

A Poetics of Chaos:
Schizoanalysis and Postmodern American Fiction

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Ph.D.

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Kiki Benzon
16 August 2006

For my parents—Axel and Susan

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Abstract

In "A Poetics of Chaos: Schizoanalysis and Postmodern American Fiction," I use theories from physics and psychoanalysis together to explore narrative structures in recent American fiction. Chaos theory, which emerged in mathematical and biological discourses in the 1960s, postulates the intrinsic instability and unpredictability of many natural and physical phenomena. Theorists like Bertalanffy, Mandelbrot and Lorenz produced a vocabulary to account for these pervasive systems. In assessing historical, economic and, indeed, literary systems, we may draw terms from chaotic inquiry: bifurcation, fractal, moebial, reiteration, complexity, butterfly effect, strange attractors, and sensitive dependence upon initial conditions. "Chaotic narratives" may explicitly deploy (Barth, Pynchon, Gibson) or inadvertently express (Coover, Ondaatje, Powers) the structural features of chaotic systems. Such writing is characterized by a diffusion of linear chronology, as well as ontological and narrative fracture, repetition and variation. Literary theorists N. Katherine Hayles, Joseph Conte, Hanjo Berressem and others have discussed how chaotic scientific and psycho-social systems are not only invoked in contemporary literature, but are themselves the structural and philosophical underpinnings of postmodern culture. My thesis builds upon chaotic-literary criticism by investigating the psychological implications of "chaotic narratives." Drawing from the anti-deterministic "schizoanalysis" of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, I explain how writings by Don DeLillo, Paul Auster, David Foster Wallace and Mark Z. Danielewski perform and reflect the "orderly disorder" of psychic development. I advance the term "psychochaotics" to describe a theoretical approach that uses principles from chaos theory to reveal the psychodynamic systems in postmodern fiction.

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Introduction: Literary Psychochaotics

Isn't the destiny of American literature that of crossing limits and frontiers, causing deterritorialized flows of desire to circulate, but also making these flows transport fascisizing, moralizing, Puritan, and familialist territorialities?

- Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari,
Anti-Oedipus, 277-8

I open with this quotation because it expresses the central duality—some might say *paradox*—in American literature that I will be exploring in the following pages. The remarks occur in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972) at a moment when Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari extrapolate their political and psychoanalytic concerns into the literary domain. Of course, anything sweepingly said about “American literature”—or, for that matter, any national product as a whole—is going to make even the most dedicated generalist narrow her or his eyes. But the alternate and sometimes simultaneous denial and perpetuation of structurally rigid conditions—what Deleuze and Guattari call “territorialities”—does appear to be a prevalent impulse throughout the American canon, whether this impulse be manifest in the delimited fluidity of the Mississippi River navigated by Twain’s heroes, the reiterative, evolving prose of Stein, or the skewed quest novels of Kerouac, McCarthy and Pynchon. Inasmuch as American fiction reflects the culture’s reigning values of expansion and self-determination, encoded in these drives are commensurate pressures to advance new forms of organization, which are inevitably anchored in (though, perhaps, strung taut from resistance to) pre-revolutionary modes of fascism, morality, Puritanism and familialism (to use Deleuze and Guattari’s terms). These foundational precepts are a blueprint upon which successive

cultural patterns, or “flows of desire,” are sketched out; markers from which new lines diverge; and ideas that yield new imaginings. In such a dialectic, there is neither order nor disorder but, rather, perpetual oscillation between the two poles, affirming, finally, the fallacy of distinct polarities altogether.

Produced within this system, literature becomes a means of measuring a cultural temperature that is always changing, a means of assigning coordinates in the knowledge that our emplotments are as ephemeral as the system under observation is fluxous. Before delving into particular literary works—these “turbulent mirrors”¹ that reflect the philosophical and ideological variables of the environments from which they emerge—I will attempt to make plain the particular theoretical ideas of relevance to my study. Because I am working with a cluster of concepts drawn from discrete disciplines,² it will take some unpacking to bring into view all necessary elements. I hope that this technical back-story will not eclipse the narrative matters that form the core of this investigation into recent American fiction. My approach is literary throughout, but it is charged by concepts drawn from three fields of inquiry: postmodernism, chaos theory and schizoanalysis. Over the next few pages, I will elaborate upon each of these subjects,

¹ I borrow this phrase from John Briggs and F. David Peat’s *Turbulent Mirror: An Illustrated Guide to Chaos Theory and the Science of Wholeness* (1989), whose title refers to the Chinese myth of the Yellow Emperor, who used magic to keep the “chaotic” creatures dwelling on the “other side” of mirrors from invading earth; the magic spell forced the creatures to mechanically repeat the appearance and actions of human beings. Briggs and Peat’s study describes how “a new breed of scientists has begun constructing a new mirror to hold up to nature: a turbulent mirror” (14).

² Though as one might infer from the “interdisciplinary fever” that is becoming something of a pandemic in academic circles (evinced, indeed, by this very dissertation), barriers between scientific and literary fields—what C.P. Snow referred to in his famous lecture of 1959 “the two cultures”—have of late been much eroded. Michel Serres’ “dualist hell” of disciplinary distinctions (“Dream” 33) has been to an extent remedied by a polymorphous postmodernism, heralded in works like *Order out of Chaos: Man’s New Dialogue with Nature* (1984), in which Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers argue for “a convergence of science and the humanities” (xxix), and Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), which advances a theory of “nomad science” to replace the rigid delineations of “state science” (“Plateau 12”). Researchers at institutions like the MIT Media Lab, the Santa Fe Institute, the Center for the Integration of Medicine and Innovative Technologies, The Art-Science Laboratory in New York, and the Research in Experimental Design group at XEROX-PARC are exploring novel disciplinary combinations, such as nonlinear dynamics and history, technology and music, and medicine and art.

foregrounding terms that are particularly salient to my thesis, providing historical information where warranted, and, at times, alluding ahead to literary applications that will be developed in the ensuing chapters. Mining the literary and cultural theories of Brian McHale and Jean-François Lyotard, in the first instance, I advance a conception of postmodernism that is characterized by indeterminacy, multiplicity and ontological ambiguity; this conception is not new in itself, but highlights certain elements within the vast, polyphonic field of postmodernist discourse that will be pertinent to the current work. I then explain how chaos theory—a branch of science concerned with systems in perpetual oscillation between order and disorder—has become conceptually useful as a means of understanding the structural and material properties of postmodern fiction. Having gestured toward the sources and features of what I call “chaotic narratives,” I begin to sketch-out the parameters of my particular interpretation of these texts—namely, that their literary chaotics expresses a vision of the psyche that is both radical in its resistance to traditional psychoanalytic approaches and revelatory in that its systems are structurally analogous to those of the culture they seek to represent and from which they emerge. I argue that just as chaos theory has undermined Newtonian convictions of causality and determinism in physical and mathematical systems, so too has the anti-psychiatry of Deleuze and Guattari—“schizoanalysis”—problematized the Freudian model of the psyche. Chaotic narratives, I submit, are sites where these two conceptual revolutions are together expressed. As such, these narratives work to enact and incite a “psychochaotics” that is at once individually affirming and sociopolitically transformative.

i. *Postmodernism*

Nobody likes the term.

- Brian MacHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 3

Postmodern science—by concerning itself with such things as undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, ‘*fracta*,’ catastrophes, and pragmatic paradoxes—is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, non-rectifiable, and paradoxical. It is changing the meaning of the word *knowledge*, while expressing how such a change can take place. It is producing not the known but the unknown.

- Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 58

Where individual attempts to produce the known, when taken collectively, produce the unknown: such is Lyotard’s characterization of “the postmodern condition.” But mustn’t this condition, then, necessarily be a *non*-condition, a pool of perpetually circulating “undecidables,” within which nothing definite can take root? There are, indeed, as many definitions of postmodernism as there are ostensible manifestations of . . . the disease. There are Jean Baudrillard’s convictions about the waning of authenticity and preeminence of simulacra [*The Precession of Simulacra* (1981)], Lyotard’s “incredulity towards metanarrative” (xxiv), Linda Hutcheon’s focus on ironicism and the “dedoxification” of cultural mythology (3), Ihab Hassan’s binary distinctions between modernist and postmodernist aesthetic and philosophical concerns¹ (91), John Barth’s incitement to a postmodern “literature of replenishment” [*The Friday Book* (1984) 206],

¹ In *The Postmodern Turn* (1987), Hassan presents a handy chart where modernist preoccupations with concepts like *author*, *temporal*, *purpose*, *original*, *closed form* and *hierarchy* are posed against postmodernist emphases upon *discursive field*, *spatial*, *play*, *copy*, *process* and *anarchy* (91).

Fredric Jameson's emphasis upon a multinational consumer capitalism and "schizophrenic signifying chains" (25), and a veritable cacophony of others. Each approach posits its own ideological valances, aesthetic values, and theoretical applications. While, for example, Brian McHale's contention that an "ontological dominant . . . is the principle of systematicity underlying [the] otherwise heterogeneous catalogues [of postmodernism]" (*Postmodernist Fiction* 10) is a move to establish a general paradigm within which cultural objects and processes may be interpreted, Michel Foucault's framing of postmodernism is preoccupied with the institutionalization of power and its affects on knowledge and identity. Feminist approaches to postmodernism may, like those of Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, stress "a fluid subjectivity and the end of totalizing narratives as freeing women from the constraints of the 'feminine' that was always already male defined" (Kaplan 250) or, following Donna Harroway, they might refer to contemporary sites of ontological hybridity (such as the cyborg) to illustrate the social and technological inscriptions specific to female identity. Some intellectuals, finally, will utter the word "postmodernism" at gunpoint only, and still others consider it to be an outright theoretical hoax.¹

Particularly specious to some academics from diverse fields of inquiry are postmodernist invocations of models and theories from the so-called hard sciences (particularly physics and mathematics) towards the scientification and legitimization² of literary and cultural analysis.³ To these watchdogs and doctrinaires, I would simply say

¹ After sending out a Call for Papers through the University of Pennsylvania list serve (inviting submissions for a conference panel on psychoanalysis and postmodern fiction), I received a terse corrective from one such disgruntled academic at UC Irvine: "There is no such thing as Postmodernism."

² These terms I use tentatively, as literary application of hard science may also humanize the scientific or delegitimize scientific objectivity.

³ See, in particular Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont's scathing critique of Lacan, Irigaray, Deleuze and other cultural theorists in *Intellectual Imposters* (1998), which Richard Dawkins favourably reviewed ("Postmodernism Disrobed") in *Nature*. Sokal and Bricmont's book was born from their "success" in

this: give up—or don't; you have (always already) been assimilated in your very dissent. Perfectly self-perpetuating in its premises of absent origins and omni-referentiality, its ethos of multiplicity and indeterminacy, and its once-, twice- (or, basically, *n*-) removed points of apprehension, postmodernism may bend and diffuse to incorporate practically every cultural product and procedure—even those that would pose themselves against postmodernism. Roland Barthes, for one, casts an approving gaze upon disciplinary mingling, which, he proposes in “From Work to Text,” would occur “when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down . . . in the interests of a new object and a new language, neither of which has a place in the field of the sciences that were to be brought peacefully together” (155). Contestation and discord, theses and antitheses and, as Lyotard says (in lines quoted in the above epigraph), the “discontinuous, catastrophic, non-rectifiable and paradoxical” are the substance and sustenance of postmodernism. One wonders what historico-aesthetic movement might emerge to supplant *it*.¹

Still, a literary study—and mine is no exception—requires a theoretical superstructure (not in the Marxist sense) that will assist in avoiding what Jameson calls “a view of the present history [and its concomitant fiction] as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable” (4). It may seem unhelpfully syllogistic, then, that one of the theoretical lenses through which I suggest we examine postmodernism and its products is *itself* characterized by

having an article filled with bogus science (“Transgressing the Boundaries: towards a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity”) published in *Social Text*. Several instances of humanities applications of science highlighted in Sokal and Bricmont’s book do, indeed, seem ridiculous—for example, Lucy Irigaray’s argument that $E=Mc^2$ is a “sexed equation” because it “privileges the speed of light over other speeds that are vitally necessary to us” (110). But attack pieces always cite the cases of extreme folly, extracted from a field that might otherwise contain benign or fruitful inquiry. Bad scholarship, furthermore, is hardly just an *interdisciplinary* phenomenon: bad scholarship may be practiced internally, *within any discipline*—even the hard sciences! Assorted responses to Sokal and Bricmont’s contentious publication are collected in *The Sokal Hoax: The Sham that Shook the Academy* (2000).

¹ Cybernetics, probably—but this is more a continuation of a polymorphous postmodernism than an adverse reaction to it.

indeterminacy, heterogeneity and instability—but that, importantly, is not to say (as Jameson fears) “random.” In order to view as “scientific” a mode of literary appraisal that foregrounds the opposite of definitiveness and solubility—one that is “rhizomatic”¹ in its processes and structures, one that, in fact, *searches for* instability rather than resolution—it behooves us to consider a branch of scientific inquiry that has (largely coincidental to postmodernism) elicited a reconsideration of what, precisely, constitutes knowledge. Scientific knowledge, Lyotard contends in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), is erroneously cast as the sole site of knowledge. One strategy towards redefining the parameters of empirical knowledge has been to bring together science and humanities discourses in order to detect and elucidate the structural, systematic or philosophical correspondences.² Among recent discourse of this kind, Joseph Conte’s *Design and Debris: A Chaotics of Postmodern American Fiction* (2002) perhaps most successfully connects a particular scientific model with literary strategy, producing a compelling argument for the interpenetration of the two fields. While Conte does not argue for literature *as* science, he manages to problematize and, at times, efface the line separating scientific and humanistic discourse, finding that in both “the arts and sciences a paradigm shift occurs in postmodernism in the conception of the relation between order and disorder” (7); it is this shared, roughly contiguous shift in paradigm that motivates a broader inspection of the correlatives between postmodern literature and the physical science of

¹ In his essay, “Are Rhizomes Scale-Free? Network Theory and Contemporary American Literature,” John Johnston provides a usefully clear description of the rhizome, as it is employed by Deleuze and Guattari: “the rhizome—literally the root-like stem that sends out shoots in all direction—evokes . . . a completely different image [from the “order and hierarchical organization” of the tree, which grows according to a model of binarism and splitting]—that of a burrow, crabgrass, swarm or pack. With multiple entrances and exits, and mobile, heterogeneous connections, a rhizome is a network with a unique consistency but no unity” (53). I will pick up on this term when I come to discuss schizoanalysis and, further on, with reference to various novels.

² Important “literary” analyses to invoke scientific principles include Gillian Beer’s *Darwin’s Plots* (1983), Bruno Latour’s *Science in Action* (1987), and Charles Bazerman’s *Shaping Written Knowledge* (1988).

chaos. “Postmodern fiction,” Conte asserts, “dwells at the interces between order and disorder, certainty and uncertainty, verifiability and disruption” (4)—and the shrewd analysis of a range of postmodern novels in *Design and Debris* goes far in supporting this assertion. Although Conte distinguishes between two kinds of literary enactments of chaos (“proceduralists” and “disruptors”¹), he does not, finally, propose a literary mode or type that may be considered a sub-genre of postmodernist fiction. Redressing this omission, I would suggest a categorical determinant—*chaotic narratives*—to account for those literary works whose architecture has been (either intentionally or unconsciously) informed by the structures and philosophical principles of chaos theory—or, as it is variously called, nonlinear or complex dynamics. In order to make clear the character and silhouette of such literary forms, and to introduce the set of ideas which directed the philosophical energies of Deleuze and Guattari, some historical and conceptual discussion of chaos theory is required. To the provision of this, the following section will tend. I will then turn my attention to schizoanalysis, which provides the conceptual framework for understanding the psychological dimension of chaotic narratives.

¹ Proceduralist fiction, according to Conte, includes Robert Coover’s *Universal Baseball Association* (1968), Gilbert Sorrentino’s *Pack of Lies* (1997), and John Hawks’ *Travesty* (1976)—“works in which an undisclosed pattern becomes emergent in disorder; they are novels that reveal an imminent design in the fractious conditions they describe” (4)—while disruptors include DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1984), Kathy Acker’s *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) and Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1987)—“works for which the disorderly confusion of the phenomenal world, the disruption of staid and resolved structures, becomes the requirements for the emergence of a new and more desirable order.”

ii. *Chaos*

The postmodern cross-pollination of disciplines and media is evident in its literary artifacts, whose complexity and “orderly disorder” are themselves reflections and embodiments of chaotic systems.

- N. Katherine Hayles, *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science*, 10

The theoretical and formal correspondences between postmodernism and chaos theory have been enumerated in humanities and scientific discourses alike. Floyd W. Matson, in *The Broken Image: Man, Science and Society* (1964), was the first to make explicit these correspondences, referring to chaos theory as “postmodern science,” a coinage later picked up by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*. Chaos theory emerged in the early twentieth century as part of a scientific movement that undermined classical assumptions of causality and determinacy.¹ Developments like Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, Gödel’s Incompleteness Theory, Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle, and discoveries in quantum mechanics,² moved scientific thinking away from Newton’s mechanistic physics toward an unpredictable, indeterminate and, at times, paradoxical concept of the universe. Together, these developments constituted a revolution in scientific thought—or, to extract Thomas Kuhn’s phrase from *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970), a *paradigm*

¹ These “classical assumptions” are first articulated in Isaac Newton’s *Principia philosophia naturalis mathematica* (1687).

² To wit: relativity theory (1905) finds that objects moving extraordinarily fast possess different properties than objects moving at everyday speeds; Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem (1931) holds that “there are no rules for generating all of the truths about the natural numbers” because “there are an infinite number of ways we can choose a finite set of axioms and rules of a formal system in an attempt to mirror syntactically the mathematical truths of the structure” (Casti 371); Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle (1927) implicates the observer as a presence in any system of measurement—a contention that was furthered by Niels Bohr’s Principle of Complementarity (1927), which rejects the logical contradictions of light as wave and photons as complementary; and quantum theory supposes that extraordinarily small objects behave differently from everyday microscopic objects.

shift, where “an older paradigm is replaced in whole or in part by an incompatible new one” (92).

Chaos theory analyzes systems that move between states of order and disorder, generation and destruction, unification and dislocation, hybridization and homogenization. While the Newtonian paradigm for physical behavior emphasizes predictability, chaos theory stresses unpredictability. Rather than deeming systematic indeterminacy anomalous and non-conducive to standard, rational methods of deciphering, chaotic inquiry attempts to make sense of the particular information produced by these indeterminate, irrational systems. In *Chaos Theory in the Social Sciences: Foundations* (1996), Douglas L. Kiel and Euel Elliott explain that “[w]hile a Newtonian universe was founded on stability and order, chaos theory teaches that instability and disorder are not only widespread in nature, but essential to the evolution of complexity in the universe” (2). In Newtonian mechanics and its conceptual parent, Euclidean geometry, small causes lead to small effects and geometrical properties are scale-invariant; an equilateral triangle, for example, will appear and behave like an equilateral triangle, no matter what its size. But in a chaotic system, statements made about one scale level do not necessarily apply to another. Systems of interest in chaos theory are *dynamic* (they change over time) and may be mathematically represented in differential equations.¹ Not all dynamic systems are chaotic, however, and this is where the terms *linear* and *nonlinear* become important. In a linear dynamic system, a variable will change proportionally in response to a stimulus; examples of such are the graphic representations of a circle, a parabola or an ellipsis. But chaotic systems differ from other dynamic systems because they are nonlinear, which means they depend upon two or more

¹ An equation containing derivatives—that is, dynamic variables that change in response to change in the independent variables.

(often unquantifiable) factors acting independently. In these cases, response and amount of stimulus are not necessarily proportionally linked (as they are in Newton's conception). Thus, as a chaotic system progresses over time, its behavior (or, if graphed, its shape) changes in unpredictable ways.

One of the most famous graphic examples of chaotic behavior is the Lorenz Attractor [Appendix *i*]. While plotting a differential equation corresponding to a weather pattern, Edward Lorenz found that each repetition would appear slightly off-kilter from the one that preceded it. This successive variation, which produced the famous butterfly-shaped Lorenz Attractor, resulted from tiny fluctuations in the starting point of the system. Lorenz reveals in his seminal paper of 1963, "Deterministic Non-periodic Flow," that a system's behavior is largely contingent upon its initial conditions. The infinite imprecision of a system's initial conditions produced a mathematically random but generally discernible image, which became increasingly unpredictable with each iteration.¹ The term "chaos theory" may therefore be something of a misnomer, as it connotes sheer randomness rather than the combined patterns of form and formlessness that chaotic systems in fact embody.² Each disorderly element is counterbalanced (either alternately or simultaneously) by an orderly one. While the course of a chaotic system cannot be predicted (disorder), its trajectory will veer toward a representative point (order). In a linear system, this spot or *attractor* is fixed—for example, consider the midpoint of a pendulum's path, where the motion is always toward or away from a fixed

¹ This infinite imprecision—or, in chaos theory, a "sensitive dependence upon initial conditions"—is in turn complicated by another dependency, the Liapunov exponent, which accounts for the *severity* of sensitive dependence upon initial conditions.

² At the 1986 meeting of the Royal Society, chaos theory was officially defined as "the study of stochastic behavior occurring in a deterministic system" (Stewart 16-7). "Chaos theory" may also be considered an imprecise term because, in addition to not representing utter randomness, it is not a *theory*: oscillation toward and away from periodicity and chaos has been experimentally proven in both nature and pure math.

point at the center of its trajectory, when the pendulum is at a right angle to the earth. In a chaotic system, however, the compelling force is impossible to locate precisely and is rather aptly called a *strange attractor*. This kind of attractor appears, for example, in the behavior of a double planar pendulum, which is made by attaching a second pendulum to the swinging end of the first: the shape of this system cannot be predicted—to know how the second pendulum will swing, one must know the starting position of the first pendulum with infinite precision, which is impossible. Still, the disorder contains order: when mapped into phase space¹ (recording the pendulum's angular position, i.e. each time the second pendulum forms a vertical line), the orbits stay within a confined region, though they never exactly coincide.

Lorenz discovered that in a nonlinear dynamic system “a nearly imperceptible change in a constant will produce a qualitative change in the system's behavior” (69). What can begin as a tiny fluctuation in a seemingly orderly system can result in catastrophe, or the complete dissolution of pre-existing structures. This is a result of *recursion*, “the continual re-absorption or unfolding of what has come before” (Briggs and Peat 66)—an integral property of any dynamic system, but one with potentially dramatic consequences in nonlinear dynamic systems. Each time a system reiterates, the turbulence grows exponentially because the output of one iteration is fed back into the succeeding one. One way of conceptualizing this is to think of a continuous river that is suddenly interrupted by a fallen pebble. The water must deviate from its previous course in order to move around the pebble. The system bifurcates [Appendix *ii*]. And after passing by the pebble, the water does not return to its original course of motion, but rather

¹ Phase space is a means of plotting in many dimensions, represented by positive, negative, real and imaginary numbers (imaginary numbers are real number multiplied by -1); each variable of an equation corresponds to one dimension.

fans out into unknowable swirls and vortices which repeat on various scales for an unforeseeable number of times. Formally speaking, bifurcation gives rise to perpetual *mise en abyme*, or fractals, where an initial pattern is replicated within and without itself, making it impossible to determine the origin or borders of the system. Probably the most famous graphic representation of this process is Benoit Mandelbrot's Julia Set, a mapping of the recursive equation, $z \rightarrow z^2 = C$ [Appendix *iii*]. Mandelbrot's major contribution to chaos theory—fractal geometry—is a technique by which nonlinear systems (the irregular or fractional figures produced) can be represented in visual form.

With the 1988 publication of James Gleik's *Chaos: The Making of a New Science*, as well as other non-technical accounts of the subject,¹ chaos theory took root in the popular consciousness. Supplying a theoretical mode for understanding turbulent operations in all composite dynamical systems, chaotic applications would emerge in several disciplines outside the realm of the hard sciences. A literary theorist who has studied systematic processes in postmodern fiction (in particular, DeLillo's "systems novels"²), Tom LeClair affirms that chaos theory enables an investigator to "recognize uncertainty and incompleteness" (Slethaug 13) that are indigenous to social and cultural as well as biological, physical and mathematical fields. Chaotic systems are in fact more common than orderly systems,³ showing up in contexts as diverse as measles epidemics.

¹ Other popular works about chaos theory include Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers' *Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* (1984), W. Mitchell Waldrop's *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos* (1994), John L. Casti's *Complexification: Explaining the Paradoxical World Through the Science of Surprise* (1994); Peter Coveney and Roger Highfield's *Frontiers of Complexity: The Search for Order in a Chaotic World* (1995), and Richard Leaky and Roger Lewin's *The Sixth Extinction: Biodiversity and Its Survival* (1996). These works are particularly influential in the humanities because they deal more with the aesthetic and philosophical dimensions of chaos theory, playing down its technical and mathematical aspects.

² This is the subject of LeClair's *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (1994).

³ This assertion is expanded upon in Hayles' essay, "Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science," in *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science* (1991).

dripping faucets, and stock market fluctuations.¹ Though disruptive to a previously stable system, chaotic emergence can prove to be a productive, even necessary, phenomenon. In *Chaos Theory in the Financial Markets* (1994), Dimitris Chorafas states that “[h]ealthy capital markets and money markets are characterized by turbulence and volatility, rather than efficiency and fair price [and like] any dynamic system, a healthy economy does not tend to equilibrium but it is, instead, in steady change” (16). Sociological discourse has likewise connected long-term cultural robustness with complexity and periods of upheaval—evinced, for example, by diaspora, which, Paul Gilroy writes, “can be used to instantiate a ‘chaotic’ model in which shifting ‘strange attractors’ are the only visible points of fragile stability amid social and cultural turbulence” (128).² As it is with social systems, so is it with physiological ones; Lewis Lipsitz discovered, for example, that aging is marked by decreased complexity in measures such as heart rate, blood pressure and brain wave pattern.³ Too much coherence and inflexibility in organic systems can, in fact, impede long-term functioning. And because chaotic recursion incorporates new levels of incongruity and fluctuation, a system’s ability to accommodate further alteration

¹ Explicated, respectively, in William Schaffer and Mark Kot’s “Nearly One-Dimensional Dynamics in an Epidemic” (1985), Bernardo Huberman’s “A Model for Dysfunctions in Smooth Pursuit Eye Movement” (1986), Robert Shaw’s *The Dripping Faucet as a Model Chaotic System* (1984), and William Brock’s “Chaos and Complexity in Economics and Financial Science” (1989).

² “By embracing diaspora,” Gilroy states, “theories of identity turn instead toward contingency, indeterminacy, and conflict. With the idea of valuing diaspora more highly than the coercive unanimity of the nation, the concept becomes explicitly antinational. This shift is connected with transforming the familiar unidirectional idea of diaspora as a form of catastrophic but simple dispersal that enjoys an identifiable and reversible originary moment—the site of trauma—into something far more complex” (128).

³ These findings appear in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (April, 1992). Frank Zingrone’s comments in “Chaos and the Meaning of Electric Culture” are also illustrative here: “Biology and physiology are finding chaos in the human body in which erratic, random behaviours, once thought to be pathological, are now understood as ‘normal’ chaotic irregularities. A system in extreme disequilibrium can fluctuate in ways that force the system up into a state of higher organization, more complex, more lively. Understanding such turbulent patterns, once thought to be dangerous, even life-threatening, is beginning to allow for more effective therapies and a better understanding of the effects of electric process on the body. Medicine is discovering that some degree of chaos is necessary for the healthy functioning of the heart, as it is for the brain. A healthy heart is continually varying its beat over a range of frequencies. For the brain, especially in literate, analytical pursuits, a high level of chaotic activity is generally expected in a healthy individual” (*McLuhan Studies* n.p.).

is enhanced; in his essay, “Negentropy, Noise and Emanicipatory Thought,” Edward Charles White confirms that chaotic fluctuation may actually lead a system to “organize itself into a more complex structure [and a] highly differentiated state” (263). Vann Spruiell provides an example of this increased robustness in psychological systems: “We can begin to understand how a system under threat from impingements or perturbations from the external world may alter itself by cutting off or distorting communications among its parts, either dampening or intensifying its ‘optimal levels’ of chaotic behavior, but also restricting certain functional interactions” (30). Recent developments in evolutionary computing have also used chaotic modeling to develop “genetic algorithms,”¹ which form part of the “conceptual and computational model for problem-solving and creativity” (Goertzel 9) that is being used in the fabrication of artificial intelligentsia.

Bringing chaos theory into the humanities has been both a revelatory and spurious exercise. Not everyone is happy with disciplinary mingling.² I have mentioned the infamous *Social Text* hoax, which became the basis for Sokal and Bricmont’s book, *Intellectual Imposters*, a lengthy polemic against philosophical and critical “misappropriations” of scientific and mathematical ideas; the ninth chapter is devoted to writings by Deleuze and Guattari, which Sokal and Bricmont call an “avalanche of ill-digested scientific and pseudo-scientific jargon” (146). Similarly, in *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (1994), Paul Gross and Norman Levitt

¹ Genetic algorithms generate structures according to the behavior of “memes.” Conceived by Richard Dawkins in 1976, memes are replicators of cultural information that one mind transmits (verbally or by demonstration) to another mind. Some proponents of memes suggest that they evolve via natural selection—in a way similar to Darwin’s notion of biological evolution—on the premise that variation, mutation, competition, and “inheritance” influence their replicative success.

² Perhaps this is why in (what is referred to among DeLillo buffs as his “science novel”) *Ratner’s Star* (1989), the eyepatched Celeste Dessau says of her role at Field Experiment Number One: “My work here is interdisciplinary. This is the loneliest kind of work. I find it hard to make real friends” (114).

refer to the “vaporous pontifications” (98) of Steven Best¹ and the “amateurish errors” (99) of N. Katherine Hayles as “the metaphysical hubris of postmodernism as such” (98). To maintain perspective, however, we should acknowledge that displeasure exists on both sides of the disciplinary divide; in “Blurred Genres,” Clifford Greets offers a wry but telling account of indiscriminate promiscuity between intellectual tribes. The objects of his derision include:

scientific discussions looking like belles lettres *morceaux* (Lewis Thomas, Lauren Eiseley), baroque fantasies presented as deadpan empirical observations (Borges, Barthelme), histories that consist of equations and tables or law court testimony (Fogel and Engerman, Le Roi Ladurie), documentaries that read like true confessions (Mailer), parables posing as ethnographies (Castenada), [and] theoretical treatises set out as travelogues (Levi-Strauss). (165-66)

Geertz continues his jeremiad against generic hybridization with reference to “Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962), that impossible object made of poetry and fiction, footnotes and images from the clinic, [which] seems very much of the time; one waits only for a quantum theory in verse or biography in algebra” (166). *One waits, indeed*—if the number poems that Geertz augurs would constitute anything as magnetic and agonizing as the polymathic *Pale Fire*. But rather than engage in mud slinging with those who oppose cross-breeding of science and the humanities, it is perhaps more interesting to consider why the adoption of scientific concepts by non-scientists (or humanities models by those not formally educated in the humanities) might invoke such hostility from practitioners of the borrowed discipline. In *Chaos Bound* (1990), Hayles attempts to explain the so-called

¹ Author of “Chaos and Entropy: Metaphors in Postmodern Science and Social Theory” in *Science and Culture* (1991).

“science wars,”¹ stating that concepts like chaos “become highly charged and thus explored and exploited without the sanctioning of the established discourse owners in question” (116). The novelist, for example, has “no right” to home in on a body of knowledge that he or she did not help to create and (presumably) does not have the background to fully understand. Kurt Vonnegut acknowledges an (albeit dated by a few decades) intolerance to scientific knowledge even within literary studies, where “[t]he feeling persists that no one can simultaneously be a respectable writer and know how a refrigerator works” (1).² From their respective vantage points as scientist/critic and author, Hayles and Vonnegut gesture toward an intellectual territorialism that, we must agree, is a (perhaps *the*) common denominator among not only research fields but also individual researchers within individual fields. Shunted as we are through institutions that (quite rightly) reward innovation and original thought, the impetus to specialize (and, within a specialist area, to become *the specialist*) is significant. The problem arises when, in our efforts to defend an exclusive expertise, we render the knowledge pertaining to that specialist zone exclusive. Postmodernism, for all of the typological dissidence it breeds, “aspires to an interdisciplinarity that presumes a shared discourse, the diffusion of theoretical concepts into all quadrants of society, and a sense of an integrated feedback loop among the disciplines” (Conte 15). It seems inevitable, then, that we would see during this period (at worst) an assault on the perimeters of would-be “specialist zones” and (at best) a willed circulation of ideas from laboratory to chapbook to website.

An embargo on free trade between the humanities and the sciences is, finally, an embargo on knowledge. By strictly delineating—or, *pace* Deleuze and Guattari,

¹ For a selection of these debates, see Keith Parson’s *The Science Wars* (2003).

² He continues: “College may be to blame. English Majors are encouraged . . . to hate chemistry and physics, and to be proud because they are not dull and creepy and humourless and war-oriented like the engineers across the quad” (1-2).

territorializing—separate spheres of discourse and investigation, we prevent the circulation of ideas—the sifting, reconstituting, imagining and holding patterns that give rise to new information. In *Man's Rage for Chaos: Biology, Behavior and the Arts* (1967), Morse Peckham maintains that the roughly simultaneous emergence of ideas from seemingly discrete disciplines reveals a rudimentary interdependence among operations and investigations from all discursive fields. Peckham finds that “the phenomenon that different individuals in the same culture arrive at the same solution to a problem, but quite independently of one another” testifies to a “cultural convergence” (11). Such a convergence is continually taking place, both visibly and invisibly. This is particularly true in the case of chaos theory and postmodernism, which are suffused with suspicions of scientific “universals” and cultural “master narratives,” respectively. It makes sense that both practices would gain momentum at a point when the edicts of determinability and order no longer resonate with a fractured and schizophrenic¹ cultural consciousness. Sociologist T.R. Young’s characterization of chaos theory as undermining “all claims for perfection, finality, normality, or historical necessity” (290) could equally be applied to the postmodernism of Lyotard, McHale and others. Ecologist Michael E. Zimmerman reinforces this comparison, stating that “chaos theory seems compatible with postmodern theory’s critique of modernity’s search for a univocal, stable structure that organizes all

¹ Here I employ Jameson’s sense of the term, which associates postmodern aesthetic and cultural movements with schizophrenia. “The schizophrenic experience,” Jameson says, “is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence. The schizophrenic thus does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ over time” (119). According to Jameson, the schizophrenic lacks a personal identity, is unable to differentiate between self and world, and is incapable of experiencing continuity through time. Jameson argues that contemporary capitalism has extended the symptoms of schizophrenia to the masses in the form of postmodern culture. The schizophrenic confusion destroys the possibility of critical perspectives. Conversely, Deleuze and Guattari contend that “schizophrenia is not the identity of capitalism, but on the contrary its difference, its divergence, and its death” (*Anti-Oedipus* 246); they advise radical political movements to “learn from the psychotic how to shake off the Oedipal yoke and the effects of power, in order to initiate a radical politics of desire freed from all beliefs” (Seem xxi).

phenomena” (13). And if it appears that cross-referencing among disciplines is profitable only to the arts and so-called “soft sciences” like economics and sociology, we might consider Spruiell’s statements: “The science of the future will be less restrictive, range further, and be more modest in its claims to approach the truth. At the same time it will benefit from the cross-currents of information created by interdisciplinary studies” (4).

The intercalations between chaos theory and postmodernism may now become apparent.¹ As Hayles states, “[b]oth the literary and scientific manifestations of chaos are involved in feedback loops with the culture. They help create a context that energizes the questions they ask; at the same time, they also ask questions energized by the context” [*Chaos and Order* (1991) 7]. Indeed, the structural features of postmodern fiction portray the randomness and incalculability that permeates postmodern culture; and just as chaos theory in physics studies the emergence of discrete structures from smooth, continuous ones, postmodern narratives depict the shift from linear and progressive notions of causality and history to a multifarious and, at times, paradoxical network of events and experience. I take as my point of departure that chaos theory has generated within literature a particular kind of fictional text. I would call these fictions *chaotic narratives*. The formal characteristics of chaotic narratives resemble those found in chaotic systems of the physical sciences—except in the case of fiction, these systems are made material in language and, in particular, narrative structure; reiteration, disorder/order, unpredictability, sensitive dependence upon initial conditions, indeterminate scale,

¹ Critical discourse is itself a nonlinear dynamic system—a veritable field of intersections and strange attractors, rather than a set of parallel lines that would process information autonomously. There are (to evoke Brian McHale’s evocation of Kuhn) paradigm shifts. Like the multi-planar pendulum that alters its orbit with each successive appendage, critical theory modulates around a basin of attraction that is continually shifting in relation to intellectual, social and political development. Chaotic iteration, furthermore, may be conceived as the systematic process of inclusion and evolution, an at once dismembering and coalescing operation that resists rigidity and orderly replication and works against hegemonic structures that require totality and continuity. Structuralists and poststructuralists would thus find in chaos theory a means of formally representing concepts of indeterminacy and the absence of origin.

alinity and diffusion are all variously detectable in such texts. In some cases, literary applications of chaos have been announced by authors: in *Further Fridays* (1995), John Barth says that he deliberately applied a nonlinear, dynamic structure in *The Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991), a novel that he refers to as “chaotic-arabesque Postmodernism” (289), whose “coaxial esemplasy” (282) is achieved through a continual movement between the poles of order and disorder; the protagonist in Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* (1988) laments the windy digressions of the plot in which he is enmeshed and foresees that “he will repeat the deception, at ever rarer-intervals all his wretched life” (93). In *The Open Work* (1962), Umberto Eco writes that the “tendency toward disorder characteristic of the poetics of openness, must be understood as a tendency toward *controlled* disorder, toward a circumscribed *potential*, toward a freedom that is constantly curtailed by *the germ of formativity* present in any form that wants to remain open to the free choice of the addressee” (64-5). In other instances, chaotic etiology is made explicit in narratives themselves: Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* (1989), a novel about an illegal Indian immigrant in the United States, contains an epigraph from Gleick’s *Chaos: Making a new Science*; the citation informs our interpretation of Jasmine, whose seemingly erratic personal transformations belie a deeply embedded order. As Conte reminds us, William Gibson’s *The Difference Engine* (1991) mentions the “period-doubling route to chaos” (211) and Hanjo Berressem sees Brigadier Pudding of Pynchon’s *Vineland* (1990) “oscillat[ing] catastrophically between two impossibilities” (38), trying to “list all historical bifurcations that might come to define the next epoch.” In still other cases, while perhaps not directly signaled by either text or author, nonlinear dynamics are manifest in the formal properties of a narrative or the behavioral patterns of its characters: Richard Powers’ *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991) (whose title, of course,

references Bach's fugal masterpiece and Poe's short story) interposes four characters, whose actions and destinies are patterned out as a complex system. William Marshall's *Roadshow* (1985), which jump-cuts among those involved in a massive traffic jam, presents a similar complex system through variegated subjectivities and the coincidence of movement and stasis. Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992) reveals the symmetries and orders that exist among geographically and historically disparate events. Beyond postmodernism proper, we can locate chaotic processes within the liminal or prescient texts by Beckett and Joyce; respectively, the iterative narration in *How It Is* (1965), and the implicate meanings of *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), both of which continue to unfold new insights, ever *tending toward* meaning without becoming exhausted by full explanation.

Attending these literary invocations (both explicit and implicit), a body of critical work has been accruing since the early nineties, mostly in the form of articles by science-literature theorists like Hanjo Berressem, Paul Civello, David Porush, and Peter Freese.¹ Along with Hayles' *Chaos Bound* and the essay collection she edited, *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamic Systems in Literature and Science*, book-length discussions of chaos and literature include Susan Strehle's *Fiction and Quantum Universe* (1992), Gordon Slethaug's *Beautiful Chaos: Chaos Theory and Metachaotics in Recent American Fiction* (2000), Harriett Hawkins' *Strange Attractors: Literature, Culture and Chaos Theory* (1995), and Joseph Conte's aforementioned *Design and Debris*.² As yet unplumbed,

¹ For example, Berressem's "Strangely Attractive: The Topology of Psychic and Social Space in *Vineland*" in *Pynchon Notes* (1994), Civello's chapters on the new sciences and DeLillo's fiction in *American Literary Naturalism and its Twentieth Century Transformations* (1994), Porush's "Making Chaos: Two Views on a New Science" in *The Literature of Science: Perspectives on Popular Scientific Writing* (1993), and Freese's "The Entropic End of the American Dream: Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*" in *Anglia* (1991).

² While these works attend primarily to postmodern literature, several critical works examine modern and pre-modern literature in relation to chaos theory: Philip Kuberski's *Chaosmos: Literature, Science, and*

however, are the psychological implications of chaotic narratives, which are essential in understanding the function and effects of this particular narrative mode. These functions and effects, I argue, can be gleaned by interpreting apposite texts through the philosophical writings of Deleuze and Guattari—specifically, their anti-psychiatry, which they label “schizoanalysis.” Itself rife with the structural and philosophical principles of chaos theory, Deleuze and Guattari’s writing provides the language and theoretical foundation for a literary psychochaotics.

iii. *Schizoanalysis*

A like determinism will govern the stones of the
roadway and the brain of man.

- Émile Zola, *The Experimental
Novel and Other Essays*, 17

I have tried to establish the historical background and conceptual fundamentals of chaos theory—as it is conceived in scientific and social discourse alike—and extrapolated from the theoretical to the literary dimension, where narrative systems can be seen to embody the “orderly disorder” of chaos. I would suggest that these “chaotic narratives” constitute a literary mode unto themselves, figuring prominently in the historical-aesthetic movement generally (if contentiously) referred to as postmodernism.¹ It now remains for me to build upon this foundation, to respond to the materialist philosopher’s favourite retort: “If so, then what?” If chaotic narratives are in fact a significant species of text and

Theory (1994), Thomas Jackson Rice’s *Joyce, Chaos and Complexity* (1997), and Ira Livingston’s *Arrow of Chaos: Romanticism and Postmodernity* (1997).

¹ That they constitute one mode, it should be noted, does not preclude such works from participating in other modes; this is not an *either/or* binary but, in true inclusive, chaotic fashion, an *and/and* of coexisting possibilities.

not merely a structural curiosity among myriad other postmodern experiments in form, then what particular effects do these texts achieve that other literary works do not? While it might be (and has been) argued that nonlinear narrative systems function to disrupt those “master narratives” that would otherwise confine everybody to the cause-and-effect regimes of capitalism, the penal code, and behavioral edicts inscribed by age, gender and race (all faces of what Foucault calls “the Normal”¹), how is this in actuality accomplished? The printed page itself effects nothing; the person apprehending said page, however, may effect much.

I suppose divining—insisting upon—a textual *function* is at base an exercise in literary politicization. As an inherently subversive science (toppling and de-truthing formerly dominant scientific “givens”), chaos theory, when deployed in the arts, brings with it a vindication of the anarchic, the uncodified, and the perpetually mutating. But how do these principles and themes move from the page and into the world? How does form become a political strategy? To wit: by textually staging a psychic scenario that accommodates—or, indeed, enacts—permutation, flux and systematic complexity. Literary manifestations of chaos, I contend, represent psychological operations as reiterative, indeterminate, interpolary and interconnected; in so being, these textual expressions activate (rather than suppress) in the reader analogous cognitive processes and ontological sensibilities. If it were the case that “the stones of the roadway” to which Zola refers in the above epigraph were deterministically governed, then we might identify

¹ In *Discipline and Punish* (1979) Foucault uses the principle of “the Normal” (184) to illustrate the mechanisms and effects that cultural orders have upon citizens. According to Foucault, the concept of “normalcy” is so thoroughly ingrained in public consciousness that it is practically indistinguishable from that of consciousness. The Normal operates through negation, emphasizing difference to the point where all persons are inclined to operate in unison (e.g., if my lawn contains the only patch of yellow grass on an otherwise green block, I will be getting out the sprinkler and fertilizer). The value of such social homogeneity is, of course, its propensity to prescribe practices that are desirable to governing and marketing bodies, thus casting critical and radical elements into the unfavoured, “abnormal” margins.

a “like determinism” in the “brain of man”—but, as studies in chaos have revealed, what regulates the behavior of those stones on the roadway is not reducible to a set of measurable and repeatable physical forces. If psychic development and psychological operations are understood to be at least as complex as the collection of stones in the roadway, then the representation of these operations must assume an accordingly chaotic form.

Enter Deleuze and Guattari, *les enfants terribles* of postmodern philosophy and fervent adversaries of all-things-hegemonic-and-determined-and-otherwise-totalizing. In the same way that chaos theory problematizes Newtonian causality, so too does the anti-psychiatry of Deleuze and Guattari problematize Freud’s psychic topography. At issue here, to put it bluntly, is the delimiting nature of Freudian psychoanalysis—the codes and myths which, Deleuze and Guattari argue, serve to condition and homogenize the subject towards the supposed goal of neuroses evacuation.¹ In opposition to orthodox psychoanalysis, Deleuze and Guattari posit another mode of psychic apprehension, which, in *Anti-Oedipus* (the first of two books composing their major work, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*²) they label “schizoanalysis.” For Deleuze and Guattari, there is more at stake here than changing the rhythms and routines of free association and dream analysis in the fifty-minute session (which Lacan had already tampered with); the

¹ Their project can be compared to Nietzsche’s *The Anti-Christ* (1892), an attack on Christianity and the herdism it promotes. Here, the commonalities between psychoanalysis and religion become important: a set of beliefs propagated by the faithful in a move to find security and legislation where none exists—a system “in which every lie is sanctified” (Nietzsche 38).

² Stuart Moulthrop, in “Rhizome and Resistance: Hypertext and the Dreams of a New Culture,” propounds the importance of this work: “*Capitalism and Schizophrenia* sets in motion perhaps the most radical reinterpretation of Western culture attempted in the second half of this century. Geopolitics, psychoanalysis, neurobiology, sexuality, mathematics, linguistics, semiotics, and philosophy all fall within the purview of their encyclopedic project. . . . [T]heir various co-resonating tropes of nomadology, deterritorialization, lines of flight, smooth and striated spaces, double articulation, war machines, refrains, and rhizomes. The generating body for all these tropes (the arch-rhizome) is the concept of a social order defined by active traversal or encounter rather than objectification. . . . what Deleuze and Guattari have in mind is a chaotically distributed network (the rhizome) rather than a trunk and branches” (301).

reconstitution of psychoanalytic methods is simply the first, critical line of attack—an “effective politicizing of psychiatry” (320)—that would bring about change in the culture at large. Deleuze and Guattari are explicit about the broad consequences of the schizoanalytic project:

[A] revolution—this time materialist—can proceed only by way of a critique of Oedipus, by denouncing the illegitimate use of the synthesis of the unconscious as found in Oedipal psychoanalysis, so as to rediscover a transcendental unconscious defined by the immanence of its criteria, and a corresponding practice that we shall call schizoanalysis. (75)

That psychological conceptions and treatments affect social and political realities is proposed here and throughout Deleuze and Guattari’s schizoanalytic discourse. The authors write of “revolution” and “practice,” where the denunciation of a reigning mode is a way to rediscover what has ever-existed but has, for a time, been eclipsed by another, synthesizing psychoanalytic strategy.

But what, precisely, is it about the Freudian practice that would render it the object of such a vehement, politicized attack? Deleuze and Guattari do credit Freud with establishing a zone and a language for the investigation of the unconscious.¹ They take exception, however, to the fruits of Freud’s investigation: his psychic topoi and, in particular, the instantiation of the Oedipus myth as *the* allegory for psychic development.

¹ They limn their position in relation to Freud thus: “[A]ll [psychoanalytic cartographies] are important insofar as they support a certain context, a certain framework, and existential armature of the subjective situation. Our question here is not simply of a speculative order, but is posed in very practical ways: how appropriate are the concepts of the Unconscious, offered to us on the psychoanalytical ‘market,’ to actual conditions of the production of subjectivity? Should they be transformed, should new ones be invented? . . . What processes unfold in consciousness affected by the shock of the unexpected? How can a mode of thought, a capacity to apprehend, be modified when the surrounding world itself is in the throes of change?” (11-12).

This excerpt from *Anti-Oedipus* makes clear where Deleuze and Guattari's appreciation for the Freudian project ends and where their objections begin:

For what Freud and the first analysts discover is the domain of free syntheses where everything is possible: endless connections, nonexclusive disjunctions, nonspecific conjunctions, partial objects and flows. The desiring-machines pound away and throb in the depths of the unconscious: Irma's injections, the Wolf Man's ticktock, Anna's coughing machine, and also all the explanatory apparatuses set into motion by Freud, all those neurobiological-desiring-machines. And the discovery of the productive unconscious has what appear to be two correlates: on the one hand, the direct confrontation between desiring-machines and social production, between symptomological and collective formations, given their identical nature and differing regimes; and on the other hand, the repression that the social machine exercises in desiring machines and the relationship between psychic repression and social repression. This will all be lost, or at least singularly compromised, with the establishment of a sovereign Oedipus. Free association, rather than opening onto polyvocal connections, confines itself to a univocal impasse. All the chains of the unconscious are biunivocalized, linearized, suspended from a despotic signifier. The whole of desiring-*production* is crushed, subjected to the requirements of *representation*, and to the dreary games of what is representative and represented in representation. And there is the essential thing: the reproduction of desire gives way to a simple representation, in the process as well as theory of the cure. The productive unconscious makes way

for an unconscious that knows how to express itself—express itself in myth,
in tragedy, in dream. (54)

Though its ills are multiply identified in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, the chief malevolence of conventional psychoanalysis, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is its adherence to a predetermined template of psychic development and the therapeutic process. Their prose is bellowing, their language militant: part of the “social machine,” Freud’s methods produce “psychic repression” that is engineered through a “despotic” and “univocal” streamlining of “polyvocal connections” and “nonexclusive disjunctions.”¹ The reductive, delimiting and, finally, ineffectual Freudian program, as Deleuze and Guattari see it, is analogous to Laplacian mathematics and Newtonian physics, which would attempt to reduce natural phenomena to repeatable, soluble systems but, in this attempt, ignore those phenomena that do not comply with the proposed solution.

[H]ow does psychoanalysis go about reducing a person, who this time is not a schizophrenic but a neurotic, to a pitiful creature who eternally consumes mommy-and-daddy and nothing else whatsoever? How could the conjunctive synthesis of “so *that’s* what it was!” and “So it’s *me!*” have been reduced to the endless, dreary discovery of Oedipus: “So it’s my father. my mother”?
(20)

¹ In *Reading for the Plot* (1984), Peter Brooks maintains that Freud’s schema of psychic development may be mapped onto the plot structures of (primarily nineteenth-century) novels, thus revealing their narrative mechanisms; Brooks’ description of the analytic environment, however, abounds in the language of subjugation, depicting it as more a context of imposition than one of revelation: “the patient comes to the analyst with a story to tell, a story that is *not so much false*—since it does *in some manner* signify the truth—as it is *incomplete* and *un-therapeutic*. Its plot *lacks* the dynamic necessary to creating sequence and design that integrate and explain. The *fuller* plot constructed by the analytic work must be more dynamic, thus more useful as a shaping and connective *force*. Above all it must be hermeneutically *more forceful*” (emphases mine 283-4). I will return to Brooks later on to elaborate upon the limitations of his psychoanalytic storyboard.

The authors of *Anti-Oedipus* here point to the error of assigning the same narrative structure to each experience of self-discovery. Invariably, during Freudian analysis, “*that*” (an event, idea, object) and “*me*” (a self) become reconstituted to conform to the Oedipal story, where psychic agency is the exclusive province of (to cite Deleuze and Guattari’s oft-scorned trinity) “mommy-daddy-me.”

It is no great secret that Freud’s first and precedent-setting patient, from whose experience many of his theories extend, was himself. His psychic topology, for example, was based upon insights he achieved through self-analysis.¹ In a letter to William Fleiss, Freud explained this extrapolation from the specific to the general: “I have found, in my own case too, [the phenomenon of] being in love with my mother and jealous of my father, and now I consider it a universal event in early childhood, even if not so early as in children who have been made hysterical” (271). In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud maintains that “[t]here are a certain number of dreams which almost everyone has dreamt alike and which we are accustomed to assume must have the same meaning for everyone” (241). Deleuze and Guattari find Freud’s assumption that “[Oedipus’s] destiny moves us only because the oracle might have been ours” (262) to be dangerous in the extreme because it assigns a particular narrative to the cusp between experience and the unconscious, which must be a zone of overdetermination if we are to be anything other than robots. Such an assignation, they claim, is nothing less than tyranny under mommy-daddy-me, where you must “say that it’s Oedipus, or you’ll get a slap in the face” (45). As an example of the dictatorial function of this trinity, Deleuze and Guattari refer to an episode from Melanie Klein’s work with children—an episode which the philosophers call “a sheer moment of terrorism” (45). Klein asks a child what

¹ Evidence of this presented in Grossman’s “Hierarchies, Boundaries, and representation in the Freudian Model of Mental Organization” (1989).

he thinks about the toys he is playing with: a train and station. Dismissing the child's initial remarks about the toys, Klein "tells" the child that the train entering the station is the father entering the mother. This "information" prompts the child to run out of the room and stand in the adjoining hallway. Rather than suspecting that the child's defiant behavior might constitute his reaction to having his view about the toys discounted, Klein takes the boy's retreat to the hallway as (further) evidence that his play has been an enactment of, and a move to master, the primal scene between mother and father. Deleuze and Guattari react:

The psychoanalyst no longer says to the patient: "Tell me about your desiring-machines, won't you?" Instead he screams: "Answer daddy-mommy when I speak to you!" Even Melanie Klein. So the entire process of desiring-production is trampled underfoot and reduced to (*rabattu sur*) parental images, laid out step by step in accordance with supposed pre-oedipal stages, totalized in Oedipus. (45-46)

Oedipus, by way of the analyst, becomes *power as such*—and neurosis, even in Freud's conception, results from the imposition of an external power!¹ How can oedipalization be a means of quelling neurosis when it is itself a neurotogenic?

Deleuze and Guattari would have Freud's "tripartite formula—the Oedipal, the neurotic one: mommy-daddy-me" (23) transformed into a flexible and individually wrought structure, one that nests in a statement like: "*I have been my own father and I have been my son*" (15). The literal impossibility or paradox in such a statement is part of

¹ In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), Freud contends that culture necessarily develops in a fashion at odds with the individual, where the universal needs of man are overshadowed by the inclination to "progress"; this discrepancy gives rise not only to neuroses but also to an array of practical problems.

its success, demonstrating a self-determination that occurs in spite of logical incongruity.¹ Rather than passively receiving adjudication from a position of therapeutic prostration, the schizoanalysand effects his or her own revelation during a breakdown, “a *system of interruptions or breaks*” (36). The “breaks” to which Deleuze and Guattari refer must be distinguished from psychotic breaks—just as the “schizoid” subject of schizoanalysis must be distinguished from one who suffers from the mental illness schizophrenia.² The Deleuzo-Guattarian schizophrenic is a symbolic figure, one who, like the psychiatric schizophrenic, cannot be oedipalized³ and who maintains an “ontological heterogeneity” (61).⁴ For Deleuze and Guattari, the schizophrenic possesses a revolutionary capacity for individuality and a flexibility that enables him to “[pass] from one code to another, deliberately scrambl[ing] all the codes, by quickly shifting from one to another, according to the questions asked of him, never giving the same explanation from one day to the next, never invoking the same genealogy, never recording the same event in the same

¹ In *A Reader's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1992), Brian Massumi gives us versions of the schizoanalytic mandate: “Don’t toe the line—be superlinear. Don’t plod the straight and narrow path down the aisle—marry the void. Rewrite the slogan of the United States Army: dare to become all that you cannot be” (41).

² Schizophrenia, the psychiatric condition [according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders IV-TR* (2000), the standard means of diagnosing psychiatric illnesses], “is a disorder that lasts for at least 6 months and includes at least 1 month of active-phase symptoms, (i.e., two [or more] of the following: delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech, grossly disorganized or catatonic behavior, negative symptoms)” (298).

³ The schizophrenic, Deleuze and Guattari contend, dwells in a heightened version of a state that is already part of the life the “ordinary” person: “Madness enclosed in its strangeness, reified in alterity beyond return, nevertheless inhabits our ordinary, bland apprehension of the world. But we must go further: chaotic vertigo, which finds one of its privileged expressions in madness, is constitutive of the foundational intentionality of the subject-object relation. Psychosis starkly reveals an essential source of being-in-the-world” (*Anti-Oedipus* 77).

⁴ Baudrillard’s concept of the schizophrenic, though relatively nihilistic, is similarly metaphorical: “The schizo is bereft of every scene, open to everything in spite of himself, living in the greatest confusion. He is himself obscene, the obscene prey of the world’s obscenity. What characterizes him is less the loss of the real, the light years of estrangements from the real, the pathos of distance and radical separation, as is commonly said: but, very much to the contrary, the absolute proximity, the total instantaneity of things, the feeling of no defense, no retreat. It is the end of interiority and intimacy, the overexposure and transparency of the world which traverses him without obstacle. He can no longer produce the limits of his own being, can no longer play nor stage himself, can no longer produce himself as mirror. He is now only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence” (“The Ecstasy of Communication” 133).

way” (15). “Schizoanalysis,” explains Guattari in *Chaosmosis* (1992), “does not consist in miming schizophrenia, but in crossing, like it, the barriers of non-sense which prohibit access to a-signifying nuclei of subjectification, the only way to shift petrified systems of modelisation” (68).

Critique of Freudian ideas and methods is, of course, practically an industry unto itself. The problems of reduction and oversimplification in Freud’s interpretive models have been a refrain, for example, in narratological and structuralist discourse. “How many times,” wonders Judith Mayne in *Cinema and Spectatorship* (1993), “does one need to be told that individual film x, for film genre y, articulates the law of the father, assigns the spectator the position of male oedipal desire, marshals castration anxiety in the form of voyeurism and fetishism, before psychoanalysis begins to sound less like an exploration of the unconscious and more like a master plot?” (68-9). Dissent surfaces even from ostensible “psychoanalytic critics” like Shoshana Felman, who warns that “[i]n its efforts to master literature, psychoanalysis . . . can thus but blind itself: blind itself in order to deny its own castration, in order not to see, and not to read, literature’s own subversion of the very possibility of psychoanalytic mastery” (156). Similar complaints have emerged from the many-faceted realm of psychological discourse—from neurological, psychiatric and cognitive theorists alike. Even before the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, William James opposed the “automaton theory” of the brain (the prevailing paradigm of the time, emphasizing determinacy); he foregrounded the unknowability of mental processes, claiming that “[t]he performance of the high-brain (cerebral hemispheres) are like dice thrown forever on a table” (6). Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, the systems analyst whom I mentioned in the preceding section, extended his findings from biological population studies into the realm of psychology, calling deterministic

psychology a “robot concept” (Klee 194). Indeed, although theories of psychology may be loosely divided into studies of perception, personality, and cognition, the field is generally united in considering mental processes “complex systems”—interactive with each other and physiological processes throughout the body. “Vision processing,” for example, “is based on interconnections with cognitive, motor, and emotional centers of the brain” (Goertzel xviii). The dynamic interfacing between physiological zones is also believed to be integral to phenomena that might be best described as emergent¹ from (rather than biologically rooted in) complex interactions between systems. An example of such an emergent phenomenon is innate creativity, which, Crutchfield *et al* maintain in an article in *Scientific American* (1986), “may have an underlying chaotic process that selectively amplifies small fluctuations and molds them into macroscopic coherent mental states that are experienced as thoughts” (47).

As early as 1976, chaos theory was described as the “third force”² in *American Psychology* (Poppen, Wandersman and Wandersman)—a notion that is still held nearly twenty years later by Spruiell, who calls psychoanalysis itself a “theory of a complex system” (4). Part of the affinity between psychic operations and nonlinear dynamics, as Stanley Krippner explains in “Chaos Theory and Humanistic Psychology: The Third Revolution and the Third Force,” is born from the failures of previously dominant scientific and psychoanalytic approaches: “Just as the attempt to study chaotic systems with linear analysis had yielded little—or incorrect—data, the attempt to use behavioral and psychoanalytic models to study complex human experiences has been unsatisfactory” (n.p.). Possibly the most weighty connection is advanced by Alvin Toffler—*weighty*

¹ I use Anthony Wilden’s definition of “emergent” phenomena, which are “qualities not included in, and generally not predictable from, knowledge of the quantities of the systems in which they arise” (170).

² The “third” force refers to a triangulation of factors that transforms a system’s behavior from stable to erratic.

because it appears in his forward to Prigogine and Stengers' *Order Out of Chaos*—who calls for a “new interpretation of chaotic psychological processes” (xxiv).¹ All of these arguments promote the *chaotization*, if you will, of psychoanalytic concepts and practices.

Interestingly, recent studies in cognitive and psycho-computational sciences have, through quantitative analysis, arrived at some of the same criticisms of psychoanalysis as the ones put forward by Deleuze and Guattari—namely, the reductive nature of Freud's psychic template and the dearth of empirical data to support its scientific petition. In *From Complexity to Creativity* (1997), math scholar and AI researcher Ben Goertzel criticizes Freud's personality theories for their “lack of subtlety” (310):

These theories simply do not do justice to the complexity of personality.

What past personality theories have done is to replace complexity with simple stock ideas—ideas “pulled out of a hat,” with no scientific or mathematical foundation, for the sole purpose of making personality theory simpler. (310)²

Efforts to model the mind through computational means have cast Freudian theory even further to the margin, turning to chaos theory for organizing systems that can accommodate psychological and neurobiological complexity. In “Neural Nets, Chaos and

¹ Moran's “Chaos and psychoanalysis: the fluid nature of the mind” was the first article on the subject to be published in an established psychoanalytic journal, *International Review of Psychoanalysis* (1991). Other examinations of the intercalations between chaos theory and psychoanalysis include R.F. Blackerby's *Applications of Chaos Theory to Psychological Models* (1993) and J. Weiland-Burstanm's *Chaos and Order in the World of the Psyche* (1992). Among his many studies on psychoanalysis and computer science, Galatzer-Levy has written about the relationship between psychoanalysis and catastrophe theory (a close relative of chaos theory, invented by René Thom in 1975) in “Qualitative change from quantitative change: mathematical catastrophe theory in relation to psychoanalysis” (1978).

² Goertzel continues: “The biggest difference is that Freud built his models from concepts like id, ego, and super-ego, which were fabricated especially for the purpose of modeling the mind. Thus one finds that many of Freud's models are clear and sensible in their abstract structure but unclear or unreasonable in their details. In the system-theoretic approach, on the other hand, the details are not left “dangling” into a sea of jargon and ad hoc concepts, but are rather grounded in concrete computational and complex systems models. Even if, as a consequence of lack of data, a system-theoretic model of some personality phenomenon must be constructed on intuitive rather than deductive grounds, at least the concepts used as building blocks for the model will be scientifically meaningful” (312).

Psychotherapy,” Gerald Klee, a psychiatrist and lecturer at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, envisions a point where computer modeling (itself enabled by advanced maths) could provide a means of exploring complex psychological processes in live subjects:

[I]t is now possible to describe systems in operational detail, in terms of nonlinear differential equations. From these, computer models of multiple variables in interaction can be produced. In turn, these possibilities will allow experimentation on the models by altering the live variables in the subject being investigated. At the present time, however, psychoanalysis can only use deterministic chaos and fractals metaphorically. In the future, especially if psychoanalysis is seen in terms of process or organismic theory, it is likely that within such models will be produced the origins of major changes among those disciplines having to do with mind, brain, and the reorganization of concepts of these interactions. (3)

Ray Kurzweil states in *The Age of Spiritual Machines* (1999) that simulated thought models of this kind must use parallel systems rather than series (like most of today’s computers); “the system would be non-linear, chaotic, self-organizing and emergent” (82).¹ Goertzel points to the same limitations of linearity psychological models:

Freud was trying to formulate laws to explain the behavior of a complex system, the personality, but he had no concept of the brain/mind as a complex system to fall back on, and one can see this shortcoming in the details of his personality theories. The whole idea of a symptom as a consequence of the

¹ Briggs and Peat presage this argument, citing the nonlinear neurological models devised by William Gray and Paul LaViolette: “They’ve proposed that thought starts as a highly complex, even chaotic bundle of sensations, nuances, and ‘feeling tones’ which cycle from the limbic system through the cortex. During this feedback cycling, the cortex selects out, or ‘abstracts’ some of these feeling tones. These abstractions are then reinserted back into the loop. The continued abstracting process has the effect of nonlinearly amplifying some nuances into cognitions or emotions, which become organizers for the complex bundles of nuance-filled sensations and feelings” (170).

underlying problem bespeaks a failure to appreciate the circularity of complex system dynamics. The symptoms maintain and produce the underlying problem, and the underlying problem maintains and produces the symptoms: the whole “complex” is an autopoietic self-organizing system. In some situations, removing one element from an autopoietic system will destroy the whole system; in some situations it will not. (311)

If personality is a complex system—where multiple variables are in play at any given instant—then the *recursive* properties of this system must be taken into account when trying to understand the system’s behavior. Freud’s discernment of the compulsion to *repeat* cannot be considered anything but a stroke of genius; but (armed with computer technologies that make such insights possible and, moreover, workable), Goertzl illustrates how the loops involved in psychic systems feed back upon themselves, where the output is factored back as new input, which in turn transforms the nature of the system in highly unpredictable ways. Because the system is generating change from within—it is, as Goertzl says, autopoietic¹—any relation we might intuit between the system’s behavior and a primal scene (or other external factors) will bring us scarcely closer to understanding, predicting, or altering that system. By emphasizing repetition rather than recursion, Freudian theory renders itself incompatible with the nature of its very object.

I hope that the links among chaos theory, psychology, schizoanalysis and culture are now beginning to materialize in the shape of a network, a rhizome of associations and knowledge. Like Klee, Goertzl and others I have mentioned, Deleuze and Guattari view

¹ Joseph Tabbi’s *Cognitive Fictions* (2002) provides a detailed analysis of autopoietic processes in recent American fiction; Tabbi asserts that “[t]here can be no question of studying either the work or its tradition for direct insight into the working of society: both the work and the society are self-constituting, or autopoietic, systems” (298).

the psyche as a complex system—though they arrive at this view by way of philosophy and aesthetics rather than neurobiology or computer science.¹ *Chaosmosis*, a kind of reflective text wherein Guattari reviews and qualifies the most salient themes of his career, includes some of the most penetrating and personalized justifications of schizoanalysis:

I opted for an Unconscious superimposing multiple strata of subjectification, heterogeneous strata of variable extension and consistency. Thus a more “schizo” Unconscious, one liberated from the familial shackles, turned more towards actual praxis than towards fixations on, and repressions to, the past. An Unconscious of Flux and of abstract machines rather than an Unconscious of structure and language. (12)

In signature seditious rhetoric (“subjectification,” “liberation,” “shackles”), Guattari affirms the ultimately pragmatic imperative underpinning schizoanalysis, a “heterogeneous” and “variable” conception of the unconscious. Perhaps to redress some of the “problems” of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (namely, the convoluted and neologism-rich prosody that some readers find offputting—though other readers consider the ballectic expressiveness in such earlier texts invigorating²), *Chaosmosis* contains concrete sociopolitical instruction:

¹ However, as John Johnston points out in “Machinic Vision,” the “significant references to the neurophysiology of the brain and to chaos theory in *Cinema 2: The Time Image* and *What is Philosophy?* suggest that [Deleuze] was moving toward a critical encounter with aspects of cognitive science” (47). In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze says that, in relation to a supposedly objectified brain, art, science, and philosophy are not mental objects but vectors of deterritorialization—“the raft on which the brain plunges into and confronts chaos” (41).

² Foucault, in his forward to *Anti-Oedipus*, suggests that we “read” the book in the same way we would listen to a record—sampling sections, replaying certain parts, skipping over others. Brian Massumi encourages further readerly flamboyance: “[T]he reader is invited to lift a dynamicism *out* of the book and incarnate it in a foreign medium, whether painting or politics. Deleuze and Guattari delight in stealing from other disciplines and they are more than happy to return the favour. Deleuze’s own image for a concept is not as a brick but a tool box. He calls this kind of philosophy ‘pragmatics’ because its goal is the invention

The refoundation of politics will have to pass through the aesthetic and analytical dimensions implied in the three ecologies—the environment, the socius and the psyche. We cannot conceive of solutions to the poisoning of the atmosphere and to global warming due to the greenhouse effect, or to the problem of population control, without a mutation of mentality, without promoting a new art of living in society. We cannot conceive of international discipline in this domain without solving the problem of hunger in the third world. We cannot conceive of a collective recomposition of the socius, correlative to a resingularisation of subjectivity, without a new way of conceiving political and economic democracies that respect cultural differences—without multiple molecular revolutions. We cannot hope for amelioration in the living conditions of the human species without considerable effort to improve the feminine condition. The entire division of labour, its modes of valorization and finalities need to be rethought. Production for the sake of production—the obsession with rate of growth, whether in the capitalist market or planned economies—leads to monstrous absurdities. The only acceptable finality of human activity is the production for a subjectivity that is auto-enriching its relation to the world in a continuous fashion. (20-21)

of concepts that do not add up to a system or belief or an architecture of propositions that you either enter or you don't, but instead pack a potential in the way a crowbar in a willing hand envelops an energy of prying" (8).

iv. *Fiction*

It is fiction's role to imagine deeply, to follow obscure urges into unreliable regions of experience—child-memoried, existential, and outside time.

- Don DeLillo, "The Power of History, 60

[T]he narrator-spider never ceases undoing webs and planes, resuming the journey.

- Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 318

"Ultimately," writes Peter Brooks in the opening section of *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*,

we may dream of a convergence of psychoanalysis and literary criticism because we sense that there ought to be a correspondence between literary and psychic dynamics, since we constitute ourselves in part through our fictions within the constraints of a transindividual symbolic order, that of signs, including, pre-eminently, language itself. Through study of the work accomplished by fictions, we may be able to reconnect literary criticism to human concerns. (xiv)

It will be evident from the nature of my project that, in principle, I share Brook's desire for a psychoanalytical and literary critical convergence. What is the purpose of literary criticism, if not to illuminate "human concerns," and what is of greater concern to humans than the very nature of ourselves? Later on in *Reading for the Plot*, Brooks claims that "by attempting to superimpose psychic functioning on textual functioning, we

might discover something about how textual dynamics work and something about their psychic equivalencies” (90). With this, too, I tend to concur. What strikes me as problematic about the “psychic superimpositions” suggested here, however, is the rigidity of the framework that Brooks would have literary critics superimpose. In his chapter (rather menacingly) entitled “Freud’s Masterplot: a Model for Narrative,” Brooks contends that the psychic formula outlined in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) offers a kind of *überplot*, to which both fictional and actual (i.e. lived, by you and me) narratives structurally correspond. Brooks says that this text by Freud

lays out most fully a total scheme of how life proceeds from beginning to end, and how each individual in its own manner repeats the masterplot and confronts the question of whether the closure of an individual life is contingent or necessary. . . . [Freud’s] boldest intention may be to provide a theory of comprehension of the life span, and hence of its narrative understanding. (96-7)

The precise nature of this “total scheme” is, by this point in my introduction, both obvious and irrelevant. It is the fact of a total scheme that I find dubious—and it is toward debunking this fact of a total scheme that I examine a group of fictional works. Novels like *City of Glass* (1985), *Infinite Jest* (1996), *Underworld* (1997), and *House of Leaves* (2000) variously resist total schemes (masterplots, masternarratives) that would be established in psychological, historical, political and cultural contexts. The works that I will deal with in the following pages effect this resistance by representing characters, environments and events as indeterminate, complex—chaotic—systems. Although not apparently a fan, Brooks provides an excellent description of this non-schematic type of fiction:

The plots of narrative have become extraordinarily complex, self-subversive, apparently implausible. They have been forced to abandon clear origins and terminations in favor of provisional closures and fictional inceptions; their causes may work by deferred action and retroaction; their connections are probable rather than logical; their individual dramas stand in uncertain tension with transindividual imaginings. (285)

Brooks goes on to expatiate on “the importance of issues in narrative that Freud so forcefully poses” in light of these “self-subversive” narratives, stating that “Freud’s restless thought and his dynamic model of psychic life summon us to think beyond formalist paradigms, to engage the dynamic of memory and desire that can reconnect, however provisionally, time lost and time continuing.” Aside from being confusing, these last comments ring rather false: linking past and present through memory and desire is the very kind of “formalist paradigm” that Brooks says Freud “summon[s] us to think *beyond*” (emphasis mine). A little earlier, Brooks had described Freud’s “dynamic model” as “a total scheme of how life proceeds from beginning to end,” but it becomes difficult to locate any real dynamicism in the model as it is actually described in *Reading for the Plot*. Rather than using the Freudian model to reconstitute or “reterritorialize” narratives that are (as Brooks says in the block quotation above) “extraordinarily complex, self-subversive, [and] apparently implausible,” we might be better served by contemplating what new information is communicated by these unconventional narratives. If fiction has “been forced to abandon clear origins and terminations in favor of provisional closures,” then *why* has this happened and what has *forced* the abandonment? If individual dramas in literature “stand in uncertain tension with

transindividual imaginings,” perhaps we should reconsider our transindividual imaginings or, even better, the very idea of the transindividual.

Brooks might take a lesson from Don DeLillo, who, in “The Power of History,” describes the author as “violate” of sanctioned codes:

Against the force of history, so powerful, visible and real, the novelist poses the idiosyncratic self. Here it is sly, amazed, mercurial, scared, half-crazy. It is also free and undivided, the only thing that can match the enormous dimensions of social reality. . . . It is almost inevitable that the fiction writer, dealing with this reality, will violate a number of codes and contracts. He will engineer a swerve from the usual arrangements that bind a figure in history to what has been reported, rumoured, confirmed or solemnly chanted. (60)

The texts I have chosen to explore may not neatly align with any “code or contract”—social, existential or otherwise—but neither do they completely eschew cultural myths, psychosocial regimes—in short, the delimiting patterns within and between which we reside. If it is to have any relation to our lives, literature must account for the constraining and the coercive as well as the idiosyncratic and the radical. This dialectic, in part, explains why Deleuze and Guattari dub Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* (1927) “the schizoid work par excellence” (*Anti-Oedipus* 42). Through Marcel’s ponderous and anachronistic reminiscences, Proust depicts a mind in perpetual and productive tension between the regimental march of time and the aleatory functions of desire—a tension intrinsic to the orderly disorder of memory, which is always a mixture of truth, perception, and invention. In Proust’s narrative, Deleuze and Guattari find that “all the parts are produced as asymmetrical sections, paths that suddenly come to an end in hermetically sealed boxes, noncommunicating vessels, watertight compartments, in which

there are gaps even between things that are contiguous.” These “gaps” and “asymmetries,” furthermore, become the space of individual expression, and not the consolidation of a unified, “watertight” and “contiguous” life narrative. Deleuze and Guattari identify similar fissures and gaps in works by Maurice LeBlanc, Borges, and Joyce, where “bifurcations, divergences, impossibilities, and discord belong to the same motley world that can no longer be included in expressive units” (81). The non-viability of expressive units is captured, for example, in Borges’ “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins,” which describes an entry from the *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge* (“a certain Chinese encyclopedia”) that divides animals into perplexing categories such as “embalmed ones,” “fabulous ones,” and “those that from a long way off look like flies” (98). Here Borges presents the “motley world” that resists categorization even as it is typologically organized—a paradoxical scenario that supports the chaologist’s belief that “behind every infraction is a rule [and] underlying every uncertainty there is certainty” (Slethaug xiii). Borges’ writing is, of course, filled with these kinds of improbable possibilities—some of which I adumbrate later on—that expand our imaginings beyond ontological and epistemological “masterplots.”

The texts I will be concentrating on participate in a Borgesian subversion of customary knowledge and its orders. But where Borges depicts philosophical puzzles through magical or historically fantastic allegories, writers like DeLillo and Wallace ground their work in contemporary America. These authors do not encode abstract problems or political polemics in an invented universe, but, as DeLillo avers in the above quotation, they “engineer a swerve” from “what has been reported, rumoured, confirmed or solemnly chanted,” keeping social reality always in full view even as it is critiqued. That said, Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*, the focal point of discussion in my first chapter,

verges on allegory in its depiction of quasi-fantastic events that take place in New York City. This short novel follows Daniel Quinn, a bereaved and reclusive detective novelist, who receives a phone call for “Paul Auster” and becomes embroiled in a (frayed and knotted) yarn of urban surveillance, ambiguous identity, and linguistic intrigue. My analysis of the novella demonstrates how the distinctly chaotic structures in the narrative (chiefly, a sensitive dependence upon initial conditions, systematic bifurcation, and fractal recursion) problematize psychological “masterplots” (*vide* Brooks and Freud) such as the knowability of the self and the analytic omnipotence of “mommy-daddy-me.” I read the phone call as a point of bifurcation, which sets off a reiterative process of “doubling” in Quinn’s identity, his environment, and the narrative domain at large. *City of Glass* shows how a relatively tiny change in a system (the unexpected phone call) can lead to catastrophic change in a system’s behavior. In response to the personalities and mysteries he encounters, Quinn’s identity continually splinters and diverges along increasingly unlikely trajectories, becoming, finally, living testimony that the self is a “connective synthesis” (Deleuze and Guattari *A Thousand Plateaus* 41), “part of an all-encompassing system of mutually interacting systems” (Civello 123).

Dealing primarily with Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* and *Cosmopolis* (2003), the second chapter discerns the radical potential of chaotic narratives—*radical* in the sense that the employment of nonlinear structural dynamics allows for a historiographic multiplicity that reinstates individual agency. DeLillo’s novels evince the principles of indeterminacy and ontological instability that govern Auster’s *City of Glass*, but DeLillo extends these principles into the greater geographical, cultural and historical domains. An anatomy of the latter half of the twentieth century in America, *Underworld* is a vast, heterogeneous polyphony, whose content ranges from a 1951 Dodgers and

Giants pennant game to Lenny Bruce stand-up routines, from a hypothetical long-lost Eisenstein film to a mass Moonie wedding. While in *Underworld* DeLillo depicts the deep structures—the hidden strata of individual experience that exist beneath the crust of “official” history—his *Cosmopolis* effects an expansion along a different axis, revealing the impossibility of subjective autonomy and the individual’s necessarily symbiotic relationship with the surrounding environmental and cultural systems. In *Cosmopolis*, a New York mogul attempts to cross the city in a limousine, but he is perpetually sidetracked by the unexpected: protest demonstrations, a celebrity funeral procession, and collisions with wife, lovers, employees, and the man who is trying to assassinate him. One of the main ways DeLillo subverts the masterplot is by diffusing ostensibly linear systems: *Underworld* dismembers historical chronology and transforms finite instances into reiterative loops, while *Cosmopolis* posits unpredictable digressions and expansion that complicate a would-be linear trajectory. The emergence of variable structures from smooth, continuous ones in both *Underworld* and *Cosmopolis* encourages us to think about history and ourselves as part of a rhizomatic, flexible network of associations, rather than deterministic products of unassailable causality.

In the third chapter, I turn to the writing of David Foster Wallace. Chaotic indeterminacy and flux inform the narrative structure of many of Wallace’s texts and the cyclical, irresolvable social formulations he depicts. In his massive novel, *Infinite Jest*, characters, items, thoughts and symbols circulate perpetually throughout the narrative domain at large, their patterns and behaviors not leading toward any final, quantifiable result or objective “solution,” but rather conveying meaning in their unwieldy reverberations. On a fundamental level, *Infinite Jest* is very similar to Auster’s *City of Glass*: both novels, while inhabiting opposite poles in terms of character density and

geographical scope, depict a non-deterministic and reiterative portrait of the psyche—amenable to schizoanalytic rather than Freudian interpretation. Wallace’s much heftier book chronicles (among myriad other things) the evolution of the eccentric Incandenza family and the morbid antics at a Boston drug rehabilitation clinic. A temporally disordered narrative (like *Underworld*), *Infinite Jest* embodies the chaotic process of recursion, which permeates the novel in the form of behavioral, situational, and psychological fractals. These indeterminacies and loops, I assert, reflect the “real,” rhizomatic infrastructure of late-capitalism and postmodern psychologies.

Mark Z Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* expresses a chaotic complexity through uniquely visual means: the tension between order and disorder is materially manifest in a typographic and pictographic diversity that approaches a hypertextual, collage aesthetic. The heterogeneity of the work is due, in part, to its indeterminate authorship; *House of Leaves* is collectively narrated by a delinquent twenty-something, his incarcerated mother, an old blind man, and the “Editors”—each of whom contributes information about an impossible house whose interior is larger than its exterior. The cumulative “information,” however, merely engenders further uncertainty about the nature of the house on Ash Tree Lane and the ontological complexes governing those who attempt to explore and document the house. Although *House of Leaves* participates in the psychochaotic mode of *City of Glass*, *Underworld* and *Infinite Jest*, Danielewski’s novel departs from its predecessors by depicting an abstract “psychic architecture” that finds its concrete analogue in a disparate and multifarious narrative architecture. Considered in relation to each other, the four novels provide a literary domain within which the intercalations between complex dynamics and psychology may be investigated.

Chapter 1

Self and the City: Ontological Chaos in

Paul Auster's *City of Glass*

A schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than
a neurotic lying on a couch.

- Deleuze and Guattari,
Anti-Oedipus, 2

I have delineated the various scientific and cultural sources of chaotic narratives and presented the theoretical ideas—synthesized in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's schizoanalysis—through which the psychological meanings of these narratives may be ascertained. I have termed the field of intersection between chaos theory and schizoanalysis *psychochaotics*. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how chaotic structures in an important postmodern novella function to express the dynamic processes of psychic disintegration and reconstruction. *City of Glass*, part of Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, is wrought according to a physical model of recursion—which permeates narrative in the form of behavioral, situational and psychological fractals; this formal constitution, along with Auster's explicit interest in the nature of the "self," renders *City of Glass* an exemplary psychochaotic text. Daniel Quinn, a detective novelist and widower, receives a midnight phone call from someone who asks to speak to a private detective named "Paul Auster." Quinn "has long ago stopped viewing himself as real" (5)

and, as if replacing one non-reality with another, he assumes the identity of the summoned “Paul Auster.” Quinn becomes increasingly fixated with the man he is hired to tail, Peter Stillman, who is himself consumed with a fantasy of recovering the Edenic language, the prelapsarian tongue that will allow us “to become masters of the words we speak, to make language answer our needs” (98). Issues of ontological indeterminacy and the limits of surveillance are carried into the second story of Auster’s trilogy, *Ghosts*, which traces Blue, a private eye who is hired by White to observe and record the activity of Black. Taking up residence across the alley from his subject’s flat, Blue monitors Black’s decidedly unextraordinary doings: “Black writes, reads, shops in the neighborhood, takes an occasional stroll” (185). Finally, after years of watching and documenting, Blue breaks into Black’s apartment and finds the very reports he has written about Black. White and Black, Blue realizes, must be the same person, and, indeed, Black confesses that he hired Blue to track his own activities “[t]o remind [himself] of what [he] was supposed to be doing” (230). Blue’s constant monitoring sutures Black to reality; he recounts: “Every time I looked up, you were there, watching me, following me, always in sight, boring into me with your eyes. You were the whole world to me, Blue, and I turned you into my death. You’re the one thing that doesn’t change, the one thing that turns everything inside out” (230).¹ In *The Locked Room*, the final work in *The New York Trilogy*, an unnamed first-person narrator fixates upon Fanshawe, a childhood friend turned literary genius, whose work the narrator publishes posthumously. Whilst writing Fanshawe’s biography, the narrator slowly takes on his subject’s former life—marrying his wife, adopting his child, and even sleeping with

¹ Staging an investigation of himself “from the outside,” as it were, Black attempts to short-circuit the problematic of subject position and knowledge acquisition, made famous by Wittgenstein—that is “to represent logical form, we should have to be able to station ourselves with propositions somewhere outside logic, that is to say outside the world” (*Tractatus* 4.12).

Fanshawe's mother. The narrator's role as biographer thus transforms into a pathological process of identity appropriation.

Each of these short novels is about the impossibility of achieving or representing (through surveillance, performance, or writing) a coherent and orderly self. Ontological stability is progressively compromised (or, more precisely, it is revealed to *have always been* illusory) through a series of irresolvable shifts in the characters' identities and the perplexing discontinuity of the narratives themselves. It is true that Auster's literary oeuvre abounds in the inexplicable and the synchronous. In *Leviathan* (1992), a writer mulls over the convoluted circumstances leading up to the death of the infamous bomber, "the Phantom of Liberty" (243), who accidentally blows himself up; in *The Music of Chance* (1991), with a hat-tip to Sisyphus, two unlucky gamblers must resolve a poker debt by erecting a purposeless stone wall on the property of two eccentrics; and *Moon Palace* (1990) describes a young man's apparently random actions that lead him to discover his father's identity. In these novels, Auster connects the complex puzzles in life with the opaque logic of chance. In an essay collection, *The Art of Hunger* (1982), Auster admits a fascination with "the presence of the unpredictable, the utterly bewildering nature of the human experience. From one moment to the next, anything can happen. Our life-long certainties about the world can be demolished in a single second. In philosophical terms, I'm talking about the power of contingency" (278-79).

If *The Music of Chance* suggests that "random, accidental encounters" (1) can provide information about one's "place in the invisible order of things" (10), then *City of Glass* proposes the reverse. In this work, seemingly meaningful encounters make visible the disorder of things, where patterns are imposed upon the world rather than discovered. Quinn searches for meaning and order as psychological and epistemological systems

become progressively unstable and unpredictable. Like the indeterminacies propounded in structuralist inquiry, Auster's novel conveys the impossibility of locating a coherent center in both subjects and language, thus denying the causal continuity we expect from fiction—especially, as I will discuss in the following pages, detective fiction. *City of Glass* not only portrays chaotic processes through the bifurcation of identity and iterative dissolution of stable systems, but it also projects an order and logic of its own, emergent from the convolution and excesses of indeterminacy. In a way, the novel is *un jeu idéal*—an ideal game, the model for which is the Borgesian labyrinth—where, in a field of bifurcations, we become privy to possible divergences, rather than oppositions, or what Deleuze in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (1993) calls “compossibilities.” What is generated is a paradoxically kinetic and inert kind of story, whose narrative processes are counterbalanced by an equivalent but antithetical stasis, so that “progress” is continually delayed, thwarted by so much canceling-out. The perpetual vacillation between states of knowledge and ignorance—about the self, other selves, “reality,” and the urban environment—the piling up of fractals of various scales—creates a narrative density that deepens the psychic and historical burdens of the characters portrayed.

i. Diffuse detection

A city is a material and social organization which derives its reality from the ubiquity of its absence.

- Alan Trachtenberg, “Experiments
in Another Country,” 138

Most of what has been written about *City of Glass* focuses upon its status as a type of “detective” novel. Confronted with mystery and complexity, the detective sorts through clues, adding and subtracting signs in an effort to determine a solution to the riddle at hand. “[T]he detective story,” according to Brooks, epitomizes what he calls the “hermeneutic code”¹ for plots in general, “in that everything in the story’s structure, and its temporality, depends on the resolution of an enigma” (18). At its outset, Auster’s novella appears to be erecting such a plot: Quinn, a bereaved and reclusive detective novelist, receives a mysterious phone call for “Paul Auster” and becomes involved in a perplexing yarn of urban surveillance, ambiguous identity, and linguistic intrigue. But while truth in the conventional detective novel can be arrived at through the logical assessment of facts, Auster’s work, despite its many conspicuous and suggestive “clues,” expresses the insufficiency of reason as a means of acquiring knowledge. What constitutes a “clue” depends upon the subject position of the investigator, which is itself opaque (probably, even, to himself). And if there were such things as legitimate, “truth-imputing” clues in *City of Glass*, they simply do not add up. Still, the countless symmetries and resonances (both inter- and intra-textual) suggest an overarching design that can eventually be known: Quinn, whose initials ascribe him (at least a symbolic) kinship with Don Quixote, seeks assistance from the New York author Paul Auster, who is writing an essay about *Don Quixote*; Quinn’s client, Peter, is the namesake of Quinn’s son, while Auster’s son, Daniel, is Quinn’s namesake. Surely, all this must *mean* something. But if Quinn’s detective work reveals anything, it is that meaning is contingent upon the context in which it is sought, which is itself subject to change. One

¹ For Brooks, a *plot* “concerns the questions and answers that structure a story, the suspension, partial unveiling, temporary blockage, eventual resolution, with the resulting creation of a ‘dilatatory space’—the space of suspense—which we work through toward what is felt to be, in classical narrative, the revelation of meaning that occurs when the narrative sentence reaches full predication” (18).

moment Quinn is attempting find the logic underlying a network of namesakes, and the next moment he is *adding* to that network—by introducing himself to Stillman as “Henry Dark,” the name of the central figure in Stillman’s Ph.D. dissertation. Thus meaning may be (mis)inferred *and* (mis)construed, where (mis)information is (mis)taken for knowledge. Quinn calls himself “Henry Dark” because he believes that this name will “mean” something to his interlocutor—but “Henry Dark” is not his real name. Then again, the young Peter Stillman says repeatedly, “I am Peter Stillman. That is not my real name” (22). Indeed, in the context of a novella that swells with pseudonyms, misnomers, and namesakes, the “facts” are impossible to determine. Instead, each “clue” (a name, a number, a pattern) in *City of Glass* feeds back into the prevailing algorithm of uncertainty, so that each attempt to derive meaning generates exponential growth in uncertainty.

Auster said in a 1992 interview: “I was employing . . . detective conventions only as a way to get somewhere else entirely” (22). Auster uses the detective genre—a genre that is supposedly “all center,” where all material factors into the overarching mystery—to express the fundamental absence of center in both the narrative and the selves it contains. The unsolvable puzzles of *City of Glass*, Richard Swope notes (following McHale), mark a shift from the epistemological dominant of classic detective fiction to the ontological concerns of postmodern detection—what Stefano Tani, in *The Doomed Detective* (1984), calls an “anti-detective” novel (11). While detection in Raymond Chandler’s works, for example, leads to definitive answers, the anti-detective novel reveals the infirmity of so-called “facts” and the sobering futility underpinning every investigation. Instead of providing “reassurance,” states Michael Holquist, these novels “disturb” (153) notions that coherent subjects exist and that mystery and perplexity can be

resolved. In the case of *City of Glass*, this disturbance extends to the phenomenological status of the fiction itself, in which a “Paul Auster” participates, but another, unidentified writer is, in the final two pages, posited as the “real” author. With this additional mystery of authorship, the generic permutation becomes even more complex, its multiple levels of self-referentiality prompting Madeleine Sorapure to call *City of Glass* a “meta-anti-detective story” (72). This kind of “metaphysical detective” fiction, according to William Spanos, is “the paradigmatic archetype of the postmodern literary imagination” (154). The mirrors, counterparts, fluctuations, and absences in Auster’s novella embody a postmodernism that negates the possibility of continuous systems and coherent identity. These themes will again surface in chapter four, in which I examine similar “impossible cues” (or “clues”) in Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*.

In addition to generic considerations, the explicitly semiotic aspect of Quinn’s investigation has prompted much deconstructionist attention. Alison Russell reads *City of Glass* as a text in which “[m]eaning is differed in an endless movement from one linguistic interpretation to the next, as an incessant play of ‘différance’” (72). Both the detective (Quinn) and the ostensible object of detection (Stillman) are interminably caught up in the production and evaluation of language. Everyone in the novel writes, logs, encrypts, drafts; characters send letters, pen dissertations, sign cheques, produce essays, keep journals, name and rename objects. The domination of language extends from individual subjects to tangible objects and terrain. As Stillman and Quinn move through New York, the city becomes the vocabulary and documentation of experience. City blocks are alphabets and trash is testimony. But the production of language does not lead to the production of meaning. Writing both creates the case and effaces it. More documentation means more indeterminacy. The proliferation of language leads to inertia

rather than illumination. An assemblage of indeterminate cues, the novella may well be, as Russell claims, a deconstruction of logocentrism. Even Quinn's written account—and his existence—are finally contingent upon the number of remaining pages available to him. The detective's ultimate question, "What will happen when there are no more pages left in the red notebook?" (157), is swiftly answered: the text and he will come to an end. But that is not to say the case is closed.

ii. *Bifurcation and compossibilities*

His life, which used to be a straightforward set of basically linear equations, has become a differential equation.

- Neal Stephenson,
Cryptonomicon, 548

In *Beautiful Chaos*, Gordon Slethaug says that a chaotic novel "may be posited upon the basis of a sensitive dependence upon an initial condition and then follow through the extreme turbulence of its conclusion" (15). Auster's novella is posited on such a basis. If we understand the beginning of a narrative as the "setting-up of stakes," the opening passages of *City of Glass* do not present particularly interesting stakes. The stakes are not high; there are no stakes. There is, rather, an arrestingly inert Quinn, who is defined by a "salutary emptiness" (4), the almost complete absence of subjectivity: "He no longer wished to be dead. At the same time, it cannot be said he was glad to be alive" (6). Quinn, living a kind of "posthumous life" (6), is as close to non-existent as one can be without being dead. And whatever faint residue of "himself" remains, Quinn methodically works to efface. This work, predominantly, takes the form of Max Work, the alter ego Quinn

erects in his fiction, one of the “triad of selves Quinn had become” (6). Along with Quinn’s pseudonym, William Wilson, Work becomes a vessel into which his inventor’s subjectivity is transmitted. And, in Quinn’s estimation, Wilson and Work are the more “concrete” or real, calling Wilson a “ventriloquist,” himself the “dummy,” and Work, “the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise” (6). What is left for Quinn is merely form, a biophysical life without concomitant development on psychic, moral, or ideological levels. In such a system, any small variation is apt to cause severe disturbances, since Quinn’s “initial conditions” are characterized by an absence of force—objects and selves at rest. Instead of willfully acting, Quinn functions like a pinball, finding himself “doing a good imitation of a man preparing to go out” (14). Penning the lives of fictional characters, Quinn is reduced to a wooden husk, a “dummy” whose gestures are governed by dislocated projections of his imagination. Walking the streets of Manhattan, Quinn becomes a “seeing eye” and is “able to feel that he [is] nowhere” (4). He becomes sealed into a mechanical routine like the clarinetist whom he later observes “inside that music. . . drawn into the circle of its repetitions” (130). He is “[l]ost, not only in the city, but within himself as well. Each time he took a walk, he felt as though he was leaving himself behind and giving himself up to the movement of the streets” (4). Even the recollection of his deceased child is experienced physically and not emotionally, “an imprint of the past that had been left on his body” (6).

The emphasis on the physical texture of Quinn’s character, as it is established from the beginning of the story, lends a disarmingly mechanical aspect to the ensuing narrative. On one hand, Quinn is a pathetic figure, traumatized by a series of losses; his inability to feel pleasure and his dissociation from himself and the world might be interpreted as the symptoms of a depressive disorder, brought about by bereavement and

exacerbated by isolation. Reflecting upon the source of his numbness, however, is as unpalatable a prospect as facing his own reflection, as Quinn finds it “unpleasant to look in the mirror and kept trying to avoid himself with his eyes” (125). But whatever “reasons” we might assign to Quinn’s state at the beginning of the novella, his subjective vacancy renders him particularly effective as a “factor” in a narrative system, a variable in an equation, or what William Lavender calls a “humanoid narrative function” (225). Without the complexity and nuance of interiority, the patterns and (dis)orders of the systems that encompass Quinn—a kind of neutral barometer—are brought to the fore. The question becomes not What kind of person is Quinn? but What kind of structure is he? or What kind of system does he inhabit? How does the reclusive, routine-driven Quinn ultimately (at the end of the narrative) find himself crumpled on the floor of an abandoned apartment, hallucinating, and scribbling incoherent “data” about recent acquaintances or imaginings? Over the course of the short novel, Quinn moves from stable, if lifeless, inertia to physical and mental catastrophe. But the rate and contours of this decomposition can be identified by neither the reader nor Quinn—both of whom become detectives of a kind. The single “clue” about the nature of the system we are reading is provided by the midnight phone call, the “wrong number” that prompts Quinn to swerve from his regime. The call works on a number of levels. The voice, asking for “Paul Auster” establishes an authorial absence, adding another layer of ontological “vacancy” to the narrative. The request for “Paul Auster” also invokes the reader’s appeal for authorial guidance that is implicit whenever someone undertakes to read a novel. But, as Quinn says to the disembodied voice, “There’s no one here by that name” (7), a response that announces the meta-fictional concerns both in and of *City of Glass*; “I suggest you dial again. This is not a detective agency” (8). In other words, “Paul

Auster”—as a conventional author who makes sense of the details—is not to be found in this text, which won’t provide the answers to a puzzle as another “agent” of detection might.

The sequence of phone rings, the number of calls, and the “wrong number” dialed establish the narrative significance of numbers. The first call rings twice before Quinn responds; the second call rings six times; the third call comes on May nineteenth, Quinn’s “parents’ anniversary” which Quinn believes was “the first moment of his existence” (6). The numerical linkage of the telephone call and Quinn’s conception suggests associations beyond the level of coincidence—that we are here dwelling in a mathematical world, where objects and events are related in some system that can be numerically defined. The phone call might, too, bring about another kind of “conception”—but what matters is the *suggestion* that disparate events are related by the numbers attached to them. Stillman’s fictional Henry Dark’s fictional 1690 pamphlet marks 1960 as the year that a foundation would be laid “for the new Babel” and, Quinn realizes, “1960 was the year Stillman locked up his son” (49). Peter and Virginia live on 69th Street. Dates, times, street addresses, arithmetic, baseball jerseys and train numbers are enumerated throughout the text. The conspicuous detailing of repetitions and numerical connections implies that the events cohere according to mathematical logic. Experience is encoded and, with enough ciphering, the code can be cracked. In one respect, the phone call represents all things that are opposed to the static, reclusive scenario that Quinn calls his life. Its mysterious source and content, further, are appropriately synchronous with issues of detection and identity central to Quinn’s character. “There’s no one here by that name,” Quinn tells the voice at the end of the wire; but there are three others present—at least their names are: Wilson, Work and Quinn. The appeal for “Paul Auster,” too, speaks to the absences, or lack of

influence and meaning, which defines Quinn's life on many levels; he "did not consider himself to be the author of what he wrote," and "he no longer had any friends" (5). The urgency of this unexpected appeal is starkly contrasted with Quinn, who "stood there on the cold floor, looking down at his feet, his knees, his limp penis" (8). The call is, then, a paradoxically unsettling and regenerating interruption of a static situation. In terms of the narrative system we are engaging, however, the phone call functions as a point of bifurcation in the trajectories of plot and character, reminiscent of a forking path one inevitably confronts whilst navigating a labyrinth. Referring to Borges' story, "The Garden of Forking Paths," Deleuze shows how the bifurcation effects a multiplication of narrative possibilities:

A bifurcation . . . is called a point in the neighborhood of series' divergence. Borges, one of Leibniz's disciples, invoked the Chinese philosopher-architect Ts'ui Pên, the inventor of the "garden with the bifurcating paths," a baroque labyrinth whose infinite series converge or diverge, forming a webbing of time embracing all possibilities. Fang, for example, keeps a secret; a stranger knocks at his door; Fang decides to kill him. Naturally, several outcomes are possible: Fang can kill the intruder; the intruder can kill Fang; both can die, etc. In Ts'ui Pen's work, all outcomes are produced, each being a point of departure for other bifurcations. (*The Fold* 62)

The phone call is like the knock on Fang's door—an act, as expressed in this fittingly multilayered reference (I reference Deleuze, who references Borges, who references Ts'ui Pen) that is pregnant with numerable outcomes—all of which are "are produced, each being a point for other bifurcations." Similarly in Auster's text, all possible responses to

the phone call are produced: on the occasion of the first call, Quinn, answers the phone and “truthfully” responds, “There is no one here by that name.” The second time the phone rings, Quinn, disliking the “tyranny” of the telephone, remains seated on the toilet and chooses not to pick up. Though curious about the caller and the mysterious “Paul Auster,” Quinn, in this instance, puts his biophysical routine above an intellectual interest. The figure who remains on the toilet and “decide[s] to resist” (5) the ringing phone, is one bifurcated strand of Quinn’s identity—the identity he will assume until the next point of bifurcation. There is, however, a third occasion, another strain in the system of calls, which mirrors its predecessors. The figure that receives this call is another potential version of Quinn’s identity; and this version finally subordinates Quinn who sits inert night after night ignoring or awaiting another strange ring. Thus deviating from the initial conditions, this counterstrand—this particular “self”—is actualized at the moment when Quinn tells the caller, “This is Paul Auster speaking” (12).

What I term “counterstrands” or “potential versions” Deleuze would call “compossibilities.” All possible events take place; we experience the “one” event that gets filtered through, but all other variations remain simultaneously “compossible.” Following his discussion of Borges’ multi-outcome tale (of Ts’ui Pen’s Fang), where each result of an act is represented in the narrative, Deleuze theorizes this multiplicity in terms of both narrative and subject identity. While at any given moment, a subject will inhabit a single strand—a single reality—this inhabited strand represents only one of many “compossible” strands which persist (even though they are not inhabited or realized, as it were).

At the core of every monad there exist singularities that in every case are the requisites of the individual notion. That each individual clearly expresses only

a part of the world derives from the real definition: is clearly expressed in the region determined by its constituent singularities. That every individual expresses the entire world also derives from the real definition: the constitutive singularities of each are effectively extended in all directions up to the singularities of others, under the condition that the corresponding series converge, such that each individual include the sum of a compossible world, and excludes only the other worlds impossible with that world (where the series would diverge). (63)

To put this another way, Deleuze explains: “Adam sinned, but his opposite, Adam the nonsinner, is neither impossible nor inherently contradictory” (59). At any given juncture, several divergent series or compossibilities are present rather than relegated to entirely distinct worlds. The series of phone calls—the first one disturbing, the second over-ruled, the third invigorating—can be considered a “playing out” of compossibilities. But more than this, the calls disrupt the status quo, introducing turbulence to a stable system and igniting a pattern of reiteration that will dominate the remainder of the novella. From the set of midnight calls onward, structures in the narrative system are shadowed by their mirror, a compossibility. Obvious character doubles permeate the text: Daniel Quinn and Don Quixote. Quinn and William Wilson. Quinn and Max Work. Quinn’s deceased wife and child and Paul Auster’s wife and child. Daniel Quinn and Daniel Auster. The Peter Stillmans. The twin Senior Peter Stillmans at the train station. Peter Stillman and Peter Quinn. Peter Stillman, Jr., isolated and without language throughout childhood, and Quinn, isolated and without language before his “termination.” Saavedra, who recommends the Paul Auster Detective Agency to Virginia Stillman, and Saavedra, the alleged translator of *Don Quixote*. The unidentified narrator, just returned from Africa,

and Paul Auster, the unlocatable author of *City of Glass*. Paul Auster, the writer who makes Quinn an omelet, and Paul Auster, the author of *City of Glass*.

It has been suggested that the one component in each pair works as a foil for the other component, conveying what Russell calls, “the deconstructive denial of a single self” (81); coherent identity is not possible in a scheme where, at every turn, subjects are reflected, absorbed, or cancelled out by other subjects. Indeed, the bifurcating series refuses the structuralist attempt to “grasp the ‘center’ of the system which functions as a principle of inclusion and exclusion” (Culler 99). But while these doubles speak to the Derridian fallacy of “presence,” their significance, I think, is not fully realized if considered in terms of deconstruction alone. The doubling that dominates *City of Glass* is not merely a situation of self-effacing binaries that illustrate, as Steve Alford says, that “the self is a textual construct subject to the difference and deferral inherent in language” (17). These doubles, rather, are iterations that refract perpetually throughout the narrative system, opening up realms in which new information and alternate perspectives may emerge. The three narrative pieces that compose *The New York Trilogy*, in effect, illustrate this expansion; as the narrator of the final section says, they “are finally the same story, but each one represents a different stage in my awareness of what it is all about” (346). Deleuze explains how this “divergent” and “decentered” reproduction—the single story birthing multiple “same stories”—creates autonomies for each possible perspective:

To every perspective or point-of-view there must correspond an autonomous work with its own self-sufficient sense: what matters is the divergence of series, the decentering of circles, ‘monstrosity.’ The totality of circles and series is thus a formless ungrounded chaos that

has no law other than its repetition, its own reproduction in the development of what diverges and decenters. (*Difference and Repetition* 69)

Thus, the thrice-reiterated story of *The New York Trilogy*. Even within one “independent” iteration, other micro-iterations are apparent. On the third phone call, for example, Quinn asserts, “I don’t go around killing people,” and the voice objects: “No . . . I mean the reverse” (13). Here, the opposing propositions effect a type of cognitive doubling, a strand and counterstrand that are derived from the larger, encompassing dialectic. The same doubling and splintering takes place in Quinn’s identity, beginning with his pseudonym, William Wilson, and his heroic *alter ego*, Max Work. When the opportunity presents itself, he impersonates Paul Auster, the detective. Due partly to his internal vacancy, he adapts seamlessly to each new scenario—without much substance of his “own,” he is particularly malleable. The iterative function of doubling is clearly demonstrated during the series of encounters Quinn has with the elder Stillman. The first encounter is a performance of ambivalence, a swaying between polar identities and ideas. Quinn begins by “stubbornly fixing his eyes on the wrinkled profile” of Stillman (88). His marked interest is countered by a blockade. Stillman says, “I’m sorry but it won’t be possible for me to talk to you” (88). The mirroring interlocutors, each with his own red notebook, immediately set up antithetical objectives. This double folds again into another set of opposing positions. Shifting at once from his initial engrossment, Quinn’s “whole being exude[s] indifference” (89), at which point “Stillman smile[s] brightly, . . . lean[s] toward Quinn, and [says] in a conspiratorial voice, ‘I think we’re going to get along’” (89). Like Democritus and Heraclitus, whom they later discuss, Quinn and Stillman are “two poles of the dialectic” (97). Their gestures and dialogue fluctuate in an oppositional

but complementary fashion, demonstrating the flexibility of doubling functions. Their status as doubles, furthermore, indicates the unlikely mathematical situation where one factor equals two of the same factors.

Quinn and Stillman, Sr., both name and rename things in an effort to solve their respective puzzles, to right the particular wrongs they detest. Working to save the young Peter from paternal threat, Quinn changes appellation each time he meets with Stillman. Stillman, for his part, provides names for objects that, he's convinced, are no longer connected to their current, post-lapsarian names. Quinn's seamless switching of identity performs Vladimir Propp's notion that within a genre only character names (and not functions) change from one tale to the next.¹ But the name changes also reflect Stillman's conviction that "words no longer correspond to the world" (92). Ironically, the first alias Quinn supplies is "Quinn," which he makes a point to spell out, breaking it apart to its smallest components for Stillman's inspection. Stillman points out that the name "rhymes with twin" (89) and proceeds to enumerate other rhymes and resonances; he notes the name's paradoxical "quintessence . . . of quiddity" and its propensity to "[fly] off in so many little directions at once" (90). Henry Dark, the name Quinn uses at the second meeting, undergoes a similar dissection, but this time Quinn does the sussing: he proposes Henry David Thoreau, Hilda Doolittle, Heraclitus and Democritus as the name's sources. Quinn, in this instance, identifies himself as Stillman's fictional creation, while on the third meeting, Quinn assumes the name of Stillman's biological creation, Peter. Stillman Sr. accordingly bends with each successive introduction, accommodating the "new" Quinn with whom he speaks. These transformations, though "false," illustrate ontological adaptation through systematic recursion. And if, as Stillman says, "little by

¹ Propp discusses genre and character in *The Morphology of the Russian Folktale* (1928).

little . . . things have broken apart, shattered, [and] collapsed into chaos” (93), it follows that other interconnected systems fluctuate and adapt in chaotic sympathy.

iii. The implicated observer

We have to remember that what we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning.

- Werner Heisenberg,
Physics and Philosophy, 58

The double, a key structural feature in *City of Glass*, turns out to be much more than a unit of simple polarity. Not only do terms feed back upon themselves and produce new terms, but the system is also complicated by the involvement of an observer, a less conspicuous third variable. Quinn, for one, “had always imagined that the key to good detective work was a close observation of details. The more accurate the scrutiny, the more successful the results” (80). But, as Heisenberg postulated in 1927, an observer is always implicated in what he or she observes; such were Heisenberg’s findings, extrapolated from his discovery that we cannot measure accurately both the velocity and position of subatomic particles because the means needed to measure one aspect disturbs the nature of the other aspect. This paradox is echoed in *Theory of Heat*, where James Clerk Maxwell describes how the most efficient experimenter will inadvertently and “without the expenditure of work,” alter the transfer of heat molecules in a manner that, consequently, “contradict[s] the second law of thermodynamics” (328). This observer, known as Maxwell’s Demon, demonstrates that any attempt to reveal order, no matter how benign or meticulous the investigator, is an imposition of order. “When the scientist,” as Susan Strehle asserts in *Fiction and the Quantum Universe*, “for centuries a

figure typifying neutrality, distance, passive observation, becomes an actor in the interplay, the entire set of relations between mind and world has changed” (13). Hayden White describes similar effects of the historical theorist, whose conception of historical structure—his choice of archetypes—shapes the way in which “the facts” are organized and narrated;¹ preconceived systems in the mind of the documentarian determine the way in which facts are structured. We can safely say that Deleuze and Guattari would consider the psychoanalyst to be a version of Maxwell’s Demon.

The interactive dynamic between the observer and the observed is a good example of systematic complexity. Because, as Niels Bohr says, “[a]n independent reality in the ordinary physical sense can neither be ascribed to the phenomena nor to the agencies of observation” (54), we must view both operations together. Furthermore, in the absence of “independent reality,” it becomes prohibitively difficult to evaluate the material at hand, to differentiate meaningful from irrelevant. “Since there is nothing outside the field,” writes Paul Civello, taking up Hayles’s “field theory” of science and art discourses,² “there is no frame of reference either” (116). While he tracks Stillman’s course, for example, Quinn, like Maxwell’s Demon, must sort through information and privilege some items over others. But his selections, his particular “logic of hierarchy” (Chatman 53) creates the narrative he studies. No matter how objective he tries to be, or how precisely he records the data, Quinn—simply *because* he observes—will participate in the system under his observation, and, in so doing, he will have an impact on how the system is interpreted. The most striking instance of this observational influence occurs at the train station where Quinn awaits the arrival of the elder Peter Stillman. As the passengers

¹ This is a central contention in White’s essay, “The Structure of Historical Narrative” (1972).

² In N. Katherine Hayles’ *A Cosmic Web: Scientific Field Models and Literary Strategies in the Twentieth Century* (1984).

alight the train, Quinn sees the “unmistakable” (67) object of his pursuit and begins to follow him. When Stillman puts down his bag, however, Quinn happens to “glance to Stillman’s right, surveying the rest of the crowd to be doubly sure he had made no mistakes” (67). Quinn is horrified:

Directly behind Stillman, heaving into view just inches behind his right shoulder, another man stopped, took a lighter out of his pocket, and lit a cigarette. His face was the exact twin of Stillman’s. For a second, Quinn thought it was an illusion, a kind of aura thrown off by the electromagnetic currents of Stillman’s body. But no, this other Stillman moved, breathed, blinked his eyes; his actions were clearly independent of the first Stillman. (67-8)

The object of Quinn’s investigation effectively bifurcates, making explicit the doubling principle that governs the narrative as a whole. The episode positions the observer as simultaneously detached from and participatory in the system under observation. Faced with twin specimens, Quinn knows that “whatever choice he made—and he had to make a choice—would be arbitrary, a submission to chance” (68). At first Quinn follows the second Stillman for a few paces, then realizes “he was acting out of spite, spurred on to punish the second Stillman for confusing him” (68). That Quinn is influenced by his spiteful feelings—and, even, that he feels spite at all, where he should be neutral—exposes the fallacy of “detective” as a roving, disassociated eyeball. And just as surely as “spite” has him choose one Stillman over the other, it promptly works to counteract that decision. Trembling, Quinn switches course and undertakes to trail the first Stillman.

The scenario at the train station is problematic on several levels. Because Quinn cannot differentiate between the two Stillmans, he must rely upon intuition and (though

perhaps not consciously) his own beliefs and apprehensions to decide which man to pursue. Of his accuracy, “[t]here was no way to know” (68). The quest for meaning is thus fundamentally skewed because so much—indeed, the central figure under investigation—becomes contingent upon Quinn’s perceptions, which are infused with unquantifiables like “spite.” Quinn hopes that “beneath the infinite facade of gestures, tics, and silences, there was finally a coherence, an order, a source of motivation” (80), but, ironically, the motivation and order he seeks to reveal in Stillman’s actions are the very forces that have contaminated his investigation. Beyond the interpretive partiality of the detective, the scene at the station implicates the *reader* in the system that is the novel, *City of Glass*. Full of contradictions and doubles, the novel requires that the reader assess which “twin”—be it a character, an image, or an idea—should be given precedence over its counterpart. Of course, the “plot” does not alter under a reader’s influence, but the meaning of its many conflicting signals are subject to the unpredictable deductions made by a “textual observer.” The name “Stillman,” for example, can be perceived as “a still man,” thus imbued with inertia, obsolescence, or death; conversely, the name may connote the phrase, “still a man,” implying a kind of humanitarian optimism or resilience in the face of pervasive social decay. And there are two Stillmans to consider: each is “still,” trapped in linguistic nebulae, but are their stillnesses identical or oppositional?

The narrative system, then, is altered by an external Maxwell’s Demon, the reader, whose particular perspectives inform the meaning of the narrative. But these perspectives are themselves governed, to some extent, by the cues presented by the text. Quinn must arbitrarily decide which Stillman to follow at the train station, but, during his conversations with Stillman, Sr., Quinn’s thoughts and behavior are influenced by those of Stillman; similarly, one who “detects” *City of Glass* is implicitly coerced into handling

information in the same way that Quinn does. The reader cleaves to the principles and actions of his object. There is, as stated by a line Quinn recalls from Poe, “[a]n identification of the reasoner’s intellect with that of his opponent” (40). And just as Poe’s Legrand decodes Captain Kidd’s cryptographs by imagining the “crude intellect of the sailor” (639), Quinn’s method is influenced by Stillman’s scriptophilia, and he “turn[s] to a clean page of the red notebook and sketche[s] a little map of the area Stillman had walked in” (80).

It seemed to him he was looking for a sign. He was ransacking the chaos of Stillman’s movements for some glimmer of cogency. This implied only one thing: that he continued to disbelieve the arbitrariness of Stillman’s actions.

He wanted there to be a sense to them, no matter how obscure. (83)

Quinn’s mapping exercise seems to reveal a pattern—each day’s ramble generates a letter, and the days seem to spell “TOWER OF BABEL.” But Quinn, “clinging to the semblance of objectivity” (84), may just be “looking for pictures in the clouds” (85). After all, far from clear-cut, the drawings are “complicated by numerous irregularities, approximations, and ornate embellishments,” with letters “precariously tilted on a perverse single point, like an upside-down pyramid” (85). Quinn tries “to look as if he had not been anticipating a letter of the alphabet” (84), but, because of the essentially linguistic aspect of the case, Quinn’s interpretations of these “irregularities” are inevitably weighted towards language. White’s conception of historical emplotment is instructive here:

[One] way we make sense of a set of events which appears strange, enigmatic or mysterious in its immediate manifestation is to encode the set in terms of culturally provided categories, such as metaphysical concepts, religious

beliefs or story forms. The effect of such encodings is to familiarize the unfamiliar. (10)

In *City of Glass*, the “culturally provided category” is fiction, or more specifically, language. This is not, however, to negate the possibility that Stillman does intentionally trace out letters with his urban promenades; after all, in Poe’s “The Gold Bug,” LeGrand’s decoding measures do yield results. But like Maxwell’s Demon, Quinn’s methodology and his preconceptions—the way in which he perceives and organizes his data—exert pressure on the mystery before him. Quinn “emplots” the data. And this emplotment in turn modifies the development of the case: believing that only “the last two letters remained” (87), he shifts his entire detective approach and ventures to meet Stillman in person.

Quinn’s pictorial representations, though possibly misleading, establish an investigative paradigm by which the various Maxwell’s Demons of *City of Glass* interpret information. The narrator, for one, admits that Quinn’s red notebook was “difficult to decipher” but insists that he “refrained from any interpretation” (158). One wonders about the veracity of this claim, given assertions like: “In his dream, which he later forgot, [Quinn] found himself in the town dump of his childhood, sifting through a mountain of rubbish” (87). But even without these mystifying statements, the effects of Quinn’s detective strategies upon those of the narrator are evident in the way in which information is conveyed. When faced with Stillman’s “impenetrability” (80), Quinn, quite randomly, looks to his subject’s route for answers; when faced with an impenetrable Quinn, who “no longer had an opinion” (125) and “knew that he knew nothing” (124), the narrator lays out the stark, geographical coordinates of *his* subject. Quinn “walked down Broadway to 72nd Street, turned east to Central Park West, and followed it to 59th Street

and the statue of Columbus” (127). This is the beginning of a long and scrupulously precise account of Quinn’s course through the streets and avenues of the city. Essentially a list of directions, the passage is notably devoid of other descriptive or psychological commentary. We are told only when and where Quinn “veers left and progresse[s] further downtown,” “continue[s] south for a mile,” “turn[s] right on Houston Street,” and so on (127). The passage is remarkable, in part, because it offers sufficient detail of Quinn’s course that—as Quinn does with Stillman’s meandering—whosoever regards the text can envision Quinn’s movements pictographically. One might, instructed by Quinn’s evaluative method, take it upon oneself to plot this course out on a map of Manhattan. When thus plotted, an eerily suggestive image emerges: Quinn’s route “draws” an elongated pseudo-rectangle, a tower of sorts, rooted in Central Park with its utmost point at the Staten Island Ferry. The “TOWER OF BABEL” that Quinn ciphers from Stillman’s steps is reiterated in Quinn’s depiction, but only, perhaps, because the investigative approach Quinn uses to arrive at Stillman’s “message” has been once again employed by both narrator and reader.

The methodological contagion shown here illustrates how interpretation is itself another force which alters dynamic systems under investigation. Compelled by various insidious forces, Quinn applies a specific method of analysis, and this method emerges again and again in various incarnations. But just as an interpretive system is influenced by the codes of other interpretive systems, so too does the material under observation resist the codes and orders being used to understand it. If you draw Quinn’s course on a map of Manhattan, for example, you will end up with a figure that resembles an inverted tower. This, perhaps, makes narrative sense since Stillman’s path forms an image “precariously tilted on a perverse single point, like an upside-down pyramid” (85). But in

keeping with Quinn, who tries “to look as if he had not been anticipating a letter of the alphabet” (84), so too must one who assesses the diagram of Quinn’s course be aware of his or her own detective conditioning. Quinn’s drawing is not, after all, a perfect rectangle. Within the narrator’s account of Quinn’s steps, chaotic eruptions occur. Along his route, Quinn “[circles] haphazardly for a few blocks,” while at one point he “stop[s] momentarily to watch a juggler perform on a slack rope stretched between a light pole and a tree trunk” (127). While Quinn searches for a “glimmer of cogency” (83) in Stillman’s maneuvering, the reader cannot ignore the twists and turns in Quinn’s urban trek. Other designs, apart from the tower depiction, emerge: Quinn “[swings] around to Varick Street . . . number 6, where he used to live, and then regain[s] his southern course” (127) and later, at the World Trade Center, he “enter[s] one of the fast-food places on the ground floor and leisurely consume[s] a sandwich” (128). It would be easy to walk in a strict rectangle in Manhattan, but Quinn’s path is broken by unpredictable swerves.

The promenades and their interpretations compose the complex system, the manifold variables involved in (what should ostensibly be) simple perception and analysis. Quinn derives information from the terrain he covers, from the semblance of things around him, and from the way in which he and his subject negotiate the city. The walks express the way in which an observer impinges upon the system she considers, and how that impingement affects subsequent employment of similar methods. Inasmuch as they “reveal meaning” in the form of approximate hieroglyphics, the promenades reveal the inherently approximate quality of truth or supposedly understandable systems. Random disruptions and subjective motivation persist beneath the semblance of order and design. As Slethaug says, “the mappable can become a means of introducing the unmappable, and apparent attractors can reveal inconsistencies, gaps and absences” (161).

Quinn's account of "the things he had seen while walking" (128) reveal the disorder within the fixed grid of the city: "There is the woman with the Halloween mask on her face. There is the man in a business suit with bare feet and a football helmet on his head" (131). People are haphazardly dressed in holiday or political gear—the American flag, presidential campaign buttons: random and out-of-place. Possibly the most evocative figure of concomitant order and disorder is the man "who goes everywhere with a set of drumsticks, pounding the pavement with them in a reckless, nonsensical rhythm, stooped awkwardly as he advances along the street, beating and beating away at the cement" (131). Here, the rhythmic regimentation of drumming becomes erratic, signifying the human disorder that swells within the city's concrete delineation. Finally, Quinn cedes to the same, taking up residence in an alley, believing (as the insane drummer might) that his continued surveillance of Stillman—who is long gone—is of vital importance. In order to break from the regimentation of the system he studies, Quinn has to exile himself from the system altogether.

[The analyst's] task is to make out what has been forgotten from the traces which it has left behind or, more correctly, to *construct* it.

- Sigmund Freud,
"Constructions in Analysis," 24

In Auster's depiction of observation, *pace* the claims of improbabilities science, the one who observes is necessarily implicated in the object or processes under observation. This subject/object overlap problematizes the hierarchical distinction between the observer and the observed, where both agents are, finally, positioned within the same field. What begins as a scientific idea—Heisenbergian uncertainty—comes to assume psychological significance. Although conventional psychoanalysis acknowledges the inevitability of transference and counter-transference, it is left to the "good analyst" to sort through the projections and fantasies. Partial implication, however, becomes complete involvement when the observer (unwittingly or in a loop of moebial indeterminacy) becomes (or realizes that he has always been) the *observed*. All three novellas in *The New York Trilogy* involve these complex or twisted scenarios of observation. Midway through *Ghosts*, the narrator explains that "spying out at Black across the street, it is as though Blue were looking into a mirror, and that instead of merely watching another, he finds that he is also watching himself" (172). In *City of Glass*, Quinn eventually realizes that even as he surveys Peter Stillman, Stillman is observing Quinn—and that Stillman "had known he would be followed, had known his movements would be recorded, had known his message would be deciphered" (86). And in *The Locked Room*, the protagonist realizes that even as he builds a trail of clues leading to Fanshawe, Fanshawe is watching him. As Fanshawe explains near the end of the novella, "I turned everything around. He

thought he was following me, but in fact I was following him. . . . I led him along, making it impossible for him not to find me. But I was watching the whole time, and when the moment came, I set him up, and he walked right into my trap” (362). Whatever pretences these characters adopt for observing other people, it is watching itself that matters to Auster—the way in which watching can function as a means of contagion. Thus does Quinn consider, toward the opening of *City of Glass*, the tripartite meaning of the term “private eye”:

Private eye. The term held a triple meaning for Quinn. Not only was it the letter “I,” standing for “investigator,” it was “I” in the upper case, the tiny life-bud buried in the body of the breathing self. At the same time, it was also the physical eye of the writer, the eye of the man who looks out from himself into the world and demands that the world reveal itself to him. (9-10)

Observing others in *City of Glass* becomes synonymous with observing the self. In his essay on DeLillo’s *Ratner’s Star*—a novel about scientific investigation, whose characters seem as mathematically defined as their theories—David Cowart points out that “no matter how frequently scientists remind themselves of Gödel’s theorem (that all systems ultimately falter in the ultimate lability of their postulates), they merely struggle, Lāocoons of the Enlightenment, in the toils of subjectivity” (124). In other words, no matter how sophisticated and self-aware the investigation (the “eye”), the object of scrutiny is always influenced by the investigator’s self (the “I”). But how does this dynamic play out when—as is the case throughout *The New York Trilogy*—the investigator becomes the investigated, and the observer the observed? Quinn, for example, begins to assume properties of the objects and processes he examines and the persons he surveys. He is revealed to be a node where multiple forces intersect, a

Deleuzo-Guattarian “desiring-machine,” whose identity is in continual flux and contingent upon external as well as internal factors. Brian Massumi provides an instructive gloss on the concept of “subjectification” as it is presented in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*:

There is no interiority in the sense of a closed, self-reflexive system. There is only multileveled infolding of an aleatory outside, with which the infolding remains in contact (as a dissipative structure). Reactive forces do impose “self”-reflection on the infolding at a certain level. On that level, a more rigid boundary takes shape between “self” and “other,” but the cordoning off is never complete. The self remains susceptible to identity crises brought on by confusions between “inside” and “outside.” A membranous porosity subsists, muted, on other levels, and always threatens to break through.

Subjectification is the constitution, through interlocking passive and active syntheses on every stratum, of infoldings of various porosity. (80)

Quinn, whose subjectivity is molded through various encounters with “others,” including father and son Stillman, exemplifies this “membranous porosity.”

In “The Library of Babel,” Borges writes that “for every sensible line of straightforward statement, there are leagues of senseless cacophonies, verbal jumbles and incoherences” (53). Every ostensible line contains all compossible senseless alternatives. Raised without exposure to language, the young Peter Stillman speaks in an incoherent deluge, where meaning is obfuscated by too many words, too much nonsense, and too much contradiction. He describes his boyhood in the dark room of his childhood: “Wimble click crumble beloo. Clack clack bedrack. Numb noise, flacklemuch, chewmanna” (20). His body, like his voice, is “machine-like, fitful, alternating between

slow and rapid gestures, rigid and yet expressive, as if the operation were out of control, not quite corresponding to the will that lay behind it” (17). But from Peter’s tangled prattle, a pattern emerges: the assertion, “My name is Peter Stillman,” recurs periodically, a strange attractor toward which the other words and ideas veer—in attempted elaboration—but never actually reach. As with the butterfly-shaped Lorenz’s Attractor, a generally recognizable shape appears. Peter’s psychology, accordingly, guides and evades his speech but can never be definitively ascertained. Cadaverous and clad in white, Peter is “almost transparent,” and at times, “invisible” (18). Though tumultuous, Peter’s speech is remarkably perspicacious. Amidst his messy circumlocutions, Peter spews forth the odd phrase of clarity. He calls his neologisms “pretty and true” (23), conveys his love for “the air and the light” (25), and refers to himself as “the end of everyone, the last man” (23). Without the strictures of verbal decorum or syntax, Peter’s articulations become a veritable stream of consciousness, the voice of “everyone,” expressing the ontological confusion that permeates *City of Glass*. Babbling produces the “possibility for escaping coercive structures of order” (Hayles 265), and is thus, as DeLillo maintains, a “purer form of speech” (Slethaug 58). Peter’s father, conversely, tries to generate a “precise” language to represent shattered things, “from the chipped to the smashed, from the dented to the squashed, from the pulverized to the putrid” (94). Stillman, Sr., takes it upon himself to put a fragmented world “back together again” (91). But the old man’s extrapolations—his imposition of order and meaning upon language and events—do more to confuse than clarify: he takes, for example, George Washington’s chopping of the cherry tree to reveal “an essential truth. Namely, that money doesn’t grow on trees” (103). Stillman, Sr., creates meaning by graphing pre-established systems of his own construction onto the material world. In White’s terminology, Stillman, Sr., “emplots”

(10) significance, whereas his son's meaning unintentionally emerges from the chaotic ramblings that characterize his expression.

Quinn operates somewhere between the Stillman poles of regimented and unbridled expression. He is alternately laconic and garrulous. Ironically, Quinn is at his most verbose when he is discussing a Mets baseball game, a supremely structured scenario. He states which player "can't keep his mind on the game" and which should be "shipped back to Cincinnati by express mail" (44). The regiments of baseball here facilitate expression; the routine plays and patterns of the game supply concrete objects toward which Quinn directs strategic opinions. Later, however, similar rigidity obstructs speech: a busy signal—a strict, metronomic sound—prevents him from speaking to Virginia Stillman. The busy signal is incessant, and, by stages, Quinn is forced to turn off the baseball game on television so that he may write without distraction in his red notebook. Quinn vacillates between linguistic freedom and inertia. As the case spirals out of control, he tries to assure himself of the facts, as one might do in order reaffirm one's touch with reality: "This is New York, and tomorrow will be June third" (124). Like Peter Stillman, too, Quinn intermittently acknowledges his identity, writing his initials in the red notebook and the imperative: "remember who I am" (49). Fluctuations between fluid and stultified expression persist until, finally, the busy signal becomes "a counterpoint to his steps, a metronome beating steadily inside the random noises of the city" (106).

Thus we have the irresolvable tension between what seems and what is, what is perceived and what is imposed. The intermingling of order and disorder is embodied finally in a musician whom Quinn encounters on his route through Manhattan, a clarinetist playing in sync with two wind-up, percussionist monkeys:

With one [monkey] shaking and the other banging, beating out weird and precise syncopation, the man would improvise endless tiny variations on his instrument, his body swaying stiffly back and forth, energetically miming the monkeys' rhythm. He played jauntily and with flair, crisp and looping figures in the minor mode, as if glad to be there with his mechanical friends, enclosed in the universe he had created, never once looking up. (130)

The monkeys are both primitive and technological forces. They evince an innate tendency toward structure, but one that requires construction or mechanism to ensure its perpetuation. The monkeys' perpendicular "shaking" and "banging" create an axis upon which the musician whimsically plots his "looping figures." The players are themselves in a looping system, where the monkeys' syncopated patterns determine the parameters of the man's behavior, his "swaying stiffly back and forth" and weaving his music to fit their dominant rhythm. But this constricting system is also of the musician's contrivance, a "universe he had created." The ensemble is like Barthes' onion, a vision of narrative:

a construction of layers (or levels, or systems) whose body contains, finally no heart, no kernel, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing except the infinity of its own envelopes—which envelop nothing other than the unity of its surfaces. (10)

The artificial monkeys—signs, simulations of living creatures—chart out the space for improvisation wherein the "glad," jaunty player, like a writer within the strictures of language and genre, finds *jouissance*. The "genius" (130) Quinn perceives is the musician's embodiment of the paradoxes of structure and fluidity, machine and human, order and disorder.

Chapter 2

American Rhizomes: Don DeLillo's

Underworld and *Cosmopolis*

The writer wants to see inside the human works, down to dreams and routine rambling thoughts, in order to locate the neural strands that link him to men and women that shape history.

- Don DeLillo,
"The Power of History," 61

Any event is a fog of a million droplets.

- Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari,
A Thousand Plateaus, 63

Much of Don DeLillo's fiction works to express the ineluctable connections that exist among apparently disparate phenomena—persons, objects, cultural processes, and historical events. In his polyphonic *Underworld* (1997), DeLillo disrupts conventional notions of social and political evolution by advancing an atemporal, intertextual anatomy of the latter half of the twentieth century in America. DeLillo undertook a similar historical de-creation in *Libra* (1988), where the JFK assassination functions as a node to which myriad subjects and destinies are attached. Individual trajectories in these novels are never autonomous but participate, rather, in dynamic concert (or contest) with each other and greater cultural patterns. DeLillo's latest, relatively short novel, *Cosmopolis* (2003), affirms the impossibility of discrete experience that is elaborated in *Underworld*, but focuses upon a single action—a single day and event—as a means of undermining the

very notion of *the single*: during a would-be linear trip across Manhattan to get a haircut, protagonist and corporate tycoon Eric Packer encounters a flurry of obstacles that transform his undertaking from simple and solitary to complex and multitudinous. The preponderance of tangents, fragments and cycles in *Underworld* and *Cosmopolis*, while signaling the inevitable distortion of boundaries both theoretical and actual under cyber-capitalism (public/private, consumer/consumed, national/global), collapses the atomistic concept of the individual and simple psychological determinism. What is staged is a narrative rhizome, whose pleats and intersections work to disinter those individuals and events that a single, “official history” would bury.

DeLillo has been criticized for the “constructedness” of his prose and the personalities he portrays. It is true that the later novels in particular (*Mao II*, *Underworld* and *Cosmopolis*) are conspicuously *wrought*, foregrounding the physical contours of subjects and episodes through jarring shifts in perspective, recurring phrases and parodic intermissions. But this heightened awareness of narrative shape and texture would seem appropriate to DeLillo’s subject—a late-capitalist environment that is itself preoccupied with structure, form, semblance and simulation.¹ A consciousness of narrative and subjective construction, furthermore, makes palpable the analogously constructed nature of the cultural narratives that would enlist our involvement, such as *The Normal*, cause-and-effect, and, indeed, *Oedipus*. Although not generally admired for creating “haunting” characters with whom we might empathize emotionally, in keeping with his emphasis on *what seems*, DeLillo is renowned for his ability to emulate regional American dialects

¹ As Timothy Parrish states [in response to Margaret Scanlan’s comment that in *Mao II*, “one misses . . . an old-fashioned novelistic virtue, the attempt to communicate the distinctive accents of a culture” (246)], “[t]he irony that critics repeatedly face, DeLillo’s ability to deconstruct ‘old-fashioned novelistic virtues,’ is in large part what enables his work to capture the distinctive accents of postmodern culture” (697).

and integrate all manner of colloques and jargons into his baroque textual weaves.¹ The resulting fictions exemplify a “dialogic imagination,” which is egalitarian in its scope and diversity, representing specific discourses “belonging to professions, to genres, languages peculiar to particular generations, etc.” (Bahktin xix). An original clash of literary sensibilities is achieved, where an acutely “artificial” prose style supports a host of distinctly human concerns. Johnston aptly dubs DeLillo’s fiction “machinic”—a term he borrows from Deleuze and Guattari, which “applies to the machine in its functional unity of discrete but homogenous parts and . . . the organic, which applies to the organism as a hierarchical organization of biological organs” (“Machinic Vision” 28). The doubly organic and mechanical—the machinic—produces an invigorating hybrid form whose “ambiguities,” states Philip Nel, “are both provocative and representative, actively shocking and passively matter-of-fact” (725).

The machinic novel, which portrays a “working relationship among the heterogeneous elements and relations” (Johnston 28), is rhizomatic in nature: its many facets operate simultaneously and interdependently. In *Underworld*, form befits content, and history in all its tenses occurs not in a sequentially unfolding, linear arrangement, but all at once, forming a narrative assemblage. The “assemblage,” as Deleuze and Guattari explains in *A Thousand Plateaus*, is an aleatory space:

[An assemblage is a] multiplicity made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns—different natures. Thus, the assemblage’s only unity is a that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a ‘sympathy’. It is never affiliations that are

¹ Even, in the case of *Ratner’s Star* (1989), inventing plausible dialects that fuse ultra-specialized sciences with intergalactic nationality.

important but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind. (84)¹

Such is the structural dominant in both *Underworld* and *Cosmopolis*—though, in the latter work, “liaisons,” “affiliations” and “symbiosis” occur as inevitable contingencies of what initially seems to be a linear (and physical: driving from point A to point B) narrative system.² This is achieved through the chaotic representation of history, which problematizes the notion of deterministic—and, indeed, individual—psychic development. Stephen Bernstein’s contention about *Libra* could equally be applied to *Underworld*: “[the novel] finally makes the same case for history as chaos theory has clarified about weather forecasting: the impossibility of grasping the plurality of details inherent in initial conditions renders any human attempts at understanding the present forecasting the future proportionally deficient” (n.p.).³ His fiction depicts cultural and psychological themes, problems, patterns, thus revealing the unassailable connections between society, its products, and the individual narratives ^{that} embody contextual structures.

¹ The “assemblage” formation, as Brian Massumi explains, also applies to the constitution of the human subject: “The subject is not psychological, it is not contained in one mind. It is in the interactions between people. Which is not to say that it is simply interpersonal; it is also in the technology that defined the kinds of productive work our docility serves. Which is not to say that it is simply socioeconomic: it is also in the raw materials at the basis of that technology and in the genes that define the physical and intellectual potential of the human body-machine. Which is not to say it is material in any deterministic way; genes result from chance mutation. The subject is a transpersonal abstract machine . . .” (26).

² “Where bodies and machines enter into machinic relationships,” says Johnston, “Deleuze and Guattari distinguish two opposed processes: a point of instability, where a functional equilibrium gives way to movements of change and becoming, there is what they call a decoding or deterritorialization; but on the opposed face of the assemblage, in contrast to these ‘lines of flight,’ there are processes of stratification, involving redundancy and recoding, or reterritorialization” (28).

³ Structural chaotics, Bernstein explains, revise the classic formulation of plot in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where a sequence of events follows the unity of a single “action” and its consequences. Fracturing this unity “allows moments to be related to each other in multiple and non-linear ways . . . [T]here are many curved lines that pass through points in an order other than linear succession” (n.p.). Bruce Baugh’s commentary on such fracturing in Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* is also pertinent to DeLillo’s *Underworld* and *Cosmopolis*: “within the finitude of life there lies infinity, since moments are traversed not only once and in one direction but an infinite number of times, from innumerable directions” (51).

In this chapter, I examine how DeLillo's rhizomatic, dialogical representation of American history attests to the emancipatory potential of a chaotic expression of the past.

i. Aggregate, perspective, event

A contemporary portrait no longer directs our attention to an authoritative lineage, to evocations of heritage and tradition alone. Simultaneities intervene, extending our point of view outward to an infinite number of lines connecting the subject to a whole world of comparable instances, complicating the temporal flow of meaning, short-circuiting the fabulous stringing-out of 'one damned thing after another'. The new, the novel, must now involve an explicitly geographical as well as historical configuration and projection.

- Edward Soja,
Postmodern Geographies, 23

"Pause for a moment, you wretched weakling, and take stock of yourself" (295): it's a line Nick Shay remembers from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a medieval tract that is also the title of a chapter in *Underworld*. DeLillo's novel is itself a kind of "un-knowing" semantic cloud, which, through the diffusion of time and space, dissolves accepted lines of historical and psychological causality. It asks that we "pause for moment," in the midst of progressive and cumulative flow, and acknowledge the unknowable schemes that emerge from intersections of variable and layered experience. In its explicitly retrograde chronology, *Underworld* works to remodel cultural conceptions that have taken shape under a decisively linear concept of history. It might have been by accident that DeLillo came across a 1951 copy of *The New York Times*, whose front page sets side by side the headlines: "Giants Capture Pennant" and "Soviets Explode Atomic Bomb." But it is of no

small consequence that the long and heterogeneous novel that ensued covers the latter half of the twentieth century. Where the early part of the century saw, as Edward Soja notes, a “rejection of environmental causality and all physical or external explanations of social processes in the formation of human consciousness” (35), DeLillo insists that “everything is connected” (a sentiment recapitulated several times in *Underworld*)—though these connections may not be observable through the usual kinds of inspection. In *Chaosmosis*, Guattari lists some of these less-obvious interconnections: “human inter-subjective instances manifested by language; suggestive and identificatory examples from theology; institutional interactions of different natures; machinic apparatuses (for example, those involving computer technology); [and] incorporeal Universes of references such as those relative to music and the plastic arts” (9).¹ In *Underworld*, DeLillo condenses these complex relationships in one deceptively simple, small sphere: the baseball that circulates regions and decades, a madeleine, cathecting memory and desire in each of its temporary owners.² The ball is a version of the recurring “motifs and themes” that John McCarthy maintains “function like strange attractors which provide intermittent concerns of ordered significance in the otherwise endless flux of energy and matter” (141).

¹ Guattari presents these interconnecting “machines” as part of his argument against lineages founded solely upon interpersonal relationships: “[I]t’s a question of being aware of the existence of machines of subjectification which simply don’t work within the ‘the faculties of the soul,’ interpersonal relations or intra-familial complexes. Subjectivity does not only produce itself through the psychogenetic stages of psychoanalysis or the ‘mathemes’ of the Unconscious, but also in the large-scale social machines of language and the mass media—which cannot be described as human” (9).

² John Mullan, in his short essay on *Underworld* in *The Guardian*, provides some interesting background about this literary type. The “novel of circulation,” as Mullan calls it, has its roots in *Pompey the Little* (1751), an “anatomy of Georgian absurdities,” which traces the ownership of a lapdog. Mullan refers to other literary precedents, including Charles Johnstone’s *The Adventures of a Guinea* (1860-5), which follows a gold coin, and, more recently, Annie Proulx’s *Accordion Crimes* (1996), which tracks, you guessed it, an accordion.

The debate about whether *Underworld* is a postmodernist or a modernist work is, on one hand, surprising: questions of category and period seem curiously posed at a moment when literary scholarship finally seems comfortable with the polymorphous and the indeterminate. On the other hand, though, the impulse to situate *Underworld* within a particular tradition is understandable, coaxed along by a story that ever approaches but never fully embraces one or another resolution—utter disarray or final cohesion. Modernist writing is often regarded as an effort to bring order to an inchoate universe; in his essay, “Imagination and Value,” Wallace Stevens holds that “imagination is the power that enables us to perceive ^{the} normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos” (153). In DeLillo’s novel, we may read a commensurate move to order the chaos (geopolitical, interpersonal), particularly in devices like the baseball, which provide a sense of continuity to otherwise random events. In addition, *Underworld* contains modernist intertextual cues, such as references to Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (in the foregrounded waste and final word of the novel, “Peace”) and its evocation of *Ulysses* (in characters like Albert Bronzini, a version of Leopold Bloom). And although rife with the signature “representational inconsistencies and dilemmas” (Jameson xxii) of postmodernism, *Underworld* is not dominated by the “flatness and depthlessness” of orthodox metafiction, parody and pastiche. True, DeLillo’s narrative frequently invokes two-dimensional figures and images that are commodity currency, but these are not dislocated, sinister signs, dangling like so many Warholian shoes. The baseball and the Lucky Strikes “target” icon, for example, are not merely emblems of consumerism, but rather they compose part of the real symbology of experience and memory. Thick, hyperbolic descriptions of a novelty condom dispensary and involved diatribes about Jell-O are always refracted back to the characters related to them (in these cases, Brian

Classic and Matt Shay). Refuse spews ceaselessly into the dumps, but the dumps are meaningful beyond themselves, even mythologized as “the national parks of the future” (80). Waste becomes part of civilization as would an archeological site: Brian Classic spies in the Gizaesque heaps a teal bikini brief and imagines its former owner, a secretary from Queens who “is dark-eyed and reads the tabloids and paints her nails and eats lunch out of molded styrofoam” (185).¹ Toppling the capitalist hierarchy of “Things are higher than Man” (Fromm 95), DeLillo positions objects of the marketplace in the hands and minds of perceiving subjects—and, in this sense, his may be interpreted as a modernist effort to unify the oppressively discrete.

Postmodernism, “conversely,” (made tentative by quotation marks because, as discussed earlier, this is not a field of clear delineations) would aspire to the disruption of order—summed-up in a line from William Burroughs’ *The Ticket that Exploded* (1962) “the first step is to isolate and cut the association lines of the control machine” (217). DeLillo says in “The Power of History” that fiction is “the dream release, the suspension of reality that history needs to escape its own brutal confinements” (61). In this respect, *Underworld* is profoundly postmodernist, with its chronological permutations and reiterative moments. The chief “line” needing to be severed—or so goes the postmodern refrain—is the temporal one, as Johnston explains:

If modernist art privileges the ecstatic, visionary moment, or frames the present moment against the mythic time of archetypal recurrence,

¹ Steffen Handke expands this point in his review of *Underworld*, stating that “[g]arbage allows the metaphor of process, a constant flow of change and transformation, rather than for a static dualistic structure within which two diametric opposites are deadlocked. . . . What’s discarded is being picked up and reused, channeled once again into the cycle of production and consumption. The decommissioned aircraft in the Arizona desert become the canvas for artist Klara Sax, who has a team of volunteers paint the abandoned machinery, elevating it to a grand spectacle of the Cold War’s ‘bone heap and broken tools’” (n.p.); Tony Tanner simply states: “The real protagonist in the novel is waste” (63).

postmodernist art tends to stall temporality in the endlessness of the present, as in Beckett's fiction, or to open it up to a multiplicity of layered or virtual times, as in Borges' story "The Garden of Forking Paths." (*Information Multiplicity* 170)

Indeed, *Underworld* undercuts the modernists' attempt to be outside history, as well as their reliance upon pure form, myth, abstraction and other models of closure in the construction of a well-wrought urn. DeLillo dissects history as if it were an organism—conducting an autopsy, separating pristine bits of skeleton from broken vessels, pulling apart the most resilient tissue to reveal the inflamed tumors within. Thus the many historical perversions in his writing, though in part ironic and alienating, are not simply the cultural excavation and recycling associated with a self-consciously clever postmodernism. They do not signify that which is, according to Baudrillard, our era's peculiar lust for revisionism, or "retrospective apocalypse" (*The Illusion of the End* 22). Rather, DeLillo's historical cognizance and recreation tries to re-familiarize and integrate items and constructs which, through extensive commoditization, have become (again, to cite Fromm) "higher than" us. In *The Physics of Language* (2002), David Cowart refines this account, suggesting that *Underworld* effects a "hybridization" of modernism and postmodernism by reinscribing elements of the former with values particular to the context from which the novel emerges:

Part of the greatness of this novel is the way that, at the end of the nineties, it seems a compendium of literary fashion from turn-of-the-century naturalism, through modernist and postmodernist reaction, to hybridized millennial vision. In other words, it offers elements of naturalism qualified by that movement's successor's styles: dislocated chronology; abundant, often

conflicting perspective; intricately motivic construction modeling a near-paranoid dream of universal connectedness; deconstruction of national and religious myth, a self-referring mode of history; and a treatment of language that seems to map out contending views on the limits of referentiality. (200)

Retrospection, the “hybridized millennial vision,” is less a mourning for shattered past or cosmetic surgery on an ugly present than it is a convergence of past and present, a historiographic “decreation” that, Linda Hutcheon contends, “may problematize the conventions of teleological closure or developmental continuity, but that is not to ‘banish’ them from the scene” (94). DeLillo’s is a studied attempt to address contemporary problems by countenancing dislocations within the present and between the present and the past—problems like how we might cohabitate with “drudges who do not dream of family dead” (*Underworld* 63), our machines, without becoming machines ourselves. What results is not merely an organism splayed-out by an artist-coroner, but machinic synthesis of mechanical and organic properties.

If “[l]onging on a large scale is what makes history” (11), then any historiography must account for varieties of longing and willfulness. A baseball game makes for an apposite scenario to initiate a semifictional retelling of history because it is a place wherein multiple longings, perspectives, agendas, and fictions gather to participate in a simultaneously public and personal activity. Baseball, Marshall McLuhan shrewdly observes, is an “outer model of inner psychological life” (237) and “the elegant abstract image of industrial society” (239). An environment where space (rather than time) is the dimension of principle importance, the baseball game sets up a psychodynamic model that will be played out in the rest of *Underworld*, where geographical expanses (from

Phoenix, AZ to Kazakh, USSR) constitute psychological as much as physical terrain.

Deleuze explains this “spatial” conception of the psyche in *Dialogues*:

[A]t each moment we are made up of lines which are variable at each instant, which may be combined in different ways, packets of lines, longitudes and latitudes, tropics and meridians, etc. There are no monofluxes. The analysis of the unconscious should be geography rather than history. Which lines appear blocked, moribund, closed-in, dead-ended, falling into a black hole or exhausted, which ones are active or lively, which allows something to escape and draw us along? (102)

Deleuze’s language of delineation—“lines, longitudes and latitudes”—might well describe the physical conditions of baseball. On the field, the batter represents at once both himself and his team, the individual and the community, in a struggle against an enemy force bent on putting both him and his allies “out.” In the stands, amidst intimate conversations, DeLillo writes, “the crowd repeats the sorry arc of the baseball, a moaned vowel falling softly to earth” (35). A whole system erupts according to the variable trajectory of the ball—the individual narratives of pitcher, batter, fielders, and crowd join in an abstract, unknowable geometric design. This physical and subjective expansion “[renders] inextricable the public and the historic and the private and the biographical” (Hutcheon 94). In DeLillo’s diffuse composition, the historical instance is broken apart, shattered into myriad psychic, social and political shards, just as the narrative of the game, the possibility of a sequence of discrete moves and plays, is rejected. Like chess, baseball is a game of “location, situation and memory” (*Underworld* 674), operating within the tension between regiment and randomness. The diamond insists on a basic, unwavering route of progress. “For baseball,” as McLuhan says, “is a game of one-thing-

at-a-time, fixed positions and visibly delegated specialist jobs . . . with its fragmented tasks and staff and line in management organization” (239). But the intersecting arc of the ball and the infinity of possible plays repeatedly upset this fixity; once it is hit, “nothing is the same”:

The men are moving, coming out of their crouches, and everything submits to the pebble-skip of the ball, to rotations and backspins and airstreams. There are drag coefficients. There are trailing vortices. There are things that replay unrepeatably, muscle memory and pumping blood and jots of dust, the narrative that lives in the spaces of the official play-by-play. (27)

If it is the unpredictable atom, the ball, and its attendant physical properties that precipitate and govern action, then the “official play-by-play” is at base a fallacy, or at least a gross approximation. The variable “coefficients” and “vortices” extend beyond the game by way of the ejected the ball, which permeates the world and the narrative like a virus or radioactive fallout. As Andrew Paulus declares, “our wins and losses tend to have impact well beyond our borders” (670); similarly, J. Edgar Hoover muses that “pathogenic bacteria could be every bit as destructive as megaton bombs. Worse, in a way, because the sense of infiltration [is] itself a form of death” (57). The ball, despite its tininess, is as powerful as state weaponry—elliptically conveyed by Marvin’s trivia: “when they make an atomic bomb, listen to this, they make the radioactive core the same size as a baseball” (172). Thus the game is not, as John Duvall suggests, simply an “auratic frenzy” (286), which can “eclipse a moment crucial to the construction of the Cold War” (287), but it is itself another incarnation, a fractal recapitulation, of the distant conflict.

The “Prologue” in *Underworld* sets up historical and psychological models—fluxious, complex, dynamic—that will appear on various scales throughout the rest of the novel—on various scales and from various subject positions. The complex dynamics among positions and forces in this scene recall Guattari’s subjective formation in *Chaosmosis*:

The various semiotic registers that combine to engender subjectivity do not maintain obligatory hierarchical relations fixed for all time. Sometimes, for example, economic semiotisation becomes dependent on collective psychological factors—look at the sensitivity of the stock exchange to fluctuations of opinion. Subjectivity is in fact plural and polyphonic—to use Mikhail Bakhtin’s expression. It recognizes no dominant or determinant instance guiding all other forms according to univocal causality. (1)

The multiplicity of subjects and history requires that they be studied from multiple angles. DeLillo probes thus the deep structures of an event in the same way that Marvin Lundy scrutinizes the photographs from the momentous 1951 ball game:

He rephotographed the footage. He enlarged, repositioned, analyzed. He step-framed the action to slow it down, to combine several seconds of film into one image. It was a work of Talmudic refinement, zooming in and fading out, trying to bring a man’s face into definition, read a woman’s ankle bracelet engraved with a name. (177)

Marvin sees the composition of the crowd as a universe of dots, and “once you get inside a dot, you gain access to hidden information, you slide inside the smallest event” (177).

At first, Cotter Martin is that dot, a shadowy and elusive one, that darts among the thousands gathered to witness a crucial moment of triumph and defeat. While there is a

distinctiveness, a marginality to his position—young, black, broke—there is also a sense that he is as significant as any chemical element in a compound, an aggregate that is composed of “Dodgers scoring runs, a man dancing down an aisle, a goateed black in a Bing Crosby shirt” (33), and, extending from the game, a “woman cooking cabbage” and a “man who wishes he could be done with drink” (32).

This is just a kid with a local yearning but he is part of an assembling crowd, anonymous thousands off the buses and trains, people in narrow columns tramping over the swing-bridge above the river, and even if they are not a migration or revolution, some vast shaking of the soul, they bring with them the body heat of a great city and their own small reveries of desperation, the unseen something that haunts the day—men in fedoras and sailors on short leave, the stray tumble of their thoughts, going to a game. (11)

“[T]he self in DeLillo’s [fiction],” writes Civello, “is ineluctably and inextricably a part of the universal field or systems universe—whichever way we choose to describe it. He is part of an all-encompassing system of mutually interacting system” (123). The equalization of the single and the many, unified in diversity and desire dissolves the hypothetical binaries of the crowd and the individual, the public and the private—or, at least, exposes this binary as a hopelessly simplistic construction. Every event, DeLillo’s “Prologue” suggests, is both: *and/and* rather than *either/or*. In this we can see a departure from DeLillo’s earlier fiction, which tends toward an atomistic depiction of the individual. While the characters in *Endzone* (1972), *Players* (1977) and *Great Jones Street* (1973) are confined to particular zones of junior football, Wall Street trading, and the music industry, *Underworld* disallows the segregation of the socius. New York City is

thus both built solid and dispersed vapour, with a “body heat” and stray, tumbling thoughts.

That “small reveries of desperation” are commensurate with greater historical measures such as “migration and revolution” is carried forth into the configuration of the crowd itself, a jumble of commoners and celebrities. This arrangement is reminiscent of Doctorow’s *Ragtime* (1996) in its depiction of ex-centric members of society, traditionally excluded from history, existing alongside figures of notable historical import. On Hammerstein’s rooftop garden, Freud eats a cup of custard and later has “one of the fainting fits that had lately plagued him when Jung was around” (33): performing a breakout from Murderer’s Row, Houdini is flashed by a lewd inmate, but “was to tell no one of this strange confrontation” (26). In *Underworld*, historically prominent figures are plunged into the middling masses: A drunk and slobbering Jackie Gleason, “sending quidbits of meat and bread in many directions, pellets and smithereens, spitball flybys” (18), and a puke-spattered Frank Sinatra, in “an awe of muted disgust,” blend seamlessly into the confetti decadence of the crowd. Gleason is skipping rehearsal, but he’s “in character” at the game, hurling insults at awed spectators—whereas Sinatra is made uneasy by the attentive crowd and “the way they use him as a reference for everything that’s happening” (24). Sinatra’s image, his casting as salable goods, is at odds with this apparent indifference about his status: he “didn’t know he was in this month’s *Life* until the page fell out of the sky” (39). Once-removed from his role as a public figure, Sinatra thinks about those who work to sell his image, the “people who are supposed to tell him these things” (39). He glances at advertisements for Quaker State, RCA Victor and General Motors, “the venerated emblems of the burgeoning economy, easier to identify than the names of battle fields and dead presidents,” but he is otherwise ensconced in his

own humanness, “sunk in deep inertia, a rancid sweat developing, his mouth filled with the foretaste of massive inner shiftings” (39). The public icon, whose fame is instrumental to the proliferation of marketing regimes, is at bottom dissociated from his integral role in capitalist machinery.

In his essay “American Blood,” DeLillo explains that interweaving historical figures into the fictional fabric is a means of expanding our conception of ourselves, others—in short, “consciousness”:

The novelist does not want to tell you things you already know about the great, the powerless and the cruel. Fiction slips into the skin of historical figures. It gives them sweaty palms and bad colds and urine-stained underwear and lines to speak in private and the terror or restless nights. This is how consciousness is extended and human truth is seen new. (22)

Thus, DeLillo’s fiction “slips into the skin” of the Hegelian “real historical figures,” locating the “private,” sub-epidermal substances that make them human. This probing is perhaps most incisive in the representation of Hoover. Hoover is the most “powerful” of the celebrity trio at the game (his decisions directly impact public safety in the Cold War context) but, comically, and disconcertingly, his levels of “reverie” and “desperation” are by far the most intense. Indeed, Hoover’s power and his strength of character seem to be inversely proportional. “Hoover is a disinvention,” DeLillo maintains, “real, conjured, gambled on, guessed at. Hoover is taut and raging selfhood. Hoover in his impregnability is an incitement to the novelist’s perennial effort to detect the hidden nature of things” (“The Power of History” 62). Though integral to the political ramifications of the game (he alone is informed of Russia’s concomitant nuclear testing), Hoover’s presence and,

specifically, his fraught self-consciousness, invites us to consider the frail humanity within the historical enigma:

[Hoover] admires the rough assurance of these men. It seems to flush from their pores. They have a size to them, a natural stamina that mocks his own bible-school indoctrination even as it draws him to the noise. He's a self-perfected American who must respect the saga of the knockabout boy emerging from tenement culture, from the backstreets slant with danger. It makes for gutsy egos, it makes for appetites. (29)

Hoover's "self-perfected," elitist grooming is no competition for the crass, larger-than-life Sinatra and Gleason. Constructed and synthesized to be "American," Hoover will never be *really* American, like his "gutsy," "tenement culture" compatriots. His political largesse shrivels alongside their immense presence and stage-intensity, the "natural stamina" that Gleason and Sinatra so effortlessly exude. Hoover will be utterly swayable—"drawn to the noise" as far as the game and everything else go—and fickle in his support: "Whoever wins," he says, "That's my team" (29).

These less-than-laudatory depictions of political, television and music "celebrities" raise questions about national, collective values, as well as the location of power and influence in the culture. As individuals, Hoover, Gleason and Sinatra appear repulsive and pathetic—quite apart from the charismatic agents who define popular opinion and the country's destiny. They are the former, but they affect the latter. Away from the stature of the specific individual, then, DeLillo redirects our focus to the superstructures that contain/produce them and the microstructures that are the common denominators of all people. Gleason's power is reduced to spew: Hoover is moved to act, to flee the scene, when Gleason coughs up "an all-pervading medium of pathogens,

microbes, floating colonies of spirochetes that fuse and separate and elongate and spiral and engulf' (19). Although we might think, as does Le Corbusier, that "society [is] controlled by the enlightened businessman and the architect, both products of an impersonal, universal transhistorical force symbolized by the machine" (Hutcheon 28), DeLillo deflates this conception by showing these power-wielders coughing up "floating colonies of spirochetes" and running away from each other in disgust. It is not a picture of "enlightenment." DeLillo reveals that our "businessmen and architects" are phlegmy machines—just like ourselves. By infusing the minute, microbial "all-pervading" media with "power," furthermore, DeLillo sets the stage for a novel that posits great force in the ostensibly slight or invisible.

The fugal prologue is a microcosm of the polyphonic work that contains it, a fractal of the narrative at large. The baseball game balances and intermingles three primary loci of perception: the individual subject (say, Cotter Martin), the radio broadcast or broadcaster, and the author. No voice in the counterpoint dominates.¹ The arrangement works not only to set up multiple indeterminate points of view but also, with seeming paradox, to detract from the details of the event proper. Look, for instance, at the scene's sequencing, which gradually distorts the action of the ball game. After a break in the text and a tie in the score, there is Cotter's stripped-down viewpoint: "He watches Maglie bounce a curve in the dirt" (32). This is followed by the somewhat obtuse, digressive position of Russ Hodges: "He hears the announcer from St. Louis on the other side of the blanket, it is Harry Caray . . . and Russ thinks of the Japanese term for disembowelment and figures he and Harry ought to switch names right about now" (33). The authorial voice then intervenes with "[l]ight washing down from the sky," and an interpretive note

¹ One might think, too, of the voices as "complementarity"—in Bohr's sense—"that the wave and particle pictures" are "complementary descriptions of the same reality" (Heisenberg 43).

that “[e]verything is changing shape, becoming something else” (33). Perception becomes progressively abstract and subjective, ranging from the visual, to the aural, to the metaphorical. These mutating perspectives integrate the authorial voice within the network of other voices it governs.¹ As with *Libra*’s Nicholas Branch, ever investigating the Kennedy assassination, “the author becomes part of the event itself, his fiction an addition to the historical fact” (Civello 123). Russ Hodges says of a pivotal boxing match: “When you see a thing like that, a thing that becomes a newsreel, you begin to feel you are a carrier of a solemn scrap of history” (16). The implication of the observer/author as participant in the system/fiction echoes Auster’s narrative, where Quinn modifies the objects and mysteries he observes. The narrator, the observer of the 1951 baseball game similarly asserts a presence through his staccato sequence of remarks: “Pafko moves to the wall to play the carom,” “Pafko throws smartly to Cox” (16)—all intermingled with paper falling from the stands, the internal heavings of particular viewers, and the general heaving of the crowd. Through the blunt descriptions of single movements on the field, the authorial voice positions itself at the scene as the carrier and remodeller of scraps of history. What emerges is a novelistic representation of Hayles’s “field theory,” which she characterizes in *A Cosmic Web*: “A field view of reality pictures objects, events, and observer as belonging inextricably to the same field; the disposition of each, in this view, is influenced—sometimes dramatically, sometimes subtly, but in every instance—by the disposition of the others” (9-10).

¹ *Governs*—because the act of observing something happen makes it happen. See Heisenberg’s discussion of Aristotle’s *Potentia*: “What happens depends on our way of observing it or on the fact that we observe it . . . the term “happens” is restricted to the observation . . . The observation plays a decisive role in the event and . . . the reality varies, depending upon whether we observe it or not” (50-52). The authorial involvement makes plain that “[t]he observer or theorist, unlike the physicist who stands apart from his experiment, is part of the system that is under investigation” (LeClair 4).

ii. *Time, space and linear diffusion*

Perhaps history itself has to be regarded as a chaotic formation, in which acceleration puts an end to linearity and the turbulence created by acceleration deflects history definitively from its end, just as such turbulence distances effects from their causes.

- Jean Baudrillard,
The Illusion of the End, 37

Like many of DeLillo's novels, *Underworld* is concerned with the subjugation of the individual by the forces of technology, the marketplace, and history. But whereas in *Mao II* (1991), artistic agency is compromised and eroded through duplication and commodification, *Underworld* depicts art that actively reconfigures systems of production and reproduction. Decorated bombers compose a sublime landscape painting. Garbage dumps become the "national parks of the future" (289). Where characters in novels like *Libra* and *Great Jones Street* flounder in confines,¹ crippled by professional insecurity, rules of employment, socioeconomic marginality, or a ravenous marketplace, *Underworld* places these "men in small rooms" (*Libra* 183) within a greater scheme, offsetting their passive seclusion with men and women of action and desire. The closed system is broken apart—as the pennant game is fractured by the homerun ball, a projectile that ties peripheral subjectivities into the would-be "closed" system of the game. This aleatory rupture, I suggest, defamiliarizes cultural regimes that are so

¹ Nicholas Branch, Win Everett and Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra*, and Bucky Wunderlick in *Great Jones Street*.

pervasive, so embedded in the routine patterns of our lives that we take them to be normal.¹

Though conspicuously revisionist in both structure and content, the ultimate focal point is the present, an accumulation of detritus both physical and psychic, no more fathomable than a New Jersey garbage dump. DeLillo's project is analogous to Benjamin's interpretation of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*: a looking back at the wreckage of human experience while moving forward through space. The angel of history, as Walter Benjamin calls it, "would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" (257). Similarly, for DeLillo, reviewing the past is not so much an act of "collective self-flagellation" (Baudrillard 22), but an attempt to reveal processes that approach maximum velocity and to make legible the necessarily jumbled condition of the past. The angel of history may more aptly be called the angel of space: Benjamin explains that "where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" (257). The past is layered, not linear, and it is towards expressing this layeredness that DeLillo writes sentient, participating subjects into the historical drama so as to prove, as his protagonist Nick Shay puts it, that "we are not

¹ As I mentioned in a footnote on page 29, for Foucault, norms are concepts that are constantly used to evaluate and control us: they also exclude those who cannot conform to "normal" categories. The Normal thereby ensures that certain defects can flourish without being seen as illnesses. A comment by Spinoza here becomes apt: "factually, greediness, ambition and so forth are forms of insanity, although one does not think of them as an 'illness'" (*Ethics*, Proposition 44). Indeed, we do not consider mercenary and cutthroat behavior to be defective because such qualities are evident in the most "successful" among us and adhere to and propagate the strictures of the Normal. The Normal epitomizes the tricky nature of those invisible cultural regimes, masterplots, whose omnipotence is inextricable from their elusiveness; the more deeply buried the design, the more stable and total the power. Fromm discusses similar principles at work in capitalism, "a system which has no purpose and goal transcending it, and which makes man its appendix" (87). There may, indeed, be "purpose" to the specific coercion of capital, but, as with Hegelian teleology, this purpose is not one about which we may have any existential understanding. In the causal grid of social and economic relations, subjects act according to pre-inscribed patterns that have become "the norm," while those deviating atoms are swiftly expelled from the system like so much toxic waste. As Nick Shay says in *Underworld*, corporations use "smiles and nods, a collective inflection of the voice," in order to "twist and shape you . . . without persuasion" (282). The result of this set-up, is, of course, the necessary attrition of individual agency in appeasement of the behemoth, invisible hand.

excluded from our own lives” (82). Dense, fluctuating, and conflicting incidents ultimately give credence to subjective experience, not because they transcend the structure of a particular historical account, but because these incidents underpin those accounts, invisible elements that compose the swirling dynamo propelling mass and individual identity.

Rather than signaling the complete disintegration of order, DeLillo’s chaotic historiography is a means of refining and complicating national assumptions about the past. DeLillo’s historical performance works to replace the exclusive strictures of a so-called “official” American half-century with an “inclusive” narrative that acknowledges the experiences of disenfranchised racial and socioeconomic groups. Historical chaotics invites a revision of canonical history by revealing, as Hayles says, that “what have been understood as essential, unvarying components of human experience are not natural facts of life but social constructions” (*Chaos Bound* 265). In dismembering these “unvarying constructions,” DeLillo effectively expands and democratizes the history of the Cold War and its aftermath in America. The integration of the individual subject into the fabric of culture and the past is primarily brought about through the supplanting of historical time, a regulated and fixed document, by space, a dimension more conducive to the fluxion that defines subjective action. Such a shift in focus undermines those oppressive forces that thrive upon linear conceptions of cultural development. “History, like politics,” says Lyotard, “seems to have a need of a unique point of perspective, a place of synthesis, a head or eye, developing the diversity of movements in the unification of a single volume” (164). In Western thought, historical time has been the primary dimension because it is a totalizing, “synthesizing” force that lends itself easily to the formation of categories and patterns. It follows that whatever social theory is developed under this conception will

invariably conflate diversity into a single strand, privileging time and viewing space as contingent rather than fundamental to human action. Time, as Kristin Ross says, “excludes and subordinates, while space coordinates and tolerates” (8). We need only look to the workers at a local cubical office complex to see the stiff repercussions of a life regulated by straight lines, or what David Harvey calls a “structured coherence” (375). By employing chaotic structures in narrative form, DeLillo breaks down the serial constructs that regulate and control activity like the lines on a baseball diamond. This demolition is achieved by the narrative’s generally backwards pattern; the story begins in the present and jumps back in textual chunks through the decades. The diametrical flow of events is braided or criss-crossed by anachronistic trajectories and isolated vignettes, creating a rhizomatic network through which experience permeates.¹ The sequentially unfolding narrative, Soja suggests, has psychological effects, predisposing the reader to think historically; such temporal thinking, “one damned thing after another,” is the basic apparatus of hegemonic systems, invoking always the threat of suffering or the promise of reward to follow. Soja argues, and DeLillo’s work confirms, that “[w]e can no longer depend on a story-line marching straight forward in plot and denouement, for too much is happening against the grain of time, too much is continually traversing the story-line laterally” (23). We can no longer depend upon verisimilitude and factuality in historical fiction; in celebration of his own novel’s inaccuracies, DeLillo describes in detail a shot-by-shot account of an imaginary Eisenstein film, *Unterwelt*, a science-fiction horror which bears unnerving resemblance to the grotesqueries of nuclear warfare. Near the end of the book, DeLillo unites Sister Edgar with J. Edgar Hoover as hermaphroditic

¹ This narrative construct is similar to Edward Soja’s *Postmodern Geographies* (1989), which begins with a coalescent “Preface and Postscript”; this combination, Soja says, signals an “intention to tamper with familiar modalities of time, to shake up the formal flow of linear text to allow other, more ‘lateral’ connections to be made” (1).

counterparts in an implausible cyber-dream sequence. As if enacting the governing principle of narrative, subjectivity and history, DeLillo tosses together various media and perspectives, mixing film footage, photographs, news reportage, and omniscient narration to create a multidimensional—at times, impossibly paradoxical—aggregate of experience. DeLillo's chaotic representation of the past, its subjects and artifacts—ruptured, turbulent arrangements—may be more “realistic” an historical account than a single, “official” historiography. “Our experience of the world,” as Foucault averred in a lecture on heterotopias, “is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein” (“Of Other Spaces” 22).

In *The Physics of Language*, David Cowart writes that “[t]he novel’s shifts in viewpoint, like its dislocations of temporality, (seen in the scrambling of chronology as well as the mixing of present-tense and past-tense narration), hint at the self’s lability, especially via-à-vis memory, which ranges forward and backward in time, at once registering and qualifying the individual’s alienation” (200). The manslaughter/suicide scene between Nick and George Manza illustrates the depth that such chronological “scrambling” achieves. Time is distorted: “In the extended interval of the trigger pull, the long quarter second, with the action of the trigger sluggish and rough, Nick saw into the smile on the other man’s face” (780). Nick sees *into* the smile, effectively piercing the veil of countenance and accessing the subjective intention behind it. The dispensing of temporal strictures allows for further, more inherently spatial maneuvering. It is not clearly articulated what is “seen” behind the smile of one who has tricked a teenaged boy into blowing his head off. Nor is it detailed what particular reaction this blunder incites in Nick. Rather, the fallout of the shooting is imparted by textual expansion, where the terms and motions of the act repeat themselves, continually set up against one another in

slightly variable shades. Each bolt of text, arranged in single-sentence paragraphs, emulates the firing of the gun—as well as the synaptic misfirings of the stunned observer.

He felt the trigger pull and then the gun went off and he was left there thinking weakly he didn't do it.

But first he pointed the gun at the man's head and asked if it was loaded. (780)

While the first sentence expresses a passivity on the part of the shooter, the second sentence highlights the subject's deliberate involvement in the act. The question of culpability is tossed around from one textual bullet to the next. Several times, there is a flashing disclaimer, "And the way the man said no when he asked if it was loaded." Conversely, the sequence of the motion and the perception is inverted, as in the following:

Then the noise busted through the room and he stood there thinking weakly he didn't do it.

But first he force-squeezed the trigger and saw into the smile and it seemed to have the spirit of a dare. (780)

This reiteration obstructs the linear progression of the scene just as a skipping record halts musical momentum. The first words of most statements propose a cycle wherein the subject ("He") is stymied by both cognitive ("But") and temporal ("Then") obstacles. But, as with hip-hop's repetitious tripping of the needle atop vinyl, the clogging and stagnancy evident in this depiction create space for a new discourse that operates within the expansion of a single point in time.

DeLillo uses this jumbled, revolving narrative strategy to represent critical moments that cannot easily be reduced to a single description. For Nick, the reasons for

and meanings of the shooting are unquantifiable, and thus the manner in which the incident is expressed is appropriately disjointed and indefinite. DeLillo employs a similar strategy in *Libra*, where the shooting of John F. Kennedy—its plethoric attendant meanings on personal, national, political and philosophical levels—can hardly be synthesized in a straightforward description. The president is shot by Oswald, by ex-CIA conspirators, and by Zapruder. He's shot repetitively in Oswald's imagination, on television, and in DeLillo's own recursive textual bullets. The shots are rehearsed, performed and replayed psychologically, electronically, and literally. *Libra* portrays and, more poignantly, reconfigures the presidential assassination by diffusing the single incident to include its myriad precursors, facets, and implications. As with Nick's, the description of Oswald's shot is characterized by temporal dismemberment, spatial expansion, repetition, and fluctuating perspective. First there is the initial description of gunman and target:

Through the scope he saw the car metal shine.

He fired through an opening in the leaf cover.

When the car was in the clear again, the President began to react.

Lee turned up the handle, drew the bolt back.

The president reacted, arms coming up, elbows high and wide.

There were pigeons, suddenly, everywhere, cracking down from the eaves and beating west.

The report sounded over the plaza, flat and clear. (396)

This play-by-play account of the event, the precision of the “flat and clear” report, is reiterated and revised in the pages that follow. What seems to be a fixed sequence is

repeated, reconceived and obscured as the instant percolates through various points of view:

On the grass a woman saw the limousine emerge from behind a freeway sign with the President clutching at his throat. She heard a sharp noise, like a backfiring gun, and realized it was the second noise she's heard. She thought she saw a man throw a boy to the ground and fall on top of him. She didn't really hear the first noise until she heard the second. (397)

In this passage, time folds back upon itself. The woman hears the second shot before the first. And then further variations on the theme follow:

A man threw his kid to the ground and fell on him. That's a vet.
Hargis had time to think.

He [Oswald] 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.

"By crafting sentences that unsettle our subject position, offering unexpected juxtapositions that make us pause to try to reassemble disparate images," comments Nel, "DeLillo's language interrupts the readers and asks us to reconsider what we had thought was true" (746). Components of the assassination revolve perpetually, subverting the historical mandate for a fixed sequence of events. The kid is thrown to the ground again and again. Oswald converses with an interlocutor in the future. Along with temporal constrictions, spatial codes and points of view are folded and compromised, making evident the many layers that compose the incident. The narrator says, "There was a woman taking a picture and another woman about twenty feet behind her taking the same picture, only with the first woman in it." Even the narrator's position is in flux, at one

point invading the minds of the spectators, and at another point occupying space among the spectators: the speaker says, “[s]omeone with a movie camera stood on the abutment over there, aiming this way.” In his essay, “American Blood,” DeLillo describes his rendering of the assassination as unraveling a “sense of coherent reality we all share”:

There are jump cuts, blank spaces, an instant in which information leaps from one energy level to another. Dallas is a panorama of such things, a natural disaster at the heartland of the real, the comprehensible, the plausible. The lines that extend from the compressed event have shown such elaborate twists and convolutions that we are almost forced to question the basic suppositions we make about the world of light and shadow, solid objects and ordinary sounds, and to wonder further about our ability to measure such things, to determine weight, mass and direction, to see things as they are, recall them clearly, explain to waiting faces what happened. (22)

Johnston explains that this “puts into practice a different understanding of the event, one that will finally allow us to begin to read the Kennedy assassination less, however, as an aesthetic or epistemological break than as a multidimensional, unrepresentable information multiplicity whose every manifestation is entangled with conflicting versions and contaminated physical evidence” (*Information Multiplicity* 187).

This perverse narrative sequencing—or, more precisely, de-sequencing—is a formal attempt to provide alternative perspectives and interpretations of both the single, fixed act and what is considered to be the orderly, causal flow of events. The text comes to formally resemble a piece of garbator-twisted string depicted in *White Noise*:

There was a long piece of twine that contained a series of knots and loops. It seemed at first a random construction. Looking more closely I thought I

detected a complex relationship between the size of the loops, the degree of the knots (single or double) and the intervals between knots with loops and freestanding knots. (259)

In scrutinizing the looping intervals, DeLillo asks, in the words of Bronzini, “[h]ow deep is time?” (111) and what would we “learn by going deeper into structures beneath the standard model, down under the quantum, a million times smaller than the old Greek atom” (222)? DeLillo thus introduces tensions, dislocations and associations that exist despite the long periods that separate them, as if the straight line of time had been looped and knotted prior to its inspection.

iii. *Psychochaotics I*

I long for the days of disorder. I want them back, the days when I was alive on the earth. Rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real. I was dumb-muscled and angry and real. This is what I long for, the breach of peace, the days of disarray when I walked real streets and did things slap-bang and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself.

- Nick Shay in *Underworld*, 810

The historically destabilizing intersections of the solo and the choral reproduce as *Underworld* unfolds. Psychological connections among characters expand likewise, further compromising linear ideas of history and experience. After the prologue, Cotter is usurped, or “doubled,” by Nick Shay as the focal point in the narrative. Nick and Cotter respectively begin and end the chapter called “Long Tall Sally,” which is itself a bundle of episodic splinters, tied together by the prevailing notion of a search. The section begins

with Nick in the sterility of a rented Lexus, zooming through the desert (with a vague purpose of retracing some lost romantic attachment), and ends with Manx Martin desperately and greedily swiping his son's trophy ball. The two scenarios, though geographically and temporally disparate, are positioned in the narrative as the alpha and omega of an obscure loop, outside time. Their association suggests that, as Nick says, "All mysteries of the family reach their culmination in the final passion of abandonment" (86). And while Marvin traces the genealogy of the home-run ball, the concrete link between Nick and Cotter, Nick, a pacified waste manager, living "like someone in a witness protection program" (66), is ever retracing the pivotal and banal moments that have led up to his Phoenix existence. It is, perhaps, a search inspired by Dr. Lindbald, Nick's juvenile psychotherapist, who tells him that he has a responsibility to decode his own history—that he is "required to try to make sense of it" (152). But it is the inherently indeterminate nature, the blurry and unsystematic condition of his past that makes it seem irreducible to explanation. Nick reflects:

[I]t was hard for me to imagine that all the scuffle and boredom of those years, the criss-cross boredom and good times and the flare-ups and sameshit nights—I didn't understand how the streaky blur in my nighttime mind could have some kind of form or coherence. Maybe there was a history in her files but the thing I felt about myself was that I'd leaned against a wall in a narrow street serving out some years of mostly aimless waiting. (511)

Indeed, there is a difference between a life lived and the one recorded, dissected and analyzed. The patterns and connections, if they do exist, require a mediating perspective in order to make any kind of *sense*; they cannot simply sit in someone's "files" (another official text generated external to the subject). It takes Nick's wife Marian, for instance,

to point out that Nick, clutching the baseball in deep reverie and remorse, looks “like Hamlet gazing at Yorick’s skull” (132).

That Nick on some level associates the ball with the most traumatic event of his life—his shooting of George Manza—is suggested by the subtle shifts, the non sequitur, fragmentary thought. Nick squeezes the ball in his hand and the thought flickers: “I hefted the weapon and pointed it” (132). The juxtaposition of the squeeze and the thought connects Nick’s expensive acquisition—a symbol of victory to counteract, perhaps, his great failure—with his role as a killer (though the shooting has not yet been revealed in the narrative). The convergence reveals not only the unpredictable nature of psychological functioning, but also the way in which experience is reiterated. Similarly, a description of the young Nick, “the older son with his distance and dimmed moods and undimmed rage, up on the roof in the evening sleet to smoke a cigarette,” is poignantly postured against a strand of his “current” thought: “I look at the Lucky Strikes logotype and I think target” (122). The “undimmed rage” is connected to his father’s favourite brand of smokes, a brand decorated with a “target,” an abstract focal point of the rage that would later focus more concretely on George’s head. It is a narrative tactic that embodies the same type of riddling that Dr. Lindbald uses in her reconstruction of Nick’s personal history; she assembles the impossible scenery, stating that Nick’s “father was the third person in the room the day [he] shot George Manza” (512)—an impossibility that may nevertheless be true.¹

¹ “One can never, it seems,” says Cowart, “leave behind the loss of a father, the act of ‘criminal negligence’ that suffers the fate of the child touched, in his brother Matt’s fantasy . . . to become ‘it forever’ (717). Nick’s murder of George is the slaying of a double, the self that by rights Nick (a drop-out at sixteen) was destined to be” (190).

Customary orders of representation will not suffice in rendering the movements of the mind because, as Deleuze and Guattari explain in *Anti-Oedipus*, these are the representative forms that sustain the “iron collar of Oedipus,” and other masternarratives.

Wouldn't it be better to schizophrenize—to schizophrenize the domain of the unconscious as well as the sociohistorical domain, so as to shatter the iron collar of Oedipus and rediscover everywhere the force of desiring production; to renew, on the level of the Real, the tie between the analytic machine, desire, and production? For the unconscious itself is no more structural than personal, it does not symbolize anymore than it imagines or represents; it engineers, it is machinic. Neither imaginary nor symbolic, it is the Real itself, the “impossible real” and its production. (53)

So we see in *Underworld* characters physically “working through” psychological issues—engineering rather than representing the unconscious. The links between tactile, physical structures and psychological movements are conveyed, for example, when Nick describes the process of breaking down household garbage for the recycling bin:

At home we wanted clean safe healthy garbage. We rinsed out old bottles and put them in proper bins. We faithfully removed the crinkly paper from our cereal boxes. It was like preparing a Pharaoh for his death and burial. We wanted to do the small things right. (119)

Accounting for “the small things”—the painstaking separation and compartmentalization of one's self and one's past—is here translated into the diligent sorting of everyday refuse. But the garbage is anthropomorphized (“clean safe healthy”) and ritualized (“preparing a Pharaoh for death and burial”). Garbage, here, may be what Eliot called an “objective correlative” of Nick's psychological experience; who is the Pharaoh if not the

“ruler,” the king, the father? This notion is supported by what follows the above passage, a thought seemingly out of sync with the one that precedes it: “He never committed a figure to paper. He had a head for numbers, a memory for numbers” (119). Breaking apart and reorganizing the garbage becomes a taking of psychic inventory, the excavated father becoming the “crinkly paper” in Nick’s psychic “cereal box.” The poignancy of the paternal abandonment is accented not only by the anomalous context of the thought but also the by punitive shades of the language: the father had a “head for numbers” (for gambling) and he “never committed” (to the family). Nick’s issues with his father, momentarily disinterred while dismembering refuse, engender a new but related self-reflective strain of thought: Nick recalls how “[i]n the bronze tower I looked out at the umber hills and felt assured and well defended, safe in my office box and my crisp white shirt and connected to things that made me stronger” (119). Nick’s position in the “bronze tower” and “crisp white shirt” is one of security and solidity (“assured and well defended, safe”), in diametrical opposition to his father’s recklessness. The cognitive process depicted here—the movement from waste to father to self—affirms Deleuze’s contention that “[t]he individual identity finds its psychic image neither in the organization of the self nor in the determination of the species of the I, but rather in the fractured I and the dissolved self” (*Difference and Repetition* 259). The peripatetic thought, though divergent from a logical consideration of the subject’s trauma, identifies essential, buried operations and relations that linear, causal connections would not present.

The psychic dimension in DeLillo’s characters is suggested rather than described; it is enacted physically, emerging from an assortment of fragments and elliptical cycles of thought. The “mommy-daddy-me” of Freud is present, but it is not omnipresent. To be so would signify a psychic formula completely at odds with DeLillo’s resolutely complex

and multifarious social and psychological ethos. Nick's internal life is variously informed by many "agents of collectivity," to evoke Deleuze and Guattari:

[T]he father and the mother exist only as fragments, and are never organized into a figure or a structure able both to represent the unconscious and to represent in it the various agents of collectivity; rather, they always shatter into fragments that come into contact with these agents, meet them face to face, square off with them, or settle the differences with them in hand-to-hand combat. (97)

The unconscious is an overdetermined battleground where myriad fragments—including but not limited to the father and the mother—collide and collapse together. DeLillo effects this complex dynamicism by planting dissonant thoughts side-by-side on the page, simulating the diversity of factors at work upon the subject—including the *subject himself*. Nick, a version of LeClair's "systems man," "is more a locus of communication of energy in a reciprocal relationship with his environment than an entity exerting force and dictating linear cause-effect sequences" (10). When Nick is in his hotel, "waiting for room service to show up with his brandy" (208), the television is re-broadcasting the Texas Highway Killer shootings. Nothing is "happening" and yet a dense jumble of impressions and anxieties erupt from fleeting convergences of memory, anticipation and peripheral stimuli in the room. Nick thinks of the taxi driver who "told [him] about the murders of gypsy drivers, a regular event lately, a game of chance you play every night" (209), and the narrator simply intones, "Nick did not like cats"—*cats* being one of Nick's mother's arguments against relocating from New York to Phoenix. One statement springs organically from another, implying an underlying logic that is too complex to decipher but, nevertheless, *functions*. The driver's voice, again recollected—"either they rob you

and kill you or they rob you and let you live”—is counterbalanced by Nick’s assertion of personal stability, “I live a quiet life in an unassuming house in a suburb of Phoenix.” The violence on the television and in the driver’s complaints prompts in Nick further thoughts about his mother, whom he’s anxious to deposit in his protective domestic ziplock: “Once he got her to say yes, they’d be able to spend untrammelled time remembering together.” There is then recursion to the cabby whom Nick assures himself, “[h]e’d tipped . . . nicely.” Finally, Nick “look[s] at the TV screen, where the tape was nearing the point when the driver waves, the crisp wave from the top of the steering wheel, and he wait[s] for room service to knock on his door.” From Nick’s ruptured thoughts, the mother surfaces but always in relation to a context (that is also of the past, made present through recollection) that informs her surfacing, as much as she reciprocally informs the context. By representing a psychic process that posits multiple variables in symbiotic interaction, DeLillo performs Deleuze and Guattari’s schizoanalytic deposition of a reigning “mommy-daddy-me,” where “the family is never a microcosm in the sense of an autonomous figure, even when inscribed in a larger circle that it is said to mediate and express” (*Anti-Oedipus* 97). The “larger circle” and its constituent elements function rhizomatically, rendering Oedipus a contingent rather than autonomous factor in subjective interiority.

iv. *Visual media, rhizomatic nodes*

In my work, film and television are often linked to disaster. Because this is one of the energies that charges the culture. . . . And they play the tape again and again and again and again. This is the world narrative, so they play it until everyone in the world has seen it.

- DeLillo, *The Paris Review*, 302

A collage of film, photographs, news reportage, third- and first-person observation, *Underworld* forms a quasi-hypertextual space through which ideas and events circulate independent of the linear constraints of time, history and Oedipus. Thomas Carmichael says in his discussion of intertextuality in *Mao II* (a novel that begins with a picture of a mass Moonie wedding), the photograph “invites us to consider . . . the nexus that fully characterizes the field of postmodern intertextuality” (215). More than this, however, for DeLillo the visual image is a node where “random energies . . . approach a common point” (*Underworld* 157), where a range of perceptions and experiences converge to form a subjective aggregate. Not just “texts” are cathected here but thoughts and selves. The photograph both works upon and is worked upon by the various people who behold it. Looking at a picture of her younger self at Truman Capote’s *Black & White Ball*, for example, prompts Klara to consider her current work in the desert in relation to her past exploits among war-makers:

What is it about this picture that makes it so hard for me to remember myself?

. . . Surrounded by famous people and powerful people, men in the

administration who were running the war, and I want to paint it over . . .

[M]aybe this is what I’m doing. I don’t know, it’s a work in progress. (79)

While in *Mao II*, the photograph dulls its subject, rendering him or her or it “flat as birdshit on a Buick” (54)—the Benjaminian “aura” depleted by so much reproduction—and the artist-photographer becomes a kind of terrorist who “shoots and shoots and shoots” (54), in *Underworld*, the photograph serves as catalyst for subjective reflection, discharging all things attached to the image from a fixed time and place. Klara’s thoughts, furthermore, are not the end of the interconnections; rather, they become strands in the greater web of associations. The event depicted by the photograph is kneaded back into the fabric of the text and the consciousness of other subjects: Capote’s ball is later recounted by star-struck Hoover, who remembers Klara as “a middling painter called whatever she’s called. Sax or Wax or something” (574). The meanings inscribed within the photograph are drawn out by each person who beholds the image;¹ their participation, in turn—their thoughts and memories—add dimension to the event represented in the photograph, thereby creating a matrix, or an intersection of lines which form a node.

Among the debris fluttering over the crowd at the 1951 ball game are the pages of *Life* magazine. In contrast with its name, the magazine connects the morbidity of two realms, despite their temporal dislocation. Bruegel’s *The Triumph of Death*, “a landscape of visionary havoc and ruin” (41), falls upon Hoover’s shoulder; he is fascinated by its “cankers, lesions and rotting bodies so long as his connection to the source is strictly pictorial” (50). But, of course, it is not. Something of the ball game is recapitulated in the image, the carnivalesque atmosphere of the fans, “sinners,” “all around [Edgar] cheering,” but it also abounds in the “black and white” of Capote’s ball, which, we later learn, is attended by a medieval gamut of monks and executioners, “skeleton men and

¹ The “jostled footage” of the Zapruder film, to cite another example, is perceived by an audience that has to “contend with the impact” (488). And Mick Jagger in *Cocksucker Blues* makes Klara think how “everything that everyone has eaten in the last ten years has gone into that mouth” (382).

raven women” (576) who form “a death rank on the dance floor” (576). But Bruegel’s painting offers as well an eerie parallel between the ball game and the effects of a simultaneous Russian nuclear test—a correlation that would later form the dual newspaper headline.¹ To Hoover, entranced by the painting as it flutters past his eyes, the connection is all too clear:

The meatblood colors and massed bodies, this is a census-taking of awful ways to die. He looks at the flaring sky in the deep distance out beyond the headlands on the left-hand page—Death elsewhere, Conflagration in many places, Terror universal, the crows, the ravens in silent glide, the raven perched on the white nag’s rump, black and white forever, and he thinks of a lonely tower standing in the Kazakh Test Site, the tower armed with the bomb. (50)

Hoover’s personal terror, progresses through the painting, becomes “Terror universal.” Later in *Underworld*, the reality of that terror is refracted back, where scenes of nuclear holocaust are described in the language of Bruegel’s *Death and Conflagration*. Nick and Brian are escorted through the Kazakh Test Site by Viktor Maltsev of the Tchaika company. They tour the Museum of Mishaps that catalogues and archives the residual effects of the 1951 nuclear test, a contemporary incarnation of Bruegel’s “meatblood colors and massed bodies.”

It is the boy with the skin where his eyes ought to be, a bolus of spongy flesh, oddly like a mushroom cap, springing from each brow. It is the bald-headed children standing along a wall in their underwear, waiting to be examined. It

¹ “The homerun that won the game,” says DeLillo, that was “soon to be known as the ‘shot heard around the world’ had found its awful counterpoint. A Russian mushroom cloud” (“The Power of History” 63).

is the man with the growth beneath his chin, a thing with a life of its own, embryonic and pulsing. (800)

The very mushroomy and “embryonic” autonomy of their deformed tissue embodies the shape of the explosion that ravaged them, reaffirming that processes, fractal-like, repeat infinitely down the chain of scale. And across historical and geographical spans: as it does at the pennant game of the “Prologue,” the debris of the western marketplace permeates the ravaged humanity of the Test Site in the novel’s final chapter, “Das Kapital.” Nick sees “the dwarf girl who wears a t-shirt advertising a Gay and Lesbian festival in Hamburg, Germany, bottom edge dragging on the floor” (800), and fetuses “preserved in Heinz pickle jars” (799). The brands and slogans are morbid proof that the bomb with its “Many buzzing neutrons [and] very little blast [is] the perfect capitalist tool” (790). Its perfection is, as Viktor says, that the bomb will “[k]ill people, [but] spare property.”

The video footage of the so-called Texas Highway Killer is another such node, whose meanings emanate from the brutal crime: “It shows a man driving a car. It is the simplest sort of family video. You see a man at the wheel of a medium Dodge” (155). But even within this simple description, the psychodynamic fallout is signaled by the subtle transferal of perspective: the video, the “It” which “shows,” mutates into the “You” who “sees.” The image of the exploding head “is the jostled part of your mind, the film that runs through your hotel brain under all the thoughts you know you’re thinking” (156) and works “to make a channeled path through time, to give things a shape and a destiny” (157). In *Chaosmosis*, Guattari speaks of how watching television produces in the subject this “polyphonic multiplicity”:

[W]hen I watch television, I exist at the intersection: 1. of a perceptual fascination provoked by the screen's luminous animation which borders on the hypnotic, 2. of a captive relation with the narrative content of the program, associated with a lateral awareness of surrounding events (water boiling on the stove, a child's cry, the telephone . . .). 3. of a world of fantasms occupying my daydreams. My feeling of personal identity is thus pulled in different directions, How can I maintain a relative sense of unicity, despite the diversity of components of subjectification that pass through me?

(16)

Guattari's description of the televisual experience—his evocation of the many forces acting upon the subject (narrative content, peripheral stimuli, unconscious phantasms)—corresponds to the one DeLillo imputes in treatment of the Texas Highway Killer footage: “There's something here that speaks to you directly, saying terrible things about forces beyond your control, lines of intersection that cut through history and logic and every reasonable layer of human expectation” (157). The killing, because it is random (and in that sense “democratic”) is “a crime designed for taping and immediate playing” (159).¹ Indeed, the shooting is “replayed” in various instances throughout DeLillo's text, indicating as much about those who watch it, or ignore it, as it does about the crime itself. Matty, for one, watches the news report incessantly and is “not able to look at the tape without wanting to call out to Janet” (217) each time they air the exploding head. Nick, however, does not pay attention to it; he knows first hand what it's like to shoot a man

¹ As DeLillo remarks in his article, “In the Ruins of the Future”: “The events of September 11 were covered unstintingly. . . . The event dominated the medium. It was bright and totalizing and some of us said it was unreal” (n.p.). But the thrill of calamity passes soon enough, replaced by fresh calamities: referring to the Gulf War, DeLillo reminds us that “after the first euphoric days, coverage became limited. The rush of watching all that eerie green night-vision footage, shot from fighter jets in combat, had been so intense that it became hard to honor the fact that the war was still going on, untelevised. A layer of consciousness had been stripped away.”

and doesn't need a video to tell him. Nick's son, whose personal computer "had a multimedia function that allowed him to look at a copy of the famous videotape showing a driver being shot" (118), displays the endgame that results from this combination of innocence and technology. The multiplicity of narratives that the computer provides, later picked up in the novel's culminating description of the world wide web, epitomizes the liberties afforded by technological mediation. With the computer, the acts of the Texas Highway Killer are drawn out of obscurity, and Jeff, a completely dislocated subject, can effectively plunge into and manipulate the details of the shooting: "Jeff became absorbed in these images, devising routines and programs, using filtering techniques to remove background texture. He was looking for lost information" (118). Rather than simply receiving the information on the screen, Jeff, enabled by his computer system, scrutinizes and manipulates the images so as to find something hidden in the blur of pixels. DeLillo tells the *Paris Review*:

We've reached the point where things exist so they can be filmed and played and replayed. . . . Think about the images that are most often repeated. The Rodney King video tape or the Challenger disaster or Ruby shooting Oswald. These are the images that connect us the way Betty Grable used to connect us in her swimsuit, looking back at us over her shoulder in that famous pinup.
(302)

Embedded in these comments, the analogue between the Challenger disaster and a Betty Grable pinup, is television's peculiar capacity to draw together the erotic and the terrible. This capacity is played out in DeLillo's depiction of the Highway Killer himself, who becomes yet another subjective strand emanating from the videotaped killing. He turns out to be a grocery clerk named Richard. His life is markedly banal, spent diligently

administering Nitrospan to his father and occasionally eating “a muffin standing up, a hand cupped under his chin to catch the crumbs” (272). He has a crush on his friend’s wife and leaves milk out for a stray cat. Though there is nothing to explain Richard’s murderous tendencies, glimpses into the workings of his mind reveal acute dislocation caused by a lack of social interaction. Again it is the visual representation of the killings—the video footage and the green eyes of the anchorwoman—that provides the evidence of this dislocation: “He watched her over there and talked to her over here. . . . He talked to her on the phone and made eye contact with the TV. This was the waking of the knowledge that he was real. . . . He needed her to keep him whole” (270). This mediated self-realization recalls Oswald who, in *Libra*, could “see himself shot as the camera caught it” and glimpses, as if through Ruby and the millions in their living rooms, “the twisted picture of his face on TV” (440). Richard too becomes animated, becomes *real* when he is on television—his voice, at least, talking with the anchorwoman: “he was actually chatting now, confident, getting the feel of the medium, the format” (270).

In Eisenstein’s “lost” film, *Unterwelt*, DeLillo creates yet another rhizomatic node, this time conspicuously linked to *Underworld* itself. Could not this, a description of film, be a description of the novel that contains it?: “The plot was hard to follow. There was no plot. Just loneliness, barrenness, men hunted and ray-gunned” (431). Still, the deep focus in each segment of film, its emphasis on space and physical detail, illuminates those variables that permeate the novel as a whole.

Overcomposed close-ups, momentous gesturing, actors trailing their immense blended shadows, and there was something to study in every frame, in every camera placement, the shapes and planes and then the juxtaposition

shots, the sense of rhythmic contradiction, it was all spaces and volumes, it was tempo, mass and stress . . . (429)

DeLillo's descriptive dilations—the Demmings' Jell-O (513), Condomology (109), the garbage dump (185)—are similarly “overcomposed.” The “rhythmic contradiction” of George's shooting is a matter of “tempo, mass and stress.” The action depicted in *Unterwelt* is a grotesque version of events of the novel, a compossible shooting that, unlike George's, did not (in this particular universe) happen:

The mad scientist aims his gun.

A figure stands against a wall, his body going white.

The scientist shows a tight smile.

The victim is transfigured, pain-racked, his lower lip dribbling off his face, a growth appearing at the side of his neck, a radiant time-lapse melanoma. (431)

The sly smile of George is transferred into the tight smile of the scientist. A sci-fi version of Nick's rifle brings about a “transfiguration” more obscene than death, rendering the victim a cancerous blob of radioactivity.

The psychodynamic functions of technological media culminates in the two final episodes of the book, both of which are built upon peculiar “intersections” that verge upon the sublime. There is, first, the awe and fear engendered by the appearance of the murdered child Esmerelda's face upon a Manhattan billboard. Hundreds gather and “stare stupidly at the juice” (821). Esmerelda's image, like the literary works in Borges' library, emerges randomly, a fleeting collision of disparate energies. It appears “when the train lights hit the dimmest part of the billboard . . . under the rainbow of bounteous juice and above the little suburban lake and there is a sense of someone living in the image, an

animating spirit” (882). Like the taped murders on the Texas highway, the image of the child cathects an array of disparate impulses, “the sound of the crowd . . . a gasp that shoots into sobs and moans and the cry of some unnamable pain of elation” (821). The visionary moment, facilitated by the collision of multiple media is, in the last pages of the novel, again performed in another machinic context; the World Wide Web, with its “billion distant net nodes” (825), is a rhizome *par excellence*: “a new kind of shared space or habitat, an ecology that is neither completely artificial nor natural, the Internet may be both the harbinger and testing ground of a new kind of environment in which technology continues evolution by other means” (Johnston “Are Rhizomes Scale-Free?” 69). “Everything is connected,” in the internet, where “[a]ll human knowledge [is] gathered and linked, hyperlinked, this site leading to that, this fact referenced to that, a keystroke, a mouse-click, a password—world without end, amen” (*Underworld* 825). DeLillo presents a final imagining of chaos, fusing in cyberspace Sister Edgar with J. Edgar Hoover—twins symmetrical in name, yet asymmetrical in practically every other respect. Their pairing as “Sister and Brother” (826) is “a way of seeing the other side,” and epitomizes the elliptical connections that DeLillo is requesting we recognize. Ultimately, the text incorporates the reader into the relational network, gelling together second- and third-person narrative in the sentence: “When you decide to visit the H-bomb home page she begins to understand” (825). This convergence of subjectivities, signifies an interconnectivity that extends beyond the pages of the novel—from fiction to reality and back again.

v. *Narrative geometry*

Philosophy is written in that vast book which stands forever open before our eyes. I mean the universe; but it cannot be read until we have learned the language and become familiar with the characters in which it was written. It is written in mathematical language, and the letters are triangles, circles and other geometric figures, without which means it is humanly impossible to comprehend a single word.

- Galileo, *The Assayer*, 1623

In *Cosmopolis*, billionaire Eric Packer crosses Manhattan in his limousine to get himself a haircut. This “simple” exercise is made enormously complex as Packer is diverted by violent anti-globalization protests, traffic gridlock resulting from a presidential visit and a celebrity funeral, erratic stock market shifts, marital disintegration, and the death threats of a disgruntled former employee. The novel thus presents the inevitable intersections of multiple, co-existing lines—of selves, systems, and the concrete formations of urban life. These intersections, or collisions, distort Packer’s would-be linear, orderly cross-town drive and, by metaphorical extension, perform the attrition of hegemonies that Viktor Maltsev describes in *Underworld*: “[tyrannies] fade and wane, states disintegrate, assembly lines shorten their runs and interact with lines in other countries” (786). In this sense, *Cosmopolis* scrutinizes closely one thread of the many that comprise the baroque weave of *Underworld*. Capital, continues Viktor, “burns off the nuance in a culture” (785)—and *Cosmopolis* goes some way to reinstate this nuance.

It is somewhat ironic, then that *Cosmopolis* has been criticized for its sterility and lack of nuance: *New York Times* book reviewer Michiko Kakutani deems the novel “a major dud, as lugubrious and heavy-handed as a bad Wim Wenders film” (E10) and

Laura Miller of *Salon Magazine* calls it “a deeply silly book” (n.p.). It may be true that in *Cosmopolis*, as John Updike says, “implausibility reigns unchecked” (103) and that, to quote William Corbett, “DeLillo doesn’t waste a moment caring whether his readers find comfort or solace in his tale” (n.p.). But these criticisms, I think, miss the point. We are not meant to draw solace from these pages. As its title implies—*cosmo*, a term originating from Pythagoras, means “order”—the novel steps aside, for a time, the social, ethical and ontological complexities of psychological realism, and instead plots out the forms, structures, and orders of the lives and spaces we inhabit, so as to consider contemporary ideological conflicts from a point of disconnected clarity. DeLillo requests that we reconsider our categories—our national, moral and ontological definitions—and not that we simply buy into the ones he presents through Packer, “a repulsive character whose existence it is surely the author’s desire to excoriate” (Conte “Blood Sport” n.p.). Such a reconsideration is made all the more imperative following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, an event that pre-dated the publication of *Cosmopolis* by only a few months. While the Cold War is substantively invoked in *Underworld*, the “war on terrorism” is more a haunting than an historical intertext of *Cosmopolis*.¹

Among the criticisms of *Cosmopolis* is the conspicuously “theoretical” quality of its characters. John Powers in *LA Weekly* laments that “so skimmed of recognizable human feeling, his characters feel freeze-dried” (n.p.); Miller similarly bemoans DeLillo’s “superficial and cartoonish grasp of how people who work with technology think and work” (n.p.). Yes, there is the bodyguard, Torval, “whose head seemed

¹ In his commentary on the events of 9/11, “In the Ruins of the Future,” DeLillo evokes this “haunting” potential of the attacks: “We may find that the ruin of the towers is implicit in other things. The new PalmPilot at fingertip’s reach, the stretch limousine parked outside the hotel, the midtown skyscraper under construction, carrying the name of an investment bank—all haunted in a way by what has happened, less assured in their authority, in the prerogatives they offer” (39).

removable for maintenance” (*Cosmopolis* 11); the bionic Kendra Hays, “a woman of straps and belts”; and Vija Kinski, Packer’s head of theory, whose abstract pontifications seem eerily academic at a moment when protesters are urinating upon the limousine in which she sits. Most unsatisfying, critics have argued, is the caricaturish depiction of its central figure, Eric Packer, to whom reviewers have variously referred as a cartoon nihilist, a comic-strip capitalist-pig, an idea, a satirist’s smudge and “no more human, artistically, than his limousine.” Conte recommends in a review of *Cosmopolis*, “[the] reader must set aside the simple need for a ‘pleasurable read’ and recognize why the novelist has brought him or her to this harrowing, if short, trip” (n.p.). These so-called analyses, furthermore, are simply parroting what is already made more than evident in the novel itself, where “every act [Packer] performed was self-haunted and synthetic” (6). Indeed, Packer is described in decidedly synthetic and mechanistic terms—akin to Quinn in Auster’s *City of Glass*. Packer, for example, doesn’t sleep but works out at night, “pulling weighted metal sleds, doing curls and bench presses in stoic repetition” (6); through “the live video feed from his website” (151), one sees that Packer’s “bathroom mirror had a readout telling him his temperature and blood pressure at that moment, his height, weight, heart rate, pulse, pending medication” (153); he favors the geometric paintings of Rothko and reads science and poetry concurrently, always approaching aesthetics from a deductive, quantitative angle; and even Packer’s thoughts proceed with the linear elegance of a progressive geometric series: “He did not know what he wanted. And then he did. He wanted to get a haircut” (7).

The haircut is itself emblematic of the compulsion toward order and control that drives Eric Packer. Hair—relentlessly advancing (or receding as the case may be), organic, unwieldy—is an exemplary amorphous site to which Packer would subject

various procedures of alignment, proportion and containment. “This was his method,” we are told, “to attain mastery over ideas and people”—an objective he works toward through his uncanny talent for recognizing the deep structures regulating economic and social phenomena. “There’s an order,” he tells Kinski, “at some deep level. A pattern that wants to be seen.” “Then see it” (68), she replies. So Packer tries to: in Times Square, he scrutinizes “numbers gliding horizontally and bar charts pumping up and down. He knew there was something no one had detected, a pattern latent in nature itself, a leap of pictorial language that went beyond the standard models of technical analysis” (63). He watches the frenzied perturbations in the streets, hoping to decipher the hidden principles at work behind the chaos. Packer even schematizes his own existence in this way, as evinced by the mural on his limousine’s ceiling which depicts the planetary arrangement on the day, hour, and second of his birth.

But for all the order and symmetry emergent from or projected onto the physical world and its inhabitants, the random and the unaccountable—the *uncountable*—repeatedly assert themselves, undermining the systems and equations that sustain Packer and the capitalistic structures he metonymically represents. If the limousine is headed toward a single objective, a specific geographical point—the particular barber on East 10th where Packer wants to receive his haircut (and has routinely done since boyhood)—this one course of motion is perpetually stymied by an array of unforeseeable (often ridiculous) obstacles and distractions: an assault by the notorious pastry assailant, a street lined with naked bodies for a film shoot, men entering restaurants hurling rats, etc, etc. While Packer “wanted to trust the power of predetermined events” (147), Kinski censures his confidence in a “sensible text . . . that wants you to believe there are foreseeable trends and forces. When in fact,” she says, “it’s all random phenomena. You apply

mathematics and other disciplines, yes. But in the end you're dealing with a system that's out of control. Hysteria at high speeds, day to day, minute to minute" (85). The cross-town journey thus becomes progressively "asymmetrical," a skewed, unbalanced form that recurs on many levels: the limo driver's one disfigured eye, Packer's half-haircut and lopsided prostate. What is initially conceived as balanced, definite and orderly is ultimately revealed to be complex, unpredictable and variegated. The asymmetrical shape, however, must be understood not as the absence of proportion, but an introduction of diversity, what Packer calls a "counterforce to balance and calm, the riddling little twist, subatomic, that made creation happen" (52). Creation happens, as does beauty: Packer's Rothkos are "color-field and geometric," perhaps, but they are also "knife-slabs of mucoid color" (8); and, Packer thinks, "[t]he one virtue of [a skyscraper's] surface was to skim and bend the river light and mime the tides of the open sky" (9).

If *Cosmopolis* can be read as a narrative of shapes—of lines that "skim and bend"—then what insight, if any, can the novel bring to the events of September 11, 2001 when the twin (i.e., symmetrical) towers—the most distinctive of "New York shapes"—were demolished by airplanes, swerved from their course by terrorist anti-logic? DeLillo had almost completed writing *Cosmopolis* when this attack occurred and he claims that neither this, nor any of his novels, predict or respond to specific historical events but that they are, rather, "generated by the unconscious."¹ One has to wonder, though, to what extent the unconscious is informed by the context in which it exists. DeLillo himself seems to vacillate on this point: in one interview with John Barron, he says that the attacks didn't directly affect the novel except that they delayed its completion by about two

¹ Uncanny prescience has also been ascribed to DeLillo's *Underworld*, whose dust jacket shows a silhouetted bird swooping ominously near the World Trade Center, and *Mao II*, in which terrorism and the Middle East figure prominently.

months; in a later interview with Peter Henning, DeLillo asserts, “my book dealt with the events of September 11 on a deeper level.” But what is this deeper level? On its surface, *Cosmopolis* does portray something analogous to a 9-11 scenario, in its depiction of an enormous event—in this case, a crashing financial market—and western assumptions of its invincibility that led up to it. Furthermore, it’s impossible to read DeLillo’s descriptions of city towers whose “banality . . . reveals itself over time as being truly brutal” (8) without thinking *9-11*:

The bank towers loomed just beyond the avenue. They were covert structures for all their size, hard to see, so common and monotonic, tall, sheer, abstract, with standard setbacks, and block-long and interchangeable. and [Packer] had to concentrate to see them. They looked empty from here. He liked that idea. They were made to be the last tall things, made empty, designed to hasten the future. They were the end of the outside world. They weren’t here, exactly. They were in the future, a time beyond geography and touchable money and the people who stack and count it. (36)

Even as Packer looks upon them, the towers are as translucent and hypothetical as ghosts. Already gone, the language suggests, or waiting to be built. Most poignant, in light of events that must color any reading (and writing) of the passage, is the sense of human absence: the towers “looked empty,” were “made empty,” and exist somewhere other than where people reside. While the elegiac tenor of these terms evokes the real, human losses of 9-11, the vacancy and intangibility here attests to the relative insignificance of the towers *per se*; the image of falling towers, played and re-played on television during the days following the WTC attack, is an image of a symptom and not the underlying defects that would bring about such destruction. The towers in DeLillo’s text are “hard to

see” because, perhaps, they are not the things that need to be looked at. Both their appearance and disappearance are reflections of particular belief systems—systems that, I think, compose the “deeper level” to which DeLillo refers. If *Cosmopolis* contains any “response” to 9-11, it would seem to be an admonishment of essentialist thought, which, when translated into action, becomes hideously definitive—the events of 9-11 being but one example of this.

Packer’s unwavering drive toward order and control is one incarnation of such essentialism, but so too is the resolute “out-of-controlness” of Packer’s enemy, Richard Sheets, who goes by the name Benno Levin (a name DeLillo apparently derived from the past two presidents of Yale University, Benno Schmidt and Richard Levin). A former employee way down in the innumerable ranks of Packer’s empire, Levin claims he “became a minor technical element in a firm, a technical fact” (60). Levin tells Packer: “You have to die for how you think and act” (202). A “terrorist” figure in the 9-11 analogy of *Cosmopolis*, the pathetic and disenfranchised Levin represents the asymmetrical potential that symmetrical structures invariably contain. Levin knocks down the walls in the condemned building where he resides, declaring “I don’t want to live in a little set of quads.” Packer lives in forty-two rooms on the top floor of a skyscraper (forty-two, a number of symmetries) and Levin builds his home from whatever he finds on local sidewalks, lamenting, “What people discard could make a nation” (57). And while Packer is daily examined by one of his two personal physicians, Levin diagnoses himself with what he calls “global strains of illness” (152) like “cultural panic” and “soul loss,” which he claims to have caught on the internet. Levin’s thoughts and utterances, repetitive and illogical, are disordered to a level approaching psychosis: he speaks of his “agitated behavior and confusion. . . delirious gusts,” the “voices” he

hears in third person, and an ego “bursting with importance, which has major defeats and triumphs all the time” (61).

The dialogue that ensues between Levin and Packer is the verbal equivalent of trying to superimpose a scalene triangle onto an equilateral one, in vain anticipation that they will eventually align. But because we do not empathize with these characters, and have been discouraged to do so by the “freeze-dried,” “cartoonish” accounts of the preceding two hundred pages, we are able to consider their exchange as a moment where absolute, polar ideologies are pitted against one another. As in Socratic discourse, thoughts and ideas are here laid bare, not obscured by the nuances and specificities of emotion, personhood, etc. Levin’s rationale for committing murder is as dangerously abstract and essentialist as Packer’s conviction in the inherent orderliness of things:

It’s banks and car parks. It’s airline tickets in their computers. It’s people signing the merchant copy. It’s people taking the merchant copy out of the leather folder and signing it and separating the merchant copy from the customer copy and putting their credit card in their wallet. This alone could do it. (195)

Levin attributes his rage to the *fact* of these economic operations and products—and, indeed, they do connote oppressive greed and banality in the way that Levin describes them. His comments echo those of Detwiler, the garbage guru in *Underworld*: “Consume or die. That’s the mandate of the culture” (287).¹ But the grave logical error occurs when Levin shunts his anger from operations and products onto the population at large: “It’s women’s shoes. It’s all the names they have for shoes. It’s all those people in the park

¹ Even the baseball, at once a catalyst for social coalescence and action, is, finally, a commodity with value attached to it—a value contingent upon time and the forces of inflation—worth to Manx “thirty-two dollars and change” (655) and to Nick, decades later, “thirty-four thousand five hundred dollars” (132).

behind the library, talking in the sun” (196). Shoes and people: equivalent agents, equal and homogenous cranks in the capitalist machine? Levin’s is an “asymmetrical” grouping—elliptical and inscrutable justification for a violent response to the systems, then people, then *person* whom/which he claims has rendered him a “helpless robot” (195). Packer’s refutations, however, convey a commensurate (and flawed) reduction; he tells Levin:

No. Your crime has no conscience. You haven’t been driven to do it by some oppressive force. . . . You’re not against the rich. Nobody’s against the rich. Everybody’s ten seconds away from being rich. No. Your crime is in your head. Another fool shooting up a diner because because. (196)

Citing an absent “conscience” is pretty rich, coming from a man who has, among other things, lately squandered his wife’s estate on a whim. As is Packer’s insistence upon concrete and “real” justification for action—“Violence is meant to be real, based on real motives” (193)—when he spent the day watching the “real” world unravel from the remote and luxurious interior of his limousine (except, of course, for the odd sexual or gastronomical foray). Both Packer and Levin, in presenting their opposing, rigid and essentialist moral perspectives, reveal the essential inconsistencies that make these perspectives untenable at best, and at worst perilous.

When Miller calls the dialogue in *Cosmopolis* “sub-Mamet” (n.p.) and Kakutani finds it to be a “flat . . . experimentation in concentration and reduction” (E10), they are, in fact, quite on the mark. The dialogue needs to be sub-Mamet and terse. It needs to be, as Sven Philips says in the *electronic book review*, “strangely disconnected and disconnecting” (n.p.) in order to reflect current disconnected and disconnecting attitudes. What finally emerges from the collision of Packer’s drive for order and Levin’s

violent resistance to it is inertia and impasse. Each approach, each shape, is rigid, absolute, and consequently each cancels out the other. Packer tries to be an autonomous system unto himself, convinced that “[w]hen he died, he would not end. The world would end” (6). Packer is not, in his solipsistic estimation, at the center of the world, but he *is* the world itself. Levin, is correspondingly without a self, claiming “[t]here’s nothing in the world but other people” (187); he wants to kill Packer to “count for something in [his] own life” (187). Neither Packer nor Levin need to be understood as “real,” but as extensions, rather, of the polarized world they inhabit. The cartoonism of *Cosmopolis*, then, is not an effacement of humanity but a characterization of a contemporary environment where variations and gradients are conflated into one or another systematic regime, into one or another non-malleable shape. The novel thus offers a critique of absolutist thought—thought whose manifestation as actions can be equally absolute.

Chapter 3

“Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders”:

Recursion and Realism in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*

What fluctuates is order and disorder. What fluctuates
is their vicinity and common border, their relationship
and mutual penetration.

Michel Serres, “Dream,” 33

“All writers,” states Alain Robbe-Grillet in *For a New Novel*, “believe they’re realists. None ever calls himself abstract, illusionistic, chimerical, fantastic, falsitical [I]t is the real world which interests them; each one attempts as best as he can to create ‘the real’” (176). In the recent literary avant-garde, this realist drive has gained considerable momentum: the conventions of “high” postmodernism (i.e. self-reflexivity, irony, parody and pastiche) are being replaced by tropes and modes which countenance and express—rather than flee from, mock or negate—sites of sociopolitical contestation and stagnation. David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* reflects this transition from a conspicuously metafictional, irony-driven sensibility to a deliberate attempt to, in his words, “do something real American, about what it’s like to live in America around the millennium” (McCaffery “Interview” 138). But while what Wallace calls “big-R Realism,” born in a nineteenth century Darwinian context, emphasizes linear causality and psychological coherence, Wallace’s literary aesthetic foregrounds indeterminacy, recursion and flux. As chaos theorists have established in physical, biological and social studies, “complex and fluctuating phenomena [are] the rule rather than the exception” (Favre 147). Thus the unwieldy and quasi-cyclical structures in *Infinite Jest*, rather than signifying distortions of

cultural realities, in fact express the “real” and “porous” infrastructure of late-capitalist culture and post-Freudian psychologies. Wallace’s “chaotic fiction” is thus a kind of literary realism, apposite for rendering experience in what Joseph Conte calls the “postmodern milieu of dispersion” (*Design and Debris* 12). As it is in the works I have discussed in the preceding two chapters, the “dispersion” here is psychological, as well as cultural and material. In what follows, I identify the theoretical and structural resonances of chaos theory in Wallace’s fiction and show how these resonances operate to advance a “complex dynamics” of the psyche—what I have earlier termed “psychochaotics.” Like Deleuze and Guattari’s schizoanalytic program, Wallace’s problematization of the conventional psychic model principally involves a dissolution of the oedipal myth. Although I will gesture toward significant instances of this dissolution in a number of Wallace’s texts, my analysis emphasizes “anti-oedipal” manifestations in the narrative chaotics of *Infinite Jest*—emerging, in particular, from the reiterative and indeterminate operations (and attendant rituals and wastes) at Ennet House and Enfield Academy. Not the product of Pynchon-clone “crank-turning” (McCaffery 135), the novel generates a mimetic—if multitudinous and turbulent—depiction of contemporary life in America.

Trained in mathematics and philosophy, Wallace possesses what François le Lionnais calls a “double nationality” (Motte 290) in science and literature.¹ Indeed, both psychological and narrative structures in Wallace’s fiction are conspicuously systematic and quantitative in nature, where characters reveal themselves through syllogistic, inductive or otherwise formulaic logic and stories emerge from complicated rhetorical ecologies of paratext, puzzles and genre. But while the cross-pollination of scientific and

¹ LeLionnais’ term was first advanced in *Nouvelle Revue Française* (1977). Wallace’s “double nationality” is further substantiated by the recent appearance of *Everything and More* (2003), the author’s historical account of the mathematical concept of infinity.

literary models might seem to be a means of making aesthetic and social constructs amenable to empirical investigation, Wallace's fiction in effect works to dismember mythologies of objectivity and resolution. Where the science-inspired Zola and Dreiser fashioned novels according to Newtonian principles of causality, proportionality and continuity—seeing these as “natural” conditions in systems both material and abstract—Wallace's narrative methods reflect a twentieth-century understanding of relativity, incompleteness and complexity. Emerging from a postmodern period that values heterogeneity and simultaneity above historical, ideological and psychoanalytic master narratives, much fiction of late resists coherent characterization and narrative continuity in favor of more malleable or fractured representations. But *Infinite Jest* is unique within chaotic narratives and the postmodern canon because, while the many plots and subjects in the novel spiral out from an undetectable point of narrative origin, and cycles of addiction, inheritance and political-ideological contestation behave alternately deterministically and stochastically, *Infinite Jest* exudes a thick and gritty realism that exceeds the narrative's status as a technical performance as such. A “chaotic realism,” a mode which I develop in the first section of this chapter, emerges from a narrative system whose fusion of material and abstract phenomena generates a representational design that is as “real” as it is complex. As Guattari writes in *Chaosmosis*, such an “infinite” association of the “actualized” and the “incorporeal” characterizes the many interpenetrating borders that constitute every being and society.

Beneath the diversity of beings, no univocal ontological plinth is given, rather there is a plane of machinic interfaces. Being crystallizes through an infinity of enunciative assemblages associating actualized, discursive components

(material and indicative Fluxes, machinic Phylums) with non-discursive virtual components (incorporeal Universes and existential Territories. (58-9)

Thus rather than portraying characters simply *as* systems—through historiographic chaotics (as in DeLillo’s *Underworld*) or allegories of ontological indeterminacy (Auster’s *City of Glass*)—Wallace also positions characters *within* systems, evincing the interpenetration of social and psychic spheres.

i. Realism, metafiction and “radical realism”

[Narratives do not differ] in form from the structure of the “real world”—they are an extension and refinement of the very form and structure of the reality they represent.

-David Carr,
“Getting the Story Straight,” 120

For a writer so concerned with the typological status of his own fiction, David Foster Wallace has produced a body of work that is remarkably difficult to categorize.¹ Emerging from the author’s divided impulse to be both literary producer and critic, Wallace’s fiction embodies more than the oedipal anxieties that are par for the course in literary production; anxieties of influence and tradition are here compounded by an acute awareness of the work’s relationship to critical paradigms exercised in academic circles.² One suspects that such a resolve to classify one’s own writing signifies either an author’s transference with his own work—adding up to little more than an aesthetic and

¹ In several interviews and essays, for example in his piece “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young” (in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* issue “Writers on Writing”), Wallace describes at length the critical approach through which he would have his fiction be interpreted.

² Wallace’s history of institutional affiliation probably factors into this awareness; for several years, he was a faculty member in the English department at Illinois State University in Normal, and now teaches creative writing at Pomona College, CA.

philosophical wish list—or a coercive (however unconscious) means of eliciting certain kinds of desired critical reception. This heightened self-consciousness can be problematic for a literary critic who must balance the author’s self-referential taxonomies against any conceptual and philosophical orders identifiable in the texts themselves. Trust the tale, and not the teller, etc. But rather than taking Wallace’s asserted terms and categories at face value, they may be elliptically heeded, taken as indicators of the work’s “pores,” the theoretically problematic, irresolvable zones of contestation which have been brought to the fore by the author’s own insistence upon methodological coherence.

The theoretical tension at the center of Wallace’s work involves a dual inclination toward “realism” and self-conscious, ironic, or performative writing, which can be loosely termed “metafiction.”¹ Indeed, Wallace simultaneously employs and derides both literary approaches. In a 1993 interview with McCaffery, Wallace criticizes “big-R Realism” because, he says, it “is soothing, familiar and anesthetic [and] . . . drops us right into spectation” (138)². Later in the same interview, he rails against conventional postmodern “image-fiction,” the self-conscious and ironic writing of Pynchon-clone “crank-turners” (167). Wallace’s own attempts to “countenance and render *real* aspects of

¹ In *Alternate Worlds* (1989), John Kuehl defines metafiction as texts which convey the “irrelevance of the individual author and the assumption that literature is collaborative/plagiaristic; the borrowing of characters from one’s own and others’ work; the fictionalization of the author who appears in the ‘unreal’ domain of the characters, and the actualization of characters (often writers) who appear in the ‘real’ domain of the author; the treatment of history as fictitious; the inclusion of unreliable; the projection of linguistic heterocosms or substitute worlds; the tendency to unmask and defamiliarize dead conventions through parody; the employment of arbitrary beginnings and multiple endings; the introduction of frames and tales-within-tales, leading to circularity and regresses *ad infinitum*; and the focus on fiction as process rather than product” (62-3). Patricia Waugh’s definition in *Metafiction* is also instructive: “Writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” (2).

² For more on spectation, “anesthesia of form” and literature, see Wallace’s “*E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction*” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (1997); also, in his essay “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young,” Wallace dismisses television as “a narrative art that strives not to change or enlighten or broaden or reorient . . . but merely and always to *engage* and to *appeal to*” (44).

real experiences that have previously been excluded from art” (140, emphasis mine) as well as his heavy-handed formal and linguistic innovations might seem to contradict these professed literary indictments. *Infinite Jest*, a voluminous anatomy of American (cultural, psychological, political) “reality” and the irony-ridden formal gymnastics of the short fiction in *Girl With Curious Hair* (1989) and *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* (1999) indicate that Wallace neither fully rejects nor embraces either realism or metafiction; rather, he employs both strategies, generating a third literary mode that is energized by this fundamentally unresolved generic constitution. The interpenetration of realist and metafictional modes exemplifies the productive complexity that may^{be} generated by chaotic systems, where the seemingly oppositional forces of order and disorder are balanced in perpetual and oscillating flux. The conflation of performance (where language is deployed towards the acknowledgement of its own artifice, creating a destabilizing but creative kind of disturbance¹) and mimeticism (where depicting “the actual” is privileged over innovative methods of depiction), though theoretically paradoxical, establishes a dialectical aesthetic which distinguishes Wallace from his immediate precursors and contemporaries: the verbal antics of postmodern “crank-turning” do not displace a realist drive as they do in writings by Mark Leyner, Robert Coover and Donald Barthelme, but neither are the intrinsic constructedness and potential for verbal play in Wallace’s work obfuscated by the realist imperative to “tell it like it is/was/would be” that governs the writing of more mainstream authors like Cormac McCarthy, Jonathan Franzen and Richard Ford.

¹ Or, as Frank Cioffi contends, the performativity of *Infinite Jest* may be linked to the novel’s “alienation effect” or “confusion, frustration, despair [and] disgust” (162) that is brought about by its “ever-mushrooming heteroglossia; . . . its vast array of associated characters, incidents; . . . its amorality, its immorality, [and] its moralizing” (169). Tom LeClair gestures to similar performative feats in the work’s “multiple points of view both first- and third person; [its] stylistic tour de force in several dialects; [and] a swirling associative structure” (“Prodigious Fiction” 35).

What Wallace sees as the anesthetizing effect of so-called “big-R Realism” results from its implicit thesis that “real” phenomena and processes are identifiable and coherent and thus can be delineated by analogously coherent language systems. As LeClair says, the structure of realism “stays close to the subject-verb-object syntax of the kernel English sentence and to the causality of linear processes” [*The Art of Excess* (1989) 21]—but, I must ask, is a realism wrought according to grammatical linearity an authentic or legitimate realism? Like television, whose channels offer an illusory freedom of choice but only one “real” option—*to watch*—classical realism is, according to Wallace, “engaging without being demanding” (“Fictional Futures” 44). Realism, in the “big-R” tradition, may imply a social or psychological imperative through the representation of “real” conditions; realist texts may thus be imbued with the potential to instruct and enlighten a readership. But whatever material imparted in a big-R realist novel must inevitably be fashioned according to the “real” as it is perceived in the author’s particular mind; it must be always-already determined by the specific ideology of the writer who conveys *qua* constructs it. The straight-forward, often temporally linear description of characters who (appear to) independently determine their destinies is, then, an aesthetic trick—a trick to which contemporary readers, ensconced in a postmodern context of involitional irony have decidedly caught on: as Lyotard rather cynically puts it, “so-called realist representations can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia or mockery” (74). To suppose that there is a single and definitive reality that may be represented in a single text is to erect yet another master narrative, a cultural fiction that functions to limit diversity and facilitate social control.

But viewing realism as an inauthentic transcription of the world that is conceived by a particular author is somewhat misleading because it neglects the fact that all

fiction—and language itself—is fundamentally referential. An element of “reality” can hardly be avoided. But, as Timothy Jacobs states, “effective (and affective) art must render things as they are, not in the Realist school of literary representation, but in the real experiences of daily human existence” (225). Wallace concurs:

I’ve always thought of myself as a realist. . . . The world I live in consists of 250 advertisements a day and any number of unbelievably entertaining options, most of which are subsidized by corporations that want to sell me things. The whole way that the world acts on my nerve endings is bound up with stuff that the guys with leather patches on their elbows would consider pop or trivial or ephemeral. I use a fair amount of pop stuff in my fiction, but what I mean by it is nothing different than what other people mean in writing about trees and parks and having to walk to the river to get water a hundred years ago. It’s just the texture of the world I live in. (McCaffery 130)

According to this autoanalysis, it is merely the millennium-specific content, the “pop stuff” in Wallace’s fiction that distinguishes it from other versions of realism. It may be that televisual frenzies and toxic waste sites are simply updated versions of Zola’s *charcuteries* and Tolstoy’s battlefields, but Wallace’s “realism” extends beyond simple reflection and rendition of the visible phenomena of contemporary life by incorporating the visceral responses to the ways in which these phenomena act on one’s “nerve endings.” The real is known not only by its observable artifacts and structures but also through its effects upon a perceiving subject whose physiological and neurological responses to the environment suggest as much—or, perhaps, more—about a given context as its own physical properties and manifest behavior.

“The literature of referent, of ‘psychological glow’,” says Wallace, “has finally come under constructive attack . . . and exploded into defraction” (“Fictional Futures” 50). But utter “defraction,” as Wallace sees it, can be as unsatisfying a narrative mode as “big-R realism.” The complete shattering or the laying bare of literary conventions remains, at base, just like the depictions of the realist author: a hegemonic and restrictive means of representation in its own right. In his interview with McCaffery, Wallace explains:

We’ve seen that you can break any or all of the rules . . . but we’ve also seen the toxicity that anarchy for its own sake can yield. It’s often useful to dispense with standard formulas, of course, but it’s just as brave to see what can be done within a set of rules. . . . There’s something about free play within an ordered and disciplined system that resonates for readers. And there’s something about complete caprice and flux that’s deadening. (149-50)

The dispensation of literary “rules” may, Wallace suggests, be “useful” as one stage in the productive reworking of aesthetic values, but as an end in and of itself, simple defraction is an equally hollow narrative strategy. As much as Wallace’s work challenges “the literature of referent, of ‘psychological glow’,” it denounces the artificiality of postmodernist “crank-turning.” This denouncement is perhaps most palpable in “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” from *Girl With Curious Hair*. The short story, a veritable compendium of self-conscious, 1980s-avant-garde literary techniques, exposes the essential emptiness of postmodern metafiction by way of parody—a classic postmodernist strategy. Written “in the margins” of John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* (1969), “Westward” applies the strategies of Wallace’s literary forerunners (the authorial interjections of Barth, the long sentences of Bartheleme—the

tropes, in other words of “high-postmodernists”) with a heavy ironic hand, so as to produce a kind of *meta*-metafiction which not only knows it is an artificial construction, but also *knows* that it knows. “Westward” is an attempt to illuminate and push beyond the “toxicity” of ironic and anarchic postmodernist writing, but, Wallace says, he ultimately “got trapped” the same way “metafiction tried to expose the illusions of pseudo-unmediated realist fiction that had come before it” (Scott 40).¹ Simple parody of targeted literary modes, “Westward” finally reveals, is insufficient as a means of generating a new and productive literary approach because it merely adds another layer of self-referentiality to the one it originally takes to be spurious.

Wallace recognizes his own lapses into this tone but holds that *his* metafiction is “mimetic of a . . . late twentieth century American experience which is [that] we’re terribly afraid of one another” (Miller n.p.). Resolutely not another “crank-turner,” Wallace considers himself to be “a tourguide who is every bit as bound up and Americanized and self-conscious and insecure as the reader.” To support this self-assessment, Wallace distinguishes between an “autonomous, almost solipsistic self-consciousness” and one that is “far more concerned with the perception by others . . . [and is] a far more involved, sophisticated acceptance of human limitation versus ‘I want to make a certain kind of impression.’” What is warranted, then—and, I argue, what Wallace achieves—is neither a return to realism nor a heightened irony, but an amalgamation of the two modes—an amalgamation which mobilizes the tropes and ideologies of both literary kinds toward a rendition of experience that partly embraces,

¹ Or, as Wallace pithily states in “*E Unibus Pluram*,” “Metafiction, in its ascendant and most important phases, was really nothing more than a single-order expansion of its own great theoretical nemesis, Realism: if Realism called it like it saw it, Metafiction simply called it as it saw itself seeing it. This High cultural postmodern genre, in other words, was deeply informed by the emergence of television and the metastasis of self-conscious watching” (45).

partly critiques, realism and metafiction. In his essay “Prodigious Fiction,” LeClair frames this self-consciously mimetic style as “radical realism,” the genre propounded by the “tall, lexically gifted and etymologically conscious wraith” in *Infinite Jest* whom LeClair takes to be a surrogate for Wallace himself (2). The wraith calls for the portrayal of “real life’s real egalitarian babble of figurant crowds, of the animate world’s real agora, the babble of crowds every member of which [is] the central and articulate protagonist of his own entertainment” (*Infinite Jest* 836). Realism becomes “radical” when, instead of erecting an orderly interpretation of “real agora,” the incoherence and disorder of “egalitarian babble” is embraced and enacted by the narrative strategy that conveys it. Accordingly, Wallace’s fiction offers an anti-confluent, turbulent, multitudinous (but nonetheless mimetic) representation of systems and experiences that, in turn, disrupt the passivity of a “spectator” *qua* reader by problematizing the real. Its mimeticism exists not on the level of representational “mirroring”—though detailed depictions of the material world are a constitutive element—but in the manner by which the texture, structure and tone of the narrative assumes the chaotic properties which pervade physical and cultural spheres. Brian McHale evinces a similar intuition in *Postmodernist Fiction* when he states that postmodern writing “turns out to be mimetic after all, but this imitation of reality is accomplished not so much at the level of its content, which is often manifestly un- or anti-realistic, as at the level of form” (38). Through its chaotic constitution—manifest on the levels of both form and content—*Infinite Jest* affirms that the perpetual, fundamental tension between order and disorder is precisely where “the real” resides.

ii. *Tennis, drugs, waste*

The skeletal, allegorical constitution of *City of Glass* lends it a universality that *Infinite Jest* does not, at least upon first inspection, possess. Unlike Auster's elegantly minimal depiction of progressive convolution, Wallace's text is convolution amplified to its maximal degree, scaling greater pagination than most publishing houses would possibly allow¹. The narrative "nucleus" of *Infinite Jest* is (at times hideously, absurdly) compounded by multiple reflections and permutations of itself, so that the work may best be conceived as an assemblage of fractals—formal, social and psychological—where recursive patterns exist on levels as microscopic as diction and gesture, in domains as disparate as tennis academy and drug rehabilitation clinic, and through media as various as puppet shows, statistical calculus and political memoranda. But though conspicuously anatomical in the traditions of the so-called "encyclopedic novel,"² the "Great American Novel," and "novels of excess"³ the basic structure of *Infinite Jest* participates in the same kind of orderly disorder I have described in *City of Glass*: an "infinite" system of

¹ When Laura Miller asked Wallace about the novel's length, Wallace replied, "I know it's risky because it's part of this equation of making demands on the reader—which start out financial. The other side is publishing houses hate it because they make less money. Paper is so expensive. . . . The manuscript that I delivered was 1700 manuscript pages, of which close to 500 were cut. . . . If it looks chaotic, good, but everything that's in there is in there on purpose" (n.p.). Many reviewers have held this "maximal" aspect against the book: In her review of the novel, Michiko Kakutani says, "[s]omewhere in the mess, the reader suspects, are the outlines of a great novel . . . but it's stuck there, half excavated, unable to break completely free" (n.p.); Messud similarly opines, "*Infinite Jest* billows and sags in ungainly proportion, at least a partial victim of its own ambition" (n.p.).

² In his study of "encyclopedic narratives," Edward Mendelson writes: "Narrative is, among other things, an encyclopedia of narrative, incorporating, but never limited to, the conventions of heroic epic, quest romance, symbolist poem, *bildungsroman*, psychomachia, bourgeois novel, lyric interlude, drama, eclogue and catalogue" (19).

³ In *The Art of Excess*, LeClair posits three things so-called "masterful" novels must do: make full use of its technology (the book) and medium (language), "represent large cultural and often global wholes" (2), and undercut the narcissism of the individual. Examples include (according to LeClair) Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Gaddis's *JR* (1975), Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977), Heller's *Something Happened* (1971), McElroy's *Women and Men* (1987), Barth's *LETTERS* (1979) and LeGuin's *Always Coming Home* (1985).

Barthesian envelopes, where narrative structures recur on multiple scales and reflect the psychic composition of the myriad subjects and characters they contain. In interpreting the novel, Hayles prompts us: “Imagine a huge novel that has been run through the recursive feedback loops of a intelligent agent program and then strung out along the page” (“Illusion of Autonomy” 684). So while the recursion in *City of Glass* exists on the level of a single individual in a relatively localized sphere—one central psyche with multiple manifestations—that which pervades *Infinite Jest* spans multiple subjects and settings and, thus, enacts the rhizomatic proliferation only intimated (or apparent on a smaller scale) in Auster’s crystalline novella. With each reiterative system producing additional reverberations, the overall territory covered in *Infinite Jest* becomes exponentially greater. To use a common chaotic analogy, Auster’s book is a jagged piece of coral and Wallace’s is the correspondingly jagged coastline.

In *Infinite Jest*, we are given a set of “character clusters” whose behaviors reflect the greater recursive cultural and philosophical systems depicted in the novel. The focal cluster is the Incandenza clan, a luminous, “radically-real” example of The American Family, comprised of eccentric and erratically effectual prodigies. The patriarch, Joe Incandenza—or, as his sons call him with appropriate closed-circuitry, “Himself”—runs the professional gamut of *avant garde* film director, nuclear researcher, and tennis school headmaster, generating the same destructive cycles with each successive incarnation until he does Himself in by way of a microwave suicide. Joe and his wife Avril, a.k.a. (with superheroic objectification/idealization) “the Moms,” a fabulously capable ex-professor-cum-neatfreak, founded and operate the Enfield Tennis Academy, “the product of negotiated compromises between Avril’s academic hard-assery and James’s . . . keen sense of athletic pragmatism” (188). Their steroidal eclecticism is reincarnated in their

three “radically real” sons: Mario, the hideously deformed cameraman-child; Hal, the tennis champ-*cum*-lexical genius; and Orin, the disillusioned romantic, tennis-then-football champ. Each son, fractal-like, is a feedback loop of the obsessive and solipsistic neuroses that govern their parents’ dispositions. But far from being hermetic—even in their circuitry—dynamics within the Incandenza family and the Enfield Tennis Academy materialize also at the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery Facility, presided over by the physically enormous ex-addict Don Gately. The institutional reflection is pointed because, as Wallace says in his interview with *Salon*, “sport and the idea of dedication to a pursuit [are] kind of like an addiction” (5). Inhabitants of both camps are ensconced in drug/sport-mediated attempts to fill their assorted voids, characterized variously as anhedonia, unipolar dysphoria, or clinical, involuntal, or psychotic depression (695). The mutual reflectivity of the two sites is concretely, as well as thematically, manifest in the many controlled substances upon which both groups fixate, either through abstention (Ennet House) or rampant consumption (E.T.A). The inter-institutional connection is deepened still by romantic or professional associations, which are often invisible to those involved in them: Joelle van Dyne, for example, is an Ennet House inmate and member of U.H.I.D (Union of Hideously and Improbably Deformed) but was once Madame Psychosis, the namesake for Michael Pemulis’s street-drug product, DMZ; she was also the droning, enigmatic radio hostess who provided late-night fantasy fodder for the two younger adolescent Incandenza boys; she was girlfriend to the eldest son, Orin, who (allegedly) dodged flying acid so that it splashed and (hideously) deformed Joelle’s face instead; and she was an actor in several of Himself’s films, including the notorious “Infinite Jest.” Hal and Gately too, though never connected directly during the course of the novel, fleetingly appear in each other’s dreams, signifying a kinship that transcends

the physical realm and approaches the symbolic. The single identity becomes multiple, its behavioral and psychological systems resonating in numerous contexts despite temporal and spatial dislocation.

The film cartridge, “Infinite Jest,” is the crucial thread linking the inmates of E.T.A and Ennet House; it both epitomizes and embodies the recursion that characterizes the psychological and physical processes in the two institutions. The film opens with two figures going about a revolving door, unable to make contact with one another, but perpetually pushing forward in a vain attempt. This cyclical idea is then echoed by a figure, Death, who explains that the woman who kills you reemerges as your mother in the next life. The film then depicts a disconsolate “mother” figure leaning over her infant child, repeatedly pleading “I’m sorry” in various ways; shot from the blurry perspective of the crib-bound child, this segment plays upon deep psychic operations concerning the (im)possibility of deviation from the oedipal structures and produces in the viewer an irresistible “pleasure”/addiction which makes it impossible to turn away from the screen. Ensnared in an identification with the physical and psychic recursion of “Infinite Jest,” the viewer, utterly consumed by what she sees, loses all compulsion to do anything but watch the film and consequently dies in her own excrement. The absorption of subjects into the film’s narrative loops threatens to affect more than the handful of viewers we see expire in their living rooms. The fate of the “Infinite Jest” master cartridge is, as explained in clandestine dialogues between O.N.A.N. (Organization of North American Nations) agent David Steeply and A.F.R. (Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents) radical Rémy Marathe, of global importance: Quebecois militants plan to release the cartridge upon Americans to avenge the Great Concavity/Convexity dumpsite on Canadian soil into which the U.S. deposits its waste via giant catapult. The lethal loops of “Infinite Jest”

correspond to cycles of effluence and its reprisals that operate on individual (biological and psychic) and social (waste and international relations) levels. Its properties are at once generative and “natural,” insofar as recursion is “necessary” in nature¹, but is also a potent means of destruction, particularly in contexts where its basic “givenness” is challenged by alternative, flexible systems.

The Enfield Tennis Academy supplies the context for the filial and developmental neuroses of the Incandenzas and is, at the same time, a focal metaphor for the novel’s principle concern with systematized flux. Just as DeLillo in *Underworld* employs baseball as a metaphor for social mechanics in post-industrial life and, in *End Zone*, uses football to convey a nuclear-military fanaticism, Wallace’s tennis embodies the tension between rigidity and fluxion that defined natural, social and psychological dynamics. In *Infinite Jest*, tennis becomes the central metaphor for what Serres (in “Dream,” as cited in the epigraph to this chapter) calls the “interpenetration” of order and disorder. Supplying a conspicuous dialectic between the fixed boundary lines and the infinitely-variable trajectory, speed and rotation of the ball, tennis is depicted in a language of chaotic aesthetics:

Were he now still among the living, Dr. Incandenza would now describe tennis in the paradoxical terms of what’s now called Extra-Linear Dynamics. And Schtitt, whose formal knowledge of math is probably equivalent to that of a Taiwanese kindergartener nevertheless seemed to know . . . that locating beauty and art and magic and improvement and keys to excellence and victory in the prolix flux of play is not a fractal matter of reducing chaos to pattern. Seemed to intuitively sense that it was not a matter of reduction at all,

¹ In her article, “The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity,” Hayles argues that destruction results when “necessary recursivity” is disrupted.

but – perversely – of expansion, the aleatory flutter of uncontrolled, metastatic growth. (82)

Tennis, as E.T.A. coach Schtitt paradoxically contends, is about “*not-order, limit*, the places where things [break] down, fragmented into beauty” (82). Like the incalculable trajectories of the narrative and its myriad occupants, tennis is “no more reducible to delimited factors or probability curves than chess or boxing;” it is at once “mathematically uncontrolled but humanly *contained*” (82). Confronting the infinite variability of his media, a player works to effect an artistic “containment” and thereby enlarges both the aesthetic potential of the game and his own creative agency. The competitor works alone, mimicking the directions and gestures of an adversary, effectively doing battle with his own reflection or twin. Thus the dichotomous rigidity and erraticism of tennis exists not only on the tangible “canvas” of the court but also within the psychic operations of its players—specifically Hal, heightening his “Existential individuality, frequently referred to in the West. Solipsism” (113). Hal’s disposition—simultaneously contemplative and escapist, assiduous and flippant—fuses the game’s dialectic of order and flux. The psychological resonances of tennis and its tropes resound in Hal’s recurrent dream, where he is “standing at the baseline of a gargantuan tennis court”:

The lines that bound and define play are on this court as complex and convolved as a sculpture of string. There are lines going every which way, and they run oblique or meet and form relationships and boxes and rivers and tributaries and systems inside systems: lines, corners, alleys, and angles deliquesce into a blur at the horizon of the distant net. (67)

In Hal's dream, the lines that ought to "bind and define" play assume the "metastatic" convolution that would normally be characteristic of the movements of ball and players. What should be fixed is in Hal's unconscious distorted and conditioned by traits of the game's flexible elements, exemplifying the psychic "expansion" occasioned by the sport. Further, the adversarial aspect of tennis is changed from one involving two opposing players (Hal muses, "Even the 'we' is theory: I never get quite to see the distant opponent, for all the apparatus of the game") to a pitting of child against parent—or more specifically, child against parental scrutiny. Hal spies "In the stands stage-left the white sun-umbrella of the Moms; her height raises the white umbrella above her neighbours" (68). Like the court lines, which are meant to delineate the limits of play but whose "mess" renders it impossible to know "where to direct service," the Moms' presence is highlighted by a white umbrella's radiance but she herself is obscured by its "circle of shadow" (68). Her presence is signified synecdochically by her umbrella, as she herself is submerged beneath its shade, as if in the unconscious itself.

The physical "expansiveness" of tennis is linked to an analogous psychological magnification on the part of the player. Unlike DeLillo's Dodgers and Giants—whose movements within the gaming context invigorate the world within and beyond the stadium, as the teams metaphorically enact social and industrial processes—the tennis player of *Infinite Jest* functions in a context of heightened solitude and self-reflexivity. The absence of a discernable opponent, the mother's looming figure, and the perpetual jettisoning and return of the tennis ball practically force to mind the psychoanalytic trope, *fort-da*.¹ In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud uses the phrase to describe a child's playful attempt at vicarious mastery over the displeasing and recurring

¹ In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes the play of an eighteen-month old as *fort* ("gone") *da* ("there").

disappearance of the mother (when she enters and exits the nursery); “beyond” this pleasure-based motivation, Freud holds that the *fort-da* game ultimately dramatizes the death drive. To apply this Freudian idea to the tennis game¹ is to view a player/son sending the ball away in order symbolically control (or rehearse and thus mitigate) the departure of the desired object (in Freud’s estimation, the mother²); the returning ball requires him to send it away once again, so that the (psychological, developmental) process remains suspended in the attempted mastery of the disappearing parent. In Freud’s conception, “by repeating it, as unpleasurable though it was as a game, he took on an *active part*” (15). Only when the ball fails to return (i.e. Hal scores a point) has *fort-da* achieved its purpose (a successful break from the mother) and the player/son psychologically develops, or “moves up the ranks.”

While Freud holds that the repetitive projection stages loss and death, Lacan reads the process differently, focusing on the wait for return, the “anticipating provocation,” which takes form “in the symbolic dyad of two elementary exclamations” (103-4). Though he emphasizes a different phase of the process, Lacan, like Freud, draws out a *prescriptive* meaning from *fort-da*, which he reads as “a point of insertion of a symbolic order that pre-exists the infantile subject and in accordance with which he will have to structure himself” (104). The schizoanalyst, while she does consider *fort-da* a phenomenon unto itself, does not subscribe to the formulaic or essentialist models outlined above. Guattari explains in *Chaosmosis*:

¹ *Fort-da* after all, in Guattari’s estimation, happens in many places: “it can be expressed in relation to the effective absence of the mother or in a child’s game with its own image in the mirror that it makes appear and disappear” (*Chaosmosis* 75).

² In the Incandenza family, both parents “depart” in one way or another: Joe is impossible to talk to, and then dies; Avril “disappears” into her obsessive compulsions.

Unlike Freud, schizoanalysis doesn't make the Fort-Da refrain depend on a feeling of frustration with regard to the mother and on universal principles of life and death; nor like Lacan on a transcendent signifying order. It considers it as a desiring machine, working towards the assemblage of the verbal self—in symbiosis with the other assemblages of the emergent self, the nuclear self and the subjective self—and thereby inaugurating a new mastery of the object, of touch, of a spatiality from Winnicott's transitional space. (74-5)

Aligning the schizoanalytic interpretation with Winnicott's "transitional" findings,¹ Guattari emphasizes the physical, spatial nature of the *fort-da* game and, with deceptive simplicity, imagines its significance based on this. The infant is becoming a "self," and one of the things a self must do is negotiate the physical environment, including the spatiality of "other assemblages." While it appears that Freud and Lacan would find the subject simple and the act complex, Guattari views the act as simple, and the subject complex—"[i]n fact, a matter of a rich, multivalent, heterogenetic machine that can neither be legitimately fixed to a maternal-oral stasis, nor to a language stasis, although they incontestably participate in it. It is all these things at the same time and many others besides!" (75). While conceding that Freudian ("maternal-oral") and Lacanian ("language stasis") interpretations may be involved, Guattari identifies in the peculiar jettisoning/retrieval game a more flexible, complex dynamic, where what's being rehearsed is the negotiation of order and disorder—in all of their forms.

Fort is a chaosmic submersion; Da the mastery of a differentiated complexion . . . The submersion in chaosmic imminence is always ready to exploit the slightest weakness. Its presence haunts, with more or less intensity, unstable

¹ These are expounded in Donald Winnicott's *Playing and Reality* (1971).

situations—intolerable absence, bereavement, jealousy, organic fragilisation, cosmic vertigo . . . The rituals of exorcism brought to bear on it can become refrains of fixation, reification, tenacious fidelity to pain or unhappiness.

The “chaotic submersion”—a “haunted” state of “instability” and “intolerables”—must be encountered so as to be *known*, distinguished from areas of experience over which the “emergent self” may exert some form of control or “mastery.” The *fort-da* game thus becomes a means of measuring subjective limitations—but, Guattari warns, at some point the measuring becomes an end unto itself, relegating a “stultified [rather than emergent] self” to behavioral cycles of fixation and unhappy fidelity.

Thus, the “paradox” of tennis, which, “[w]ere he now still among the living,” James Incandenza would describe as “Extra-Linear Dynamics” (82): the player exists in the tension between order (the lines of the court, the score, his “masterly” aim) and disorder (his own compulsion to plunge into the “chaotic submersion” of ontological and physical indeterminacy). In keeping with the fractal composition of the novel, the tension between order and disorder, the participation in, and the subversion of, a system materializes again in the drug-culture at the academy. Under certain conditions, drugs operate as poisons, wreaking havoc on psychological and neurochemical processes. Cocaine, as endnote 232 explains, is broken down by a process of “hydrolysis . . . [which is] essentially toxic and can yield unpleasant neurosomatic fallout in certain systems” (1037).¹ In the academy, however, drugs function as alternately recreational and “medicinal” supplements for aspiring professional athletes—accoutrements of a capitalist

¹ The note goes on to enumerate the litany of ailments plaguing specific coke users: i.e. Ken Erredy’s “unstoppable rhinorrhagia,” Bruce Green’s “binocular nystagmus and walloping depression,” and Randy Lenz’s “vascular constriction, diuresis extremus, phosphenism, compulsive tooth-grinding, megalomania, phobophobia, euphoric recall, delusions of persecution and/or homicidal envy, sociososis, [and] postnatal drip (1036).

culture that requires that its subjects adhere to pre-ordained and inflexible systems of performance, and thereby be “successful” (and consequently rewarded) propagators of cultural norms. “Bob Hope” (a suggestive yoking of celebrity *qua* success and “dope”) helps Hal sleep through his dream disturbances, which were “beginning to grind [him] down and to cause some slight deterioration in performance and rank” (67). The drug gives him “Hope,” “substance” to fill the void, while the “absence of substance is what allows the root to take hold” (Raizman 21). Drugs—both as remedies and poisons—are the media through which a character’s experience and self-definition take shape. For the students of E.T.A., identity is closely linked to sporting rank, and, by extension, the socioeconomic superstructure wherein sporting rank is only one of many success-based hierarchies—thus neurochemical alteration is legitimized and even necessitated. But, just as the returning tennis ball signifies a perpetual developmental deferral, so too are patterns of drug use predominantly cyclical:

[E.T.A. students take] dexedrine or low-volt methedrine before matches and benzodiazapenes to come back down after matches, with Mudslides of Blue Flames in some discrete Academy corner at night to short-circuit the up-and-down cycle, mushrooms or X or something from the Mild designer class – or maybe occasionally a little Black Star . . . to basically short out the whole motherboard and blow out all the circuits and slowly recover and be almost neurologically reborn and start the gradual cycle all over again . . . (53)

Thus the social and medical implications of drug use, which are suspended in irresolvable dialectical relations (toxin/medicine, sanctioned/illicit) sustain further recursion by way of the perpetual cycle of substance use: intoxication, burn-out, and subsequent re-toxification.

The reiterative, drug-mediated system participates in patterns of expulsion and resurgence that permeate the novel at large. As Hayles states, *Infinite Jest* records the “underground seepages and labyrinthine pathways through which the abject always returns in recursive cycles of interconnection that inexorably tie together the sanctified with the polluted” (“Illusion of Autonomy” 687). A central metaphor for this recursive destruction and generation is annulation, a process of nuclear fusion that works by “bombarding highly toxic radioactive particles with massive amounts of stuff even more toxic than the radioactive particles;” essentially, it is “a fusion that feeds on poisons” (572). In the recursive process of annulation, toxicity and waste become synonymous with fertility and replenishment. When deployed in the Great Concavity, annulation “turns out so greedily efficient that it sucks every last toxin and poison out of the surrounding ecosystem, all inhibitors to organic growth for hundreds of radial clicks in every direction” (573); waste land is transformed, through the fact of its own toxicity, into supremely fertile and luscious terrain. Though both *Underworld* and *Infinite Jest* are preoccupied with the ecological and philosophical implications of waste, Wallace’s interpretation of dump sites is the more problematic: DeLillo’s garbage heaps, for example, prompt Brian Glassic to sublime reverie and contemplation of human commonality, but Wallace’s dump testifies to the pesky resilience of that which we wish to discard. Even its descriptive, “Concavity/Convexity,” is a site of irresolvable contestation. And not only is the waste site a point of contention between nation states, it spawns havoc in the genetic codes of the creatures (some human) that “inhabit” its grounds. Unsuccessfully rehabilitated Ennet inmate, Randy Lenz pontificates at length to whoever will listen:

Whole NNE cults and stelliform subcults Lenz reports as existing around belief systems about the metaphysics of the Concavity and annular fusion and B.S.-1950s-B-cartridge-type-radiation-affected fauna and overfertilization and verdant forests with periodic oases of purportaged desert and whatever east of the former Montpelier VT area of where the annulated Sawshine River feeds the Charles and tints it the exact same tone of blue as the blue on boxes of Hefty SteelSaks and the ideas of the ravacious herds of feral domesticated housepets and oversized insects not only taking over the abandoned homes of relocated Americans but actually setting up house and keeping them in model repair and impressive equity, allegedly, and the idea of infants the size of prehistoric beasts roaming the overfertilized east Concavity quadrants, leaving enormous scat-piles and keening for the abortive parents who'd left or lost them in the general geopolitical shuffle of mass migration (561-2)

As Marathe succinctly puts it, "What goes around, it comes back around . . . [that's] the nature of filth" (233). So the feral infants of the Concavity/Convexity, as described in James A.L. Struck Jr.'s term paper for his History of Canadian Unpleasantness class, "feed on the abundance of annularly available edibles the overgrowth periods in the region represent, do deposit titanically outsized scat, and presumably do crawl thunderously about, occasionally sallying south of mured retention lines and into the populated areas of New New England;" though the report later qualifies the point, stating that the massive infants, "formed by toxicity and sustained by annulation" are essentially "passive icons of the Experialist gestalt." (1056). The infants represent the greater processes that produced them, the group responsible for the Great Concavity/Convexity waste "disposal" system itself, O.N.A.N., evoking onanism—the futile (and, Biblically,

sinful) ejaculation of one's seed onto the ground. The organization's name, with its self-defeating implications, indicates that catapulting noxious material away is, simultaneously but insidiously, a pollution of one's own soil.

iii. *Narrative reverberation*

There is no topology more beautiful than Möbius' to designate the contiguity of the close and the distant, or interior and exterior, of object and subject in the same spiral where the screen of our computers and the mental screen of our brain become intertwined with each other as well.

- Baudrillard, *Xerox and Infinity*, 56

"A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life," the first piece in Wallace's *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, consists of two short paragraphs which describe people desperately trying to connect with each other:

When they were introduced, he made a witticism, hoping to be liked.

She laughed extremely hard, hoping to be liked. Each drove home alone, staring straight ahead, with the very same twist to the faces.

The man who'd introduced them didn't much like either of them, though he acted as if he did, anxious as he was to preserve good relations at all times. One never knew, after all, now did one now did one now did one.

(0)

This tale would simply be a pithy depiction of everyday loneliness in an alienating world, if not for the syntactical glitch of the final line. The thrice-repeated phrase, "now did one," is conspicuously at odds with the piece's professed "radical condensation" of

postmodern experience. Indeed, the repeated words add neither action nor detail to a text whittled down to an almost imagistic minimum. But it is the Steinian repetition itself that embodies a defining property of “postindustrial life”—the glitch in the would-be continuous system, the fallacy of resolution or completion. In the looping logic of the short piece, information accrues not via teleological advancement or “progress” but, rather, on the level of perpetual recursion. The phrase “now did one” also sounds like a repeated question, leaving the possibility of communication between people open for deliberation even after the work itself has come to an end.

This minute instance of narrative looping, what one Wallace commentator calls “Infinitesimal Jest,”¹ epitomizes a general trait of Wallace’s literary corpus: the diffusion of supposedly closed, finite systems and linear narrative formats. Wallace’s work mines the “porousness of certain borders,” to borrow from the recurring short story title in *Hideous Men*, by focusing on the anomalous elements of apparently continuous and coherent systems, and by amplifying these anomalies to the point where idiosyncrasy becomes the rule rather than the exception. *Infinite Jest* conveys the porousness of myriad borders, from physical “borders” like the “spangled mess” of tennis court lines in Hal’s dream to national borders permeated by waste of the Great Concavity/Convexity. While these distortions may superficially appear to be sites of psychological and political disaster, the chaotic properties they present also provide a means of generating orders that are more stable or complex than preceding ones. The novel is riddled with cyclical operations of this kind, where instability and destruction is balanced against an emergent productivity and order: annular fusion, for example, is an exercise in rampant toxicity, but it “can produce waste that’s fuel for a process whose waste is fuel for the fusion” (572);

¹ The comment can be found at <http://www.smallbytes.net/~bobkat/jesterlist.html>.

the drug DMZ is “synthesized from a derivative of fatviavi, an obscure mold that grows only on other molds” (170); ONAN doctors “[treat] cancer by giving cancer cells themselves cancer” (572); Marathe is “a kind of triple agent or duplicitous double agent” who is “pretending to pretend to betray” (995). In addition to the infolding aspect of specific items, identities and processes, characters move in a cyclical fashion; in an attempt to break his pot habit, for example, Hal visits Ennet House and finds most of the residents clutching teddy bears. The narrator describes the Incandenza’s marital relationship as “the evolved product of concordance and compromise” (183), a phrase exactly repeated two pages later by Joelle (Madam Psychosis) in her radio broadcast. Also compelling is the moebius strip shape of the infinity symbol,¹ an icon that Orin traces on the bodies of his female conquests and that is also represented by the ubiquity of the number eight in the text (super-8 mm, some movies last 88 minutes). No thing is autonomous but reverberates, rather, throughout the family and community, as well as the symbolic and structural constitution of the narrative at large. These self-emulating, cannibalistic phenomena generate energy and new information, illustrating that while systems might be odious in themselves, their “pores” may be sites of creativity.

Chaotic indeterminacy and orderly-disorder thus inform the narrative structure of *Infinite Jest* and the cyclical and irresolvable social formulations it contains: characters, items, thoughts and symbols circulate perpetually throughout the narrative domain at large, their patterns and behaviors not leading toward any ultimate, quantifiable result or objective “solution” but, rather, conveying meaning in their very unwieldy reverberations.

¹ For instances of infinity in the novel, I am indebted to Toon Theuwis’s “The Quest for Infinite Jest: An Enquiry into the Encyclopedic and Postmodernist Nature of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*,” <http://www.geocities.com/Qthens/Acropolis/8175/toon.html>. Theuwis maintains that the recurrence of the symbol infinity “does not seem to add up to anything. It makes the reader feel rather paranoid” (10). I suggest, however, that the recurrence of infinite cycles and iconography attest to the indeterminate structure of the work as a whole.

These “methods produce . . . a prodigious density,” LeClair explains, “because parts do not disappear into conventional and easily processed wholes” and “disrupt the tranquilizing flow of conventional fiction” (“Prodigious Fiction” 35). This configuration—a “disruption of tranquility” achieved through a process of reiterative folding—counteracts the “anesthesia of form” (McCaffery 138) that Wallace associates with traditional, “big-R” realist fiction and its valuation of linear causality and stable subjectivity. These self-emulating and recursive phenomena operate like Chinese boxes, “closed systems” that create energy instead of entropy. But, like *Underworld*, a rudimentary but profound recursion is also achieved through the disruption of chronological sequences. This kind of narrative arrangement—what Ursula Heise terms “chronoschism”—demonstrates a “dividing, bifurcating and branching off continuously into multiple possibilities and alternatives” (55). The first episode of *Infinite Jest* is chronologically the last: during a college interview, Hal erupts into “subanimalistic” (44) noises and convulsions. Not until much later in the novel are possible “causes” of the outburst supplied, and even then explanations are myriad and only hypotheses: Hal may, the text implies, have become deranged through ingesting DMZ, with which, we are to suspect, he accidentally brushes his teeth; or his violent incoherence could be a consequence of marijuana withdrawal; or he may have accidentally watched all or part of the “Infinite Jest” cartridge; or Hal may be expressing a delayed hysteria connected to discovering his father’s corpse.¹ Hal’s introduction at a point chronologically later than the rest of the material in the novel not only compels the reader to look beyond temporal sequences and linear causality, but also establishes the novel’s central mystery, for which

¹ These and other explanations for Hal’s disorder are proposed by readers of *Infinite Jest* and appear in “*Infinite Jest* Notes and Speculations” at the DFW website, [wysiwyg://92/http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/8175/notes2.htm](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/8175/notes2.htm).

(although it asymptotically approaches resolution) the narrative never quite provides an explanation.

While my interest in the schizoanalytic meanings of recent fiction compels me to interpret the narrative matrix of *Infinite Jest* in terms of chaos theory, it is worth remarking upon other “science-inflected” analyses of the text—particularly because several of these analyses employ physical or mathematical models that, like nonlinear dynamics, countenance systematic indeterminacy and reiteration. Toon Theuwis, for example, suggests that by engaging with Wallace’s narrative, “one ends up in a closed helix. As a reader we move around as if in a spiral, continuously moving around central point and the great moment of truth, the end, the epiphany, the moment of insight never seems to arrive” (16). Chris Hager compares the novel’s structure to a parabola, which (like the chaotic cycling I present here) undermines the notion of causal explanations of events, relying instead on slightly-skewed symmetry between events on the “descending” arc of the narrative and those on the “ascending” arc.¹ And, as in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, “only the peak we’re allowed to see” (726). Hager claims that the parabola’s vertex on page 489, where the non-French speaker, Lucien Antitoi dies, is the “purest reflection on Hal’s unspoken transformation” (11). The parabolic structure encourages us to infer rather than be given connections; “the circumscription,” Hager argues, “ultimately elucidates the essence of Hal’s transformation more clearly than a literal transcription of that transformation could have: that Lucien’s drastic increase of communicative function comes at the vertex of the novel begs a reconsideration of Hal’s

¹ Hager claims that “the entrances and re-entrances of characters mark the vectors that mark the symmetry of these two slopes” (34); for example, around page 300, “Poor Tony Krause has a seizure on the T,” then, about 300 pages from the novel’s end, “Poor Tony Krause awoke in the ambulance.” The same correspondent positioning Hager observes in Hal and Don Gately’s respective dreams of each other.

ambiguous fate—as a renewed ability to communicate, if at the cost of conventional appearances of communication” (12).

Whether all or some or none of the geometrical models that critics have found in *Infinite Jest*—Pynchonian parabola, Borgesian library of octagonal rooms, Mandelbrosian fractals, or Hemingwayesque iceberg—were “intentionally” built into the narrative is immaterial. Indeed, even so-called intentional devices will always have effects that are unforeseen by the author. The extensive endnotes punctuating *Infinite Jest* exemplify well the imperfect functions of intentionality. Wallace is not, of course, the first author to employ such paratextual structures in fictional work—Lawrence Sterne uses footnotes in *Tristram Shandy* (1767), as does Flann O’Brien in *The Third Policeman* (1940) and Vladimir Nabokov in *Pale Fire*. More recently, the footnote has become part of the postmodernist arsenal of metafictional devices, featuring prominently in Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* and David Eggers’ *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2001). But, in proportion with the “maximal” tenor of his enterprise, Wallace’s use of paratext is by all accounts excessive: the author himself admits, “it got kind of addictive” (Miller n.p.). There are 388 notes in *Infinite Jest*, contributing to about ten percent of the work’s length. In an interview with Charlie Rose, Wallace describes the purpose and *intended* effects of the endnotes:

[I]t seems to me that reality’s fractured right now, at least the reality that I live in. And the difficulty about writing . . . about reality is that text is very linear and it’s very unified. . . I, anyway, am constantly on the look out for ways to fracture the text that aren’t totally disoriented. (10)

These comments might be read alongside the notes to Deleuze and Guattari’s “partial objects”—“bricks that have been shattered into bits, and leftovers”—which the authors

value because “[w]e no longer believe in a primordial totality that once existed, or in a final totality that awaits us at some future date” (*Anti-Oedipus* 42). Critics have tended to read Wallace’s “fracturing” device in various ways: Frank Cioffi claims that the “constant flipping between text and notes . . . [is a] near aerobic activity” and as such forces the reader into a “performance of disturbance” (169); Timothy Jacobs conceives the endnotes as a way of making the reader “engaged with his work—as opposed to the ‘passive spectator’ that television prescribes,” generating a “participatory aesthetic” where “readers adopt the narrative and physically reconstitute it as their own” (225-6); in “The Panic of Influence,” A.O. Scott calls the endnotes an expression of “quasi-Oedipal hostility” which attests to the author’s anxiety over “the obstacles of writing” (39).

Keeping in mind Wallace’s “double nationality” in literature and mathematics, the notes may also be seen to perform particular quantitative operations with regard to the text from which they are sprung. Inasmuch as they might have philosophical (or psychological, obsessive, fetishistic) implications, endnotes as such are fundamentally a technical contrivance, a way to transmit information that relates to a main idea but does not quite constitute a main idea itself. Like Raymond Queneau’s “One Hundred Thousand Billion Poems,”¹ Wallace’s exploitation of the literary (and essayistic) device is a means of generating sheer textual mass, both actually (the novel’s word count) and potentially (a reader’s distraction from the main narrative). The endnote is a type of “strange loop”² because it entails a departure from the numerical signal in the text proper to the

¹ Ten sonnets, wherein each line of one poem may be replaced by its homologous line in the other poems, creating a “potential” 10^{14} poems; François LeLionnais explains: “Thanks to this technical superiority, the work you are holding in your hands represents, itself alone, a quantity of text far greater than everything man has written since the invention of writing, including popular novels, business letters, diplomatic correspondence, private mail, rough drafts thrown into the wastebasket and graffiti” (Motte 291).

² A “strange loop” occurs when “[b]y moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves back where we started” (10), devises Douglas Hofstadter in *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (1979).

corresponding number in a separate bolt of text and, although one returns to the abandoned spot in the text proper, new information (or, frequently, mystification) has been added through the divergence. And unlike the footnote which can be perceived in a simple vertical glance, the endnote requires a physical negotiation with a (hefty and cumbersome) book and the temporary abandonment of place in the narrative proper, so that the reader becomes embroiled in a recursive performance. A reader's detour to the note may also necessitate further journeying, as some notes have their own attendant notes and many notes contain medical, mathematical and linguistic jargon or complex/archaic diction that then require a consultation of the *OED* or some other dictionary.¹ The coercive loops force the reader into a position of suspended "intermediariness," herself confirming through action the porous borders of the text she is experiencing.

Variouly confounding and enlightening, the notes introduce points of rupture and turbulence to the (already convoluted) narrative proper. Their content ranges from pharmaceutical catalogues and mathematical formulae, to interview transcripts and historical elaborations. The endnotes—offering elaboration, clarification, sometimes crucial information, sometimes completely redundant asides, and, sometimes, entire scenes several pages long—supply yet another dimension to the indeterminacy and recursion functioning in the novel at large. Often, the endnotes are fractals of patterns found in the main text—for example, the particular dynamics of the Incandenza family. Note 24, an eight page filmography for James Incandenza, includes this one-line summary of his short film, *As of Yore*: "A middle-aged tennis instructor, preparing to instruct his son in tennis, becomes intoxicated in the family's garage and subjects his son

¹ Wallace recently joined with several other writers (including Zadie Smith and Stepin Merritt) to put together *The American Writer's Thesaurus* (2006).

to a rambling monologue while his son weeps and perspires" (991). In addition to the obvious parallels between the synopsis and "real life" in the novel (tennis coaching and a father-son conversation/contestation), note 24 affirms through recapitulation the link between sporting obsession and drug addiction, which I explored in the previous section of this chapter. In other cases, the endnotes operate on a more conceptual level, where content subverts the ostensible function of the note itself. Note 216, referring to what Dr. Rusk at Enfield calls the 'Coatlicue Complex' (516), states simply, "no clue" (1036), while note 110^c, a note upon another note which is a letter sent from Avril to Orin, addressed "Dear Filbert" (1006)—which, in turn, sprung out of almost nowhere amidst Hal's thoughts on Canadian separatist politics—*this* note 100^c states, "don't ask" (1021). The lack of explanation undermines the *raison d'être* of the endnote technique itself, evincing the "porousness" of the paratextual system. All but disclaiming its purported function to clarify and qualify a greater text, these paratextual arrangements work to subvert the primary material. "Octet," a short piece from *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, takes this undermining a step further in its attrition of the ontological significance of the author himself. Assuming the general character of a "pop quiz," "Octet" presents a number of hypothetical situations intended to prompt the reader into pseudo-ethical reflection. But the scenario, in classic metafictional style, gradually mutates, ultimately foregrounding the pseudo-ethical problematic of literary production itself: "You are, unfortunately," the ninth "Pop Quiz" hypothesizes, "a fiction writer . . . [who is] attempting a cycle of very short belletristic pieces" (145). The pop quizzes increasingly become displaced by their attendant footnotes until the quizzes themselves get sucked into the auxiliary text, evoking an organism's propensity to propagate itself. The author-

qua-originator pleads inefficacy and, finally, pretends to stand by and watches while his “literary device” takes on a life of its own.

The notes implode as much as they explode systematic borders upon themselves. Originality and flexibility—indeed, “free defraction”—can only be attained in a context where limits are present as forces against which freedom exerts: so writes Sartre of the necessity for strictures, or *facticité*, which “allows us to say that the For-itself [i.e. autonomous and free agent in the world] *is or exists*. The *facticité* of freedom is that fact without which freedom is not able to be free” (631). Timothy Jacobs connects Wallace’s adherence to rules to Gerald Manley Hopkins’s license within strictness, which held that “literature produced without boundaries results in chaotic and solipsistic expression” (223). In keeping with this, Jacobs asserts, “Wallace . . . imposes on himself a mandate of aesthetic restraint in *Infinite Jest* that diminishes his presence as author and concomitantly ‘speaks’ to the reader’s consciousness” (221). The application of a formal stricture, and the subsequent turn back upon itself, marks the convergence of structure and play that informs Georges Perec’s comments: “The system of constraint—and this is important—must be destroyed. It must not be rigid; there must be some play in it; it must ‘creak’ a bit: it must not be completely coherent” (Motte 70-71)¹. Wallace’s invocation for a coalescence of “free play” and “ordered systems” is indeed reminiscent of the OuLiPo² mandate, which holds that the introduction of a constraint to the writing process gives rise to work that neither expresses a universal ordering principle nor the intended expression

¹ Originally in “Entretien: Perec/Ewa Panlikowski.” *Littératures*. 7. 1983.

² Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle (Workshop of Potential Literature), a predominantly French literary movement of the 1970s and 80s that included Georges Perec, Raymond Queneau, Italo Calvino and Harry Mathews.

of a controlling artist; the emergent pattern will relate to the initial conditions set by the author, yes, but ultimately—autopoetically—it is sprung from the work itself.¹

iv. *Psychochaotics II*

A membranous porosity subsists, muted, on other levels, and always threatens to break through. Subjectification is the constitution, through interlocking passive and active syntheses on every stratum, of infoldings of various porosity.

- Brian Massumi, *A Reader's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 80

The structural recursion at play in Wallace's writing is a means of expressing his characters' psychic disposition and development, through enacting states of cognitive distortion, acceleration, and entropy. The correlations between structural and behavioral/mental process are mutually reflective: a narrative pattern may be wrought according to the psychological mechanics it describes, or a character's thoughts can correspond to the systems and conditions wherein they exist or took shape. This psycho-structural dynamic implies less a simple determinism than a reiteration of patterns which permeate ontological domains of character, text, and world alike—reiteration, with its provisions for similarity and flux, and not direct repetition.

The apotheosis of structural and psychological intercalation in Wallace's *oeuvre* is, perhaps, "The Depressed Person." I have discussed how the endnotes in *Infinite Jest* influence the narrative mechanics of the novel as a whole, but in "The Depressed Person"

¹ An exemplary work is Georges Perec's *La Vie, mode de l'emploi* (1978), wherein an artist regulates his life around an (arbitrary, mathematically-delineated) regiment of production which is, in turn, reflected in the structure of Perec's encompassing novel; also, Perec's lipogram, *La Disparition* (1969), 300 pages without the letter E.; and, for an American follower, see Walter Abish, *Alphabetical Africa* (1974).

similar structures are used to reflect chiefly psychological processes. In this short story, footnotes encroach upon the text proper like an exponentially growing colony of bacteria, or a thriving parasite, to the point where several pages of the story consist of more than eighty-percent footnotes. The incrementally increasing footnotes enact the depressed person's insatiable and escalating dependency on others, her "neediness." One cursory reading conveys the (somewhat nauseating) cognitive and emotional spirals that characterize the experiences of a particular "depressed person" who is ensconced in an endless spiral of advancement and regression in dealing with her melancholic ailment. Evidently, the prolonged irresolution is not only hers to endure: her friends, therapist and, indeed, we readers become implicated in its cycles to the point where the continuation and enlargement of the patient/subject's depression is the only certainty offered by the text. Even the therapist, whose death means (among other things) extrication from the depressed person's plight, is ultimately co-opted by the reigning grief as her former patient fixates on her own misfortune of the therapist's death. The footnotes are textual expressions of the depressed person's dependence upon the reception of others (contingent, like paratext itself). No thing is independent, but rather all becomes embroiled in the depressed person's lamentable (and lamenting) cognitive system. It is, furthermore, distinctly a feedback system, which I discussed in my introduction with reference to Goertzl, who reminds us that the "complex dynamics" of the psyche is "an autopoietic, self-organizing system" (311): "The symptoms maintain and produce the underlying problem, and the underlying problem maintains and produces the symptoms." The narrative's repetitive drone is intensified by the footnoted material, which extends the woman's depression beyond the confines of the *text-qua-story* proper into attendant domains both textual and ontological. This narrative configuration or "seepage" attests to

the “porousness” of the depressed person’s psychological “borders”—in effect, it is a textual staging of psychochaotic recursion.

Depression and psychotherapy (and its attendant psychotropic medications) are recurring motifs in Wallace’s fiction¹. Near the beginning of *Infinite Jest*, a nameless figure describes despair:

I am coming to see that the sensation of the worst nightmares, a sensation that can be felt asleep or awake, is identical to those worst dreams’ form itself: the sudden intra-dream realization that the nightmares’ very essence and center has been with you^{all} along, even when awake: it’s just been *overlooked*. (61)

This deep and insidious pain is present in so many characters in the novel that, at one point or another, attempt to articulate or act upon the distress they experience. Kate Gompert tells her attending physician, “it’s more like horror than sadness . . . Lurid is the word. . . everything sounds harsh, spiny and harsh-sounding like every sound you hear all of a sudden has teeth” (73); James Incandenza cannot face the “psychic pain” (695) and fashions a microwave within which he can “nuke” his head; the “moribund” Marathe (read: Marat) feels “chained in a cage of the self, from the pain” (777); Ken Erdedy “understood on an intuitive level why people kill themselves” (651) and feels “total psychic horror: death, decay, dissolution, cold, empty black malevolent lonely space” (650); Orin wakes from dreams “soaked, fetally curled, entombed in that kind of psychic darkness where you’re dreading whatever you think of” (42). Counterpointing the chorus

¹ A few out of many possible examples: “Good Old Neon” in *Oblivion* is narrated from the perspective of a suicidal “yuppie who cannot love” who undergoes psychotherapy in hopes of becoming less “fraudulent” a human being; in “My Appearance” in *Girl With Curious Hair*, a celebrity named Edilyn pops Xanax to alleviate the psychic stress associated with her appearance on David Letterman; “Octet,” in *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, includes a three-page footnote detailing the development of “a post-Prozac” antidepressant which “completely wipes out every last trace of dysphoria/anhedonia/agoraphobia/OCD/existential despair” (148); and the same collection includes “Suicide as a Sort of Present” (the title speaks for itself).

of despairing, alienated figures are the ineffectual would-be therapists: the doctor who cannot understand Kate's depression, Enfield's overly-academicized Dr. Rusk, the grief counselor whom Hal tricks into "therapeutic approval" by using the accepted language of the industry, and the (marginally more successful) cultish brainwash doctrinaires of Alcoholics Anonymous. In her essay on the carnivalesque and *Infinite Jest*, Catherine Nichols holds that "By depicting the ubiquity of depression, Wallace creates a context for viewing social reality rather than an individual mental state as the source of despair" (8). Patients, therapists and, indeed, drug providers (both illicit and pharmaceutical) constitute a psychic economy where, because pain is addressed on a case-by-case basis, the fundamentally social character of depression is evaded and "overlooked."

Psychic unrest in its various forms, as represented in Wallace's writing, often emerges from particular recursive patterns within families and between generations. Such patterns may well be, as Nichols maintains, the "requisite pain of existence" (8). Indeed, the fixations and dysphoria experienced by many characters in Wallace's fiction are related in some fashion to a specific traumatic incident or behavioral trait involving a parent. As previous chapters have detailed, filial relations and their psychic repercussions remain of critical interest to many, usually male, writers in the postmodern period: Auster's *Moon Palace* and *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) deal with the concealment and emergence of paternal history, while *Mr. Vertigo* (1994) and *Timbuktu* (1999) center upon an orphan child and an orphan dog, respectively; in DeLillo's *Underworld*, the target icon of the Lucky Strikes packet, for which Nick's father ostensibly went when abandoning his family, surfaces in the "target" George Manza, the man Nick ultimately

shoots and kills.¹ Wallace's father-son formulations carry a similar psychoanalytical resonance, but they are even more explicit and directly acknowledged by both characters and narrators, as paternal behavior is reflected or negated, fractal-like, in the psychological composition of the son. In several stories, Wallace details at length the unraveling of such traumas and traits, usually as they are played out by a father and a son. "On His Deathbed, Holding Your Hand, The Acclaimed Off-Broadway Playwright Begs a Boon" is a thirty-page diatribe by "THE FATHER" who (in a kind of deathbed confessional) bewails the sheer fact of his son's existence: "I despised him. There is no other word. Often I was forced to avert my eyes from him, look away. Hide. I discovered why fathers hold the evening papers as they do" (261). In "Signifying Nothing" (pointedly invoking Hamlet's filial disillusionment), a son recalls the long-repressed memory of his father exposing his genitals, as if "the dick was a fist and he was putting it in my face and daring me to say anything" (76); now a decade since the incident (which the father will not acknowledge) and after a year of voluntary estrangement, the son makes a comment at the dinner table regarding his dislike for chicken and the father "drew one of his fists back jokingly, and said, "Get the fuck out of here" (81). The act of aggression is seen as an allusion to the primal scene in which the genital/fist was exposed. In "The Girl With the Curious Hair," a father's sinister mode of punishment (he burns his son's penis) is played out down the line in the son's sociopathic proclivity for burning those who fellate him. Known as Sick Puppy to his punk rock comrades, the speaker tells of his father, "one of the highest ranking individuals of the United States Marine Corps" (61) and brother, a Marine Lieutenant, who "has the honor of serving as the carrier of the Black Box of nuclear codes for the President of the United States."

¹ See also, for example, Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father* (1975), Curtis White's *Memories of My Father Watching TV* (1998) and Richard Ford's *Independence Day* (1995).

While characters in Wallace's short fiction—his "Hideous Men" and anhedonic women—reveal their traumatic kernels unconsciously through Browningsque monologues, characters in *Infinite Jest* are all-too-aware of the recursive systems they inhabit. In Mario's *Tennis and the Feral Prodigy*, an "instructional" cartridge he produced three years after his father's death, Hal, the narrator, recommends:

Have a father whose own father lost what [talent] was there. Have a father who lived up to his own promise and then found thing after thing to meet and surpass the expectations of his promise in, and didn't seem just a whole hell of a lot happier and tighter wrapped than his failed father, leaving you yourself in a kind of feral and flux-ridden state with respect to talent. (173)

Amidst the litany of athletic and technical advice ("This is how to hold the stick"; "This type of stress prevents the groin-pull"), appears the above reference to varieties of "talent" in a prodigy's paternal history. The seemingly unusable piece of didacticism indicates that, for the Incandenza brothers, a father's psychology and behavior is as systematic a structure as any other kind of knowledge or determinism. It is analogously "given," part of (to reiterate Nichols) "the requisite pain of existence" (8). And, completing the loop, just as soon as paternal conditions are directly expressed, they are directly and consciously repressed: "Here is how to avoid thinking about any of this by practicing and playing until everything runs on autopilot" (173).

The perennial cycle of paternal "idiosyncrasy" and its impact upon offspring is pithily parodied in a specific episode: A pre-teen Hal visits a "conversationalist," saying "All I know is my dad said to come here" (27). Once the alleged conversationalist's moustache begins to sag and his argyle sweater is recognized, Hal sees that he is in fact conversing with his father, "Himself," in disguise. Ignoring Hal's swift protests, James

laments how his father's newspaper was like a "room's fifth wall," and how he "after all this light and noise now has apparently spawned the same silence" (31). The next thing James knows, Hal has disappeared and the father is left repeatedly calling "Son?" to yet another in the line of silent Incandenzas. The scene recalls a snake eating its tail. The father tricks his son into a conversation, begins to converse about the dearth of conversation, and the son promptly desists conversing.

Hal's extremely polarized linguistic abilities become chronologically jumbled in the narrative. A "lexical prodigy" (29), the pre-teen Hal reads and can recite from memory whole sections of the *OED*. At the age of ten, when called in to see the "conversationalist," Hal deploys language precisely but sparingly. When placed in therapy after his father's suicide, Hal resorts to learning the grief counsellor's lingo in order to perform the speech acts required to get him out of therapy. He actually goes to the library and sifts through grief-counselling manuals and text books in order to learn the industry vocabulary and, subsequently, proceeds to strategically apply these words during his sessions with the therapist: "I went in there and presented with anger at the grief therapist ... I was subtly inserting loaded professional-grief-therapy terms like *validate*, *process* as a transitive verb, and *toxic guilt*. These were library derived" (255). But mimicking, and thereby circumventing the language system, does not mean that the communicative problem is resolved. Rather, emulation of another's "language game" is merely another step toward the utter non-viability of expression. The opening section of the novel, however, depicts a Hal with an entirely different expressive mode. He is eighteen, applying for college entrance, and undergoing interrogation regarding his suspiciously sophisticated application essays. Silent, Hal mentally evaluates the committee members' diction: "I presume it's probably *facilitate* that the tennis coach took

for *accentuate*, though *accelerate*, while clunkier than *facilitate*, is from a phonetic perspective more sensible, as a mistake” (6). In another version of therapeutic language games, Hal, the “lexical prodigy,” when placed in therapy after his father’s suicide, resorts to learning the grief counselor’s lingo in order to perform the speech acts required to get him out of therapy.¹ He actually goes to the library and sifts through grief counseling manuals and text books in order to learn the industry vocabulary and, subsequently, proceeds to apply these words during his sessions with the therapist: “I went in there and presented with anger at the grief therapist . . . I was subtly inserting loaded professional-grief-therapy terms like *validate*, *process* as a transitive verb, and *toxic guilt*. These were library derived” (255). But mimicking, and thereby circumventing the language system does not mean that the communicative problem has been resolved. Rather, imitating another person’s language game in order to hasten the end of a conversation is merely another form of de-validating language. Hal may read the *OED* and spend prolonged periods in libraries, but ultimately the thoughts and sentiments can be neither translated nor transmitted to other people. This predicament culminates in the final catastrophe (the first scene narrated), which I discussed earlier, where Hal’s “speech” comes across to those present as a “strangled series of bleats” (14). When it becomes imperative that he speak, however, Hal’s “utterances” come across as “subanimalistic noises and sounds” (14). While, in his own mind, he is “speaking slowly and distinctly” (10), the committee members tackle and restrain him as if he were having a seizure or a psychotic break. They compare his behavior to a “time-lapse, a flutter of

¹ The phenomenon of the manipulative patient recurs in “Good Old Neon,” though in this case the patient’s fraud in analysis—“fencing and general showing off” (116)—is motivated by a desire to “make sure [the therapist think of him] as smart and aware” (108). The assumptions of analysis are further compromised when the patient, convinced of his analytic superiority, speculates that the doctor’s continual touching of his mustache signifies that he is a “deeply repressed homosexual or androgyne” (130) and that his colon cancer symbolically infers “that the open acknowledgement of it would equal disease and lethality” (124).

some awful . . . growth” and “A goat, drowning in something viscous” (14). Hal tries to communicate, “slowly to the floor, ‘I’m in here. . . . I am not what you see and hear’” (13).

I cannot make myself understood. “I am not just a jock”, I say slowly.

Distinctly “My application’s not bought”, I am telling them, calling into the darkness of the red cave that opens before closed eyes. “I am not just a boy who plays tennis. I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings.

I’m complex. . . . I’m not a machine. I feel and believe and have opinions.

Some of them are interesting. . . . I could interface you right under the table”.

(10-11)

Hal’s assertions—as he “distinctly” remembers them to be—are, for the others present, a “strangled series of bleats” (14), no more comprehensible, one would surmise, than the “clack clack bedrack” of Auster’s Peter Stillman, Jr.; ““What in God’s name are those . . . one Dean cries shrilly . . . those *sounds?*?””(12). Cognitively, Hal’s linguistic abilities are intact—they are, perhaps, too lucid, as he calmly wonders “why U.S. restrooms always appear to us as infirmaries for public distress,” while he is “being rolled over supine on the geometric tile” (13). But that which is “seen and heard” bears no relation to Hal’s inner experience and is met with “eyebrows high on trembling foreheads” (12) and, finally, prompts physical intervention as he is dragged off and pinned to the bathroom floor.

The “time-lapse . . . growth” comment may well be accurate, though, if not on the level of physical resemblance then as a means of understanding the recursive nature of Hal’s behavior. As his fit begins to take hold, he says (or thinks he says) to the committee, “[c]all it something I ate” (12). Suddenly, time lapses and the narrative cuts to a recollection when, as an infant, Hal terrified his mother by eating some moss. Hal’s

reference to “something [he] ate” suggests a kinship between his “marginally mammalian” attack and the panic that had then overwhelmed his mother. But further, the memory is an instance when Hal’s father was absent at a moment of danger. At the college interview, chaperoned by his uncle, Hal is again devoid of a father—James, once more unavailable after having put his head in the microwave, a place, ironically, usually reserved for something one eats. Hal’s cognitive agility-then-incapacity is a kind of skewed mirror, or an emergent fractal, of his parent’s extremely adept expressiveness (film and linguistics being the professional domains of James and Avril respectively) but fundamental inability to communicate. Joelle calls James “a brilliant optician and technician who was an amateur at any kind of real communication” (742), while Orin finds James “[so blank] and irretrievably hidden that [he]’d come to see him as like autistic, almost catatonic” (737). Indeed, James’s own communicative glitches seem to stem from his own filial circumstances. This connection is supported by James’s essay, “Awakening my Interest in Annular Systems,” which, in the first twelve pages, describes how his father would vex over James’s parent’s squeaky Simmons Beauty Rest mattress before the essay approached anything close to the point: its final two paragraphs recall how, when swan-diving onto his own bed, the young James dislodges a doorknob and, as it rolls on the floor, notices “the cycloid’s standard parametric equations were no longer apposite, those equation’s trigonometric expressions here becoming themselves first-order differential equations” (502). Before he can rationalize any mention of his original scientific discovery, James is compelled to provide pages and pages of his father’s commentary surrounding the maintenance of a bed.

Avril is comparably adroit in the technical practice of language, but her mobilization of these linguistic talents thwarts rather than encourages communication.

She is, according to her sons, an “*insane*” (1038) “agoraphobic workaholic and obsessive compulsive” (42); in his interview with *Moment*, Orin enumerates Avril’s “accredited reports and structuring both quadrivium and trivium three years ahead of time at the start of every year,” her “prescriptive linguistics books that come out every thirty-six months so you could set your watch by them,” her grammatical conferences and conventions where she appears “videophonically,” and her obsessive involvement with the Militant Grammarians of Massachusetts who spend their time getting “Ten Items or Less” signs at express check-outs changed to “fewer” (1039). When Mario comes to her with concerns about “someone who is sad” (presumably his brother Hal), Avril responds by writing the words *disassociation*, *engulfment*, *suppression* and “not-equal-to *repression*” on a Post-It note and “making herself not look at her watch” (767). Avril is, like her coffee mug advertises, “A WOMAN OUTSTANDING IN HER FIELD,” but she is also as solipsistic as the cup’s image of a solitary woman standing in an empty field. She seems to support her children unconditionally, but they are ever aware that her experience of them is merely a narcissistic reflection of her own ambition to be outstanding in the field of motherhood as well. Orin, who no longer has any contact with Avril, laments the insidious way in which she controls his brothers:

She’s got to keep Hal’s skull lashed tight to hers without being so overt about it that Hallie has any idea about what’s going on. To keep him from trying to pull his skull away. The kid’s still obsessed with her approval. He lives for applause from exactly two hands. . . . Plus the Moms has to obsess about Mario . . . and worship Mario and think Mario’s some kind of secular martyr to the mess she’s made of her adult life. (1040)

But rather than instilling in her children a sense of security, Avril's overzealous but essentially performative maternal devotion makes them feel all-the-more alienated. Hal knows that "his Moms Avril hears her own echoes inside him and thinks what she hears is him, and this make Hal feel the one thing he feels to the limit these days: he is lonely" (694).

Orin's disownment of Avril may provide a practical evasion of her "smothering" ways, but it does not prevent her obsessive and narcissistic proclivities from conditioning his thoughts and behaviors. Orin catches himself stuck in one of Avril's preoccupations: "Jesus I'm thinking usage again" (1038). And inasmuch as Orin sees Hal's "skull lashed tight to hers," he himself—albeit unconsciously—feels similarly trapped by the Moms. In a dream of a competitive tennis situation, where he closes his eyes to the bright sunlight,

[Orin] struggles up from this kind of visual suffocation to find his mother's head, Mrs. Avril M. T. Incandenza, the Mom's disconnected head attached face-to-face with his own fine head, strapped tight to his face somehow by a wrap-around system of VS HiPro top-shelf lamb-gut string from his Academy racquet's own face. So that no matter how frantically Orin tries to move his head or shake it side to side or twist or roll his eyes he's still staring at, into, and somehow through his mother's face. As if the Mom's face were some sort of overtight helmet Orin can't wrestle his way out of. (46)

Orin wakes to find a note from the woman he just slept with, indicating that during the night he had "clutched her head in both hands and tried to sort of stiff-arm her" (47).

Thus beyond this deep-seeded psychic "suffocation," the compulsion to extricate himself from a smothering female is enacted in Orin's relations with women, or, as he calls his romantic partners "Subjects" (566). Orin's "intimacies" are entirely devoid of intimacy,

constructed to remove any trace of subjectivity from his mate, so that he is “both offense and defense, she neither” (566).

v. *Mediated fractals*

Just as the ringing telephone in *City of Glass* regulates behavior and, as a catalyst for narrative and ontological bifurcation, ignites a series of recursions, technological devices in Wallace’s text give rise to fractals and loops that assume momentum on psychological, social and physical levels. Rather than the one element of Auster’s austere allegory, Wallace presents a veritable catalogue of such devices that at once “please” and control the subject—mediating technologies that function together in the Bakhtinian tradition of heteroglossia and polyphony: newspaper clippings, puppet show scripts, bibliographic references, mathematical formulae, political meeting minutes, letters, emails, dialogue, television transcripts, film, and memories combine and play off one another to create a chaotic web of information. For instance, a microwave (the quintessential time-saving device) becomes James Incandenza’s deathtrap of choice and as such sets in motion Hal’s deterioration to “marginally mammalian” bleating. Video-recordings of repetitive tennis plays may help students learn and develop their skills—“it’s easier to fix something if you can see it” (55)—but the repeated screening of “Infinite Jest”—itself a repetitive assault by a sinister, apologetic mother—has a viewer expire in his/her own excrement. Time itself becomes another site where control and commodity are conflated; “subsidized time” (391) means that years are sponsored by and assume the names of commercial technologies like the Whisper-Quiet Maytag Dishwasher, the Tucks Medicated Pad, and

the Depend Adult Undergarment. Like the many other devices and concoctions in *Infinite Jest*, they become recursive facilitators, mechanisms through which the expelled returns.

The lethally pleasurable video cartridge is a version of Auster's irresistible telephone developed to an extreme—it is entertainment so “perfectly tailored to the subject's psychology that no one can escape its fatal ecstasy” (Hayles “Illusion of Autonomy” 684). Whereas Quinn's telephone serves as the inaugural instrument for his chaotic fracturing, the cartridge “Infinite Jest” is a “virtual environment” and a “predatory practice” that binds together “enraptured consumers’ with recursive cycles to create a complex system that is spinning out of control toward a socio-ecological catastrophe of unprecedented scope” (Hayles 684). The first reference to the heinous cartridge, appropriately, describes the observer rigging the tape to play in a “recursive loop” (87), ensuring that, with each successive repetition, the death toll of unsuspecting viewers will proportionally rise. The irresistible loops of “Infinite Jest” make explicit an inherently regimented televisual culture in general, which conceives itself as “free” because it can surf channels at seeming whimsy, but is actually confined to the fixed parameters of television (or, in the novel, InterLace TelEntertainment's Big Four)—the medium, the program and the advertisement. Thus the “Infinite jest” viewing experience enacts the “detrimental effects of technology-based media reconfigurations on a televisual culture when those reconfigurations are undertaken solely to satisfy market dictates” (Kaufman 1), implicitly condemning corporate media outlets for producing a subject who becomes progressively more uncritical in its responses to an increasingly sophisticated corporate-controlled televisual culture.

Mediating devices, though, inasmuch as they may generate turbulence, may also be actively (but perhaps not consciously) mobilized by subjects within recursive systems

toward the ordering of mysterious and chaotic phenomena. For Quinn, a single pen and notebook facilitate the pictographic representations that provide some means of understanding old Stillman's peculiar routes through Manhattan; for Mario, the camera and the visual image of film offer a similar means of comprehending his perplexing father and a complex political regime, each of which are characterized by the expulsion of toxic material. Mario's first "halfway-coherent film cartridge . . . consists of a film of a puppet show" (380) and depicts politicians bandying about phrases like, "I happen to have my Term-In-Office-At-A-Glance book right here" (386) and "You have gorgeous souls" (384). The distinctly artificial and arcane quality of puppets, in addition to the heightened manner in which President Gentle and his group relate to each other, suggests the essentially parodic aspect of Mario's film. Further, as Quinn's method of record is influenced by Stillman Sr.'s spatio-linguistic preoccupations, so too do Mario's films share the allegorical veneer of those of his father; Mario's is an "openly jejune version of his late father's take on the rise of O.N.A.N and U.S. Experialism" (385). The similarities are formal as well, as Mario uses "his late father's parodic device of mixing real and fake news-summary cartridges, magazine articles, and historical headers from the last few great daily papers" (391).

Film becomes the chosen method of "emplotment" for the Incandenza family. James Incandenza's films, which are periodically described in detail, are fractals, microcosmic reiterations, as well as representations, of larger themes in both the filmmaker's life and *Infinite Jest* at large: *The Joke*, "the most hated Incandenza film," is a feedback loop where the audience sees "row after row of itself staring back at it with less and less expectant and more and more blank and then puzzled and then eventually pissed-off facial expressions" (398); *Medusa v. Odalisque* depicts a staged battle between

the two mythical (hologram) figures and spectators who, by the film's "end," have all been transformed to either stone or gem, depending upon which combatant they gaze upon first. The interlocking cycles that inform the two films evoke the symbiosis and contagion that exists among the members of the Incandenza clan, with Himself supplying the generative "source." *Blood Sister: One Tough Nun* (described in footnote 24, "JAMES O. INCANDENZA: A FILMOGRAPHY," as a "parody of revenge/recidivism action genre, a formerly delinquent nun's failure to reform a juvenile delinquent leads to a rampage of recidivist revenge") conveys the fallacy of supposed "salvation" from the ills of drug addiction and a sordid lifestyle. Rumbles and drug deals on church turf are proof positive that certain "saved" nuns remain corrupt. The film, footnote 289 states, is "a veiled allegory of sponsorship and James's own miserable distaste for the vacant grins and reductive platitudes of Boston AA that M.D.s and counselors kept referring him to" (1053).¹ *Blood Sister* points to the inevitability of one's own nature—to the belief that behavior is ingrained, hard-wired, and that no amount of creed-elocution and affable shoulder-punching is going to change a person's fundamental character. Hal, "the only person in the room who isn't 100% absorbed" (704), finds the deterministic vein of *Blood Sister* simple testimony of his father's resistance to change.

However, James Incandenza's *Wave Bye-Bye to the Bureaucrat*, (in the same footnoted "FILMOGRAPHY," described as a "Possible parody/homage to B.S. public-service-announcement cycle of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, a harried commuter is mistaken for Christ by a child he knocks over") depicts a man replacing frenzied preoccupation with philanthropy. Compared to the irreversible trends of *Blood Sister*,

¹ This may be read in light of Christian Metz's formulation of film as analogous to daydream—"It is a rich, and disparate, analogy between film and dream, film and fantasy, film and document—and one that makes its call on psychoanalysis as a very modern form of dream interpretation, a therapy which is going to put fantasy at the heart of being and reality" (Lebeau 4).

Bureaucrat offers a less pessimistic view of personality—one in which there is room for development and change. In the film, a random power failure jeopardizes the bureaucrat's last chance to get to work on time. The man speeds, smacks into a child at the train station, and misses his crucial train. Though highly mechanistic in its delineation of the acts and happenings that lead up to the ultimate disaster of the missed train, the final moment contains a morally sentimental gesture: the bureaucrat “watches the train pull out . . . [and] straightens the kid's bow-tie, kneeling down the way adults do when they're ministering to a child, and tells him he's sorry about the impact” (688-9). As plot, *Bureaucrat* illustrates James's (read: Himself's) self-absorption, but with a fantastical, altruistic addition: the bureaucrat sacrifices his “ontological security” and chooses child over job. As if recognizing the gravity of this sacrifice, the kid asks the bureaucrat, “Are you Jesus?” (689). The film is the favourite of both Hal and Mario, “possibly because of its unhip earnestness” (689). Hal likes to “project himself imaginatively into the ex-bureaucrat's character on the leisurely drive home toward ontological erasure” (689)—the “himself” here serving doubly as a reference to Himself, the aloof father who, by all accounts, would have lunged forth onto the ontologically-affirming train.

The recursive patterns perpetuated by visual media are further played out in the linguistic domain. As much as language in the novel exhibits a Bakhtin^{ian} dialogism, it also presents the problems that occur when disparate communicative modes converge. Bakhtin posits that in a narrative “each character's speech forms his own belief system” (“Discourse in the Novel” 315), but as Derrida would have it, while these “belief systems” may (under optimal conditions) be delineated through language, their *interpretations* seldom align. As it is with interpretations of language, so is it with interpretations of other individuals and the self. In *Infinite Jest*, characters cannot

understand each other, because each one has his or her own lexicon and employs language in a different way; many kinds of *paroles*—Québécois, English, Ebonics, ESL (coach Schtitt), silence, animal noises, erudition, street and technological jargon, internal language—and their varying contexts make for a heterogeneous conglomeration of individual speech and multiple narratives, rather than a coherent communicative space. Further confusion is caused by the fact that words don't necessarily correspond to what they mean; Hal's verbal breakdown, for example, denies any Saussurean relationship between the signified and the signifier. In *Infinite Jest* meaning is conferred less through language than through context, the ways and places in which words are *actually used*. Call Michael Pemulis and ask "Is Bob Hope in town?" and you are asking to buy drugs. When Joelle refers to herself as "hideously deformed," she is saying that she is impossibly beautiful. Language, like tennis, is a game and its rules fluctuate depending on where and when the game is played. The final complication (a problem that concludes *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) is that there are things outside language that exist but cannot be named—metaphysical concepts connected to ethics and values—which do not correspond to anything in the corporeal world. "What we cannot speak about," Wittgenstein determines in the *Tractatus*, "we must pass over in silence" (74). Thus, the remarkable indeterminacies (textual, linguistic, ontological) of *Infinite Jest*: formal coherence in the novel not only goes against Wallace's attempt to represent "the real," but it also constitutes a philosophical impossibility.

Language as a medium, then, is represented as the most turbulent and chaotic of communication technologies because, as Marshall McLuhan maintains, in the "spoken rather than the written arena of experience . . . audience participation is created. The spoken word involves all senses dramatically" (84). "Participation" entails

misunderstanding. James's films—themselves unfathomable artifacts—often play out such misunderstandings: in his *Cage II*, “[s]adistic penal authorities place a blind convict (Watt) and a deaf-mute (Leith) together in ‘solitary confinement,’ and the two men attempt to communicate with one another” (987). Communicative fissures are all-too-real for Kate Gompert, who endures a conspicuously disconnected interview with an attending emergency physician. After listing the pills that Kate had taken in her suicide attempt, the doctor says: “You must really have wanted to hurt yourself” (70). Kate, after much circumlocution and some attempts at dark irony responds,

I wasn't trying to hurt myself. I was trying to kill myself. There's a difference. . . . [It's like] every cell and every atom and every brain-cell or whatever was so nauseous it wanted to throw up, but it couldn't and you felt that way all the time. . . . Part of the feeling is being like willing to do anything to make it go away. Understand that. *Anything*. Do you understand?
It's not wanting to hurt myself, it's wanting *not to hurt* (70-78)

At one point during Kate's description of her mental state, the doctor writes down “something much too brief to correspond directly to what she'd said” (74); the doctor, perhaps, condenses her description into medical shorthand, the name of a syndrome or condition which, broadly speaking, might encompass the symptoms with which she presents. His thoughts about Kate's remarks are chillingly at odds with her manner of expression:

He couldn't keep himself from trying to determine whether the ambient blank insincerity the patient seemed to project during what appeared, clinically, to be a significant gamble and move toward trust and self-revealing was in fact projected by the patient or was somehow counter-transferred or projected

over the critical therapeutic possibilities her revelation of concern over drug use might represent. (78)

The doctor metabolizes his patient's description through a set of psychoanalytic principles in order to put her condition into a linguistic and conceptual format he can recognize. But this reformulation of her speech distorts its meaning, rendering it as neutral as a crossword puzzle. Where Kate puts as plainly as possible the reason for her suicide attempt ("*not to hurt*"), the doctor thinks in terms of "ambient blank insincerity" and counter-transference." Such disparities highlight the discontinuity between scientific, technical training and lived experience. Doctor and patient use the same "language" (English) but their respective *milieus* and subject-positions make dialogue impossible. Finally, realizing that the discussion is going nowhere, Kate begs for shock therapy, the only thing she can hope might relieve her depression.

Though linguistic division between individuals and the resultant turbulence are, scenes I have mentioned make explicit, inherent properties of the medium, certain communicative contexts are designed toward the "ordering" of language and, concomitantly, ideation. The linguistic tenets of Alcoholics Anonymous are used to streamline diversity of thought among drug users, "teaching them fairly deep things through these seemingly simplistic sayings" (Miller n.p.). After venting his or her often horrific personal history (and, often, rationalizations for addiction) in confessional monologues, the alcoholic is armed with a set of phrases and expressions to replace the blameful and dis-empowering logic that, according to AA subscribers, merely perpetuates addiction. Residents of Ennet House learn that "Denial ain't just a river in Egypt;" they are told to repeat "I didn't know that I didn't know;" and they are advised, "One day at a time," and "Ask for Help" (678). Similar kinds of mantras echo throughout Enfield

Tennis Academy: “Don’t Think Just See Don’t Know Just Flow” (110). Brooks Daverman sees the AA slogans (and, one might add, the sayings at E.T.A.) as “master narratives that make fragmented subjects coherent” (3) “These shared narrative conventions,” Daverman continues, “also eliminate conceptual and stylistic differences between members that might block communication.” Geoffrey Day, one of the “rehabilitated” in *Infinite Jest* explains how the simplicity works:

I used sometimes to think. I used to think in long compound sentences with subordinate clauses and even the odd polysyllable. Now I find I needn’t. Now I live by the dictates of macramé samples ordered from the back-page ad of an old *Reader’s Digest* or *Saturday Evening Post*. Easy does it. Remember to remember. But for the grace of capital-g God. . . . I walk around with my arms stretched out in front of me and recite these clichés. (271)

Just as the tennis players “disappear into the loop” (110) of their internal, institutionally-sanctioned chants, so does the alcoholic, zombified, become subsumed by the drone of AA dogma.

Infinite Jest the novel is, of course, the outermost layer of mediation, its techniques functioning in ^{the} same manner as the diverse media it describes. The discontinuities of cinema and television are reproduced in the novel’s multi-textured composition, wherein perspectival, temporal and spatial changes are as erratic as cross-cutting and commercial breaks. Wallace employs the “technology” of intertext; most obvious are the allusions to *Hamlet*, which supplies the novel’s title [“Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him Horatio—a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy (5.1.71)] and archetypes for several of Wallace’s characters: the implication of incest between Avril and Tavis and Tavis’ usurpation of the late James’s role at the academy are analogous to

the union of Gertrude and Claudius; Hal's solipsism and verbal preoccupations hearken back to Hamlet's obsession with "words, words, words;" Gately's dream in which he picks up Himself's head corresponds to Hamlet's handling of Yorick's skull; and Hal's essay, "The Emergence of Heroic Stasis in Broadcast Entertainment" (7) discusses a Hamletesque hero of inaction. References to *Hamlet* make sense because, in addition to confronting the limitations of linguistic acts, Shakespeare's play dramatizes the snares of psychological recursion and cognitive feedback that become, to quote Guattari, "refrains of fixation, reification, tenacious fidelity to pain or unhappiness" (*Chaosmosis* 75).¹

Infinite Jest manages to achieve all this and still be extremely funny, providing the "euphoria" of the so-called pleasurable text. The humour, however, is predominantly ironic: for example, in James Incandenza's film, *The Joke*, is a "parody of Hollis Frampton's 'audience-specific events', where two EC-35 video cameras in theater record the film's audience and project the resultant raster onto screen—the theater audience watching itself watch itself get the 'joke' and become increasingly self-conscious and uncomfortable and hostile" (991). Like the audience of *The Joke*, readers of *Infinite Jest* soon recognize that the filial, social and political circumstances in the novel are actually lightly-veiled expressions of our own. We participate in its "infinite" cycles while fumbling between text and endnotes; we laugh at its many "jests"—the funniest parts are those which "manque de souplesse" (Bergeson 66). Thus, the ironic humour is also darkly sober, recalling Barthes' "text of bliss," "the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's

¹ Deleuze and Guattari quote Henry Miller: "[A]re we born Hamlets? Were you *born* Hamlet? Or did you not rather create a type of Hamlet in yourself? Whether this be so or not, what seems infinitely more important is—*why revert to the myth?* . . . This ideational rubbish out of which our world has constructed its cultural edifice is now, by a critical irony, being given its poetic immolation, its mythos, *through a kind of writing which*, because it is of the disease and therefore *beyond*, clears the ground for fresh superstructures." (*Anti-Oedipus* 298)

historical, cultural psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relationship with language” (“Style and its Image” 14). Skeptical of simply negating “sanctioned themes,” Wallace’s work ridicules its way towards diagnosis and redemption.

Chapter 4

Psychological Orders and Disorders

in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

" . . . Whenever I'm in stress, the dream comes."

"That's terrible."

"No, it's not," he said. "Not very, anyway. We all have our bad dreams." He gestured with a thumb at the silent, sleeping houses they were passing on Jointner Avenue. "Sometimes I wonder that the very boards of those houses don't cry out with the awful things that happen in dreams."

- Stephen King, *Salem's Lot*, 411

I say Mother. And my thoughts are of you, oh, House.
House of the lovely dark summer of my childhood

- Czeslaw Milosz, "Melancholy," 1913

Danielewski's novel begins with an ominous anti-dedication: "This is not for you."

Immediately, we are dropped into a world of uncertainty, where neither the source nor the function of the novel—let alone the best means of apprehending it—can be simply ascertained. A monstrous, typographically diverse text, *House of Leaves* masquerades as an academic-*cum*-biographical report about a physically impossible "house," whose shifting and seemingly infinite interior becomes a point of obsession for documentary filmmaker Will Navidson. The work, in part, consists of the quasi-scholarly accounts of an old blind Los Angeleno man, Zampanò, who spends decades cobbling together mountains of eclectic material related to Navidson and company's incredible and tragic

expeditions into the architectural depths. What compels Zampanò to accumulate this material is not made precisely clear, but obsessive compulsive disorder, script-fetishism, existential vacancy, and the hovering sword of imminent mortality are all possible motivations for his unchecked accrual of data. These scraps and jottings are in turn elaborated upon by Johnny Truant, a down-and-out Gen-Xer and tattoo-parlor employee, who takes it upon himself to make sense of the late Zampanò's impressively disorganized and mysterious manuscript. A final narrative layer is supplied by Truant's mother, Pelafina, who, incarcerated in a psychiatric institution, sends her son wildly inconsistent and/or encrypted letters lamenting their tragic family history and the horrors of her life at the hospital. The three narratives are clunkily integrated and appendicized by the book's "Editors," who advance the odd clarification or disclaimer via footnotes or subsidiary documents. *House of Leaves*, like the house it describes (where "leaves" are pages and "house" is book), is thus without narrative center or contextual foundation. As a result, the novel produces a kind of vertigo in its readers, who are at once enthralled by dramas attached to the unfathomable house, the Navidson family dynamics, and Truant's difficult life, but are, at the same time, unsettled by the pervasive ambiguity between truth and invention and the apparent (possibly causal) link between the house's physical indeterminacy and its inhabitants' psychological troubles. In what follows, I identify some of the many pressures involved in Danielewski's narrative chaotics, with particular emphasis on the psychological implications of this style of storytelling. What emerges from the novel is a battle between an impulse to assign structure to otherwise unwieldy psychological processes—both within and between individuals—and concede to a psychic space that is inevitably overdetermined and amorphous. Chaos, with its intrinsic tension between order and disorder, provides the conceptual model for the expression of

this psychological dynamic. Ever-vacillating between destructive and constructive drives and, indeed, giving rise to corresponding vacillation in its reader's experience, *House of Leaves* exemplifies the “in-the-middle-ness” that Deleuze attributes to the most compelling and vital of literary machines. “Affective, intensive [and] anarchic” forces, writes Deleuze in *Essays Clinical and Critical*, belong to objects—aesthetic, textual, organic—which consist “solely of poles, zones, thresholds, and gradients” (131). *House of Leaves*, with its variable textual and psychic architecture, may be considered one such object.

i. Composition and the absence of origin

The goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader not the consumer but the producer of text.

- Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, 4

In *House of Leaves*, that which is being constructed is simultaneously or periodically being destroyed. Textual production, as it is depicted in the novel, is perhaps the most pronounced and multifaceted site of this dialectical, often paradoxical, process. Self-reflexively undermining the solidity of the work itself, Danielewski presents a number of scenarios where writing—and, by extension, any meanings which an author would attempt to convey—exists indefinitely between form and formlessness, presence and absence. Text at once aspires to structure and flees from it, corroded by the ephemerality of its medium or the falsities, assumptions and incongruities in its substance.

As emanations from a subject or collection of subjects, texts trace out processes both conscious and unconscious. In an interview with Sophie Cottrell, Danielewski likens

the writing process to a dramatic event, where the text enacts and reveals the internal lives of the people (authors, narrators, characters) who produce them:

I like to look at *House of Leaves* as a three-character play: a blind old man, a young man, and a very special, extraordinarily gifted woman. The three of them are telling each other stories . . . and it's easy not to see them. You get swept up in their narratives, in their images. But then . . . there are moments when you become aware of the actual person and realize all these things they're describing, the dialogue, the events, along with the gestures, even the hesitations, everything involved in all you're hearing—the errors, the repetitions, the energy—is in fact an intimate portrait of themselves. (6)

Storytelling thus becomes a barometer for operations in the mind—and it is writing's capacity to measure, chart and explore these operations that Danielewski exploits in his variegated novel. Using an array of rhetorical, generic and typographical strategies in order to create an environment that is overtly “constructed,” Danielewski implies that not only is identity linguistically and semiotically constructed, but it is also variable and polysemic. His collage makes explicit Barthes' view that “a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (146). This principle is hardly new: language is always a code. But in *House of Leaves* this code is itself encoded so that much of the text can be understood as a kind of para-language, aiming to express what cannot be directly verbalized (whether for intellectual or emotional reasons). In one of the few critical articles written about *House of Leaves*, Hayles posits that “[t]he relevant frame [in the novel] is no longer consciousness alone but consciousnesses fused with technologies of inscription” (785). Indeed, the various

accounts are advanced in as many representational formats. There are Zampanò's incoherent fragments and pseudo-academic citations; there are shot-by-shot descriptions of Navidson's documentary footage; there are poems, letters, distorted/inverted phrases, footnotes, drawings and medical reports. There are three fonts: Courier, Times, and Bookman.¹ In one edition of the novel, the word *house* is printed in blue ink, *minotaur* in red, and some ~~erossed-out text in purple~~.² Another edition contains Braille—which makes sense in view of Zampanò's lack of sight, but functions as yet another form of encryption for those of us not proficient in this particular font. Hayles is correct in connecting print technologies with discrete modes of perception (consciousnesses, minds, *wills*), but what must be considered are the effects of this blend (*pace* the Deleuzian imperative: How does the text work?).³ Most significantly, in terms of the present consideration of narrative and psychological indeterminacy, one finds that the novel renders normative epistemological strategies fruitless. On one hand, the structural and semiotic perversions and elliptical coding mean that plausible interpretations of *House of Leaves* approach inexhaustibility. On the other hand, the conspicuous absence of author and origin stymies interpretation altogether.

In trying to understand the implications of epistemological ambiguity in *House of Leaves*, it is useful to look at its generic relatives within the narrative tradition. While Danielewski's is perhaps the most dense and ornate novel of its kind, a textual resistance

¹ The "meanings" of such forms of coding in the text can be more or less oblique; as Danielewski glosses, "Johnny Truant's typeface is called Courier . . . because he is a courier of sorts" (Wittermaus n.p.).

² The colouring of certain words is an allusion to cinematography: "While Danielewski would not reveal his motives for using blue for 'house,' he was kind enough to offer that it has something to do with how blue is used in film. Knowing this, it's not much of a stretch to say that Navidson's house acts as a psychological 'blue screen,' meaning those who enter the maze effectively come into an empty structure on their own, with their psyches providing the background images and sound." (Wittermaus n.p.)

³ "Reading," Deleuze says, "is never a scholarly exercise in search of what is signified, still less a highly textual exercise in search of a signifier. Rather, it is a productive use of the literary machine . . . that extracts from the texts its revolutionary force" [*Essays Critical and Clinical* (1993) 106].

to typographical, formal and narratological coherence and order is not new. Importantly (in terms of the novel's general positioning within the genre of horror),¹ the use of multiple viewpoints and disparate sources of information is a prominent device in nineteenth-century gothic fiction, where, as Lyn Pykett says in her essay "Sensation and the Fantastic in the Victorian Novel," "narrative complicatedness, manifested in the widespread use of layered, framed, and embedded narratives including journal extracts and other ostensible documentary records, [works to] create an illusion of verisimilitude, disperse narrative authority and to disrupt narrative causality and problematize origins" (3). While the twice/thrice-removed narrative viewpoints in *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and *Frankenstein* (1818), for instance, encourage a degree of skepticism and permit the reader "safe distance" from articulated threats, their manipulation of pseudoscientific, historical and testimonial discourses imbues them with a chilling sense of truth. *House of Leaves* achieves a similar, dual tension through its several (less than mentally sound) narrators and multiple framing devices. But this perspectivism, as Deleuze says of Henry James's novels, "is not a variation of truth according to the subject, but the condition in which the *truth of variation* appears to the subject" (*The Fold* 20; my emphasis). "Truth" may be variable depending on whose perspective is singled out, but truth also varies within each perspective and in the context of that which is being perceived. Every point of view is thus a point of view in flux. Zampanò's many "scholarly references" fluctuate in this way, turning out to be alternately fake, factual, facetious, internally contradictory, or some amalgam of the above. As with the narrator-*qua*-parasite in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*,

¹ Although, heightening the indeterminacy effected through textual and linguistic opacity, the novel is a generic mongrel; this elision of categories is but one strategy in its general interrogation of normative perception. In this respect the novel, Danielewski says, is "much like its subject, The Navidson Record [which] is also uneasily contained—whether by category or lection. If finally catalogued as a gothic tale, contemporary urban folkmyth, or merely a ghost story, as some have called it, the documentary will, sooner or later, slip the limits of any one of those genres" (Cottrell n.p.).

Zampanò blends fantasy and veracity to achieve the critical perspective that serves him best (though, unlike Nabokov's hero, whose analyses are means of injecting himself into his textual object, Zampanò's make obvious the inherent biases of scholarship and not narcissism as such). In the footnotes, authentic material is interspersed within (and is sometimes indecipherable from) invented material. Zampanò cites, for example, cultural, literary and psychological critics like Susan Sontag, Jacques Derrida and Erica Jong (among scores of others) but these citations are often misquoted, anachronistic, or completely fabricated. One impressive page-long footnote catalogue of photographers whose work, Zampanò contends, would illuminate Navidson's artistry was constructed entirely at random: we are told that Zampanò and his reader/assistant "just picked the names out of some books he had lying around" (67). In discussing *The Navidson Record*, Zampanò cites Ken Burns, but Truant provides the dispelling footnote: "As you probably guessed, not only has Ken Burns never made any such comment, he's also never heard of The Navidson Record, let alone Zampanò" (206). Zampanò's "research" and critical commentary thus at once evoke and undermine the very concept of authenticity and authority. And, as if infected by the ambiguity he finds in Zampanò's parent text, Truant's own "studied" contributions become increasingly inconsistent and impossible: for example, he asserts that Volume 28 of Hubert Howe Bancroft's collected works doesn't exist, while page 658, in the Contrary Evidence Appendix, shows a picture of its title-page. It would seem that, in view of the horrendous paradox of the shifting house, neither Truant nor Zampanò can be relied upon. And so the uncertainties of *House of Leaves* pile into each other, concentrically, like Russian dolls: the house, without Navidson's substantiating film, would not exist; Navidson's film, even in the imagined "real" of Danielewski's novel, does not exist; and the two figures for whom the house and

film are their (narrative and otherwise) *raisons d'être*—Truant and Zampanò—are rendered indifferent to the discrepancies that riddle their own investigations. Truant admits, “the irony is it makes no difference that the documentary at the heart of this book is fiction” (480). Zampanò adamantly revels in the fallacy of his whole enterprise: “They say that truth stands the test of time. I can think of no greater comfort than knowing this document failed such a test” (480).

Confusion generated through textual and generic diversity and undetermined authority/origin is intensified by a pervasive disjuncture between the various investigative techniques and belief systems practised by characters in the novel. The “confrontation between opposing models of reality,” as Todorov contends in his analysis of the literary fantastic, “is the essence of terror” (25), and *House of Leaves* is riddled with such confrontations. The comforting “solutions” of science, in particular, are put into question as physical and mathematical laws fail to account for the behavior of the house on Ash Tree Lane: even when repeatedly measured by world experts in geophysics using the most sophisticated instruments, the interior dimensions of the house are shown to exceed those of its exterior by $1/4$ ”—a discrepancy which, Navidson hopes upon its discovery, had “better be a case of bad math” (31). But the impossible data persist as Navidson and his brother Tom fret over their empirical results:

No matter how many legal pads, napkins, or newspaper margins they fill with notes or equations, they cannot account for that fraction. One incontrovertible fact stands in their way: the exterior measurement must equal the internal measurement. Physics depends on a universe infinitely centered on an equals sign. . . . The problem must lie with their measuring techniques or some

unseen mitigating factor: air temperature, mis-calibrated instruments, warped floors, something, anything. (32)

Even our prosthetic senses cannot be trusted to concur with the “laws” of physics, which, Navidson and Tom are made to suspect, have not been discovered but rather imposed upon an indifferent universe. The house is terrifying because it undermines a scientific promise of objectivity and truth. Such disrupted certainties produce a gothic malignance because, as Richard Davenport-Hines asserts, they “provide constant reminders that power is ephemeral, that controls fail and hierarchies totter” (116). Indeed, not only are scientific paradigms compromised by the impossible house, but also established methods of representation and interpretation like cartography and critical analysis illuminate nothing about the house’s history: Truant can neither locate Ash Tree Lane on maps of the region nor can he find any reference to Navidson’s documentary in film or cultural studies literature. And, at once inviting and resisting a theological understanding of the house, samples taken from its walls indicate that the structure is both larger and older than planet Earth.

Rather than simply depicting a mystifying puzzle, *House of Leaves* is itself a mystifying puzzle. Initially published on the internet, *House of Leaves* shares the enigmatic provenance of the house it describes. The absent architect of the ever-morphing house on Ash Lane is matched by the absent author of the ontologically unstable *House of Leaves*. The demiurgic elusiveness exemplifies, however self-consciously, Bakhtin’s assertion that “[t]he author (as creator of the novelistic whole) cannot be found at any one of the novel’s language levels: he is to be found at the center of organization where all levels intersect” (111)—but where, precisely, is this intersection? While the print form of the novel fluctuates from one “truth” to another by way of typographical semiotics, the

internet version, suspended in the insubstantial and fluid space of cybertext—and now, in fact, having vanished from the web altogether—jeopardized conventional assumptions that, once published, novels are forever unalterable things-in-the-world. The untraceable dissemination of *House of Leaves* via the web, too, renders its readership largely unlocatable, itself becoming part of the novel's extra-textual mythology. The many voices and scripts (and, indeed, shifts and fissures within each distinct psyche or passage) work not only to disorient readers—immersing them in a domain as unpredictable and inconsistent as the one in which Navidson and company find themselves—but also to prevent them from arriving at any conclusions about the meaning and origin of the novel in hand. That reading the book is both an act of devouring and of being devoured is performed in Navidson's perishing moments, when he floats in space within the bowels of the house; he reads *House of Leaves* and burns its pages, producing a flame that will last only as long as there is printed matter to fuel it.

Still, the metatextuality of *House of Leaves*—its allusions, references, puns, acronyms, acrostics—compels the reader (as Truant was compelled by Zampanò's efforts) to dissect the book, in the spirit of interpretation. Its polysemic density invites as much decoding. But symbolic, allegorical, and otherwise interpretive readings do not provide answers. We try, for example, to decode Pelafina's letters using the system she has devised: she instructs her son to use the first letter of each word to spell new words, which will be her "real" message, hidden from the medical censors she suspects are reading her mail. If we apply the same acrostics to a letter dated 5 April, 1986 (not one she specifically says should be decoded in the manner), we come up with the question, "My dear Zampano who did you lose?" (615). How does Truant's mother know about Zampanò? Does this indicate that she is the actual author of *The Navidson Record* or, for

that matter, the text we have been attributing to Truant? As in *Infinite Jest* and *City of Glass*, moves to decode simply produce further mysteries. And these mysteries, in turn, destabilize the reader, who, in effect, becomes yet another site of narrative uncertainty. A “drama of terror” is achieved, which, the nineteenth-century author of *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), Charles Maturin suggests, has “the irresistible power of converting the audience into its victims” (98). Truant’s exposure to *The Navidson Record*, and the way in which it alters his experience of the world from one of relative solidity to disquiet and, eventually, to anguished paranoia, exemplifies the capacity of a “work” to alter and redefine the nature of one who apprehends it; as he gets deeper into his efforts to compile, decode and organize Zampanò’s notes, Truant’s identity and sense of himself begin to assume properties of the text itself. Plumbing passages about Heidegger’s “uncanny,” for example, produces in Truant a remarkable sense of existential dis-ease:

The point is, when I copied down the German a week ago, I was fine. The last night I found the translation and this morning, when I went to work, I didn’t feel at all myself. It’s probably just a coincidence—I mean, that there’s some kind of connection between my state of mind and The Navidson Record or even a few arcane sentences from a former Nazi tweaking on who knows what. More than likely, it’s something entirely else, the real root lying in my strange mood fluctuations, though I guess those are pretty recent too, rocking back and forth between wishful thinking and some private agony until the bar breaks. I’ve no fucking clue. (25)

This terror is felt, too, by Navidson and his brother when their science fails to account for the dimensions of the house; our interpretive tools, when applied to *House of Leaves*, fail

to produce the explanations we need or expect. Resisting the very interpretation it invites, the novel finally demands the kind of reading Bruce Baugh calls “experimental”:

It’s clear that an experimental reading doesn’t search for a single meaning (what the author really meant): such a reading subordinates the reader’s objectives to that of the author (or perhaps the text), when ‘intended meaning’ can only be a matter of conjecture in any case. By restricting the goal of reading to the imaginative attempt to identify and duplicate a prior intention, interpretation rules out questions of use and efficacy in favour of meaning-exegesis . . . [K]nowing the meaning of something (a symbol, word, image) gives us no clue as to what it does or what is done with it, its operative use or positional functioning within a functional assemblage. (37)

Decoding symbols, at best, scratches the surface of a text, producing outcomes on a par with ones we might find in deciphering the hidden principle in a number series. On a broader, political level, the subordination of the reader’s objectives to those of the author is a means of propagating the “imperial-despotic-system” by “assigning an identifiable meaning or set of meanings that correspond to a signifier, thereby excluding others” (Baugh 37). In *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Deleuze regards this approach to literature as a “‘flattening out’ . . . [of] the polyvocal nature of the real” (76). The “use and efficacy” of fictional writing and, by extension, its potential as an instrument and catalyst for revolutionary thought and action, Deleuze contends, can only be grasped by evaluating writing in terms of how it works and what effects it achieves:

We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does and does not transmit intensities, in

which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed, and with what bodies without organs it makes its own converge. A book exists only through the outside and on the outside. A book is itself a little machine; what is the relation (also measurable) of this literary machine to a war machine, love machine, revolutionary machine, etc.—and an *abstract machine* that sweeps them all along? (4)

ii. *Media and the extensions of the unconscious*

Literature ceases to be defined by its “signs of literariness” but rather by its intransitivity, its refusal of all rhetorical and generic markers, [emphasizing instead] the material fact of that trace, an inscribing and re-inscribing.

- Michael Davidson,
“Palimpsests,” 79

In *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, Deleuze develops an aesthetic theory based upon the concept of continuous folding and unfolding, which he finds exemplified first in baroque art and architecture and, later, in what he calls “technological objects” (19). This type of object, Deleuze says,

refers neither to the beginnings of the industrial era nor the idea of the standard that still upheld a semblance of essence and imposed law of constancy, but to our current state of things, where fluctuation of the norm replaces the permanence of a law; where the object assumes a place in a continuum by variation; where industrial automation or serial machineries

replace stamped forms. . . The object here is manneristic, not essentializing: it becomes an event. (19)

Whether or not we agree that “fluctuation of the norm” is exclusive to this age, there is much to be gleaned from Deleuze’s convergence of technology, variation and “an event.” What causes more consternation and excitement than an occurrence (real or cinematic) where change or catastrophe is brought about through some technological innovation or mishap? Deleuze looks to those cultural objects (bodies, machines, artifacts, texts) that effect and are effected by other objects (they, in other words, *work*) because they possess a technological flexibility that makes them conduits (rather than sponges) of disparate forms of energy and information. Deleuze’s writing is notoriously (and defiantly) obscure and poetic,¹ but, at root, he argues politically for an aesthetic of multiplicity and fluidity, and insists that we explore objects and processes that never occupy a definite state but are always “in the middle.” Bearing in ^{mind} the designation “technological object,” it is not a stretch to identify forms of media and, in particular, media composites, as fertile objects for a Deleuzian consideration. Always “in the middle,” mechanistic and changeable, media-objects become both nexus and disseminator of “multitudes and energies.” Hayles extends this notion beyond individual objects to the cultural environment generally when she claims that there is “no reality independent of mediation” (779). Indeed, now that information can be delivered in a multitude of ways (or, to use Deleuze’s term, media are “manneristic”) and cyborgs and artificial intelligences are the new faculty recruits, the “technological object” must increase its valences exponentially in order to maintain its affective purchase. McCaffery sees this heightening and expansion of the technological

¹ He insists that the philosopher, like the poet, should invent the rhetorical tools and methods he requires, that she be encouraged to create the terms and parameters of discourse in her conceptual deliberations (*Essays Critical and Clinical* 108).

object as an “avant-pop”¹ preoccupation and connects it to what he terms the second wave of capitalism—“hyperconsumption”—in which our imaginings are extensions of the extensions of man:

With so much already stored away and available to anyone with enough computer memory and the right software, there is naturally something fascinating about things that as yet evade our efforts to download them. Hence the recurrence in [avant-pop] of the invention of the machine capable of capturing experiences not presently “capturable”: a “special camera” capable of photographing the spirits of the dead . . . a “psychopraxiscope,” which records human thoughts. . . . Such fabulous inventions are, of course, extensions of our own actual fabulous inventions . . . which have utterly changed the borders of reality, human perception and memory . . . The ultimate goal, of course, is to be able one day to record—thus capturing it, making it susceptible to human reason and control—everything. (xxiv – xxv)

Because of this goal, he argues, we find fantastic apparatuses like Wim Wenders’ dream-recording devices in *Until the End of the World* (2001) and William Gibson’s memory implants in *Johnny Mnemonic* (1981) so affecting; they draw together the biological and the synthetic, translating the formless (dreams/memories) into digital arrangements that can be variably consumed and/or altered from without.

¹ Avant pop, McCaffery explains, expresses a fascination with technology and next-generation or imaginary media: “Avant-pop has invented a whole range of innovative formal strategies and narrative approaches on more kinetic, dynamic, nonliterary forms of art: . . . hypertext’s reliance on branching narrative paths; . . . the windows-within-windows structures of computer software and video games, with their dizzying sense of infinite regress; rap music’s sampling techniques, with an endless recycling of ‘bites’ feeding the hand that rearranges them into new aesthetic contexts; and principles of collage and other forms of spatial, visual, and temporal arrangements borrowed from video and cinema” [*After Yesterday’s Crash* (1995) xxii-xxiii].

The affective capabilities of the technological object are intensified through the processes of remediation—and this, as Hayles explains in her interpretation of *House of Leaves*, is what makes Danielewski's novel so dynamically resonant. "Remediation," Hayles explains, is "the re-presentation of material that has already been presented in another medium . . . [and] has been greatly expanded by the advent of digital technologies" (781). Inventing a remediating machine in its own right, Danielewski (via Zampanò, via Truant, via Pelafina, via The Editors) imports "pre-existing" (in the context of the fiction) material and arranges it in a new way toward new effects. This construction, Danielewski argues, works for the contemporary reader because it reflects the hypermediated context from which the novel has emerged:

Whether it's dealing with magazines, newspapers, radio, TV, and of course the Internet, most people living in the 90s have no trouble multi-processing huge sums of information. Older generations—despite the fact they're multi-processing their morning breakfast, a train wreck in India and thoughts of an ailing friend—will find *House of Leaves* difficult because they're prejudiced . . . [Formal invention] can intensify informational content and experience. Multiple stories can lie side by side on the page. Search engines—in the case of *House of Leaves* a word index—will allow for easy cross-referencing. Passages may be found, studied, revisited, or even skimmed . . . Words can also be colored and those colors can have meaning. (Cottrell n.p.)

House of Leaves is an "affective" technological object in the Deleuzian sense because its formal qualities—its concurrent storylines, snippets, indices and collages—have been made familiar to us by the modalities of television, film, the internet, etc, and supply numerous pores through which the object might connect with its perceiver. The novel

works, in other words, because we know how to use it. In *Writing Machines* (2002), Hayles coins the term *technotext* to describe literary works like *House of Leaves* which foreground their materiality in order to draw attention to the technologies of inscription that compose them. What emerges upon our engagement with a technotext is necessarily informed by the creative faculties of a particular reader responding, through interpretation, to the “catalytic interaction and intertwining of media from different historical moments” (Tabby and Wutz 10).

It would be difficult to determine whether the complex textuality, the intermediality, that is *House of Leaves* were informed by conditions intrinsic to its original hypertextual format (appearing, as it initially did, on the web) or whether Danielewski selected the internet as an appropriate home to narrative strategies he had already imagined; the relative cheapness of a web-based publication was, the author maintains, part of the reason for his original choice.¹ The degree to which we would read hypertext theory into *House of Leaves* further depends upon what we take the term to mean. Drawing her conception from a general consensus among theorists (such as Douglas and Bolter²) that hypertext is a “rhetorical form having multiple reading paths, chunked texts, and a linking mechanism connecting the chunks” (“Remediation” 795), Hayles concludes that *House of Leaves* is a hypertext; she supports her assertion by referring to the novel’s parallel commentaries, which cohere through linking mechanisms such as footnotes, intratextual allusions, and typographic cues. But, as George Landow reminds us, as with print technologies, hypertextuality accounts for a diversity of forms: “hypertext can take the form of stand-alone or networked systems [which] in turn can

¹ Danielewski maxed-out five personal credit cards to fund the novel.

² Respectively, Jane Yellowlees Douglas’s *The End of Books—or Books Without End: Reading Interactive Narratives* (2001) and David Bolter’s *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* (1991).

take the form of read-only, or broadcast, systems, or those that permit readers to create links and brief annotations, or of those that grant the reader full access as a writer” (30-1). Obviously, a print book is not adaptable in the way that an e-book might be; online novels like Michael Joyce’s *Afternoon: A Story* (1987), Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* (1995) and Carolyn Guyer’s *Quibbling* (1992) shift narrative course in relation to what paths the reader “chooses” to pursue, so that each reader encounters a different text (up to a point: the number of lexias, or possible installments, is finite) and will probably not encounter all available text. While one would not necessarily navigate *House of Leaves* in a purely linear progression (the novel is conducive to the cursory flip-through, inviting its reader to dart haphazardly between its many images and typefaces), all elements of the narrative are present and not buried as they might be within a hypertextual construct. In his essay, “Wittgenstein, Genette, and the Reader’s Narrative in Hypertext,” Gunnar Liestøl shrewdly uses Gerard Genette’s narratological categories of order, duration and frequency as a basis for ascertaining what distinguishes the hypertextual work from its print cousins. Liestøl notices “that one of the defining characteristics of hypertexts, from the reader’s point of view, is to engage in selection and combination of different modes and techniques of narrative construction and composition. With hypertext fiction, the reader is invited to take interactive part in the operations of what we might call the narrative machinery” (98). In some works, this interactive role is extended beyond machinery to include narrative content—as is the case in the well-known collaborative hypertext, Robert Coover’s online project, *The Hypertext Hotel*. Polyvocalism in Danielewski’s novel—in addition to being a product of multiple arrangements and editings rather than a “co-operative” enterprise *per se*—is at base a simulation, or

fictionalization, of collaboration—and, furthermore, one that is documentary or conspiratorial rather than literary in nature.

Although *House of Leaves* may fall short of some interactive possibilities afforded by hypertext, many of the novel's stylistic features and philosophical concerns resemble those of online writing. Collage, which has come to dominate online aesthetics, is perhaps the most salient hypertextual import in this regard. Not simply the inventive juxtaposition of items drawn from diverse media (e.g., photographs, paintings, music, charts, etc.), collage—particularly in online applications—means merging the creative with the discursive. Gregory Ulmer has dubbed this generic yoking *mystorical*, where personal, public and mythic history are brought together so as to expand the epistemological terrain of the work. Ulmer argues that this generic polymorph, facilitated especially through networked technologies like hypertext, opens up structural and rhetorical strategies for a new kind of critical theory, which he calls *teletheory*; he argues that “one purpose of teletheory is to make personal images accessible, receivable, by integrating the private and public dimensions of knowledge—*invention and justification*” (39). A teletheoretical arrangement, furthermore, is a means of circumventing the strictures of linguistic flow, which Wittgenstein and other philosophers have taken to be detrimental to continuous thought; in the fragmentary and multidirectional text of *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) “Wittgenstein claimed a looser textual organization and arrangement that obviously parallel the acclaimed liberalization and decenteredness of hypertextual structures” (Leistøl 89). Large sections of *House of Leaves* are teletheoretical: Truant's personal accounts sit alongside Zampanò's “scholarship,” which sits alongside *The Navidson Record*, which is itself a kind of narrative/documentary hybrid. The strategy is perhaps most memorably prefigured in *Pale Fire*—and, interestingly, both Nabokov's

and Danielewski's fusion of the critical with the literary are less illuminating epistemologically than they are psychologically. Placing a responsive text beside its object—a move that, as Ulmer would have it, might clarify or expand epistemological concerns—may be more revealing of the interpretive values (or neurotic complexes) of the commentator. Isn't this, you might wonder, essentially the status of all criticism, then—a parasitical means to communicate one's own biases? Herein lie the cautionary and parodic functions of *Pale Fire*, *House of Leaves* and, as discussed in the previous chapter, *Infinite Jest*. These works capture the richness and complexity afforded by the pluralism of teletheory and, at the same time, by foregrounding the risks of deception and fallacy, contest teletheoretical claims on epistemological expansion.

In addition to exploiting the psychographical potential of collage, Danielewski's flirtation with hypertext accentuates the more general issues of authorial ambiguity in the novel. Anonymity is known to be (for better or for worse) easily achievable on the internet; this is perhaps one of the reasons why resolutely intertextual and a-teleological literary work—such as Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden* (2001) and *The Unknown* (ongoing) respectively—find accommodation on the web. In Moulthrop's piece, a re-writing of Borges' short story, "The Garden of Forking Paths," the original text is divided into discrete lexias and then supplemented with further lexias of his (i.e., Moulthrop's) own; a mystery intensified by questions of origin like the ones which saturate Borges's writing, *Victory Garden*, like *House of Leaves*, cannot be attributed to any particular author. In *The Unknown*, pockets of local organization in the form of vignettes, lists, short essays, etc., are linked upon multiple axes, creating an ever-threading docu-narrative which never comes to a determinable or fixed end. Counterpointing critical claims that closure is essential to narrative poetics—claims advanced, for example, by Frank Kermode, Peter

Brooks and Walter Benjamin¹—works like *The Unknown* force the reader to decide when a reading experience has achieved fruition and, indeed, what conditions need to be satisfied before we can consider a narrative “closed” or complete. Is a story finished when a conflict is resolved (but what about life *after* the documented conflict?), when the protagonist dies (but what about his evil twin?), or when (as is the case with *House of Leaves*) we simply run out of text to read? The three other novels central to my thesis, in one way or another, resist narrative closure: the case is never cracked (*City of Glass*), the fate of a central character is left unresolved (Hal in *Infinite Jest*), and all elements fuse into the amorphous metaphor of the perennially present World Wide Web (*Underworld*); but the openendedness achieved in *House of Leaves* is interesting because it stems not only from questions and characters left dangling but also from inferences signaled by its hypertextual constitution. *House of Leaves* would thus be better understood as a print text that *alludes to*—rather than participates in or aspires toward—hypertext. By referring to, borrowing from, and problematizing elements of an inscriptive form (one which, moreover, has been associated with the impending “obsolescence” of the tangible artifact, the book), Danielewski is able to exploit the epistemological and ontological resonances of the new medium without wholly assigning it supremacy.

Of all media invoked in *House of Leaves*, either imitatively or substantially, film proves to be the dominant one. Of course, in terms of narrative content, film is significant as the chosen means of documenting the house and its exploration. Where other systems of record and measurement have proven incapable of representing the building’s fluid interior and unpredictable behavior, a filmic record “prevails” precisely because seeing,

¹ Their positions are summarized by J. Yellowlees Douglas thus: “Endings . . . either confirm or invalidate the predictions we have made about resolutions to conflicts and probable outcomes as we read stories, watch films, or speculate about the lives of others” (161).

proverbially, is believing. Then again, maybe not: the typical reaction to Navidson's film, after all, is distrust. "The Navidson Record does not first appear as it does today," the critical literature informs us; "Nearly seven years ago, what surfaced was "The 5 Minute Hallway"—a 5 minute optical illusion barely exceeding the abilities of any NYU film-school graduate. The problem, of course, was the accompanying statement that claimed all of it was true" (28). The image becomes an object of suspicion (it must be a hoax of special-effects, its instrumentation must be faulty or tampered with) because it posits an incredible scene:

In one continuous shot, Navidson, whom we never actually see, momentarily focuses on a doorway on the north wall of his living room before climbing outside of the house through a window . . . crawling back inside the house through a second window . . . finally returning us to the starting point, thus completely circling the doorway and so proving . . . that insulation or siding is the only possible thing this doorway could lead to, which is when . . .

Navidson's hand appears in frame and pulls open the door, revealing a narrow black hallway at least ten feet long . . . threatening this time to actually enter it [at which point] Karen snaps, "Don't you dare go in there again, Navy. (4-5)

The (in)capacity of the image to convey truth is made explicit in Zampanò's opening commentary when he states that "[a]uthenticity" still remains the word most likely to stir debate. In fact, this leading obsession—to validate or invalidate the reels [read: real/reality] and tapes—invariably brings up a collateral and more general concern: whether or not, with the advent of digital-technology, image has forsaken its once unimpeachable hold on the truth" (3).

Danielewski's application of film may be in part inspired by his father, who was a filmmaker and who made film screenings and criticism part of his children's upbringing. In an interview, Danielewski tells Michael Sims that the "look" of *House of Leaves* was influenced to a degree by the formal engineering of e.e. cummings and John Cage, but that film informed most decisions regarding textual layout; while working to achieve certain fluctuations in pace, he "began to realize that cinema has an enormous foundation of theories on how to control the viewer's perception of a film" (12). Elsewhere, Danielewski explained that he wanted his text to produce in his reader the "visceral" experience of a cinema-goer:

Most of the typographical setting is influenced by film. That had been the design from the very beginning: to use the image of text itself in a way that had been studied very carefully for a hundred years by exquisite film-makers and to increase the reader's experience as they progress through the book . . . Before an action sequence, a director tends to present the audience with long shots and static views so the eye is fixed on a certain focal point on the screen and doesn't move. When the action sequence actually comes in, a lot of short cuts are used and it intensifies the viewers' experience by shifting the focal point all over the screen. The eye is moving all around and there's an actual visceral response to that. (G2 5)

House of Leaves moves all over the place, using layouts designed for, among other things, jockeying the reader along at a rate that keeps pace with the action in the novel. Pages 424 to 441 provide a good example of how typographical arrangements work to instill in the reader a sense of movement, speed and space (see Appendix iv for images of the original formatting):

- As soon as Navidson begins his solo venture into the house, the paragraphs on pages 424 and 425 are centre-aligned, denoting a straight course.
- Summarizing the first five days, the type is squeezed into a rectangle, also centre-aligned (425).
- An entire page dwarfs the single sentence, “nor does this endless corridor he travels remain the same size” (426).
- The clause “sometimes the ceiling drops in on him” appears, alone, at the bottom of a page (427).
- The ceiling’s subsequent rise is denoted by the diagonal graduation of words . . . (429).
- . . . and the corridor’s widening to “an enormous plateau” is indicated by sending alternate words to opposite sides of the page (431).
- A sense of speed is conveyed by turning pages 425 through 435 rapidly.
- A sense of difficulty is likewise conveyed by having to tilt the book to read certain pages (436 – 441)
- There is also a claustrophobic compression of text between pages 443 and 458.

This passage illustrates how textual size, positioning and formatting can bring the reader deeper into the experience of a novel; in some instances, a gesture that a reader is made to perform corresponds to a motion described in the text (e.g., on page 427, the reader’s eyes drop to the bottom of page to read the line, “sometimes the ceiling drops in on him”); in other instances, format emulates spatial qualities, so that the reader’s navigation of the text enacts Navidson’s exploration of the house (phrases suspended on an otherwise blank page as on page 426, convey desolation; we physically struggle with the book to read

pages 436 to 441). In addition to these experiential effects, though, Danielewski points out that he wanted to increase the pleasure of the reader, and providing moments of speed was one means of doing this: “I’ve never talked to anyone who didn’t feel a sense of elation when they’d read, say, 80 pages in an hour, because something was moving quickly—or expressed some sort of frustration because it took them an hour to read ten pages” (Sims n.p.).

But while Danielewski’s borrowing from film and its strategies does indeed propel the reader into the drama of the narrative and, at times, allows for a respite of swiftness in reading this largely grueling text, it also has important connections to the novel’s more general themes concerning the orders and disorders of psychological operations. If we accept Louis Andreas-Salomé’s statement that “[o]nly the technique of film permits the rapid sequence of pictures which approximates our own imaginative faculties” (101)—then we might argue Danielewski’s application of film technique also brings about a textual resonance with the workings of the mind. Much theoretical ink has been spilt on the relationship between the cinematic screen and the Lacanian mirror; the analogy breaks down, however, because it is not a reflection of herself that the viewer sees on the screen, but, rather, a fictive world devised by an auteur-subject. Whether the viewer recognizes or projects herself within the narrative she observes depends upon the constituent elements of the particular film. In other respects, though, film and psyche are mutually reflective—for example, in both cases the perceptual object is simultaneously present and absent, both shown and hidden. “[W]hat unfolds there [on the screen],” says film theorist Christian Metz, “may be more or less fictional, but the unfolding itself is fictive (43); Joan Copjec, in her psychoanalytic study of cinema, echoes this distinction, pointing out that when we watch a film, “[b]ehind the visual field there is, in fact, nothing

at all” (450). Just as the film spectator will look and never find its object (but still feel as though she has encountered something), the psychoanalyst will probe but find nothing visible or tangible in the mind of her patient (although she will draw meaning from whatever intangible systems she does identify—she will find something *there*). As “hallucination that is also a fact” (André Bazin 16), the cinematic image provides an analogue to the hallucinated realities which riddle *House of Leaves*: an impossible house exists, *The Navidson Record* is analyzed but does not exist, Pelafina’s delusions are insights, and Navidson reads *House of Leaves* whilst located within the same novel.

Deleuze admires film because, while it aspires to the fictional expression of subjectivity, it is an intrinsically flexible medium, capable of breaking apart regimental temporal sequence in order to explore the “in-the-middle-ness” of experience—processes of becoming rather than finite instances of being. In *Cinema 2: Time Image* (1989), Deleuze writes that in film, “[t]he elements are constantly changing with the relations of time into which they enter, and the terms with their connections. Narration is constantly being modified in each of its episodes, not according to subjective variations, but as a consequence of disconnected spaces and dechronologized moments” (133). But bearing in mind Deleuze’s adamantly effect-based method of evaluating art, he would agree with Jean-Louis Baudry that “[t]he key to the impression of reality has been sought in the structuring of image and movement, in complete ignorance of the fact that the impression of reality is dependent first of all on a subject effect that might be necessary to examine the position of the subject facing the image in order to determine the *raison d’être* for the cinematic effect” (702-3). Film works because its “disconnected spaces and dechronologized moments”—its “apparatus” (Baudry)—mirror our own “mental machinery” (Metz); in fact, as Vicky Lebeau states, “the unconscious is the condition of

cinema, essential to the very act of watching a film” (45). In order to apprehend film, the conscious mind must cleave to the unconscious, the hallucinatory state that is the basis of dreams: “The difficulties met by the theoreticians of cinema in their attempt to account for the impression of reality are proportionate to the persistent resistance to really recognizing the unconscious” (Baudry 703).

Why, then, does Danielewski present his tale in the form of a book? More than simply moving toward the print form, he has resolutely moved away from the idea of *House of Leaves* as a film, having rejected a number of lucrative Hollywood offers for an adaptation. One theory worth considering is that Danielewski is resisting (and working to subordinate) a form that is strongly associated with his father. In her essay on *House of Leaves*, Hayles describes an episode when, in his early twenties, Danielewski brought a short story to his father, who was ailing in the hospital. The story, called “Redwood,” was a thinly veiled account of his relationship with his father; upon reading the story, Danielewski’s father became infuriated and berated his son, saying that he should stop wasting his time writing and get a job at the post office. Devastated, Danielewski tore up the story and threw it in a dumpster. A few days later, his sister Poe handed him a manila folder containing the story, which she had retrieved from the dumpster and taped back together. “That rescued story,” Hayles reveals, “became the kernel of *House of Leaves*” (794). Given this background of the novel, as well as its overt themes of paternity, embodied by Truant (whose father was a dead-beat) and Zampanò (who yearns for the “perfect son”), Danielewski’s incorporation of—and adamant non-reversion to—his father’s medium becomes psychologically interesting. Rather than make a film, he would subjugate film to become but one of many elements in a book, an arch-form that contains and is not itself contained. By drawing from film and hypertext both, Danielewski

expands the potential of the novel and extends its claims as a form that may not only achieve effects considered exclusive to or superior in other media, but also surpass many of these effects. When discussing the operational speed of computer-based writing in an interview, Danielewski makes his case:

But here's the joke. Books have had this capability all along. Read Chomsky, Derrida, Pinker, Cummings. Look at early 16th century manuscripts. Hell, go open up the Talmud. We may be using a 300 Mhz G3 to finish the layout of my book, but to get from the first page to the last takes impossible seconds. Not a second but seconds. And yet you can pick up a book—even an encyclopedia—and get from one to a thousand in much less than that. You can even access several pages at the same time. And you can carry this magical creation with you, write in it, and never need to hunt down conversion software to find out what you wrote and read years ago. But somehow the analogue powers of these wonderful bundles of paper have been forgotten. I'd like to see that perception change. (Cottrell n.p.)

iii. *Psychic architecture*

Welcome to my nightmare.
I think you're gonna like it.
I think you're gonna feel right at home.

- Alice Cooper,
"Welcome to My Nightmare," 1975

If each site of potential truth or meaning in *House of Leaves* (indeed, the ontological status of the novel itself) turns out to be the result of smoke and mirrors, on what level

does substance reside—sufficient substance to render the novel meaningful or, even, readable? One signal is Danielewski’s conspicuously architectural focus. Built space becomes a means of expressing colliding domains of the real and the imaginary, the conscious and the repressed. Such collisions date back to eighteenth-century literature, “whose favourite topos,” states Anthony Vidler in *The Architectural Uncanny*, “was the haunted house” :

A pervasive leitmotiv of architectural revival alike, its depiction in fairy tales, horror stories and Gothic novels gave rise to a unique genre of writing that, by the end of the century, stood for romanticism itself. The house provided an especially favored site for uncanny disturbances: its apparent domesticity, its residue of family history and nostalgia, its role as the last and most intimate shelter of private comfort sharpened by contrast the terror of invasion by alien spirits. (17)

Think only of the forbidding castles of Otranto and Udolpho, the crypts and hidden vaults of Poe, the isolated, archaic, haunted territories, manors and dungeons of Brontë, Shelley, and Stoker; consider more recent yokings of psychology and domestic space in films like *The Others* (2001), *Safe* (1995), and *The Shining* (1980) or novels such as *Beloved* (1987) and *The Body Artist* (2001). In these works, in- or quasi-human agents emerge from hidden chambers, penetrate walls, loom menacingly over their mortal cohabitants, incarnating what Maggie Kilgour calls a “subconscious psychic energy [that] bursts from the restraints of the conscious ego” (3). Cabin pressure, so to speak, escalates with unexpressed guilt, repressed traumatic memory, and all else unnamable. In the case of Morrison’s and DeLillo’s novels, an entity comes to reside in the house of the bereaved, as a projected wish-fulfillment and catalyst for the acceptance of loss; in gothic texts and

sophisticated works of horror, a supernatural presence surfaces as the psychic residue of proscribed deeds committed, social or moral transgressions, or an anguished passage through adolescence or illness; in Todd Haynes' 1995 film *Safe*, the home becomes a toxic environment—or, at least, from the point of view of its inhabitant, an unsatisfied but numb woman who develops an incapacitating allergy to the chemicals and pathogens which permeate her home (read: mind). The solidity of the domicile—of reality, history, family and self—is thus compromised by an unfathomable entity who/which, one must suspect, has *always been* as elemental as any corridor or window pane, but has been hitherto now undetected. Its appearance breeds further paranoia, begs further questions: “What *else* lurks unseen in this house? *Why* is it unseen, and when will it, too, surface?”

Of course, the correlation between psychic and domestic architecture is a *Leitmotif* throughout foundational psychoanalytic discourse: Jung recounts a dream, which he shared with Freud, about being in the house of his youth; as he descended the various levels of the house, the décor became increasingly antiquated until, in the basement, Jung locates “yet another flight of narrow steps leading down to a sort of cave which was obviously a prehistoric tomb” [*Man and His Symbols* (1964) 213]. Jung reads this dream as “a short summary of [his] life—the life of [his] mind” (213), as part of (what was then his emerging) his professional conviction about the personal specificity of dreams. More and more, Jung would resist Freud's dominantly death- and/or sex-inflected analyses, viewing the recurrence of certain images and scenarios not as indicative of a definitive dream-semiotics but, rather, evidence of a collective unconscious, “a psychic propensity to a regular functioning, independent of time and race” (515). The cross-cultural recurrence of dreams and myths featuring labyrinths (versions of built space, ranging from domiciles to mazes) is one phenomenon that Jung

posits in support of his theory^{of} universal symbolism. In *The Poetics of Space* (1969), Gaston Bachelard identifies the aesthetic importance of Jung's collective conception, stating that "an immense cosmic House is a potential of every dream of houses. Winds radiate from its center and gulls fly from its windows. A House that is as dynamic as this allows the poet to inhabit the universe. Or, to put it differently, the universe comes to inhabit his House" (51). Freud, for his part, sees the house and its component parts as expressions of both psychic and somatic structures. "I know patients," claims Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, "who have retained an architectural symbolism of the body and the genitals. . . . For these patients pillars and columns represent the legs (as they do in *The Song of Solomon*), every gateway stands for the bodily orifices (a 'hole'), every water pipe is a reminder of the urinary apparatus, and so on" (346); drawing from Scherner's early attempts at dream analysis, via Volkner, Freud notes that "the human body as whole is pictured by the dream-imagination as a house and separate organs of the body by portions of a house" (225).¹ Later, Freud asserts with great conviction that "Steps, ladders or staircases, or, as the case may be, walking up or down them, are representations of the sexual act" (355).

Whether we subscribe to Jung's personal and collective interpretations or Freud's psychic equations (or neither), the house stands as an apt literary metaphor by way of which a subject's anxieties and fears can be represented. In investigating the

¹Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1984) provides a potently anthropomorphic rendering of a house: "No human eye can isolate the unhappy coincidence of line and place which suggests evil in the face of a house, and yet somehow a maniac juxtaposition, a badly turned angle, some chance of meeting of roof and sky, turned Hill House into a place of despair, more frightening because the face of Hill House seemed awake, with a watchfulness from the blank windows and a touch of glee in the eyebrow of a cornice. Almost any house, caught unexpectedly or at an odd angle, can turn a deeply humorous look on a watching person; even a mischievous little chimney, or a dormer like a dimple, can catch a beholder with a sense of fellowship; but a house arrogant and hating, never off-guard, can only be evil. This house . . . reared its great head back against the sky without concession to humanity. It was a house without kindness, never meant to be lived in, not a fit place for people or for love or for hope. Exorcism cannot alter the countenance of a house; Hill House would stay as it was until it was destroyed." (248)

psychological implications of the house, and imagining why it appears in dreams (and in art, where its symbolic application is deliberate), we may look first at what this space in and of itself *suggests*. Freud's thoughts on this are instructive. Emblematic of what we would find comforting—familiarity, the known, the domestic, the mother—the house, when compromised, invaded, or distorted in dreams or in art, comes to signify its opposite: the obscure, the unacknowledged and the wild. Attacks upon the house thus cathect perturbations in the psyche, or what Freud polysemically terms *das Unheimliche*—polysemic because *das Heimlich* means “homey and intimate” as well as “hidden or obscure,” so that its opposite, *das Unheimliche*, conveys both a “not-at-home-ness” and an “uncovering.” Freud uses the term in his essay, “The Uncanny,” to describe “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known to us all along” (233). Thus is characterized the particular kind of eeriness that descends upon us when we recognize “something familiar and old-established in the mind which has become alienated only through the process of repression,” when something “which ought to have remained hidden . . . has come to light” (234). The return of the repressed—in stories and dreams, allegorized by the emergence of a formerly-concealed, dreadful figure—generates in the subject a sense of *das Unheimliche*, where what should be familiar (i.e. the home) becomes strange, uncanny. Thus, as Vidler explains, “not-at-home-ness” is not simply a sense of not belonging, but rather, “the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream” (7).

This notion of derealization, of the merging of (and blurring of the boundary between) the house and dream, regularly surfaces in *House of Leaves*. In the beginning of the second chapter, for example, we are alerted to “the impending nightmare [that Navidson] and his entire family are about to face” (8). Though this might initially be

taken as a figure of speech (“nightmare” as a terrible ordeal endured while awake), the frequent comparisons between the house and a dream that is at once lived and “unconscious” provoke a more literal understanding of the relationship. For example, when confronted with the anomaly of the dark hallway and the sheer endless staircase, Wax, the young assistant in the expedition, remarks, “It’s so deep, man, it’s like it’s almost dream like” (85). At the end of the novel, Karen describes the dissolution of the house as both a dream and death:

Q: How did you get him out of the house?

Karen: It just dissolved.

Q: Dissolved? What do you mean?

Karen: Like a bad dream. We were in pitch blackness and then I saw, no . . . actually my eyes were closed. I felt this warm, sweet air on my face, and then I opened my eyes and I could see trees and grass. I thought to myself, ‘We’ve died. We’ve died and this is where you go after you die.’ But it turned out to be just our front yard.

Q: You’re saying the house dissolved?

Karen: [No response]

Q: How’s that possible? It’s still there, isn’t it? (532-533)

Dream and reality are here in Karen’s description melded, where the “front yard” is conflated with the place “where you go after you die.” Familiar territory and structures—home, property, the canny, what is “known”—become synonymous with the unfamiliar, unknowable regions of dream and death.

Further encouraging a psychological interpretation of the house and its inhabitants are the direct references to *das Unheimliche* and its theoreticians that occur on several

occasions in *House of Leaves*. As with much of the meta-analysis in the novel, these references function as interpretive cues, prompting the reader to think about figures and events in particular ways. “[V]iable works of literature.” Peter Brooks points out, “tell us something about how they are to be read, guide us toward the conditions of their interpretations” (XII)—and *House of Leaves* is such a work of literature. Near the beginning of the book, Zampanò remarks about the internal expansion and contortion of the house, which began after the Navidsons returned home after a short trip:

What took place amounts to a strange spatial violation which has already been described in a number of ways – namely surprising, unsettling, disturbing but most of all uncanny. In German the word for ‘uncanny’ is ‘unheimlich’ which Heidegger in his book *Sein und Zeit* thought worthy of some consideration.

(24)

This is followed by a long passage from Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927), cited in the original German and, on the following page, provided in English (as footnoted by Truant—who calls the translation “a real bitch to find”):

In anxiety one feels uncanny. Here the peculiar indefiniteness of that which Dasein finds itself alongside in anxiety, comes proximally to the expression: the “nothing and nowhere”. But here “uncanniness” also means “not-being-at-home” [das Nicht-zuhause-sein]. (25)

While Zampanò finds these ideas conceptually relevant to Navidson’s predicament— “[The uncanny] is alien, exposed, and unsettling, or in other words, the perfect description of the house on Ash Tree Lane (28)^p—Truant is dismissive, remarking only that Heidegger’s text “goes to prove the existence of crack back in the early twentieth century” (25). But, indirectly affirming the philosopher, Truant swiftly shifts focus to

recount a recent experience in the tattoo parlor, where he felt the presence of “something bitter and foul, something inhuman, reeking with so much rot & years, telling me in the language of nausea that I am not alone” (26).

Before I turned, it felt exactly as if I had turned and at that instant caught sight of some tremendous beast crouched off in the shadows, muscles a twitch from firing its great mass forward, ragged claws slowly extending, digging into the linoleum, even as its eyes are dilating, extending beyond the point of reason, completely obliterating the iris, and by that widening fire, the glowing furnace of witness, a camera lucida, with me in silhouette, like some silly Hand shadow twitching about upside down, is that right? Or am I getting confused? Either way registering at last the sign it must have been waiting for: my own recognition of exactly what has been awaiting me all along—except that when I finally do turn, jerking around like the scared-shitless shit-for-brains that I am, I discover only a deserted corridor, or was it merely a recently deserted corridor? This thing, whatever it had been, obviously beyond the grasp of my imagination or for that matter my emotions, having departed into alcoves of darkness, seeping into corners & floors, cracks & outlets, gone even to the walls. (27)

Truant denigrates Heidegger’s concept of the uncanny, but he then goes on to relate his experience of the very thing he denigrates. In the familiar environment of his workplace, a place that “pretends to afford the utmost security while opening itself to the secret intrusion of terror” (Vidler 11), Truant senses a terrible presence, whose pupils are “extending beyond the point of reason” and who, Truant suspects, has been waiting for Truant’s “own recognition of exactly what has been awaiting [him] all along.” The

insidious always-already uncanny is felt in the same way that it is by the depressed person in *Infinite Jest*, who finally sees that “the sensation of the worst nightmares, a sensation that can be felt asleep or awake, is identical to those worst dreams’ form itself: the sudden intra-dream realization that the nightmares’ very essence and center has been with you all along, even when awake: it’s just been *overlooked*” (61).

In addition to these various appearances of the uncanny in *House of Leaves*, a psychological interpretation of the house is indicated by the many allusions to Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* in the novel. Bachelard’s book stands as a classic analysis of everyday spaces—from closets to boxes to staircases—that, in one way or another, act upon or express psychological states and processes. An entire chapter is devoted to the space of the house, about which, in his signature reflective and impressionistic style, Bachelard muses: “It is a strange situation. The space we love is unwilling to remain permanently enclosed. It deploys and appears to move elsewhere without difficulty; into other times, and on different planes of dream and memory” (53). The house on Ash Tree Lane comes to physicalize Bachelard’s more abstract ideas about the “house” and its relation to subject formation.

[I]n point of fact, a House is first and foremost a geometric object, one which we are tempted to analyze rationally. Its prime reality is visible and tangible, made of well hewn solids and well fitted framework. It is dominated by straight lines, the plumbline having marked it with its discipline and balance. A geometrical object of this kind ought to resist metaphors that welcome the human body and the human soul. But transposition to the human plane takes place immediately whenever a House is considered as space for cheer and

intimacy, space that is supposed to condense and defend intimacy.

Independent of all rationality, the dream world beckons . . . (47-48)

The lability of “loved space”—space that is intimately experienced (like the one we call “home”)—corresponds to the amorphous spheres of dream and memory—the space of the unconscious—which equally defy definition or fixity. When, during their expedition of the house, Navidson and Reston encounter a door with no door knob, Zampanò mentions Bachelard’s discussion of traumatized children who draw knobs on doors as “kinesthetic sign[s]” (*House of Leaves* 188-89). This reference inclines us to suspect that, like Bachelard’s “children,” who symbolically enact an escape from (psychic, traumatic) imprisonment by depicting a house that one may enter and exit freely (the doors have *knobs*), Navidson and Reston’s encounter with an *un*-doorknobbed door suggests an analogous traumatic imprisonment.

iv. *Schizoanalysis and the house*

A person should never represent anything they aren’t
willing to have come true.

- Richard Powers,
Plowing the Dark, 130

Given the prevalence of psychoanalytic cues in *House of Leaves* nudging us toward Freud, Vidler and Bachelard, it is not surprising that the few critics who have written about the novel interpret the text along orthodox psychoanalytic lines. Nell Bemong’s “Exploration #6: The Uncanny in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*” explicitly addresses the psychoanalytic dimensions of the novel: she uses the conspicuous traces of Freud, Lacan and Heidegger in *House of Leaves* (some of which I have discussed above)

to argue that the novel is a “narrative repetition of Freud’s theorization as put forward in his essay ‘The Uncanny,’ where Jentsch’s postulation of intellectual uncertainty is replaced by Freud’s concept of suppression” (n.p.). Bemong reads the labyrinthine house as something invented by Navidson and Karen, who “created the impenetrable and unfathomable labyrinth” as an expression of their “real and phantasmatic traumas.” While I would agree with this reading to an extent, I think it goes only as far as Freud’s psychic topology will permit. I would suggest that rather than signifying a manifestation or projection of its inhabitants’ unutterable and otherwise unrealizable psychic states, the house and its labyrinthine interior testify to the impossibility of psychic interpretation through the Freudian model. The house is psychologically poignant, yes, but not because it expresses what is concealed or repressed in the minds of those who apprehend it, but because, in its perpetual movement between states of solidity and malleability, the house reveals the fundamental indeterminacy of psychic operations. Danielewski’s house on Ash Tree Lane thus posits neither hidden spaces to be revealed nor boundaries to be transgressed—because the *space itself* is in continual motion. It is the space itself which transgresses logic and physical law. Zampanò explains:

It would be fantastic if based on footage from *The Navidson Record* someone were able to construct a *bauplan* of the house. Of course this is an impossibility, not only due to the wall-shifts but also [sic] the film’s constant destruction of continuity, frequent jump cuts prohibiting any sort of accurate mapmaking. Consequently, in lieu of a schematic, the film offers instead a schismatic rendering of empty rooms, long hallways, and dead ends, perpetually promising but forever eluding the finality of an immutable layout.

(109)

If viewed as a psychological analogue, then, the house postulates not “repressed” structures but the absence of structure *per se*—a “schismatic” system of forms and spaces. And so any corresponding psychic topology, any analytic claim that links, for example, one closed door or a constricted hallway with a subject’s internal life is rendered an ephemeral speculation, a projection of whomsoever claims the linkage. The architectural metaphor implies that there should be a blueprint, and yet Zampanò writes:

Where Navidson’s house is concerned, subjectivity seems more a matter of degree. The Infinite Corridor, the Anteroom, the Great Hall, and the Spiral Staircase, exist for all, though their respective size and even layout sometimes changes. Other areas of that place, however, never seem to replicate the same pattern twice, or so the film repeatedly demonstrates. No doubt speculation will continue for a long time over what force alters and orders the dimensions of that place. But even if the shifts turn out to be some kind of absurd interactive Rorschach test resulting from some peculiar and as yet undiscovered law of physics, Reston’s nausea still reflects how the often disturbing disorientation experienced within that place, whether acting directly upon the inner ear or the inner labyrinth of the psyche, can have physiological consequences. (178-9)

The house, connected here by Zampanò to “subjectivity,” is irreducible to any kind of blueprint, is “more a matter of degree.” If there ever was a blueprint, it is constantly being redrawn—or reread.¹ Or *reviewed*: the relativity of perception and interpretation is made

¹ I mention *reading* because the novel—as an inscription or textual pictograph of the house—might be regarded a kind of blueprint; but, as I have discussed earlier on in this chapter, its demarcations offer little in the way of structural solidity, and it is difficult to imagine reading the work in exactly the same way twice, the way a blueprint would, if followed exactly, generate identical structures. Rather than providing a repeatable, definitive prescription, the novel (like the house and, as I argue, the psyche) in fact repels and

plain in Zampanò's comments about labyrinths, the ability to navigate through which is entirely different if positioned inside or outside the maze. "[M]aze-treders, whose vision ahead and behind is severely constricted and fragmented, suffer confusion," writes Zampanò,

whereas maze-viewers who see the pattern whole, from above or in a diagram, are dazzled by its complex artistry. What you see depends on where you stand, and thus, at one and the same time, labyrinths are single (there is one physical structure) and double: they simultaneously incorporate order and disorder, clarity and confusion, unity and multiplicity, artistry and chaos. They may be perceived as a path (a linear but circuitous passage to a goal). . . . Our perception of labyrinths is thus intrinsically unstable: change your perspective and the labyrinth seems to change. (133-4)

While the dynamic between analyst and analysand may seem to be consistent with the one between "maze-treder" and "maze-viewer," this holds only when the maze is a fixed construct. The one viewing the totality of the space "from above" and the subject's position within that space, may perceive how the center or exit can be reached, but this constitutes the hierarchical situation that Deleuze and Guattari find problematic in the analyst/analysand dyad. With a change in perspective, "the labyrinth [may seem] to change," but a labyrinth that itself shifts and morphs relegates both viewer/analyst and treder/analysand to positions of equivalent perplexity.

negates interpretation as much as it encourages and invites it. Beginning on page 119, for example, is a long, sprawling list of things that the house *does not* contain; on the same series of pages are boxes of text which are "transparent" (the "idea" of transparency is achieved by having the boxed text appear in reverse at the exact place on the corresponding overleaf). Footnote 146 on page 120 lists (in justified columns along the outside edge of each page) architectural schools and buildings that *cannot* be applied to the house; the list continues until 134 and terminates in footnote 147, which, in "mirroring" columns that follow a retrograde pagination, is an unjustified, italicized list of architects whose works are *dissimilar* to the house. At page 130, this peculiar but consistent layout becomes progressively distorted [see Appendix v].

That “subjectivity is a matter of degree” is further suggested by the way in which “readings” of the house are conditioned by the disciplines and ideologies of those advancing the readings. Long after witnessing her husband’s obsessive explorations, which destroyed their marriage and killed several of his cohorts, Karen shows footage of the house to a number of critics, artists and public personalities. Each one puts his or her own characteristic spin on the labyrinth that is captured in the film: “Camille Paglia” sees it as “the feminine void” (363), artist “Kiki Smith” focuses upon “the surfaces, the shapes, dimensions, even all that movement,” and “Jacques Derrida” pontificates: “that which is inside, which is to say, if I may say, that which infinitely patterns itself without the outside, without the other, though then where is the other?” (361).¹ “Harold Bloom” pulls his book, *The Anxiety of Influence*, from the shelf and reads to Karen a passage in which he quotes Freud: “anxiety can be shown to come from something repressed which recurs” (359). Bloom’s response, like the other responses Karen documents, seems sadly inept, cookie-cut from the rhetoric of the particular discipline in which he, Bloom, happens to possess expertise. He “reads” the film as he would a text, as an emanation of the anxiety a writer necessarily experiences under the “influence” of a literary precursor (who stands for the “ultimate” precursor, the father). Bloom’s approach to the film conforms to the Freudian prescription for representation and the psyche, as opposed to a more flexible, schizoanalytic interpretation. In light of this, the “critical” take on Karen’s footage of the house seems insufficient, highly contingent upon the theoretical or practical biases of each individual critic.

¹ Zampanò himself quotes Derrida: “The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since, the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere. The center is not the center” (112).

Truant's very visceral response to *The Navidson Record*, by comparison, seems more in keeping with the nature of the labyrinth—unpredictable and “organically” emergent, but is still conditioned by his particular psychic debris. Truant's reaction (though he is responding to Zampanò's manuscript and not Karen's film) is belated, a surprise even to himself: while carrying a tray of ink at the tattoo parlor, he “encounters” a terrible beast, which causes him to drop the tray and drench himself in ink, symbolically effacing himself in its blackness. Truant describes the shock in a fashion that embodies a moment of fractured reality—or, what I referred to in my introduction, a schizoanalytic “breakdown”:

The rest is in pieces. A scream, a howl, a roar. All's warping, or splintering. That makes no sense. . . .

Everything falls apart.

Stories heard but not recalled.

Letters too.

Words filling my head. Fragmenting like artillery shells, Shrapnel, like syllables, firing elsewhere. Terrible syllables. Sharp. Cracked. Traveling at murderous speed. Tearing through it all in a very, very bad perhaps even irreparable way.

Known.

Some.

Call.

Is.

Air.

Am?

Incoherent—yes.

Without meaning—I'm afraid not.

The shape of a shape of a shape of a face dis(as)sembling right before
my eyes. (71)

In the fragments, we find traces of his mother (her “letters” from the asylum, “stories heard but not recalled” that she would tell him about his childhood); she is present, but nothing in the passage guides us toward any definitive *meaning* of her presence. The fragmentary nature of the passage *is itself* the meaning, the tale of inner workings in Truant’s mind. His interpretation of *The Navidson Record* is similarly inflected by his own history, but the inflections don’t give rise to any definitive explanation for his interpretation. Excavating the crossed-out sections of the manuscript, Truant discovers Zampanò’s description of the minotaur, the deformed son of King Midas, who, out of shame, sends the minotaur into the labyrinth. Truant, the son of a mentally ill mother and deadbeat father, imputes himself into the script, remarking, “I discovered a particularly disturbing coincidence. Well, what did I expect, serves me right, right? It means that’s what you get from wanting to turn The Minotaur into a homie” (336). What he “discovers,” we deduce later on, is that “the minotaur” is anagram for “O Im he Truant.” So has Truant (his own name suggesting absence) grafted himself onto the absent, effaced (crossed-out) minotaur figure, or is Truant another of Zampanò’s creations? Zampanò writes:

Perhaps in the margins of darkness, I could create a son who is not missing;
who lives beyond even my own imagination and invention; whose lusts,
stupidities and strengths carry him further than even he or I can anticipate. . . .
He will fulfill a promise I made years ago but failed to keep. (543)

We can only assume that this “promise” involves the *Navidson Record*; Truant points to this, also using the language of failure: “There’s only one choice now. . . [F]inish the book Zampanò himself failed to finish. Re-inter this thing into a binding tomb. Make it only a book” (327). Thus is reception revealed to be the twin force of perception; the viewer (or, in terms of my earlier interpretation of *City of Glass*, the “experimenter”) inflects what is observed with the currents of his or her own thought.

The house on Ash Tree Lane exemplifies and *enacts* the orderly disorder that is the omphalic design in the chaotics of schizoanalysis. “Absolutely nothing visible to the eye,” writes Zampanò, “provides a reason for or even evidence of those terrifying shifts which in a matter of moments reconstitute a simple path into an extremely complicated one” (69). The house is alternately stable and unstable, constant and shifting. As much as the structure deteriorates, it regenerates. Locating the *right passage* becomes a *rite of passage*.¹ If this is so, between what states, or from where to where, does Navidson’s journey into the labyrinth signify passage? What does Navidson discover at the centre of the house? Not the minotaur he expects. More alarming than any monster, there is nothing—or rather an infinite extension of nothing. Like the man in Borges’ story “The Circular Ruins” who dreams a son into being only to discover that he himself is the product of a dream and is immolated at the center of circular ruins, Navidson penetrates

¹ In *Through the Labyrinth* (2000), Herman Kern describes the labyrinth as an embodiment of initiation rites: “[A labyrinth is] an interior space isolated from its surroundings. An external wall surrounds and there is only one small entrance. The interior space resembles an architectural ground plan and appears alarmingly complicated at first glance. A certain level of maturity is required to understand the shape of, as well as to make a decision to venture into, a labyrinth. . . . The interior space is filled with the maximum number of twists and turns possible—meaning the greatest loss of time and the most physical exertion for the walker on the way to his or her goal, the center. The experience of repeatedly approaching the goal, only to be led away from it again, causes psychological strain. Since there are no choices to be made on the path to the center, those who stand this strain will inevitably reach the center. This experience is symbolic of the conformity to natural laws and is not limited to subjective, arbitrary experience. Once at the center, the subject is all alone, encountering him- or herself, a divine principle, a Minotaur, or anything else for which “the center” might stand. In any case, it is meant to be the place where one encounters something so basic that it demands a fundamental change of direction. . . . [T]urning around at the center does not just mean giving up one’s previous existence; it also marks a new beginning” (30).

the unreal maze to become, finally, weightless with only the lit pages of *The Davidson Record* to approximate anything outside his self—and finally the light burns out.

But “nothing” permits the advancement of something. The house and the novel both act as psychological “blue screens,” meaning those who enter/read the maze effectively come into an empty structure which activates mind to provide form, content or meaning. This is the inevitable situation of fiction. Danielewski is explicit about this point, saying in an interview: “Our fictions are real enough in themselves, but, as signs pointing to any world outside the fiction or the dream, they have no factual status. All thought, being fiction, tends towards this situation. We may think about reality all we please, but we shall never reach it in thought” (48). The radical mutations and dislocations depicted within and comprising *House of Leaves* itself have, for a number of reviewers, indicated a deep nihilism, an effacement of any sense of stability, meaning, or selfhood. But this is to overlook the effects of terror as means of identifying what is valued, what one defends from perceived, imagined, or actual threats. Danielewski explains that luring readers into his labyrinth, and the ontological subversion it generates, works toward affirmations both ideological and ontological. He says:

“Meaningless” and “terror” cannot exist together at the same time. At the heart of any terror is the fear of losing what we find meaningful. Even “terror of the meaningless” is the same; the fear that our lives will be rendered inconsequential. In a strange and perhaps ironic way—especially when elicited by the thought of others in peril—terror can actually be evidence of our ability to *care* and generate significance. (Cottrell n.p.)

If the house can be taken to be an architectural representation of the psyche, then, what does its evasiveness to delineation, its lack of adherence to form in *House of Leaves*

imply in terms of psychological investigation? A problematization of this (domestic, ontologically symbolic) space, in short, allows for a productive problematization of the psyche. We might wonder about the psyche in the same way that Truant wonders about the house on Ash Tree Lane:

Is it merely an aberration of physics? Some kind of warp in space? Or just a topiary labyrinth on a much grander scale? Perhaps it serves a funereal purpose? Conceals a secret? Protects something? Imprisons or hides some kind of monster? Or, for that matter, imprisons or hides an innocent? As the Holloway team soon discovers, answers to these questions are not exactly forthcoming. (111)

We may adopt the same language—“physics,” “labyrinth,” “scale,” “conceals,” “purpose”—in our interrogations of psychic processes, but we will likewise find answers “not exactly forthcoming.” The schizoanalytic model (which can only loosely be termed a “model”) would, within the conditions embodied by the house, appear to be the more productive and apt analytic strategy: While the purpose of Freudian psychoanalysis is to restore links which have been broken (through which neurosis emerges), to liberate the repressed through articulation, to, in essence, reconstruct a psychic and somatic order in the subject, schizoanalysis resists binaries like repressed/expressed and order/disorder altogether, acknowledging the coincidence and simultaneity of seemingly polar processes and states. The Freudian *either/or*, which schizoanalysis deems to be superimposition rather than revelation of order, is supplanted by the Deleuzo-Guattarian *and/and*.

Conclusions, Irrolutions

The literary machine thus becomes the relay for a revolutionary machine-to-come, not at all for ideological reasons but because the literary machine alone is determined to fill the conditions of collective enunciation that are lacking elsewhere in the milieu: literature is the people's concern.

- Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 17-8

Chaotic narratives illuminate the inherent indeterminacy and instability of cultural and psychological systems. They undermine masternarratives in the same way that chaos theory undermined the tenets of classical physics—the discreteness of physical matter, the linear cause-and-effect chain of natural processes, and the ultimate knowability of natural laws. Chaos theory has been called “postmodern science,” in part, because its development roughly coincided with a cultural shift towards heterogeneity and, in part, because technological innovation since the 1970s has made possible the complex computations involved in studying nonlinear dynamical systems. As Hayles says in her introduction to *Chaos Bound*:

The postmodern context [specifically, Hayles is referring to the proliferation of the microcomputer] catalyzed the formation of the new science by providing a cultural and technological milieu in which the component parts came together and mutually reinforced each other until they were no longer isolated events but an emergent awareness of the constructive roles that disorder, nonlinearity, and noise play in complex systems. (7)

The convergence of chaotic science and literary practice is, in some respects, an inevitable one because, as Conte explains, “there has been a homologous development in which the two disciplines move independently but to shared convictions regarding the

nature of chaos. Correspondences between the self-similarity of tropes in a literary form and in a fractal are not accidental, but the refraction of a common observation in each discipline” (3). In analyzing a set of texts, I have borrowed from chaos theory and related fields (fractal geometry, Heisenbergian uncertainty, Maxwell’s Demon) structural and operational terms like bifurcation, recursion, complexity, fractal and alinearity. My goal has been to demonstrate how these structures work to express psychological operations that are unaccounted for in the deterministic semiotics of Freud. The anti-psychiatry of Deleuze and Guattari, I have argued, provides a suitable theoretical framework within which we may discern the psychological significance of chaotic narratives. Where Freud and his disciples posit the oedipal myth (with its substructures: the pleasure principle, the death drive, the castration complex, and arch-signifier—the phallus) as the governing force of the unconscious, Deleuze and Guattari propose an altogether more flexible and, for the individual, a more empowering psychic arrangement. The significations and representations of classical psychoanalysis, Deleuze and Guattari contend in *Anti-Oedipus*, are a means of instilling a social homogeneity; as such, Oedipus becomes “part of those things we must dismantle through the united assault of analytical and political forces” (x). Thus, in works like *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, the philosopher-analyst duo argue for a mode of psychic apprehension that not only tolerates but encourages in the subject erratic, contradictory and indeterminate kinds of transformation. Their polemic, “designed as a matrix of independent but cross-referential discourses which the reader is invited to enter more or less at random” (Moulthrop 300), embodies the very tenets of their argument, rendering “causality”—both theoretically and textually—multitudinous to the point of being unformulizable, overdetermined. Deleuze

and Guattari provide a vivid account of multiplicity—a psychosocial rhizome—that includes the family (indeed, *creates* the family) but is not reduced to it:

The father, the mother, and the self are at grips with, and directly coupled to, the elements of the political and historical situation—the soldier, the cop, the occupier, the collaborator, the radical, the register, the boss, the boss’s wife—who constantly break all triangulations, and who prevent the entire situation from falling back on the familial complex and becoming internalized in it. In a word, the family is never a microcosm in the sense of an autonomous figure, even when inscribed in a larger circle that it is said to mediate and express.

The family is by nature eccentric, decentered. We are told of fusional, divisive tubular, and foreclosing families. But what produces the hiatuses and their distribution that indeed keep the family from being an “interior”? There is always an uncle from America; a brother who went bad; an aunt who took off with a military man; a cousin out of work, bankrupt, or a victim of the Crash; an anarchist grandfather; a grandmother in the hospital, crazy or senile. The family does not engender its own ruptures. Families are filled with gaps and transected by breaks that are not familial: the Commune, the Dreyfus Affair, the Vietnam war, May 68—all these things form complexes of the unconscious, more effective than everlasting Oedipus. (*Anti-Oedipus* 97)

The Deleuzo-Guattarian self is part of a matrix of information and impulses that transcends the Freudian trinity (“mommy-daddy-me”) and exists, rather, in an interactive dynamic with social, political, technological, environmental, and all other phenomena.

The self is both organic and mechanical—machinic—and develops along multiple axes of effectivity.

But what does the schizoanalytic model look like and, more importantly, how does it work? This, I have argued, is where narrative becomes important and, in particular, chaotic narratives, as the space of schizoanalytic expression and effectuation. Deleuze and Guattari locate in Beckett's *Unnamable* (1959), for example, "a succession of irregular loops, now sharp and short as in the waltz, now of a parabolic sweep" (20) that exemplify schizoid subjectivity, which is never fixed to a central point (as it is, for example, in the Oedipal narrative) but is forever oscillating between states of order and disorder. The oscillation is a chaotic one, as each transformation is perpetually processed back into the system, so that the psyche incorporates new information as it develops. This feedbacking is expressed in the various quests or searches that are staged in *City of Glass* (the Stillman mystery), *Underworld* (the baseball genealogy), *Infinite Jest* (the whereabouts of the deadly cartridge) and *House of Leaves* (the nature of the house on Ash Tree Lane)—where new information or "clues" remove the searcher (and, by extension, the reader) ever further from a resolution. Similarly, the accrual of information about a character's experience—through memory, flashback, photograph, or allegorical intertext—repels us further from any deterministic system that might account for his or her psychic development. A chaotic narrative perplexes and invigorates the reader's critical capacity by defamiliarizing cultural and psychological patterns we take to be orderly, predictable and finite. Thus, as Deleuze writes in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, the writer becomes "a physician, the physician of himself and of the world" (3).

Theory itself can become an oppressive regime in its effort to create a totalizing logic: "the more powerful the logical system, the more powerless the reader comes to

feel” (Jameson 5). The theorist’s objective, the creation of an impenetrable arrangement of ideas and explications, is ultimately his impediment because the reader’s capacity for revolution is paralyzed by the very inflexibility of the theorist’s argument. We see the trap of such inflexibility in Brooks’ *Reading for the Plot* (which I have discussed at some length in my introduction). It is true that, towards the end of his exegesis, Brooks remarks upon the recent trend in narrative to deviate from the so-called “masterplot” of Freudian psychoanalysis; he refers to narratives that express a “pervasive suspicion that plot falsifies more subtle kinds of interconnectedness” as “bad conscience plots” (113).

If the novels of Joyce and Woolf and Proust and Gide, and then Faulkner and Robbe-Grillet, cannot ultimately do without plotting insofar as they remain narrative structures that signify, they plot with irony and bad conscience, intent (in the very different ways) to expose the artifices of formal structure and human design. Whereas it was part of the triumph of the nineteenth-century novel in its golden age to plot with a good conscience, in confidence that the elaboration of plot corresponded to, and illuminated, human complexities. (113-14)

But is it really the case that the so-called “bad conscience” plots of writers like Joyce, Proust and Faulkner—simply because they do not align with principles established by Newton, Darwin, or Freud—portray the “artifice” of “human design”? Do they portray “artifice” at all? Or (and I would consider this more to the point) do these rogue plots testify to a human design that cannot—given the cultural conditions of the twentieth-century—be confined to previously unquestioned master narratives? Johnston’s commentary on DeLillo’s work is instructive on this point:

[If fiction explores] new ways of thinking in and about the postmodern world, especially as conceived and represented in the generally unfamiliar terms of physics, mathematics, technology and systems theory, it is because this world presents itself specifically as a multiplicity of forces and relations that can no longer be mastered by a centered subject nor even represented by conventional novelistic forms. (*Information Multiplicity* 180)

Thus, what Brooks takes to be the “triumph” of the nineteenth-century novel is, rather, a reflection of the philosophical principles of the period and not a sign a masterful illumination of “human complexities.” This is not to diminish the particular achievements of Flaubert, Hardy and others, but to dismantle the “good” and “bad conscience” binary that, for Brooks, depends upon a narrative’s relative congruence with psychosocial models that dominated nineteenth- and early-twentieth century philosophy in the West. As I argued in my introductory comments, the “truths” and universals of Newton and Kant have been revealed to be mere approximations: Einstein showed us that time, an apparently “constant” physical unit of measurement, fluctuates depending on speed; Heisenberg discovered that the assessment of a particle’s behavior is contingent upon the way in which it is observed. If, as Zola says in *Le roman expérimentale*, the novelist must be like a scientist, then “chaotic narrators” like Auster, DeLillo, Wallace and Danielewski are certainly novelists in the way that Zola recommends. Their fictions—structurally complex, culturally perspicacious and psychologically dynamic—reveal the rhizomatic interconnections among physical, social and subjective environments.

Appendices

i. Lorenz Attractor

ii. *Bifurcation*



iii. *Julia Set*

iv. House of Leaves *pp. 431 and 438*

v. House of Leaves *pp. 121 and 122*

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