to the introduction of the therapist, the framework of meaning is confined to a combination of traditional literary modes. A narrative comprised of dialogue naturalizes itself up to this point by reproducing recognizable speech patterns, and some common themes related to the realm of male-female contention are presented. The narrative to that point offers an ontological proposition, namely, that a mental picture of a fellow human being may not be conflated with the intersubjectively experienced other without solipsism emerging. A reader could, if the story went no further, be content to ponder the truth of this proposition. But the figure of the therapist/critic begins a dilation by introducing a metafictional commentary on the story as it unfolds.

The three (the analyst/critic speaks first):

"Yes but remember we decided to construct an instance in which for once your interests are to be subordinated to those of another."

'So she's to be reader, as well as object?'

"See above for evidence that here she is so constructed as to be for once subject as well."

'A relief of contrivance, then? The therapeutic lie is to pretend the truth is a lie?'

"Affording you a specular latitude perspective disinterest the opportunity to be emotionally generous."

'I think he should get to do whatever makes him feel better. I still care about him a lot. Just not in that way anymore.' (153)

The analyst/critic suggests intersubjectivity. Bruce's objection, that the truth (of the fiction under construction) is that one pretends the truth is a lie, is complex in its implications: it signals that regardless of his claim in fiction that she is subject, she remains for him an object, an image in the mind; it also implies that the necessary fictions we tell ourselves help us to offer emotional generosity although the 'fictions' have no philosophically provable basis; and it signals to Wallace's reader that if what we are ostensibly reading is the result of fiction therapy, then we must wonder at the possibility that the therapist is only a character of Bruce's creation.

Either way, the therapy appears to work. He slowly comes to a Wittgensteinian awareness of his dilemma, prompting the therapist/critic who offers the consolation of philosophy to say, "Now you stop kissing pictures and tearing up proofs and begin to intuit that things are, and have been, much more general and in certain respects sinister all along" (165). The story thus exhibits a high level of dilation by its close: raw experience is 'sinister' to those who require that experience be tightly configured to internally generated schemata. The story ends with Bruce kneeling down behind his aunt's broken oven, trying in vain to repair the appliance and feeling intense fear. Despite his theoretical acumen as regards analytical systems, he does not know how to proceed. He has no schemata of its electrical system, and as a result he experiences psychological growth:

'I believe, behind the stove, with my aunt kneeling down to lay her hand on my shoulder, that I'm afraid of absolutely everything there is.'  
 "Then welcome." (172)

Whether it is the therapist/critic or the aunt or Bruce himself who issues the words of welcome does not matter, for the point is that Bruce has come to the understanding that introspection cannot alone account for the contents of lived experience.

“Everything is Green” relates the thoughts of a man, Mitch, who is having an argument with his younger and possibly unfaithful (we are never sure) wife, Mayfly:

She says I do not care if you believe me or not, it is the truth, go on and believe what you want to. So it is for sure that she is lying. When it is the truth she will go crazy trying to get you to believe her. So I feel like I know. (229)

The story is told in the first-person and we may only observe Mitch approach the other that is his wife. He does not believe what she says, and thinks instead on past and select linguistic performances in order to deduce the truth of her present statements. He assigns these prior statements a value, but it is one which cannot be checked, by her or by anyone else (including the reader). He does not adequately consider the public language game that is man/woman contention. Mitch cannot say that he knows, only that he *feels* like he knows, a marker from Wallace to alert us to the fact that epistemological certainty and the belief in such certitude are two different things. The couple fall silent and proceed to stare out a window (that perennial symbol of perception). They are at an impasse. As he then expresses to her his desire to put the past behind them and to make things “feel right” (229), she interrupts: “Everything is green she says. Look how green it all is Mitch. How can you say the things you say you feel like when everything outside is green like it is” (230). Mitch does not relate her words to us as a question, for he is resisting a dilational frame of mind. He does not respond by considering how her remark is inserted into their conversation or think on any of the positive connotations of nature

and verdancy (optimism, hope, renewal). Instead of thinking about the incongruity of his discomfiture when set against a beautiful, summer morning, or instead of perceiving that she is going about her own way of making things feel right by declaring the morning beautiful, Mitch ponders the literal truth of her statement that everything outside the window is green, and observes that

there is a mess of green out. The trees are green and some grass out past the speed bumps is green and slicked down. But every thing is not green. The other trailers are not green and my card table out with puddles in lines and beer cans and butts floating in the ash trays is not green, or my truck, or the gravel of the lot....Everything is green she is saying. She is whispering it and the whisper is not to me no more I know. (230)

His “every thing” is set against her “Everything”, the difference being a lexical clue to their diverse ways of seeing: he atomizes while she is inclined to the holistic. But they are *both* finally alone with their thoughts. They ostensibly define the picture outside the window, point to it and give it a name, but the transferability of that definition/name to another individual depends, as I have said Wittgenstein suggests, “on whether someone has taken a definition ‘as I wish’” (*PI* 63). She defines ‘morning’ to herself, saying not *what* green is to her (and thus potentially to him) but *that* it is. This definition of the morning--and by extension, of the moment for her, of being--is not successfully communicated to Mitch. Simply, he does not understand her because she engages in ostensive definition of her emotion. Mitch makes the same mistake as Mayfly

She is looking outside, from where she is sitting, and I look at her, and there is something in me that can not close up, in that looking. Mayfly has a body. And she is my morning. Say her name. (230)

He does not ascribe a name to her, but he does recall the connection between his feelings for her and her name, a connection established by him in the past and now remembered.

He looks inward and affirms the label he has attached to his feelings. But if he actually says her name, it will mean nothing to her because his past act of turning inward did not fix a criterion of meaning they could share. The metaphorical note that sounds is hopeful (she is his morning), but there is no reason to believe that the issue of marital fidelity will resolve itself as they remain incommunicative. She is also his mourning, since her existence foregrounds his solitude inside his private language. Not even their eyes meet as he gazes at her while she gazes elsewhere. The two are lost to introspection. The first-person limited view here is appropriate to the Wittgensteinian subtext, and this brief parable of the private language argument functions in the collection alongside the televisual motifs in the other stories to make us think on the public contexts for our pictured and inward experiences. When watching television or when watching ourselves watch, we should ask, as does Wittgenstein, “[t]he picture is *there*....But *what* is its application?” (*PI* 424).<sup>23</sup>

In “Little Expressionless Animals”, we learn that one Julie Smith is abandoned by the roadside as a child by her mother. Both she and her severely autistic brother are left by a fence post waiting for the return of that which always returned before. They stare into the expressionless face of a cow under gray “cerebral” (3) clouds, a sky not unlike the one described on the first page of William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* as “the colour of television tuned to a dead channel”. Julie is horrified, like Nietzsche, by the expressionless face of an animal, of eyes bespeaking a consciousness incapable of self-reflection. The siblings are raised by indifferent foster parents who leave them locked in a room much of the time (both this isolation and the inward-looking world of the autist

operate as metaphors for solipsism), with only paper, pens, straight edges and *LaPlace's Guide to Total Data* to amuse themselves with. They both memorize the complete set of reference books. Julie one day becomes a long-running champion on the game show *Jeopardy!* in order to pay for the costs of maintaining her brother in an institution. She begins a romantic relationship with a researcher/compiler of questions (or rather, of answers) for the show, named Faye Goddard, daughter of the producer. (To remind us of Jean-Luc Godard, the radical French New Wave director, within the setting of a television studio is to suggest that television has replaced the cinema as the dominant medium; the stylistically radical film gives way to the banality of the game show.) Julie is unstoppable except for the fact that any question concerning animals confounds her. Faye avoids using the animal category out of love and out of a concern for the ratings Julie garners for the show. Faye asks Julie at one point if their relationship depends on the show to exist. On a literal level, she asks what will become of them when Julie's championship reign ends, but she also wonders if the relationship of self, of their selves, to world depends on, and is configured by the televisual. What televisual signification allows and does not allow is at issue here; whatever is not functional in the economy of a system of signification cannot manifest itself. The lesbian other was not, at the time of the story's publication, yet a part of televisual signification and is therefore not manifest there in the story.



How characters fare in a televisually delineated society depends in Wallace on their exposure to discourses found outside the mass media. Julie is aware of the importance of such exposure:

“You asked me once how poems informed me,” she says. Almost a whisper—her microphone voice. “And you asked whether we, us, depended on the game, even to be. Baby?....Remember? Remember the ocean? Our dawn ocean, that we loved? We loved it because it was like us, Faye. That ocean was *obvious*. We were looking at something obvious the whole time....Oceans are only oceans when they move. Waves are what keep oceans from just being very big puddles. Oceans are just their waves. And every wave in the ocean is finally going to meet what it moves toward, and break. The whole thing we looked at, the whole time you asked, was obvious. It was obvious and a poem because it was us. See things like that, Faye. Your own face moving into expression. A wave, breaking on a rock, giving up its shape in a gesture that *expresses* that shape. See?” (41-42)

Poetic awareness emerges as an alternate discourse which only becomes ‘obvious’ when it is *accepted* as a filter for experience. Julie interpolates lines here from John Ashbery’s poem “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”. The lines from Ashbery read, “They [ideal forms of beauty] seemed strange because we couldn’t actually see them. / And we realize this only at a point where they lapse / Like a wave breaking on a rock, giving up / Its shape in a gesture which expresses that shape” (193). Julie considers poetry an aid to living, believes it transparent and informing as opposed to the televisual. Her answer to Faye is that their relationship does not depend on the positions they occupy within television, Julie on air and Faye within the corporation.

In a chapter entitled “How it Means: Making Poetic Sense in Media Society”, Marjorie Perloff suggests that one question put forward by John Ashbery’s poem “Business Personals” is, “to whom does the voice that says...‘Thank you for flying

American' belong?" (181). Ashbery expresses over the impenetrable veil of anonymity that surrounds individuals at the helm of corporations. Earlier in her chapter, Perloff states that

*Houseboat Days* (1977), the volume in which 'Business Personals' appeared, contains numerous references to the 'centers of communication'...where business transactions take place...the titles alone--'Collective Dawns,' 'Bird's-Eye View of the Tool and Die Co.,' 'Unctuous Platitudes,' 'The Wrong Kind of Insurance'--are revelatory. 'Business Personals': the invented oxymoron wittily invokes business persons, business mail, business cards, and so on, the irony being, of course, that these constructions were designed precisely to distinguish the business from the personal aspect. (175)

Ashbery appears intent on locating and understanding the nerve center that produces corporate semiosis, the centres of communication where decisions get made. The title "Collective Dawns" reminds at once of the democratic collective and of the undifferentiated, homogenous mass of consumers which corporate semiosis seeks to enthrall. To understand the corporate, a 'bird's-eye view' becomes necessary, and I equate here that metaphor with the piercing of the corporate veil. "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" provides readers with an array of perspectives on the operations of mind, but it autocritiques itself to avoid offering interpretive imperatives or ideological closure, and thus it exhibits a very high degree of expansive dilation. Ashbery's point of departure is the precise verisimilitude of Parmigianino's 1524 painting *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. Realism, and the stable reality it assumes, becomes to the speaker of the poem a suspect form. As Heffernan points out, in his discussion of Ashbery and with reference to Rembrandt and Rousseau, "a truly masterful autobiographer knows how to

construct a rhetorically shielded self, how to greet the reader with a hand that protects the writer" (175). We read the following in Ashbery:

Therefore I beseech you, withdraw that hand,  
Offer it no longer as shield or greeting,  
The shield of a greeting, Francesco. (525-27)

When it appears that the media have found out about the relationship between the two women, Julie offers Faye dramatic soundbites for when the cameras inevitably arrive. She would teach her how to rhetorically protect herself. But she offers her suggestions ironically and expresses her incredulity over Faye's concern for a media profile. The moment reminds of Ashbery's *A Wave* which suggests that when in love, there is "[n]o need to make up stories...." (84). The claim to verisimilitude and realism that television offers ('We now take you live to the scene of the riots') is under close scrutiny in Wallace. Television functions to hide its own intentions just

As Parmigianino did it, the right hand  
Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer  
And swerving easily away, as though to protect  
What it advertises. (1-4)

Television offers up the 'real' in a bid to protect what it advertises, namely its presumed right to advertise.

Wallace uses Wittgenstein's picture theory of sentences to critique the solipsism of the *Jeopardy!* game show. Viewers see on the program pictures of sentences when the camera focuses on any one of the array of television screen-shaped game boards which bear the answers to which contestants must supply the appropriate questions. Language is likely nowhere better subsumed into the consumerist ethos than in this example. Facts such as Eva Braun's shoe size or which politician said what at the height of the Cuban

missile crisis become factoids entirely devoid of context except for one: that of a game the aim of which is the accrual of cash winnings. The most trivia-inclined contestant receives the most money, the actual cash amount of which is on prominent electronic display on the front of each contestant's podium. The interspersion of commercials during the game completes the rhetorical sequence: knowledge has a clear utility, namely, the pursuit of a financial gain which offers the power to select the goods of one's choice from a sumptuous and handy catalogue in the form of commercials. Knowledge is purchasing power.

Enter Merv Griffin, functioning less as a character and more as the corporeal embodiment of the corporate entity known as Merv Griffin Enterprises. He and his assistant explain at a meeting how Julie's sensibility, informed by poetry, may be forced to serve the mechanism of the hyperreal. "I'm impressed as I've never been impressed before. She's like some lens, a filter for that great unorganized force that some in the industry have spent their whole lives trying to locate and focus." His assistant continues the explanation.

Merv posits that this force, ladies, gentleman, is the capacity of facts to transcend their internal factual limitations and become, in and of themselves, meaning, feeling. This girl not only kicks facts in the ass. This girl informs trivia with import. She makes it human, something with the power to emote, evoke, induce, cathart. She gives the game the simultaneous transparency and mystery all of us in the industry have groped for, for decades. A sort of union of contestantorial head, heart, gut, buzzer finger. She is, or can become, the game show incarnate. She is mystery." (24-25)

The ideal game show would be one which imbues the decontextualized statement of fact, trivia, with intense human emotions. Such emotions are only attendant on facts when

certain contexts are supplied; mention of Eva Braun's shoe size becomes a somber reminder of the confiscation of shoes in the death camps only if mention of the camps is made in the same instant the fact is presented, or if knowledge of the confiscation has been acquired prior. When facts are "kicked in the ass" they are denuded of their referential power as a result of being decontextualized and recoded. The "simultaneous transparency and mystery" refers respectively to the ostensible nature of the medium and the illusion of pure perception.

Julie, as long as she remains on the show, is deeply compromised. Yet, she is there for the selfless reason of earning her autistic brother's maintenance. When Merv Griffin learns of the brother, he has one concern:

"The potential point," Merv murmurs, "is can the brother do with a datum what she can do with a datum....Is he mystery, I want to know," says Merv.

"He's *autistic*," Faye says, staring bug-eyed. "Meaning they're like trying to teach him just to talk coherently. How not to go into convulsions whenever somebody looks at him. You're thinking about maybe trying to put him on the air?"

Merv's man stands at the dark office window. "Imagine sustaining the mystery beyond the individual girl herself, is what Merv means. The mystery of total data, that mystery made a sort of antic, ontic self-perpetuation. We're talking fact sustaining feeling, right through the change that inevitably attends all feeling, Faye."

"We're thinking perpetuation, is what we're thinking," says Merv. "Every thumb over at Triscuit is up, on this one." (27-28)

This "perpetuation" is nothing less than the solipsistic feedback loop the televisual seeks to install in the cognitive faculties of viewers. Thus, the inward-looking solipsist, here figured as autist, displaces the poetically informed but corporately harnessed intellect as the ideal televisual figure.

Wallace observes that “we ended up seeing why [metafictional] recursion’s dangerous, and maybe why everybody wanted to keep linguistic self-consciousness out of the show. It gets empty and solipsistic real fast. It spirals in on itself. By the mid-seventies, I think, everything useful about the mode had been exhausted” (Interview 143). This sentiment finds an equivalence in “Little Expressionless Animals” when Merv Griffin realizes that Faye is in a relationship with Julie. He assigns her a menial task just prior to the taping wherein Julie’s brother will displace her, presumably to keep her from interfering should she have a crisis of conscience over her role, albeit a minor one, in setting up Julie’s dethroning. “Faye’s been temporarily assigned to help the key grip try to repair a defective *E* in the set’s giant “JEOPARDY!” logo” (39). In light of Wallace’s criticism of linguistic self-consciousness, of experimental fiction that is preoccupied with its own status as fiction, one cannot help but think here of French writer George Perec whose 1969 novel *La Disparition* (which has appeared in translation as *The Void*) is a three hundred-page novel in which the letter E does not appear. Perec’s story has the letter disappear from the planet, and characters must confront a number of lacunae, such as the fact that all fifth volumes of encyclopedias have gone. Reviewers at the time of the novel’s publication felt that while impressive in terms of writing effort and lexical resourcefulness, the novel was finally empty, a highly self-conscious fiction about fiction that in no way attested to Perec’s stated belief that such constraint-driven writing made all things possible. What, after all, did the work accomplish? It falls to Perec’s readers to reach *outside the text for a public language context* in which to situate the work meaningfully. Warren Motte does exactly this when he observes that “[t]he absence of a

sign is always the sign of an absence" (9). He goes on to suggest that *The Void* comes of Perec's parents having died in the camps during World War II. According to his self-imposed rule, Perec could not write the words 'père', 'mère', 'parents', or 'famille'. Wallace's alignment of the self-regarding features of televisual texts with self-reflexive fiction is intended to cast aspersions on the solipsistic impulses of both forms of communication.

The ekphrastic elements of the show are as follows: both the game show and the story contains 'cuts' to the *Jeopardy!* sign, breaks for commercials, the answer/question format, back and forth shots of the contestants and Alex Trebek, references to winnings, the theme music, the name of the controlling corporation, and background information on the life of contestants. These structural elements from the game show make up the ekphrasis, and an interpolated artifact from TV takes shape inside the narrative. But the elements are attuned to their new context: the *Jeopardy!* sign is aligned with the solipsistic aspect of self-obsessed experimental fiction *and* television; the commercial breaks cut not to product promotions but to a lesbian with a tragic past trying desperately to maintain her psychological equilibrium in order to help her institutionalized brother; the answer/question format transmutes into the answer that fiction provides by asking questions (rather than declaiming univocal solutions); the narrative juxtapositioning of Trebek and Julie highlights no connection between the two, only a stony silence; the theme music is not upbeat but clownish; and that moment on the show when Trebek inquires after the background of a contestant is wildly extended to encompass Julie's unique past. The structural hallmarks of the show now operate in the service of a

different rhetoric. Their hypogrammatic arrangement facilitates fictional access to the centers of network communication and production.

The protagonist of "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" is Mark Nechtr, a student in a creative writing class taught by one Professor Ambrose. Ambrose, we are told, wrote *Lost in the Funhouse* (the figure is clearly Barth). Nechtr shuns what he considers the hopelessly solipsistic dead end of American metafiction, and we may assume that Wallace is not a fan of Barth's mid-career writing. After the course, he ends up on an odyssey with his wife, a postmodernist he married out of pity and who eventually gave up fiction for advertising. Accompanying them is an ad actor who has one eye facing inward (another metaphor for solipsism). They are going to a reunion of actors that will involve everyone, including them, who has ever appeared in a McDonald's campaign. Footage of the gathering will be recycled into yet another ad, and at the site will be the grand opening of the first *Lost in the Funhouse* Discotheque franchise (a club replete with funhouse mirrors). Participants will arrive courtesy of a freshly deregulated helicopter franchise named "Lordaloft", run by Jack Lord of *Hawaii 5-0* fame.

All is arranged by one J. D. Steelritter, an advertising magnate. In an age of document shredders, of security guards who block access to the upper floors of corporate towers, and of what Pat Buchanan calls idea advertising,<sup>24</sup> fiction writers must deduce the nature of corporate culture from corporate semiosis. So Wallace shows us the mind of an ad man, Steelritter, and in so doing pulls aside the corporate veil: if corporations remain mute on the subject of the intentions behind corporate semiosis, then interpretive



communities (reader-viewers at large) must fill in the resulting gaps in the realm of public discourse. The intentional nature of corporate semiosis must be divined by imaginative reconstructions. Here J.D. Steelritter discourses *to himself only* about his trade:

Criticism is response. Which is good. If J.D. lays out a campaign strategy nobody criticizes, then J.D. right away knows the idea's a dink, a bad marriage of jingle and image, one that won't produce, just lays there, no copulation of engaging gears, no spin inside the market's spin. You need it. Eat it up. It's attention. It engages imaginations. It sells. It works off desire, and sells. It sold books, it'll sell mirrored discotheque franchises. The criticism'll be what fills the seats with fannies. J.D.'d bet his life....Admen do this. Bet their life on criticism, attention, desire, fear, love, marriage of concession and market. Retention of image. Loyalty to brand. Empathy with client. Sales. On life. *Life!*

Life goes on. You're empty, sad, probably the least appreciated creative virtuoso in the industry; well and but life just goes on, emptily, sadly, with always direction but never center. The hubless wheel spins ever faster, no? *Yes*. Admen approach challenges thus: concede what's hopelessly true, what you can't make folks ever want to not be so; concede; then take your creative arm and hammer a big soaked wedge, hard as can be, into whatever's open to interpretation. Interpret, argue, sing, whisper, work the wedge down into the pulp, where the real red juices be, where folks feel alone, fear their genitals, embrace their own shadows, *want* so badly it's a great subsonic groan, a lambent static only the trained adman's sticky ear can trap, retain, digest. Interpretation, he's fond of telling DeHaven, is persuasion's driveway. Persuasion is desire. Desire is the monstrous pulse, the trillion-hearted river that is the care and feeding of J.D. and Mrs. J.D. Steelritter and their clown of a son DeHaven....This is J.D.'s way since the Lucky Strike campaign, the first, in '45. Then McDonald's, through Ray, in '53. Coca-Cola. Arm and Hammer. Kellogg's. The Funhouse. LordAloft Shuttles. The American daydream, what made Us great: make a concession, take a stand. (240-241)

Most important here is Steelritter's recognition that criticism of, or protest to a particular selling campaign is key to that campaign's success. The machinery of the hyperreal is adept at co-opting protest into its own project, and we are reminded of Baudrillard's example in *Simulations* where he claims that public protests towards Nixon's behavior in

office only served to affirm the social order that placed Nixon in office. The criticism my analysis suggests demands an engagement with the complex web of intentions that is corporate semiosis *through the interpretation of mediant fiction*. Fiction is reconstructive, rather than simply reactionary, and for the most part offers a venue distinct from the gears of mass media spin. Wallace's style here is important. When referring to advertising axioms or product names, Steelritter's sentences are short, unadorned, and declamatory. Wallace co-opts advertising's habit of offering ostensibly simple and confident propositions, the truth of which appears self-evident. These propositions appear unambiguous while remaining very much indeterminate, and as a result of this last, they become cultural reference points for the quotidian anxieties, fears, hopes, and aspirations of the masses—they are multiply interpretable and therefore approach being all things to all people. When Wallace supplies his recontextualizations for consideration of a product, the clauses become labyrinthine, wholly dependent for their meaning on careful linguistic navigation of the utterance by the reader, in order to make noticeable the process of interpretation that mediant fiction demands.

Wallace not only levels a charge of social disconnection at the extreme self-reflexivity of the Barth of *Lost in the Funhouse* but aligns it with the solipsistic operations of postmodern media culture. Writer-centered fiction and product-centered television are both set up for a fall. Wallace bases his speculations about corporate motivations on the spin we are offered, and then offers his reader his own spin:

"Westward" concludes thusly, as J. D. Steelritter finds that his car is stuck in a ditch:

But the wheel! Bound by nothing, the Goodyear spins and spins, has lost its ringing hub, has disclosed a radial's spokes. Hold rapt for that

impossible delay, that best interruption: that moment in all radial time when something unseen inside the blur of spokes seems to sputter, catch, and spin against the spin, inside.

See this thing. See inside what spins without purchase. Close your eye. Absolutely no salesman will call. Relax. Lie back. I want nothing from you. Lie back. Relax. Quality soil washes right out. Lie back. Face directions. Look. Listen. Use ears I'd be proud to call our own. Listen to the silence behind the engines' noise. Jesus, Sweets, *listen*. Hear it? It's a love song.

For whom?

You are loved.<sup>25</sup>

Wallace simultaneously voices here the philosophy of the ad man and the reader-centred consolation of the ethically committed writer. In so doing, he signals that fiction may meaningfully circumrotate within the spin of late capitalist semiosis.

In "My Appearance", Edilyn and Rudy (an actress and her husband/agent) plan out an upcoming, scheduled appearance by Edilyn on *Late Night With David Letterman*. They watch the show together in order to take notes:

We saw what the "Late Night" research staff considered the ten worst television commercials ever. I can remember number five or four: a German automobile manufacturer tried to link purchase of its box-shaped car to sexual satisfaction by showing, against a background of woodwinds and pines, a languid Nordic woman succumbing to the charms of the car's stickshift.

"Well I'm certainly swayed," Letterman said when the clip had ended. "Aren't you, ladies and gentleman?" (177-78)

The base sexual aspect of the German ad is allowed to function on the show as a low gag. All jokes offered by Letterman on the show must be undercut in some way because the show's pervasive cynicism cannot allow anything to stand on its own as valid, in this case, neither the quasi-pornographic ad nor the ostensible condemnation of it. As Edilyn's agent Ron later advises, "appear the way Letterman appears, on Letterman....[l]augh in a way that's somehow deadpan. Act as if you knew from birth

that everything is clichéd and hyped and empty and absurd, and that that's *just* where the fun is" (183). The audience responds to Letterman's joke with hisses, the requisite sign of disapproval that signals approval. Rudy and Edilyn find Letterman's ploy and grin "attractive", and the scene ends with the woman ensconced in the folds of the television watcher's couch. She laughs and is sleepy, and is an ideal state of televisual suggestibility. Wallace ekphrastically presents the Letterman show, dilating its framework to encompass television's feigned auto-critique of its own practices and to suggest what takes place at the site of viewer reception.

He also demonstrates how shows such as Letterman's offer an infinite regress of viewing moments out of which emerges, as content, *only* the act of watching. The act of viewing television is the message we finally perceive from the medium. A televisual text may sometimes cast a dubious eye towards its own functional pretenses, and in so doing broaden the frameworks of meaning it offers to viewers. However, what is most often seen are programs which make only gestures towards auto-critique, motions which actually serve to anticipate and deflect criticism of the media. Such is the case with the increasingly self-reflexive television talk show. *Letterman* completely dismantles the traditional talk show format by offering ironic self-reference to the point of saturation; the camera lingers inappropriately on off-set subjects and studio personnel and highlights the workings of the talk-show, the apparatus of televisual illusion. Glaringly apparent is the reliance of the host on set pieces and cue cards, the structurally central position occupied by the commercial break, and the reification of the self-promoting intentions of celebrities. *The Larry Sanders Show* upped the self-reflexive bar by offering a sitcom

that was about a talk show very like Letterman's, a behind-the-scenes look at a show that was already looking behind the scenes. It is televisual programs such as these that show there are two sides to self-reflexivity: one conceals, the other reveals.

While the possibility of such shows generating the grounds for critical evaluation of television is there, the medium's ongoing self-justification, the inevitability of commercial contexts for all program elements, and the perennial avoidance of earnestness in favour of ultrahip, postmodern irony (or more accurately, comic indeterminacy) disallows any effective critique from emerging from the formal features of such programs. Audience applause on Letterman follows well-executed, postmodern media happenings such as faked footage of a planning session for the show, a grand and over-the-top entrance by a complete unknown, and the placement and operation of a camera in a non-studio context such as a drive-through window at a McDonald's restaurant. Such formal elements of the program are *ends in themselves*, and are not offered as part of any implicit critique of televisual duplicity. This feigned deconstruction of television by itself is really only a maneuver to deflect serious inquiry into the rhetorical intentions of television. While it appears that nothing and no one are safe from Letterman's scathing commentaries and treatments, he could never have mentioned that General Electric, the company that owned the network for which he used to work, NBC, manufactures trigger devices for nuclear weapons. His derogatory remarks about the corporation's domestic products only served as a form of advertising, for they raised the profile of the products, their televisibility, which is all that is necessary in consumer culture for a product to gain symbolic currency. This currency is most easily obtained when other discourses are not

present to contend with those emplaced in the consciousnesses of reader-viewers by corporate semiosis. The medium's ability to negate contending discourses is formidable. This is why Eco suggests that scholars and technicians of communication should "[imagine] systems of complimentary communication that allow us to reach every individual human group" (1986: 142), a perhaps finally impossible goal but one that even partial achievement of would increase the egalitarian participation of reading-viewing publics in a pluralist society. The talk shows to which I have referred appear to exhibit anamorphic dilation when they 'allow' or offer a certain amount of auto-critique, but the amount is sufficient enough to generate a simulacrum of critical activity, a red herring that is finally constrictive. The reader-viewer requires the arrival, on the site of reception, of social texts that exhibit dilation, texts which may be brought to bear on constrictive forms. The greatest threat to televisual closure comes from fiction and non-fiction works that reify televisual operations by broadening television's frames.

Edilyn is utterly confident in the experience of the eye, and of that experience's autonomy and lack of a need for any form of verification. In her mind, pure perception is both possible and operative. She argues with Rudy that Letterman is actually a kind and generous man, based on what she has seen of him:

He leaned across right up to me, Rudy. I could see every little part of his face. He was freckled. I could see little pinheads of sweat, from the lights. A tiny mole, near the label. His eyes were the same denim color Jamie and Lynnette's eyes get in summer. I looked at him. I *saw* him. (199)

Rudy argues back that

"No one is really the way they have to be seen."  
I looked at him. "You really think that's true."

His cigarette crackled. "Doesn't matter what I think. That's what the show is about. They make it true. By watching him." (199)

'They' are the voice that thanks us for flying American. This 'they', this veiled agency is revealed in the appearance that precedes Edilyn's:

The executive coordinator of NBC Sports apparently fashioned perfect rings of high explosive dynamite in his basement workshop, took them into his backyard, and sat inside explosions....somebody who sat in the exact center of a perfect circle of dynamite would be completely safe, encased in a vacuum, a sort of storm's eye.... "*Kill?*" Letterman kept repeating, looking over at Paul Shaffer, laughing.

The Bolsheviks had used the circle ceremoniously to 'execute' Russian nobleman they really wanted to spare, the executive said; it was an ancient and time-honored illusion. (187)

Directly in the middle of this passage is that aspect of the show's structure that involves Letterman sharing a joke with his band leader, a moment designed to show the two are people who 'get it', that is, who know that the show's comic indeterminacy is its only point. Their banter inscribes this message. In the story, the televisual hallmark is bracketed by elements alien to the show itself, and thus that which it signifies is remodulated. Dilation takes place. Letterman and his sidekick are no longer innocuous jokers but appear complicit with the process of corporate veiling. The talk show emerges as a semiotic outgrowth of the corporate bid for secrecy, for a climate in which its operations and intentions are veiled, are as smilingly enigmatic as the on-air hosts who front network talk shows. The show ostensibly offers to explode televisual illusion, but in so doing only purchases for the network a greater safety, at the center of operations, for its corporate officers.

In the short short story "Luckily the Account Representative Knew CPR", Wallace disrupts this center. Underneath what is described only as "the Building, empty

and bright, dispossessed, autonomous and autonomic” (52), an “Account Representative” tries to aid a “Vice President in Charge of Overseas Operations” who is having a heart attack in the parking garage. The older man is on the floor dying:

Clothes, coat, gray knit suit seemed to be spreading, loose, from the supine senior executive--spreading like water, thought the Account Representative, an inveterate thrower of stones at the skins of ponds--spreading as water retreats in rings from what's disturbed its center. (50)

Here is the inverse of a corporate center of communication--a mere parking garage. But it is one in which the executives are “[b]ent to what two lives required, below everything” (52). Here Wallace echoes his fascination with office buildings, a prominent motif in his first novel *Broom of the System*. Such structures are set up in his fictions as extensions of the discourses which shape the lives of those who move within them. The motif is compelling as few would ask what is the *meaning* of an office tower. The novel's title is a reference to Wittgenstein's ‘meaning is use’ formulation; a broom may ‘mean’ sweeping only until the implement is turned around and used to smash windows in an emergency fire. Here, the building carries no meaning and is only part of an automatic system, empty and bright. The Account Representative's cries for help echo upwards but only reach the material manifestation of a system. He can only administer “artificial circulatory maintenance” as he kneels beside the man on the “cemented monoxide floor” (52).

The story “Lyndon” opens with another situating of subjects in relation to a building: “‘My name is Lyndon Baines Johnson. I own the fucking floor you stand on, boy’” (77). Here, a young man applies to work in the office of the mercurial politician. Wallace moves once more behind the scenes in order to depict the nature of the



discourses that configure the spin of mass media treatments. The aid quickly becomes key to the politician's public relations ploys and learns early the man's central dictum: "NEVER ELABORATE" (105). The story is a meditation on what may have motivated such a public figure, what may have enabled him to thrive in an environment where spin on an issue was key to political survival. There are no claims by Wallace in the fiction as to the 'true' nature of the man, only episodes of an indeterminate nature interspersed with testimonies by people who knew or worked with him. One such comment reads "Who knows how many decisions he was in on. Tonkin. Cambodia. The whole Great Big Society" (104). The state of not knowing is here juxtaposed with references to events that resulted in massive felt effects. The man at the center is unknowable, shielded by the rhetoric he generates, and all the community may do is offer diverse interpretations in order to arrive at some sense of collective orientation. The narrative takes the reader to a point just adjacent to the office wherein a number of high-level decisions are made, but when the opportunity to peer in arrives, Johnson is engaged in an activity of an unrevealing nature such as standing beside a fire or sitting in a chair and sleeping. Wallace extends his interest in the enclaves of powerful social institutions to the political realm here, and it is significant that he chooses a president from a generation wherein politicians were learning to capitalize more effectively on the power of the mass media. Lady Bird Johnson says the following to the aide:

Lyndon is haunted by his own conception of distance, David. His hatred of being alone, physically alone, no matter atop what...his hatred of being alone is a consequence of what his memoir will call his great intellectual concept: the distance at which we see each other, arrange each other, love. That love, he will say, is a federal highway, lines putting communities, that move and exist at great distance, in touch. My husband has stated

publicly that America, too, his own America, that he loves enough to conceal deaths for, is to be understood in terms of distance. (115)

Lyndon places himself at a remove from the social by choosing to exist within the role of the media-delineated public figure. In the bid to control people at a distance he has distanced himself from people in general. By speaking mostly on the subject of his political art, and by anticipating his memoir, an extended contemplation of the self, Lyndon becomes the solipsistic manifestation of media being. Wallace knows and seeks to meet the public need for versions of public figures beyond those offered by the mass media, and he recognizes the importance of fictional dispatches such as this to democratic publics who are blocked from view of what they most need to understand. Barthelme's Kennedy in "Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning" and Coover's Nixon in *The Public Burning* fulfill the same function. DeLillo's study of both Lee Harvey Oswald and the C.I.A. in *Libra* also pierces a number of veils.

## Chapter Two

### Don DeLillo and the Optics of Mass Viewing

The Soul Never Thinks Without a Mental Image.

--Aristotle

Here I am in your lens. Already I see myself differently. Twice over or once removed.

--writer Bill Gray in *Mao II*

Why ask why?

--Slogan for television beer ad

#### 1) Self and Sight, Auras and Aberrance

In 1996, researchers from the Hospitiaux Universitaires in Strasbourg, France published a case study of a seventy-seven year-old Canadian man who, after a right hemisphere stroke, began feeling the existence of supernumerary phantom limbs.<sup>1</sup> He suffered the delusion that he possessed six arms. The researchers focused on how sensory miscues caused distortions in the man's mental images of his body and on how his altered self-awareness led to his unwavering commitment to aberrant rationalizations regarding the figments. In related cases involving amputation, magnetic resonance imaging and thalamic mapping often reveal neural, stump representations that either cause phantom

sensations or that will do so when electrically stimulated.<sup>2</sup> Of interest to me here is this *phenomenon of mislocalization*, and its potential use as an analogy for the effects of mass communications technology on reader-viewers, specifically those consequences that follow when viewers sensuously experience the remote as proximate. Given Don DeLillo's extensive thematic focus on the mechanical reproduction of images, this analogy may usefully be developed in relation to Walter Benjamin's notion of the aura, which he says in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is a result of "the unique phenomenon of a distance" (222). In *One-Way Street*, Benjamin says that a sense of distance is felt during subjective experience of an object's aura, its unique fullness or luminosity. There takes place a "strange weaving of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be" (250). Industrialization, and the technological means of reproduction that accompanied it, dissolved the aura by removing a unique object from the traditional contexts that sustained its singularity. Benjamin initially applauded this development (the masses need not travel to the Vatican or Versailles to experience the image of a great work of art), and he hoped that the aura might be reinvigorated in a politicized, Marxist context. However, he became disillusioned by how emerging visual media fetishized the object and created a false aura within a ritualistic aestheticism. I submit that the mass media, a symptom of the hyperreal logic of late capitalism, has entirely reversed the experience of the aura as Benjamin originally explains it, that is, as involving the semblance of distance. This reversal carries with it an enormous persuasive power, for we believe that the phantom extension of consciousness brings the remote and unique object or subject before us for

full comprehension. We are actually engaged in an aberrant rationalization regarding our technology's capacity for truth.

The adjective 'afferent' refers to the process whereby physical stimuli bring impulses into a nerve center in the brain and become part of a representation there. Sensory deafferentation takes place when stimuli create a false neural representation, a presence which then demands of the mind some form of rationalization to explain what is felt. Unilateral and technological communication over vast distances can create mental misperceptions of scale due to only illusory fulfillment of what was once the exclusive preserve of sensory intimacy. Don DeLillo's novels are rife with characters who respond with recalibrated sensitivities and intense ontological insecurity to the mass mediatic, hyperextension of consciousness. The boundaries between the electronic environment and the psychological/physical self are repeatedly perceived by them as compromised, and they strain to understand imagined impressions of sensory extension and severance. Further, many characters generate and act in accordance with a phantom, external ocular capacity; they are deeply self-regarding, perennially concerned with how they appear to spectral viewers which are only themselves--in bizarre fashion, they act out Benjamin's contention that "[a]ny man today can lay claim to being filmed" (231). The implosion to which McLuhan has drawn our attention<sup>3</sup> and the psychological dysfunction that results from mass bombardment of instantaneous and mosaic communication shape human agency in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, *Mao II*, and *Libra*, mediant fictions wherein central characters behave "in the true Narcissus style of one hypnotized by the amputation and extension of his own being in a new technical form" (McLuhan 26).

As is well known, McLuhan focuses extensively on the medium as message and claims that “the personal and social consequences of any medium--that is, of any extension of ourselves--result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (23). But who, we should ask, performs this introduction at a given stage in history? We should temper McLuhan’s *Understanding Media* with Benjamin’s *Illuminations*; McLuhan studies medium and message inside a frame that does not allow for the intentional manner in which technologies are introduced into the social, while Benjamin aligns communications technologies with prevailing political climates. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Benjamin claims that

During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well....And if changes in the medium of contemporary perception can be comprehended as decay of the aura, it is possible to show its social causes. (222)

This decay, this fall from sensual experience wherein sensory stimuli are not directly present and are only electromagnetically conveyed, has taken place for a reason or reasons. If oppositional writing is to exist as such, it must focus on reasons, and by extension on the subjective agents at the end of a line of instigation. These last must be somehow conceptualized, however variously, if we are not to end up personifying technology and protesting only practices. As Wittgenstein says, “the chain of reasons has an end” (quoted in Altieri) and as Altieri usefully asks, “if reasons are to stop somewhere,

we must turn to the agent. But what version of the agent?" (1994: 159). We may look to mediant fiction for answers to this question.

However, there will be no direct naming or depiction of agents in DeLillo's works of agents in corporate employ, for he is concerned primarily with delineating and affirming agency at the site of technological reception and on the part of the viewing subject. To focus primarily on corporate activity would be to grant the corporation the same primacy in the folds of fiction that it enjoys in its own semiosis. The reader must utilize mediant fiction to find ways of entering back into the agency denied her by corporate visual culture. Through dramatizations of both the deterioration of the aura and the rise of a specious aura, DeLillo offers versions of recent historical changes, not a single history on which to base social action of a predetermined kind. His fictions are descriptive and suggestive, not prescriptive and finalist. They offer individuals perspectives through which to experience and assess mass media spin, and are not proffered to supplant one 'truth' with another. They do not bespeak easy solution or suggest a vantage point outside history and ideology; DeLillo is like Nicholas Branch in *Libra*, a researcher trying to trace and interpret events surrounding the Kennedy assassination. He believes as Branch does that, "There is no need...to invent the grand and masterful scheme, the plot that reaches flawlessly in a dozen directions" but also like Branch he is aware that "the cases do resonate" (58). Both men explore cases in a legal sense, tracing instigation and intention along lines that flow back from human adversity. Through a literary resonance image scan of media-infiltrated being and of the fascination persons have for those technologies that extend the senses, DeLillo uses ekphrasis to

transpose those images that most resonate in mass visual culture. He seeks to offer a neuropathology of those social agents who rationalize to their detriment the corporate semiosis presented to them.

DeLillo takes as his subject the postmodern condition as it is manifest in North America and most of the West--the advent of the hyperreal, the pervasive consumerism linked with late capitalism, the alleged recession of history. But stylistically, he avoids language disorder and the linguistic experimentation that characterizes much of postmodern writing. While one may be tempted to say that DeLillo shares with the modernists a desire to present efforts to secure culture against a blinkered technologism and faltering ideological certainty, his fictions are nonetheless postmodern in that they grapple with radical contingency without asserting foundations. DeLillo's lack of postmodern pyrotechnics when it comes to style have led some critics to mistakenly brand him a realist, and not a very good one at that. One of DeLillo's detractors, a critic for the *Washington Post*, claims that characters in the fiction implausibly mouth "the shop-worn ideologies of the '60s and '70s" (quoted in Passaro 72) in such a way that any realist tone in the work is compromised. I suggest that DeLillo is aware that a realist text frequently "refers as much to its own philosophic origin and processes of validation as it does to an extratextual reality" (Smith 3). It is these origins and processes that his characters give voice to. Thus, in *Libra*, CIA operatives may 'implausibly' hold forth on the logic of political secrecy. Such figures speak the language of their psychological orientations, which are often veiled by official grammars. The fiction is not a compromised realism but a mode of reattachment wherein subjects are understood in



relation to that which informs them and not in accordance with those surface behaviors so favoured by mass visual culture.

The visual texts of corporate semiosis are judged in the fiction according to their public utility. Many of these are instances of bygone news footage, such as that which showed the upsetting of the Ayatollah Khomeini's coffin by frenzied mourners. The footage originally aired on networks amidst commentary on American/Iranian relations, and functioned ideologically to construe the Iranian populace as not only fanatical but as an undifferentiated mass under the spell of a charismatic leader. As I discuss below in the section on *Mao II*, DeLillo uses ekphrasis to appropriate the footage from its original televisual framework in order to present it within the context of America's own homogenized and ideologically motivated masses.<sup>4</sup> This is not a simple re-presentation of the footage, and the meanings the images carry inside the fiction are not immediately evident. What is unique to the experience of reading mediant fiction is that readers must work to interpret the new contexts of images now linguistically set down. The footage by itself, outside of any context, assumes what Barthes calls "the special status of the photographic image: *it is a message without a code*" (136). I suggest that the public utility of DeLillo's fiction is high because it facilitates analysis of the mass media without codifying the image in such a way as to enact anamorphic constriction. DeLillo's contexts offer ways in which we might interpret images but the experience of them remains open in order to demonstrate the limitations imposed by mass media frames. This does not always make for easy reading in a culture that prefers closed univocal solutions to open-ended pluralist investigations, but reader participation in the text's

meaning-making practices is essential to DeLillo's project. Joseph Tabbi importantly observes that DeLillo insists in interviews on the necessity for the difficulty of modern narratives (170). As regards this question of difficulty, we note Benjamin's discussion of the changes in pictorial reproduction brought about by the advent of film, particularly his citing of Paul Valéry who predicts that media texts will become consumable products piped directly into the home like gas and water (as public utilities are) and who importantly raises the issue of the viewer-consumer's expenditure of effort:

Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign. (quoted. in Benjamin 219).

Valéry's prognostication uncannily predicts the ubiquitous remote control, and speaks of the ease with which visual texts may be consumed. With such a low demand on our critical faculties, passive viewing and the linked, unconscious assent to the ideologies contained within mass visual texts take place. The form and content of a DeLillo novel insist upon a critical, active reading of both itself and the social text in question.

As Benjamin learned from his study of the Nazi utilization of film, image media render invisible the interpretive practices of viewers. Object perception, which is non-epistemic, may involve the base perception during viewing that a figure on screen speaks. Fact perception--*that* the speaker is a fascist--is a proposition epistemically arrived at, if it is arrived at at all. The ease of non-epistemic experience of images may easily cancel out the will to interpret that which is seen. Nazi propaganda of the filmic variety capitalized on how that which is visually perceived makes objects and actions seemingly and entirely

self-evident, and thus self-justifying. *How could all those cheering people be wrong?*

*Just look at them.* If other texts do not offer challenges to a given medium's process of self-validation, a fascism of the image unfolds.

I will turn shortly to DeLillo's psychologizing of the reader-viewer, but will first allow my mediant criticism to explore somewhat this psychology itself. It is important to note that Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" lauds techniques of reproduction that permit a copy "to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation" (221). He then claims that reception in a state of distraction is a fortunate, cognitive habit brought about by the advent of film, a profound change in apperception (240). While he is right to assume that the site of reception is of central concern to politically pitched analyses of filmic communication, Benjamin is so intent on suborning elements of his analysis to the logic of Marxist plans for social transformation that he argues against the usefulness of private contemplation of social text, a contemplation that he himself, along with all viewers, must necessarily value.<sup>5</sup> He argues at one point that the ideas contained in architectural aesthetics "cannot be understood in terms of the attentive concentration of a tourist before a famous building" (240). He suggests that the daily use of the building (activities which shape its quotidian meaning) take place while the mind is otherwise occupied, and that this is the mode in which the masses know their environments. Since it is a way of knowing favoured by the masses, he claims it is an *acceptable* mode (Benjamin untenably conflates what persons are compelled to do by circumstance or habit with conscious, democratic expression). He can hardly argue otherwise in this instance since he is at pains to discredit what is, in his

view, the private (and therefore neither public nor political) contemplation of aesthetics that so enabled auras in traditional contexts to exist.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Benjamin is able to say easily that “[t]he public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one” (241).<sup>7</sup> He argues that “[t]he camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses” (237). But absent-minded absorption of such optics does not reveal them; a person might observe stop-motion photography in film but think nothing about what such footage reveals or explains. Benjamin’s own concerted critique emerges from a focused, undistracted attention, a mode that should be encouraged to take place in the minds of viewers. Passive or distracted viewing can result in the creation of a false *unconsciousness* that dictates unconscious behaviors, as Benjamin suggests in his epilogue but does not acknowledge at all points in his argument. Cognition is ineluctably private, whether one experiences the aura of a hidden work of art in the basement of the Vatican or ponders the image of the same work in facsimile at home. What matters is whether or not a viewer engages with several and diverse discourses at once or passively accepts a single one piped into the site of reception. This is why mediant fiction is public and political; it acknowledges itself part of a continuum of textual experience. Within the confines of mind, one may be very much engaged with public concerns as long as mental processes do not become closed-circuit and solipsistic. If the masses are susceptible to the recreated aura, then it is before that aura and in the mind of the viewer that a resistant gaze must manifest itself.

The normalized assumptions which I claim result from distracted viewing--from the acceptance of the ostensible in place of the actual, and from the belief attendant on

this assumption that one's consciousness is extended in space and time through engagement with the mass media--must be understood through site-specific understanding of viewer processes. Accepted visual practices must be challenged through reconceptualizations of them that do not confuse mind's eye with camera lens. By reading and promoting the oppugnant and revelatory aspects of DeLillo's neuropathology of site-specific viewer operations it becomes possible

to forge a conscious recognition of the constructive relation between our visual practices and our visual culture. Such a recognition flies in the 'gazing' face of modernity's inert mythologies of 'objectivity', 'pure vision', 'bias-freedom' and the 'naked eye'. And it inverts their mythic claims to provide the yardstick against which all ideology is assessed by 'seeing' such claims as themselves 'ideological'. (Jenks 11-12)

Conscious, concerted and critical observation of one's own viewing experience can repulse the manipulations of a false aura; the idea here is to take Benjamin at his word when he states that the "effect of the film...should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind" (238).

Photographic reproduction, Benjamin claims, "enables the original to meet the beholder halfway....The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art" (220-221). The decay of the aura

rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. (223)

I would add that the desire to efface distance through electronic communication leads directly to the conceptually debased image--debased since pulled from the social contexts which gave the object in the image its original meaning but not transplanted into a

suggestive but open context. Benjamin goes on to say that “[t]he adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception”. I suggest that the adjustment to which Benjamin refers involves a severe narrowing of epistemic and non-epistemic range, not a broadening of conceptual and cognitive capacity. In *Mao II*, a work preoccupied with crowds and their relationship to mass visual culture, DeLillo gives us the spectacle of the mass wedding orchestrated at Yankee Stadium by Korea’s Reverend Moon. Rodge, “Karen’s daddy, watching from the grandstand...focuses his binoculars on a young woman, another, still another” (3). He cannot see his daughter. His wife Maureen looks at the other persons in the seats, whom she feels are “city nomads more strange to her than herdsmen in the Sahel, who at least turn up on the documentary channel” (4). Rodge, who “stays fixed to his binoculars” (4), “sees the brides lift their veils and...zooms in urgently, feeling at the same moment a growing distance from events, a sorrow of spirit” (6). Rodge’s binocular vision and Maureen’s televisual one serve only to alienate them from the individuals they attempt to view, understand, and connect to, even though each technological extension of their sight visually effaces distance. The technological framework in each instance serves to facilitate only anamorphic constriction of meanings attributable to the viewed. Rodge could opt to ‘see’ his daughter, that is, to understand her choice of belief system and husband by dilating his conceptual purview (he could conceivably gain understanding into the nature of crowds). Instead, he constricts his technological scope. Maureen could approach the fellow parents rather than dwell inwardly on their televisual invisibility. What DeLillo depicts is the discarding of sensual

proximity in favour of an ostensible adjacency through technologies that have flourished in cultures that carry a belief in the possibility of pure perception. Rodge and Maureen restrict themselves to the technologically observable in order to assuage their anxieties over Karen's involvement in the cult; it is as if they live out Comte's dictum that knowledge of things can only follow from observation and that seeing allows for explanation and prediction. Technological sense extension fails them, and each feels a "loss of scale and intimacy" (7). McLuhan remarks on this ontology of cyborg perception when he speaks of "the amputation and extension of [one's] own being in a new technical form" (qtd. above). We attempt to sever from the operations of mind certain perceptual processes that have developed over thousands of years of tactile, face-to-face communication, and seek to replace these with the 'pure' and ostensibly unambiguous visual 'realities' of electromagnetic communication.<sup>8</sup>

Such a disconnection severely compromises grounds for awareness on the part of the viewer since the ideologies of distant agents do not arrive on the site of reception. The image arrives with its object denuded of the social contexts from which it came. Viewers incorporate this debased image into their own frames of reference. What Bryson says of painting holds true for all contemporary visual communication: "what is suppressed by the account of painting as the record of perception is the social character of the image, and its reality as sign" (xii). Viewers do not see the selective and limited character of their watching and so do not see their place on the cultural field; as Benjamin says, to "satisfy the human interest [in visuality] may mean to have one's social function removed from the field of vision" (243). While one may possess an intellectual

understanding that distance is not actually decreased through the experience of electromagnetic visual communication, that one does not really stand outside the cathedral, one understands images as if one *were* able to experience distant objects or others in all their native contexts. What is absent is the sociopolitical orientation one would encounter in direct engagement with what the image purports to convey (imagine if Maureen were to live with herdsmen in the Sahel for a time). Reader-viewers need consciously to insert a text on the subject of their watching into their perceptive experience. A text that puts the lie to visual communications needs to arrive on site and in sight.<sup>9</sup>

In *Mao II*, Rodge attempts to see his daughter through binoculars, and in *White Noise*, Jack Gladney's son Heinrich sits on a ledge outside a window looking "east through binoculars" (109), a part of that novel's depiction of how spiritual yearning has been supplanted by an impulse to technological extension of sight. Binocular vision emerges in DeLillo as a metonym for both the technological extension of the senses and the need to efface distance. In *Libra*, the mother of Lee Harvey Oswald gives agonized testimony before a government committee, stating at one point that Oswald "used to climb the tops of roofs with binoculars, looking at the stars" (451). As I will discuss in more detail below, Oswald is unable to understand that the act of viewing does not decrease the distance between himself and the political truths or certainties he believes cohere around distant objects (Russia) or subjects (Kennedy). This misperception results in his belief that he can know and see himself as he does objects under technological view, through an imagined ocular capacity that he believes offers crystallinity: "There



was so much clarity Lee could watch himself in the huge room of stacked cartons” (398).

The view of the presidential assassin becomes, in David Foster Wallace’s “Lyndon”, the view of a president. As Lady Byng explains to the aide-de-camp:

Lyndon is haunted by his own conception of distance, David....[L]ove, he will say, is a federal highway, lines putting communities, that move and exist at great distance, in touch. My husband has stated publicly that America, too, his own America, that he loves enough to conceal deaths for, is to be understood in terms of distance. (115)

Scopes, sensors (I am thinking of Pynchon’s use of radar in *Gravity’s Rainbow*), computers, televisions, cameras--none offer the *ideological* depth of field or the sociopolitical risks and rewards that one experiences when navigating cultural spaces directly rather than at a technological remove. Lyndon is haunted by his conception of distance, rather than enriched by it, because a blind faith in the connective power of communications technology cannot alleviate the loneliness brought on by solipsistic engagement with the visual. Mechanical reproduction cannot replace contact per se, but when one does choose to view, ideological depth of field must be achieved through a focusing of diverse social texts upon whatever is under consideration. This is the epistemic equivalent of binocular focus, which involves two independent scopes that train simultaneously on an object.<sup>10</sup>

Within the economy of mass visual culture, critical superimposition of this kind is rarely valued or performed. There is instead a resistance to complexities per se, an acceptance of surfaces and a suspicion of inquiry. An advertising campaign for beer this decade involved the slogan, “Why ask why?” As Jenks observes, the “prime cultural value now becomes ‘face-value’”. A pre-modern faith in the deity has been replaced by

modernity's faith in the precision of human optics buttressed by a serious commitment to surface" (7). In *Mao II*, Rodge has a similar insight:

When the Old God leaves the world, what happens to all the unexpended faith?....They are a nation, he supposes, founded on the principle of easy belief. A unit fueled by credulousness. They speak a half language, a set of ready-made terms and empty repetitions. All things, the sum of the knowable, everything true, it all comes down to a few simple formulas copied and memorized and passed on. And here is the drama of mechanical routine played out with living figures. (7)

Positivism and pure perception form a new religion; the other is easily known when seen, not because he or she have been approached but because the ground separating persons is assumed to have been traversed.

In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney, professor of Hitler Studies at a small college, drives his son Heinrich to school. They debate whether or not it is raining. Heinrich presents the case of the sophists regarding the unreliability of exteroception, asserting the finally indeterminate status of sense experience (one cannot finally know for certain that it rains). Jack makes the case for pragmatism, implying that his belief that it is raining is a warranted claim because he possesses the desire to remain dry. Both are able to discuss the topic philosophically, but appear incapable of applying their critical capacities to their experiences of the mass media. It is as if they do not believe the phenomenon requires their consideration. The family's behavior is dictated by radio and television. These media are always turned on in the Gladney home, despite Babette's efforts to deglamorize television and render it distasteful by watching it as a group (a context which is, ironically, a communal moment of shared, familial experience). The family fails to bring to their encounters with mass media any other types of social text. Its members do,

however, perform the reverse of this operation and bring the televisual to bear on basic sensory experience. Just prior to arguing about the rain, Jack recalls that he drove

Heinrich

to school on his first day back after a sore throat and fever. A woman in a yellow slicker held up traffic to let some children cross. I pictured her in a soup commercial taking off her oilskin hat as she entered the cheerful kitchen where her husband stood over a pot of smoky lobster bisque, a smallish man with six weeks to live. (22)

Here is a strange intersection of interior experience and corporate semiosis, both of which are interlarded with an awareness of mortality. Mediant fiction and mass visual culture often combine these elements of contemporary psychological experience (though in markedly different ways) : DeLillo gives us the funeral of Khomeini by showing us characters who watch the spectacle on television; the airborne toxic event in *White Noise* that causes mass media confusion (which in turn causes widespread panic) presaged an actual disaster and information systems collapse in California (a media event of a quite different sort than is usually intended by networks); and the version of Kennedy's assassination in *Libra* involves bystanders who conceive in ocular terms their fear of being shot. Recent television footage of robot exploration of the *Titanic* wreck is heavily interspersed with commercials, for the descent into the previously inaccessible grave was certain to garner high ratings. At one point, the remote controlled underwater camera pivots to get a shot of its operator who peers out of a submarine window with a self-conscious look of mourning for those who perished (prior to a commercial break, the look into the grave is characterized by a focus on the act of our own looking). Jack has applied the mode of corporate semiosis to himself to the extent that his psychology is interior,

consumerist, and fearful. (I do not mean to suggest that some form of conditioning does not affect or dictate one's interpretation of sense experience; the problem is that rhetorics that impose themselves on individuals bring on different psychological results than those which function on behalf of the subject.) Jack Gladney is incapable of extricating his perceptions from a consumer culture that not only fails to alleviate his fear of death but augments it. Only the purchase is offered as solace. Pre-empted are meditations on mortality. At the same time viewers are deluged by images of beauty and youth that arrive alongside stories of death and destruction. We are alienated from our own dying, for such estrangement is conducive to high sales figures.<sup>11</sup> Babette's psychology is similar to her husband's, and she finally decides to purchase (through the granting of sexual favours to a salesman) an experimental drug that, its manufacturers claim, can alleviate the fear of dying. Jack sifts through his own anxieties on the subject by filtering his perceptions of others through stock television images, and it becomes clear that "TV, film, video, photography and advertising...[provide] our most immediate access to 'other' through frozen, stored, contrived, and re-presented images....[There is an] apparent dissolution of modernity into a more generalized logic of public representations" (Jenks 10).

This state of affairs has led to the creation of a phantom scopic regime, one in which viewers unconsciously believe that an external ocular capacity, controlled by the self, tracks both the self and others. *This is not an articulated or conscious belief*, and that it is not so attests to the power of unconscious optics.<sup>12</sup> Jenks claims we are "waiting to be 'seen' by 'extro-spection' of the 'naked eye'....There is no-thing 'out-there'" (10). I

suggest that what resides ‘out-there’ is a projection of the self, a phantom doppelganger whose existence saves us from the painful experience of solitude, of insufficient communion with other human beings. A neuropathology of such belief and behavior is submitted to the reader by DeLillo in *White Noise*, *Mao II*, and *Libra*. But before turning to a discussion of specific examples, I will suggest why the sense of being watched has become so widespread. What DeLillo expresses in fiction about the phantom, omnipresent eye, Benjamin and Wallace state directly in their essays on visual reproduction. Benjamin claims that what matters primarily is that, in film, “the actor represents himself to the public before the camera, rather than representing someone else”, and he makes mention of Pirandello, that miner of ontological indeterminacies, and quotes the playwright as follows:

The film actor feels as if in exile--exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence. (229)

Pirandello describes the alienation felt by the camera actor as the estrangement one often feels when confronted by the specter of the self in a mirror. This image, Benjamin states, “has become separable, transportable. And where is it transported? Before the public” (231), adding in a note that “[t]he change noted here in the method of exhibition caused by mechanical reproduction applies to politics as well” (231). This last is of particular importance to *Libra*, a novel which casts one of the defining political moments in twentieth-century America as a media moment, setting up as I discuss below, the literal assassination of Kennedy in relation to his being photographically and filmically shot,

just as Oswald was not long after he committed his crime. Private and public realms are collapsed when distance itself is believed to have been defeated. Interior space becomes deeply oriented to the processes of visual transmission wherein one is 'taken live' to the scene of the crime; inner is thus outer, is open to lens and light. It is not surprising that Benjamin compares magician and surgeon, saying that the former only undertakes a laying on of hands while the latter penetrates inside the individual.<sup>13</sup> One is reminded of Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic* and that work's discussion of the medical gaze. Once the forensic or surgical view is established, the "residence of truth in the dark center of things is linked, paradoxically, to this sovereign power of *the empirical gaze* that turns their darkness into light" (xii). We may here think back to Benjamin, who quotes Georges Duhamel as complaining of film that he "can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images" (Benjamin 238); the inner self becomes a projector screen onto which a bright light shines, distracting the mind from other functions of mind.

In his essay on television and American fiction, Wallace frames his discussion of the screen actor with a consideration of the voyeuristic impulses of the television viewer. He states that what takes place as an individual watches is not "true espial" as

the voyees behind the screen's glass are only pretending ignorance. They know perfectly well we're out there. And that we're there is also very much on the minds of those behind the second layer of glass, the lenses and monitors via which technicians and arrangers apply no small ingenuity to hurl the visible images at us. What we see is far from stolen; it's proffered--illusion...It's ultimately of course not even actors we're spying, not even people: it's EM-propelled analog waves and ionized streams and rear-screen chemical reactions throwing off phosphenes in grids of dots not much more lifelike than Seurat's own impressionistic 'statements' on perceptual illusion. (153)

My point here is that viewers suffer the same fate of today's screen performers. Screen actors of Pirandello's day may have felt in exile from tactile live theatre, may have felt (quite justifiably) disembodied after being severed, through mechanical reproduction, from the moment of their performance's reception. But screen actors today, raised on the popular cinema and television, are their own viewers, and their viewers are them; persons on both sides of the lens practice a cultivated behavior that is not acting so much as it is a thinly disguised awareness of being watched. Benjamin quotes Rudolf Arnheim as saying of film acting, "the greatest effects are almost always obtained by 'acting' as little as possible" (Benjamin 230). Such an actor is for Wallace "a walking imago, a certain type of transcendent freak who, for Emerson, 'carries the holiday in his eye.' The Emersonian holiday television actors' eyes carry is the potent illusion of a vacation from self-consciousness" (155).<sup>14</sup> Large numbers of human beings now want to experience this illusion, make such a vacation real, and to do so they develop a filmically mediated and specious self-awareness that is historically unprecedented. It is made possible by the conviction that all is seen (technological omnipresence), that the faculty that sees sees purely, and that the process is one that supplies meaningful connection. But to what is one connected? By dwelling on the physics of television in the passage above, Wallace emphasizes that viewers forget they are very much alone with the technology and symbolic material of solitary viewing.

Wallace's most important observation (not entirely original but one that he understands bears repeating) is as follows:

[t]elevision, even the mundane little businesses of its production, have [sic] become our interior....and if it's true that many lonely people are prodigious TV watchers, and if it's true that lonely people find in television's 2d images relief from the pain of their reluctance to be around real humans then it's also obvious that the more time spent watching TV...the harder it becomes not to feel alienated from real humans, solipsistic, lonely. (159, 163)

The one thing that most allows corporate semiosis its purchase on mass audiences is the invisibility of the solitude the medium engenders. Those who do not bring to bear on both mass visual texts and their own viewing practices information that helps them understand perception will not perceive the mechanism of their alienation. Without textual superimposition, one superstitiously embraces telesthesia, an inarticulate and unfounded belief that that which is at a remove is brought nearer. A phantom extension of consciousness, it is unconsciously believed, will compensate for that lack of connection. It is as if to stave off the self-consciousness and aloneness one may feel when looking in a mirror we pick up a video camera and aim it at our image. We could lose ourselves in the circuitous loop of that electronic viewing, make ourselves the other, and with an air of calculated indifference (that is really anything *but* indifference) stand before that figment other believing it watches us. When a video camera is aimed at a television screen that displays what the camera is filming (and thereby establishes a video feedback loop), an infinite regress of television screens appears. If one then turns up the gain or zooms in, trying to see further down that unreal corridor, TV screen and lens fill completely with a white glare. This is the video version of an overloaded system and is akin to the phenomenon of white noise. Gaze has turned completely inwards and there is an implosion, a radiant death of consciousness, what Foucault in *The Birth of the Clinic*



calls “the white brightness of death” (xiii).<sup>15</sup> In *Mao II*, Bill says of his assistant Scott that he is “at my brainstem like a surgeon with a bright knife” (38). Death and the harsh light of the flashbulb close *Mao II* as Brita, who has photographed the once elusive and now dead writer of novels, Bill Gray, “stays on the balcony for another minute, watching the magnesium pulse that brings an image to a strip of film. She crosses her arms over her body against the chill and counts off the bursts of relentless light. The dead city photographed one more time” (241). Consciousness here is a dead city, pointlessly illuminated by the shooting gaze which killed it.

As I have suggested, DeLillo is at pains to depict ekphrastically the processes involved in experiencing commercial visual culture. Pynchon’s filmic ekphrases, and Wallace’s televisual ones, constitute what I term first-order ekphrases. Although DeLillo sometimes transposes readily recognizable screen formats into literary fiction, sometimes calls films by name and describes them, he most often makes use of second-order ekphrases. These are familiar dramas of viewing and response. We ‘see’ in the fiction transferred screen images and the hallmarks of screen formats in addition to scenes of reception recognizable from our own experience. In *Mao II*, characters watch television for considerable periods of plot time; readers experience both the televisual frame and the frames imposed by a given viewer/character. DeLillo places the reader on the couch along with his characters, thus literalizing on the plains of narrative and reader reception our immersion in mass visual culture. This second-order ekphrasis is put into play in order to pierce the corporate veil, but DeLillo is less interested in indicating possible boardroom machinations than he is in characterizing the political nature and implications

of the veil. He seeks to reify the implied ideologies of mass media concealment, and the result is an alignment of corporate semiosis with fascism; his treatments of mass visual culture unfold in *White Noise* alongside Jack Gladney's theorization of Hitler; in *Mao II*, abreast of Mao and international terrorism; and in *Libra*, in tandem with rogue elements of the CIA. I emphasize that the function of DeLillo's fiction is to put the lie to various rhetorics received, not to draw parallels between late capitalism and Nazism. Thus, "there is no Führer figure attempting to manipulate the masses; nevertheless, there operates what might be termed a postmodern, decentralized totalitarianism in which the mass media--often linked to advertising--constructs an aura around popular culture events" (Duvall 286).<sup>16</sup> Here then is the point at which anamorphic dilation is apparent in DeLillo's handling of rhetorics received; as the anamorphic lens ('Panavision' is the proprietary name) redistributes small images on a wide screen, DeLillo places the products and consumption of image culture in the wider context of the technological impulse towards fascism.

## 2) To Buy is to Be: *White Noise* and the Self-Regarding Consumer

In *White Noise*, many of the faculty members at the "College-on-the-Hill" are intent on deciphering "the natural language of the culture, to make a formal method of the shiny pleasures they'd known in their Europe-shadowed childhoods--an Aristotelianism of bubble gum wrappers and detergent jingles" (9). Staff at the college have made their own consumerism their object of study, creating a vocation that enables them to be both

high priests and faithful followers of a symbolic postmodern economy that their analyses do little to critique seriously. They are Eco's integrated intellectuals who,

if apocalypics survive by packaging theories on decadence, the integrated intellectuals rarely theorize. They are more likely to be busy producing and transmitting their messages in every sphere, on a daily basis. The apocalypse is a preoccupation of the dissenter, integration is the concrete reality of non-dissenters. The image of the Apocalypse is evoked in texts *on* mass culture, while the image of integration emerges in texts which *belong* to mass culture. (1964: 18)

Jack Gladney is a professor of a burgeoning field he seeks to make a mark in: Hitler Studies. His professional interests are historical, but his lifestyle epitomizes the consumerism that so fascinates his colleagues. He would live in a perpetual present tense consisting of hyperreal media events and fleeting vogues in purchasing choices. His house is awash in the "Waves and Radiation" (the title of the first chapter) that issue from radio and television, delivering the litany of advertising. The detritus of consumer culture that accumulates around the family contributes only briefly to its happiness (purchases, it seems must always be recent) : "Things, boxes. Why do these possessions carry such sorrowful weight? There is a darkness attached to them, a foreboding. They make me wary not of personal failure and defeat but of something more general, something large in scope and content" (6). Jack appears mostly unaware of the larger, sociopolitical contexts that are his family's and the West's current condition. A flat and featureless materialism has compromised the characters' humanity, for they respond in animal fashion to pleasurable or unpleasant stimuli: the family's shock at seeing Babette on TV is described as "an animal growl" (104); when Jack and Babette run into Murray in the supermarket, Murray actually sniffs at the couple as he "sidled around her [Babette],

appearing to smell her hair....He took a twin roll of paper towels out of her cart and smelled it" (35, 37); and family members are described in terms appropriate to a pack: "They would attack us," thinks Jack of his children, who sit in the back seat of the car as he drives, "using the classic strategy of fighting amongst themselves" (235). Throughout, Jack remains obsequious to, and adoring of, the aura that emanates from both the electronic missives that bombard his home and many of the historical materials that are his sources (for example, Nazi Propaganda films). As complicity with the aura of consumer culture empowers his fellow academics through a process of symbolic reciprocation and affirmation, so does Hitler's aestheticization of the political--the Nazi recuperation of the aura for fascist purposes--power Jack's career. This interdependence is confirmed by Murray Jay Siskind, a professor of cultural studies, who says to Jack, "You've established a wonderful thing here with Hitler....He is now your Hitler, Gladney's Hitler....The college is internationally known as a result of Hitler studies....It's what I want to do with Elvis" (11-12).

The two men later drive to a tourist site called "THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA" (12). Critics have frequently made reference to this scene, particularly to Murray's remarks, which neatly interpolate Benjamin: "Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn....We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain it....We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura" (12-13). It is no surprise that Murray is "pleased by this" state of affairs, by both the phenomenon that plays itself out before him and the tellability of it that he tests using his lecturer's tone of address while speaking to Jack; he has just gathered up more

of the symbolic currency that allows him to flourish in the economy he adores. Critics have been mute, however, on precisely why it is that characters in *White Noise* are drawn to self-reflexive viewing practices. The two men

walked along a cowpath to the slightly elevated spot set aside for viewing and photographing. All the people had cameras; some had tripods, telephoto lenses, filter kits. A man in a booth sold postcards and slides--pictures of the barn taken from the elevated spot. We stood near a grove of trees and watched the photographers. (12)

Murray says of the tableau that it is a “religious experience in a way, like all tourism....They are taking pictures of taking pictures” (12, 13). Sacred ground in a postmodern society is any place whereupon aperture, lens, film, and the framing eye are in contact with a god of objecthood, a deity known not through the Word but through the Image. The object itself is not an icon, but the picture of it is; objecthood is made into the ineffable through the processes of mechanical reproduction--it becomes impossible for the pilgrim/tourist to see the barn, to find satisfaction in that seeing. Instead, a picture bearing a specious aura is carried away like a relic, and this image becomes a conduit for a yearning directed at an object that, in its immediacy, was shunned by the observer. The picture attests more to the manner of our viewing than to an aspect of objecthood, and it seems we are compelled to indulge the urge to observe ourselves observing (I am reminded of the *Titanic* cameraman mentioned above). This is why tourists are drawn to the site, but it is a compulsion that requires further scrutiny.

The picture-takers experience simultaneous and contradictory desires. They want to bring the object closer to themselves, to efface the distance between mind and object. Perhaps this is as a way of expanding one's subjecthood to take in a world consisting of

objects that carry neither consciousness nor intentionality (in the existential view, non-human externalities are the source of no inconsiderable amount of unease). The effort to enact such effacement along with others also may offer solace; there is reassurance in the fact that it is the most photographed barn in America (at least we may all share the same object and view). At the same time, that which is viewed must have something of the ineffable or the unapproachable about it. Objecthood cannot be experienced by some directly since that would risk the existential awareness that we are alone in a world of objects without consciousness. The sense of a god in nature can be maintained this way. The level of anxiety is high, however, and the means of mechanical reproduction become fetishized, our observing an exegetical exercise in optics, and our photo albums reliquaries inside of which are images that are a sunny testament to the existence of god in the world: "I found some family photo albums....We [Jack and Babette] spent hours going through them, sitting up in bed. Children wincing in the sun, women in sun hats, men shading their eyes from the glare as if the past possessed some quality of light we no longer experience, a Sunday dazzle" (30). Of course, the viewers love the priest instead of the god; the manner in which the ineffable is approached is the true focus of our attentions, and thus it is not the barn itself that inspires awe but the fact that it is the most photographed barn in the country. Picture-takers teleconvert their visual senses in order to join with a warm and familiar congregation of fellow witnesses and to decrease the distance between inner self and outer world. But these witnesses are silent, are non-interactive individuals since they are part of a mass.<sup>17</sup> They are severed from their tactile existence--no one moves into the interior of the barn, feels the wood, smells the hay,

hears the creak of beams. Such an attraction would likely be roped off or fenced in, as are most popular objects of tourist attention, including religious shrines. We remain atop an elevated spot, camera in hand and only ostensibly closer to god.

Jack and Babette do not, possibly cannot, engage in sexual relations without reading aloud to one another pornographic passages from books. Sensual proximity is not the impetus for sex; they need to generate mental image tracks first, and in so doing they turn sexual union into a vicarious rather than immediate experience. That they feel ridiculous at points does not result in their giving up the game. They have attached phantom, ocular extensions to themselves. Having amputated their psychological dependence on tactile experience, they have come to depend on the glaring light of pornography to alleviate despair over the distance between inner and outer, self and other:

“Insert yourself, Rex. I want you inside me, entering hard, entering deep, yes, now, oh.”

I began to feel an erection stirring. How stupid and out of place. Babette laughed at her own lines. The TV said: “Until Florida surgeons attached an artificial flipper.” (29)

Inside this second-order ekphrasis, DeLillo forces the television to issue the diagnostic pronouncement on the drama of severance and extension going on in the couple’s bed: the televisually delineated gaze inward creates a prosthetic awareness on which the pair come to rely. Their experience of, and response to, existence is degraded to the level of a Florida seal act wherein stock stimuli elicit stock responses. Jack’s embarrassment at his response and Babette’s unserious laughter signal their unease with the extensions of their being. Elsewhere, the TV makes another reference to synthetic extension: “The TV said: ‘Now we will put the little feelers on the butterfly’” (96). When DeLillo depicts his

characters as willing to supplant religious consciousness with a technological sense of connection, his tone becomes unmistakably satirical. Jack Gladney finds a mystical connection through his bank machine:

In the morning I walked to the bank. I went to the automated teller machine to check my balance. I inserted my card, entered my secret code, tapped out my request. The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my independent estimate....Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval. The system hardware, the mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant city. What a pleasing interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. A deranged person was escorted from the bank by two armed guards. The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with. But we were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies. (46)

We may interpret this passage in at least two ways. DeLillo is labeling as laughable the high seriousness with which consumer culture takes itself, a solemnity humorously evident in mass visual culture when actors attempt to critique meaningfully cliché-ridden projects or when banks assure us they are forever a part of the cycle of life. Still, we may not ignore in the above that prayer, consecration, religious mystery, and a sense of one's place in an ordered vast universe are supplanted by a process of technological conjuncture that effaces distance and allows a symbolic connection over distance to take place. Jack's yearning for connection is a serious matter even if DeLillo's tone here is not. Jack 'senses' a union between his being and a machine, the latter of which is remote, inaccessible but for telesthesia, as are the pieces of stone purported to have rested under Christ's cross and which are sequestered at the hearts of altars. However, Jack senses that the accord is temporary, and the juxtapositioning of his peace with the deranged man who is ousted from the concrete and tactile embodiment of the system--the bank building--



does not bode well. After the airborne toxic event has threatened the city, Jack is 'plugged into' another machine, a diagnostic computer that this time offers not peace but a forewarning of death. Technological extension of the self is linked in the minds of characters to religious communion with a cosmic force that can divine, foretell, or even dictate their fate.

Serious as well is the self-regarding gaze of the consumer, for in such a purview the self looms large and pushed beyond the frame is the political, that region of accommodation between the self and the other. At a mall, Eric Massingale says to Jack, "You look so harmless....A big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy" (83). Jack hurries from the store with his purchase (he has bought "fifty feet of Manila hemp just to have it around" [82]) feeling powerless and weak hearing the other man's impression of him. "The encounter put me in the mood to shop" (83), Jack observes of himself. Shopping is an activity that is sure to offer visual affirmation of the self *if* one is engaged in purchasing. Malls and the individual stores therein are inundated with mirrors. These environments are set up in such a way that as you move through them your own image becomes part of a montage composed of stylized and alluring photographs of beautiful (and beautifully attired) fashion models. If your image poses an unpleasant contrast, then a purchase brings you into the economy of the visual commercial field. In order to shore up his flagging self-image, Jack becomes the ideal consumer: "I kept seeing myself unexpectedly in some reflecting surface"; his family, initially "puzzled" by his desire to buy, is soon delighted that he is "one of them, shopping, at last"; he feels "expansive, inclined to be sweepingly generous" and tells his children "to pick out their Christmas

gifts here and now....I was the benefactor, the one who dispenses gifts, bonuses, bribes, *baksheesh*"; and his family purchase items before returning to dote on the "indistinct" man now turned august and generous patriarch. Jack experiences the false sense of empowerment engendered by interacting with corporations on their terms--"We moved from store to store, rejecting not only items in certain departments, not only entire departments but whole stores, mammoth corporations that did not strike our fancy for one reason or another. There was always another store" (83). To believe this last is to take the view, when in Las Vegas, that there is always another slot machine. All the corporations which sell their wares in malls benefit from the false consumer belief that access to selection is a type of consumer power. We should ask, of what larger context is this selection a part? However one shops amongst corporate offerings, one pays figures a substantial portion of which goes into advertising budgets that not only require higher ticket prices but that unremittingly target one's sense of self-worth, seeking to infantilize buyers by making them self-pitying and self-centered (Massingale judged Jack's appearance according to the norms of corporate semiosis).

During this scene of consumer hedonism, which covers barely two pages, the pronoun 'I' appears twenty-four times, most often beginning a sentence in which Jack's narcissistic view of himself as master of all he surveys is apparent:

I shopped for its own sake...inspecting merchandise I had no intention of buying, then buying it. I sent clerks into their fabric books to search for elusive designs. I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgot existed. Brightness settled around me....Our images appeared on mirrored columns, in glassware and chrome, on TV monitors in security rooms....A little later I watched Steffie in front of the TV set. She moved her lips, attempting to match the words as they were spoken. (84)

Jack chooses to be processed in the manner corporate semiosis encourages. In the harsh glare of the solipsistic feedback loop, images of the self in a commercial setting configure the gaze of the inner eye. We then carry this mutation with us. Steffie, back home in front of the TV, rehearses the ritual incantations of the belief system that shapes her being.

Mass visual culture in the novel encourages such an extensive self-regard in members of the Gladney family that that culture becomes the measure, the standard by which all possible social responses are measured. When environmental disaster threatens, Jack says, "I'm not just a college professor. I'm the head of a department. I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That's for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the county, where the fish hatcheries are" (117). He cannot see himself fleeing on television so he balks at actually doing so, for he *does* so himself in that frame. While he waits at the airport to pick up Bee, he hears a story from a man who was aboard a plane that has just landed after a twelve-thousand-foot, uncontrolled emergency descent. The man describes it as "[f]our miles of prime-time terror" after which the "first officer walked down the aisle, smiling and chatting in an empty corporate way. His face had the rosy and confident polish that is familiar in handlers of large passenger aircraft. They looked at him and wondered why they had been afraid" (92). Bee then asks Jack where the media is, to which Jack replies that there is no media in Iron City. Bee is saddened: "They went through all that for nothing?" The passengers are denied an opportunity to enter the televisual frame in a manner other than their imaginations provide. To enter the frame by being filmed would be a type of

ascension; a non-corporeal state of being would be achieved while the image of one's bodily existence would be maintained. When Babette suddenly appears on the television screen as the other family members watch (they do not know that Babette's yoga class is being televised by the local cable station), Jack wonders

Was this her spirit, her secret self, some two-dimensional facsimile released by the power of technology, set free to glide through wavebands, through energy levels, pausing to say good-bye to us from the fluorescent screen?

A strangeness gripped me, a sense of psychic disorientation....It was but wasn't here. Waves and radiation. Something leaked through the mesh. She was shining a light on us, she was coming into being, endlessly being formed and reformed as the muscles in her face worked at smiling and speaking, as the electronic dots swarmed.

We were being shot through with Babette. Her image was projected on our bodies, swam in us and through us....I tried to tell myself it was only television...not some mysterious separation. (104, 105)

A television image of Babette provides Jack with a union both physical and mystical that direct contact with her does not afford. Technological consciousness, hyperextended and cut off from sensual experience of the intimate, tactile variety oversees here the dissolution of the boundaries between the electronic environment and the psychological/physical self. Sensory disconnection stands opposite in DeLillo's fiction from a handful of moments when the family are together in the kitchen. In *Mao II*, when Brita arrives to take Bill Gray's picture, she is glad "to be reminded that kitchens are places for long talks, the late hour, the wood stove and musty wine" (29). Here, the experiences of ear, skin and tongue are evoked, but not those of the eye. To Jack Gladney, moments in the kitchen are periods of "teeming interactions, part of the sensory array I ordinarily cherish. Heat, noise, lights, looks, words, gestures, personalities....A

colloquial density that makes family life the one medium of sense knowledge in which an astonishment of the heart is routinely contained” (117).

However, this scene of warm, domestic association is undercut by the fact that Denise routinely goes to the bathroom to vomit. She may or may not be bulimic, but there is the likelihood that she enjoys exhibiting the symptoms of ailments made known and thus somewhat fashionable through the media. Heinrich chastises her for “showing outdated symptoms” (117). Heinrich plays chess by mail with a man in prison who is serving time for shooting six people. As Jack asks his son questions about the man, Heinrich responds, “Like who did he kill? That’s the big thing today. Concern for the victim” (45). He sees empathy as a fashionable attitude, ethics as being *en vogue*. Their conversation reveals Jack’s fascination with the details of the man’s crime as these might unfold in a television newsmagazine format. He asks,

“Did he care for his weapons obsessively? Did he have an arsenal stashed in his shabby little room off a six-story concrete car park?”

“Some handguns and a bolt-action rifle with a scope.”

“A telescopic sight. Did he fire from a highway overpass, a rented room? Did he walk into a bar, a washette, his former place of employment and start firing indiscriminately...People out on the street thinking they heard firecrackers. ‘I was just waiting for the bus when I heard this little popping noise like firecrackers going off’”

“He went up to a roof.”

“A rooftop sniper....Had he been hearing voices?”

“On TV.”

“Talking just to him? Singling him out?”

“Telling him to go down in history. He was twenty-seven, out of work, divorced, with his car up on blocks. Time was running out on him.”

“Insistent pressuring voices. How did he deal with the media? Give lots of interviews, write letters to the editor of the local paper, try to make a book deal.”

“There is no media in Iron City. He didn’t think of that until it was too late. He says that if he had to do it all over again, he wouldn’t do it as an ordinary murder, he would do it as an assassination.” (44-45)

This section prefigures DeLillo's handling of Oswald in *Libra*. Here, the killer's impulses towards, and reactions to the telescopic and the televisual are conflated, creating an altered frame of mind. He feels disconnected from the social because he experiences it from far off. Instead of dispensing with that which mediates his experiences for him, he remains enamored of the scopic and chooses to bring into murderous focus, the social, in the form of the other, through a gunsight. He assumes that his existence will then become televisually manifest. The desire to live a phantom existence outside of one's body and mind (an 'existence' that could not be confirmed unless one was viewer as well as viewed) is a bizarre wish, a schizoid yearning that arises from the belief that the ostensible is the actual. This frame of mind leads to a hyperawareness of mind *as mind*, not surprising since corporate semiosis encourages awareness of shopping as shopping, of self as self, and of viewing as viewing. Subjects require a degree of distance from their own mental processes; self-awareness in the sense of understanding of one's self in relation to one's environment is not necessarily attendant on self-reflexivity. Heinrich holds forth at one point as might one of the neuropathologists from the Hospitiaux Universitaires in Strasbourg in a contemplative moment:

"Who knows what I want to do? Who knows what anyone wants to do? How can you be sure about something like that? Isn't it all a question of brain chemistry, signals going back and forth, electrical energy in the cortex? How do you know whether something is really what you want to do or just some kind of nerve impulse in the brain?" (45)

These remarks send Jack running for his bank machine, propelled by his yearned-for telesthetic connection with the ineffable. Consistently absent from the characters' thoughts is an awareness of how their consciousnesses are being re-wired. Since they do

not even know that the process is taking place, they cannot inquire as to the identity of the human agencies that have designs upon them. When Jack listens to Steffie sleeping and hears her say in her sleep, "*Toyota Celica*" he realizes that the buzz words and product names of international marketing messages are part "of every child's brain noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe. Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence" (155). Whatever its source! The moment is comic since the corporate presence in their lives and minds is so extensive that it is hard to believe Jack cannot determine the origin of a product name. Corporate semiosis is so ubiquitous that it has become such a large background to our lives that we often cannot see the edges of it and thus fail to perceive it as background at all; as Orest says to Jack, "[e]verything was on TV last night" (268). Jack is the type of reader-viewer most in need of dilational, mediant fiction. Indeed, such fiction usually presents the figure of reader-viewer who does not understand mass media effects. Thus concerned, it bears a public address, even as it thematizes interior mental operations.<sup>18</sup>

Feedback loops abound in DeLillo's America both privately and publicly. When an environmental crisis strikes in the form of an airborne toxic event, Jack realizes that, "We'd become part of the public stuff of media disaster" (146). Such a disaster in this sense may mean two things: first, that any crises will play out on the screen, and that this is Jack's primary concern; second, that the real disaster is that too much white noise in an overheated communications system (wherein only speculations on the states of things are offered) has plunged Iron City and surrounding areas into a chaos wherein persons cannot even find out if there is any actual threat to their safety. This is the climate that prevails

when, at the end of the novel, aberrant operations of mind, corporate semiosis, and spiritual yearning, all salted with an existential dread, combine. Jack and Babette try to buy Dylar, a pill its manufacturers claim can dispel the fear of dying. Babette explains the pill to Jack, saying,

all I can tell you for certain is that the substance contained in Dylar is some kind of psychopharmaceutical. It's probably designed to interact with a distant part of the human cortex....I have only a bare working knowledge of the human brain but it's enough to make me proud to be an American. Your brain has a trillion neurons and every neuron has ten thousand little dendrites. The system of inter-communication is awe-inspiring. It's like a little galaxy that you can hold in your hand, only more complex, more mysterious....We still lead the world in stimuli. (189).

Note here that Babette attributes power to the drug because it can interact with a *distant* part of the cerebral cortex. Once again, the bridging of distance is a prime value. Babette unintentionally describes here mass communication and the systems in which her family's existence has become imbricated. She considers the brain a marvel of technology, admiring its capacity to function as a receptor for mass media messages that offer a national and corporate drama of adversity and triumph. Prior to Jack's attempt to murder the Dylar salesman whom Babette has sold herself to, husband and wife watch "a postmodern sunset, rich in romantic imagery" (227). (DeLillo pokes fun here at the idea of a postmodern apocalypse, at the death of meaning, and lays blame at the feet of those who do not perceive that communications are fueled by human agency.) As Jack plans and executes his assault on the man, he can only turn to television murders for a modus operandi. He decides that he will "train relentlessly, speak of himself in the third person" (268), that is, as a self apart from himself--he will watch himself perform the murder. His



attempt fails, and although he gains the ability to empathize with the man he has injured, he lies in hospital with the “TV floating in the air, in a metal brace, pointing down at him” (304), waiting to administer last rites. An omnipresent postmodernity hovers, in air, like the transmissions of which it is made, and by the close of the novel, “[t]here was nothing to do but wait for the next sunset, when the sky would ring like bronze” (321).

### **3) The Photographed Word and the Written Image: The Struggle of the Author(s) in *Mao II***

*Mao II* offers DeLillo's most extended treatment of crowds. His treatment of the mass media arrives through his meditations on mass audiences. Rodge looks on at the mass wedding orchestrated by Reverend Moon, half expecting “the chanting mass of bodies to rise in the air, all thirteen thousand ascending slowly to the height of the stadium, lifted by the picture-taking, the forming of a aura, radiant brides clutching their bouquets, grooms showing sunny teeth” (15). Increased enormously in scale is the ritual of matrimony, a transformation of it into a postmodern rite of homogenization. Rodge theorizes that this “is what people have wanted since consciousness became corrupt” (16), a kind of transcendence through massing and through mass transmission of the self towards a specious aura. His daughter Karen remains in the cult for a while before drifting into the company of Bill Gray, a writer in self-imposed exile from the media fame his two novels have brought him. His withdrawal, a protest against image culture, has been commodified by the media, and the longer he goes without producing new work, the more famous he becomes.<sup>19</sup> His assistant Scott brings Karen into Bill's household, and the two take care of Bill as he struggles with a third novel too long in the making.

Scott likes to wander into bookstores and check the shelves for Bill's books. On one visit, he sees a disheveled and frantic man storm into the bookstore to declare, prior to being removed, "I'm here to sign my books" (20). The man may or may not be a writer, but the moment is ironic either way. The author who arrives to connect himself to his work has no place in the economy of fame; the man's insistence is an unauthorized claiming of the product that is not part of a promotional signing. Scott moves from the bookstore into the art gallery to view some pieces by Andy Warhol, a master of spin who engineered his fame through a full complicity with the operations of the mass media. Warhol's exclusive subject has always been mass, cultural reception itself. His body of work celebrates corporate semiosis and generates a complimentary aura, a nimbus that surrounds works which Jameson says "*ought* to be a powerful and critical political statement. If they are not, then one..would want to begin to wonder a little more seriously about the possibilities of political or critical art in the postmodern period of late capital" (9). I suggest that DeLillo's ekphrastic method, now drawing on visual art that celebrates corporate semiosis rather than on such signification itself, is part of an effective oppositional aesthetic involving an aggressive recontextualization of late capital signs. Scott

walked past the electric-chair canvases, the repeated news images of car crashes and movie stars, and he got used to the anxious milling, it seemed entirely right, people eager to be undistracted, ray-gunned by fame and death. Scott had never seen work that was so indifferent to the effect it had on those who came to see it....He stood before a silk screen called *Crowd*.... Work that was unwitting of history appealed to Scott. He found it liberating. Had he ever realized the deeper meaning of Mao before he saw these pictures?....The surge of bodies made its own soft roar. (21)

One is left to wonder what the deeper meaning of Mao might be if his figure is lifted out of history. In his discussion of Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*, Jameson says that "[t]he ideal schizophrenic, indeed is easy enough to please provided that only an eternal present is thrust before the eyes" (10). Scott's present tense viewing, as it takes place within a crowd before an aura, is all he requires for enjoyment of the art. Brita, the woman Bill commissions to take his picture as part of his re-emergence into the public eye (a move he makes in order to re-inspire his will to isolation), also views the exhibit. She pauses before *Gorby I*, and wonders if "she could detect a maximum statement about the dissolvibility of the artist and the exaltation of the public figure" (134). The question that has ever surrounded Warhol's work centers on whether or not it is complicit with, or critical of consumerism. The historical Warhol worked hard to efface any trace of agency from both his work and from his extensive appearances in the media, and I suggest that this aligns him with the concealing effect of the corporate veil. Warhol once said to Brita during a photo shoot that "'The secret of being me is that I'm only half here.' He was all here now, reprocessed through painted chains of being, peering out over the crowd from a pair of burnished Russian eyes" (135).<sup>20</sup> Warhol's works do double duty as regards the manufacturing of aura, creating it around both the artist and the subjects/objects he portrays. But in the DeLillo's ekphrastic system, the specious aura is disallowed.

As Brita prepares to take Bill's picture (a photograph of him has not appeared anywhere in thirty years), the two talk about his aversion to having his image circulate in the culture at large. Bill says that when a writer is inaccessible, "he becomes a local symptom of God's famous reluctance to appear" (36), a sentiment to which Brita

responds, “we’re all drawn to the idea of remoteness. A hard-to-reach place is necessarily beautiful, I think. Beautiful and a little sacred maybe” (36). This exchange indicates the same cultural impulse as do the passages in *White Noise* involving the often photographed barn; a religiosity directed at a distant object or human other makes the act of technological seeing a type of prayer. Karen realizes that “often in her work the human shambles was remade by the energy of her seeing, by the pure will that the camera uncovered in her, the will to see deeply” (37). Her portraits are as much about her desire to look through a lens as they are about her subject. But such looking is presented in the novel as a death gaze since it fetishizes and commodifies, makes the subject an element in an exercise of textual, semiotic power. When persons come under that gaze, their perception of themselves changes and their role in society is removed from view. Bill says to Brita,

The image world is corrupt, here is a man who hides his face....I’ve become someone’s material. Yours, Brita. There’s the life and there’s the consumer event. Everything around us tends to channel our lives toward some final reality in print or on film....Nature has given way to aura. A man cuts himself shaving and someone is signed up to write the biography of the cut. All the material of every life is channeled into the glow. Here I am in your lens. Already I see myself differently. Twice over or once removed. (36, 43, 44).

The Foucauldian notion that representation is inextricably linked to power is played out here. Brita, as an emissary of image culture with camera in hand, has the power to dictate a culture’s attitude towards the writer and his work.

After the photo session, whenever Bill contacts Brita, he is hyperaware of how his self is dispersed through technological systems. He is more cognizant of the dilemma the self undergoes in the face of total communication than is Jack Gladney. Brita, alone in

her apartment, attempts to sleep, falling “into that helpless half life of self-commentary, the voice film that runs between light and dark....The telephone rang” (91). It is Bill calling, but she does not pick up the telephone and the writer must improvise on her answering machine:

“Do you know how strange it is for me to sit here talking to a machine? I feel like a TV set left on in an empty room. This is a new kind of loneliness you’re getting me into, Brita....I imagine you’re always catching up with messages. Accessing your machine from distant sites....The loneliness of voices stored on tape. By the time you listen to this, I’ll no longer remember what I said....The machine makes everything a message, which narrows the range of discourse and destroys the poetry of nobody home....I’m calling to describe the sunrise.” (91, 92)

Just as Bill attempts to use the telephone, a bilateral form of communication rendered unilateral by the answering machine, to offer at least a poetic description, the machine cuts him off. What communications technology threatens to do (the “access industry” as Bill calls it) is to make invisible those persons who have not correctly entered the system. When Bill is recruited to help in the freeing of a hostage, a young man who his captors in Beirut thought possessed a substantial reputation as a writer in order for them to gain significant attention, George Haddard explains to Bill and his publisher Charlie, “You are nonpersons for the moment, victims without an audience. Get killed and maybe they will notice you” (130). The young man’s freedom “‘is tied to the media’” Bill observes (137), for the terrorists are seeking to pull from the system an element of it, in order to gain access to public consciousness themselves. This is what DeLillo sees as the now co-opted role of the writer, a function terrorists have taken over. Bill argues that, “‘What terrorists gain, novelists lose. The degree to which they influence mass consciousness is the extent of our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought. The danger they represent

equals our own failure to be dangerous” (157). He goes on to argue the novel’s public utility:

“Do you know why I believe in the novel? It’s a democratic shout. Anybody can write a great novel, one great novel, almost any amateur off the street. I believe this, George. Some nameless drudge, some desperado with barely a nurtured dream can sit down and find his voice and luck out and do it....And when the novelist loses his talent, he dies democratically, there it is for everyone to see, wide open to the world, the shitpile of hopeless prose.” (159)

This public dying is a far cry from the fifteen minutes of fame Warhol says all individuals may achieve through mass communications. Bill fails, however, to complete and to publish the inferior work that would be his public undoing. He is killed off during his dealings with the terrorists as they aspire to prominence in the mass media.

Metaphorically, the death of the author comes when space is no longer available to him in the economy of mass culture. Of course, his image and reputation will live on.

Karen thinks about the Reverend Moon, and observes that the “messiah is here on earth and he is a chunky man in a business suit from the Republic of Korea” (186). Followers of messianic figures usually believe that the Word of prophecy, the word of a god, becomes incarnate in the world with the arrival of a savior. But for the Reverend Moon, along with all of the larger-than-life figures DeLillo suggests are surrounded by a decentralized totalitarian aura, it is vision that heralds the arrival of the *image* of the god. Karen, a perpetual watcher of television, thinks of the man in terms of his appearance, and she says to the homeless persons she tries to convert (people awash in the detritus of postmodern culture, living out of shopping carts and donning bizarre combinations of clothes and objects) that they “will all be a single family soon. Because the day is

coming. Because the total vision is being seen....For there is single vision now” (193).

Advocates of forms of belief so strict that they are devoid of any anamorphic dilation ‘see’ themselves in visual terms, and this form of visibility must necessarily be total if it is to carry universal significance. The imposition of the religious self upon the world in DeLillo’s fiction is the impulse to the fascistic foreclosure of meaning, the affirming response of populations to the free-floating totalitarianism apparent inside “the impossible totality of the contemporary world system” (Jameson 38). This world system is increasingly characterized by “the deregulation of financial markets and the consequent mobility of capital, the inexorable growth of privatization, the internationalization of the division of labour, the introduction of ‘flexible’ manufacturing systems, the development of specialized product cultures and the ubiquity of ‘customized’ advertising campaigns” (Trodd 89-90). It is a strident, global capitalism that encourages us to speak and think in what DeLillo calls in *Mao II* a “synthetic mass language, the esperanto of jet lag” (23) a type of communication based on “the dialect of the eye” (175).

Thus, if one agrees with the necessity of Eco’s project, namely, the bid “to restore to human beings a certain freedom in the face of the total phenomenon of Communication” (1986: 142), then it becomes imperative to understand how the human mind responds to the semiotic force fields that play across the land and the surfaces of our eyes. Karen stays for a while in Brita’s loft. She is partially plugged into such force fields, is keenly sensitive to their electronic language. As a deep encounter with aura draws near (the watching of the Ayatollah Khomeini’s funeral on TV), we discover that

she is both cybernetic and organic, and that her signs presided over what seems a technologically forced extension of mind:

The warning aura came when she was alone in the loft. A mercury glow moved up the shanks of the towers out there. She came away from the window with a feeling in her arm that was like running current. She saw zigzags of silvery light and thought at once of the fleeting text that ran around the building in Times Square.... She saw the lightning-lit word streams.... She groped to the sofa and sat motionless for fifteen minutes, seeing the words streak across the building and go over the edge and continue on the other side. Then the pain and nausea rolled in. She had no sense of time. The light was metallic and intense. (187)

Karen and Brita proceed to watch the funeral on TV, and the scene is reminiscent of an earlier one in which Karen and Scott watch television footage of persons being crushed during a soccer riot. DeLillo's offers an instance of metawatching. We watch characters watching, or in the case of the barn photographers, we 'watch' watchers (Jack and Murray) watching the watchers (see my remarks above regarding the infinite regress that occurs on screen when a video feedback loop is established with a video camera and a TV monitor). Both first- and second-order ekphrases are in evidence. The former comes in the form of now rarely seen footage of Khomeini's funeral and the latter in a drama of viewing and response. Karen's and Brita's responses to what they see of the funeral are markedly different. Karen "turned and saw Brita leaning back on the far arm of the sofa, calmly smoking. This is the woman who talked about needing people to believe for her, seeing people bleed for their faith, and she is calmly sitting in the frenzy of a nation and a race" (191). Karen assesses her viewing context while Brita, the photographer, assesses the play of images. DeLillo ironically modulates the idea of ekphrasis, the literary bid to describe rhetorically a visual form, by treating the act of watching as itself a visual



element, since this is precisely what corporate semiosis encourages--the seeing of ourselves seeing. His first-order ekphrasis is a treatment of the footage itself to show that networks aestheticized the political content of the images in a manner favourable to U.S. ideologies at the time (the aestheticization I speak of here is the applying of traditional television news formats to the story). What precedes, follows, and interrupts the footage, in addition to the deployment of editing techniques and editorial commentary, is the means. "The voice said, Eight people trampled to death and many thousands injured....everyone else tuned to this channel was watching sober-sided news analysis delivered by three men in a studio with makeup and hidden mikes" (190). These are a secondary set of image manipulations following those made by the film crews. The original camera operators themselves made use of switch-cuts, close-ups, wide-angle views, deep focus, and panning. However, the political is not aestheticized in the way that Benjamin describes; neither government nor ruler ordered and paid for the footage. Media corporations obtained the images and distributed them. DeLillo is at pains to show how later twentieth-century mechanical reproduction techniques are utilized by corporations *to aestheticize business practices*, to create auras around both events and the act of viewing in order to distract the populace from what takes place behind corporate veils and what the implications and effects are of decisions made there.

To admit Chomsky, consent is manufactured in boardrooms, and as Bill's agent Charlie says to the writer, "We understand how reality is invented. A person sits in a room and thinks a thought and it bleeds out into the world....And there's no longer a moral or spatial distinction between thinking and acting" (132). The distinction Charlie

makes is between the consideration of action and considered action. Proper execution of both usually requires that one accepts a distance between the act of observation and the act of engaging with the observed. But mass visual culture collapses this distinction--thinking becomes mere visual engagement. DeLillo's subject is not Iranian culture. There, it is indeed governmental forces that manufactured aura. DeLillo re-aestheticizes the media aestheticization of corporate practices, changing through ekphrastic manipulation the messages such exercises in video technology convey. Thus, we read of the funeral footage that "[i]t was the story of a body that the living did not want to yield" (192) and of the soccer riot footage that "it is like a fresco in an old dark church, a crowded twisted vision of a rush to death as only a master of the age could paint it" (34). Story and visual art here contribute to a theory of crowds and the dilation of the novel is at this point high.

#### **4) Shooting the Shooting: the Ballistics of Camerawork in *Libra***

For Bill, "[t]here were the camera-toters and the gun-wavers and Bill saw barely a glimmer of difference" (197); Jack Gladney watches his wife on TV and feels he is "being shot through with Babette" (105), and as Oswald nears death after being shot by Ruby, he "could see himself shot as the camera caught it. Through the pain he watched TV" (437). *Libra* contains DeLillo's most lengthy portrayal in ballistic terms of the operations of visual technology, and here as elsewhere, the phantom extension of human

sentience into technological being follows from encounters with mass, visual communications. DeLillo makes the ballistic and filmic shootings of Kennedy and Oswald highly analogous to one another; each shot, figuratively heard but quite literally seen around the world,<sup>21</sup> is linked to the fascist impulse, the first to CIA conspiracy and the second to the free-floating totalitarianism of corporate, visual culture. DeLillo does not offer a traditional conspiracy narrative. Instead, he shows how such narratives are constructed and how they can serve to normalize the operations of visual culture. As Jameson says, “conspiracy theory (and its garish narrative manifestations) must be seen as a degraded attempt--through the figuration of advanced technology--to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system” (38). It is this system of unthinkable complexity (as William Gibson puts it) that allows, *because* of its complexity, corporate semiosis to function unhindered. We are shot while watching TV, our cognitive and social functions taken hostage as we become subjects caught up in the culture of the viewfinder.

Benjamin and McLuhan both discuss visual expression as a type of shooting.

Benjamin ascribes to perceptually arresting visual texts a firing capacity:

From an alluring appearance or persuasive structure of sound the work of art of the Dadaists became an instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him....It promoted a demand for the film, the distracting element of which is... based on changes of place and focus which periodically assail the spectator. (238)

McLuhan paraphrases and takes issue with a line from a speech given by General David Sarnoff as the military man accepted an honorary degree from the University of Notre Dame: “Firearms are in themselves neither good nor bad; it is the way they are

used that determines their value.’ That is, if the slugs reach the right people it is good. If the TV tube fires the right ammunition at the right people it is good” (26). The broadcast and experience of moving images become together a kind of perceptual exchange of fire. The visual mass media assail viewers with an unremitting series of image salvos; the viewer in turn becomes eager for the shooting to take place (the demand for film). An aspect of a restless and dynamic actuality is pinned down in a filmic instance and thus ‘killed’. The desire to view, to contain what is viewed within a permanent record, is inherently violent. The situation makes provocative the actions of Elvis Presley, who Jack Gladney notes was, “a fellow who sat in La-Z-Boy chairs and shot out TVs” (74). In this context, this habit of the entertainer may be interpreted as a gesture of resistance by a man who, perhaps more than any other in American society, lost his private existence to a public media one.

Characters in *Libra* are delineated in close relation to the visual media that surround them. Very near the start of the novel, we read in a paragraph how Oswald and his mother came to live in a small basement room in the Bronx. The paragraph begins and ends with television, in order to suggest that their relationship with the evolving televisual culture of the fifties is intimate:

They watched TV, mother and son, in the basement room. She’d bought a tinted filter for their Motorola. The top third of the screen was permanently blue, the middle third was pink, the band across the bottom was a wavy green....They were not wanted anymore and they moved to the basement room in the Bronx, the kitchen and the bedroom and everything together, where blue heads spoke to them from the TV screen. (4)

When it got cold they banged the pipes to let the super know. They had a right to decent heat. (4)

The banging on of pipes, a most rudimentary form of communication, contrasts here sharply with the medium of television and attests to the communicative unsophistication of Oswald and his mother. A likely equally impoverished superintendent will be the only one to hear their message. Oswald has great difficulty communicating to others throughout his life, and his mother speaks only ostensibly to others, delivering monologues that are mostly addressed to herself. At one point, Lee thinks as his mother speaks, "Here it comes. She would forget he was here. She would talk for two hours in the high piping tone of someone reading to a child. He watched the DuMont test pattern" (6). Their personalities in this regard are closely configured to the solitary act of television viewing, which carries with it no real connection to others. From the outset, Lee is drawn to the mass media, taking in the visual texts without interpreting or analyzing either their contents or the medium through which they arrive: "Lee saw a picture in the Daily News of Greeks diving off a pier for some sacred cross, downtown. Their priests have beards....Thursday nights he watched the crime shows. *Racket Squad*, *Dragnet*, etc." (5). Truancy officers criticize his mother for letting him stay home all day to watch TV (11), and his friends all parrot advertising slogans, allowing these repetitions to make up whole conversations: "'Bad-breath kissing sweet in seconds....' 'Smoke a Fag-a-teeer' .... 'Ex-treeeem-ly mild'" (9). From the outset it is clear that Oswald's personal psychology becomes imbricated in the psychology of television, even to the extent that he creates a veil for himself not unlike the corporate one: "The social worker wrote, 'Questioning elicited the information that he feels almost as if there is a veil between him and the other people through which they cannot reach him, but he prefers

this veil to remain intact” (12). As Oswald later rides the subway, “[t]he view down the tracks was a form of power” (13). Oswald early aligns personal power with the mere act of seeing off into the distance, and the stage is set for his decision to bring his sights to bear on Kennedy.

Walter Everett Jr., an ex-CIA operative, and his wife Mary Frances have breakfast one morning in a kitchen where sounded “radio voices with their...optimistic buzz” and “[i]mages wavered in the sunlit trim of appliances”. We are told that he is “a gentle and tentative man, it would be fair to say, based solely on appearance” (16). The scene is one of surfaces. The couple even discuss semblance and the act of watching. Mary says, “One of the nicest things to watch? And I’ve never really noticed till we moved here? People coming out of church. Just gathering near the steps and talking. Isn’t it one of the best things to watch?” Walter says shortly after,

“All the frumpy people in their starched clothes. Depressed the hell out of me.”

“What’s wrong with frumpy? I like being a middle-aged frump.”

“I didn’t mean you.”

He reached across the table and touched her arm as he always did when he thought he might have said something wrong or cut her off. Don’t listen to what I say. Trust my hands, my touch.

“It’s so comfortable,” she said. (16-17)

The kitchen is once again in DeLillo a scene of direct human contact, as this laying on of hands attests to. It is a moment of connection devoid of mediation, and even of language. But immediately after this point comes Walter’s strange observation that “[w]e tend to draw together to seek mutual solace for our disease (17). The nature or name of this disease is not apparent, but Walter’s ensuing contemplations offer a clue. Although he no longer works for the CIA, he feels

as if he were still on their side, watching himself from a distance. This is what we end up doing, he thought. Spying on ourselves. We are at the mercy of our own detachment. A thought for breakfast. (18)

Once more, something is wielding an influence, exercising a power capable of making individuals imagine themselves from the outside. Oswald and Robert Sproul's sister later discuss the Rosenberg execution. Oswald says, "Ike is a well-known boob. He could have stopped the execution", to which she replies, "Like a movie, I suppose" (39).

Characters throughout the novel set their mental projections of possible circumstances inside cinematic forms that readily provide for them spatial, semantic, and shared fields of reference. Later, inside a Russian prison, Oswald thinks in strict relation to the mass media, and not to other forms of communication: "The prisoner thought ahead to a lifetime of potatoes and cabbage soup. Maybe a short lifetime. They might shoot him in the courtyard, like a movie, to muffled drums" (191). Like Jack Gladney, Oswald seeks connection with mass systems through technology, and approval from those systems. At one point he takes a lie detector test: "Oswald stood while they unplugged him from the console. He was lonely for his friend and had a sneaking suspicion he'd messed up the test something awful. He told them Alek had promised TV" (163). Lee shares the Brechtian sentiment with his Russian captors that, as Alek says, "The masses need radios so they won't be masses anymore" (197), but he is unaware of how distance communications have affected him and how they may be used to manufacture aura.

Oswald does not experience events in his life in any direct sense but filters them through a heightened and solipsistic self-awareness. Ferrie is quick to intensify Oswald's disembodied ontological perspectives as the two men sit in a car with a prostitute and

smoke a joint: "What Linda says is true. You're at home, in bed now, remembering"

(333). Later at home, while Oswald and his wife Marina are watching television, the interweaving of Oswald's self with televisual texts intensifies in direct relation to the televisual medium:

The first movie was *Suddenly*. Frank Sinatra is a combat veteran who comes to a small town and takes over a house that overlooks the railroad depot. He is here to assassinate the President. Lee felt a stillness around him. *He had an eerie sense he was being watched for his reaction.* The President is scheduled to arrive by train later in the day....He felt connected to the events on the screen. *It was like secret instructions entering the network of signals and broadcast bands, the whole busy air of transmission....They were running a message through the night into his skin.* Frank Sinatra sets up a high-powered rifle in the window and waits for the train to arrive. (my emphasis 369-370)

Here, Oswald senses an external ocular presence or mechanism, feels he is permeated by the language of transmission, and believes he experiences a meaningful communion with a mass system.

Oswald sends to George de Mohrenschildt the infamous picture of himself "dressed in black, holding a rifle in one hand, some newspapers in the other", on the reverse of which he has written "*To my friend George from Lee Oswald*". When George receives the photograph, he looks

at the second inscription. This was in Russian, clearly in Marina's handwriting and evidently written without Lee's knowledge, sneaked in before he sealed and mailed the envelope--a private message from the wife of the poseur to the sophisticated older friend.

*Hunter of fascists--ha ha ha!!!* (290)

Oswald very much needs his political existence to take on a visual aspect. His wife's subversion of his pretensions bespeaks an awareness on her part that this is so. At this point, he has only defined his politics in photographic space. After the assassination,



Oswald is arrested in a movie theatre. It is almost as if he seeks visual and external confirmation of what he has done (this soon comes of course in the media coverage of his arrest and imprisonment). Appropriately, the sequences that recount Kennedy's assassination take on the aspect of an accelerated, filmic montage not unlike the dialectical montage of Eisenstein.<sup>22</sup> The Russian film maker "avoided the narrative continuity characteristic of then-contemporary film in favor of a tension between images in time, space, shape, and rhythm", a process which "required the viewer to be an active participant in constructing the meaning of events shown on the screen" (Barry 204). Eisenstein's emphasis on the active engagement of his viewers in the participation of meaning finds its counterpart in the novel as *Libra* uses the mysteries of the Kennedy assassination to draw attention to the undecidability that surrounds social phenomena and historical events in general. We must balance out (to recall the work's title) events to decide on our version of them.

The series of images DeLillo presents are an ekphrastic nesting made up of first- and second-order ekphrases; the latter comes in the form of descriptions of individual moments of visual perception experienced by Oswald, bodyguards, bystanders, and Oswald himself while the former take shape in direct relation to the famous Zapruder footage of Kennedy being shot, a gruesomely violent series of frames that is perhaps the world's first globally distributed snuff film. Postmodern ekphrasis borrows from an image stock that deeply informs us, and fiction that makes use of the technique is able to trigger in the minds of readers their own experiences and impressions of the shots in both

their ballistic and photographic manifestations. DeLillo thus takes his readers to the very seat of perception he most wishes us to re-evaluate.

The binocular vision Oswald's mother says her son enjoyed as a boy (he liked to look at the stars) takes on an ominous manifestation near the close of the novel. Binoculars have two eyepieces which focus independently but whose foci are synchronized with the turn of a screw connected to both. Both Oswald and the ex-CIA operative Raymo train their guns on Kennedy, aiming with only one eye through single sights. To acknowledge that the lone assassin theory (which has officially received the most credence) stands opposite conspiracy narratives that attempt to make sense of larger forces and systems at work, DeLillo turns the narrative screw to bring both interpretations of events (represented by Oswald and Raymo respectively) into focus. Whether one or the other view is the 'true' version matters little; important is the anamorphic constriction of view the characters both succumb to, and the dilation that the text exhibits by anatomizing technological viewing. The narrative sequence that recounts the assassination first cuts from Raymo, who is "sighting through the scope" (399), to a woman who realizes that she did not know the first gunshot for what it was until she heard the second (one is reminded here of how one may only make sense of a single filmic frame by considering the image that follows it). A cut to Oswald in the Book Depository reveals he perceives "so much clarity" that he "could watch himself in the huge room" (398). He is watching himself make history as a man stands "applauding at the edge of the telescopic frame". As he makes a telescopic connection over the distance between himself and the scopically perceived head of the American political system--

bringing Kennedy so close to himself that the two become inseparable from one another in history--he prepares to take his third shot, the one that kills the president. But strangely, a voice intervenes: "*Stand by a moment please*". Radio transmissions that are exchanges between secret service agents and police officers 'shoot through' the scenes; technological communications wholly imbue the setting. As rifles fire, there is "a woman taking a picture and another woman about twenty feet behind her taking the same picture, only with the first woman in it" (398-399). The moment is reminiscent of the sorts of infinite regress that mass visual culture encourages, and it also conveys the idea that viewers are both the shooters and the shot.

DeLillo places a camera and not a firearm atop the infamous grassy knoll where, it has been unremittingly theorized, a second gunman may have shot from (the omnipresence of visuality is signaled here by the elevated position of the camera lens, as is the case in *White Noise* at the site of the most photographed barn in America):

A motorcycle went fishtailing up the grassy slope near the concrete structure, the colonnade. Someone with a movie camera stood on an abutment over there, aiming this way...A misty light around the president's head. Two pink-white jets of tissue rising from the mist. The movie camera running. (400)

Gun and lens converge on their shared target. The light that activates the light-sensitive emulsions on film is the medium for the forensic and public gaze that renders the contents of Kennedy's skull visible. (DeLillo graphically depicts the appearance and movement of the brain matter throughout the sequence.) Two senses of 'exposure' come into play here; there is the exposure of film to light and the act of making something shameful publicly known--as is the idea behind crucifixion where the a public dying is intended as

part of the victim's shame and humiliation. Oswald sees his own role in affairs played out through a self-generated image track:

Lee was about to squeeze off the third round, he was in the act, he was actually pressing the trigger.

The light was so clear it was heartbreaking.

There was a white burst in the middle of the frame....He was already talking to someone about this. He had a picture, he saw himself telling the whole story to someone, a man with a rugged Texas face, but friendly, but understanding. (400)

The sequence then cuts to the woman who had earlier appeared in another woman's viewfinder. Here, optical and ballistic shot are entirely conjoined. The woman experiences the vertigo and confusion associated with awareness of the phantom extension of the senses. She cannot distinguish between self and other, and believes she is the one who has been shot (she has been, but by camera, not gun):

A woman with a camera turned and saw that she was being photographed. A woman in a dark coat was aiming a Polaroid right at her. It was only then she realized she'd just seen someone shot in her own viewfinder. There was bloodspray on her face and arms. She thought, how strange, that the woman in the coat was her and she was the person who was shot. She felt so dazed and strange, with pale spray all over her. She sat down carefully on the grass....The woman with the Polaroid didn't move. The first woman sat on the grass, put her own camera down, looked at the colorless stuff on her arms. (401)

The sequence only roughly accords with a linear chronology. The narrative is, in a sense, re-wound at points in order to suggest what may be 'seen' on a second viewing. After the fatal shot, a bodyguard can "see right into the President's head", but following this moment are Raymo and his gun prior to the last blast and the subsequent acceleration of the motorcade: "Raymo's view was briefly obscured....He had a sense of people ducking and scattering even though they weren't in the frame" (402). The ex-operative also fires

a shot and, like Oswald, sees Kennedy die in his sights. But we cannot be sure whose bullet hits, just as we cannot know whose view of the assassination is the correct one. DeLillo's detractors could have taken the writer at his word when he says in an author's note, "I've made no attempt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by the assassination". Of concern to him are questions raised by enormous changes in apperception and the social consequences that accompany these shifts. The result on display here is that people come to believe privately that they are always on view, a conviction born of a preoccupation with photographic rather than ideological frames.

After Oswald's arrest, the news media eagerly await a chance to photograph and question Oswald. The reporters are unaware of their role in manufacturing reality, and believe that if they can only bring a human subject into technological focus, they can access the real, engage their phantom extensions to alleviate the pain of paradox, the awareness that collectively they are alone. Both they and the members of the general population are

lonely for news. Only news could make them whole again, restore sensation. Three hundred reporters in a compact space, all pushing to extract a word. A word is a magic wish....With a word they could begin to grid the world, make an instant surface that people can see and touch together....They were hearing their own reports on the radios and portable TVs. But what did they really know? The news was somewhere else, at Parkland Hospital or on Air Force One, in the mind of the prisoner on the fifth floor. (414)

Agents of the mass media themselves become ensnared in a feedback loop. Once they hear word, they will feel freed from ignorance and be able to place facts without context into contexts, insert speech acts into the modes of presentation that carry the dominant

ideology. What did they really know? They most certainly do not know that, in an important sense, meaning lies with them, the pilots of medium.<sup>23</sup>

Like the woman who believes she is shot, Oswald also experiences an ontological vertigo:

Whenever they took him down, he heard his name on the radios and TVs. Lee Harvey Oswald. It sounded extremely strange. He didn't recognize himself in the full intonation of the name....No one called him by that name. Now it was everywhere. He heard it coming from the walls. Reporters called it out....They were talking about someone else. (416).

Oswald is more meditative on the subject of the mass media than is his assassin. Jack Ruby says to his friend George that he is “trying to take a crime reporter’s frame of mind” since becoming convinced that a “Jew or someone posing as a Jew to blacken the name of the Jews” has signed a billboard ad that bears the imperative “*Impeach Earl Warren*” (420). He notices that the billboard ad has a post-office box number, and he wonders if that number would match the one on an ad in the newspaper that welcomes Kennedy to Dallas. The two men find the billboard in order to check. “George got out of the car and took three pictures with the flash. To Jack Ruby this was hunting down a major clue and acquiring physical evidence” (421). Shortly after, he watches

a famous New York rabbi on TV.

The man spoke in a gorgeous baritone. He went ahead and eulogized that here was an American who fought in every battle, went to every country, and he had to return to the U.S. to get shot in the back.

This, with the rabbi’s beautiful phraseology, caused a roar of sorrow in Jack’s head. He turned off the set and picked up the phone....He called KLIF and asked for the Weird Beard.

“Tell you the truth,” Jack said, “I never know what you’re talking about on the air but I listen in whenever. Your voice has a little quality of being reassuring in it.” (422)

In the case of the billboard, visual evidence is tactile to Ruby. His emotions are entirely keyed to mass media neither the contents nor the broader sociological implications of which he can grasp. Oswald is only a slightly more knowledgeable consumer of media text. Not long before he is shot by Ruby (this murder is also caught on film, a supreme irony), Oswald realizes that he “could easily live in a cell half this size”. The reason for this is that his life “had a single clear subject now, called Lee Harvey Oswald”, and he plans to “fill his cell with books about the case....Whatever pertains to the case he will examine and consume” (434-435). Oswald is all solipsist now, cut off as he is from the rest of the world but finding complete satisfaction in contemplation of himself, in a construction of the self that proceeds as if his self were other. The cell is tolerable because he believes in an expansive, phantom existence for himself: “He and Kennedy were partners. The figure of the gunman in the window was inextricable from the victim and his history” (435). Oswald takes the logic of the camera to its extreme; while most of us would be content to photograph famous individuals, perhaps to have a picture of us taken alongside them so that our reality may be reinforced by the same form of public documentation which has told us that *they* are real, Oswald needs to place his being entirely inside the system of mass communication. Then, schizophrenically, he watches himself from outside that locus. “He could see himself shot as the camera caught it. Through the pain he watched TV....Lee watched himself react to the augering heat of the bullet” (439). When he psychologically achieves this state, he is simultaneously shot by both gun and camera, and he watches “in a darkish room, someone’s TV den....It is the white nightmare of noon, high in the sky over Russia. Me-too and you-too. He is a

stranger, in a mask, falling” (440). Once self sees self as other, consciousness is corrupted and one comes to exist in the airy preserve of the transmission. A groundedness, slippery and likely provisional, is supplied by DeLillo’s fiction, a word that is probably only a magic wish but whose manifestation in image culture can be manumitting.



## Chapter Three

### Robert Coover and the Time of Media

One day you'd think misfortune would  
get tired, but then time is your misfortune...

--*The Sound and the Fury*

Play it, Sam.

--Bogart in *Casablanca*

Play it again, Sam.

--Common misquote

#### 1) The Viewer and the Viewed in Time

Edward Kienholz's installation piece *The Beanery* can help us to understand what a reader precisely enters into when reading the short fictions in Robert Coover's *A Night at the Movies Or, You Must Remember This*. After experiencing a typically discomposing Kienholz environment, visitors bear the expressions of moviegoers who have just taken in a horror film. The art of perturbation, either of the mixed-media, filmic, or literary variety, threatens a foreboding conceptual encirclement; "[i]nside we feel profoundly vulnerable and cold; outside we are all aflutter and hot. In horror art we are transported to the threshold, to the margin...to be caught in what Jean Cocteau has called 'la zone'"

(Twitchell 16). *The Beanery*, a full-scale environment the viewer may move about in, offers the interior of a typical 1965 New York eatery, one of the crowded, narrow, rectangular kind with bar, stools, and a few small tables. Inside and out, one can hear tape recorded sounds that suggest only obliquely the din of a busy restaurant (the tape is, it seems, played backwards). As one moves between dressed mannequins—cafe service staff, customers in various stages of eating, arrival and departure—one's sense of proximity is engaged, and it becomes necessary to maneuver carefully around some figures while resisting the impulse to say "Excuse me" (an urge that is reinforced as one encounters other gallery patrons). It is immediately apparent that the countenance of each mannequin is the face of a clock, a feature which in itself does not create as much anxiety as the fact that the size of the heads is too small, an intentional skewing of scale that is most unsettling when perceived through the peripheral vision. By the time one reaches the back of the structure and discovers the figure of a waitress hovering over a dirty table at which is seated a man in a collapsed posture of distress, the effect is chilling, though one is not immediately sure why. The element of distress must at that point be reconciled with the placement of the timepieces, and it becomes clear that, in this otherwise commonplace setting, on everyone's faces is our shared woe—an awareness of the passage of human time. Horror results from what is a palpable and physical proximity to a frightening perception that is routinely hidden under the surface of the mundane. The zone may be any place where the gaze notionally penetrates, drawing the subject after it into a conceptual environment where facade gives way to structure, veil to the veiled, skin to blood (all horror art could be metaphorically described in terms of the breaking of

surface tension). The power of *The Beanery* lies in its refusal to allow that which is familiar an existence independent of a most serious human question: what of time?

To enter into Coover's filmically informed fictions is to move through and behind the familiar face of Hollywood narratives of the 40's and 50's to perceive certain relationships there between time and the carnal, and time and the pernicious, the filmic delivery and simultaneous cultural quelling of which allowed (and for the most part still allows) the narratives to enjoy cultural currency. Cinema complicit with dominant culture suppresses these relationships while a particular viewership, that I will define, represses them during each consumption or 'taking in' of the popular cinema (film becomes a venue for what are, in the Lacanian complex, the metonymic substitutions of the conscious mind). Coover surrounds his reader with a narrative environment one moves through as might a roving camera through a set or scene, a locale that is, in many respects recognizable to consumers of popular films. But he renders select details horrific (as does Kienholz) and their resulting significance as much so. The fictions are designed to affright us with the more unsettling philosophical and psychological implications of our desire for that which the filmic offers in siren song fashion—a mode of being defiant of time. The viewership of which I will speak wishes to defy the march of time as well, but in failing becomes increasingly drawn to the violence and violent sex beneath film's luminous surfaces.

When I refer in this chapter to 'the viewer' I wish to indicate a figure that both corporate semiosis and ideological film criticism project. To understand the corporate conditioning of this viewer, it is necessary for me first to define Hollywood, and this may

be accomplished with reference to its success.<sup>1</sup> It is reasonable to assume that the popular cinema is adept at either appealing to, or creating mass audiences, though I would suggest that the latter is increasingly the case. When they are well-received, films immediately work their way into contemporary frames of cultural reference. When they are ‘bombs’ (Pynchon plays extensively on the pun involving movies and missiles), they are glorious failures that are often later revered (*The Wizard of Oz*), resurrected as kitsch (the films of Ed Wood) or become ultrahip points of retroactive reference (Quentin Tarantino’s reworking of 70’s blaxploitation films). Since the 50’s, cinematic failures have still contributed to the making of stars, and since the creation of the home video market, even films that never make it to theatres enjoy widespread video release, often taking on a second life there and securing future work for directors, stars, and studios. If we accept the definition of Hollywood as a highly successful marketing force, then we may begin to construe types of audience. Speculation in this matter would do well to take into account production contexts, for it is these that most strongly affect the form and content of film texts: as Stephen Heath claims, “cinema does not efface the signs of production, it contains them” (352). When I refer to Hollywood, to the popular cinema, I intend either designation to connote mass produced films of the last sixty years the production contexts of which involve the following: a corporate hierarchy that keeps writers and directors under strict supervision and control by a major studio; a casting scenario that sees the Hollywood star system play a central role; a promotion machine of large proportions that is attendant on a film’s release; and a writing environment that generates film texts affirming of the values of dominant culture. Such production contexts have led to the

commercial omnipresence of the film sequel, the star vehicle (a film the narrative of which takes a backseat to the visual presentation of a particular celebrity), films that celebrate Hollywood, and myriad versions of the American triumphalist narrative in the form of Westerns (read, settlement of the American west) and World War II movies. When I speak of the viewer, I speak of the kind of viewer/consumer that is the proper target of motion picture studios. The type of ideological film criticism I embrace is that kind which emphasizes a cognitive approach to film texts and which bases a concept of the viewer on plausible accounts of psychological processes rather than on unfounded generalizations regarding the mental experiences of viewers. Ideological formalism holds that the stylistic and formal properties of films carry universal ideological effects. I side, however, with Carl Plantinga, who claims we must “be skeptical of ideological formalism, of the claim that any formal strategy, considered independently of propositional content and rhetorical purpose, has an inherent ideological significance” (377).

My analysis also rests on what I will term time anxiety, a response of human beings to the inevitable expiration of corporeal consciousness. And I suggest that one response to this uneasiness, a primarily though not exclusively masculine one, is the will to violence and violent sex. I will not seek to prove the nature of such an anxiety or of its connection to such a reaction, but will focus instead on examples of fiction, film, and conceptual art which appear to presuppose both phenomena. Further on, I will theorize the intersection between these forms of expression and will venture a pluralist’s definition of pornography for use in my discussion of Coover’s handling of popular cinema.

The viewer develops a deeply serious attraction for film, for there on the screen, life may be repeated, rewound, revisited. He is in love with the illusion of temporal manipulation, with the ontological freedom the medium celebrates and suggests is possible. As Coover says, film “has a relationship with time that is fascinating—we can take in centuries in an hour or two, even in a few minutes. All narratives play with time, but only film can truly juggle it” (Interview 103). Against his better judgment and usually beyond any conscious analysis, the arrest of time the viewer sees take place on the screen becomes a *principium rationis sufficientis*, and he yearns for existence on the filmic plane. Movies come to supplant traditional narratives of transcendence; film in turn, the viewer believes, covets his corporeality, and the medium becomes Pinnochio, telling lies while yearning for the status of mortals.<sup>2</sup> Of course, this yearning on the part of film is only a recognition--and projection--of an awareness of entrapment in a life that runs unstoppably forward and deathward. Film offers a masque, a form of wish fulfillment, a ritualized antidote to existential desiderata. But once reader-viewers take their seats to experience vicariously the life of the camera through the linked fictions in *A Night at the Movies Or, You Must Remember This*, Robert Coover tells us that we should be careful what we wish for.

## 2) Triangulating on Time Through Diverse Media

In a chapter on commercial video and video art, Frederic Jameson writes that “thinking anything adequate about commercial television may well involve ignoring it and thinking about something else; in this instance, experimental video”, and of the latter, he says that “what is so highly specialized as to seem aberrant and uncharacteristic in the world of daily life...can often yield crucial information about the properties of an object of study” (71). During the course of my research I found it useful to put aside Coover’s filmic short fiction and to contemplate the vertiginous and violent spatio-temporal environments of West Coast assemblageist/sculptor/concept artist Edward Keinholz.<sup>3</sup> The two men have both produced works extreme and aberrant enough to tear at the obscuring semiosis that arrives through the mass media to take shape in the more characteristic discourses of dominant culture. The interlarding of the spatio-temporal features of their works will reveal the nature of Coover’s judgment (under postmodern conditions) of the golden age of Hollywood. What I claim are the distinctive features of his mediant fiction will emerge out of the discussions that follow.

Keinholz’ *ROXYS* (1968) is a re-creation of a Las Vegas bordello of the same name which was in full swing on the West Coast during the 40’s and 50’s (the same time period during which Hollywood films such as those Coover appropriates flourished). As patrons enter, they hear a scratchy 78-speed record playing a popular 40’s tune. One moves into what one contemporary and anonymous reviewer called “a quintessence of the sordid” (Keinholz et al. 12). Resting innocuously about the room are tables on which rest movie magazines, and there is a calendar on the wall dated June, 1943. In the center of the room is the Madam, Roxy, an expensively dressed mannequin without legs (she is

affixed atop a wire stand) whose head is an animal skull. The prostitutes, variously seated or laid out around her, appear grotesquely deformed, not in such a way that one thinks of genetic miscues but in a manner that reminds one seemingly of the pains suffered by circus 'freaks' who were fitted with metal plates and helmets in their youth to bring about disfigurement. They sit, stand or lie on furniture in a variety of positions, and attached to them are objects of childhood fascination such as dolls and small animals. The truncated upper body of one figure is wreathed in a laundry detergent sack, a squirrel crawls out of the bosom of another, and one lies across an old sewing machine stand as would a torture victim on the rack. Their heads are those of baby dolls, suggesting the young age at which women are recruited to be prostitutes. All, including the Madam, are streaked with paint (clearly blood). The contemporary reviewer quoted above responded to the tableau by saying that

[b]eneath the polite surface of our organized society is repressed, unimaginable brutality, sadism, and violence—the model boy from Kansas who shoots up his family, the senseless rapes and beatings that crowd the ads for space in our daily papers. This is where Keinholz finds his inspiration....[he] obviously has something to say, but why has he chosen to express himself visually and not verbally? For the reason, I think, that our most talented young people are more attracted today to the plastic arts than to literature, often forcing an essentially literary idea into a visual context. It appears that all our senses, with the exception of sight, through which, because of our conditioning, we can still be reached, have atrophied. Things happen so fast we have no time, either as readers or writers, to devote to books. (12)

Compelling visual art here triggers, of all things, a brief contemplation regarding mass media saturation of contemporary sensibilities and the suggestion that Keinholz' source was the media rather than direct observation of sex trade conditions. There is in this a recognition of an uneasy, though fascinated relationship with the violent and the lurid, as



each comes to us--in often attenuated and suborned forms--through films, television, and photographic journalism. The technological furtherance of mass culture renders the experience of reading time-ineffective and threatens to distract everyone by accelerating event time into media time, compressing temporal experience in such a way that it becomes harder to find the time to engage in extended periods of contemplation and concentration (activities which are anathema to fiberoptic marketing strategies). One must reclaim forms of experiential time through an act of resistance to media time, to the perpetual yet constantly evaporating commercial present, a temporal flux highly conducive to the fostering of fashions and fads wherein fame is measured in Warholian quarter hours.<sup>4</sup>

As Heidegger says in *The Concept of Time*, “[t]o have no time means to cast time into the bad present of the everyday” (14).<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the art critic’s perspective above is prompted by the presence in *ROXYS* of movie magazines, by the small insertion of popular film and magazines into the art, but likely it bespeaks fledgling insight into what notions are specifically operative in the installation and in Keinholz’ broader body of work. *The Commercial No. 2*, another concept tableau, is a portion of a living room empty of figures at the center of which is a television. Across the screen is a blood-red sign that reads, “LEGALIZE ABORTION”. Works such as these defy compelling visual (mechanical) reproduction. Since they are environments, photographs capture almost nothing of the experience of being in them. The works also resist generating an aura; Keinholz was known to sell his art in idea form after which local contractors in distant cities would build a given piece according to specifications. Although the pieces

themselves, in a public gallery or private collection, may eventually take on something of an aura, the idea itself does not. It may genuinely manifest itself anywhere, a testament to the physical and notional mobility of concepts. It should be remembered that Keinholz coined the term 'conceptual art' and participated in the movement as part of his resistance to the mass media. Such art is exemplary in its ability to carve out a space for itself in a media-saturated and hyperreal social context. *The Eleventh Hour Final* has a tombstone-shaped television set under a clock which reads eleven. Inside is an Asian child's head, and one of the daily body counts aired on national television during the Vietnam war is etched on the glass screen. The actuality of the deaths takes on a petrified insistence (the state of petrification, the will to monument, is a resistance to time that functions in this context as a rejection of media time). The count may not be forgotten or sublimated as programs move on to advertising and entertainment segments.<sup>6</sup> The televisual medium reports on, or attests to violent acts and death but does not delve into causes. Keinholz does engage in considered etiologic analysis when he repeatedly aligns reminders of time with both violence and violent sex, implying that the will to each follows from an awareness of mortality.

Which brings us back to *ROXYS* and a figure in it individually titled "Fifi, A Lost Angel". At the top of the long, paint-streaked legs of a mannequin is an armless torso pinched off at the neck by a corset on top of which rests a doll's head. In her belly is a clock. The timepiece may refer to gestation, to procreation in general, or to the period of time to which a user of prostitutes entitles himself after payment. However, as Nancy Redden Keinholz says, it is "virtually impossible not to respond empathetically to the

mutilation of the human body" (12), and this emotion inaugurates a search for reasons.

The brutalized figure compels one to think on the absent perpetrator of the violence. One *buys time* with a prostitute, and perhaps the actions of a 'john' are in part a response to "the ticking away of real time minute by minute, the dread underlying irrevocable reality of the meter running" (Jameson 75). (I will here begin developing in parentheses a pluralist definition of pornography, one that will evolve over the course of the chapter.

By pluralist I mean that my definition will be multifaceted and possibly contradictory so as to facilitate a variety of perspectives on sexually, or more accurately, violently explicit materials. Here, I refer my reader to the O.E.D. which at one point in the entry defines pornography as a "description of the life, manners, etc. of prostitutes or their patrons."

Keinholz' work is, by this definition, pornographic.<sup>7</sup>) It is hard when viewing Keinholz not to think of the Sadean heroine, always initially figured by the Marquis in terms of her youthful age. All fascisms of the heart (the jealous or obsessed frame of mind) or of the state (Pol Pot's year zero and Mussolini's punctual trains) are a violent response to time. A savage wrath over the dying of the light becomes directed at the other, and in the case of the prostitute, there is also a sexual component. It is not surprising that Sartre, after explaining how a reader searches in vain through Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* for a complicating action (Sartre considers in turn such pernicious or carnal events as "the castration of Benjy or Caddy's wretched amorous adventure or Quentin's suicide or Jason's hatred of his niece", all figurings of violence, male/female contention, and death), concludes that "it is immediately obvious that Faulkner's metaphysics is a metaphysics of time" (203).<sup>8</sup> In the figure of the prostitute, on the street or in the gallery, time and the

masculine will to violence and violent sex disastrously converge. The clock in Fifi's belly reminds of time's overlord role in the bordello in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* wherein a clock rests upon a mantle, hands frozen at midnight, underneath a painting the Madam demands never be cleaned: "She always said...that Time himself, the father of transfigurations, was the greatest of artists, and his invisible hand must be respected at all costs" (28).<sup>9</sup> The Madam here reveals that she acts in accordance with a masculine response to mortality, submitting as she does her 'girls' to the sex trade. In light of these examples, I believe it will be useful to elaborate on aspects of temporality as these come to us in various correspondences between Keinholz' installation art, Coover's short fiction, and Hollywood's popular film texts.

There are of course enormous differences between these modes of expression. When meaning is transposed from one medium to another (a transposition Coover performs), signifier and signified are modified: as Kristeva points out, "the *passage from one sign system to another*...involves an altering of the *thetic position*--the destruction of the old position and the formation of a new one" (1984: 59). (Kristeva refers to the *thetic* phase, a function of the *symbolic* which requires the identification of the subject and its distinction from objects prior to the setting down of a sign system.) I suggest that a point of connection between these three modes is a complex space somewhere between ideas and materiality. At the peak of its influence, conceptual art was considered "an art of conceptual patterns, embodied by any means the artist saw fit...[D]espite its claim to be purely an art of ideas, [it] often manifested itself in elaborately environmental form"

(Lucie-Smith 261). Lucie-Smith suggests that Joseph Kosuth's *One and three chairs* is a good example of the form:

It consists of a wooden folding chair, a photograph of a chair, and the photographic enlargement of the dictionary definition of a chair. The artist asks his audience in which one of the three the identity of the object is to be found—in the thing itself, the representation, or the verbal description; and, if it can really be discovered in all of them? (261)

Unless we are prepared to call thinking an art form, ideas it seems must find expression external to mind. But what forms do ideas take and how do they differ?

Sometimes, paradoxically, conceptual art became totally physical—an idea is expressed in the most literal sense through flesh and blood. Dennis Oppenheim's *Reading Position*...consists of two photographs which record the effects of sunburn on the artist's own torso—part of it sheltered by an open book, and part left exposed" (Lucie Smith 262).

In each of these examples, object, word, photographic image, and corporeal human being are juxtaposed to encourage contemplation of them singly and together (I refer to the human being in front of the art work, not the figure of the artist in the photograph in the second example above—in many cases, this being is implied in, and as part of a conceptual art piece). As I hoped to show in my opening discussion, palpable and physical proximity to a frightening perception is what makes *The Beanery* a powerful piece. The gaze notionally penetrates the surface of objects, drawing the subject after it into a conceptual environment that is the realm of ideas. Conceptual art *materializes* the space of, and the connection between ideas and materiality by triggering this process. As regards fiction, we might follow Kosuth and ask if the identity of an object or phenomenon can be found in the written. To understand how an idea is embodied in discourse requires a sense of what discourse precisely is. For Mikhail Bakhtin, it is

comprised of language units longer than one sentence and is related to linguistic and sociocultural dimensions; for Michel Foucault, it is language and practices of language in which knowledge and power reside; and for Dominique Maingueneau, it is the relation between discursive formation (historical restraints) and the historical dispersion of utterances.<sup>10</sup> Sociocultural dimensions, power, and historical constraints all have their material component, and by this I do not mean the materiality of ink, page and book; according to the above definitions, there is an implied physical dimension to discourse in which the *effects of power* the texts contain play themselves out (this is the dimension of food, bullets, bodies). The discourses of mediant fiction perhaps have much to do with proxemics, the semiotics of the spaces in which matter resides. Proxemics aspires to understand the codes of spatial behavior, those valid in different cultural circumstances, proper to human beings. Edward T. Hall argues that “proxemic behavior parallels language, feature for feature”, though he says that “proxemic behavior is obviously *not* language and will not do what language will do” (1018-19). This duality for semioticians is a major criterion for the semioticity of a code. Coover’s mediant fiction has everything to do with codes of spatial behavior in physical relation to film. As I will discuss in subsequent sections, the stories in *Movies* depict characters moving inside, through, and outside film. This is part of Coover’s transposition to the sign system that is fictional narrative of viewers’ proxemic behavior in light, and in the light of film. The complex space between idea and materiality is reflected in film’s complex ontological state. Where precisely *are* film’s images? Conceptual art has the physicality of its environments, fiction (unless it arrives via the computer screen) has both its ink and page

*and* its discursive objecthood, but the film image, being a creature of light, is fleeting. It is not primarily a property of celluloid because viewers rarely glimpse the image as it is manifest on a piece of film. I will not say more here on the commingling of film idea and materiality, for my goal is to trace what Coover says on the subject. However, I will say that in Coover this intersection has everything to do with how viewers respond to the popular cinema and to that cinema's temporality. I will expand the scope of this mediant criticism to encompass the three systems of signification just discussed.<sup>11</sup> I will factor into my claims the manner of signification unique to each mode of expression.

In 1982, a German gallery that was home to the Society of Actual Art (Gesellschaft für Aktuelle Kunst) sought to prompt "visitors and critics at...exhibitions to ask what notion of actuality we attribute to art" (Nievers in Keinholz et al. 7). We might distinguish between what notion of actuality Keinholz' works suggest and the notional/temporal actuality of the works themselves. I have described his pieces as horrific because they succeed in bringing a disturbing *idea*--one that posits the will to violence and destructive sexual relations, realized or not, as ineluctably human impulses--as near as possible to the *material* plane the viewer occupies. Keinholz seeks to make ideas into environments we may physically inhabit so that they do not become abstractions, just as I will explain Coover places us in the world of popular film's repressed and disturbing significations so as to insure that we do not accept the mode's beguiling yet stubbornly unself-aware surface narratives. What horrifies in Keinholz is not only the idea but that the idea is somehow externalized, is no longer subject to the controls and concealments of mind. And that it is *proximate* (one is in Cocteau's

terrifying zone) makes the figures threatening to a degree that Madame's Tussaud's wax figures could never approach. The meeting point between viewer and idea is, in this case, the temporal plane. Temporality is a part of both art objects and human beings. One perceives time not *through* an art piece but *in* one and *in relation to* one. *The Beanery* compels viewers to realize that they occupy a time locus that the work shares in. This realization is intensified in an environment installation piece, for one is temporally *and* spatially part of the art.

Heidegger claims in *The Concept of Time* that the temporal "is initially encountered in those entities which are changeable; change is in time" (3-4). I wish to modify this view and say that time may be understood as change itself. Mutability in art, then, is a quality of the materiality of the medium, and therefore time is indelibly part of the art. This is the case in Keinholz. One could of course say that by this definition everything is in part composed of time, but this is no more extraordinary than to say that everything exists *in* time (particularly when the nature of the latter remains so elusive). We perceive the time of art differently than we do the time of rocks or trees because we do not say that art *is* something (as we say of a rock) but that it is *about* something. The time in an object becomes conceptually pitched to our experience through our notional engagement with it. This is why humankind possesses an affinity for art. Art is temporally, materially, and ontologically with us. It is able to speak to us *of* us since the viewer who moves along an event horizon is also *in*, and of time.

If we think on what a piece of art materially participates in, we may conclude that it participates in time. We might acknowledge Kafka and say that time is finally illusory



but challenge this view with the proposition that the growth and disintegration of materiality, including that of human beings, may reasonably be called time. If matter is subject to change, then a work of art at the moment in which it is beheld contains the property of *nowness* or *presentness*. It does not hold out representational access to time, for it is *of* time. As the present and the material shift to later moments, they become something else and cease to be identical with what they once were. A piece of art may not perceivably change during our observation of it, for our senses are not calibrated finely enough to discern incremental changes in the material beyond a certain temporal threshold. Works do sometimes change perceptibly, most obviously as recent media footage of a cathedral roof collapsing in on a number of frescoes and statues shows, or more interestingly as do works by artists who use pieces of rotting flesh as a medium in order to draw attention to the temporality of art.<sup>12</sup> The olfactory register experiences chemical changes in types of matter quite directly, not by taking in the fact of decomposition through a play of light on the retina, not through any process of representation, but through the actual incorporation of scent chemicals into the body, making matter part then of human time as conceptualized in relation to the body. That Keinholz' work has been considered rather simplistically as an example of the art of the 'objet trouvé' is problematic. While he does trace a portion of the recent history of materialism, his use of ostentatious objecthood is intended to draw attention to the time of objects, and by implication, to human time. Perhaps works such as *ROXYS* and *The Beanery* are thus not installation pieces at all so much as they are site-specific (keeping in mind my earlier note on site-specific art works), participating as they and gallery patrons

do in the space-time they share. Properly considered, a stony response to Keinholtz' environments is unthinkable, for such would be an indifference to time itself.

Interestingly, the first story in Coover's collection begins with just such a dispassionate response to the temporal:

"We are doomed, Professor! The planet is rushing madly toward Earth and no human power can stop it!" "Why are you telling me this?" asks the professor petulantly and sniffs his armpits. "Hmm. Excuse me, gentleman" he adds, switching off his scientific instruments..."I must take my bath." But there is already an evil emperor from outer space in his bathtub....The alien emperor, whose head looks like an overturned mop bucket, splashes water on the professor with his iron claw and emits a squeaky yet sinister cackle. "You're going to rust in there." grumbles the professor in his mounting exasperation. ("The Phantom of the Movie Palace" 13)

Why does Coover comically deflate the complicating action of an interpolated film (as he does repeatedly throughout the collection), an action which hinges on time, on an impending apocalypse? Or why does the alien do so, forcing the professor to remain in his unwashed state and to experience himself and time through his olfactory senses? The initial scenario could derive from any number of B-grade sci-fi movies of the 50's wherein characters or objects follow time vectors which threaten to intersect disastrously. But apocalypse immediately ceases to matter in the fictions once the proposition offered at the outset of *Gravity's Rainbow*--that all is theatre--is deployed at a subtextual level and axiomatically installed there. Coover literalizes that which is offered as desirable in film, what the repeatable, reversible, and speed-adjustable medium promises but never delivers--escape from time. Screen 'immortals' remain forever young (in the sense that they do not age perceptibly within the space of a single film) and Hollywood seeks to produce what will become a 'timeless classic'. But movie plots for the most part offer

the traditional view of time as linear, as finite, and as bent toward apocalyptic convergence with the eternal. Thus, the film stories engage with our lot in time whilst the medium itself advertises its timelessness. By the end of the collection, where Coover stalls yet again both fictive and filmic time in “You Must Remember This” (*Casablanca* is the appropriated movie) we have been given what viewers want from film, a cessation of story time that suggests a perpetual present. However, this is something viewers do *not* want in terms of film stories, they crave a perpetual present for themselves yet desire forward narrative momentum. In Coover’s version, Ilsa has not gone off to aid Victor Lazlo in the fight against the Nazis but has stayed with Rick out of selfish need, and the story ends with Rick begging Ilsa for narrative movement: “And then...? Ilsa...? And *then...*?” (187). The story makes explicit what it is viewers desire from film, and shows us that the result is deeply unsatisfying (except perhaps in terms of intellectual exercise). A question arises out of the arrival of Coover/alien on the filmic planet and from his ensuing campaign of narrative terror. In the environment he creates, the reader is left to wonder why Coover so debilitates popular movie plots by rendering their temporal apparatuses dysfunctional. Provisional answers lie in close consideration of filmic and literary time.

Artists, philosophers, and scientists have developed diverse and complex notions of time, but viewers of popular cinema generally conceive of time in what is essentially a loose combination of the Platonic and Augustinian senses: as a line that runs alongside the eternal but which finally “curves upward towards that eternity in a final juncture that defines the purpose of both individual existence and historical collectivity” (Wilson 688).

Film offers a seductive view of the timelessness that is the preserve of a believed in eternity while it aids in the establishment of individual selfhoods and larger social groups. But although popular film is enamored with ends, with dramatic climaxes and plot resolutions, it exhibits an indifference to eschatology; the ends of human kind are not a concern so much as are the replayable events leading up to dramatic (not philosophical) fulfillments. 'Immortal' film moments are dramatic scenes held in stasis by the medium's capacity for repeatability. Nostalgic viewers return to these again and again (to hear Sam be told to "Play it again", though, as my opening epigraphs show, viewers insert the "again"). Film itself does not appear to change. At the end of *Casablanca* Bogart speaks of beginnings. Ironically, his line regarding 'the beginning of a beautiful friendship' inaugurated decades of repeated viewings, a long-standing cultural relationship with a film narrative.

We are ready now to consider a particular paradox of the filmic medium. In an important sense, film's moving images are more static than the unmoving countenance of a sculpted figure, the constant aspect of a painted tableau, or the final order of words set down on a printed page. Consider that in the context of film viewing the human image remains youthful as viewers themselves grow old. To be sure, celluloid deteriorates, pictures fade, the film becomes scratchy. As well, the world changes around the film, and screen personas age in the sense that they become old-fashioned, historical, out of the now. But film's power resides in its ability to offer up a human image as immutable *while that image is in motion, breathing, speaking; and living there on the screen*; on offer is a paradox: changelessness is conveyed through movement. This simulacrum of

life is more uncannily 'real' than those presented by any other medium, for its similitude presents life's movement. Moreover, it can impressively *play* with time, as slow and fast motion film techniques do (film may also co-opt its sister medium, photography, through freezes). Artistic forms that do not use the body as a medium (dance, happenings, and live dramatic performances are examples of ones that do) offer the perceptual experience film does. By comparison, a sculpture or an image on canvas appears curiously dead since material transfiguration is so slow it appears abeyant (and we do not ask movement of such art anyway). Imagination and knowledge must 'bring' the still image 'to life'. The movement of life is a property of mind in this instance, something we bestow on static objects or images in accordance with our subjectivities, but in film the medium takes over. And it comes as no surprise that early resistance to the cinema, as Benjamin tells us, involved the objection that film would not let people think what they wished to think. Film's virtuoso handling of time is impressive, autocratic, seductive.

Fiction does not provide the same sense of time forestalled as film does. When reading, we must imagine, say, a face beaming with youth. If the reader is perhaps preoccupied by the sentiment that we are born to die, the patina of youth in the conjured image may be compromised in some way (the face may be wise beyond its years), or even substituted by, or juxtaposed alongside an older individual looking back. A literary scene, for instance, that was once imagined (not described) as drenched in sunlight may later be perceived as unfolding in shadow. Not so with filmic youth, for those images are intransigent and exist in an ethereal realm of pure light; they are almost literally sprites of the air since in terms of film's locatability the images en route to the screen (the result of

halogenic luminescence filtered through celluloid) move above our heads in the theatre.<sup>13</sup>

In Coover, this is a region of darkness shot through with the white light of death, the light of the film that is our yearning for eternity made visible (light as possessing, in the view of the physicist, atemporal characteristics, and light as able, from the perspective of our senses, to be both here and there in an instant with no lag in time). At the close of *Gravity's Rainbow*, this same region of the odeum is that of the bomb just before impact (the theatre of film becomes the theatre of war, the 'bomb' picture becomes an incoming missile, time inevitably descending):

*Start-the show!* The screen is a dim page spread before us, white and silent. The film has broken, or a projector bulb has burned out....The last image was too immediate for any eye to register. It may have been a human figure, dreaming of an early evening in each great capital luminous enough to tell him he will never die, coming outside to wish on the first star. But it was *not a star*, it was falling, a bright angel of death....something has kept on, a film we have not learned to see.... (760)

This as yet unseen film is time itself, and the implication in Pynchon as in Coover is that we err when we accept film time as human time.

If we conceptualize film and our experience of it as Pynchon or Coover do, we may see that we wish to rise up into the timelessness of light, of film. This is an unconscious wish. Closer to consciousness is our attraction to a popular cinema that deals in major and minor apocalypses, offering catharsis through raw plot. Perhaps through violent horror films we rehearse (or re-hearse if we consider the endless loop of the funeral march in "After Lazarus", discussed below) our own deaths. While formulaic film plots superficially engage the urgencies of human time, pandering to our sense that time is of the essence (for it is, for the body), the medium simultaneously taunts us with

its indifference to the temporal. As we see a close-up shot of Ilsa's face, during the scene in which she begs Rick for the letters of transit, we are as Leontes before Hermione near the close of *The Winter's Tale*: "[t]he fixture of her eye has motion in't, / As we are mocked with art" (V, iii, 67). What really attracts the viewer is the idea that apocalypse can cease to matter (there can always be a sequel); subconsciously, we are intrigued by the notion that a screen apocalypse should and finally does not terrify since it is always only now, penultimate rather than ultimate, the perpetual present of the screen tense (a tense Coover maintains throughout).

Coover suggests that to live in filmic time would provide a horrific experience since it would involve our being imprisoned in an ontology alien to our being. The fictions dramatize this imprisonment. The professor and the alien (and us along with them) enter into the boredom, tedium, and absurdity of a filmic infinitude wherein eternity is mere repetition. To experience a divinity's grace perpetually would be one thing. But of course, we are in the theatre, not the hereafter; as Heidegger says in *The Concept of Time* of a notion of time wedded to a notion of the eternal, film "looks like eternity but proves to be a mere derivative of being temporal" (2). In Coover, what is repeated on the screen are human responses to death, the fact of it, the feared arrival of it. Thus readers, through either characters or narrational lenses, are immersed in a world that is vaguely filmic, predominantly dangerous, and almost inexplicable. Coover assails his reader with the recursions of metafiction as unrelentingly as Hollywood delivers the formulaic. On offer in these fictions is the foregrounded self-reflexivity of fictional form and the now standard postmodern interference in the easy production and reception of

texts. But these techniques are not offered up for their own sake. They are being used to think about popular film (see my discussion below on the uses of self-reflective metafiction). The disrupted literary narratives compel us to ask of them where and what is story time, where and what is our time, and why it is we are caught up in narrative loops and repetitions. Coover's goal is to have us ask these questions of film's narratives too, though still we must discover why his subject is Hollywood and not the more interesting treatments of time as seen in avant-garde cinema. Why is Hollywood set up for such anatomization?

The fictions in *Movies* unflinchingly cast the worship of filmic timelessness as a death in life wreathed in the stink of nostalgia. Coover does not merely suggest that we live in the present, that is, choose our own life narratives over those on the screen; he wishes us to dwell on the temporal per se, and on our response to whatever notions of time we possess, en route to challenging the notion of time sold to us. A notion of time is a response to an awareness of death. Heidegger acknowledges as much when he questions the *principium individuationis* behind the view of time as parallel to, and as destined to intersect with eternity. In *The Concept of Time* and elsewhere, he argues Dasein as an option that "individuates in such a way that it makes everyone equal. In being together with death everyone is brought into the 'how' that each can be in equal measure; into a possibility with respect to which no one is distinguished; into the 'how' in which all 'what' dissolves into dust" (21). Coover's point appears to be that while viewers swim only the warm seas of shallow entertainments, membership in an *aware* collectivity in death or in time will elude us (Pynchon exhibits a similar concern in



*Gravity's Rainbow* when he ends that novel with a cognitive death in film, the bomb falling upon the theatre). The moviegoer in "Intermission" heads to the lobby for refreshments only to find herself transported into film and there to experience as heroine a surrealized series of cliffhanger scenes from a wide variety of adventure films. She returns to the theatre only to find that her fellow audience members are dead:

the auditorium, lit only by the light from the projector, is full of people, all right, but they're sitting stiffly in their seats with weird-flattened out faces, their dilated eyes locked onto the screen like they're hypnotized or something. Uh oh. She reaches back and taps her friend to ask her what she thinks is going on, and her friend, jostled, slides lifelessly off the guy's lap onto the floor between the seats. (133)

Braving death while individuated in filmic time, she survives--over and *over* again, she prevails. Facing collective death with the audience, the woman experiences a death in life as long as she maintains an uncritical love of the cinema, a love she insists on even after discovering the corpses. She is indifferent to her situation: "hey, she's been watching movies all her life, so why stop now, right? Besides, isn't there always a happy ending? Has to be. It comes with the price of the ticket" (133). However, Coover's point is not merely that we must initiate a pronominal shift that changes 'my time has come' to 'our time has come' just prior to exchanging *Raiders of the Lost Arc* for *Being and Time*. There are less private and more public reasons why we should consider time in relation to ourselves and to otherness.

Psychologically, quotidian intimations of mortality are heavily repressed through viewers' preoccupations with screen violence and violent sex. Viewers cannot admit they may wish to see a murder or rape take place. Instead, viewers believe that some characters must die because of their unconscionable deviance, an aberration that functions

in film plots to motivate a hero and to set in motion the requisite (because comforting) affirmation of the moral order. The same is the case with screen depictions of rape; a transgression must take place to trigger the cycle of justifiable revenge. Viewers become as the narrator's father in Acker's *Great Expectations*, a man who "believed in a stable reality which justice formed" (66). Coover appears revolted by such psychological dishonesty, and brings to the surface of his narratives the urges film represses. Thus, the Mexican in "Shootout at Gentry Junction" murders and rapes at will to cheers from the town, and easily defeats the sheriff. Rick and Ilsa shun the heroic mode in favour of orgiastic pleasures. In "Charlie in the House of Rue", Chaplin becomes a Sisyphean figure, unable to stop the cycle of death and violence that rages through a plot world he himself has created but which has taken him in. The ideological function of Hollywood films operates in part in relation to our awareness of time, and of what its passing makes inevitable, the disintegration and final wholesale dissolution of human beings and their achievements. Culturally, these preoccupations must be fitted into narratives which deny this inevitability, narratives that not only accord with the values of dominant culture but which ideally become a 'timeless classic'. Film narratives thus become accomplices to broader cultural impulses to a dominant social order. Such 'order' facilitates the dream of permanent societies, a response to the absurd condition of human existence that sees all manifestations of a will to permanence undone over time. Following Coover's table of contents, presented in the form of an old-style theatre program which itemizes previews of coming attractions such as the weekly serial, selected short subjects, cartoons, travelogues, and musical interludes ("*ADVENTURE!*", "*COMEDY!*", and

“*ROMANCE!*” are also on the bill), comes a notice to the public which reads, “Ladies and Gentlemen May safely visit this Theatre as no Offensive Films are ever Shown Here”.

What awaits inside, however, is offense of a very high order, an attack on a number of widespread and foundational beliefs. The result is psychological horror as the viewing public confronts the repressed significations it yearns for but cannot admit (I mean both the viewing public as construed in the fiction *and* those reader-viewers who read Coover’s fiction and find his assault on *Casablanca* unpalatable). Edward Lucie-Smith’s description of Keinholz holds for much of Coover, speaking as it does of a concern for “the complex, the sick, the tatty, the bizarre, the shoddy, the viscous, the overtly or covertly sexual” (126). Both artists repeatedly employ images of the living dead to express how uninhabitable the worlds we project for ourselves become when we discover what lies beneath the surface of certain cherished, narrative visions. The fictions place us inside film and ask us if we really want to live there once we realize that filmic being, seen from the inside, is a frightening world consisting of sociopsychological repressions set free and the infinite regressions of the mind turned in upon the mechanisms of delusion which inform it.

I do not mean to imply that Coover promotes a Nietzschean heroism which prefers such repressions set free (indeed, the bedlam of “Charlie in the House of Rue” appears intended to disturb the reader deeply, to trigger an ontological vertigo and an ethical revulsion over the narrative indulgence of base drives). But I do suggest he insists upon a psychological honesty as regards the contents of films and our experience of them. *Movies* at first seems to express a sense of loss over the passing of an age in which

cinema was believed capable of passively reflecting a prevailing moral order. Films of this era chronicled this order's rise to prominence in such Western, triumphalist narratives as *Casablanca*. But this apparent nostalgia is actually a sober obituary for a time in which a viewing populace imprisoned itself conceptually inside cinematic conventions and genres, accepting a pre-prescribed role for itself while sitting alongside (but remaining dismissive of) society's subaltern philosophies that make up the intellectual minor. For Coover, this bygone popular cinema not only failed and fails still to offer an escape from chaos into order, or from linear time into timelessness, but actually becomes a death force. The converse of this, a cinema of life, would involve what J. Dudley Andrew describes in his discussion of Christian Metz and the semiology of cinema as a seeing "beyond the petty cinema of the past and toward the vast domain of untried and repressed significations. With this freedom comes a vast responsibility. Signification doesn't simply exist; it must be created....The camera captures nothing" (239). But while Coover demands just such creative signifying on the part of his readers, he offers no progenitorial vision of a cinema of life, choosing instead to play the mortician and to demonstrate how a generation's decision to live in and for the movies was, at its core, based on an ignorance of what film actually implies. Thus, his characters do not perceive negative freedom and then attempt to make it positive but instead cleave to the logic of traditional filmic representation, the mechanism of which is a death spiral as the psychological self suffers dissolution in cognitive reflexivity: thus, the mad projectionist in "The Phantom of the Movie Palace" is beheaded by screen characters; the corpse in "After Lazarus" that we, the reader-viewers, become (Coover narratively

positions us as such) undergoes the false resurrection into film time; and the woman in “Intermission” is able to accept that she sits in a theatre alongside an audience of corpses, sharing in their cognitive incapacity. Properly understood, Hollywood does not offer release from, but finally only an anatomy of our anxieties and fears over the fact of death. Serious fiction and film at least seek to process these responses to life into unflinching and honest (and therefore poignant) forms of expression that stand opposite the popular filmic illusions that transport us back to the playground, for a time, to a state of blissful unawareness wherein our eyes remain riveted to the narratives which comfort us, and anticipation of what happens next is all we need concern ourselves with. As Thomas Pynchon writes in his introduction to *Slow Learner*, a collection of his early short stories,

[w]hen we speak of ‘seriousness’ in fiction ultimately we are talking about an attitude toward death—how characters may act in its presence, for example, or how they handle it when it isn’t so immediate. Everybody knows this, but the subject is hardly ever brought up with younger writers, possibly because given to anyone at the apprentice age, such advice is widely felt to be effort wasted. (I suspect one of the reasons that fantasy and science fiction appeal so much to younger readers is that, when space and time have been altered to allow characters to travel easily anywhere through the continuum and thus escape physical dangers and timepiece inevitabilities, mortality is so seldom an issue.) (5)

It is not surprising that many may wish to ‘live’ inside the ripping good yarn rather than confront the constructed nature of the narratives that inform us. The consequences that follow from acceptance of filmic condition as human condition are not dissolved but augmented and multiplied through consumption of escapist cinema. They are only delayed and will eventually erupt into the frame we have used to limit our interpretations of experience, in this case the filmic frame (here perhaps is a reason why popular film has become increasingly if incrementally violent and pornographic since the moment of its

creation). We can interpolate here St. Augustine's concatenation of the New and Old Testaments and say that there is a typological relationship between films of the 40's and 50's and Coover's handling of same; in formulaic cinema, the will to sex and violence is concealed while in the new art of ensuing decades (avant-garde fiction and film) it is revealed. The characters presented by John Wayne, Charlie Chaplin, Humphrey Bogart or Lauren Bacall are *figurae*, historically real in the sense that these identities have been circulated in society at large. They are types in their original contexts but become antitypes in Coover. As the creation of Eve from Adam's rib is said in the typological view to prefigure the flow of blood from the side of Christ, Rick's dilemma over choosing between self-benefit and the public good becomes a literary crisis in "You Must Remember This", a crisis of understanding concerning time and eschatology.

### 3) Strategic Grounds

I suggest that Coover uses the anti-representational logic of American postmodern fiction to counter the non-representational logic of late capitalism. Mediant fiction in general appears to accept the provisionality of grounds while nonetheless choosing to establish provisional grounds. In *Movies*, Coover continues a project begun in *The Origins of the Brunists*, one that dramatizes the intersection of mass media and traditional, foundationalized ways of representing the world and that depicts the confluence as an aporetic juncture, the arrival at which essentially renders (and renders essentialized) ways of knowing now only knowable through reflexivity. Near the close of *Brunists*, the cult members meet atop a hill that is cast as a latter day Golgotha (as we

shall see, aborted resurrections and the living dead play a large part in *Movies*) to experience what they believe will be the end of the world. The mass media descends with its news cameras in the usual and untenable attempt to capture the actual, the 'real', and acting as if the selection, framing and editing of 'newsworthy' events did not constitute extensive subjective assessment and presentation of 'what happens'. Any authenticity the cult felt it may have possessed is dispersed and disseminated nationwide through news wire services and television feeds. It is an apocalyptic convergence of certainty and self-reflexivity parodically rendered, for as the Brunists fall into riot atop a hill made slippery by both rain and the coming into the world of radical contingency, belief--grounded in essentialism and manifest in unproblematized representational forms that accord with the vertical structure of mimesis--is subsumed into a mass mediatic relativism that pretends to representation through its simulations while actually effacing the grounds for knowledge. The "neo-capitalist cybernetic" code is consolidated in "a field *unhinged by simulation*" (Baudrillard 31). The Brunists do not know how to prosper in the late capitalist logic of video being and at the end of representation are left scrambling.

Discussions of representation, those either dubious or credulous towards the possibility of properly conveying the world to the mind through signs, frequently bear the marks of implied attitudes towards the idea of foundations. Before discussing Coover's take on representation (for there *is* a position evident in the works; as Sartre says, "[a] fictional technique always relates back to the novelist's metaphysics" [203] or in this case

the lack thereof) , I want to make explicit my own position on the issue of grounds. Hans

Bertens writes that modernity

sends out contradictory impulses which have come to constitute...two modes of thought--the one expansionist, transcendent, and omni-representational, the other self-reflexive, inward spiraling, and anti-representational--that in our day have come to clash so violently....[They] lead us into the temptation of wanting it both ways, and thus into self-contradiction. (242)<sup>14</sup>

There are two problems with this perspective. The first is that on display is the unfortunate propensity of binarism to ignore qualitative differentiations between two binarized polarities, differences that can find no functional position in the binary opposition. The second involves the flat and damning characterization of the critique of representation (evident in critique *and* fiction) as ‘self-reflexive’ and ‘inward spiraling’. To be sure, much of postmodern criticism and art inclined to focus on the immediate processes of mind may be described as such, with the least flattering connotations of these phrases justifiably in play.<sup>15</sup> But what go unacknowledged in Bertens’ binary opposition are the outward looking *uses* to which the antirepresentational mode may be put. I wish to suggest some of these and to indicate some of the self-reflexive and inward spiraling features (in the pejorative senses) of ‘transcendent’, absolutist, or foundational thought. A belief in foundations primarily suggests a *need* for foundations. Our needs interpret the world, as Nietzsche has said. In the foundational camp (I am thinking of modest foundationalism, not the radical variant of Descartes), any view which denies the *externality* of meaning, in the shape of omniscient deities, material forms which mirror those in a transcendent realm, or propositions the justifiability of which is self-justifying, is cast as self-regarding, as hubristic, destined for a fall. It is the preoccupation with



foundational thought, however, that may be basically a function of ego, an engagement with the human need for certainty which only ostensibly looks outward while actually looking inward to gauge needs and to attune thought in accordance with those needs. To assert that it is the antifoundational camp that is self-regarding or narcissistic reminds one of the argument against atheists that they pridefully and eschatologically posit humanity as an end in itself. How exactly a philosophy that admits the possibility that we are essentially biological accident is prideful when compared to one that situates humankind at the center of a providential plan is not clear. One may also mount a pragmatic argument against foundationalism.<sup>16</sup> If, as a pre-condition for action, one must carry a certainty born of confidence in this or that essentialist notion, then action is contingent on a set of suppositions. When these last are credible in the eyes of some but not others, conflict may ensue between camps equally convinced of their respective certainties. Paralysis or conflict may be avoided if the precondition for action is an *aversion* to certainty. Negotiations between two or more opposing camps might take place on less antagonistic grounds if philosophical grounds per se were understood to be provisional; ardor might decrease if what is at stake is something less than a metanarrative in which is intertwined the desperation of belief. (As I explain below, I do not intend to set up this relativistic stance as an anti-center intended to hold; I only argue acknowledgement of our divergent paths over philosophical spectrums).

If one agrees with Bertens' above description of modernity, then one may be inclined to saying that oppositional aesthetics of the literary variety, of the kind evident in mediant fiction, accepts simultaneously the groundlessness of things while paradoxically

refusing to eschew bases for socioartistic agendas and in effect has it both ways. I suggest instead that mediant fiction acknowledges that humankind inevitably and latitudinally traverses philosophical spectrums in accordance with circumstance. Grounds for action may be understood to be temporary, to be transmutable and inclined to flux as are time, change, matter. These provisional grounds could be composed of the very elements that will eventually be their undoing, could tie together for a while assumptions, peoples, praxis, methods prior to dissipating, like dissolvable stitches. As I mentioned in my first chapter, a book, on Borges' *Tlön*, is considered incomplete if it does not contain its counterbook. (This way, temporary grounds may function in response to the moral and ethical concerns of communities but may not hold if these concerns change.) Mediant fiction offers an argument over where we should be and when, and does not arise out of a school of thought suffering from a schizophrenic disorientation.

What conditions would exactly call for an installation of provisional ground? When is it time to hover Hamlet-like between the ground of the grave and the groundlessness of infinite space? When ought we to proceed upon a set of assumptions we have chosen to give weight to? It appears we need to concern ourselves with the possibility of knowing. On this subject, Bertens writes:

[O]ne does not want to refute the proposition that knowledge is bound up with the knower...and operates, as Foucault has demonstrated, always in a field of power. One might even go further and agree with the deconstructionists that knowledge is always under erasure and therefore, properly speaking, never exists....And yet we seem to know things.  
(Bertens 240)

Our seeming to know may be born of the physical aspect of our existence which demands that we attempt to know. Changes in the body, the depletion of energy reserves due to hunger for example, require actions the fruitful payoff of which provides a rudimentary though temporary certainty. Whatever aids the body in its survival tends to manifest itself noetically as truth. Colin Falck writes that all truth “is carnal, and that energy is from the Body is the true meaning of the Word made flesh” (239). While I am wary of Falck’s possibly New Age sensibility,<sup>17</sup> I applaud his notional alignment of word and body. Word comes most successfully into meaning when it becomes part of the finally biologically based complex of the self. I suggest that since the body demands truth formulations (however temporary these prove to be), that it is a prime node around which provisional grounds may be established. Calvino is thus compelled in *If On A Winter’s Night A Traveler* to dwell on the site-specificity of the reader who reads in his or her bed or chair. Keinholz conveys ideas by encircling the body with conceptual environments, reminding the body of its temporality. And Coover, with his focus on the viewer in filmic and non-filmic time, is interested in the body and its relationship to imagined, virtual, and logical spaces (a focus that presages his fascination with hypertext and hyperspace, the placement of conscious mind [part of the body] in imagined spaces, in spatial metaphors manifest iconically on computer screens). The bodily existence that film covets and that we fear (fear because it is transitory, making us desperate to find outside grounds of a more permanent nature than the geological variety) is an ideal provisional ground—provisional because not essential in the permanent sense, and ground because not only does thought bear a compelling (and largely unexplained)

relation to our biological being but because thought cannot take place elsewhere. Could not a provisional ground be set adequately in relation to the prime precondition for being, the organic, the tellurian?

When asked about the reasons for his fascination with pop-cultural materials, Coover responds that it is

all material that's close to the mythic content of our lives, and is therefore part of our day-to-day fiction-making processes....And this mythology of ours, this unwritten Bible, is being constantly reinforced by books and newspapers, films, television, advertisements, politicians, teachers, and so on. So working inside these forms is a way of staying close to the bone. (Interview 105)

In *Movies*, film is cast as a repository for, and reinforcer of bijoux home truths that come to carry the authority of myth, of scripture. These discourses are close to home, to body. They issue from there and have their greatest impact there. Coover disparages fictions of the self that take on the iron cast of certainty, a confidence which may cause pain:

the mad visions of those persons who do see life as having a profound meaning and their own individual lives as having some eternal role and who wish to impose all that on other people. This is what causes about 90 percent of our unnecessary pain. A lot of our pain is of course unavoidable, and quite enough to bear without inventing more. (Interview 115)

Coover's engagement with popular culture is an attempt to keep word and body in close proximity to one another. The body becomes an ethical locus, a provisional ground, and a point from which the temporal disembodiment film facilitates may be assessed; this process of detachment emerges as a variant of corporate semiosis, a force that functions in against the interests of the egalitarian body politic.

We speak for the moment while standing upon a middle ground during an interregnum period where the opposition between foundationalism and antifoundationalism is less bandied about than it once was. Radical critique of knowledge, language and ground has of late been eclipsed by statements of position that acknowledge the lessons of such critiques but which firmly deny the paralysis they can ultimately incur. The tone is much as follows (this from the social sciences):

Our position is that while it is impossible to produce a fixed and exhaustive knowledge of a constantly changing complex of social processes, it is possible to map the...domains, structures, practices, and discourses of a society, and how they are constituted and interact. (Best and Kellner 260)

Mediant fiction may be understood to occupy this very position, and to be engaged in mapping their societies, though now with an eye to the inevitable relativism of things.

One can see in fiction by Susan Daitch, William T. Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace a continuance of the project begun by DeLillo, Coover, and Pynchon, namely, the chronicling of the adventures of what is now a fragmented and cybernetic self, lost in the mass media funhouse. Such chronicles dispense with sequences, linearity, cause and effect, and closed systems in favour of homologies, circularity, processes of communication and ecosystems. Coover in particular has banished the paralysis born of a literary preoccupation with demonstrating extreme self-reflexivity that performs a literary-philosophical exercise bent on proving the impossibility of representation. Frequently, critics correctly reason that works by the writers mentioned above (in addition to Reed, Barthelme, and Fowles) are collectively a response to late capitalism, a social order in which advanced information and communications systems have rendered

traditional literary codes obsolete. Thus, it is generally reasoned, fiction writing becomes a cross-examination of traditional witnesses to the connection between actuality and fiction. The result is the proliferation on the level of narrative of ontological pluralization, infinite textual regression, iconoclastic parody, sustained aporia, blending of hitherto distinct levels of discourse, and temporal and spatial dislocations. But in all the excitement over the poststructural realization that it now matters more than ever who is speaking, and the concomitant rise of cultural studies, the precise nature of the cultural work that fictions such as Coover performs has gone unexplained, the particularities of what I term mediant fiction relegated to a point in literary history and there catalogued under such reductive entries as 'self-reflexivity' and 'Chinese box structures'. Coover has never been concerned with the contemplation of his bellybutton through contortions before a funhouse mirror. Rather, he gives vent to the umbilical grieving felt by one now cut off from a belief in ideal forms, and in the light of the projector bulb, he considers our remaining options and what forces there are that compel us one way then another upon this new topography. Less understood is the interventionist agenda at the heart of such works. Intriguingly, Coover has used the techniques of experimental fiction, hitherto branded as inward looking only, to critique a popular semiotic mode, the Hollywood film. This last is a form of expression that pretends to outward show yet which only demonstrates its limits and traps a viewing populace in a self-replicating and reciprocal exchange that ostensibly offers solace but only advances the decidedly material interests of those who control the mode. What better way to show this self-replicating process than to enact the same process in fiction? Fiction operates less dictatorially and more

persuasively when it demonstrates or enacts on its own terms this or that phenomenon rather than takes up a robust and certain stance of the representational kind. Coover is a political writer working in the oppositional postmodern mode, and as surreal as his literary locales are, they bear a public address. The fictions refuse to leave the fate of macropolitics to the institutions that fuel late capitalism, and they interfere in the precession of the simulacra by anatomizing the Hollywood semiotic that now enjoys cultural dominance in the West.

We may now attempt to answer directly how it is in *Movies* that Coover undertakes an “assault on that flimsy linearity [among other cinema staples] that is the currency of Hollywood which makes of its illusions not art but lies” (Kennedy 82). What Kennedy calls lies, I will explain is a non-representational logic that Coover seeks to counter with the anti-representational logic of American postmodern fiction. The critique of objectivity that reached its zenith in philosophical and literary-critical circles during Coover’s mid-career is responded to in some measure in his fiction; it is not that Coover crafted writerly fictions that only later became understood through the interpretive ratiocinations offered by structuralism and poststructuralism (becoming then readerly in at least a small circle), but, rather, that Coover came of age as a writer during a period that saw a large scale movement of writers into universities where they could not help but be affected by developments in literary theory and philosophy (regardless of whether they took up or rejected the challenge to representation). This is not to suggest that works by these writers are not finally reconstructive rather than merely illustrative, only that they

attest to a conscious and fresh engagement with questions regarding the written and the lived, and the relationship between the two.

Characteristic of all Coover's writing is a fascination with the human habit of creating stories to live by, stories which, once formulated, are then perceived as not a product of daily composition (the self making meaning of itself while moving through change, through time) but as external, connected to the universal, issuing from without since meaning is believed to reside in an unconditioned ground or absolute not of the body. The difference, however, between Coover and Barth or Borges is that his examination of the sources, boundaries, and ends of narrative co-opts the public media and the discourses in evidence there: in *Spanking the Maid*, the recursions of pornography are enacted and thus staged for study; throughout *Pricksongs and Descants*, narrative becomes the roving camera eye with television ever in the background dispensing Cubist creeds; and in *Movies*, film viewer psychology is understood through Hollywood's golden era (Borges and the early Barth confine themselves to the mirrors of private experience). Coover proceeds more in the manner of the author of the *Quixote*, taking film as Cervantes took the romances of his day and using it to examine, through popular forms, versions of actuality and operations of mind. The decision to accept our supposedly representational narratives as external and as being both in truck with, and proof of metaphysical essentialisms, is the focus of Coover's efforts to metafictionally enact the cinema he basically writes a screenplay for, one that will never, by design, enter into production. The aim is to approach a truer (though not finally true in any total sense, but truer since more guarded, provisional, and complex) understanding of film en route to



bringing into literary focus the perception of temporality that allows corporate semiosis to function largely unhindered in the cultural zone. By casting sex and violence in relation to our knowledge of, and response to mortality, human and filmic time become linchpins in the setting up *and* the tearing down of foundations. Placed under test conditions is the theorem given voice to in *Casablanca*'s theme song: *the fundamental things apply as time goes by*.

Even prior to the installation of the hyperreal through the widespread stationing of mass media systems, representation appears not to have taken place on the big (or little) screen in an unproblematic fashion. I believe there are two reasons for this. First, straightforward representation does not seem to take place in or through media in the way that thinkers from Aristotle to Auerbach have theorized; objecthood/the material may be discontinuous with language and thus with all human expression--a conversation about the real is perhaps only an engagement with the discourses of self and other. Second, and more importantly in the context of Coover's subversion of corporate semiosis, representation of world in all its actuality is *not at all the goal* of the popular cinema, though the belief that it performs this function is encouraged and affirmed by producers, actors, distributors, critics, and viewers. Popular films that conform to pre-prescribed dictates of spin are ambitious in their appeals to the markets and beliefs they in part create, yet they are widely believed to represent or to refer to stable social realities from an objective standpoint. This is what I mean when I speak of 'non-representational' media logic; representation is believed to take place but it is corporate signification which is primarily presented to viewers. For skeptics, on offer in film is evidence of a shadow

world of the forces and processes which shape communication. The mass media offer a vague sense of connection to communicational and computer networks, but one only enters at a point on a grid, the overall schema of which remains elusive (part of the point of Wallace's *The Broom of the System*). What profits and thus what is the intention behind the Hollywood machine involves the dumbing-down of the psychologies that reside at the sites of viewer reception and the eclipse of media that carry competing discourses. The self believes itself well served by the machine, so seemingly in accord are perceptions with that which is perceived. In this mode, recognized widely as virtual but welcomed as actual, our social coordinates become enmeshed in a dubious representation. Thus, a writer, perhaps already aggrieved over the widespread social refusal to acknowledge contingency and frustrated by ongoing and unself-aware meaning-making practices made absolute prior to being commercially imposed on others can only turn to antirepresentational means.

Coover's aim is not to represent film but to explain in fiction how fictions born of the self do not represent world. Does he not in some sense then seek to represent at least this aspect of actuality? I would suggest not, for understanding of this phenomena is not given to the reader through a fugitive representation in antirepresentational garb but is arrived at by the reader who experiences fictions which facilitate rather than insist upon new perspectives. Coover's implication is that his fiction does not represent but that neither may film display world, however much the visual signifier appears to 'capture' objecthood. We come away from Coover seeming to know something more of film than we did prior. We turn to film, after reading Coover, with a sensibility newly attuned by

mediant fiction. If there is a connection between written fiction and filmed scene (or between actuality and either of these media alone), it is hard to imagine it as existing outside the processes of mind (that film versions of novels inevitably disappoint the reader in us reminds us of this). Coover acknowledges the elusiveness of this connection:

we go on writing the same story all our lives. The trouble is, it's usually a story that can never be told—there's always this distance between the sign and the signified, it's the oldest truth in philosophy—and that's why we tend to get so obsessive about it. The important thing is to accept this unbridgeable distance and carry on with the crazy bridge-building just the same. (Interview 106-7)

We may say then of Coover's "You Must Remember This" that it exists within the same social discourse structures as others that surround *Casablanca*, even as it performs serious transgressions against both the mechanism of the movie as movie and the nature of our discourses about it. That we cannot *not* 'remember this'--that is, that we cannot forget the insertion of a long erotic scene into a well-known narrative that only originally contained highly coded sexual elements--is the point. A new discourse about the film has entered the realm of discourse, and that it is transgressive guarantees its memorableness. By taking on the cinema, Coover's writing attests to a key characteristic of an oppositional postmodernism, and that is this mode's ability to accept the inevitable restlessness of thought as a precondition to meaningful action. Such action as the fictions would argue for might involve an action of thought, a purposive decision on the part of the viewer at the site of reception to realize as Ilsa does the suspect nature of all narratives which are here cast in terms of memory: "Maybe memory itself is a kind of a trick, something that turns illusion into reality and makes the real world vanish before

everyone's eyes like magic. One can certainly sink away there and miss everything, she knows" (179).

#### **4) Movie-ing through the Fictions**

Since they may now be summarized outside their contextualizing arguments, here are the particularities of Coover's mediant short fictions: horror and insight (and insight as horror) take place in a zone where the gaze notionally penetrates; awareness arising out of this penetration is forced by Coover on a cinema of surfaces that trades in violent images (sexual or otherwise) that are a response to time but which are never understood as such within the logic of the popular cinema; film becomes a stand-in for the ineffable and the transcendent, providing as it does virtuoso displays of temporal manipulation that elicit our envy and our worship (the new religious paradox is that stasis emerges from film's movement); film and film viewer are caught in a game of mutual and reciprocal repression wherein deep impulses to violence, violent sex, and social order are coded, kept at bay within the confines of traditional, filmic narrative game moves; he reclaims from film, in facilitating the reading moment, forms of experiential time through an act of resistance to media; the fictions fructify the antirepresentational impulse by disrupting the smooth production and reception of filmic and literary texts through the use of exaggerated structural patterning, infinite textual regression, parody, temporal and spatial dislocations, and blurred boundaries of discourse, all in order to spotlight the self-reflexivity of fictional form per se, including the narratives of the self ("Self-reflective consciousness is narrational", says the highly self-conscious narrator in Kathy Acker's

*Great Expectations* [58]); the reader is assailed with the recursions of metafiction as unrelentingly as Hollywood delivers the formulaic, the aim being to sing in maudlin tones the death of the aware subject and its false resurrection into filmic consciousness; and there is the argument that on screen and on sale is not mere entertainment but a uniform set of socio-philosophical responses to human experience, responses that, since arriving through corporate semiosis, operate on behalf of institutional self-interest and less on that of the human subject it baldly pretends to represent.

“The Phantom of the Movie Palace”, the first of the fictions in the collection, presents the fate of film viewers in direct relation to a screen murder:

The man with the ax in his forehead steps into the flickering light. His eyes, pooled in blood, cross as though trying to see what it is that is cleaving his brain in two. His chest is pierced with a spear, his groin with a sword. He stumbles, falls into a soft splash of laughter and applause. His audience, still laughing and applauding as the light in the film flows from viewed to viewer, rises now and turns towards the exits. Which are locked. Panic ensues. Perhaps there is a fire. Up on the ripping velour, the man with the split skull is still staggering and falling, staggering and falling. “*Oh my god! Get that ax!*” someone screams, clawing at the door, and another replies “*It’s no use! It’s only a rhetorical figure!*” “*What?*” This is worse than anyone thought. “*I only came for the selected short subjects!*” someone cries irrationally. They press their tear-streaked faces against the intractable doors, listening in horror to their own laughter and applause, rising now to fill the majestic old movie palace until their chests ache with it, their hands burn.

Ah, well, those were the days, the projectionist thinks, changing reels in his empty palace. (14-15)

The image of violent death is followed by spectator approval. There is evidently a pleasure or a necessity that makes it easy for viewers to laugh at death from a seat of safety, from beyond the reach of malevolence, fate, time. We might say that they only enjoy a comic moment, but it is difficult to reconcile this reading with the image of

violence which is not presented as comic to the reader-viewer. The audience laughs not at the pains of the actor but at the pain and demise of the character. The filmic gaze (espial on the part of both the camera and the viewer) is cruel rather than cathartic; whosoever is illuminated by the light of film becomes a sacrifice inside a rite that secures no benefit or recovery for viewers but that they nonetheless demand (if catharsis *is* involved, the emotion that is relieved is an ominous one the implications of which we should acknowledge). The man suffers and dies once he “steps into the flickering light”, and once “the light in the film flows from viewed to viewer” the viewers become imprisoned in the frame of the film they have just watched. They, too, are sacrificed to the evident pleasure of the projectionist who is also later taken into the violence of the frame. It is a manifold and recursive dying that takes place. The ripping screen signals that the boundary between theatre and film frame has become permeable. The spectators are now on the other side of the equation afforded by film, an ontology of their own making wherein they are sentenced to hear the sounds of their departed levity. We may laugh as well, though not in the way the theatre viewers do (we read through a dilated frame); the viewers’ response to the collapsing of boundaries between *ax* as object and ‘*ax*’ as component of film language might amuse the literary or film critic, as might the anxiety Coover anticipates several of his readers may feel when reading his short fiction once they find themselves cut off from verisimilitude locked in a theatre of metafiction (*“I only came for the selected short subjects!”* such a reader might cry while crossing his eyes in an attempt to see that which has self-reflexively cleaved his purview in two).

After the scene in which the professor retires to his bath only to find an alien emperor preventing him from entering the water (quoted above), readers find themselves in a 40's style nightclub in which a "squat gangster" walks through a "roomful of hard-boiled wisecracking bottle-blond floozies" (the sudden juxtaposition of this scene with the last is a quick edit) and who looks "from time to time at the plump bubble of fob-watch in his hand" (13-14). The women predict that any moment he will be "rubbed out". As he ponders both time and the lewd women he adores, the gangster wears "a quizzical self-absorbed expression on his face, as though to say: Ah, the miracle of it all! the mystery! the eternal illusion! And yet...It's understood he's a dead man, so the girls forgive him his nasty habits....They are less patient with the little bugger's longing for the ineffable" (14). To ease the tension, the women attempt to sing a number of bawdy ditties, though he wishes them to sing "Blow the Candle Out" and to perform the sex act hinted at in the title. Sex or violence or a combination of both seem sure to enter the frame. We are to imagine this scene (the reader as sole viewer ) as one from a film *and* as something watched by others (the reader watches along with an audience and thinks on the act of others' viewing—the position of the ideological film critic). The story encourages this double vision by switching narrative focus between viewer and viewed. Not for the gangster the ineffable; timeless infinitude, the "eternal", is a property the popular cinema accords itself. It is a timelessness, we should note, that is only repeatability.

In a scene shortly after, a

a handsome young priest...kneels against the partition and croons a song of a different sort to the nun sitting on the toilet in the next stall. A low

unpleasant sound is heard; it could be anything really, even prayer. The hidden agenda here is not so much religious expression as the filmic manipulation of ingenues: the nun's only line is not one, strictly speaking, and even her faint smile seems to do her violence. (14)

The appropriated movie could well be *The Bell's of St. Mary's*, the crooning priest Bing Crosby, and the nun Ingrid Bergman (who also played Ilsa in *Casablanca* and who reappears in the other story that bookends the collection, "You Must Remember This"). Coover foregrounds and explicates through fictional reconstruction the sexual dynamic between Crosby as priest and Bergman as nun. The sullyng of the sacred by the profane, a familiar motif in pornography, is in evidence. (My second definition of pornography is my own: the pornographic moment occurs when the person/object presented in the economy of a particular shot or scene is restricted in terms of agency; the shot or scene must also involve bodily exposure in combination with the threat or application of humiliation and/or violence). By this definition, the above passage could be labelled pornographic but for an emerging critique of pornographic expression that emerges.

Reader-viewers are next introduced to the figure of the projectionist "changing reels in his empty palace" (15). The scenes readers have just encountered are presumably portions of films the projectionist watches alone. These films are like and unlike films from Hollywood's golden age.. There are superficial resemblances in terms of traditional plots and stock characters, but Coover anamorphically dilates the films' frames through ekphrasis so that the encrypted desires therein are ostentatiously presented at the level of plot. The projectionist pines for the glory days of the movie palace, is awash in nostalgia. His time anxiety is linked to the passing of a bygone cinema:



All that human garbage...kiddy-pee on the front-row seats...sticky condoms in the balcony...used to enrage him, but now he longs for the least sign of another's presence. Even excrement in the Bridal Fountain or black hair grease on the plush upholstery. He feels like one of those visitors to an alien planet, stumbling through endless wastelands in the vain search for life's tell-tale scum. (15)

In his solitude he aspires to become master of filmic time by making the most of his control of the projector. Yet film cannot alleviate his yearning for lost human time; he yearns for what we might call biotemporality, seeks it out in wayward deposits of matter once part of human bodies.<sup>18</sup> He finds solace in the oscillations of possibly still living cells, the rhythms and cycles of which mark out noetic time and which are not linear as is the framed division of time proper to film. After watching an old foreign legion movie, he imagines himself "crawling inch by inch through the infinite emptiness of the desert, turning the sand over in his fingers in the desperate hope of sifting out something" (14). Coover casts the projectionist upon the sands of time which are rendered as the Hollywood canon. In the film he has just watched, a commanding officer comments on the life of the mercenary soldier, saying that "One must not confuse honor, gentleman, with bloody paradox!" As I have argued above, the paradox born of film is that the mirage of human movement, an illusion which seems to arrest the transitory, does just that--it captures dynamic movement within a loop of repetition, thereby rendering dynamism static. The effect of this paradox of filmic visuality is the suggestion to the subconscious mind that film may control time.

Once the projectionist's relationship with time is established, Coover makes clear the man's penchant for screen sex and violence:

the little orphan girl...is crawling up into the hayloft on the rickety wooden ladder. No doubt some cruel fate awaits her. This is suggested by the position of the camera, which is following close behind her, as though examining the holes in her underwear. Or perhaps those are just water spots--it's an old film. He reverses it, bringing the orphan girl's behind back down the ladder for a closer look. But it's no good. It's forever blurred, forever enigmatic. There's always this unbridgeable distance between the eye and its object. Even on the big screen. (17)

Such a camera angle suggests that a "cruel fate" awaits the girl because the shot is essentially pornographic, placing as it does the object of the camera's gaze within a strict economy. (Joan Hoff, who refuses a distinction between erotica and porn, defines "pornrotica" as "*any representation of persons that sexually objectifies them and is accompanied by actual or implied violence in ways designed to encourage readers or viewers to assume that such sexual subordination of women (and children or men) is acceptable behavior or an innocuous form of sex education*" [29]. A combination of my own definition above, which takes into account agency and which sets aside words referring to sex in favour of exposure, might work well if interpolated with Hoff's, which considers the assumptions of pornographic text.) The projectionist exercises even greater control over the girl/object's manifestation in film than did the original cameraman because he controls the viewing instant. Film does not here bridge the gap between mind and objecthood. The object here is the *youthful* girl; the projectionist can reverse the film all he likes but he will be unable to return to his own youth and to film's 'golden age.' The projectionist's response to this limitation is sexual covetousness and violence, impulses which commingle as he watches the 'ingenue' (as female characters are frequently called throughout the collection) variously manifested:

Here she is, for example, tied to the railroad tracks, her mouth gagged, her bosom heaving as the huge engine bears down upon her. Her muffled scream blends with the train's shrieking whistle, as sound effects, lighting, motion...and even set decor--the gleaming ribbons of steel rails paralleling the wet gag in her mouth, her billowing skirts echoing the distant hills--come together for a moment in one conceptual and aesthetic whole. It takes one's breath away, just as men's glimpses of the alleged divine once did, projections much less convincing than these, less inspiring of true awe and trembling. (17)

The railway track/bondage scenario, perhaps one of the most well-known clichés in film's short history, illustrates perfectly the popular cinema's endorsement of the apocalyptic view of time. Fate, life, and the eternal actually occupy vectors in the scene. She is in a state of bondage that appeals to the projectionist, and one is reminded that the torturer/murderer revels in the power over another's life *and* time. But film may freeze the instant, reverse the direction of the train, or at the very least, show the ingenue's rescue time and again. There is finally no threat of time for the viewer, only for the on-screen object, the sacrifice. Film offers a glimpse into the atemporal divine and is thus itself aligned with the transcendent.

The projectionist refers to the figures on the screen as "Purviews of Cunning Abstractions", a play on the phrase 'Previews of Coming Attractions'. The latter assures that films will come, as if from the future, and that they will attract. Cunningly abstracted in the popular cinema are a host of dark attractions. The projectionist thinks on these for a time then concludes that

[m]aybe it's just all this lonely space with its sepulchral room presence more dreadful than mere silence, but as the footage rolls by, music swelling, guns blazing, and reels rattling, he seems to see angels up there, or something like angels...aglow with an eerie light not of this world. Or of any other, for that matter--no, it's scarier than that. It's as though their bones (as if they had bones) were burning from within. They seem then,

no matter how randomly he's thrown the clips together, to be caught up in some terrible enchantment of continuity, as though meaning itself were pursuing them (and him! and him!), lunging and snorting at the edge of the frame, fangs bared and dripping gore. (18)

The light of film is not of any other world but is an illusion of this one. These creatures of light (and of darkness, for the viewing of film requires that other lights be absent) are incorporeal, but the projectionist, confined to earth, to the grave-like theatre imagines them in physical terms and projecting upon them his crisis. He construes them as having bones, reminding one of how damned souls are said to experience bodily pains in hell. Film characters, the projectionist believes, suffer the state of perpetuity. The meaning that pursues the projectionist is that he cannot defer meaning; what is poised at the edge of the frame is a wider frame that encompasses notions about film and of his own viewing habits, one that need not engulf him but which might offer liberation if he were to construct it himself--he routinely engineers anamorphic projection in the technological manner by projecting the narrow frame of film onto the wider screen but does not enact the same process conceptually. Readers are expected to do so upon navigating the mediant fiction.

Beneath the movie palace are subterranean tunnels,

secret rooms...walled off or buried under concrete during the palace's periodic transformations....He doesn't stay down here long. It's said that, beneath this labyrinth from the remote past, there are even deeper levels, stair-stepped linkages to all the underground burrowings of the city, but if so, he's never found them, nor tried to. It's kind of a Last Frontier he chooses not to explore, in spite of his compulsive romanticism, and, sooner or later, the dark anxiety which this reluctance gives rise to drives him back up into the well-lit rooms above. (19)

It is tempting to interpret this underground network as symbolic of a collective unconscious, of the inherited brain structures we possess which were formed from remote past experience and which manifest themselves in Jungian archetypes. The mind, from this view, would then be the space of the mental interior, the burrowing into of which would constitute the psychoanalytic moment. However, there is too much of the essential in this interpretation, and psychic determinism does not sit well with the fictions. It is not that primeval experience has structured our brains in such a way that they generate prototypic phenomena, resulting in the case of film in codifications that testify to baser instincts only indirectly. I think instead that Coover plays the proper postmodernist here, setting aside the bid to fully understand human needs and drives and turning instead to the possible ways in which these are channeled. Particularly if we look back at these fictions through the later Coover's interest in the circuitous world of hypertext, the "stair-stepped linkages" may well be part of what Best and Kellner would call a map of the "domains, structures, practices, and discourses of a society, and how they are constituted and interact" (quoted above). As a hypertext document may contain a site map that attests to all the linkages possible on a given site, a look at the communicational network that charts the reach of the mass media might help reveal the constructedness of things, the manner in which a society creates through electronic interaction a set of beliefs that are a response to something called reality. The projectionist is hesitant to dig through layers of representation, the upper tier of "scene shops and prop rooms...[and] old theatrical costumes" (19) for fear of finding *no essences at all* but only the remnants of human activity--no rooted phenomena, only systems of relations.

The projectionist, as a man alone against time, soon becomes desperate:

one picture does not seem enough...he projects two, three, even several at a time, creating his own split-screen effects, montages, superimpositions. Or he uses multiple projectors to produce a flow of improbable dissolves, startling sequences of abrupt cuts and freeze frames like the stopping of a heart, disturbing juxtapositions of slow and fast speeds, fades in and out like labored breathing. Sometimes he builds thick collages of crashing vehicles or mating lovers or gun-toting soldiers, cowboys, and gangsters all banging away in unison until the effect is like time-lapse photography of passing clouds, waves washing the shore. He'll run a hero through all episodes of a serial at once, letting him be burned, blasted, buried, drowned, shot, run down, hung up, splashed with acid or sliced in two, all at the same time or he'll select a favorite ingenue and assault her with a thick impasto of pirates, sailors, bandits, gypsies, mummies. (22)

He manipulates the processes of film screening, a second-order manipulation of the images, to further enhance film's already carnal and hurtful relationship to the human subject in filmic time. The projectionist/viewer sees only his frantic superimpositions while the reader-viewer of Coover's story sees his experiments in projection hobble towards biotemporality, approximating only through its shuttered divisions the stopping of a heart (stasis/immortality become death) and laboured breathing. His efforts to bring film image and body into communion are unsuccessful, and the temporally affrighted mind is once more seen to turn to a violence that will inaugurate time's end for a screen figure--the projectionist murders and rapes, either to make death a visible enemy or to rehearse his own end. He abuses screen characters because "the crisis they suffer--*must* suffer--is merely the elemental crisis in his own heart" (23-24). Since "his mind [is] locked into the simplistic essentials of movement and murder" (31), he fails to understand film as an intentionally organized way of seeing. He yearns for the days "back when time

wore a white hat” (25) as if in some past era time was redemptive and not destructive (the usual delusion afforded by nostalgia).

He seeks in film an essence, or at least a stable representation of immutable forms, something not finally sullied by inept and human attempts to know. Denied this, he would himself become creator, and with his projectors initiate biogenesis, the coming about of living systems from non-living (and therefore timeless) matter. “In the study of time biogenesis signifies the emergence of the now--the organic present--from the presentless world of physics” (Fraser 136). Here is another paradox of unselfconscious film engagement: we covet film’s perceived timelessness yet wish that we could initiate its coming into biotemporality. Thus, timelessness might somehow meet us upon the corporeal field and provide rescue. We see a creator in this story (the hapless Dr. Frankenstein who also would initiate biogenesis) bring to life a monster whom he advises to no avail: “‘Alas, I perceive now that the world has no meaning for those who are obliged to pass through it,’ replies the monster melancholically, tearing off the shinbone and crushing his creator’s skull with it, ‘but one must act as though it might’” (22). This creature, speaking from within a fiction that readers wedded to the possibility of stable representation might well term monstrous, presents us with a compelling proposition: if knowledge is without ground, representation without immutable form (the two-tier structure of mimesis), and language without god (as guarantor of meaning--such unsettling possibilities will be ever with us on our wedding night), we should proceed nonetheless in our attempts to mean. In Coover, the will to belief, to representation and

cosmic meaning, is a dogged insistence that abides even in the face of the most difficult and absurd exigencies:

The hero, trying simply to save the world, enters the fun house, only to be subjected to everything from death rays and falling masonry to iron maidens, time traps, and diabolical life-restoring machines, as though to problematize his very identity through what the chortling fun-house operators call in their otherworldly tongue ‘the stylistics of absence.’ In such a maze of probable improbability, the hero can be sure of nothing except his own inconsolable desires.... (33)

This decision to move on (an essentially heroic and romanticist decision rendered postmodern through playful parody and a watering down of tragic overtones--Lenny Bruce stands in for Nietzsche) involves conceptualizing not ‘meaning’ but ‘necessity’ in the form of inconsolable desire, and thus the fictions deal almost exclusively with *dark* necessities—for it is these which must be openly acknowledged so that they may not be codified in a pornography of semblance and used against us.

But again we should ask, does Coover not attempt to represent some aspects of actuality, namely psychological processes and the mechanisms of filmic non-representation? I still answer in the negative, for what the fictions primarily do is facilitate a reading moment with no guarantees. Their dense and at times impenetrable aspect demand that conscious attention be paid to one’s reading practices, and sophisticated as these may be, the pieces demand slow and repeated readings. Thus, they do not represent what David Harvey calls the “time-space compression” (240) brought about by late capitalism, a process that involves the acceleration of the pace of daily activity while simultaneously dissolving spatial boundaries. Harvey explains that “we have been experiencing, these last two decades, an intense phase of time-space



compression that has had a disorienting and disruptive impact upon political and economic practices, the balance of class power, as well as upon cultural and social life” (284). Coover is not interested in attempting the representational assemblage of such a phenomenon. Instead, his fictions only do what fiction is able to do, and that is enact or demonstrate within its own confines a discourse, an idea, a process. The collection exhibits a concern for the credulity over representation when this last is taken to absurd lengths, as when the virtual spaces of the popular cinema cordon off our movements in actual or logical space. Often in the works of Angela Carter is the figure of a young woman, the subject with agency whom various ominous figures would turn into a pornographic object with no will of her own. This figure usually resists the pornographic narrative she is in and escapes. In Coover, the ingenue disappears from the films in which she appears, and the projectionist is shocked to discover that “The train runs over a ribbon tied in a bow! The vampire sucks wind!” (27). The projectionist himself is dragged terrified and screaming into the torments he had watched others suffer. Music “seems to be running backwards” (as in Keinholtz’ *The Beanery*), a metaphor for the reversal involved when we live consciously in ideas rather than allow them to reside unobserved in us. The projectionist approaches the holes punched out in the screen. They form crude block letters, not unlike those used on theater marquees, and what they spell out is: BEWARE THE MIDNIGHT MAN!” (29). This man is, of course, time, though the figure is now the compressed time of late capitalism. Film in Coover here takes on a dull and twofold instrumentality: the sadistic and death-driven simulation of triumph over time is an easy pornography which meets a philosophical need only in the

basest of manners, and seductive illusions serve to garner easy and enormous financial rewards for those who engineer corporate semiosis, who view us closely from far off production contexts. As the detective in the story says, “What’s frightening is not so much being able to see only what you want to see, see, but discovering that what you think you see only because *you* want to see *it...sees you*” (33).

Coover places his reader-viewer inside the frame and within the reach of the violence therein, in order to confront us with the wages of self-delusion. The projectionist (who projects his intentional self upon the world, a self that is not only libidinous and sadistic but deeply fearful of time’s march) is arrested and beheaded by screen characters in a scene of public execution. The tone is one of high parody:

Nor are aristocrats and mad projectionists their only catch. Other milieus slide by....the mobs...cry out for blood and brains. ‘The Public is never wrong!’ they scream. ‘Let the revels begin!’....The aisle to the guillotine, thickly carpeted, is lined with red velvet ropes and leads to a marble staircase where, on a raised platform high as a marquee, a hooded executioner awaits like a patient usher beside his gigantic ticket chopper. A voice on the public address system is recounting...their crimes (hauteur is mentioned, glamour, dash and daring), describing them as ‘creatures of the night, a collection of the world’s most astounding horrors, these abominable parvenus of iconic transactions, the shame of a nation, three centuries in the making, brought to you now in the mightiest dramatic spectacle of all the ages!’ He can hear the guillotine blade rising and chopping, rising and chopping, like a link-and-claw mechanism in slow motion, the screams and cheers of the spectators cresting with each closing of the gate....‘Ja, zo, it iss der vages of cinema,’ mutters the drunken countess behind him, peeling off a garter to throw to the crowd. Spots appear on his clothing...and there are blinding flashes at his feet like punctures where bright light is leaking through....[T]he aroma of fresh pee in plush upholstery. Company at last! he remarks wryly to himself as the blade drops, surrendering himself finally...to that great stream of image-activity that characterizes the mortal condition, recalling for some reason a film he once saw (*The Revenge of Something-or Other*, or *The Return of, The Curse of...*), in which-- (35-36)

We, as audience members, are finally severed from agency, from conscious awareness of the narratives we shape and allow to shape us. The god of filmic time demands sacrifice, so given up are the blood of screen victims and the brains of a dependent viewership (the living dead in the films of George Romero desire the brains of the living). The screen personas we give ourselves over to are ostentatious parvenus whose triumph is the tyranny of the eye, the victory of iconicity over the connective performances that link signifier and signified. Semiotic degeneracy accompanies the ascension of the screen icon (to refer to an actor as an 'icon' is to offer the highest praise) for unlike genuine signs, which presuppose a complete triad of sign, object, and interpretant, the icon is sufficient unto itself, demanding allegiance to itself and dismissive of the conscious thought and engagement that would defeat iconolatry. The social omnipresence of film is sarcastically referred to in the above as the greatest dramatic spectacle of the ages, for it quite possibly *is*, but not for the reasons we might think. The simile we are given for the rise and fall of the guillotine brings into play an image process that is only available through film, the slow motion sequence. This is a reminder of film's enviable control of time, of its 'image-activity' and its connection to the 'mortal condition'. It is a reminder that plays in tellingly with the projectionist's last encounter with time as change, with the biotemporal moment involving the smell of urine on theatre seats. The moment is all time/change, for the urine, human body, and plush upholstery have all undergone transformation. It is this moment that provides the projectionist with a sense of connection to others, a sense not provided for him by film. The projectionist comes into the light of cognitive death, his body in one frame and his head in another, and is under

the film editor's blade. There is no epiphany on the man's part, only a stubborn looking back at the same time loops, the reels of a bygone cinema. His mind is a film he cannot see self-consciously.

Some of the fictions in the collection are highly resistant to interpretation, a density and indeterminacy designed to slow the interpretive process and allow nothing to be taken for granted. "After Lazarus" reads like a screenplay, the kind that includes remarks on how various images may be interpreted:

Titles and credits fade in and out against a plain white background, later understood as a bright but overcast sky. Silence at first; then, distantly, gradually augmenting, a hollow voice: *'I have risen! I have risen!'* As the cry grows louder, it repeats and echoes itself, until it folds in upon itself entirely, unfurling into a kind of hollow vibration which fades away as the last of the credits fade. (37)

This opening paragraph inaugurates all the key elements of the story. Absent from the narration is a viewer we may observe, so we become the viewer. We are under the opaque skies of the blank, lit screen, and are confronting the silence of non-human things. Into this silence comes a human voice asserting the possibility of transcendence out of contingent being, but the utterance is hollow and collapses in on itself, the inward turn of the faux foundational self. The bleakness of the story casts this cinematic consciousness as a death in life. A cinema of being would involve not a passive specularly proffered through false redemption, but narratives which provide occasions for conscious participation, in the face of contingency, in one's own meaning-making practices.

Events in the story are 'seen' exclusively through the camera lens, the readerly gaze directed only along those vectors or sight lines that camera work allows: "Slow even tilt down to a village on a flat plain under the overcast sky" (37). Again, we should

remember that Coover does not seek to represent the camera's gaze; his project is to activate those parts of our psyches conditioned by film viewing and to bring these into conflict with the psychology of reading and of meaning-making practices in general. That representation is not the aim should be clear upon careful consideration because mock descriptive lines abound in the piece. What could a descriptive phrase such as "[l]ong steady contemplative takes" actually conjure? Imagining this type of take requires that we partake in scene composition. Coover knows that readers will be compelled to access their memories of film as they read, recollections not of the *contents* of films but of their framing mechanisms. The fictions will thus ideally operate in relation to the cinema without ever attempting to capture it in representational nets. The story is a series of paragraphs that trace the silent progress of a camera into and along the streets of a seemingly deserted village. The lens encounters main streets, alleys, clay walls, closed doors, window sills, none of which, as an image, contributes to meaning. This tactic is likely designed to draw attention to how filmic framing rivets our attentions to the screen, engaging our habit of scanning visual environments for what our bodies require. The idea is that the medium of film suggests the possibility of pure perception taking place and leading easily to epistemic understanding. But in this literary context, the hollowness of *a framed picture without any clear interpretive frame being proffered to the viewer*, leads us to question filmic framing per se. Eventually the camera follows a funeral march, moving along with a number of pallbearers and mourners who make their way to a cemetery bearing a casket. "One of the pallbearers winces briefly or perhaps starts to smile and quickly suppresses it....One woman seems more agitated in her

grief...her shoulders shaking; she glances up: she is laughing, silently, or perhaps is about to sneeze” (41). The responses of the assembled are indeterminate, and the reader is thus denied an interpretation of events they may accept or reject. The camera captures nothing at this point in the story. The story does, however, produce meaning when it dilates the filmic frame.

It is an open casket funeral, and as the camera passes overhead while slowly zooming in on the body, “the hands of the corpse lift tremblingly from his chest, reach plaintively up toward the pallbearers, toward the camera” (44). All, including the camera, recoil in shock and watch closely the edge of the grave.

Then, at last, a pale trembling hand with long fingernails emerges from the grave and clutches at the edge. A moment later, the other hand appears. It claws for a hold, discovers at last the shovel, closes around it....The head of the corpse appears above the grave’s edge. The eyes still protrude, the lips still smile rigidly. The head pivots slowly, jerkily, like that of a wooden puppet, until it comes to stare straight at the camera. Slow withdrawing zoom. With a final effort, the corpse drags himself out of the grave, staggers to his feet, stands spare and tottering at the tip. (45)

We might conclude that this is what it means to live *after* Lazarus, and after Christ has departed from the world--we may only imagine ghoulish resurrections if unable to find the means to true salvation. But such an interpretation does not account for the presence of film logic in the story, a component that is the whole point of the piece. The story evokes that strange moment in dreams when, after an event or experience upon which our attentions have been utterly riveted all becomes retrospect and loss, followed sometimes by pale simulacra of that which once happened anew. This is the sense of time lost. Christ’s resurrection is described in Galatians 4:4 as taking place when “the fulness of the time was come” and in Ephesians 1:9 “in the dispensation of the fulness of times”. Time

is pregnant with futurity and potential when Christ walks the earth. When he raises Lazarus from the dead, time is essentially reversed, kept at the full. But Christ is departed (“*I have risen!*”), and after ages of belief--after the Word of scripture--the Image now presides over an age of a hyperreality in which time forestalled in frames of filmic time is our solace. Photographic images are set forward, performing poor miracles that only seemingly restore temporal plenitude. Coover asserts that our movement into the time of images is a false resurrection; the viewing subject only arrives in George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, a film which was followed by the appearance of *Return of the Living Dead*, perhaps the most bizarre sequel in movie history since, from a conceptual point of view, it presents a macabre infinite regress--we return to a movie that is a return to a ghastly return. When the corpse stares at the camera, the camera is implicated in this death in life, is the only force in evidence that could have created it. At no other point in the story is the sequence of events as gripping, not a surprise since Hollywood has long understood that horror engages attention enough to suspend awareness of the passage of time.

The scene continues:

Suddenly, a man, a pallbearer perhaps lunges forward, jostling the camera on the way...lifts the dead man above his head and hurls it, its limbs twitching violently, back into the grave. There is a deep-throated community wail, almost a scream, then silence. Close-up of the pallbearer’s face: his thin lips are pulled back from exertion, his eyes bulge slightly in excitement or horror, as he stares into the grave. Then, slowly, he lifts his eyes and gazes about him: he is alone, the cemetery is empty. (45)

That the camera is jostled as the man moves forward makes it a witness, rather than an omniscient narrator. It is an effect which, in news broadcasts and documentary films,

secures credulity on the part of viewers, or at the very least garners our attention since the camera's gaze is our own, as if we were there. Once the corpse rises we are very much inside the narrative and are as much attendant on emergent meaning as the pallbearers are on the corpse. This is the moment whereat a truth or insight should arrive, a culmination in epiphany at a crucial moment in narrative time. But the risen corpse has unnaturally reversed the order of events. The pallbearer attempts to force the more familiar narrative forward, but once he does so he becomes the star of the film. Now described in the same terms the revived corpse was, he is now changed, is resurrected himself, but into what? I suggest that it is into filmic time as his story is told by a camera and runs in the filmic present tense, one that we shortly see is prolonged in infinite regress. The people are gone because he is lost to film, as the projectionist finally is.

He makes his way back to the village, which appears as empty as it was at the outset. But a funeral march soon approaches and passes him, and he leaps up to look in the casket, only to find it empty. "He slips over the edge and down into the casket, pokes pleurably at the plush inner lining....Timidly, he eases himself down into the cushions, folding his hands on his chest" (51). The burial repeats itself with the signal difference that when the casket is lowered into the ground, it is lowered "toward the camera" (52). We are now in the dark of the grave and could conceivably rise up and stumble back to the start of the story, to the deserted village as does the risen corpse/pallbearer and read/see it all again, realizing in horror that we are in film's grim loop ekphrastically enacted. We may make full sense of this conclusion by considering events just prior to the pallbearer's second joining of the funeral procession. He enters one house and then



many more, all of which contain a room with a mirror and women's clothing. "The pallbearer grabs up the dress, stares at it a moment, then pulls it on over his black formal suit....he then peers at the mirror to see the pallbearer standing before *her*" (46 my emphasis). S/he then runs from house to house repeating these actions until espying the funeral march. Coover presents the popular cinema by making explicit its recursive spoolings of limited possibility, the coded figurations of our responses to time, and the image-centered and asexual reproduction of ways of seeing that the film medium actively promotes.

In case we have missed it in "The Phantom of the Movie Palace", Coover explicitly thematizes in "Shootout at Gentry's Junction" the violence and violent sex that have always been on offer from Hollywood and which have ever been consumed with relish by viewers. Instead of depicting a figure such as the projectionist (basically a psychological case study of one consumer of film), we are this time given an inverted Western, a postmodern *High Noon* in which a libidinous and sadistic figure, "the Mexican", emerges as hero to the people of a plains town. He indiscriminately tortures and murders. He rapes the schoolteacher in view of delighted children, and forcibly compels a recently widowed man to smile and laugh in view of delighted bar patrons. The satire is straightforward enough, culminating in the expected noontime showdown with the Sheriff. The Mexican easily prevails. The story is, in the words of the Mexican, "*funny, yes, of course, but, eh...macabre. Yes, of truth one would say, I think, macabre*" (59). Baldly thrust forward and allowed reign over the plot world is the cinematic evil that drew audiences to films of the 40's and 50's, an evil which the blushing and blinking

camera of the day rarely offered the details of. The film audience is, of course, the townspeople. The pleasure they gain vicariously from watching the Mexican indulge his sadism is really only a slight variation on the pleasure we take in the suffering and demise of screen characters. Our attention is directed toward time when we discover that the duel is scheduled not for high noon but for 12:10. The Mexican appears grinning, holding a gold pocketwatch the Sheriff recognizes as his own. The Mexican surrenders, offers the watch to the Sheriff who slowly disarms the villain. But in what must be a minute later, the Sheriff hears a click, looks down at his empty holster then up to the barrel of his own gun. He is shot dead in the face, and Coover's version of *High Noon* presents filmic time as devil, as delivering to us what we would ask of it but not in the way we hope or expect. This story's inversion of the typical Western that has good defeat evil inside a highly predictable format is every bit as repetitive as the object of its parody. The story concludes with the Mexican riding off into "*the ultimate light of the western sun*" (72), and we are reminded of the beginning of Beckett's *Murphy*: "the sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new....the sun, the poor old sun in the virgin again for the billionth time."

As the collection's program/table of contents tells us, selected "short subjects" appear. The first of these is a page-long offering entitled "Gilda's Dream". As Kennedy observes, the story evokes the Rita Hayworth vehicle *Gilda* in which Hayworth performs a provocative dance in a South American nightclub (81). He also notes that Coover's characteristic reversals are in evidence, though he fails to explain their significance. The piece bears a notable resemblance to Kafka's dreamscape fiction, particularly "The

Country Doctor”, but while the surreal elements of a Kafka piece may be federated if placed in any number of interpretive frameworks, such elements in Coover’s effort initially remain disparate and indeterminate. “I was in the men’s washroom, doing a kind of striptease” the narrator tells us, a dance that takes place before a group of persons speaking “Spanish...German, English, Italian, French” (74). The attendant points at the dancer’s oddly numbered testicles and calls him a peasant. There is a sense that the narrator has just saved the attendant’s life. Someone says to the narrator, “You can’t rule the world, Gilda, by passing the shoe”. Finally, Gilda feels free enough to fire the attendant, shoot the Germans, and continue her dance. What can be made of all this? One must turn to the one thread that runs through the piece. A particular film has been evoked, and if we accept that Gilda dreams inside a version of this film, then the elements to do with viewing and viewed are, particularly in the context of the collection, important. Gilda says that during the striptease her eyes “stared back at themselves: stared, that is, at their own staring”. She believes she is in danger of “breaking into little pieces” and that a man who stares at her through a louvered stall door frightens her:

I knew he was watching me through the slats, because I could see myself through his eyes. From that perspective, I was both threatening and desirable....Suddenly I felt free....I was back together again! But then I heard the click of the secret weapon, and realized that my surrender to him...had disturbed the categories. I’d gambled and lost. My pride, my penis, my glove, my enigmatic beauty, my good name, everything....There would be no going home... (75)

The secret weapon that clicks could well be the link and claw mechanism of the camera that drags the projectionist of the opening story into the frame and which is the claw that taps the shoulder of the woman who is seated among corpses in “Intermission”. He, the

performing subject, initially possesses control of those who gaze upon him since he is perceived by them as both threatening and desirable. He knows this because he has seen himself through a spectator's eyes. He has not been fragmented into film frames, "little pieces", and believes he remains whole, not subject to filmic manipulation. But he tells us he has surrendered to the viewer before, and the secret weapon thus seals his fate--he is now the hapless ingenue of other stories in the collection. The sense of loss at the end of the story involves the fact that she may now only see herself as do others (her eyes stare back at themselves from mirrors as though she were other). Categories disturbed include self and other, viewer and viewed, male and female. The element of transvestitism is not a mere reversal of gender (for what purpose would this serve?) but is, like the scene involving the pallbearer and the women's clothing, a symbol of the asexual reproduction of the filmically aware self, the coming into film through the giving over of the cognitive self to film logic. The process is metastatic and is thus construed in the fiction as infinite regress, a most apt structural metaphor.

"Inside the Frame" appears to affirm J. Dudley Andrew's sentiment, quoted above, that [S]ignification doesn't simply exist [in the filmic medium]; it must be created....The camera captures nothing". This short piece offers a kaleidoscope of disconnected film images that are singly or together devoid of any contexts which would render them meaningful: tumbleweeds, riderless horses, a dancing couple, a Sheriff/Indian gun battle, attentive bellhops, a tear glistening in an upturned eye. They are such because we are inside the frame, inside frames per se, and thus all screen elements become equivalent. At the close of what reads like another screenplay, come

the interrogatives, “And the banging door? The banging door?” (78). Since the story is one of many that take film as their subject, and since the style is that of the screen writer’s, the title and the final lines may provide a satisfactory interpretive frame. To imprison one in a false position or context is to engage in a “frame-up”; power comes with the ability to control frame stories, to decide on contexts and conditions for viewing of the subject. The “banging door” is the camera’s shutter as seen from *within* the camera. There is no meaning within the frame, for that which creates meaning is beyond the threshold of the lens. Coover offers here an ontological purview that literalizes the fear of having one’s picture taken, taken *from* one as it were, from out of one’s self-framing.

“Charlie in the House of Rue” offers us Charlie Chaplin moving through one of his film worlds, “his eyelids flicking shut and open under his black derby like camera shutters”. In this world, everything is illuminated by the projector light and shines “with a bright sourceless light. Charlie swaggers jauntily through this light” (86). He interacts with a number of inhabitants of the house in predictably slapstick fashion. But these persons are in despair, and Charlie’s antics become not comic but cruel, and bring about tragic results. Again, Coover would have us take a closer look at what film (in this case, ‘timeless’ Hollywood comedy) actually presents to us. All of Chaplin’s angry persecutors, figures whom the tramp usually bests, outwits, or defeats, are in this fiction suffering the usual emotional states of distress--the agitated policeman who Chaplin runs afoul of, the melancholic diner he spills scalding soup on, the woman in tears he would console. Sentimentality, designed to elicit empathy in Chaplin’s films, is generally

channeled toward the hero tramp, while the suffering of others on the screen is less considered. Coover forces us to think on how it is the woe of others in the films becomes so invisible, just so much necessary discomfort required to allow Chaplin to function comically. In the House of Rue, a depressive, catatonic automaton of a man sits impassive as Charlie repeatedly and accidentally scalds him with the soup the man is trying to eat. An impassive woman is unmoved by his efforts to engage her attentions and finally attempts to hang herself. He tries desperately to cheer her up, but as he does so he accidentally knocks her over a balcony, the rope still around her neck. He is unable to cut her down and can no where find help. As he runs from room to room, a maid strips and attempts to have sex with him, a corpse emerges from a coffin in a viewing room (only to be decapitated by the falling coffin lid and to then take a prat fall on the fallen head), and the tramp and the policeman engage in a scene of pure bedlam that is deeply unsettling in its schizophrenia. The man burned by the soup catches up with Charlie and rains blows down upon him in “an endless loop” (108). But “[s]lowly, even as the blows fall steadily, almost mechanically, small changes begin to occur” (109). Nature abhors a closed circuit, and one is reminded of the puzzled observation by scientists who study aging that it is as if cells in the body simply get tired of replicating themselves. The will to recursive and nostalgic engagement with a recursive medium is thus cast as unnatural. Charlie escapes the beating but not the recursions of the film world in which he is trapped.

Charlie clearly occupies filmic space, and must abide by the torments resident there. When he finally makes it back to where the woman is still hanging, her clothes are

moth-eaten and covered with dust. Being of film, it is strange that Chaplin's character is at odds with the laws that govern this film world. Therefore, we are compelled to think on what he precisely is, and are reminded of Nietzsche's second question of conscience: "Are you genuine? or only an actor? A representative? or that itself which is represented?--Finally you are no more than an imitation of an actor" (3). Charlie cannot function in relation to this world of filmic repressions set free, so perhaps he is us, the reader-viewer, condemned to watch the course of events in the House of Rue and in formulaic cinema. He is also the only figure in the collection of a director, so perhaps he is here as a representative, a purveyor of the medium trapped in the horror of his own creation, as is Victor Frankenstein. Or is he finally only an imitation of an actor, part of that second order simulation that characterizes the hyperreal? Does the film only imitate the stage actor, denuding the actor of any control of his performance (as, I say in my second chapter, Benjamin points out), and is this then why Chaplin is powerless? As with the cubist fictions in *Pricksongs and Descants*, Coover plays with and rearranges the elements of a medium's logic, but this time his subject is film. His effort is recombinant; film elements are scrambled but do not cohere into a satisfying analog of a popular film. The suggestion is that the "right" ordering of these elements is as arbitrary as other arrangements, and that reader-viewers should not look to popular cinema for pre-existent Meaning. The contexts for viewing, and one's own interpretive frames, are the real show.

"Milford Junction, 1939" recalls the travelogue as seen in the theatres of the 30's, 40's and 50's. This vehicle of low realism pretended to capture the essence of a place when it only ever succeeded in supplying one or another version of a locale, and

generally quite *dull* versions of places the camera visited. Words and images had to accord with the pretended pieties that surrounded and imbued the cinema of the day and thus the places filmed seemed to accord as well. The narrator of the story is an antiquarian prone to waxing rhapsodic over the approach of tea time. The narrative, though enthusiastic, reveals a boring town, one made so by the filmic treatment it receives. The tedium and banality is that of the era's travelogue. Characteristically, Coover triggers eruptions into the frame of that which the frame would suppress, and in this piece there are two explosions. The first involves an ontological uncertainty over the town felt on the part of the narrator who wonders if Milford Junction might not be a mere pantomime put on for the cameras or for the few travelers who visit, persons "checking their watches, showing signs of impatience and fatigue, appearing and disappearing like actors moving on and off stage" (142). The steam from the train seems occasionally to erase all the town, leaving only the junction in existence,<sup>19</sup> but when the locale does breathe and move, the patterns and activities are cripplingly dull. Imagining such a film, one thinks of Jameson's raising of the question of boredom as an aesthetic response and a phenomenological problem. He writes "that boredom with a particular kind of work or style or content can always be used productively as a precious symptom of our own existential, ideological, and cultural limits, an index of what has to be refused in the way of other people's cultural practices" (72). He speaks as well of boredom in experimental video, a tedium that triggers in the viewer the precise sense of time the artist hopes the piece will engage. Coover makes this fiction a gray purgatory in order to have us



interrogate a specific film genre. The other eruption involves Milford residents and a few of those traveling through. The persons in this scene are prone to

crying out, utterly dazed and bewildered...even occasionally doing violence to themselves...throwing themselves under the speeding boat train, or more likely right under the tables, engaging in rather undignified scuffling, as one might call it...("There's still time!" one of them may be gasping, as though in pain, or rapture, or perhaps mere surprise, the other replying: "We're only middle-aged once, there's no time at all!") (145)

Time anxiety enters the frame and, as usual in Coover, the human response to this unease is to either sex or violence.

I have discussed the closing story of the collection, "You Must Remember This", throughout, so will refer to it here only to offer some closing comments. The fictions throw the reader again and again into a filmic world that forces us to a point of undecidability as regards cinematic and paracinematic time. The technique is an ironic acknowledgment of the Augustinian notion of time as a perpetual present consisting of things 'past' (memory), present (sight), and 'future' (expectation). To read the fictions involves thinking on films seen in the past, on the reading instant at hand, and on the manipulation of expectations inherent to all narratives. The irony comes in that the supposed 'timelessness' of film is set up in the fictions as an emblem of Heideggerian, existential phenomenology; film—static and unchanging while it is the viewer who moves along an event horizon—does not offer an escape from linear time into the eternal but is actually a reflection of an inescapable existential 'now' wherein the *Lebenswelt* or life-world is only experienced as a perpetual present. Yet the future is something we must pretend exists because arguably it is an illusion the body demands. In Coover, Ilsa/Bacall and Rick/Bogart are destroyed when they attempt to live in Heidegger's bad

present. And of course, they 'live' in the present tense of film. They refuse to be future oriented, leaving Lazlo and the Nazis to their fates. As a result, they get their wish, and their narrative world comes to a halt, causing Rick to then beg Ilsa for a narrative as the lights slowly go out on them. Coover inserts into the familiar film a long erotic scene, one that is not pornographic since he provides a frame, an earnest defense of the body in the discourse he offers, and thus provides the story bodies with notional room to maneuver. Ilsa, lying head-to-toe with Rick, sees his buttocks, his "dark little hole". In a near scatological moment, the moment is eschatological (Coover is not above such punning), and we are to think on the ends of humankind. But in Coover there are only narrative ends, since the philosophy of the fiction does not admit the apprehension of the 'real' by fiction. At the end of the narration, as the two make love, "there is the bittersweet fall into actuality" (175). Once they have fallen, the story ends.

## Chapter Four

### Thomas Pynchon and the Threat of Incorporation

Although dreams were once powerful, they have been made puerile by the movies, radio and newspapers. Among many betrayals, this one is the worst.

--from Nathanael West's  
*Miss Lonelyhearts*

So...there crept over Berlin a gigantic Laurel and Hardy film, silent, silent....I don't know what other economies may have been affected by the A4.

--Säure speaking to Slothrop  
in *Gravity's Rainbow*

*Metropolis* was Hitler's favorite film--for all the wrong reasons, of course.

--David A. Cook in *A History of Narrative Film*

I hope it is evident to my reader that I began with fictions produced after the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and have worked my way back to Pynchon's masterwork, a fiction wholly infused by film techniques and contents transposed into literary language and by formulations of the corporate contexts for both the American movie industry and its targeted audience. It is tempting to suggest that the work is a

progenitor to later forms of mediant fiction. To make such a claim would be to set the work up as an agent of literary/historical causality, a critical move that would be quite inappropriate to a work that offers the following critiques closely aligned with specific characters: Franz Pökler, an amoral, wartime German engineer, is called a “cause-and-effect man” (159); Roger Mexico, a mathematician who rejects behaviorism, who helps Slothrop, and who joins the Counterforce, a group opposed to attempts to control all aspects of human life, argues that we should “junk cause-and-effect entirely, and strike off at some other angle” (89); and Leni Pökler argues with her husband that what is at issue is “‘Not produce...not cause. It all goes together. Parallel, not series. Metaphor. Signs and systems. Mapping on to different coordinate systems. I don’t know...’ She didn’t know, all she was trying to do was reach” (159). I do not suggest (and neither does Pynchon) that causal sequences do not take place or that referring to them as such fails to describe aspects of actuality, only that causality ought not to become the primary and unquestioned implicit conceptual frame of reference for either fictional narratives or scientific study. I have used the language of causality occasionally in this writing to describe mediant fiction as a matter of expedience, but it should be noted here that of the four writers I focus on, it is Pynchon who most privileges processes of communication and restraints over causes and effects, circularity over linearity, reciprocity over one-way relations, probabilities over laws, ecosystems over closed systems, and relation over phenomena. The German A-4 ballistic missile in *Gravity’s Rainbow* emerges as a point of termination for forms of Western, positivist thought, and is directly connected to the amorality of Weismann and Pökler (we also read of “Beláustegui, acting ship’s

engineer...from Entre Ríos, and a positivist in the regional tradition" [383]). Pynchon passes judgment on various ways of construing actuality, and narrow and restricted arguments about causal influence do not fare well in his estimation. Therefore, I do not label Pynchon a near ancestor to a DeLillo or a Coover during a time period wherein literary and philosophical developments are numerous, compressed, and interrelated (Wallace speaks in his essay on U. S. fiction and television of "a literary territory that's gone from Darwinianly naturalistic to cybernetically post-postmodern in eighty years" [151]).<sup>1</sup> Pynchon's fictional logic discourages us from placing his works inside a literary history that speaks of isolated literary effects. That such logic encourages contemplation of homologies over sequences has helped me to see that to argue Pynchon's influence of Wallace, DeLillo, and Coover would be to untenably assume that, first, these writers respond in their own writing to Pynchon's remarks on our condition in visual culture rather than to the moment in time of which they are also part, and, second, that they zeroed in on the mediant aspects of Pynchon's work when they may well have been taken instead by the fiction's gothic elements, or its handling of the psychology of sex and religion, or its critique of modern science. I will leave the question of influence to others, and will only enumerate in small part Pynchon's impressive array of filmic transpositions to the literary plane of expression, as this task has been well taken up by critics.<sup>2</sup> My main intention is to link aspects of this array to a specifically political theme that emerges at those points where state and corporate forces, literary and filmic modes, and human and institutional agencies meet. It is a theme of propagandistic warfare through signs set

against the backdrop of World War II and bearing important implications for the postwar condition of late capitalism.

In such a condition, the self suffers dissolution just as Slothrop does when, towards the end of the novel, his agency is dispersed throughout the Zone and he disappears. Selfhood in *Gravity's Rainbow* is an insubstantial and contingent affair. But whether we speak of the self as a shifting mass of protean and incomplete identifications or conceive of it as a site whereupon relatively stable patterns of thought cohere, the point is that the self *aspires* to constitution and to certainty. Whether or not the self may become coherent is beside the point because social agents proceed upon the assumption that they know *how* to proceed in accordance with sundry convictions. How to proceed within in the social is a political question. The politics social agents act upon are what Pynchon attempts to express, not the final ontological status of the self, what he describes in his introduction to the stories in *Slow Learner* as “not the still photograph of finished character but the movie, the soul in flux” (23). The philosophical view of the self in *Gravity's Rainbow* may well be anti-essentialist in orientation, but this does not mean fractured and ungrounded selfhoods do not violently contend, and in so doing, cause suffering. This, after all, is the point of the wartime setting. Therefore, we would do well to ask along with Charles Altieri how it is “we find within anti-essentialist positions...means of developing the kinds of values that we can treat as shareable, so that we can develop our differences while preserving fealty to general political ideals establishing a basis for negotiating with others?” (1994: 5). Mediant fiction is engaged in just such a search, and I suggest that Pynchon's concern for general liberal values is

manifest in his promotion of economic liberalism, an endorsement that arrives through his scathing indictment of the monopolistic impulses and practices of the late capitalist corporation, and the corollary of these, the bid to ill-constitute the subject through semiotic warfare.<sup>3</sup>

When media conglomerates seek mergers with, or acquisitions of individual companies in order to lessen costs and to eliminate competition, they initiate what economists call *vertical integration*. The term refers to the expansion of commercial firms into different levels of the same industry of which they are a part. Production studios, hardware manufacturers, and distribution companies are, in terms of their functions, separate divisions of the film industry. But during the last twenty years, Japanese equipment manufacturers have acquired various Hollywood studios: the Sony Corporation bought Columbia pictures, and Matsushita absorbed Universal Studios (Hoskins et al. 22). Today, all the major studios in the U.S. are vertically integrated and have come to exert enormous socioeconomic influence at home and abroad. They have been able to maintain control of the film industry in the West due to their large production and promotion budgets, capital outlay that firms in smaller nation states cannot afford and that garners increased market dominance over time: "A product differentiation barrier exists [between domestic and foreign film and film markets] in the sense that the majors enjoy an 'accumulative preference' by consumers for their products" (Hoskins et al. 61). Hollywood has long only acted the part of an industry marked by competition and free enterprise. Publicly contributing to the appearance of a multiplicity of corporate entities while consolidating ownership as much as possible, film

conglomerates have resisted government efforts to force divestment of holdings and have extended ownership connections across national boundaries to the extent that it becomes difficult to speak of the film industry's economic activities in terms of international cultures:

During the 'Golden Age' of the Hollywood studios...the industry was a mature oligopoly (a small number of large interdependent firms, each controlling a significant share of the market). Each of the majors...was vertically integrated. Majors have continued to dominate despite government moves to eliminate vertical integration (with the Paramount Decree of 1949 requiring studios to divest themselves of their theatre assets) and to limit anti-competitive practices such as blind bidding and block booking. Worldwide concern, in both communications and public policy circles, has been with the dominance of trade in television programmes, feature films and video by producers domiciled in the US. However, some authors question how useful it is to discuss competitive advantage in terms of nation states....[P]olitical boundaries are no longer of any significance. (Hoskins et al. 53, 37)<sup>4</sup>

One may think again here of Eco who has said that, "politicians, educators, communications scientists believe that to control the power of the media you must control two communicating moments of the chain: the Source and the Channel. In this way they believe they can control the message" (1986: 142). As I noted in my first chapter, Eco goes on to say that the only way to disperse, resist, or control media and message is to concern ourselves with the viewer at the point of reception. But as I have argued, that viewer may only resist if she is able to ascribe intention to messages and to interpret that which is viewed as issuing from a corporate agency. In an age of sprawling and elusive corporate ownership (operating in conjunction with client firms that are also under complex proprietary umbrellas), such assigning becomes impossible if we accept corporate semiosis on its own terms and suspend disbelief, for example, while watching



the spectacle of advertising 'wars' between high profile and competing soft drink companies owned by the same parent firm.

Most viewers do not have the time or resources to trace a message back through its channel to a corporate source, or, after having done so, to demand accountability. Mediant fiction does not hesitate to enact this tracing. It connects, in the strongest possible terms, unaccountable and veiled agents of mass dissemination of signs with the autocratic, the anti-egalitarian, the totalitarian: Wallace likens network TV executives to the Russian nobleman of Czarist Russia, DeLillo aligns the auras of corporatized mass culture with Mao, Coover presents as Sadean the subtexts of Hollywood films, and Pynchon, by linking both Fritz Lang's expressionism and the character of Gerhardt von Göll (also a film director) with filmic semiosis of a solipsistic cast, compels his reader to think on the will to power that inheres in propagandistic film: "[a]ccentuation of the self, individualistic vision of the world, warping of reality are among factors that come to have historical significance from the standpoint of some cultural historians who have detected a connection between these films and the emergence of Nazism" (Clerc 114). Pynchon makes sure we do not forget that cutting-edge rocket and film technology moved from Germany to the U.S. during and after World War II, to be projected back upon the world in the form of nuclear and cinematic dominance.<sup>5</sup>

Pynchon is concerned with questions of culpability, with the akratic or more general moral failings of fascists, collaborationists, and commercial profiteers during World War II. *Gravity's Rainbow* makes use of the war, of the vast network of conflicting agents that was involved, to present an extraordinarily complex model of

effects of power that speaks to postwar political orders, particularly late capitalism. This model is based on the processes of intersubjectivity, the discursive practices of governments and corporations (which, as we shall see, are intermingled in the fiction), and the constitutive powers of mass media. Joseph Tabbi writes that

In assigning responsibility to persons within the Nazi rocket state, Pynchon tends not to dwell on charismatic leaders, whether historical or imagined. The full force of his critique is trained instead on the individual civilians and engineers who served the state, people like Franz Pökler who spent years at Peenemünde...without questioning the facility's use of slave labor, and who then moved to the rocket works at Nordhausen without seeking to find out what went on in the neighboring extermination camp, Dora. (99-100)

It is indeed the case that Pynchon does not focus on those figures at the centers of wartime auras. But while personal responsibility and individual decision making are indeed foregrounded, I suggest that it is within the larger context of social semiosis and institutional mediation of same that issues of agency more fully play themselves out in the fiction. Pökler, the "cause-and-effect man", seeks to perceive narrow lines of influence. His way of thinking might conclude that Hitler was sole cause of the war rather than generate a picture of what factors produced a Hitler and allowed for his rise to power. His holistic-minded wife is frustrated by his constricted purview. Pökler believes that

The corporations and the universities--the Army said--didn't want to risk capital or manpower on developing anything as fantastic as a rocket. The Army had nowhere to turn but to private inventors and clubs like the VfR. "Shit," said Leni. "They're all in it together. You really can't see that, can you." (400)

Pynchon builds extensively on the ideas related to law, to covenants and contracts, that he began developing in *The Crying of Lot 49*. *Gravity's Rainbow* is legalistic in character

because it posits intentions and speculates on the effects of suspect actions by focusing in large part, as I discuss below, on its own textual operations. But finally it only sounds a moral or ethical protest because nation states have ever been eager to appease agents of commerce through legislative concessions--the objectionable character of corporate practices to do with visual culture were in Germany, and are in the U. S., legal.

Manipulations of the viewing subject by filmmakers in Axis or Allied camps were entirely state sanctioned, and these do not escape Slothrop's attention. He is annoyed by "the lads in Hollywood telling us how grand it all is over here" (135), and after Ensign Morituri of the Imperial Japanese Navy tells Slothrop that he "would sit most of the day watching Allied footage for what could be pulled and worked into newsreels to make the Axis look good and the other side look bad", Slothrop says, "'Looks like German movies have warped other outlooks around here too'" (474).

International legal codes relating to corporations are, in many instances, ambiguous and therefore easily ignored or exploited. For instance, bilateral co-production treaties are generally able to skirt national content rules. As well, consider the relationship of the multinational corporation to emergent global legal protocols:

An essential task of transnational corporate codes is to set out legal and ethical standards in the form of general precepts, expressed as rights and corresponding obligations for multinational corporations to respect wherever they do business....However, such precepts are typically vague. Terminology used to formulate transnational precepts must be of the type that can be applied to a variety of legal, ethical, and cultural environments....Consequently, transnational codes are constructed against background conceptions of possibility which influence the way in which managers, executives, jurists, and other individuals apply precepts to facts by interpreting concrete meanings for legal and ethical predicates which denote indeterminate, 'fuzzy' boundaries. (Jackson 142)

Where there is ambiguity, individual wills may seize the indeterminate moment and purloin the letter of law to dress aggressive corporate practices in acceptable legal garb. Ironically, in an age when postmodern localism is, in many circles, privileged over global thought, local communities suffer disempowerment as global capital now shifts unpredictably in a transnational shell game.

The question of communities looms large when multinational corporations do: “The larger and more open the markets...the greater [multinational enterprises’] competitive advantage over smaller local firms that remain rooted in a particular community and play by its rules” (Korten 126). Tensions between citizenry and the charter of incorporation may be seen as the battle between the subject and the corporate entity. The “business corporation is an artificial creation, shielding owners and managers while preserving corporate privilege and existence. Artificial or not, corporations have won more rights under law than people have--rights which government has protected with armed force” (Grossman and Adams 6).

I suggest here that *Gravity's Rainbow* offers a critique of the twentieth-century corporate entity by reminding of corporate collusion with international aggression (the military industrial complex) and by strictly aligning moral fables such as the Pökler story with the filmically configured psychologies of characters. Pynchon speaks to a contemporary condition that sets up visual culture as apologist and propagandist for the corporate entity, which practices economic hegemony against rival entities and sends out semiotic sorties against the individual human subject.<sup>6</sup> World War II only provides a metaphorical backdrop for meditations on semiotic warfare, on the fate of the human

subject in the face of signs which carry with them effects of power: the pronoun “They” in *Gravity's Rainbow* refers to the human agencies that are without proper names and that direct fellow subjects from behind institutional veils; the agencies of citizens and corporations are pitted against one another through characters who are wartime *agents*, like Tyrone Slothrop, or who are, like von G  ll the director, directing the battle; global warfare finds late capitalist expression in global commerce and transnational movement of not troops but capital; the accumulative preference Hollywood hopes to bring about is seen to take shape in the psychological interiors of those like Slothrop who interpret their life experiences in direct relation to the stars and plots of the popular cinema ; and corporations are not mere institutional structures of convenience for individuals, but are entities which semiotically and psychologically configure individuals such as Slothrop and Pirate Prentice who then cross national boundaries into the ‘Zone’ (that is both the material world and the realm of signs), carrying with them the seeds of corporate semiosis. The war machine is revealed as being as much corporate and filmic as governmental.

In a work devoted not to the representation of reality but to the reifying of the power of our representations, an economic entropy and a concomitant psychological solipsism play out at the level of individual lives. The vertical integration of the Hollywood studio system finds two structural equivalents in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The first concerns the expansionist aspirations of the Hollywood corporation, a firm that seeks to integrate both financial entities like itself into its own economies *and* that seeks to integrate the subject into the logic of consumer visual culture. The extensive use of film

mechanisms and contents in a fiction set during World War II provides the link between the business of Hollywood and the business of war—it is DeLillo’s ballistic metaphor of camera as gun blown up to international proportions. Pynchon ‘incorporates’ readers into the mass effects of visual culture by fashioning corporate semiosis into the fabric of his literary language. This semiosis functions in antagonistic relation to a literary sensibility that finally emerges as the more egalitarian mode by foregrounding both its own fictional mechanisms and those of a rival medium. Corporate semiosis, on the other hand, does not seek to explain either mode (indeed, it seeks to veil its own operations and undermine competing signifying systems), and thus its limitations and its dangers are laid bare. Pynchon expands his literary language to encompass our condition in film and then draws attention to this immersion. We see that corporate semiosis of the Hollywood variety has integrated a number of subjects in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. When Slothrop has his discussion about movies with Ensign Morituri, they begin as follows:

“Yeah, I...” why is Slothrop drawling this way? “saw ya watching...last night too, mister....”

“You think I am a voyeur. Yes you do. But it isn’t that. There is no thrill, I mean. But when I watch people, I feel less alone.”

“W’l hell, Ensign...why don’tcha just...join in? *They’re* always lookin’ ‘fer...company.”

‘Oh, my goodness,’ grinning one of them big polyhedral Jap grins, like they do, “then I would feel *more* alone.” (472)

The narrator asks here why Slothrop is affecting the cadences of a Southern accent as heard in the movies and also aligns a racial stereotype with information gained visually.<sup>7</sup> The ensign prefers watching people to having physical contact with them, possibly as a result of his assignment which confines him to watching film footage for long hours each day. Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake generate for one another “flip film-dialogue,

scenarios they make up to play alone for themselves” (121). Seaman Bodine speaks almost exclusively in movie accents and imitations of “the fake film-lives of strangers” (684), and Pökler, when he hears Eisenhower announce the invasion of Normandy, believes the man sounds exactly like Clark Gable (577). Human beings, being imitative, will adopt behaviors visually and aurally apparent to them. But when it is behavior on film being aped, that which is seen carries with it a cognitive logic, one that posits the mere act of watching as sufficient to full enjoyment of the contents of experience (this is perhaps why the ensign prefers to watch in much the same manner as Chance in Kosinski’s *Being There*). Elsewhere, in relation to the ominous rocket technology, we read of “the Askania films of Rocket flights”, footage of flight trajectories and of instrument dials aboard missiles, and these are described as “pornographies of flight”, as “[r]eminders of impotence and abstraction” (567). The atomization and abstraction of visceral experience through filmic simulacra becomes a tool to inscribe in the subject the blinkered vision necessary to create an amoral person like Pökler. The engineer ends up loving his daughter, taken from him by the Nazis who restrict his access to her, with a “love something like the persistence of vision, for They have used it to create for him the moving image of a daughter, flashing her only these summertime frames of her, leaving it to him to build the illusion of a single child” (422).

Pynchon argues that film ushers in a fundamental change in consciousness. In discussing Julian Jaynes’s theories of mind, Charles Hampden-Turner writes, “Consciousness is a lexical field, whose terms are metaphors or analogues of behavior in the physical world. We project syntheses of associations into an imagined screen within

our heads” (90). Perhaps it is consciousness to which the narrative refers when, at the close of the fiction as the bomb descends upon the theatre, we see “a dim page spread before us....old fans, who’ve always been at the movies (haven’t we?)”, consciousness as “a film we have not learned to see” (760). In *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Jaynes argues that consciousness only exists when the mind makes metaphorical connections. We are reminded here of the argument put forward by Pöckler’s wife Leni that metaphor is what is at issue in thought, not mere abstraction. Just after the description of missile test footage as “pornographies of flight”, as a contrast to the abstraction described there, we read of children “jumping village pavements from heaven to hell”, the line of vertical rocket flight differently configured, metaphor. Jaynes also discusses his idea of the bicameral mind, an earlier evolutionary configuration of the brain that saw the two hemispheres split in such a way that in moments of stress, consciousness would be replaced by voice-like commandments heard in the brain. Comfort (in the form of a felt presence and advice) would accompany a threat of death. Pynchon appears to suggest that film may fulfill the function of this early bicamerality and perhaps suggests that an unfortunate devolution is involved. For his characters, film provides interior solace and direction once it has constituted our mental image and language tracks. We read in *Gravity’s Rainbow* of John Dillinger, whom we know from the historical record was killed outside a theatre he had just merged from.

Dillinger

at the end, found a few seconds’ strange mercy in the movie images that hadn’t quite yet faded from his eyeballs—Clark Gable unregenerate to fry in the chair...there was still for the doomed man some shift of personality in effect—the way you’ve felt for a little while afterward in the real



muscles of your face and voice, that you *were* Gable, the ironic eyebrows, the proud, shining, snakelike head—to help Dillinger through the bushwhacking, and a little easier into death. (516)

*Gravity's Rainbow* begins with the lines, “A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now. It is too late. The Evacuation proceeds, but it’s all theatre.” The missile, made possible by an atomized understanding of flight based on one-way relations and laws (the stuff of positivism--see the quote from Pynchon below concerning Leibniz) flies and explodes, banishing metaphor. The evacuation is that of the subject lighting out not *for* the territory but *out of all territory* and into the dream maps given us in the theatre. We do not finally leave the theatre of war but instead learn to carry with us the mode of seeing necessary for our subjugation.

The second structural equivalent of vertical integration arrives inside Pynchon’s inversion of the vertical structure of mimesis, and three types of verticality here converge, a mapping, as Leni Pöckler might put it, on to different coordinate systems: vertical integration of the economic variety involves incorporation of diverse economic nodes into one entity under one director, the corporate executive officer (CEO); Hollywood semiosis involves incorporation of disparate narrative elements into one representational narrative under one film director; and the vertical structure of representation, as it comes to us in the Ideal and Realist classifications of mimesis, subsumes art and the actuality to which art tries to refer into a theory wherein essential forms govern all. Each of these vertical structures are hierarchical, placing power and authority at the top of a definitive structure. The Idealist classification arises from Plato’s conception of dramatic mimesis and involves a complex, two-state formulation that sees art as able to reproduce the forms

and contents of life outside of art. This life outside imitates in turn the forms of an inaccessible and ideal realm. This is the classic essentialist conceptualization of reference and meaning, a position that relegates art to a secondary representational status (life itself more closely approaches the ideal). The Realist classification comes to us from Aristotle and involves the idea that art may imitate the structural relationship between ideal forms by imitating the structure of human action. The Ideal and Realist classifications may be understood as essentialism *contra* structuralism, although it should be noted that the latter also orients itself in lesser relation to a realm of forms external to life and art. The verticality of mimesis involved in both Plato's and Aristotle's formulations comes in the representational appeal to the meanings resident in a transcendent realm, meanings knowable through life and passively reflected in a subservient and dependent art. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the will to such top-down structures of power and influence (we should also think of the military structure of command) is linked to the will to transcendence, the impulse in human beings to conceive of unitary truth and then to impose through structure that truth on others. Pynchon very much attacks this will, and makes Colonel Weismann (Blicero), planner and builder of the A4 rocket, the fiction's sadistic spokesperson for transcendent values. He is emblematic of the whiteness of death and is thus aligned with the movie screen that, at the close of the narrative, is "a dim page spread before us, white and silent. The film has broken, or a projector bulb has burned out" (760). Verticality abounds at the nexus of film and fascism; the vertical strip of film provides characters with their mental image tracks, the vertical integration of corporate endeavor and of the fascist state are juxtaposed, and the vertical rise of the

rocket emerges as the representational narrative arc towards transcendence, toward a realm that persons falsely believe to be guarantor of all meaning. But the film stops, the bomb (as missile and as film) descends, and we are left not with the represented but with the act of our own viewing: “Come-on! *Start-the-show!*” That foundational belief is emblemized by Weissman is a brutal indictment of essentialism. Perhaps Pynchon wishes us to think on conceptions of racial manifest destiny or of contending armies each of which believes itself to have god on its side. Pynchon does not blame film for human conflict but sets it up as an expression of the will to fascisms of mind, heart, and state, the foundation of total fealty to self that Charles Clerc sees as pivotal in the link between Nazism and the German cinema’s inward turn; Graciela Imago Portales (his name connotes image and portal, as well as sky, the domain of the arcing bomb/narrative) wonders if allowing von Göll to direct his filmic treatment of a Marxist hero might not be too great a compromise given the director’s commercial success, for he knows that, “There are worse foundations than film” (388).

Since dubious of transcendental realms, Pynchon is compelled to invert the vertical structure of mimesis. He does so in two ways. First, he dispenses with any attempt at rendering the ‘real’, the ‘nature of things’ through writing, leaving open the related ideas that actuality is not *what* we observe but *that* we observe and that a literary realism may only approach verisimilitude if interpretive communities construe world in the same manner a given fiction does. Second, Pynchon does not make ideal forms his final point of reference, but the act of *attempted* reference becomes his indirectly considered *region* of thematic concern. We aspire to know unitary truth through mimesis

but fail. Thus, it is the *descent* of bombs, filmic and otherwise, that receives primary thematic treatment, not the rise of subjugated populations, the hoisting of national certainties, or the triumph of the will. When characters do effect resistance, it is not because they become certain of things and then follow resolutely a plan of action but because they accept not knowing and move into the cautious uncertainties involved in exploration of *constructions* of truth. They stop interpreting world in blind accordance with their needs. Language's failure of reference, and the concomitant realization that one must confront the effects of the power of others, is not without its pains, as Oedipa Maas discovers in *The Crying of Lot 49*:

She tested it, shivering: I am meant to remember. Each clue that comes is *supposed* to have its own clarity, its fine chances for permanence. But then she wondered if the gemlike 'clues' were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night. (118)

Yet, when reading Pynchon, we *seem* to know; meaningful connections and patterns emerge in the work and resonate most when we assume that life in the twentieth-century is the work's final point of reference. To reconcile this sense of knowing with what appears a fall from certainty, I argue that Pynchon's art is one of indirection, an art that accords with Aristotle's observation that we may only describe things roughly and in outline; and it is a fall from a bright confidence that attempts to mean in language cannot finally escape the gravity of indeterminacy, the fall back into our perpetual trying. This art involves the figurative limning of real-world phenomena through a focus on that which is *not* the object or process under consideration but which is discourse *about* phenomena. (I suggest here a provisional referential capacity for fictional language; it

may refer to discourses because it is *part* of those discourses.) The technique is akin to radar and to particle physics, both of which Pynchon writes for purposes of metaphor. Radar indicates the position of an unknown object by emitting and receiving microwaves. It attests to an object's existence, position and movement by focusing on something else, deflected sound waves. We may know something through something else. Similarly, physicists know about the movements and properties of subatomic particles through analysis of other phenomena the particles influence, not through direct observation. In either case, the object or force is known indirectly, through its contextual environment and by the changes the object initiates there. How each object is located--referred to, indicated, gestured towards--is an exemplification of how this brand of postmodern 'mimesis' functions; a thing is known through its position in a relational field, not through knowledge of its essence or its truth. This is the gravity of discourse which causes us to fall back into further attempts to mean. The properties an indicated object is believed to possess become part of a web of facticity. As Wittgenstein states, "[t]he world is the totality of facts, not of things" (5); we only know things in logical, not actual space, yet our tragedy is that we are at the mercy of the material, of the bullet, the bomb, our own failing bodies.

Noting the possessive apostrophe in Pynchon's title, the relationship between gravity and rainbow now becomes clear. How, we are compelled to ask, may gravity in some sense *possess* a rainbow? Our senses may only experience gravity through something else that in some way indicates it. The rainbow is an arc, and an arcing line traces the trajectory of a missile, or of any object that becomes airborne and then

descends. Gravity may be 'known' through the arc of a rainbow, for its bend traces the curvature of the earth which is the condition of possibility for earth's gravity and its very existence speaks of the effect of gravity on rain. Pynchon's sprawling fiction also follows an arcing line, from the launch of a rocket at the start to the moment of its impact at the close, and thus gravity in its literal and figurative senses is evoked. Language, as it structurally appropriates the experience of the eye, of line (the sentence variety or otherwise), attests to something outside of text but does so by restlessly configuring its own operations, by reaching repeatedly to evoke a reality it may only finally ape. If the arc of missiles and narratives are co-equivalent in Pynchon, it is worth noting that the bombs always miss their intended targets. Narrative efforts will miss the objects of their representational aims, but will begin to indicate them, roughly and in outline, by dwelling on that which moves in relation to an object or idea.

From this view then we may see that Pynchon does not seek to represent the media-infiltrated subject by giving us the interior cinematic, narrative consciousness of Slothrop, and that he gives us instead our own. If we come across an ekphrastic interpolation of *Going My Way* (1945) or *King Kong* (1933), and we have not seen the movie, we are possibly denied the meaning of a given passage and thus suffer exclusion if we are not consuming our popular films. If we have seen the films, the fiction is not representing them so much as it is triggering in readers contemplation of their constituted mental image tracks. In making the book all (movie) theatre, Pynchon anamorphically constricts us to these filmic frames, but this process which is *not film or the film industry* attests indirectly to the vertical integration of the viewing subject.

One of the more frequently transposed films in *Gravity's Rainbow* is *King Kong* (1933). I have argued previously that the ekphrastic co-opting of film by mediant fiction involves a transformation of a movie's structural hallmarks into the economy of the fiction. Pynchon sets up for a fall the plot structure of *King Kong* and the film's symbolic patterning prior to recontextualizing these into his rhetoric of mosaic effects. By this last I mean that Pynchon emphasizes consequences in relation to multiplicity and to vast, interrelated systems of signs and social organization. The high point of suspense in the movie, the peak of the narrative arc, involves the giant ape atop the Empire State Building. In the inferior second version of the film, Kong scales the World Trade Centre. In each movie, he battles atop the physical embodiment of corporate and state entities, the vertical towers that contain strict hierarchies of social organization. Kong, as threat to this order, is eventually cut down and falls into denouement. Pynchon's second chapter begins with these words from Merian C. Cooper to Fay Wray: "You will have the tallest, darkest leading man in Hollywood" (179). Kong, however, does not long have her, and although he holds her in his hand, he will not be allowed to maintain this contact. The proper place of the vertically integrated subject (he is soon forced to the bottom of the building/hierarchy) is that of the watcher who perpetually yearns. "'Yeah well,' as film critic Mitchell Prettyplace puts it in his definitive 18-volume study of *King Kong*, you know, he *did* love her, folks'" (275). Pynchon ridicules this critic's sentimental interpretation of the film, disallowing interpretation of it in accordance with what its script intends. What is at issue is the question of cinematic authorship. Who properly speaks in a film text? If viewers confine their interpretation of the film to the film's

contents, and do not bring to bear on them competitively codifying texts, we submit to the authorized reading of the text and thus to authority. Pynchon of course knows that “what the camera grasps is the ‘natural’ world of dominant ideology” (Johnston 7), and characteristically, he focuses instead on how the film works its way into the patch-work psychologies of viewers. Critics such as Charles Clerc have observed that the film becomes tied in Slothrop’s mental images to his fear of both black and homosexual persons (146). I have suggested here that since Kong was brought to America for display purposes and for profit, he becomes as the defeated members of the Counterforce by the close of the narrative, “camera-worthy...[one of the] doomed pet freaks” (713), and that we may conclude from Pynchon’s treatment of *King Kong* that the economics of spectacle and spectacle’s textual economies demand compliance. In a sense, Kong’s dilemma is our own except that while he dies an outsider, we, as pliant viewing subjects, become the ultimate insiders.

Near the end of *Gravity’s Rainbow*--near the end of the narrative arc and descent of the missile--skyscraper, verticality of the kinds mentioned above, the fictions of the mass media, and the repressive nature of the state turned corporate conjoin as the reader moves towards a seat in the theatre upon which the bomb descends:

By now the City is grown so tall that elevators are long-haul affairs, with lounges inside: padded seats and benches, snack bars, newsstands where you can browse through a whole issue of *Life* between stops.... ‘In the early days,’ pipes Young Mindy Bloth [an elevator girl] of Carbon City, Illinois, smiling vacantly away in profile, close by the brass moiré of diamond-blurs passing, passing in vertical thousands... “before the Vertical Solution, all transport was, in effect, two-dimensional--ah, I can guess *your* question... ‘What about *airplane flight*, eh?’ That’s what you were going to ask, wasn’t it!” as a matter of fact he [Slothrop] was going to ask about the Rocket and everyone knows it, but the subject is under a



curious taboo, and polite Mindy has brought in now a chance for actual violence, the violence of repression.... (735).

Charles Reich's *The Greening of America* (published in 1970, three years prior to the appearance of *Gravity's Rainbow*) redefined the notion of the corporate state to refer to an ordered and legalistic government marred by an insensitivity to human values (the term is often used to describe as well Fascist Italy in the 20's and 30's). Pynchon plays with the words that comprise the term. The 60' and 70's saw the return in the West of corporatism (sometimes called 'neo-corporatism'), a revival of the theory of the corporate state, popular in the 20's and 30's. In this political theory, public decision making is a tripartite process involving the state, employers' associations, and trade unions. It is the middle group here that has gained ascendancy in Western democracies due to its ability to lobby for legislation friendly to the business of business and to control working conditions. Suasive corporate semiosis is a recent strategy by business to prevent or neutralize social protest over corporate practices before it can reach the stage of disagreement corporatism allows. Pynchon relies in different places on various connotations of the word 'corporate'; it variously refers to things or persons combined into one body, to whatever actions are undertaken by a legal corporation, and to the action of incorporation, an action which takes on ominous resonance in a fiction about war, propaganda, and corporate semiosis. Technology in *Gravity's Rainbow* is under the control of the elect and is used to control the preterite. Pökler, the maker of missiles, admires the verticality of a system of total control as it comes to him on the movie screen:

*Metropolis*. Great movie. Exactly the world Pökler and evidently quite a few others were dreaming about those days, a Corporate City-state where technology was the source of power, the engineer worked closely with the

administrator, the masses labored unseen far underground, and ultimate power lay with a single leader at the top, fatherly and benevolent and just, who wore magnificently-looking suits and whose name Pöckler couldn't remember, being too taken with Klein-Rogge playing the mad inventor that Pöckler and his codisciples under Jamf longed to be—indispensable to those who ran the Metropolis, yet, at the end, the untamable lion who could let it all crash, girl, State, masses, himself, asserting his reality against them all in one last roaring plunge from rooftop to street....(578)

Here, the death plunge in film is not the fall of the autonomous subject but of the fascist one, he who would impose through social disaster a fate for the social consistent with the patterns of an inward looking mind. The futuristic architecture in Fritz Lang's film was made magnificently concrete through the model work of cinematographer Eugen Schüfftan, and I suggest that in the above passage, Pynchon writes "Corporate City-state" to emphasize the confluence in the twentieth century between the city, which contains those edifices which embody the vertical hierarchies bent on total control (we read elsewhere, "In a corporate State... all the paraphernalia of make-believe can be adapted and even embodied in a physical place (419)), the film corporation, and the state, not capitalized in the first of the two examples above to signal the harnessing of representative democracy by dominant corporate interests.<sup>8</sup>

I return now to the subject of how corporate semiosis may integrate the subject into the logic of corporate semiosis. In Bavaria, Squallidozzi enters a village to find

The quaint little town deserted. How could this be? He entered a brick labyrinth that had been a harmonica factory....Sitting watching...were a dozen individuals Squallidozzi recognized right away as gangsters. The men ate sausages...in the light from the movie. Crowned window frames gave out on the brick factory courtyard where summer air moved softly. The film light flickered blue across empty windows as if it were breath trying to produce a note. The images grew blunt with vengeance. "Yay!" screamed all the zootsters, white gloves bouncing up and down. Their

mouths and eyes were as wide as children's....'No, no. Come on. Watch with us. It's a Bob Steele. He's a good old boy.' (385)<sup>9</sup>

A traditional venue for human interaction and the imitative learning of behaviors and social norms, the town square or street, is abandoned here in favour of the theatre venue. It is the evacuation of the subject from the territory into a strictly configured map of cinematic associations and mental operations. A traditional mode of production, the brick works, is left aside for a symbolic mode of production--Squallidozzi is shortly introduced in the abandoned factory to director Gerhardt von Göll, who is there as part of a "traveling business conference". Actuality, this time in the form of a summer scene, is framed by a window, but nobody is looking out through that frame. The blue light of film is personified as if it were human breath trying to reproduce a note, and one is reminded of Coover's fiction which suggests that the filmically delineated mind conceives of film as coveting our corporeality. When the images grow "blunt with vengeance", the film likely enacts, to the delight of the gangsters, a revenge motif, but the covetousness of popular film, its impulse to rivalry with other media, is also implied.

Katje Borgesius, a double agent and one-time lover of Slothrop, is filmed at the Chelsea Maisonette:

In silence, hidden from her, the camera follows as she moves deliberately nowhere longlegged about the rooms, an adolescent wideness and hunching to the shoulders, her hair not bluntly Dutch at all, but secured in a modish upsweep with an old, tarnished silver crown, yesterday's new perm leaving her very blonde hair frozen on top in a hundred vortices, shining through the dark filigree. Widest lens-opening this afternoon, extra tungsten light laid on, this rainiest day in recent memory, rocket explosions far away to south and east now and then visiting the maisonette, rattling not the streaming windows but only the doors, in slow three- and fourfold shutterings, like poor spirits, desperate for company, asking to be let in, only a moment, a touch... (92)

Pynchon transposes the filmic eye into this description in such a way as to make the reader voyeur. The filmed subject turned object (the narrator is not privy to her interior mental processes) is unaware of the camera's gaze, the lens is "wide-eyed" to take all of her image in, and the light is full as is typical of pornographic film, the play of light and shadow being germane to the distinction between pornography and erotica in film. The striking aspect of this passage is that the rocket, aligned with film throughout the narrative, terminates in explosions that arrive at the door of the maisonette like spirits hungry for a *touch* of the filmed person, hungry like Kong or Coover's lonely projectionist. The reader discovers later that another eye is trained on Katje. The octopus Grigori—"the biggest fucking octopus Slothrop has ever seen outside the movies" (186) is trained by the White Visitation to kill Katje, to respond murderously to her image only. The animal is conditioned by repeated exposure to the maisonette footage. Slothrop saves her, but of course neither he nor the octopus nor Katje is "outside the movies" as the scene is immediately recognizable from a host of Hollywood B-movies. We may usefully consider this scene in light of the earlier description of Katje in the eye of the camera. Tantivy jokes that the octopus gives Slothrop "the eye", and during the struggle, "Slothrop...in the presence of certain death, can't quit staring at...a shirt button straining at a last single thread" (186). Slothrop, conditioned by the movies, cannot help but be attracted to the sight of a beautiful woman in distress. The eye of camera, octopus, and viewer are all sexually covetous, but this early on in the narrative the link between conditioner and conditioned is elusive. An answer comes later when we read that film

director “Gerhardt von Göll, with his corporate octopus [is] wrapping every last negotiable item in the Zone” (611).

Gerhardt von Göll is, like Pökler, “the male embodiment of a technologique (578). Whereas the engineer’s vehicle is the A4, von Göll’s is film, which provides ‘vehicles’ for actresses like Greta Erdmann. At Bremerhaven, the director reveals his megalomania:

“It is my mission,” he announces to Squallidozzi, with the profound humility that only a German movie director can summon, “to sow in the Zone seeds of reality. The historical moment demands this, and I can only be it servant. My images, somehow, have been chosen for incarnation. What I can do for the Schwarzkommando I can do for your dream of pampas and sky....” (388)

Greta is a sexual masochist who, like Pökler, finds “delight not unlike a razor in ritual submission” (578). She stars in von Göll’s *Aldprücken* (nightmare) which has as its centerpiece a torture scene during the filming of which, the actors became so aroused that an orgy breaks out (the cameras were left rolling). Greta becomes pregnant with Bianca, and countless male viewers of the film become intensely aroused and run from the theatres to experience sex whatever way they can. Years later during the war, Slothrop stumbles onto the dusty set of the film and implausibly meets Greta. She encourages him to have sadomasochistic sex with her, and in the passage that follows, the reader moves from Slothrop and Greta through seven square drawn frames (these divided chapters in the Vintage edition of *Gravity’s Rainbow*) and arrive inside Pökler’s mind the night he has seen the film and is having sexual relations with his wife while superimposing violent scenes from *Aldprücken* on the scene/moment:

Margarita whispering *God how you hurt me* and *Ah, Max...* and just as Slothrop's about to come, the name of her child: strained through her perfect teeth, a clear extrusion of pain that is not in play, *Bianca...*

□ □ □ □ □ □ □

...yes, bitch—yes, little bitch—poor helpless *bitch*.... Thus Pökler's whole front surface, eyes to knees: flooded with tonight's image of the delicious victim bound on her dungeon rack, filling the movie screen...drives in again, into her again.... (397)

The transition is a crosscut, a standard film device to suggest the carry over of ideas contained in one shot into another. Pökler, builder of the A4 intersects here with the agent who seeks to find the rocket. Both men are violent and media-infiltrated. They are also at war with one another. That which joins them is the fragmented film frame, a frame provided in this instance by von Göll. The reader may usefully perform an interpretive crosscut and think on the scene wherein Pökler ruminates just prior to the firing of a test rocket:

There has been this strange connection between the German mind and the rapid flashing of successive stills to counterfeit movement, for at least two centuries—since Leibniz, in the process of inventing calculus, used the same approach to break up the trajectories of cannonballs through the air. And now Pökler was about to be given proof that these techniques had been extended past images on film, to human lives. (407)

One of the most frequently discussed scenes in *Gravity's Rainbow* is the one where Mickey Rooney and Slothrop meet. Given the indistinct ontological boundary between film and actual worlds, the moment takes on a surreal cast, even though it merely recounts a silent and brief meeting between two human beings:

Above Slothrop, at eye level, is a terrace, and espaliered peach trees in milky blossom....Footsteps approach, and over the railing leans...well, Mickey Rooney. Slothrop recognizes him on sight, Judge Hardy's freckled madcap son, three-dimensional, flesh, in a tux and am-I-losing-my-mind face. Mickey Rooney stares at Rocketman holding a bag of

hashish, a wet apparition in helmet and cape. Nose level with Mickey Rooney's shiny black shoes, Slothrop looks up into the lit room behind--sees somebody looks a bit like Churchill, lotta dames in evening gowns cut so low that even from this angle you can see more tits than they got at Minsky's....and maybe, maybe he even gets a glimpse of that president Truman....Slothrop...scuttles away...leaving Mickey Rooney with his elbows on that railing, still watching. (382)

Charles Clerc suggests that in this scene the powerful figures of the world are relegated to the background while it is the movie star that stands at the forefront. While the passage certainly supports such a reading, one that meshes well with my own here, there are important implications in the scene for the corporate motifs I have been emphasizing. The powerful are in attendance but momentarily absent is the technology that separates the elect (elevated on the terrace) from the preterite (at shoe level). This absence allows one to meet the other; newsreels and feature films cannot here interfere in intersubjective processes. But class conditioning *does* interfere—the two do not speak and we read that Rooney will never tell a soul about his encounter. In this moment of technological absence, it is Slothrop, he of the film-infiltrated mind, who is spectacle to a film star who only watches *him*. While Slothrop will eventually cease to exist in the narrative, suffering as he does dissolution in the Zone, Rooney's image becomes three-dimensional, in-the-flesh. This is desirable in an order that strives to give tangible and felt powers to missile and movie technologies while downplaying the misfortunes of the masses and effacing democratic agency.

We may also make sense of the terrace scene if we perform another interpretive crosscut:

The Man has a branch office in each of our brains, his corporate emblem is a white albatross, each local rep has a cover known as the Ego, and their

mission in this world is Bad Shit. We do know what's going on, and we let it go on. As long as we can see them, stare at them, those massively moneyed, once in a while. As long as they allow us a glimpse, however rarely. We need that. And how they know it--how often, under what conditions....We ought to be seeing much-popular magazine coverage on the order of The Night Rog and Beaver Fought Over Jessica While She Cried in Krupp's Arms—and drool over every blurry photo--Roger must have been dreaming for a minute here of the sweaty evenings of Thermidor: the failed Counterforce, the glamorous ex-rebels, half-suspected but still enjoying official immunity and sly love, camera-worthy wherever they carry on...doomed pet freaks. (713).

Pynchon's symbol of the self in *Gravity's Rainbow* is the white albatross. He encourages us to consider corporate missions that are set against this self. The elect, the moneyed, are able to cover themselves and their operations with a semiotic veil that renders the superficial aspects of their lives glamorous. Slothrop does not rebel during the terrace scene, does not crash the party; he does what he does best and that is watch in silent awe. More than other characters, Slothrop tends to live out film moments. This process increases until he is gone from both zone and narrative. He is an emblem of both the reconstituted or assembled cinematic self and the libertarian hopeful. The former prevails in Pynchon's cautionary tale, and towards the close of the narrative, Slothrop becomes a fiction within a fiction and has his identity wholly subsumed in a media event:

There is also the story about Tyrone Slothrop, who was sent into the Zone to be present at his own assembly.... 'There never was a Dr. Jamf,' opines world-renowned analyst Mickey Wuxtry-Wuxtry.... 'We were never that concerned with Slothrop *qua* Slothrop,' a spokesman for the Counterforce admitted recently in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*. (738)

Seaman Bodine is "one of the few who can still see Slothrop as any sort of integral creature any more....Does Bodine now feel his own strength may someday soon not be enough either: that soon, like all the others, he'll *have* to let go? *But somebody's got to*



*hold on, it can't happen to all of us—no, that'd be too much....*” (740-1). Bodine, himself a filmically constituted subject, will likely share the fate of the ‘rocketman’. As Slothrop’s dissolution approaches, the narrator revisits the Dillinger story, the scene of the police shooting where bystanders

were tearing off clothes, tearing checks out of checkbooks, ripping off pieces of each others’ newspaper, just so they could soak up some of John Dillinger’s blood. (741)

The short scene attests to Dillinger’s resurrection into mass media legend and reminds us of that which eased him into death, a vision of a popular film the central character of which he imaginatively became. The scene also prefigures Bodine’s own demise:

Bodine was beginning, helpless, in shame, to let Slothrop go. In certain rushes now, when he sees white network being cast all directions on his field of vision, he understands it as an emblem of pain or death. (741)

Thinking now exclusively in “rushes” (the production term for a day’s worth of film footage), he joins the audience members that sit at the end of the narrative before a blank, white screen, the bomb descending above their heads. Entering this odeum, as reader at the termination of the story, transcendence via a rainbow arc is denied you; you wait not for God or Godot, but for the social agent that shapes your life; you “wait there for your Director to come” (390).

## Epilogue

Take me out to the ballgame.  
 Take me out to the park.  
 Take me to the movies.  
 'Cause I like to sit in the dark.  
 Take me to your leader.  
 And they said, "Do you mean Ron?"  
 And I said, "I just want to meet him."  
 And they said, "C'mon, we don't even know Ron!"

--from Laurie Anderson's  
 "Babydoll"

In the preceding chapters, I have suggested that we acknowledge the emerging genre of mediant fiction. I have introduced the term 'mediant' to indicate the features of a given medium which demonstrate and critique the operations of other media, and claim that this fiction intercedes between subjective social agents and dominant corporate/consumerist culture. In suggesting that individual subjectivities have contributed to a late capitalism in which the realm of discourse is marked by the hyperreal and that the self is made part of a buying public rather than a democratic one, I follow the mediant fictions under consideration in setting up subjective agency in opposition to corporate semiosis and intention. At issue in Wallace, DeLillo, Coover, and Pynchon are the same concerns as those that concern us in the broader social run: controls and benefits. One could argue that this has always been the concern of art, control and benefit at the level of the social or of pure aesthetics. Whether we theorize postmodernity as a new epoch or as a later development in a long modernity, whether we wade into dialectics or deconstruction, finally matters less as long as we remain mobile upon the

field of hermeneutic possibility and aware that speech acts and enunciative instances carry with them effects of power.

I have attempted to balance off the radical critique of reference with the almost material status that has been assigned representations in cultural studies. To do so while avoiding contradiction, I have--when making claims *about* fiction, television, and cinema, or speculating on the claims *made in* fiction about these modes of communication, or explaining the mental operations of reader-viewers in relation to the socioeconomic maneuvers of large entertainment companies--emphasized that fiction and criticism are finally *suggestive* in orientation rather than representational. I hope that in this way I have been able to acknowledge that hermeneutics have replaced objectivity without disallowing socioartistic or sociocritical agendas, based as these must be on felt truths. The technologically delineated site of viewer reception, the constriction and dilation of the hermeneutical mind, the ostensive consumer and the ostensible mass media, and the concealments of the corporate veil are aspects of the hyperreal that I have woven into my critique and identified as thematically central to mediant fiction. The boundaries between semiotic, electronic environments and the psychological/physical self are perceived by characters in mediant fiction as compromised, and these figures strain to understand imagined impressions of sensory extension and severance. Ushered in is the drama of the fragmented self that strains to cohere into a meaningful whole but that, since nature abhors holding patterns and closed systems, must respond flexibly to dynamic experience and be prepared to dig up one then another foundation for knowing. This delicate balancing act is interfered with by a corporate semiosis that capitalizes on our

uncertainties and which, through a bedizened, high-powered system of electronic communications and a talent for emphasizing message over medium, renders subjects hypnotized by the amputation and extension of their own being in a new technical form. The contents of this form exploit the akratic dilemmas that are born of basic human drives, and also exploited are certain relationships between time and the carnal, and time and the pernicious. Mediant fiction presents liberal values not as timeless or enduring categories but as general principles to consider when engaging with various entelechies.

I suggested early that criticism of mediant fiction cannot avoid commenting directly on the mass media and that in so doing criticism itself becomes mediant, part of its own subject and compelled to offer remarks on its own condition. That such remarks become necessary is fortunate because understanding that which is mediant necessarily involves the question of representation, and it becomes less easy to gloss over the ideological orientation of one's own criticism when contending discourses form one's subject. It would constitute serious lacunae if mediant criticism did not confront how itself enacts representational processes. This failure most often accompanies discussions that treat popular mass media texts, analyses that do not take into account the corporate contexts for these texts. I leave aside now the subject of mediant fiction and conclude my remarks on the genre by saying its existence constitutes a unique aspect of literary art. It is a mode that now abides in an age of images and that is busily responding to the politics of visual culture with increasingly modified literary methods. I will conclude with an argument on the notable failures of only partially constituted mediant criticism and in so doing will attempt to offer some final insights as to the potential of this type of criticism.

Many literary critics welcome new and emerging forms of technological communication. They see expanded possibilities for human interaction in such developments as high-speed fibreoptic media, for example the Internet. While all forms of communication over distance hold out promise for negotiating and creating equitable structures of social organization, they often have woven into their operations commercial bids for expanded corporate power and influence. The message of such media is often that the new media is an essential purchase and that its importance eclipses other social considerations. Corporations, as sellers, offer a rhetoric of freedom of choice and frequently conflate this freedom with democratic ones. Critics ought not to be taken in by this claim and should resist comparisons between the interpretive diversity allowed by postmodern fiction of itself and the supposed freedom of commercial choice presented to us by late capitalism. If too accepting of the commercial mass media, we risk becoming the octopus Grigori. Shopping in the manner of the insecure Jack Gladney does not equate with the time-consuming and difficult task of sifting through the complexities of philosophically and politically informed egalitarian fiction.

Cecelia Tichi comes close to explaining the transfer of visual elements into literary expression. In her essay "Television and Recent American Fiction", she claims that televisual forms are a component of some contemporary fiction, and that this, in addition to the appearance of TV in similes or as semantic frames of reference, is part of various authors' ongoing efforts to develop shared assumptions with readers. In her discussion of television in John Updike and Bobby Ann Mason, Tichi makes the point that "not every writer who positions a television set in a fictional scene enacts the perceptual traits of the medium" (115). She points out how the now moribund high/low

art distinction operates in Updike's *Roger's Version*. Updike refuses to name (although he describes well enough) a well-known television ad character of the mid-eighties (Morris the Cat) and thereby closes down interpretive possibility for a reader in that moment as the only view to be taken of the televisual is Updike's own. Mason also admits televisual particularities to her fiction, and critics like Tichi work hard to understand the implications of this intermedial migration. She realizes that such fiction requires discussion of social contexts (such as production contexts) in addition to authors' conceptualization of reader-viewer response. However, in her remarks on Mason's novel *In Country*, she says that a televised segment is "virtually transcribed" into a central character's "narrative consciousness" (117). Tichi fails to explain the mechanism of such a transcription (why is it only virtual and what does this mean?), and she does not say what is involved in such literary transcription when she claims that contemporary fictions "are enacting the traits of broadcast television" (115). She does not explain what is gained by such co-option of rival medium and does not contrast corporate intentions with those of writers. As well, I find Tichi's methodology unsound when she incorporates theorists of the TV medium such as Raymond Williams, Neil Postman, and Marshall McLuhan. She states that

the analysts of televisual form can prove heuristically helpful. Their concept of flow, applied to TV-age fiction, can help us understand the new fictional structures which otherwise draw censure for their apparent defection from form itself. By implication, Williams and others enable readers to understand that the experience of flow, enacted cognitively in fiction, makes certain formal traits become virtually inevitable. These will not be narratives of the beginning-middle-end structure. Flow enables entry at any point. The narrative of flow is continuous, open, apparently without end. (119-120)

The problem here is that Tichi applies the work of such theorists to the fiction rather than focusing on the text prior to selecting which theorist confirms or clarifies the fiction's observations of contemporary social semiosis. There is a too ready embrace of the mass

media *Zeitgeist* as Tichi quickly accepts the claims set forward by Jean Baudrillard and Wayne C. Booth. This lapse is common in sociologically influenced critique, and various questionable assumptions about the operations of television therefore abound in literary criticism. Frequently one comes across the claim that TV viewers encounter segmentation without closure (flow) and, when channel-surfing, experience tagless dialogue aurally and the cut-up method visually. Assumptions in hand, critics turn to fiction to find parallels of one sort or another between media analysis and fiction, certain that these parallels will become evident since, after all, both theorists and artists strive to capture the particularities of their age, and the age is televisual. Rarely in television is dialogue tagless. A speaker is immediately identified visually, which is often all that is attempted and, for viewers, all that is required in the sense of appeal and advertisement--the whole point of the culture of image is that visual delineation suffices. If more is needed, viewers can deduce the genre, character relationships, and likely trajectory of a plot pattern in a very short time. A viewer cannot encounter a cut-up method while watching television, as when reading Burroughs, because 'method' implies purposiveness, and I would hesitate to call the spasms of the prehensile thumb over a remote control 'purposive'.

Maria Alzira Seixo believes that as literary studies and developments in mass media inevitably commingle, critics may behave in one of two ways:

(1) scholars may keep an attitude of cultural elitism that must face social and economic individual differences as a way of maintaining recognized levels of aesthetic perception and canonical works of guided reading; (2) conversely, they may open other perspectives by considering new modes in the emergence of the literary object.... (208)

Seixo does not appear to take into account that opposition to both the ill-considered acceptance and the very fact of signifying modalities other than those traditionally a part of book culture frequently involves opposition to the corporate ambitions of organizations

that produce and emplace those modalities. She aligns traditional book culture *only* with closed hermeneutic practices and shuttered canons, and argues a dubious connection between new electronic modes and the democratic ambitions of the masses. The technology that Seixo welcomes is part of an aggressive corporatism, portions of which are more of a threat to a pluralist, equitable society--and which are far more widespread and economically entrenched--than the supposed cultural elitism Seixo is preoccupied with. She later claims that "TV productions are looking for large audiences, and large audiences prefer low culture" (211), and goes on to say that it is the fault of "school" that "low culture" continues to have such widespread appeal (presumably because popular modalities are not incorporated into instruction at every turn). Such a position entirely ignores the fact that screen technology--including TV, video, and the Internet--creates and enlarges its own audience in line with marketplace imperatives, usually doing so by attuning all opposition and other media to itself (including literary-critical opposition in many cases). To welcome the technological products and semiosis of corporations into our syllabi and pedagogical practices in an attempt to reach and engage larger numbers of citizens is to confuse the cultural choices made by those citizens (mass culture) with the political welfare of those citizens themselves. In the otherwise justified rush to expunge inequitable and elitist discursive practices from educational institutions, critics and teachers may well be 'chumming up' to an antiegalitarian and corporate Zeitgeist without knowing it. Consider this startling pronouncement by Joris Vlasselaers in an article entitled "Literature in the Mass Media: the Challenge of Changing Enunciative and Receptive Modalities" (the author claims prior to this quotation that there is a shift taking place between the "Modernist axioms of *singularity* and *selfpurposiveness* as necessary conditions to qualify a text as a literary work of art and the correlated axioms of *seriality* and *commodification* as inherent features of mass cultural texts" [285-85]):



Commodification is no longer stigmatized as cultural inferiority of popular art forms and practices. But nor can we hold on to the linear correlation of culture and class. High culture is no more to be understood as the dominant culture of a socially or economically ruling class. The process of streamlining evolves following the rules of communication theory and practice on one hand, and *obeying the imperatives of professionalization that govern mass media cultural production on the other*. (287-88 my emphasis)

Whereas Seixo welcomes the corporate media as an antidote to elitism, Vlasselaers implicitly embraces mass medial commodification of all literary forms to ward off Modernist conceptions of purposiveness in art. In each case, the cure is worse than the disease. Context for the above quotation does not make clear what this rather ominous "process of streamlining" precisely involves. I am left to assume that it refers to a stripping down or purging of discursive and interpretive practices of a Modernist cast to the point that any works accomplice to high culture in the past will henceforth be denuded of any cultural status beyond the reductive sociological view of it as a form of semiosis which exploits possibilities of communication offered by media-systems. Again, literary artists will be eclipsed by the sociologist (in this case, Vlasselaers, a communications theorist) who will preside over cultural/analytical critique, casting Platonic aspersion on the figurative method of art while ignoring the pitfalls of positivism and analytic certainty. According to Vlasselaers, the literary critic must, since the mass media constitute a more effective communications system (by transcending class through commodification?), obey professional imperatives from a corporate hierarchy of professional managers and accept the installation of a hermeneutics modeled on mass medial, conglomerate interests. I do not believe Vlasselaers, on further consideration, would advocate such a course of action for scholars; my point is that overemphasis on media systems leads to such strategic errors.

In an article published in *American Book Review* entitled "Copyleftists and the New Networked-Narrative Environment: Does Content Want to be Free?", Mark

Amerika talks about the history of copyrights and patents, and about how the ideas contained in the material book-object, subject as it is to an "enslaving copyright law", are bound to the self-interest of a particular class of writers and publishers. There is an argument to be made in this regard, but Amerika makes the same mistake as Seixo and Vlasselaers by ignoring the connections between new technologies and late capitalism (oddly, while attempting to combat the latter):

[W]hat happens if, as in the case of contemporary network-narrative art, the initial concepts thought up by one artist are eventually expressed by a network of other artist-associates (collaborators) as a fluid work-in-progress whose multi-media digital mix is forever-in-flux?....Neo-Luddite social commentators and high-brow media critics would have us believe that this is The End of Something Terribly Important (maybe their late-capitalist hold on the right to own ideas that are really Everybody's?)....Successful creative writers and literary/social critics who have invested a great deal of time and energy in the development of their own book-centric network-value, have a terrific problem with all of this, and who can blame them? They have created their own network-value by successfully marketing their stories and ideas via a bottlenecked distribution system that not only favors the social elite who control the publishing establishment, but which has helped them all locate a consumer-audience that guarantees mainstream visibility and myriad ways of electronically streaming revenue sources into their bank accounts. (6)

I quote Amerika at length here for two reasons. First, I want to use his analysis to contribute to my earlier argument regarding the self-deconstructive impulse I argue the necessity of. I concede that I cannot rule out with any certainty the claim that my 'network-value' as a critic trained largely in and by 'book-centric' systems and teachers has biased my argument to some extent. Second, I wish to draw attention to the fact that Amerika ignores a number of pivotal corporate contexts for the technology and distribution systems he champions. He reductively assigns only a motive of self-interest to generations of writers and publishers who, in the face of a public ever-enamored of simple and unchallenging entertainments, worked hard to espouse the social and political values embodied in works by writers most often (though of course not always or

exclusively) concerned with the well-being of social individuals. Further, Amerika talks as if the technology he praises has sprung from some rustic seat of Jeffersonian populism. The source of the technology is corporate, and within a calendar year of the appearance of his article, one should keep in mind that the government of the United States took Bill Gates to court for monopolistic practices and that the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) came very close to being ratified in 1998. The agreement is not dead yet and would go much farther than NAFTA in allowing transnational corporations the chance to control cultural industries, public utilities and municipal services, telecommunications, and health care and education systems. Amerika entirely ignores the fact that Internet and software providers, as well as cable and computer companies, have inaugurated, marketed, emplaced, and aggressively fought to control the technologies he believes offer artists and critics new freedoms with no strings attached. The new media are so interlaced with commercial, rhetorical directives that media magnates constitute one of the world's most powerful elites. To set these contexts aside in order to focus on the elitist practices (and none of the progressive ones) of publishing houses who are now forced to dispense with whole literary lines in favor of popular titles, of university presses and educational institutes reeling from cutbacks, and of literary artists who, to my knowledge, rarely earn even a modest living from their labours is to offer a political rhetoric naive in the extreme. I submit that Amerika, Seixo, and Vlasselaers have done rather well themselves by chasing cultural elitism down gopher holes while ignoring much larger threats to an egalitarian society, and their remarks indicate the lack of autocritique that I have said may usefully accompany analyses inspired by the schools of deconstruction and cultural materialism. I cannot accept the wholesale supplanting of literary artists with the prognostications of cultural critics when so many canonical and non-canonical fictions of the last two hundred years in the U. S. display a far more honest and rigorous approach to the analysis of culture.

It is hoped that my emphasis in this writing on the mediant in contemporary fiction and criticism will contribute in some measure to the well-being of the perceiving subject who must negotiate between positions inherent in expression and interpretation. Perhaps the subject may come into Being by coming in between.

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## NOTES

### Pretext and Amalgam

<sup>1</sup> As regards the notion of 'doing justice' to the experience of text in the era of poststructuralism, see Charles Altieri's "Judgment and Justice under Postmodern Conditions; or, How Lyotard Helps Us Read Rawls as a Postmodern Thinker", Barbara Johnson's remarks on interpretive economies of justice in "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida", and my discussion in the chapter that follows on the legal function of fiction which thematizes what I term there corporate semiosis.

<sup>2</sup> I take the view here that while criticism can deconstruct a given discourse, postmodern fiction offers a philosophically engaged reconstruction of discourse elements, a technique often described through a metaphor that comes to us from the biological sciences. As geneticists splice strands of genetic material from different organisms in order to insert the resulting recombinant DNA into a host virus, so the postmodern writers under consideration here produce unauthorized amalgams of elements from corporate discourses for reinsertion into public language contexts.

<sup>3</sup> I am aware that this last sentence exemplifies causal reasoning; in it, I suggest that a widespread adoption of causal thinking precedes in time the manifestation of an unconscious allegiance to it. I utilize the mode here intentionally, prior to my remarks below on causality, to draw attention to our affinity for it, the ease with which it is utilized and accepted.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson's Canyon, located in Banff National Park, has running along its edges a path which intermittently presents hikers with interpretive plaques. That the canyon was and is shaped by the waters which run through it evidently compelled the author of the plaques to present select data in strict relation to the dynamics of one element, water. The water 'causes' the canyon. By the time one reaches the end of the path, one is inclined to think of the canyon exclusively from this perspective, not as rock directing water or as rock and water as elements in states of interaction, but water as active agent on passive rock (and there is the judgement that water exerts power since it is able to erode rock, a view based on the assumption that rock somehow aspires to endure as rock). In the spirit of Heidegger, one could usefully ask within what do such things as water and rock belong? What is the water and rock of this place within the broader geological framework, within either the rock cycle or within time itself? Why does the author of the plaques attribute so much agency to the water, to its flow, when it is the rock cycle which as plausibly allows for the possibility of canyons or of the movement of water? A wider ranging questioning of any phenomena unfolds when one representation is prevented from holding sway, when contending discourses swirl about the perceiving subject so that said subject must find a unique way among them. In many cases, the laying down of interpretive closure is the habit of mass media forms since the directing of one's attentions and behaviors is the primary goal of such media. I argue that literary fiction of a postmodern character more often functions to facilitate readerly wending upon a way and that such art constitutes an intransigent mode that resists the attempted eclipse of interpretive diversity by the commercial mass media.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this writing, I have left in many traces of both causal reasoning and unqualified claims to the representational capacities of various media. I believe that these traces function in a twofold manner: they demonstrate processes and assumptions that dwell in both literary and mass

media texts and show also how difficult is the task of representing representation when representation is not an object but the primary condition of its own being.

<sup>6</sup>The instrumental view of technology remains widespread due to the fleeting mental attention so often paid equipment objects and its contexts; we do not think long on a technology if we conceive what its ends are. It is instructive that if one sits and observes the gear works of a clock for any significant period of time, while trying to think of that which is seen as *only* as a timepiece, the mind will drift to the larger frameworks in which such a device exists—to human schedule and thus to the human, to chronology and thus to the question of time, to physical laws and thus to physics, and so on. I wish to encourage this fortunate gravitation away from the instrumental view of argument as well as from technology.

<sup>7</sup> I discuss television here since I am approaching my remarks on the televisually concerned fiction of David Foster Wallace. In my chapters on DeLillo, Coover and Pynchon is where I offer analysis of mediant fiction's relationship to film.

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger intends the German noun *Wesen* to mean not what something is but that it means (not quiddity then but a continuing to exist as presence).

<sup>9</sup> Resonant here is the infamous promotional line from television's *The X-Files*: "The truth is out there."

## Chapter One: David Foster Wallace

<sup>1</sup> By this I mean that there is little to which an oppositional aesthetics might attach itself in Coupland's writing, other than the fact that his works are symptomatic of the consumerist ethos one hopes to see challenged. The works may not be received in any way as oppositional, and one is reminded of Jameson's same disappointment over Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*: "There is...in Warhol no way to complete the hermeneutic gesture...." (8).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout my chapters, I incidentally develop what can be called a theory of equivalence in order to explain what I consider to be fiction's referential (or 'representational') capacity. Fiction does not transport actuality into the realm of the printed word for easy apprehension by readers but structurally reproduces the discourses that are a response to experience. See my remarks on ekphrasis below.

<sup>3</sup> Versions of agency appear to stimulate self-reflective thinking. Whenever I introduce my students (usually watchers all) to the idea that television encourages a solipsistic feedback loop in the media-infiltrated minds of viewers, they are resistant to the notion, for I present my model in such a way as to suggest that I have captured the truth about them as viewers. Many students inevitably insist that they are not perceptually engineered by the medium and assure me that they receive information from non-commercial, non-televisual sources which enable them to resist dubious or 'bogus' commercial claims. I then tell them that that is precisely my point and that I had initially presented the model to them with an air of finality and certainty in order to demonstrate the way in which the mass media aggressively assign consumers their roles in accordance with various 'realities'. It is usually the case that only students with a high level of competing discourses in their lives resist my model as it is initially presented to them. Those who do not resist and who accept without critical reflection the role my model assigns them (an acceptance evident in simplistic rehashings in papers and exams of my lectures) generally offer work steeped in media soundbites such as "the reality of the new global economy in the next millennium", "no point entering a war you're not prepared to win", "just do it", "why ask why?", and "times change".

<sup>4</sup> This last assertion is born of, in my case, the pricking of conscience that accompanied my reading of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and Aristotle's discussion of the *enkratic* agent there. Such an agent is one who is inclined to moral lapses but who usually acts in accordance with her better judgement. My notion of site-oriented analysis arises out of my unwillingness to embrace postmodern textual acrostics in the face of an increasingly antiegalitarian and corporatized society. Thus, site-oriented analysis 'sees' through a given fiction and acts as a paraclete for the reader-viewer, just as the fiction itself does.

<sup>5</sup> I do not mean to suggest that mediant fiction functions primarily to illustrate various types of philosophical thought. Rather, I follow Alan Thiher, who says in *Reflections on Language* that he does not wish to grant philosophy any kind of priority,

be it temporal, analytical, or ontological...[but] prefer[s] to speak of several different kinds of relationships between philosophical thought and writing that go to make up a large part of the common space we call contemporary culture. A central aspect of these relationships is found in various types of homologies one can discern between literary concerns and philosophical thought. Representation provides a central space for homologies between reactions against metaphysics by both writers and theoreticians. (91-92)

<sup>6</sup> I ask of my reader to tolerate such generalities for the moment. Of course, I do not mean that all viewers in all viewing instances are incapable of reflective and resistant thinking when viewing television. As I will explain, the extent to which one *is* a discriminating viewer depends on the frequency of one's encounters with discourses that compete with those offered in the commercial mass media.

<sup>7</sup> See in particular Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, Marcuse's *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, and Benjamin's *Illuminations*.

<sup>8</sup> The general tendency of *Screen* magazine

was to explore the way in which the human subject, constituted partly by the state apparatuses of capitalism which provided him or her with a place in the relations of reproduction, is made even more suitable for the purposes of capitalism by being constructed at an early age through the patriarchal family, and, continually, by such items of ideology as film which places the subject in yet more relations which invariably serve the requirements of the capitalist system (Cobley 15).

<sup>9</sup> See Chris Barker's chapter on global soaps and global news in his book *Global Television: An Introduction*. Soaps become in his analysis not only passive occasions for objective viewing by a discriminating audience but ideal catalysts for ethical discussion amongst groups that are usually marginalized. He claims that the shows provide a shared experience for a network of women viewers "often family-based--mothers and daughters--or neighbor centered"; they appeal to a "mainly female audience whose very competencies in the interpersonal and domestic sphere, allied to various kinds of program and genre knowledge, allow them to take an active role as audience members and to share this with other audience members", a sharing that "involves debate about issues of class and race" (120); and "young people in Southall (London) of a Punjabi background use *Neighbours* to articulate their own emergent norms and values", a program which becomes a rallying point for "discussion amongst young people themselves and a point of contact, exploration and confirmation of values between parents and children" (122, 123). In his headlong rush to escape the elitist enclosures of formal analysis in order to play freely in the fields of

ethnographic reception, Barker ignores overwhelming evidence that the formal features of soaps--such as seriality, product placement, commercial interruption, and the celebration of material wealth--are primarily concerned with, and function primarily to further the corporate interests of capitalist agents who demonstrably care little for the democratic ambitions of youth experiencing alienation, immigrant social exclusion, and women relegation to the domestic sphere.

<sup>10</sup> I risk here adopting a problematic position of the Frankfurt School, namely, the claim that "all mass culture is ideological and debased, having the effects of duping a passive mass of consumers....[O]ne should...not limit critical moments to high culture and identify all of low culture as ideological" (Kellner 29). Of course, 'low' culture is often critical and 'high' culture ideologically charged. I do not maintain the School's dichotomy between high and low culture in all instances. Rather, I invoke it when the opposition fits. To do otherwise is to deprive ourselves of an easy and justifiable means with which to differentiate between Don DeLillo's critique of mall culture and the passive cooing over appliances as heard and seen on *The Price is Right*. I see no reason not to use the term 'art' to denote a type of expression studied in craft, meditative (on the subject of the human condition) in orientation, and cognizant of antecedent art forms. The term has been fully taken to task for any elitist assumptions its usage once carried, and I here suggest rejuvenation of it.

<sup>11</sup> Winifried Nöth's essay "Advertising: The Frame Message" is of particular relevance to this study. It appears in a collection entitled *Marketing and Semiotics: New Directions in the Study of Signs For Sale*. Nöth shows how the semantic and pragmatic aspects of advertising are for the most part static. Thus, as a semantically closed text, advertising exists opposite semantically open poetry and fiction.

<sup>12</sup> Thus, my method here functions firmly within the French stream of discourse analysis, an approach which draws on narratology, semiotics, and content analysis in order to examine exchanges between several discourses (in this case, between the televisual and the literary).

<sup>13</sup> As regards the matter of dis-closure, the view that texts are so unstable that meaning may never be fixed, see J. Hillis Miller's "Ariadne's Thread" and William V. Spanos's "Breaking the Circle: Hermeneutics as Dis-Closure".

<sup>14</sup> I am thinking here of product placement within programs. Such situating literally 'takes place' when products seize and occupy visual space within camera shots or when the products and/or their slogans are announced by characters. As well, the pacing of all programs (and more importantly, the amount of ground covered by news reports) is geared to accommodate commercial interspersions.

<sup>15</sup> The British television show for children entitled *Teletubbies* provides a prime example of televisual self-validation through self-reflexivity. While viewers observe the show, aspects of world ostensibly arrive through sequences of reportage or through story. But what do children in this example specifically see? A sun, the face of which is footage of a giggling infant's countenance, rises benevolently over a landscape of astroturf and fake trees, all of which are electric blues and greens (two of the primary colours from which screen colour emerges). The teletubbies are rotund, jolly creatures made of felt and foam who have television sets for bellies, a conspicuous metaphor as regards TV and consumption. They awaken each 'day' to enjoy a number of adventures, all of which, in terms of plot, are of a non-linear nature (the method is said to appeal to the non-linear cognition of toddlers and to work in concert with the fact that objects, once out of sight, are out of mind). At one point during every episode (or more accurately, every recursion), a windmill emits electronic frequencies that zero in on a particular teletubby whose



abdominal screen then lights up. The others stand in a circle around the one chosen for screen activation, cooing their amazement and envy. On the stomach/screen appears non-stylized footage of very young children engaged in everyday activities such as dressing to go out in the rain. *The footage is always shown twice, back-to-back*, thereby satisfying the toddler's often heard imperative, "Again." But this is also a kind of repetition that, in a televisual context, conditions the mind to the redundancies of saturation advertising campaigns which are intended to commingle with daily psychological experience. Back-to-back image clusters of this variety bear a striking resemblance to ad spots which are 30 seconds in length but which the sponsor has cut in half, choosing to show two highly similar ads (for the same product) of 15 seconds duration each. Overall, *Teletubbies* 'shows' little beyond the mechanism of corporate semiosis. Its thematic foci are the viewing subject and the processes involved in televisual viewing.

<sup>16</sup> See Willem J. Witteveen's "Seeing Rhetoric as Law as Literature" and Bruce A. Arrigo's "Reflections on the Future of Criminal Justice: Issues for Theory, Method and Practice".

<sup>17</sup> See Eco's "Towards a Semiological Guerilla Warfare".

<sup>18</sup> In Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, the word 'condition' sounds in a legalistic as well as philosophical sense, as referring to the contracts and covenants that govern the social contract.

<sup>19</sup> An institution such as the modern corporation is a complex amalgam of publicly understood legal codes and practices, but functioning behind these are codes of conduct that unofficially govern individuals' behavior within corporate culture. The study of this aspect of corporate culture is a difficult undertaking since such codes are covertly transmitted. Courts of law rarely have access to articulations of these codes unless conversations are taped, shredded documents pieced together, or memoranda leaked. However, it is not only subterranean codes of corporate conduct which present a problem. Public legal codes relating to corporations are, in many instances, ambiguous and therefore easily ignored or exploited. Consider the relationship of one particular generator of corporate semiosis, the multinational corporation, to emergent global legal protocols:

An essential task of transnational corporate codes is to set out legal and ethical standards in the form of general precepts, expressed as rights and corresponding obligations for multinational corporations to respect wherever they do business....However, such precepts are typically vague. Terminology used to formulate transnational precepts must be of the type that can be applied to a variety of legal, ethical, and cultural environments ....Consequently, transnational codes are constructed against background conceptions of possibility which influence the way in which managers, executives, jurists, and other individuals apply precepts to facts by interpreting concrete meanings for legal and ethical predicates which denote indeterminate, 'fuzzy' boundaries. (Jackson 142)

Where there is ambiguity, individual wills may seize the indeterminate moment and purloin the letter of law to dress exploitation in acceptable legal garb. Thus, it becomes necessary to initiate a widespread, social dialogue about corporate activities based on their good and bad effects (a type of consequentialism), and to encourage the application of texts that exhibit antiegalitarian behavior to one's daily reading/viewing experience. Fiction and criticism are fields of endeavor ideally suited to facilitating such a dialogue, for both have the potential to be lightning rods for public contention, a quality most desirable in a medium or discursive arena that can act as a catalyst for communal arbitrations over meaning.

<sup>20</sup> As Heffernan explains in a footnote (191), ekphrasis originally referred to a telling in full. The term has since been a rhetorical one denoting a vivid description (second century A.D.) and eventually came to mean any description of visual art. The word's first recorded usage in 1715 (it has never been defined strictly in accordance with art) suggests it refers to "a plain declaration or interpretation of a thing". I cite this early sense of the word as part of an ongoing connection between the experience of the eye and a belief in pure perception (visual data as 'plain', self-evident, unmediated).

<sup>21</sup> Thus, unqualified objections to television as unfit subject matter for art or as part of a commodification of literary fiction (a complicity with the zeitgeist) are entirely inappropriate. The use of televisual features in Wallace's fiction is strategic.

<sup>22</sup> It is important to an understanding of the themes of the collection as a whole to note that Wallace's final story, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" aligns the solipsistic self with the metafictional experiment as practiced by John Barth. In that story, recursion is used to instigate and spotlight the dissatisfaction that the method brings about in many readers. The inward looking text, preoccupied with its own operations, is also set up for a fall in "Here and There".

<sup>23</sup> In the context of this discussion, I suggest again that it is interesting that the picture theory, isolationist in its orientation, came to Wittgenstein as he was reading a particular article in a magazine, one of the more powerful mass media modes operating during the philosopher's lifetime. The article he was reading involved a description of how a motorcar accident was represented with small models in a court of law, an instance where legal discourse was expanded to take on a more pictorial aspect to enhance the rhetorical methods characteristic of rules of evidence. In her book on visual intelligence, Anne Barry explains how in the 1995 retrial of Lyle and Erik Menendez (the brothers were charged with murdering their parents), a Californian Silicon Valley engineering firm was hired by lawyers to put together a computer simulation of the crime based on police photos. "[J]urors watched the crime enacted rather than listen [sic] to coroner testimony, signaling a new trend in trial argumentation...a simulated and highly sanitized visual version of events that would be more easily understood by a jury....no one questioned the reality of the photographs or the computer simulation" (169).

<sup>24</sup> In "Doublespeak and Ideology in Ads: A Kit for Teachers", Richard Ohmann quotes Pat Buchanan whose words underscore the intentional quality of this aspect of corporate semiosis: "How can business defend itself? The answer is not distant....Pick up the weapon lying idle at your side, your advertising budgets....Oil companies spend billions each year in advertising. Mobil's creation of 'idea advertising,' in lieu of the happy-motoring nonsense, is a first step" (106).

<sup>25</sup> Wallace may have been thinking here of the 1984 Arion edition of Ashbery's "Self-Portrait", an edition that Heffernan explains "prints the 552 lines of the poem radially on 27 large paper disks which must be rotated to be read and which are interleaved with circular prints by Willem de Kooning. There is also a record of Ashbery reading the poem, and the whole set of disks is encased in a steel canister cut into concentric rings with a bright little convex mirror at its shining hub" (171). Heffernan calls the piece "a secular monstrosity, a high-kitsch host raised up for our cultural genuflection and worship, the supreme icon of our self-obsessed and self-referential postmodernity" (171). He notes that in her notes on the record sleeve, Helen Vendler has written that contemporary secular art has turned aside "from the hidden world of religious mystery, and [lost] its iconic function" (qtd. in Heffernan 171) but he disagrees with her, saying that "nothing could be more iconic or hieratic than this way of publishing Ashbery's poem". I disagree with

Heffernan, because the package as a whole is too semiotically diverse to function in an iconic fashion; the material mode of presentation renders the poem a material art object occupying space, the record allows for an aural experience of the work and the text of the poem for a reading one, and the action of rotating the discs while reading calls for an evaluation of one's own reading practices. Heffernan oddly launches a number of logocentric pieties at the edition, and seems particularly galled by the photograph of Ashbery that is included. This is very odd since the photograph, a form which altered forever realistic, painterly portraiture in the tradition of Parmigianino, offers a second-order consideration of portraiture that handily inaugurates expansive dilation. One should keep in mind when noting Heffernan's sensitivity over a possible iconic element in the edition that the rise of literacy and the resulting logocentrism of Western thought displaced the cultural icons and communal orality of traditional oral cultures, and set up a new priest-like class in charge of interpreting written texts. A reader-oriented edition like the Arlen makes the literary critic's voice only one of several possible readings.

## Chapter Two: Don DeLillo

<sup>1</sup>See "L'homme a six bras. Un examen de membres fantomes surnumeraires apres ramollissement sylvien droit." *Revue Neurologique*. Volume 152 (3), March 1996, 190-195.

<sup>2</sup> This last involves a tracing of the operations of the thalamus, a major coordinating area of the brain that sends sensory impulses to the cerebral cortex.

<sup>3</sup>By implosion, McLuhan means the movement of persons back together into a 'neo-Tribal' or 'Electric' stage of human history wherein electronic communication media institute what Walter Ong has called a secondary orality (see McLuhan's *Understanding Media* and Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*). McLuhan does not imply that there is a return to the sensual immediacy of 'the village'. His whole point is that technological mediation, if improperly understood and poorly performed, imperils human functioning; thus his rhetoric of plosiveness.

<sup>4</sup> In light of DeLillo's fascination with the Kennedy assassination, Khomeini's funeral stands in stark and implied contrast to Kennedy's own. Recently, networks have been showing footage of Kennedy's son John (killed in a plane crash) while cutting to shots of him as a boy saluting his father's coffin. His chances of holding public office were high given the Kennedy mystique that has been cultivated by the media.

<sup>5</sup> While explaining the idea that a culturally generated aura surrounds works of art in distant locales--art pieces that one must privately contemplate in a solitary context outside the common run--Benjamin does not say how the mechanically reproduced art object discourages private contemplation of the isolated variety or why such rumination is not one of the key, site-specific cognitive operations that may potentially facilitate increased ideological awareness. Frequently, viewers consume visual products while alone. The mind may beat a retreat, even when a person sits surrounded by a group as in a movie theatre or at home with family and friends. In *Memories of My Father Watching TV*, Curtis White dramatizes such a withdrawal, presenting his reader with family members who are always seated before the television but who barely communicate with one another (the father is near catatonic). In DeLillo's *White Noise*, the Gladney family, at Babette's insistence, watch television together one night a week. She hopes that for the children "the effect would be to de-glamorize the medium in their eyes" by making it a "wholesome domestic sport" (16). But each family member responds in his or her own way, independent of responses by the others, and in no way does the fact that they are in a group (or that the text before them is now experienced somewhat publicly) affect their interpretations of that which is seen.

<sup>6</sup> My own position is that private contemplation of screen texts, the omnipresent viewing mode thrust upon individuals by corporations, must involve the mental superimposition of responses by other reader-viewers, responses in the form of contrary text, and that this activity is a playing out of the democratic impulse in the mental operations of citizens.

<sup>7</sup> While DeLillo is obviously attracted to Benjamin's conceptualization of the aura (the term appears, in the mouths of characters and elsewhere, in both *White Noise* and *Mao II*), he disagrees with him on a number of points. This is due to the fact that Benjamin's ideas require remodulation in a television age, at a time when militaristic fascism is less of a threat to citizens in the West than is the same impulse played out on the socioeconomic field within the rule of law.

<sup>8</sup> Direct sense perception and the expression of it through strictly oral communication gave way during and after the rise of literacy to a greater reliance on the experience of the eye. When image technologies proliferated this century, technologically enhanced visuality fell upon fertile ground. See Julian Jaynes's *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Walter Ong's *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture*, and *Literacy and Orality* (David Olson and Nancy Torrance, eds.).

<sup>9</sup> Taking the side of symbolic interactionists, John B. Thompson views the self "neither as the product of an external symbolic system, nor as a fixed entity which the individual can immediately and directly grasp; rather, the self is a symbolic project that the individual actively constructs. It is a project that the individual constructs out of the symbolic materials which are available to him or her, materials which the individual weaves into a...narrative of self-identity" (210). The trouble with Thompson's position is that too little emphasis is placed on the availability or lack thereof of meaningful symbolic material with which the self might assemble itself. In the absence, for instance, of any critique of the mass media (or of any other kinds of texts that might engender such a critique), the self is left to forage amongst persuasive screen texts, and is thus, for all intents and purposes, constructed by an external symbolic system. Even if we admit the possibility of freedom of choice, the choices on offer, on television, are of course limited.

<sup>10</sup> A three-dimensional image arises from the layering of objects within a visual frame. So, too, does a richer ideological 'picture' emerge when diverse perspectives are laid upon one another. I should mention here that at no point in this argument do I mean to suggest that all visual technologies are without value to the democratic citizen. I could hardly say as much in relation to DeLillo who is the subject of an excellent Web site that offers a number of visual materials one may bring to bear on the novels (the address is <http://www.haas.berkeley.edu/~gardner/delillo.html>). But it is this process of bringing one text to bear on another that is important. If one engages with television only, no superimposition takes place.

<sup>11</sup> During the 1980s, a particular bumper sticker epitomized the link between consumerism and an awareness of mortality. It read, "Whoever has the most toys when he dies wins".

<sup>12</sup> I modify here Benjamins's use of the phrase 'unconscious optics' so as to refer to that which is technically seen but not epistemically understood (for instance, the bodily mechanics of running that become apparent in slow motion film or video).

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin writes, "the surgeon at the decisive moment abstains from facing the patient man to man; rather, it is through the operation that he penetrates into him. Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. There is a tremendous difference between

the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law" (233-4).

<sup>14</sup> I must make clear here what connotations I hope to attach to the terms 'self-consciousness' and 'self-awareness', as well as explain what I mean by 'self-regarding'. I do not refer to self-consciousness as that state of mind when one feels embarrassed or awkward, but to the awareness of self as self. Persons are self-aware when they know what position they occupy in a given cultural field and how it is their ideologies and actions affect their lives. If I say that characters are self-regarding, I mean that their primary mode of thinking involves a preoccupation with a corporately delineated view of the self (such persons may be self-conscious but not self-aware).

<sup>15</sup> The medical gaze and the eye of the camera combine on television to offer a bloody, often highly disturbing look into the heart of our biological being. Film footage of medical operations is now a standard entertainment.

<sup>16</sup> Duvall offers an excellent discussion of DeLillo's "Pafko at the Wall" (a short story originally published in *Harper's* but which later became part of his novel *Underworld*). Duvall explains how that piece presents American mass culture as arbiter of national perceptions of the geopolitical, of the Cold War in particular.

<sup>17</sup> This is the fate of any crowd in DeLillo. Each semester, Jack shows to his students a large amount of film footage from Nazi-era propaganda, footage in which Crowd scenes predominated. Close-up jostled shots of thousands of people outside a stadium after a Goebbels speech, people surging, massing....Ranks of thousands of flagbearers arrayed before columns of frozen light, a hundred and thirty anti-aircraft searchlights aimed straight up....There was no narrative voice. Only chants, songs, arias, speeches, cries, cheers, accusations, shrieks. (25-26)

The scenes have the look, feel, and content of a religious festival, an ecstasy before the aura, but it is a highly non-interactive moment for individual audience members at the rally. Speeches are unilateral forms of communication, and after Goebbels has finished the crowd can only be a crowd.

<sup>18</sup> Frank Lentricchia, in his introduction to *New Essays on White Noise*, discusses DeLillo's work in reference to Eudora Welty's well-known claim that fiction must have a private address.

<sup>19</sup> DeLillo says that the novel grew out of a fascination with a picture he saw of J. D. Salinger, a photo taken against the reclusive author's will and showing his anger at having his image captured.

<sup>20</sup> Space here does not allow an extrapolation of how agency may be traced in the formal features of a work, but I refer my reader to Charles Altieri's *Subjective Agency: A Theory of First-Person Expressivity and its Social Implications*.

<sup>21</sup> DeLillo's most recent novel *Underworld* deals extensively with the shot heard around the world that was Bobby Thompson's home run hit during a Giants-Dodgers playoff game in 1951. The game was played on the same day that the Soviets tested an atomic bomb for the second time.

<sup>22</sup> *Underworld* includes a surreal description of a film by Eisenstein that does not actually exist.

<sup>23</sup> Here, as in *White Noise*, DeLillo's fiction takes on a prophetic quality. During the Gulf War one of the strangest moments in the history of photographic reporting occurred. When American soldiers advanced on a key Iraqi defense zone, they were met only by reporters. The Iraqis had

withdrawn, leaving the Americans to look at themselves through their technology. The news became the news that news reporters were the only ones there. In the case of *White Noise*, several environmental emergencies in California have occurred since the publication of the novel that have involved the breakdown of public information exchange due to too much noise in the system. The weight of verbal exchange in the emergency systems outweighed the movement of meaningful and useful information (the breakdown is similar to the crashes that occur when stock speculation outweighs trading in real value).

### Chapter Three: Robert Coover

<sup>1</sup> While Hollywood, California is not the base for all U.S. film companies, it sees the largest and most influential studios located there. I use the name as a handy tag for the American film industry as a whole.

<sup>2</sup> The movement of characters into our 'real' world, and of human beings into film worlds, has become a popular motif in contemporary film and television. Notable examples include *The Purple Rose of Cairo* wherein a screen hero escapes from the frame to explore the world occupied by film viewers, and *Pleasantville*, the story of a young man transported into the world of 50's television sitcoms. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* follows the adventures of a detective who is able to move in real and cartoon worlds, and who bears a nostalgic affinity for the latter due to his immersion in that world as a child.

<sup>3</sup> As the ensuing discussion indicates, Keinholtz' environments and the pieces within them defy easy categorization. He assembles a wide variety of materials to create a number of objects and structures, and offers figures formed out of non-traditional materials. Often, the materials of the work become close to inconsequential inside what seems more purely a conceptual exercise.

<sup>4</sup> Jameson sees such a development as a late twentieth century outgrowth of machine time initiated in the Fordist era and which comes to us today televisually in segments of the programming hour (75-76).

<sup>5</sup> Heidegger contrasts this bad present with the cultivation of the alternative present offered by Dasein, a Being that fosters such cultivation by being futural. The projection of oneself into the future in order to understand the now is, Heidegger claims, one of the key features of human being.

<sup>6</sup> It is often argued that television rallied public opinion against the war, opinion which eventually brought the conflict to a close. However, the point should be made that since that time, television has been widely employed to garner public support for foreign conflicts (the Gulf War perhaps being the prime example). This employment is not a result of government control but of the ways in which the mass media have come to depict all conflict as spectacle. The disturbing images of injured or killed Vietnamese soldiers and civilians did not find their equivalent in coverage of the Gulf War. Opposition that does manage to manifest itself on television is diluted by the economy of televisual images; there would be no compelling media event but for images of military massing and deployment, of the descent of smart bombs as seen from the nose of the bomb itself, so these images remain the primary point of reference and are thus continuously aired.

<sup>7</sup> My approach to definition here is in part a response to "Justice Potter Stewart [who] suggested more than twenty years ago [that] no one can define pornography, but everyone knows what it is when they see it and especially when they begin to argue about it" (Gubar and Hoff 8). In a

sense, I do not categorically define the term so much as I enact the parameters of a long-running debate.

<sup>8</sup> Prior to discussing time in Faulkner, Sartre describes the novel itself as an “obscene and obstructing presence”, words that well describe any one of Keinholz’ figures or environments.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. my discussion below on the materiality of time in an art piece.

<sup>10</sup> See Bakhtin’s *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, and Maingueneau’s *Initiation aux méthodes de l’analyse du discours*.

<sup>11</sup> In what follows, I refer to Keinholz’ installation pieces, but I do not want readers to confuse my notion of site-specific analysis with visual art objects that are termed site-specific. The latter are works in galleries that incorporate aspects of a gallery structure. The traditional installation piece does not do so and is self-contained.

<sup>12</sup> Damien Hirst has created pieces in which shark flesh floats in formaldehyde and Canadian artist Jana Sterbak’s *Meat Dress* is composed of beef. While these ‘pieces’ are presented for a variety of metaphorical purposes and carry diverse layers of meaning, the temporality of flesh is at issue. The process of decomposition is arrested for a time in Hirst’s work. By contrast, Sterbak’s meat dress was bought by the National Gallery/Musée de beaux-arts, which must frequently purchase fresh meat and place it upon a wire frame in accordance with the artist’s instructions. The dress rots during the course of an exhibition.

<sup>13</sup> The ontological indistinctness of film poses further interesting questions for its construal in mediant fiction. May we say (as I do not above) that it properly resides in the can on celluloid, on the screen as image, or in light as a wave that travels both to and from the screen? Or does it finally exist on the retina, at that point where the process that begun with light coming in through a lens comes full circle after journeying through the world in other forms? I suggest that this unlocatability contributes to the attractive mystery of the medium. As Brita says in *Mao II*, a “hard-to-reach place is necessarily beautiful, I think. Beautiful and a little sacred maybe” (36)

<sup>14</sup> In his excellent book, *Filming and Judgment: Between Heidegger and Adorno*, Wilhelm S. Wurzer also explains this opposition, writing that a “double-edged sword thus shines at the abyss of this epoch: *images* of practical grounding without theoretical legitimation collide with a *style of thinking* which, withdrawing from ground, is drawn into this very withdrawal.” (1) Wurzer, unlike Bertens, presents the foundational view in terms of visuality and thought, not ground.

<sup>15</sup> I think here of the overheated apocalypticism of Baudrillard in portions of *Simulations*.

<sup>16</sup> I am thinking here of Norris’ castigation in *The Contest of Faculties: Philosophy and Theory After Deconstruction* of Habermas’s preoccupation with the foundations and limits of knowledge: “the trouble with Habermas is not so much that he provides a metanarrative of emancipation as that he feels the need to legitimize, that he is not content to let the narratives which hold our culture together do their stuff. He is scratching where it does not itch” (164).

<sup>17</sup> It is the recuperation of essentialism on the heels of radical critiques of meaning that worries me about such movements (cf. the quotation in my introduction from Derrida on this matter). Of concern to me is that such movements are partially in collusion with radical critique, engaged as they often are in the full invention of precepts with little regard for traditional histories of morality and culturally diverse ethical frameworks.

<sup>18</sup> In *Time: The Familiar Stranger*, J. T. Fraser defines biotemporality as “the temporal reality of all living organisms, including man, as far as his biological functions are concerned. Living species display a very broad spectrum in the degree to which they distinguish among future, past, and present, but the biotemporal arrow is quite different from the noetic one” (111).

<sup>19</sup> See the opening story sequences in Italo Calvino’s *It On a Winter’s Night a Traveler*. A train station there is similarly all that is real to story characters. In each work, perception only yields those objects within the flashlight beam of our intentional and immediate gaze.

#### Chapter Four: Thomas Pynchon

<sup>1</sup> Wallace’s description appears only in the original version of his essay which appeared in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13: 2 (1993): 127-50. It is excised from the reprint in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* since it detracts from a modified thesis there.

<sup>2</sup> See in particular Charles Clerc’s “Film in *Gravity’s Rainbow*” and Hanjo Berressem’s chapter “*Gravity’s Rainbow*: Text as Film—Film as Text” in his *Pynchon’s Poetics*.

<sup>3</sup> In the twentieth century, the term liberalism loosely connotes such values as privacy, rationality, tolerance, participation, and minority rights. It is thus generally at odds with the inequalities that exist under late capitalism. See A. Arblaster’s *The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism*. Economic liberalism involves the application of liberal ideas in the sphere of economics and involves preferences for competitive markets and government intervention to halt monopolies. See A. K. Dasgupta’s *Epochs of Economic Theory*.

<sup>4</sup> I follow Hoskins et al. in assigning a nationality to an individual corporation in accordance with where it is that the company conducts the majority of its technological activities.

<sup>5</sup> Wallace’s uncollected and early short story “Tri-Stan: I Sold Sissee Nar to Ecko” is a mock epic treatment of Tristar Entertainment’s approach to combining ‘proven’ entertainment elements to assure that accumulative preference takes place:

There moved, and shook, Before Cable, a wise & clever programming executive named Agon M. Nar. Agon M. Nar was revered throughout medieval California’s fluorescent basin for the clever wisdom & cojones with which he presided over Recombinant Programming for the Telephemus Studios Division of Tri-Stan Entertainment Unltd. Agon M. Nar’s programming *arche* was the metastasis of originality. He could shuffle & recombine proven entertainment formulae into configurations that allowed the muse of Familiarity to appear cross-dressed as Innovation. (65)

Of Tri-Star, Hoskins et al. write,

Other acquisitions merely increase a company’s presence in the same activity. This is called horizontal integration. In 1987 (prior to its acquisition by Sony) Columbia, a Hollywood major merged with TriStar Pictures, an independent studio. Such mergers are designed to ensure a sufficient market share to sustain a substantial, and costly, distribution structure. (23)



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<sup>6</sup> I use the term 'hegemony' in the manner Gramsci does in his *Prison Notebooks*, that is, to refer to a kind of social control practiced by dominant classes or forces and that is maintained not only through force but by consent. I also intend the term to sound in its more general sense (given the themes of *Gravity's Rainbow*), as connoting the political dominance of one nation over another.

<sup>7</sup> Given the appearance of Mickey Rooney in the novel, it is hard here not to think of the actor's racist portrayal of a Japanese landlord in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, a performance marked by obscene exaggeration of Oriental features.

<sup>8</sup> If talk of such harnessing here sounds overblown, I refer my reader to Tony Clarke's and Maude-Barlow's *MAI: The Multilateral Agreement on Investment and the Threat to Canadian Sovereignty*.

<sup>9</sup> Here is the passage, quoted in part above, that aligns the childlike innocence of the gangsters with the seductions of popular film and social organization in general:

In a corporate State, a place must be made for innocence, and its many uses. In developing an official version of innocence, the culture of childhood has proved invaluable. Gems, fairy-tales, legends from history, all the paraphernalia of make-believe can be adapted and even embodied in a physical place, such as the Zwölfkinder.... Whoever carried on the real business of the town—it could not have been the children—they were well hidden. (419)

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